

I Dürer and his culture – an introduction

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Albrecht Dürer has long been considered a critical figure in the history of the European imagination. He has come to represent a pivotal moment in European artistic production and self-consciousness, the point at which German art became part of the broader art historical tradition at the basis of the Western cultural canon. It is the artist's technical mastery across a range of media, his innovative experimentation with iconographic themes, the breadth of his intellectual networks and depth of intellectual engagement, as well as his entrepreneurial endeavours, that have enticed generations of scholars to explore, analyse and interpret Dürer's literary and artistic *œuvre*. Dürer has become the subject of intense historical speculation at the same time as his artistic work continues to evoke strong public interest. His artistic position and cultural hold over the values which we associate with the German Renaissance are universally acknowledged. This is reflected in the massive number of studies devoted to Dürer and his art over the last two and a half decades, the most important of which are listed in the bibliography at the end of this book.

What we intend to do in this volume is to extend and deepen understanding of the political, social and cultural contexts through which the various meanings of Dürer's works can be more clearly perceived, and to demonstrate what a rich source his art can be for an appreciation of the cultural dynamics and discourses of early sixteenth-century Europe. The theoretical notion underlying this collection is the view that contemporary cultural practices and discourses, rather than Dürer's evolutionary development as an artist, offer the key to the understanding of much of Dürer's artistic work. This notion provided the basis for an international symposium which was held at the University of Melbourne in August 1994 in association with a major exhibition of Dürer's prints at the National Gallery of Victoria. Some of the papers from the symposium, which involved historians from various disciplines, were then expanded and rewritten into their present form. This volume does not represent an attempt at a comprehensive overview of Dürer's artistic output. It is a collection, an anthology, with

different disciplinary viewpoints and theoretical positions. We hope it will stimulate the reader to explore Dürer's works from the perspective of cultural discourses which have seldom been regarded as intrinsic to Dürer's interests, and also to focus on images which provide important insights into an understanding of his cultural milieu. An approach to Dürer which stresses the need for a diversity of disciplinary perspectives to tackle the breadth of the artist's *œuvre* and endeavours is not new.¹ This book affirms the need for such diversity and seeks to expand the range of perspectives.

THE CULTURE OF EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY

The chapters in this volume endeavour to locate Dürer within his cultural environment. 'Culture' is meant here in its broadest sense to refer to the myriad of communicative processes by which different members of a society make meaning of their experiences. Dürer's environment and experience was first and foremost that of the late medieval German town, that social formation and cluster of sites in which economic exchange, communal values and sacred ritual were often engaged in fierce struggles to preserve and expand their rights and space in the fifteenth century, and whose articulate citizenry and burgeoning economies provided the patronage and custom for an explosion of cultural production. Nuremberg was one of the most prominent of these, the third largest city in the empire after Cologne and Vienna, and a city which inspired comparisons with the great urban centres of the Italian peninsula. Not only did Dürer work within this civic culture and draw on its energies, he also responded to it and helped give it shape, as a number of recent publications on the culture of Nuremberg have stressed.²

The range of Dürer's intellectual and artistic interests and the changes which characterise his artistic production reflect a culture undergoing profound transformations. However, such transformations were neither sudden nor total. Much recent historical research has begun to play down ideas of rupture and discontinuity in the sixteenth century. The early Reformation movement in Germany, for instance, did not introduce sweeping religious and social change in a sudden and permanent fashion; nor did it result in immediate support and conversion. The changes it brought were gradual and piecemeal, and allowed for much which appears contradictory.³ Likewise the emergence of a nascent print culture in the sixteenth century was a staggered rather than linear process; and one which

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did not displace the oral and scribal culture of the Middle Ages but allowed both to coexist with print.⁴

The critique of older narrative models of social change based on linear progression has important consequences for the historical analysis of cultural figures such as Dürer. Moreover this critique parallels the recent radical questioning of models of individual development, based as they are on notions of human subjectivity as stable and autonomous.⁵ The relevance of these two critiques is clear in the case of an artist such as Lucas Cranach, a man who could provide strong support for the new religious reform movements and yet continue to draw on patronage from the old church and devote himself to artistic themes for which there would have been little sympathy among the leaders of the reform.⁶ In other words models of individual and societal development must be able to include quite diffuse, even contradictory, elements. And this will only be possible if we expand the parameters within which we read the works of artists such as Dürer and consider them as products of a complex, multifaceted culture.

Some forms of cultural transformation find clear, and sometimes even self-conscious, expression in Dürer's work. The early sixteenth century was a period when the social pretensions and status of the artist began to undergo dramatic change within the German cultural arena, for instance. And Dürer's self-portraits, with their accompanying inscriptions, represent some of the most powerful statements of an increasing self-consciousness which appears at this time across a broad spectrum of writers and visual artists.⁷ This change was related to broader factors. These included the discovery by princes such as Emperor Maximilian and urban governments such as Nuremberg of the ways in which the work of artists could serve their political power; the development of a consumer market among the nobility and the increasingly well-off and educated burghers; a closer interaction between artists and the classical learning developed by a new breed of humanist writers and scholars on both sides of the Alps; and increased interest by Northern artists in the theory and practice of art and architecture as developed in Italy. Moreover, the involvement by artists such as Lucas Cranach, Peter Flötner and Hans Sebald Beham in the development of popular forms of visual propaganda in Reformation pamphlets also served to emphasise the significant cultural role of the artist. Artists such as Hans Baldung Grien and Erhard Schön became skilled at giving expression to contemporary social anxieties over gender conflict and the regulation of the moral order; others such as Hans Burgkmair and Hans Holbein disseminated images which represented the

wonder and also uncertainty of Europeans at the discovery of the Americas; while those such as Albrecht Altdorfer and Hans Schäufelein helped promote a re-evaluation of the natural world through the presentation of topography and landscape.

There is little doubt that Dürer was actively involved in shaping these cultural transformations in the early sixteenth century. Joseph Koerner's recent study has demonstrated Dürer's critical role in transforming the status of the artist;⁸ while other studies have documented his important contributions to the new print media,⁹ to the princely propaganda of the Hapsburgs,¹⁰ to the articulation of a late medieval religious piety¹¹ and to the creative relationship between artists and humanist scholars.¹² Dürer's other interests and involvements have not received the same level of recognition and analysis. How significant, for instance, was Dürer's interest in the natural world? To what extent did this interest relate to the expansion of a European world-view which now included the Americas? And to what extent was it stimulated by the concern of Dürer and his humanist colleagues to promote a regional Germanic past? Have we unjustifiably downplayed Dürer's intense interest in various local and regional cultures and traditions in an attempt to highlight the humanist and classical themes in his work? To what extent did Dürer's work reflect sixteenth-century anxieties over gender? Did he share in the concerns of many contemporary humanists and civic authorities who argued for an increased regulation of the moral life? How does his work reflect contemporary understandings of seeing and of the relationship between viewer and image? Various chapters in this collection attempt to open up such questions and demonstrate how Dürer's work should be read not only by reference to his own artistic production and that of his fellow artists, but for the way it interprets, makes conscious and shapes various discourses and practices within his culture.

ARTIST AND ENVIRONMENT

In recent historical and art historical literature the changing relationship between individual and environment, a theme which is very pertinent to European urban societies of the early sixteenth century, has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention. The understanding of the physical world, the manner in which this understanding was integrated into broader cultural meanings of community and the role played by the artist in this process were all undergoing dramatic changes at this time. Artists, as well as writers, preachers, political authorities and even a new class of

collectors, responded in different ways to the geographical and cultural expansion of the European world which followed the Spanish and Portuguese drive into the continents of Africa and the Americas and the rediscovery of classical and pre-classical literature within Europe itself.¹³ Two major trends are evident in the recent discourse on the relationship between sixteenth-century artists and the environment. Some studies focus on the role of nature and landscape in the articulation of cultural understanding and meaning,¹⁴ while an increasing number of others concentrate on the practices and meaning of collecting.¹⁵

Studies on the relationship of art and nature or landscape have been primarily concerned with the processes by which human identity is defined through an appreciation of environment, how daily experience of the plants and animals of a landscape shapes cultural values and communal understanding. Growing interest in nature and natural phenomena is already evident in the work of early Netherlandish artists from the fifteenth century,¹⁶ but it is taken considerably further in the work of Dürer, Altdorfer and Baldung Grien. Studies on the history of early collecting also consider the awakening of interest in the meaning of nature; but they incorporate this interest into a broader search for the conceptual frameworks which motivated or underpinned the collections of the period. The capacity to accumulate a vast array of natural objects, artefacts, ethnographic materials, antiquities, books and reproductions was a privilege reserved for a small number of wealthy and powerful collectors. Individuals such as Francesco I de Medici, Ferdinand II and Albrecht V of Bavaria used their collections to express their understanding of how the macrocosm functioned and also to assert their own place within this encyclopaedic image of the world. Scholars and wealthy burghers soon followed suit in establishing more modest and less comprehensive collections, which nevertheless gave them the opportunity to express their interest in and their knowledge of a world that extended beyond their immediate local environment.

In the first chapter of this volume, Dagmar Eichberger investigates the extent to which an artist like Albrecht Dürer was affected by the general taste for collecting in the early sixteenth century. Dürer's involvement in producing and providing materials for private collections was substantial; and a close reading of the section of Dürer's diary which records his trip to the Netherlands suggests that towards the end of his life he became something of a collector himself. His distinctive studies of animals, plants and landscapes were attempts to document and comprehend the visible world;

but rather than simply being objects of proto-scientific study, they were understood to reflect a God-given order and the harmony of the universe.

Larry Silver also examines the role of nature in the art of the early sixteenth century. But he does so by exploring how this interest in nature, stimulated by the reading of classical authors such as Tacitus, shaped a distinctive notion of German past and identity. Artists such as Altdorfer and Dürer contributed to feelings of German consciousness and patriotism by illustrating the programmatic texts of Conrad Celtis, by celebrating the emperor and the military, and also by portraying German landscape and topography. The role of nature in the reworking of cultural identity by these artists represents an important aspect of the visual history of the physical environment in early sixteenth-century Germany.

Wim Hüsken's analysis and interpretation of *The Michelfeldt Tapestry*, on the other hand, addresses the issue of the moral environment of early sixteenth-century Germany. By relating the image and its accompanying text to contemporary humanist literature, and in particular to the moralist writings of the Strasbourg humanist Sebastian Brant, Hüsken offers a new reading of the complex message about justice, truth and deceit inscribed in this didactic print. Here society is characterised by foolishness and deceit. By condemning antisocial tendencies which threaten the spiritual achievements of humanity, both artist and author appeal to their viewers to avoid moral lassitude and rejuvenate the moral order.

IMAGE AND AUDIENCE

Another persistent focus of art historical and historical discourse of the past decade has been the manner in which cultural objects represent reality and the relationships created between these objects and their viewers/audiences. Within the discipline of art history, this focus has partly been a response to the dramatic way in which post modernist discourse of the 1980s has attempted to reverse the traditional Newtonian optic, so that artistic representation is no longer understood primarily by reference to the external world it claims to depict, but more by reference to the internal perception of the viewing subject.¹⁷

This recent theoretical interest in the nature of artistic representation and its relationship to the viewer has made historians of all kinds far more receptive to exploring various aspects of images and visual perception in the sixteenth century. One area of particular attention is commonly referred to by the phrase 'the power of images' – the capacity of images to

stimulate powerful emotional responses in their viewers, such as religious devotion, sexual arousal or emotional comfort, or the manner in which they could elicit commitment, consolidate identity or shape perceptions of society's functions and purpose.¹⁸ Another set of issues are grouped under the term 'the gaze'.¹⁹ These relate to the techniques and devices employed by artists to direct messages at certain viewers. The devices act as a kind of script which establishes a close relationship between viewer and object by implicating the viewer within the represented reality. The increasingly common technique within the art object of having figures look out at the viewer and establish eye contact, for instance, serves to create a powerful interactive field within which new levels of meaning can be articulated.

Bob Scribner's chapter on 'ways of seeing' in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is a contribution to such an inquiry. What 'realities' did images represent and how were these dependent on contemporary understanding of modes of visual perception? How did artists such as Dürer manipulate images in order to arouse the emotions of viewers? What implications did these forms of arousal have for the social power of images? In exploring a broad range of examples within Europe's vibrant 'visual culture', Scribner emphasises that in order to understand that culture we need to accept quite different, and even what may seem to us contradictory, attitudes towards the power of images and the realities which they communicate.

Charles Zika also pursues this relationship of images and viewers, but through examination of a particular work of Dürer's, his engraving of a *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat*. Zika is concerned to explore how this engraving was able to achieve the levels of cultural power which then enabled it to shape the developing imagery of witchcraft over the early decades of the sixteenth century. His focus is not on the strategies consciously adopted by Dürer and other artists to manipulate their audiences, but on the manner in which images are able to encode a range of cultural meanings and how audiences in turn perceive and 'read' these meanings in quite different ways.

COMMUNAL CULTURE AND REPRESENTATION

The last decade has also seen a concerted attack by historians on models of artistic meaning which posit a simple relationship between social class or power and cultural production. As Norman Bryson has argued, such views are dependent on a societal model of base and superstructure, what he calls

a ‘two-column’ approach to the understanding of image-making.²⁰ A mechanical, one-way relationship between these two spheres offers little credibility for explaining processes of cultural meaning. Yet images must in some sense represent the values and structures of particular communities: it would be difficult to deny their capacity to communicate social value and mediate social relationships. How then should we restructure our cultural models in order for them to help us make sense of such processes? One particular way forward has been promoted by Roger Chartier, a historian of reading and the book in early modern France. Chartier has argued that we need to take seriously the ambivalent space created through the interaction between ‘cultural products’ and their readers. In other words, the meanings of books and other cultural products should not be viewed as fixed: they need to be negotiated and shaped through a process of appropriation on the part of readers.²¹ In this way meanings can be radically changed or even subverted. Cultural products therefore, are never simple and unambiguous indices of social value. They need to be understood more as a means by which a cultural space for multiple meanings is created, and these meanings are then renegotiated, appropriated or rejected.²²

Similar questions about representation and its relationship to communal culture are addressed by Lyndal Roper in her examination of courtship, love and gender relations in the sixteenth-century German town. Roper’s approach is to explore the character of the sexual culture within which images of couples were produced, rather than to focus on the images themselves. Whereas sexual identities can be discerned by exploring performative rituals, Roper argues that we also need to focus on the assumption of these identities by individuals, and that this assumption is never unproblematic, never total. Roper urges historians to leave a space for human subjectivity in their reading of the past and to be sensitive to the manner in which social practices such as love magic cut across as well as reinforce social scripts.

Christiane Andersson’s quite different study of the censorship of images also deals with images as powerful symbols of communal identity. Many images were censored because they were regarded as alternative forms of text, and in the form of the broadsheet were often very similar to texts. But other images drew their power from particular ritual practices which were understood to instil shame, or from older prophetic traditions which could reveal the true nature of contemporary figures such as the pope. Both the propagation and censorship of these images rested on their capacity to release or neutralise the power which adhered to them; and this could be

achieved by virtue of their capacity to give expression to different forms of community.

DÜRER AND THE CANON

While most chapters in this volume analyse visual and literary materials from the time of Dürer within the context of sixteenth-century European culture, the last two take as their subject the ways in which Dürer's work was perceived and evaluated by later generations of artists, collectors and writers. The application of a historiographical perspective to major Renaissance artists has achieved considerable currency in the art historical writing of recent decades. There have been two principal approaches: a large number of scholars have examined the various ways in which works of later artists respond to Dürer's artistic inventions;²³ while others have sought to locate Albrecht Dürer and his *œuvre* within the various artistic and art theoretical discourses of the sixteenth to twentieth centuries.²⁴ Keith Moxey has recently taken this historiographical approach one step further – by demonstrating the significance of Dürer's *œuvre* for the formation of an art historical canon which continues to shape the policies of contemporary art institutions.²⁵

The relationship between art museums and an art historical canon underlies Irena Zdanowicz's account of the formation of the Dürer collection at the National Gallery of Victoria. In tracing the history of this collection from its beginnings in a British colony, Zdanowicz describes the changing artistic tastes and values within the colony as well as the complex artistic and institutional connections with England and Europe which allowed these Dürer prints and incunabula to be gradually assembled in Melbourne. It is a story of Dürer's place in the establishment of European cultural values in a new European society; and it is also a story of the role of museum policy and practice in shaping these values.

While Zdanowicz describes the reception of a German artist in an Anglo-Saxon cultural environment, Paul Münch explores the much longer German history of the championing of Dürer as the pre-eminent German artist. Already in the sixteenth century, Dürer and his contemporaries had begun to construct the notion of a distinctive German identity which would help further the reputation of the region and its culture throughout Europe. This notion received a radically new impulse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Dürer was again singled out to assist the quest for German unification and to promote the idea of a unique German

identity. The history of this ongoing manipulation inevitably complicates any notions of his place within an art historical canon.

The continuing interest in Dürer as an artist and representative of that period of artistic creativity in the sixteenth century which we call the German Renaissance is truly remarkable. It is an interest well attested to by the vast body of scholarly literature which has been produced over the last twenty-five years. While Dürer's traditional pre-eminent position among German Renaissance artists has occasionally been challenged in recent years,²⁶ the scope and depth of his artistic and intellectual contribution to European culture has never been in question. Dürer hardly needs another volume to celebrate that fact, to stress his special genius, to distinguish him from the society around him. What he does need, we believe, are books which give serious attention to the various ways in which he is implicated in his culture, how he is indebted to it, how he draws on its resources, how he reflects its concerns, how he establishes his intellectual and professional networks, how he engages in conversation with different social strata; and of course, how he attempts to expand the material, artistic, intellectual and organisational resources of his society and overcome its limitations. We intend this book to be a response to this need. And in that way we hope to deepen understanding of Dürer as a complex historical figure, at once a creature of his culture and also its creator.