

C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

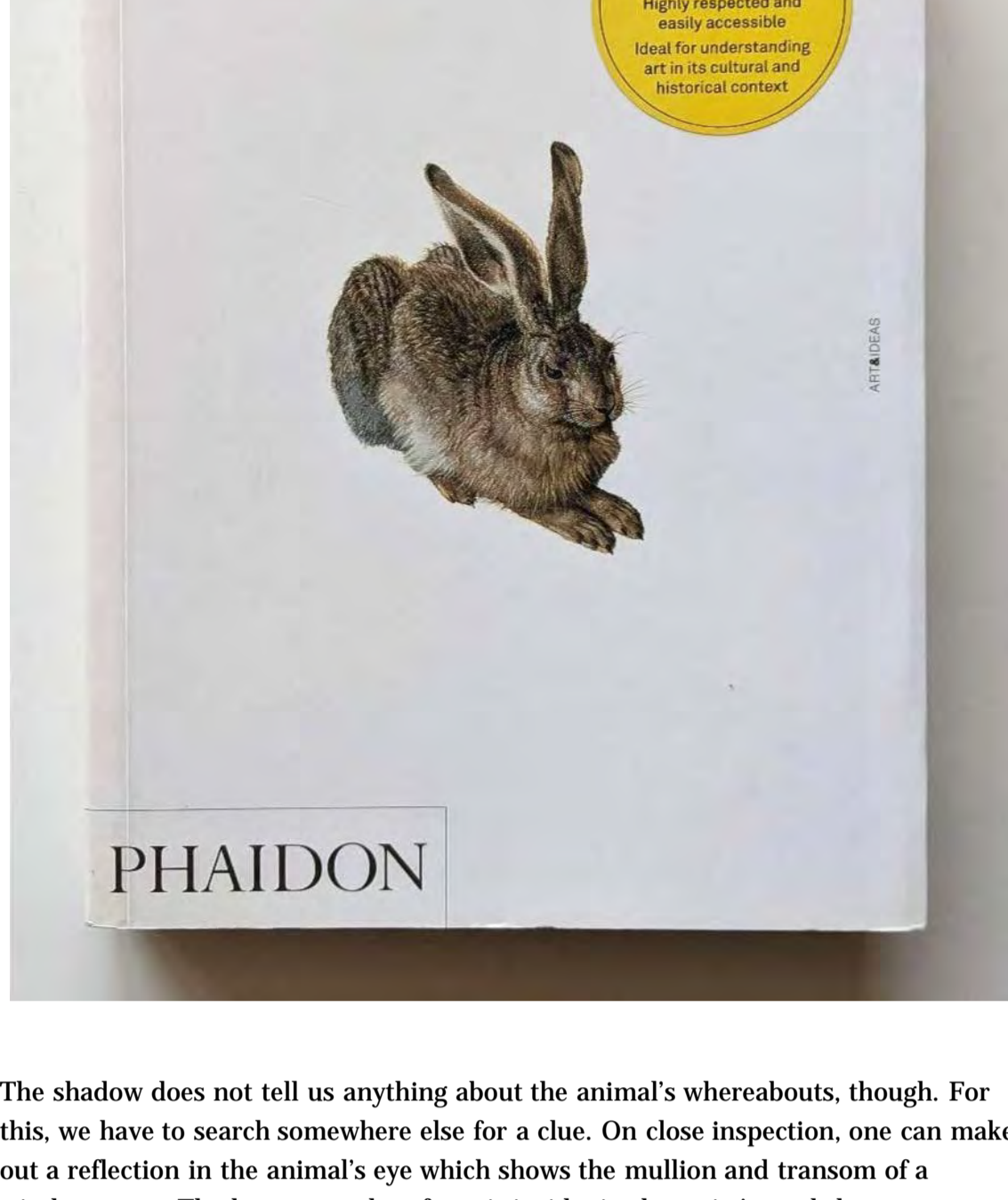
Distraction / Abwechslung
24 January 2022

The hare sits there as if in a void. It's not floating, though, nor is it an apparition in some metaverse, even if the ground it rests on remains unspecified. Light comes in from the left, casting a shadow onto the white of the paper.

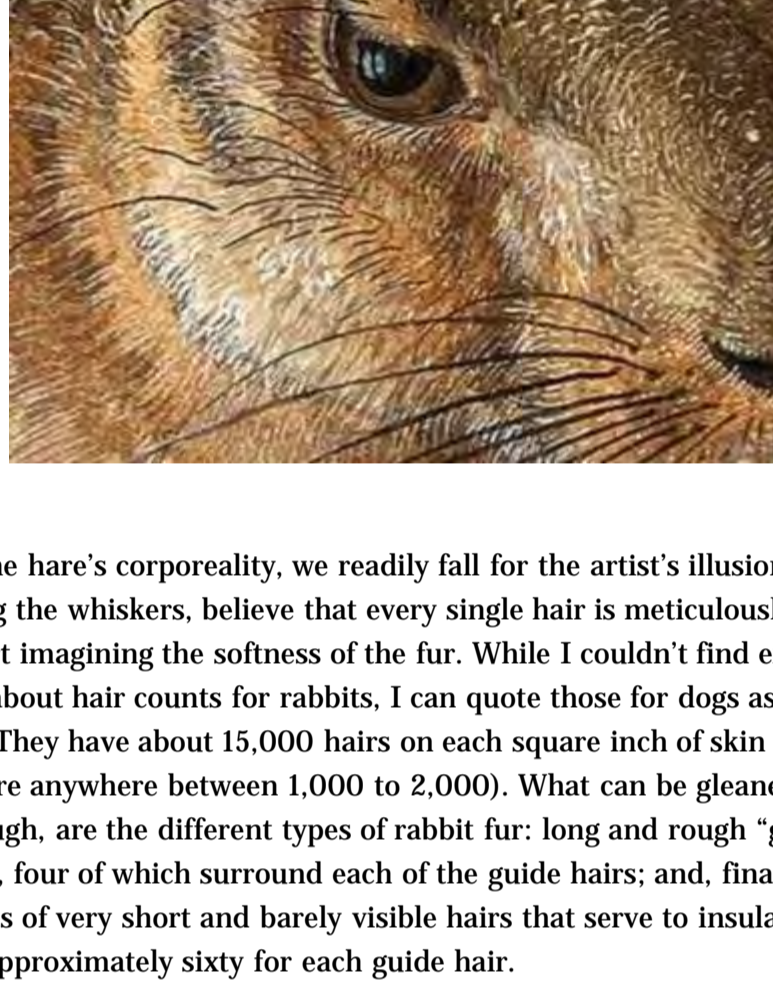


Albrecht Dürer, *A Hare*, 1502, watercolor and gouache, Albertina, Vienna

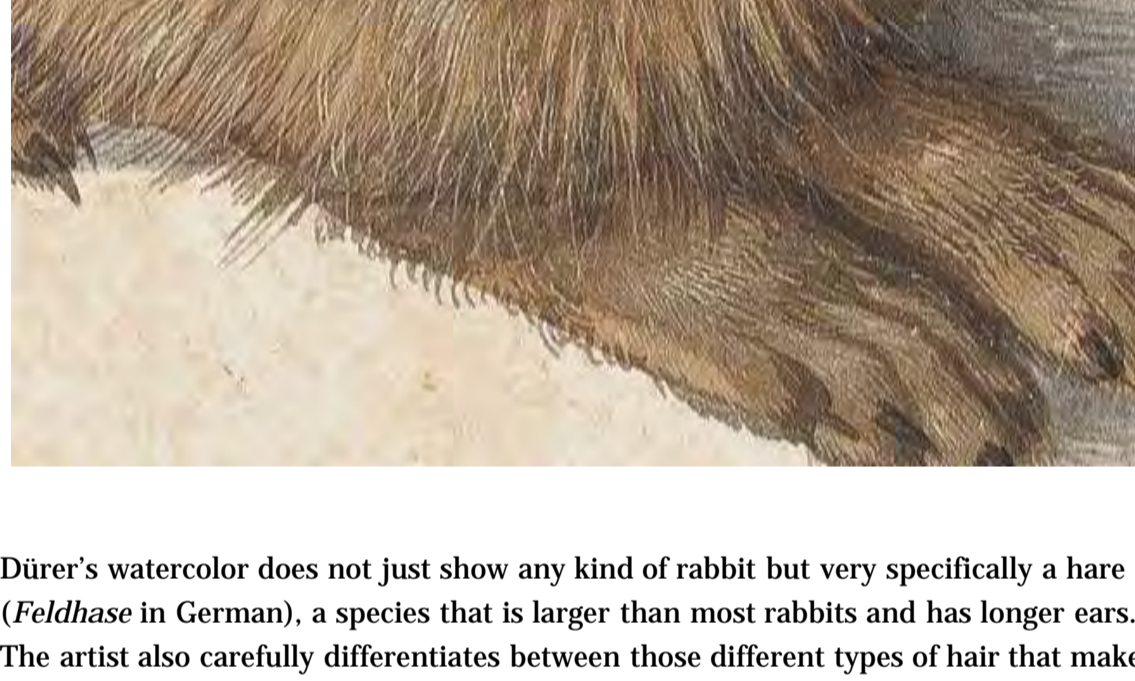
One realizes how integral this shadow is if one compares the watercolor with the way the animal appears on the cover of Jeffrey Chipps Smith's (otherwise very good) monograph on Albrecht Dürer. Here, the graphic designers gave in to their urge, unfortunately quite common among their tribe, to silhouette the figure and place it on a plain white background. It just looks awkward.



The shadow does not tell us anything about the animal's whereabouts, though. For this, we have to search somewhere else for a clue. On close inspection, one can make out a reflection in the animal's eye which shows the mullion and transom of a window cross. The hare must therefore sit inside, in the artist's workshop.



Assured by the hare's corporeality, we readily fall for the artist's illusionistic trick. We start counting the whiskers, believe that every single hair is meticulously rendered, and even start imagining the softness of the fur. While I couldn't find exact information about hair counts for rabbits, I can quote those for dogs as a comparison. They have about 15,000 hairs on each square inch of skin (human head hair counts are anywhere between 1,000 to 2,000). What can be gleaned from the internet, though, are the different types of rabbit fur: long and rough "guide hairs"; "guard hairs", four of which surround each of the guide hairs; and, finally, the "down" which consists of very short and barely visible hairs that serve to insulate the rabbit, counting to approximately sixty for each guide hair.



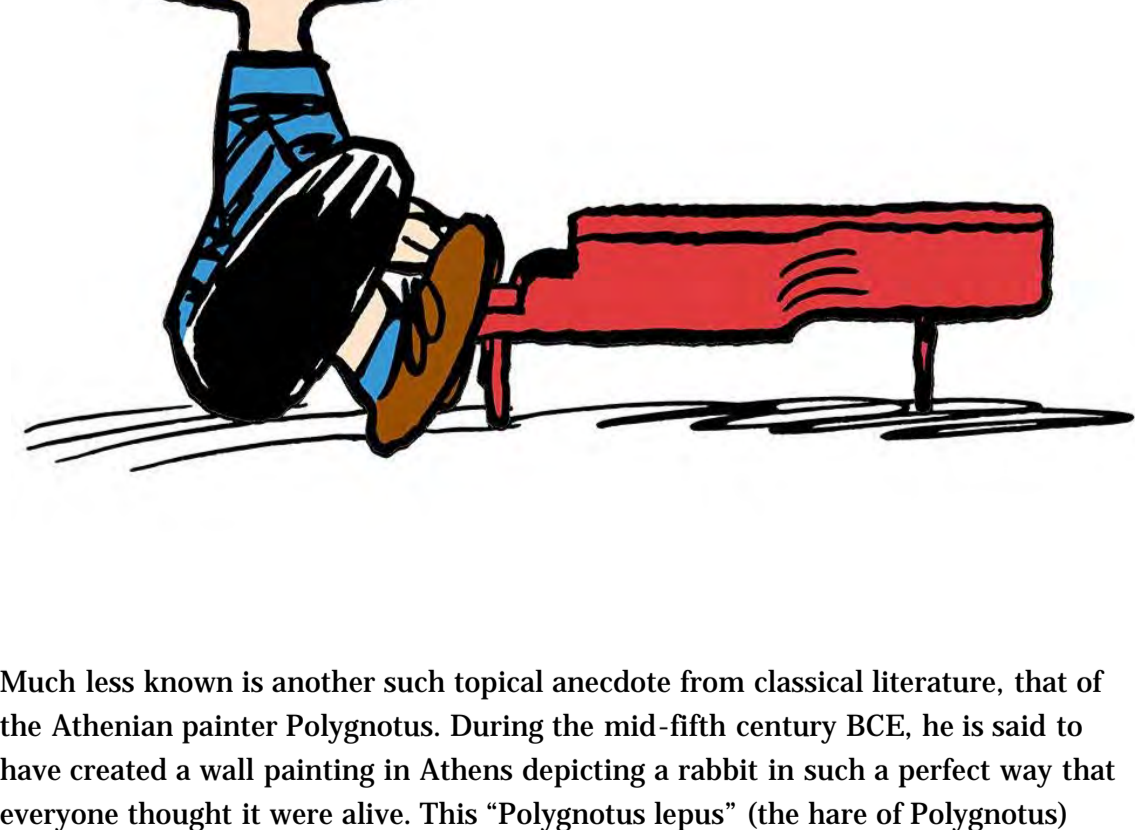
Dürer's watercolor does not just show any kind of rabbit but very specifically a hare (*Feldhase* in German), a species that is larger than most rabbits and has longer ears. The artist also carefully differentiates between those different types of hair that make up the animal's fur. (Christof Metzger identified it even more specifically as its winter coat.) Yet the way in which Dürer translates the knowledge gained from close observation into his image marks precisely the point at which his art differs from what would otherwise be merely a (scientific) illustration. Whereas the guide hairs and even many of the guard hairs are carefully depicted with the finest possible brushstrokes, the fur underneath, characterized even in the zoological Wikipedia entry as "barely visible," is ingeniously evoked by brown and grey wash that forms the ground on which the other hairs are then layered.



Dürer does not replicate reality. With great economy of means he manages instead to give us a perfect illusion of its appearance. What his watercolor is faithful to is the way in which we *perceive* the world around us, not to how it "really" is. Could it be that we are *projecting* too much of modern cognitive theory back on poor Albrecht while trying to grapple with his technical brilliance? I don't think so.

We know that incredulous astonishment already featured early on in the reception of Dürer's work. A famous instance can be found in the introduction with which the humanist teacher and scholar Joachim Camerarius prefaced the Latin edition of Dürer's *Four Books of Human Proportion* (Nuremberg, 1532), a text that counts as the earliest biographical account ever written of a Northern European artist. Camerarius tells us how Dürer met Giovanni Bellini during his stay in Venice in 1506 when both of them complimented each other on their work. "It chanced that they were having a private conversation about technique, and when this was over, Bellini said, 'Albrecht, you are a kind man; would you do your friend a small favor?'" Needless to say, Dürer agreed. "Then Bellini said 'I want to have as a gift from you one of the brushes that you use to draw hair.' At that Albrecht without delay produced a large number of brushes like any others and such as Bellini also used and told him to choose which he liked the most... But Bellini thought he was being deceived, and said, 'No, I didn't mean these, but the ones which you use to draw tresses and several hairs in a single stroke, which ought to be thinned down with tiny spacing in breadth. For otherwise it would be impossible to preserve such evenness in curves and in spacing, often over a very great length.' 'I don't use any others than these,' said Albrecht, 'and to prove it, you can watch!' Taking one of the brushes on display, he drew the very long and crinkly tresses ... while Bellini watched in astonishment" (as translated by Jeffrey Ashcroft).

As Peter Parshall has pointed out, "such 'demonstrations' [were] a common topos in the traditional literature on artists." Camerarius's story is, in essence, not so different from an episode of Charles M. Schulz's comic strip *Peanuts* in which the Schroeder character replies to Lucy's question how he manages to play Beethoven's music so well on a toy piano: "Practice, practice, practice."



Much less knian is another such topical anecdote from classical literature, that of the Athenian painter Polygnotus. During the mid-fifth century BCE, he is said to have created a wall painting in Athens depicting a rabbit in such a perfect way that everyone thought it were alive. This "Polygnotus lepus" (the hare of Polygnotus) frequently appears in late-medieval proverb collections yet only recently has Christof Metzger connected it with Dürer's famous watercolor. Given the highly sophisticated and learned circles in which the artist moved (and which also formed the audience for his semantically complex *Denkbilder*), it is indeed very tempting to think that it was Polygnotus, and not just *Hasenliebe* (a love for the fluffy long-eared creature), that made him choose, of all animals, a hare to sit for a portrait.

