

**ALBRECHT
DÜRER
MASTER
DRAWINGS,
WATERCOLORS,
AND PRINTS
FROM THE
ALBERTINA**

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was the preeminent artist of the Northern Renaissance. His bold imagination, sophisticated technique, and probing intellect made him the German equal of Leonardo da Vinci in Italy. Dürer excelled as a painter who received many important commissions, but his most influential and innovative works were his drawings, watercolors, woodcuts, and engravings. Traveling extensively, he crossed the Alps twice, unusual for a northern artist. He brought the Italian Renaissance back with him, incorporating classical motifs and humanist ideals in his compositions and introducing to the north advances in proportion and linear perspective. Like the great Italian masters he admired, he reconciled faith and curiosity, art and science in his work.

The finest collection of Dürer's graphic art, including drawings and watercolors of highly finished compositions, quick sketches, careful studies, and hundreds of impressions of his prints, resides in the Albertina in Vienna. The collection represents the full range of his subject matter, from detailed renderings of the natural world and investigations of proportion to portraits, landscapes, and religious and allegorical themes, providing keen and comprehensive insight into Dürer's artistic development and creative genius.

Fig. 1 *Self-Portrait at
Thirteen*, 1484, silverpoint
on prepared paper,
Albertina, Vienna



Early Talent and Training

Dürer was born in the Gothic city of Nuremberg. As was typical for the time, he began training at age twelve in the workshop of his father, a master goldsmith. In addition to learning how to shape and decorate metal, Dürer would have been taught to draw and create designs for objects. His precociousness as a draftsman is evident in his first self-portrait, made when he was just thirteen years old (fig. 1). He later inscribed it, noting proudly that “I drew this after myself from a mirror in the year 1484 when I was still a child.” The earliest surviving dated self-portrait drawing of any European artist, the work is characterized by a firm touch and closely spaced but distinct parallel lines, as might be expected of someone who learned to incise linear images on metal.

In 1486 Dürer convinced his father to allow him to switch professions, and he was sent to apprentice in the studio of a neighbor, Michael Wolgemut, Nuremberg’s most successful painter. The young prodigy studied the arts of painting (including the relatively new medium of oil), drawing, and printmaking before leaving Nuremberg in 1490 to travel through northern Europe. He spent the next four years as a journeyman, seeking to expand his knowledge and skills by apprenticing with established artists in various towns. Although most of his drawings from this period were made with pen and ink (a technique that became his favorite throughout his career), he sometimes worked in other



Fig. 2 *The Christ Child as Savior: A New Year's Greeting*, 1493, tempera on vellum, Albertina, Vienna

media — as for example the New Year's greeting of 1493 (fig. 2), completed in tempera on vellum or prepared calf's skin. New Year's cards at this time, typically woodcuts, often showed a full figure of the Christ child with symbols such as the orb that represented his role as Savior of the World. Dürer's inventive composition, which he may have made to send to a friend or relative back in Nuremberg, presents the child up close as a boy playfully holding his golden orb as though it were a ball. Dürer signed with his initials, an early version of his famed monogram in block capital letters.

At his father's request, Dürer returned to Nuremberg in the spring of 1494 to settle down. That summer he married Agnes Frey, the daughter of a local metalworker. She had a dowry that eventually helped him establish his own workshop, and well-to-do relatives from her mother's family (one of the oldest

in Nuremberg) brought the young artist into contact with the city's elite. Dürer drew his future bride shortly before their marriage in a quick, intimate sketch that suggests a shy and reflective young woman (fig. 3). During their thirty-four years together Agnes became an able partner, helping her husband with the business of selling his art — she sometimes took his prints to fairs in other



Fig. 3 “*Mein Agnes*,”
1494, pen and ink,
Albertina, Vienna



Fig. 4 *Agnes Dürer as
Saint Anne*, 1519, brush
and ink on prepared
paper, Albertina, Vienna

cities — and acting as occasional model; later in life she posed as the Virgin's mother, Saint Anne, in a study made for a painting (fig. 4). The couple remained childless, and perhaps Agnes reminded Dürer of Anne, who had no children until she conceived Mary by the will of God in her old age.

Landscapes, Italian Art, and Watercolor

In his early twenties, Dürer began to make landscapes and cityscapes in watercolor, becoming the first true master of the medium. His free handling captured atmospheric effects even as he conveyed details with precision, as demonstrated in his view of the castle court in Innsbruck, where an overcast sky hovers above meticulously transcribed architecture (fig. 5).

During this period works of art imported from Renaissance Italy, especially prints by Italian artists such as Andrea Mantegna, whose engravings he copied



Fig. 5 *Innsbruck Castle Court with Clouds*, 1496 or later, watercolor and gouache over a faint line drawing, Albertina, Vienna



Fig. 6 *Bacchanal with Silenus* (after Mantegna), 1494, pen and ink, Albertina, Vienna

in pen and ink (fig. 6), intrigued Dürer with their new emphasis on the nude human figure and subjects from classical antiquity. Perhaps inspired by them, he probably traveled in the fall of 1494 to the artistic and trading capital of Venice. There he studied Italian Renaissance art firsthand, as well as antiquities that adorned public spaces. Back in Nuremberg by the spring of 1496, he introduced a greater sense of monumentality in his figures.

After his return to Nuremberg, Dürer continued using watercolor, not only for architectural and landscape views, but also for figures in contemporary dress. He kept these works in his studio, often using them for details in other



Fig. 7 *A Knight on Horseback*,
1498, watercolor, pen and ink,
Albertina, Vienna



Fig. 8 *Knight, Death and Devil*, 1513,
engraving, Albertina, Vienna

compositions. The watercolor of an equestrian knight (fig. 7), annotated by Dürer to indicate it presents “the armor of that time,” was the basis for one of his most famous prints made fifteen years later (fig. 8). Dürer took up printmaking actively after his Venetian trip, earning immediate fame at home and abroad through widely dispersed prints such as his revolutionary woodcut series on the Apocolypse, published in 1498. Fifteen terrifying images illustrate the accompanying text of the Book of Revelation, including a depiction of the whore of Babylon riding the seven-headed beast described in the scripture (fig. 9).

Fig. 9 *The Babylonian Whore*, 1496/1498, woodcut, Albertina, Vienna



Search for Perfection in the Human Form

Dürer's interest in the nude predated his first trip to Italy, but his exposure there to classical art and Italian Renaissance painting intensified his quest for perfection in the representation of the human body. After reading Vitruvius, the first-century BC architect whose writing on human proportions also influenced Leonardo, Dürer attempted to develop his own system. He created series of analytic constructions of nudes using measuring devices and compasses to divide the body into mathematically related portions (fig. 10). His quest culmi-

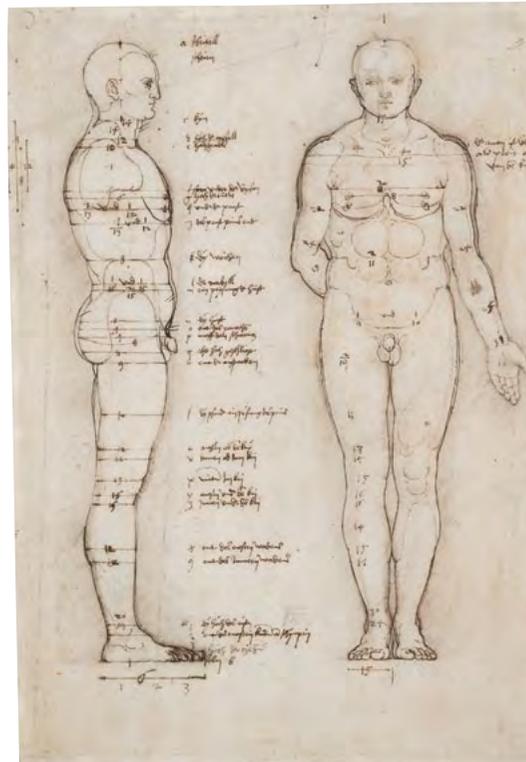


Fig. 10 *Male Nude* (recto),
c. 1513, pen and ink
with traces of chalk,
Albertina, Vienna



Fig. 11 *Adam and Eve*, 1504, engraving, Albertina, Vienna

nated in his engraving *Adam and Eve* (fig. 11), a portrayal of the biblical couple the moment before they eat the apple offered by the serpent, only to be expelled from the Garden of Eden. By 1504 Dürer was a master of the engraving technique, and this print especially demonstrates his unparalleled ability to depict light and shade as well as an astonishing variety of surfaces and textures.

Dürer's Adam and Eve are presented as the ideal man and woman, yet the artist's search for perfection in the human figure continued to occupy him for the rest of his life. Eventually he changed from looking for a single model for the male or female body to considering a variety of ideal types. This led to *Four Books on Human Proportion*, a theoretical and illustrated treatise published the year of his death, 1528.

Capturing Details of Nature

Dürer's curiosity about the world was boundless. From 1500 on he made a number of extraordinary drawings and watercolors of specific animals, fish, birds, insects, flowers, and even grasses. Not necessarily meant as studies for potential use in other compositions, they speak to the artist's keen interest in nature and reveal how closely he observed even its minutest details. *The Great Piece of Turf* (fig. 12) is a virtuoso patch of meadow seen from the perspective of a small creature. The composition balances scientific precision with artistic poetry, as the



Fig. 12 *The Great Piece of Turf*, 1503, watercolor and gouache heightened with white, mounted on cardboard, Albertina, Vienna

various species of plants — all identifiable — coalesce into a unified whole filled with light and space. *Left Wing of a Blue Roller* (fig. 13) meticulously examines the plumage of a migratory bird that once was common throughout Europe. The work delights in the color and texture of the wing, its vibrant palette employed to conjure the unmistakable softness of downy feathers. Yet at the upper right, a bit of red hints at the wound of the torn appendage — Dürer’s discerning eye left out nothing. Exquisitely executed nature studies such as these were recognized as masterpieces already during the sixteenth century and often served as prototypes for other artists who made replicas and variations of them.



Fig. 13 *Left Wing of a Blue Roller*, c. 1500 or 1512, watercolor and gouache on vellum, heightened with white, Albertina, Vienna

Studies for Prints and Drawings

Within the first few years of the sixteenth century, Dürer established himself as the foremost German artist of the day. He brought assistants into his workshop to help with his many projects and prestigious commissions. For several years he employed agents to sell his prints in other cities and countries, eventually relying instead on his wife to do the job. Dürer's earliest surviving studies for his woodcuts are from this period. Comparing the sketches to his finished woodcuts provides a glimpse into his working process. After sketching out his ideas on paper, he would redraw the design with fuller detail on the wood before giving the block to the cutter. The woodcut of *The Visitation* (fig. 14), in which the



Fig. 14 *The Visitation*,
c. 1504, woodcut,
Albertina, Vienna



Fig. 15 *The Visitation*,
1503/1504, pen and gray
and ink, Albertina,
Vienna

Virgin Mary arrives at the house of her cousin Elizabeth, adds numerous details that do not appear in the swiftly sketched preparatory drawing (fig. 15), among them the texture of the house's exterior, a pine tree behind the Virgin, clouds, and an imposing building with towers on the mountain. The artist also revised parts of the composition, which was printed in reverse of the sketch, eliminating a small cottage and fence in the middle distance and lowering the contours of the mountain peaks, thereby adding more sky. Dürer used a similar process for his engravings, finalizing the compositions on the plate as he was preparing it.

Drawings on Venetian Blue Paper

Dürer journeyed for a second time to Venice in late 1505, perhaps to escape an outbreak of the plague in Nuremberg. He spent a little over a year there and became friends with Giovanni Bellini. While working on several important commissions, Dürer adopted the practice of making studies of details for paint-



Fig. 16 *The Head of an Angel*, 1506, brush and ink, wash, heightened with white on blue paper, Albertina, Vienna

ings, such as heads, hands, or drapery. He used the technique of chiaroscuro (Italian for light and dark), combining opaque white gouache and dark ink on blue paper manufactured in northern Italy. Dürer's studies are the first dated drawings on this slightly mottled paper, manufactured from blue rags, which



Fig. 17 *Drapery*, 1506, brush and ink, wash, heightened with white on blue paper, Albertina, Vienna

artists had used since the mid-fifteenth century. In studies such as the head of an angel (fig. 16) or drapery (fig. 17), each made in preparation for altarpieces completed in Venice, Dürer employed fine, linear black and white brushstrokes to convey subtle qualities of light and shadow in a way that could be transferred to the tonal values of oil painting.

Drawings on Prepared Paper

Although Dürer was enamored of manufactured blue paper, he did not take any back with him when he returned to Nuremberg in 1507. Instead, he prepared paper himself by applying color with a brush. His most famous drawing, a study for the praying hands of a figure in an altarpiece (fig. 18), is one of several

Fig. 18 *Praying Hands*,
1508, brush and wash
heightened with white
on prepared paper,
Albertina, Vienna



made on paper with prepared blue ground that may have been an attempt to replicate the look of manufactured Venetian paper. Dürer rendered the slender fingers, rough nails, creased knuckles, and veins with the same intense realism as the aging, deeply wrinkled face of an apostle (fig. 19)—another study for the



Fig. 19 *Head of an Apostle with a Cap*, 1508, brush and ink, wash, heightened with white on prepared paper, Albertina, Vienna

same altarpiece, though on paper prepared with gray-green ground—finding expressive value in each. The latter was reproduced in engraving at the end of the sixteenth century at the request of Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who by then was in possession of the study and several hundred other drawings by the artist.

Light and Tone in Drawings and Woodcuts

By 1509, Dürer had arrived at an extremely fluid and elegant style in his pen and ink drawings, laying down lines with a sureness of hand. His experience drawing on blue and green grounds transformed his sense of light and tonality, which influenced his linear drawings and prints on white paper. In place



Fig. 20 *The Virgin and Child with Saints*, 1511, pen and ink, Albertina, Vienna

of the mid-dark tone of the blue and green ground, he used dense patterns of hatching (parallel lines), as seen in *The Virgin and Child with Saints* (fig. 20). These parallel strokes model and reinforce edges and create shadow. The artist flooded his images with light, contrasting areas of hatching against the brightness of



Fig. 21 *The Holy Family*, 1511, woodcut, Albertina, Vienna

the untouched paper. The contrast is particularly strong in woodcuts such as *The Holy Family* (fig. 21), in which the mantle over the Virgin's lap and parts of the clothing of the other figures seem almost illuminated.

The Master Engravings and Personal Crisis

The years 1513 to 1515 saw the production of some of Dürer's most provocative images, including three similarly sized, densely detailed, and meticulously executed prints that have come to be known as the "master engravings." Each touches on the theme of death or despair in some way. In *Knight, Death and Devil*

(see fig. 8), a knight remains steadfast in his mission, undeterred by the terrifying distractions along his path: a horned, snouted devil behind him and the decaying corpse on a nag who rides up alongside him, raising an hourglass as a reminder of mortality. Symbols of transience also intrude on the otherwise cozy atmosphere of *Saint Jerome in His Study* (fig. 22). While the dog rests comfortably next to the lion (the saint's attribute), a skull on the windowsill and an hourglass on the wall behind the diligent scholar warn of the brevity of life. Yet another



Fig. 22 *Saint Jerome in His Study*, 1514, engraving, Albertina, Vienna

Fig. 23 *Melencolia I*, 1514,
engraving, Albertina,
Vienna



hourglass is found in *Melencolia I* (fig. 23), Dürer's most enigmatic and complex image, hanging on a wall next to a bell that suggests the death knell. The engraving juxtaposes the personification of melancholy, a winged woman who seems slumped in despair, with the embodiment of genius in the form of the putto who writes intently next to her. Dürer most likely identified with the dejected figure, for Renaissance thinkers associated the melancholic temperament with genius and creativity.

Dürer worked on these images during a period of great personal sorrow. His godfather, the printer and publisher Anton Koberger, passed away in 1513. His mother, to whom he was very close, died a difficult death in 1514, having suffered illness for more than a year. Beyond these deeply felt losses, Dürer wrestled in these years with questions about salvation raised by Martin Luther and others that led to the Protestant Reformation. Dürer later described Luther as “this Christian man who has helped me out of great distress.”

Works for Emperor Maximilian I

After the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I came to power in 1493, he began a campaign to enhance his image, spread his fame, and preserve his memory, primarily through prints and illustrated books. The most prominent of the many artists he employed for these projects was Dürer, whom he eventually awarded a generous pension. Dürer created the only known portrait of the



Fig. 24 *Emperor Maximilian I, 1518*, chalk, heightened in white chalk, Albertina, Vienna

emperor taken directly from life (fig. 24), which served as model for several other works, including a widely distributed print. Dürer also participated in one of Maximilian's most ambitious projects, submitting designs for a monumental woodcut frieze of a triumphal procession glorifying key events in the emperor's life. Designed by several artists, the woodcuts were to be circulated throughout the Holy Roman Empire to hang in city halls and other civic spaces. Dürer prepared a watercolor for the centerpiece of the procession, with Maximilian and his family sitting on a splendid carriage pulled by twelve horses and attended by personified virtues of the emperor (fig. 25). Maximilian died before his *Triumphal Procession* was realized in woodcut, and Dürer published on his own a woodcut of his carriage scene in 1522 (fig. 26). The emperor sits beneath



Fig. 25 *The Triumphal Chariot of Maximilian I*, 1518, pen and ink and watercolors, Albertina, Vienna

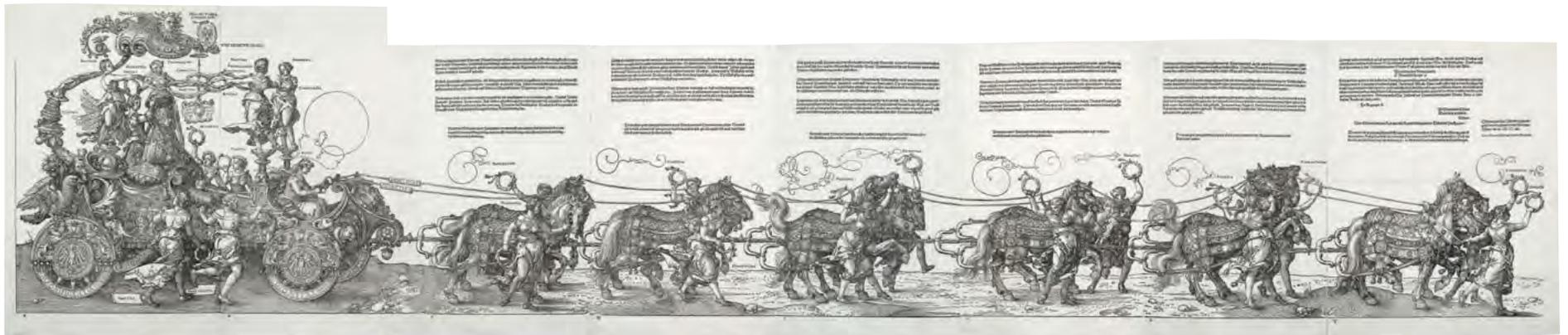


Fig. 26 *The Triumphal Chariot of Maximilian I*, 1522, woodcut, Albertina, Vienna

a canopy decorated with the sun and a shield with an imperial eagle to illustrate the inscribed motto: “Quod in celis sol hoc in terra Caesar est” (What the sun is in the heavens, the emperor is on earth). The chariot is guided by Reason, with attendants Justice, Temperance, Strength, and Prudence; and the names of four other virtues, Fame, Grandeur, Dignity, and Honor, are inscribed on the chariot wheel.

Journey to the Netherlands

Dürer and his wife traveled to the Netherlands in 1520 to petition the new Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to restore the artist’s annual imperial pension, which lapsed after the death of Maximilian in 1519. Using Antwerp as a base for a stay of a little over a year, Dürer received an enthusiastic reception from admirers, colleagues, and potential patrons. He made numerous draw-



Fig. 27 *Antwerp Harbor, 1520, pen and ink, Albertina, Vienna*

ings, especially portraits, but also delicate landscapes such as a view of Antwerp Harbor (fig. 27) and refined chiaroscuro studies on paper prepared with gray-violet ground. One of the most remarkable of these is a drapery study showing a woman from behind (fig. 28). Chiaroscuro drawings such as this



Fig. 28 *A Woman in Netherlandish Dress Seen from Behind*, 1521, brush and ink, heightened with white, background with brush and ink, on prepared paper, Albertina, Vienna

stand alone as works of extraordinary beauty, although some were also used for details in paintings. The virtuoso drawing of a ninety-three-year-old man from Antwerp (fig. 29)—noted by Dürer as being “still in good health and cheerful”—impressed those Dürer met in the Netherlands with his masterful technique; he used the drawing as a model for an oil painting of Saint Jerome to give to a friend.

Fig. 29 *An Elderly Man
of Ninety-Three Years*,
1521, brush and ink,
heightened with white
on prepared paper,
Albertina, Vienna



Late Works in Pen

Dürer's preoccupation with religious subjects declined noticeably after 1512 when he started working for Maximilian. He resumed working on them after the emperor's death in 1519, with a particular interest in the Passion of Christ. The pen and ink drawings of that subject made in the last decade of his life are masterpieces of line and light. The *Crucifixion* of 1521 (fig. 30) is a combination



Fig. 30 *The Crucifixion*,
1521, pen and ink,
Albertina, Vienna

of simplicity and monumentality. Whereas in previous images of the Crucifixion Dürer had included numerous bystanders and the landscape setting, in this drawing he reduced the scene to its basic elements. Setting the three clearly

delineated figures — Mary, Jesus, and John — against a blank background and up close to the picture plane, he transformed the biblical narrative into a powerful devotional image. Even late in his career Dürer was constantly rethinking his art.

Dürer died in Nuremberg in 1528. His health had been compromised ever since catching a severe illness, perhaps malaria, during his trip to the Netherlands. His fame has never waned, while his legacy as a draftsman and print-maker has never been surpassed. Dürer's works on paper appear extraordinarily true to life, whether they represent what he saw before his eyes, such as a man from far-flung shores (fig. 31), or what he conjured up in his own mind, such as a scholar saint in his studio (see fig. 22). Through his unrivaled power of observa-

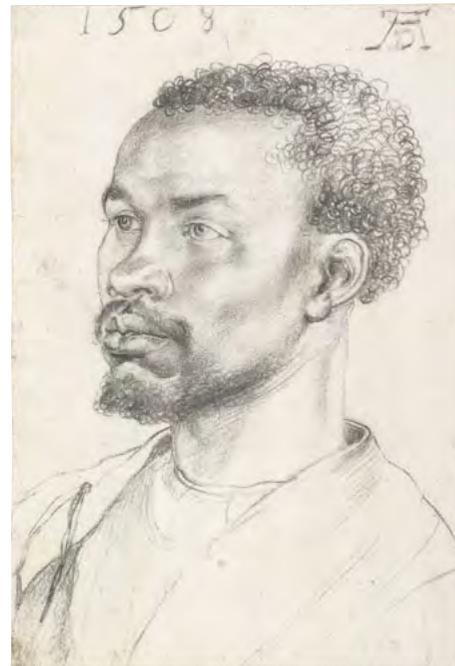


Fig. 31 *Head of an African*, 1508, chalk, Albertina, Vienna

tion, his imagination, and his masterful technique, Dürer elevated drawing and printmaking from the anonymous trade of craftsmen to independent forms of aesthetic expression.

The Albertina

The Albertina possesses one of the greatest collections of graphic art in the world, encompassing European and American drawings, watercolors, and prints from the late Middle Ages to the present. The museum originated in the collection of Duke Albert von Sachsen-Teschen (1738–1822), who married into the Habsburg dynasty and settled in Vienna. The duke focused on collecting European works on paper. In 1796 his already distinguished collection expanded with the acquisition of drawings by Dürer belonging to the imperial family. These had been assembled two centuries earlier by Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612), who spared no expense in his search for works by his favorite artist, both in Nuremberg and abroad. He had many to choose from: Dürer cared deeply about his artistic legacy and preserved an astonishing number of drawings; most never left his studio during his lifetime and were passed down to family members or friends after his death.

Today, no other artist is as closely associated with the Albertina as Albrecht Dürer. Its unparalleled holdings include some 120 drawings and watercolors,

among them many of his greatest masterpieces, along with hundreds of prints, and touch on almost every aspect of his draftsmanship and printmaking from the entirety of his career.

Nuremberg

Nuremberg lies a little more than one hundred miles north of Munich in the northern part of what is now the state of Bavaria. Compared to other German cities at the time of Dürer's birth, Nuremberg was relatively young. But the town had grown rapidly both in size and importance since its founding in



Fig. 32 Michael Wolgemut, Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, and Albrecht Dürer, *Nuremberg*, in Hartman Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum*, woodcut, hand-colored (Nuremberg, 1493), National Gallery of Art, Paul Mellon Collection, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, 1991

the eleventh century, in great part because it was favored by the Holy Roman Emperors. An administrative center for the empire, the town hosted a number of diets or councils (including three between 1522 and 1524) and was entrusted

to guard the imperial regalia and treasures. From 1219 it was accorded the status of free imperial city, allowing it to be self-governing and beholden only to the emperor, rather than any local prince or bishop. The city was a significant producer of goods such as tools and armor and thus an important stop along major trade routes, including one to Italy. Among its notable residents in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were humanist scholars, renowned artists, and one of the most successful publishers in Germany, Anton Koberger — who was also Dürer’s godfather. The fine reputation of the city’s metalwork industry and its thriving economy probably led Dürer’s father, who was born in Hungary, to settle there in 1455.



Monogram

Dürer started regularly using his initials to sign his work in the 1490s. He used the monogram on most of his drawings and paintings and prominently incorporated it into his prints. Dürer’s monogram was so esteemed that he had to bring suit to stop others from using it. It was, in essence, an artistic trademark, granted protection by the Nuremberg town council against piracy.

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