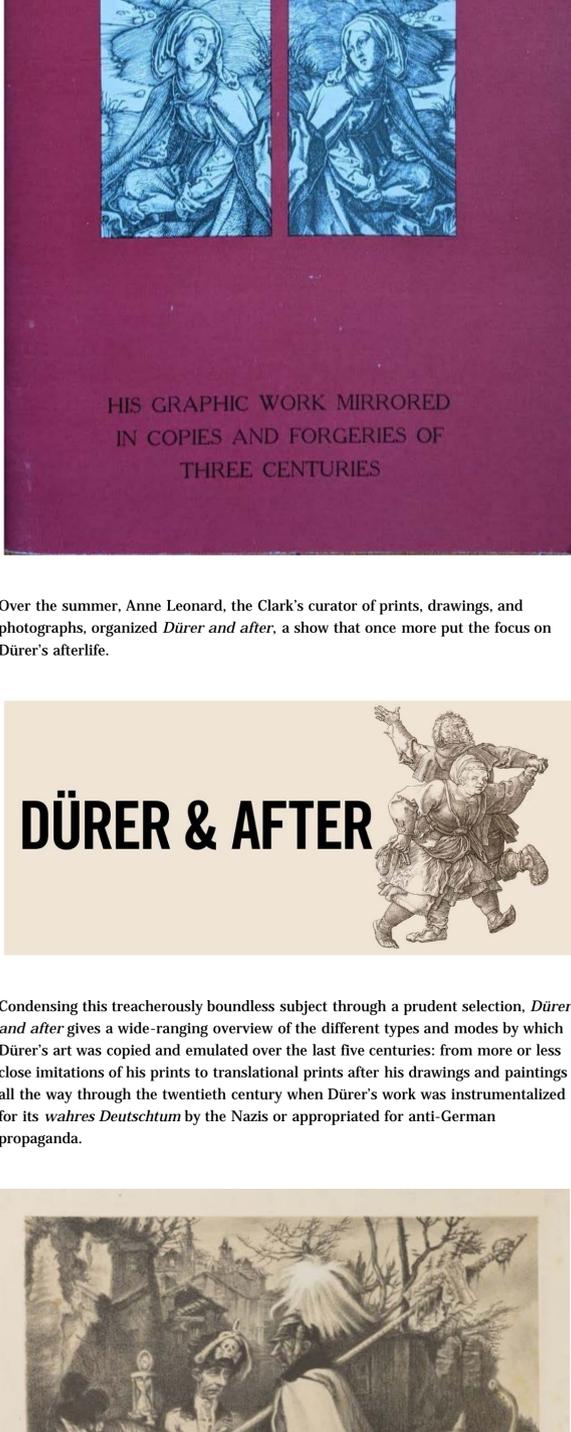


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
1 October 2021

Long before 1968, when the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, acquired the impressive collection of Dürer prints that the Catalan-born British MI6 officer, collector, and gentleman scholar Tomás ("Tommy") Harris (1908–1964) had put together, the museum already owned an unusually large range of copies after works by the Nuremberg master. Mostly of little monetary value and hence often neglected, they were the subject of a graduate seminar conducted by the eminent German-born art historian Julius Held at neighboring Williams College in the spring of 1974. This led to an exhibition at the Clark the following year and the modest catalogue that accompanied the show has to this day remained a highly-informative reference work—the more so since the most comprehensive listing of Dürer copies is still Joseph Heller's Dürer monograph from 1827.



DÜRER THROUGH OTHER EYES

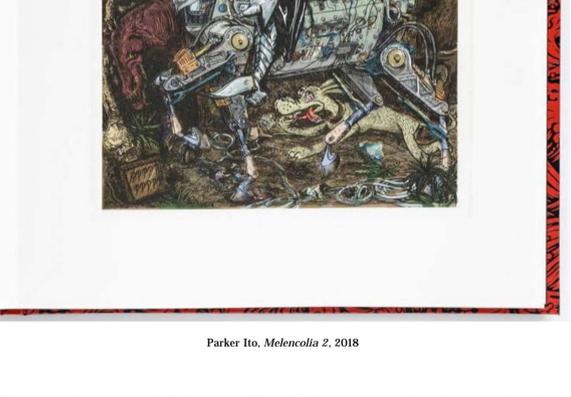
HIS GRAPHIC WORK MIRRORED
IN COPIES AND FORGERIES OF
THREE CENTURIES

Over the summer, Anne Leonard, the Clark's curator of prints, drawings, and photographs, organized *Dürer and after*, a show that once more put the focus on Dürer's afterlife.



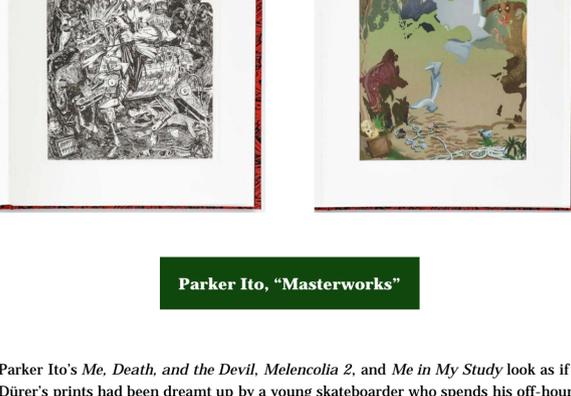
DÜRER & AFTER

Condensing this treacherously boundless subject through a prudent selection, *Dürer and after* gives a wide-ranging overview of the different types and modes by which Dürer's art was copied and emulated over the last five centuries: from more or less close imitations of his prints to translational prints after his drawings and paintings all the way through the twentieth century when Dürer's work was instrumentalized for its *wahres Deutschum* by the Nazis or appropriated for anti-German propaganda.



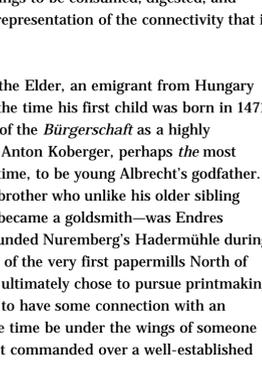
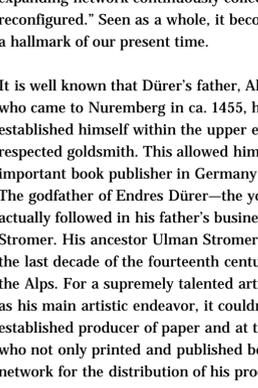
Maurice Louis Henri Neumont, *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, 1915, lithograph

The survey finds its twenty-first-century endpoint with Parker Ito's *Masterworks*, published in 2016 and displayed in a vitrine in the last room.



Parker Ito, *Melencolia 2*, 2018

Masterworks is a set of three portfolios. Each contains a digitally created etching based on one of Dürer's so-called *Meisterstiche* (master prints) of 1513/14—*Knight, Death, and the Devil*; *Melencolia I*; and *Jerome in his Study*—together with five prints that mimic woodblock progress proofs and an outline-only etching of the respective composition.



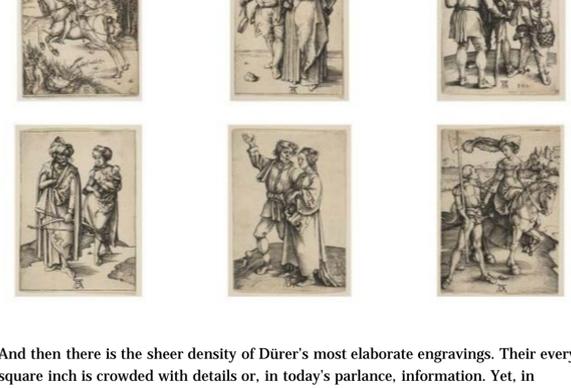
Parker Ito, "Masterworks"

Parker Ito's *Me, Death, and the Devil*, *Melencolia 2*, and *Me in My Study* look as if Dürer's prints had been dreamt up by a young skateboarder who spends his off-hours playing video games and reading Manga comics, with an undeniable element of steampunk as well as cyberpunk added for good measure. It is probably fair to say that those images look somewhat different from their 500-year-old models; and hardly surprising to learn that Parker, a Californian who was born in 1986 and grew up and still lives in the Los Angeles area, has indeed for many years been an avid skateboarder. All of this only fueled my curiosity when Anne invited Parker and me for a joint talk at the Clark on September 18, 2021.

With art historians at work for centuries to decode the detail of Dürer's prints and the internet (and the artist himself) available to retrace the plethora of visual markers that crowd Parker's no-less densely packed rebots, we decided against any pedantic one-by-one comparisons or mere explanations of what each and every motif means. Instead, Parker suggested we focus our attention on the concept of "network" that informs the very core of his artistic practice—a practice that he describes "as an expanding network continuously collecting things to be consumed, digested, and reconfigured." Seen as a whole, it becomes a representation of the connectivity that is a hallmark of our present time.

It is well known that Dürer's father, Albrecht the Elder, an emigrant from Hungary who came to Nuremberg in ca. 1455, had, by the time his first child was born in 1471, established himself within the upper echelon of the *Bürgerschaft* as a highly respected goldsmith. This allowed him to ask Anton Koberger, perhaps *the* most important book publisher in Germany at the time, to be young Albrecht's godfather. The godfather of Endres Dürer—the younger brother who unlike his older sibling actually followed in his father's business and became a goldsmith—was Endres Stromer. His ancestor Ulman Stromer had founded Nuremberg's Hadermills North of the Alps. For a supremely talented artist who ultimately chose to pursue printmaking as his main artistic endeavor, it couldn't hurt to have some connection with an established producer of paper, and at the same time be under the wings of someone who not only printed and published books but commanded over a well-established network for the distribution of his products.

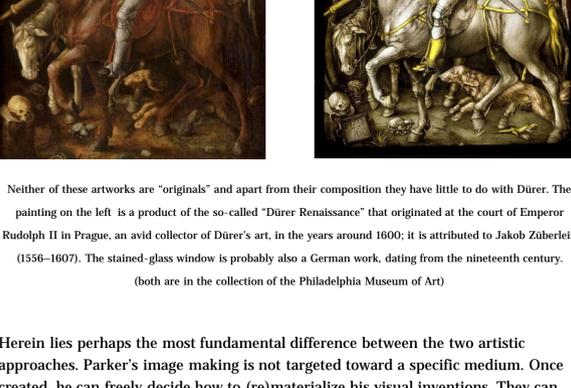
Many books were illustrated with woodcuts and learned book collectors undoubtedly represented a ready market for the thought-provoking images (*Denkbilder*) Dürer would go on to create throughout his career. Being able to rely on these connections did not stop him, however, from protecting his independence by making sure that stalls were set up on the many feast days of the Christian calendar, that some family member attended the big regional and national fairs, and that hired agents traveled far and wide to sell his works.



a print seller's stall at the annual fair held at Vladislav Hall in Prague Castle in 1607
(detail from a print by Aegidius Sadeler)

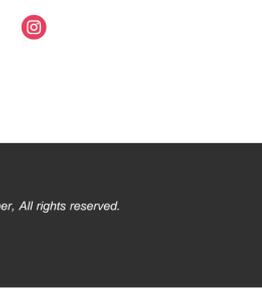
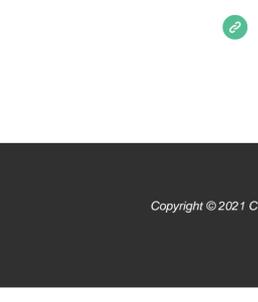
Our world is quite different from his, but fairs still happen—I[n]R[eal]L[ife] or virtually—agents make up a significant part of the art market, and yes, it remains true that people who actually care for prints often also care for books. Therefore, precious limited editions such as the *Masterworks* continue to get acquired by libraries that not only hold reference works but also artists' books. Yet Parker understands "networks" not just as personal connections between people and even less so as a relationship to the materiality with which things are made (copper plates, woodblocks, paper, etc.). He is interested in the conceptual parallels between Dürer's prints and his own image making.

A crucial part of the lasting omnipresence of Dürer's imagery is the simple—but for his time remarkably forward-thinking—fact that the majority of it was conceived as prints, and therefore as multiples that could be disseminated. They weren't quite as mass-produced as the comics that Parker repeatedly references in his own work, but Dürer did indeed already make the distinction between his more exclusive works and a *schlechtes Holzwerk* (though "schlecht" is not meant in the modern sense of "bad" but as "schlicht," i.e. "simple")—prints, therefore, that were targeted at a lower-priced and hence broader market.



And then there is the sheer density of Dürer's most elaborate engravings. Their every square inch is crowded with details or, in today's parlance, information. Yet, in Parker's work, the lines are neither engraved nor carved out. They are drawn digitally on an interactive whiteboard. And the dialogue that he is seeking is explicitly *not* an appropriation of images by substituting old meanings with new ones but a dialogue between traditional (analog) media and the digital ones available today. What he aims for is to transfer this non-hierarchical technical structure of Dürer's prints, where every area is covered with lines, into his own composition. He uses this structure as a "filter" in the same way that filters are applied in such image processing programs as Photoshop. Each area that informs the artist's work—people, objects, artworks, aspects of popular culture, etc.—becomes a layer and each layer can be built on top of each other until a density is reached that is at once comparable with Dürer's work but also decidedly different.

When writing that Dürer's engravings and woodcuts were conceived as prints, what I meant was that none of his paintings repeat the subjects of the prints or vice versa. (And whoever is rolling their eyes about the banality of this statement should know that more than once have I encountered visitors who admire, say, an exquisite display of Rembrandt prints to then remark: "These are really nice, but are there also any originals?"—And no, I am not making this up!)



Neither of these artworks are "originals" and apart from their composition they have little to do with Dürer. The painting on the left is a product of the so-called "Dürer Renaissance" that originated at the court of Emperor Rudolph II in Prague, an avid collector of Dürer's art, in the years around 1600; it is attributed to Jakob Zuberlein (1556–1607). The stained-glass window is probably also a German work, dating from the nineteenth century. (both are in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art)

Herein lies perhaps the most fundamental difference between the two artistic approaches. Parker's image making is not targeted toward a specific medium. Once created, he can freely decide how to (re)materialize his visual inventions. They can become engravings, paintings, or even 3D prints that could then be turned into sculptures. This was perhaps the most important thing I learned from our conversation: for someone of his generation, the distinction between analog and digital as binary has ceased to exist.

Parker Ito, *V550 / Me in the Studio w/ Red Hat* (R255C0B0), 2020
modified photo color scanner, stainless steel, extension cord

