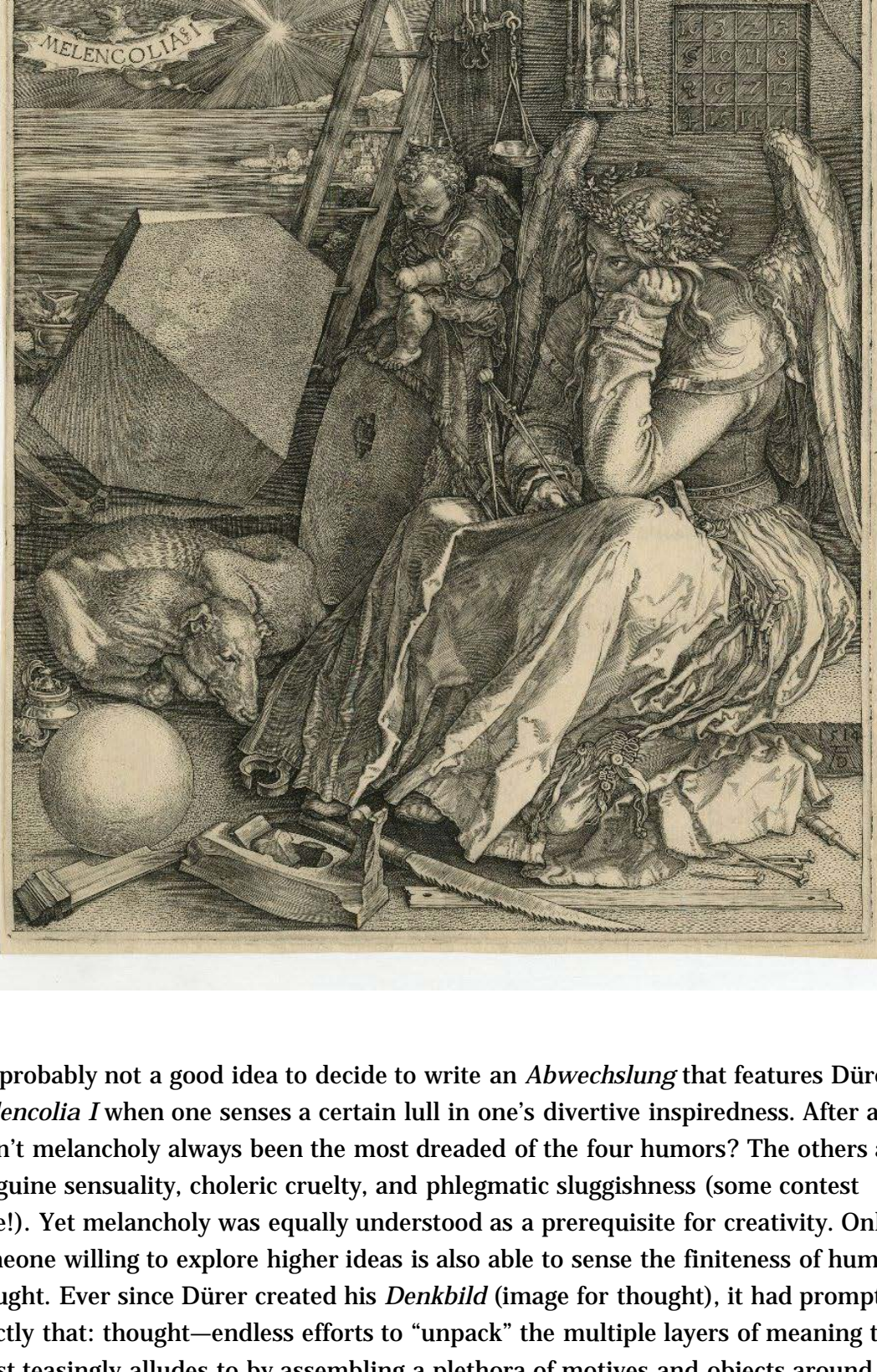


# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung  
28 July 2021



It's probably not a good idea to decide to write an *Abwechslung* that features Dürer's *Melencolia I* when one senses a certain lull in one's divertive inspiredness. After all, hasn't melancholy always been the most dreaded of the four humors? The others are sanguine sensuality, choleric cruelty, and phlegmatic sluggishness (some contest here!). Yet melancholy was equally understood as a prerequisite for creativity. Only someone willing to explore higher ideas is also able to sense the finiteness of human thought.

Ever since Dürer created his *Denkbild* (image for thought), it had prompted exactly that: thought—endless efforts to “unpack” the multiple layers of meaning the artist teasingly alludes to by assembling a plethora of motives and objects around the central figure, a brooding angel whose gaze is fixed on something beyond the image itself. Arguably more than any other figure in the history of Western art, this personification of “die Melanckolj,” as Dürer calls the print in his *Netherlandish Diary*, is a representation of thought depicted in the very act of thinking (Hartmut Böhme)—reflective and reflexive at the same time.

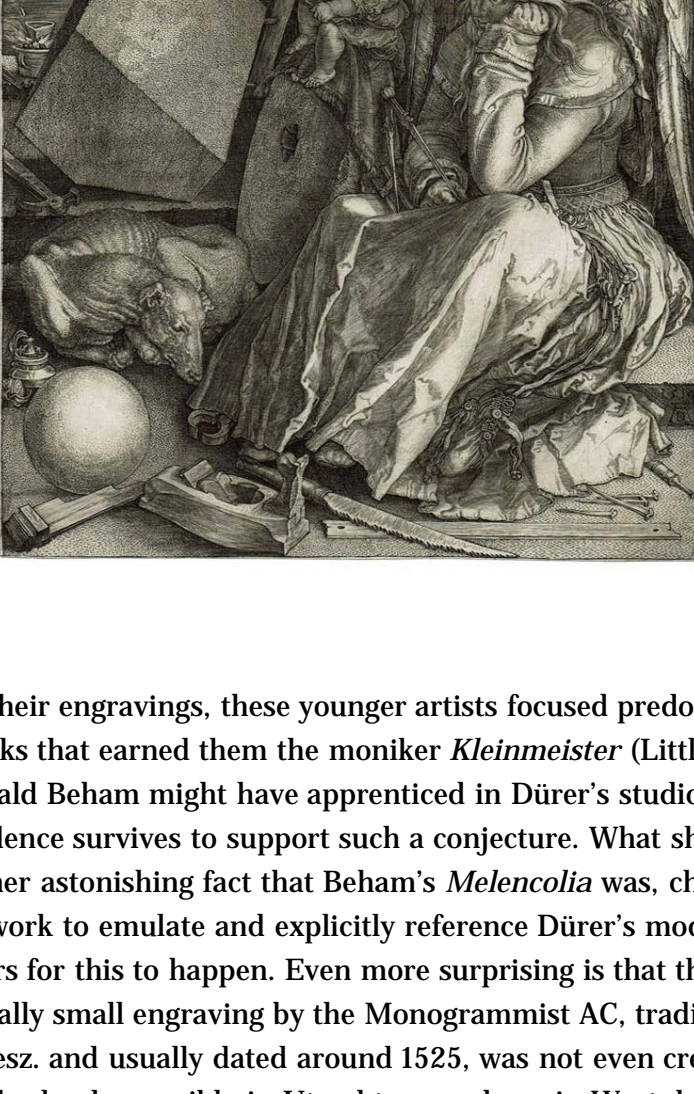
The *Discursus Melancholicus* on Dürer's *Meisterstich* started in 1541, when the Nuremberg humanist Joachim Camerarius, who had known Dürer and translated his treatise on human proportion into Latin, used the print in his *Elementa rhetoricae* to demonstrate how to eloquently describe a work of art. And it has continued ever since. William Blake had an impression of the print hanging above his desk and called melancholy “the mother of invention.” (Pity we can't ask Frank Zappa any longer his thoughts on this.) It also adorned the studio of the German Romantic artist and polymath Carl Gustav Carus, who, by the way, believed the angel to be male, a Faustian figure, despairing over what can never be known.

In the twentieth century, the discussion of the print would be dominated by the manifold analytical filiations of the Warburg School in such a way that all subsequent interpretative efforts end up being as much (if not more) exegesis of the texts by Aby Warburg, Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, and William Heckscher as they are studies of Dürer's print. And even Peter-Klaus Schuster's seminal two-volume summary, devoted solely to the print and its interpreters (*Melencolia I: Dürers Denkbild*, Berlin 1991), was hardly an endpoint. More recently, to name but one example, Mitchell Merback's 2017 book-long essay *Perfection's Therapy* proposes, as the title suggests, that Dürer's print “is not only an erudite portrayal of the peculiar misery that grips creative people . . . but also an instrument for remedying it.”

So, turning to *Melencolia I* might not be such a bad idea after all. Since even if the web of theories that had been built around this print over the last five-hundred years will hardly ever be disentangled again, a certain trust in the power of melancholy itself has never really been in question. Its connotations could—and mostly were—understood as negative (paralyzing, inhibitive), but as Blake's admiration and Warburg's (and now Merback's) interpretations show, some introspective awareness can actually be a good thing.

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By now I have already used up about half of my allotted space and probably too much of the time I could expect anyone to allow themselves to be distracted by this bit of unrequired reading. And all we have got so far is what feels like a stamp-size summary of the many meters of shelf space devoted to this *Jahrhundertbild* which, I now have to confess, I can't even offer for sale. What today's musing can do, however, apart from helping me out of an uninspired funk, is present a print by Sebald Beham (1500–1550), another Nuremberg printmaker who belongs to the generation of artists that follows Dürer (1471–1528). Other members of this generation were the fellow *Nürnberger* Georg Pencz, Sebald's brother Barthel, and the Northerners Heinrich Aldegrever and Jacob Binck. All of them were among the first to profit from the older master's innovative establishment of printmaking an important, even essential part of artistic practice.



In their engravings, these younger artists focused predominantly on small-format works that earned them the moniker *Kleinmeister* (Little Masters). It is believed that Sebald Beham might have apprenticed in Dürer's studio although no documentary evidence survives to support such a conjecture. What shall interest us here is the rather astonishing fact that Beham's *Melencolia* was, chronologically, only the second artwork to emulate and explicitly reference Dürer's model, and that it took a full 25 years for this to happen. Even more surprising is that the earliest such work, an equally small engraving by the Monogrammist AC, traditionally attributed to Alaert Claesz. and usually dated around 1525, was not even created in Nuremberg but in the Netherlands, possibly in Utrecht, or perhaps in Westphalia.



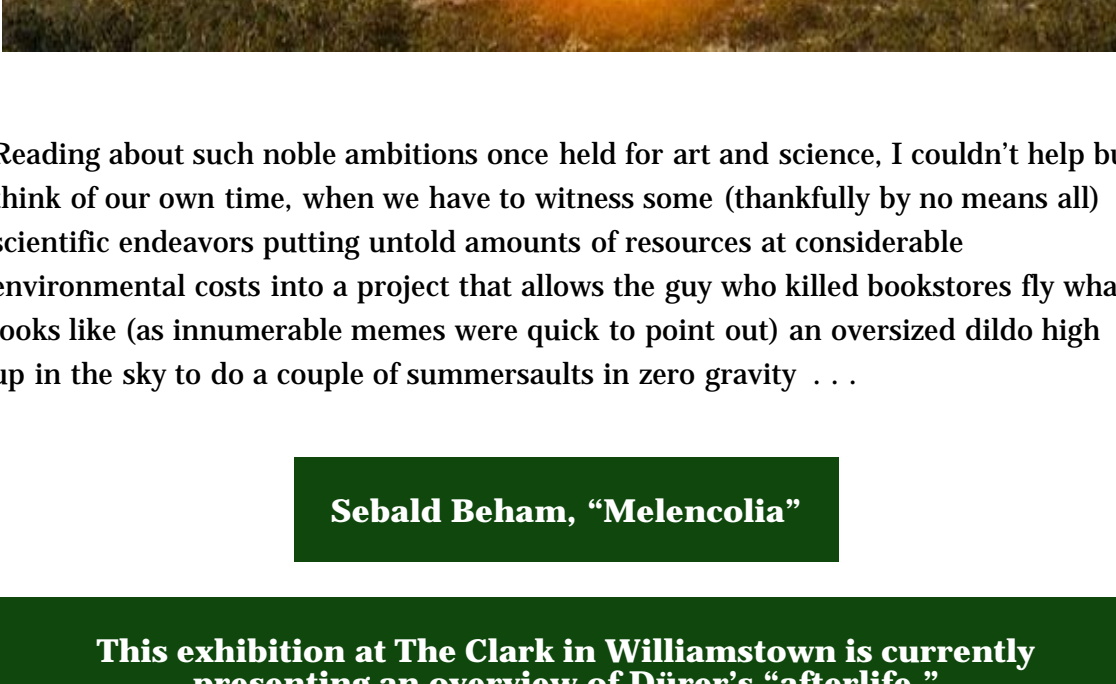
The person behind those initials AC remains ominous. He was more likely a publisher than a printmaker and since his prints are rare, it is somewhat excusable that his *Melencolien* merely features as a footnote (if at all) in the literature. Yet it is also a sign of how text-focused the expansive scholarship is when it comes to the afterlife of Dürer's print. Accordingly, neither of these two reinterpretations appears in the 365 illustrations of Schuster's magnum opus.



In Stephen Goddard's fundamental catalogue on the German Little Masters (*The World in Miniature*, exhibition, organized in 1988 for the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KA), Patricia Emison suggests that while “Sebald may have drained Dürer's image of some of its richness and nuance of meaning along with the simplification of form . . . he remembered the cause of melancholy: man's attempt to measure and calculate rationally in a vast world.” She further notes that Beham, while choosing a considerably smaller format, is nonetheless attempting “to be grander in his level of decorum” as can be noticed in the figure's well-coiffed hair and classical tunic. The most crucial change, however, lies perhaps not in Beham's subtractions but in what he adds to the scene, namely a crucible and two sealed bottles. A contemporary viewer would clearly have identified those as alchemistic tools.

It is true that Dürer's print does not depict these vessels, the only astral-magical device depicted by him is the square of numbers, the *mensula Jovis* which serves as a protective “Ex-Voto” (Warburg) by calling on Jupiter to protect against the negative influences emanating from Saturn who is associated with the melancholic humor. Panofsky and Saxl, in their 1923 study (expanded in collaboration with Klibansky in 1964), and even more vehemently Panofsky, in his 1943 Dürer biography, argue against such alchemic interpretations. Could this have been an expression of the *Zeitgeist*? With the abyss of evil having opened up in Nazi-occupied Europe, it became blatantly clear that spirituality could hardly suffice to reign in the furies of ideological delusion. This was a time to fight back, with cold rationality and the warfare it was able to provide.

On a more principal level, the relegation of such images as Beham's print at best to the sidelines of the argumentation is also symptomatic of an art history that ultimately prefers texts over images to support its own iconological theories which, after all, are produced as texts. We should remember, though, that in early modern times the boundaries of scientific rationality were by no means as clearly defined as we tend to believe today. Kepler, the most important astronomer after Copernicus, did not see a conflict in calculating the elliptical orbits of the planets around the sun and at the same time drawing up horoscopes for his patrons. A similar fluidity most likely existed between chemistry and alchemy. Briefly discussing the topic of alchemy in his study, Schuster refers to the “scientific ethos of Dürer's time for which the occupation with the arts and the sciences was not yet a purpose in itself; instead, it was aiming for the cleansing and improvement of the human soul.”



Reading about such noble ambitions once held for art and science, I couldn't help but think of our own time, when we have to witness some (thankfully by no means all) scientific endeavors putting untold amounts of resources at considerable environmental costs into a project that allows the guy who killed bookstores fly what looks like (as innumerable memes were quick to point out) an oversized dildo high up in the sky to do a couple summersaults in zero gravity . . .

Sebald Beham, “Melencolia”

This exhibition at The Clark in Williamstown is currently presenting an overview of Dürer's “afterlife.”

