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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was celebrated in his own lifetime for his skill as both a painter and a draughtsman. Yet, his paintings have received significantly less critical attention than his graphic works, his theoretical writing, or his life as an exemplar of artistic genius. This critical imbalance is demonstrated by the fact that only one monograph dedicated to the study of his paintings has been written, whereas countless studies are devoted to the examination of his life, graphic works, and theoretical writings.[1] This has contributed, in turn, to the pervasive scholarly assumption that Dürer's paintings are inferior in quality to his graphic work, and that as a painter, Dürer was less accomplished (and less intriguing) than he was as a draughtsman.

The critical partition of Dürer's oeuvre into the graphic and the painterly occurred as early as the sixteenth century. In 1528, the year of the artist's death, Desiderius Erasmus described Dürer as the "Apelles of black lines."[2] Erasmus' description was written after Dürer had presented him with the engraved portrait of 1526, which Erasmus himself had requested Dürer to make. Although Erasmus' comments were intended as a broad humanist encomium about Dürer's skill as an artist, most modern scholars have interpreted his remarks as a critical judgment about the relative artistic merits of Dürer's paintings and prints. This comment, in turn, initiated the critical partition between Dürer's painted and graphic works. Any division between painted and graphic works reverberates by necessity with Giorgio Vasari's partitioning of Italian painting into "disegno" and "colore" in his book *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori.*[3]

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Vasari's distinction between "disegno" and "colore" helped to shape the critical history of the classification of Italian renaissance painting into regional schools. "Disegno" described the quality in painting that was representative of the highest aesthetic and intellectual achievement attainable by any artist.[4] "Disegno," in Vasari's view, was married to the idea of invention and formed an integral part of the Tuscan tradition of painting. "Colore," on the other hand, was regarded by Vasari as the forte of the Venetian painters of the sixteenth century. Although he admired the bravura color effects of Venetian painting, he regarded this school as a whole (and the quality of "colore" in particular) as less rigorous and intellectual than the paintings of the Florentine artists with whom he was so familiar.

Vasari's regional classifications of Italian art have had a tremendous impact upon the critical history of Renaissance painting. Even though Vasari did not devote an entire chapter to Dürer, his ideas about regional schools of art have shaped critical views of Dürer as a northern artist engaged with Italian art. Vasari lamented that Dürer would have been the best painter in Italy if he had only been exposed to the painterly traditions of Italy, particularly Tuscan ones. Vasari wrote that "[if] this man, so able, so diligent, and so versatile, had had Tuscany instead of Flanders [sic] for his country, and he had been able to study the treasures of Rome, . . . he would have been the best painter of our land, even as he was the rarest and most celebrated that has ever appeared among the Flemings."[5] Ironically, Dürer *was* exposed to the Italian painterly tradition, although his contact was with *Venetian* painting, and not the Tuscan tradition about which Vasari wrote so eloquently. Vasari's lament that Dürer was not exposed to the Tuscan artistic tradition provided the cornerstone for generations of arguments about the merits of Italian painting and the necessity for northern artists to study in Italy to achieve greatness.

Dürer's historical encounter with Venetian painting complicates the post-Vasarian critical division between "disegno" and "colore" within Dürer's oeuvre. Vasari's discussion of Dürer is included in the *Life of Marcantonio Raimondi*, which Vasari used to explicate the history of engraving, the graphic form for which Dürer remains best known. Besides Dürer, Vasari included short sketches of many artists significant for their

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contribution to the graphic arts, including Martin Schongauer and Lucas van Leyden. Yet Vasari argued that Dürer was more gifted than any of his predecessors and credited him with the gifts specifically associated with the greatest Tuscan artists. Vasari compared Dürer to Martin Schongauer and wrote that "Albrecht Dürer began to give attention to prints . . . but with more design ["disegno"] and better judgment, and with more beautiful invention, seeking to imitate the life and draw near to the Italian manners, which he had always held in much account."[6] Ironically, Vasari's emphasis on Dürer's "disegno," coupled with judgment and invention, echoes the language Vasari used to describe the accomplishments of Michelangelo, Raphael, and the other artists for whom Vasari reserved his highest praise.[7]

In fact, because so much is known about Dürer's presence in Venice in the years 1505–7, the artist has become a figure of particular interest for scholars of the Renaissance. His life and work have been interpreted as the embodiment of the confrontation of two distinct cultures with distinct visual and intellectual traditions. Dürer's unique position as a northern artist who experienced the Renaissance in Italy firsthand has led scholars to view him as a living conduit for the exchange of artistic ideals and theories between the two cultures. His artistic production has been interpreted as reflective of the tensions between Italy and the North. It is surprising, therefore, that so little attention has been given to Dürer's painted works, not only as an indicator of his experiences in Venice but also as the primary source on which to base the critical study of artistic practice and experience.

Therefore, I have focused my investigation on the paintings executed by Dürer while in Venice during 1505–7 and those painted after his return to Nuremberg in the following years. I will discuss how Dürer's exposure to Venetian painting techniques in 1505–7 resonated throughout the rest of his career. I will argue that this exposure affected not only the way in which he painted but also the way in which he attempted to depict illusionistic space in all his artistic efforts. My arguments are based upon a study of twenty-five paintings attributed to Dürer and other paintings associated with his workshop, using infrared reflectography, microscopy, and X-radiography. Reconsideration of this group of paintings provides

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an opportunity to reassess Dürer's reputation as an artist primarily gifted in the graphic arts. In the following pages, I will show that *how* Dürer chose to paint is as significant as, and often entwined with, *what* he chose to paint.

Now more than ever before, painting technique and the history of the use of different techniques can be studied because of the availability of advanced scientific tools adapted specifically for the investigation of the materials and procedures used in the production of paintings. The study of technique, encompassing the procedures utilized and adapted by artists at every step in the production of a work of art, has been largely overlooked as a source of material for the art historian committed to the reconstruction and interpretation of the past. Few successful explorations of the meaning inherent in the actual practice of painting have been made. Yet, there is widespread acceptance that paintings, as cultural images, are the source of a virtually endless stream of interpretations. I will demonstrate here that the study of technique – like the study of style, elements of form, or iconography – can augment our knowledge of artistic development and can also be used to form hypotheses about the meaning and importance of paintings.

Outside of a contextual and theoretical basis, technical information about paintings is ultimately of limited interest to art historians. The primary problem in the critical use of technical material has been the belief that the objective importance of the findings is so great that it stands on its own and demands little if any interpretation. Only, I believe, when the information derived from the laboratory is integrated into the interpretive discourses of the art-historical tradition can any richer meaning be derived from its existence. In this regard, my attempt to interpret the material I have collected here regarding the paintings of Albrecht Dürer is intended to contribute to our understanding of Dürer as a painter and an artist. More specifically, my investigations show that Dürer utilized particular elements of painterly technique to which he was exposed while in Venice in his paintings as well as in his later graphic works. This calls for a revision of the view ingrained in the history of the art of Dürer as an artist primarily gifted in, and ultimately limited to, the graphic realm of production.

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To discuss the role of technique in Dürer's production of a painting with particular historical and iconographic meanings, I attempt to locate technique within precise historical contexts. Techniques are quite often tied specifically to particular geographic locations at particular times; identifying them makes it possible to trace regional influences. Dürer's primary source for learning about new, non-northern techniques as a mature artist was Italy, specifically Venice. In addition, I have discovered literary tropes to which Dürer may have been exposed that use painting technique as a metaphor to express the process of fulfillment promised by Christian sacrifice. This literary tradition strongly suggests that the practice of painting itself could be and was meant to be interpretable in its own right. Just as a Renaissance humanist might learn the form of iambic pentameter to express certain poetic ideas, I believe Dürer consciously appropriated specific Venetian techniques to express certain ideas in a work of art.[8]

My study of the paintings begins with the study of the techniques used by Dürer. My investigation of his later paintings, which includes those executed during his stay in Venice in 1505–7 and those completed after his return to Nuremberg in 1507, indicates that Dürer was profoundly affected by the traditions of Venetian painting. He did not merely absorb what he saw; he adapted elements of Venetian technique in conjunction with his own native traditions to refine the meanings in his own paintings. Therefore, I am interested in how and why the techniques specific to Venetian painters were appropriated and used by Dürer in his own productions. In Chapters 3–5, I explore the details of Dürer's utilization of Venetian techniques in the *Feast of the Rose Garlands* (Plate I) and the *Virgin with the Pear* (Plate IV).

A Brief Overview of the History of the Technical Investigation of Paintings

Interest in the study of the materials and techniques of paintings has gained a broader audience in the last thirty-five years due to the greater availability of investigative technology such as infrared reflectography and

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X-radiography, even though curiosity about the sometimes mysterious power of artistic practice is far from being new.[9] Pliny the Elder first voiced his wonder at the painter's manipulation of technique in the first century A.D.:

> Another most curious fact and worthy of record is, that the latest works of artists, and the pictures left unfinished at their death are valued more than any of their finished paintings, for example, the *Iris* by Aristeides, the *Children of Tyndaros* by Nikomachus, the *Medeia* by Timomachus, and the *Aphrodite* by Apelles, mentioned above. The reason is that in these we see traces of the design and the original conception of the artists. . . .[10]

Interest in the otherwise inaccessible view into the "design and original conception of the artist" has remained constant over the course of two millennia, but our ability to investigate those aspects of an artist's production has changed with advanced technology. Sophisticated means to investigate the technical aspects of paintings (and other works of art) have been available only recently. Earlier art historians relied upon unfinished or damaged paintings and the record provided in treatises and manuals on painting for their discussions on techniques and processes involved in painting.[11]

In the years after World War I, parallel developments in the technical investigation of painting occurred at Harvard University's Fogg Art Gallery and at the Bayerischen Staatsgemaldesammlungen in Munich. At both institutions, the application of X-radiography for the investigation of technique was explored and fully integrated into the accepted methodology for examining paintings.[12] In 1938, Christian Wolters in Munich and Alan Burroughs at the Fogg published parallel books simultaneously about their study of paintings with X-radiography.[13] Burroughs described the results of X-radiography as "drawings" for paintings because of the way in which brushwork is made visible with this investigative technique. In 1936, the students of Paul Sachs' museum course at the Fogg organized an exhibition about the interrelationship of style and technique. This catalogue is one of the earliest expressions of the broader interest at the Fogg in exploring the effect of technique and

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technical innovations upon style in its broadest sense. The students defined technique as

> the whole process that leads from an artist's mental concept to a final realization of that concept in a work of art. We include the materials and tools employed, the method of using both, and the shaping of the concept in the mind of the artist as it is revealed in preparatory work.[14]

Besides echoing Pliny, the essay and catalogue entries reflect the thinking and methodology of the Fogg method and is a monument to the integrated approach of teaching Fine Arts at Harvard at that time. The definition of technique, and its promised access to the mind of the artist, is here closely related to Pliny's expression of interest in the "original conception" of the artist. "Process" was perceived by the Fogg students and their teachers as an integral and significant part of the final artistic product.[15]

In contrast to this early synthetic and interpretive point of view, much of the recent art-historical literature that employs technical information, and particularly retrieved underdrawings, approaches it as concrete, minimally interpretable or even uninterpretable positivist data. As such, this information is often relegated to appendixes or given only a secondary importance in relationship to more traditional art-historical analyses.[16] Most technical research about paintings shares the assumption that the underdrawings revealed and the information produced by the scientific study of paintings is not subject to interpretation. This tendency within these technical studies is, in my view, due to the close connection such investigations have had to the scientific laboratory of the paintings' conservator. The recent increase in such studies by art historians has been nourished by investigations that originated in the conservation studio. The aims of conservators and art historians may be compatible, but they are motivated by very different goals. The conservator aims for the best possible understanding of painting technique to preserve the painting as object today. Although this information is often of interest to the art historian, the desire to use such information to reconstruct an understanding of the past is a distinctly unscientific and unobjective use of the material gathered in the laboratory. Furthermore, I believe that the

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assumption of "scientific" objectivity may prevent scholars from exploring the possibilities of broader, more interpretive investigations based upon the technical findings generated in the laboratory.

When considered together, recent studies of underdrawings can be loosely divided into three groups, depending on their art-historical biases and the breadth of their interpretive goals. The first group is dedicated to the generation and presentation of raw technical data about paintings, including, for instance, the presence and degree of underdrawing, without organizing principles or interpretation to date.[17] The second group of studies uses this kind of data to resolve issues of attribution or to determine a more precise chronological dating within the oeuvre of an artist.[18] The third group of studies addresses issues related to attribution and chronology as a corollary to the study of the function of drawings and underdrawings and the reconstruction of artistic working practices and workshop organization.[19] A separate trend in this critical literature includes studies undertaken by art historians or curators in conjunction with conservators in which technical information retrieved from the paintings themselves is connected to contemporary treatises to examine the relationship between theory and practice.[20]

The Technical Literature about Dürer's Paintings

The earliest technical literature concerning Dürer's paintings consists of reports connected with unfinished paintings and the restoration of damaged paintings. Henry Wehle, for instance, reported extensively on the unfinished and damaged *Salvator Mundi* (Figure 1). In the tradition of Pliny, Wehle grasped the significance of the opportunity provided by the painting to catch a glimpse of Dürer's artistic working practices.[21] Other examples are the case report filed by Hertha Gross-Anders and the study by D. von Hampe on the occasion of the restoration of the *Dresden Altarpiece*.[22] Gross-Anders and von Hampe did not investigate the underdrawing in that painting because the technical means to do so was not available at that time. In addition, their studies, like other pure conservation reports, was written not for an audience of art historians and curators, but for an audience of conservators.[23]

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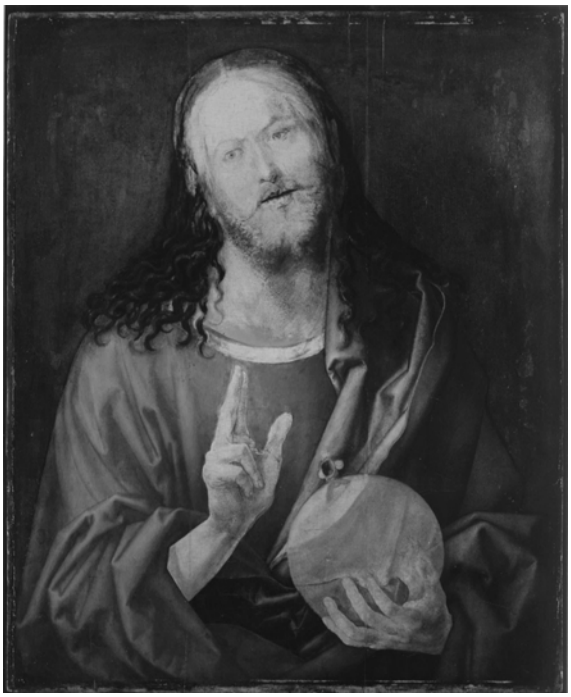

1. A. Dürer, *Salvator Mundi*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Despite the availability of some technical reports about specific paintings, little attention has been directed to investigations of the physical aspects of Dürer's paintings as a group. Fedja Anzelewsky included a short section on Dürer's painterly technique in his 1971 monograph but noted that there had been no extensive investigation of Dürer's painting technique. Anzelewsky's précis of Dürer's painting technique is based, liked Wehle's, on the damaged *Salvator Mundi* (Figure 1) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[24] Although the *Salvator Mundi* provides a unique opportunity to see the hand of Dürer at work, perusal of it alone as the explicatory example of Dürer's painterly technique is problematic on at least three counts. First, the painting is damaged; second, the surface is drastically over-cleaned; and third, it is likely that the painting was left unfinished by Dürer.[25] Together, these problems with the state of the painting preclude any reliable judgment of painting technique based upon it alone.[26]

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Christian Wolters used several Dürer paintings in his explication of the utilization of X-radiography for art history.[27] His analyses were limited to the important differentiation between various methods employed for the application of lead white by different artists in the North during the sixteenth century. Gisela Goldberg studied the *Four Apostles* in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich with infrared reflectography and with X-radiography to test the hypothesis put forward by Erwin Panofsky (based on observations made by Karl Voll) that the figure of St. Paul in the right panel was originally intended to be St. Philip.[28] Her investigation revealed this argument untenable. Technical investigation, including infrared reflectography and X-radiography of the head of St. Paul, shows that the head was executed as originally planned, with only a few pentimenti visible in either of the two Apostle panels. Goldberg's correction of Panofsky's theory about the *Four Apostles* is important because it demonstrates how technical investigations and the close study of the paintings themselves can lead to improved insights about the iconographic meaning of works of art.

Thomas and Adelheid Brachert published the results of several technical studies of paintings, including a thorough investigation of the paintings of *Emperors Sigismund* and *Charlemagne* in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.[29] The Bracherts further argued that, in addition to the primary versions of *Emperors Sigismund* and *Charlemagne* in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Dürer painted another pair of bust-length portraits located in a Swiss private collection. They note the existence of an extensive underdrawing in these bust-length portraits and assume that a copyist would not execute any underdrawing at all, much less such an elaborate underdrawing. Therefore, they argue that these two portraits must be by Dürer himself. The fallacy in this approach is the assumption that the existence of underdrawing in a composition is indicative of originality and, therefore, excludes the possibility that a composition might be a clever imitation by a copyist.[30] Furthermore the dense and rapid parallel hatching used in the two Swiss paintings does not resemble the underdrawing in other paintings by Dürer. Unfortunately, I was unable to examine the underdrawing in the *Emperors Sigismund* and *Charlemagne* myself.[31]

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