

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
23 December 2020

Exactly half a millennium ago this year, from July of 1520 until the summer of 1521, Dürer undertook a yearlong journey to the Netherlands—a trip that is unusually well documented thanks to the diary the artist kept throughout. In the entry for August 20, 1520, he notes that he gave an impression of “die Weynachten” to the Portuguese trade representative in Antwerp—a rare case of Dürer actually referencing one of his artworks by title. (Another example is his *Meister* engraving *Ritter, Tod und Teufel*, which, to the ongoing frustration of generations of iconologists, he merely calls “der Reuter”—the rider.)



*Weihnachten* is, of course, Christmas, the night (and day) when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, which, according to biblical narrative, took place in a stable on the outskirts of Bethlehem. Dürer locates the event in the forecourt of a decidedly Northern European-looking half-timbered house. Across the street from it, to the right side of the composition, are the remnants of a grander stone structure. The two buildings are connected through an archway that is perfectly constructed out of bricks in the Roman manner and opens a view into the far distance.

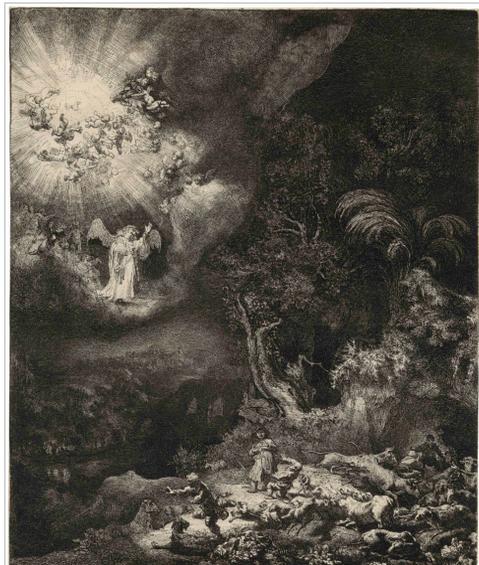
A tablet hanging off the chimney at the top shows the artist’s monogram and the date 1504, the same year Dürer engraved his iconic *Adam and Eve*. Ervin Panofsky suggested that the two prints, despite their difference in size and composition, could be seen as pendants of sorts. As we know from surviving preliminary drawings, Dürer had carefully constructed the figures of the ur-couple according to a set of mathematical proportions. Equally, the scene of the nativity displays an impeccable mastery of projective geometry, “with all vanishing lines converging correctly in one point, and equal magnitudes diminishing in constant gradation” (Panofsky). However, Dürer also ingeniously tweaked the proportions to make the figures of Joseph and Mary slightly larger than if they had been depicted exactly to scale, thereby saving them from being overpowered by the architecture. Seen together, the two images perfectly display Dürer’s grasp of representation of both the human form and of the man-made world in which the human narrative is embedded.



What further augments the visual power of these images is the hard-to-believe technical skill of Dürer’s burin work, a quality that can only truly be appreciated in fine, early impressions. And it is here that the *Nativity* dazzles even more than the *Adam and Eve*. Using modern-day tech-talk, one could say that in the *Nativity*, Dürer compressed an equal amount of visual information into a considerably smaller space while retaining the “resolution” of the lines—a technical feat that, in my opinion at least, he was probably not able to maintain a decade later when creating his *Meisterstiche* in 1513/14, for the simple reason that the human eyesight naturally diminishes over time. For all their justly celebrated complexities and artistic importance, *Melencolia I*, *Saint Jerome in His Study*, and the above-mentioned *Reuter* do not achieve the same level of meticulous detailing that Dürer accomplished in his *Weynachten* engraving.



To show just what kind of minuscule storytelling Dürer was able to render with his burin, I would like to draw attention to the scene visible through the stone arch in the far background. Here, Dürer follows the medieval tradition of depicting multiple, synchronous as well as asynchronous, episodes within the same picture. Looking closely, one can make out an angel appearing to some shepherds attending to their flock on a hillside.



One hundred and thirty year later, Rembrandt would make this biblical story into the subject of his first exploration of a nighttime scene in print. The etched nocturne *The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds* from 1634 was arguably the most ambitious graphic work the artist had undertaken so far, and here, too, the subtle gradations between light and dark can only be appreciated in impressions that were pulled before the intricately etched plate started to wear.

According to the Gospel of Luke, this annunciation to the shepherds took place the same day as the birth of the Christ Child. Rembrandt’s expansive scene shows not only a single angel but whole “armies” of them; the Hebrew צבאות (saba’oth or tzva’ot) is translated as “the heavenly host” in the King James version of the Bible: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:13f). The shepherds made their way to Bethlehem where they arrived “with haste.” They were the first to make “known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds” (ibid., 2:17f).

With this, I am now leaving you, dear readers, to wonder for yourselves at the richness of Rembrandt’s visual imagination, at Dürer’s technical mastery, but to also wonder at what happened that day, over two thousand years ago, when, with the birth of a child, a new religion came into being.

*Wishing all of you peaceful, safe, and well-distanced holidays!*

## Dürer’s “die Weynachten”

If anyone feels the need for further distractions, I recommend following this Instagram account for a lighthearted yet utterly brilliant retracing of Dürer’s Netherlandish journey in the year of its quincenennial:

## Dürer’s Netherlandish Journey – rebooted

