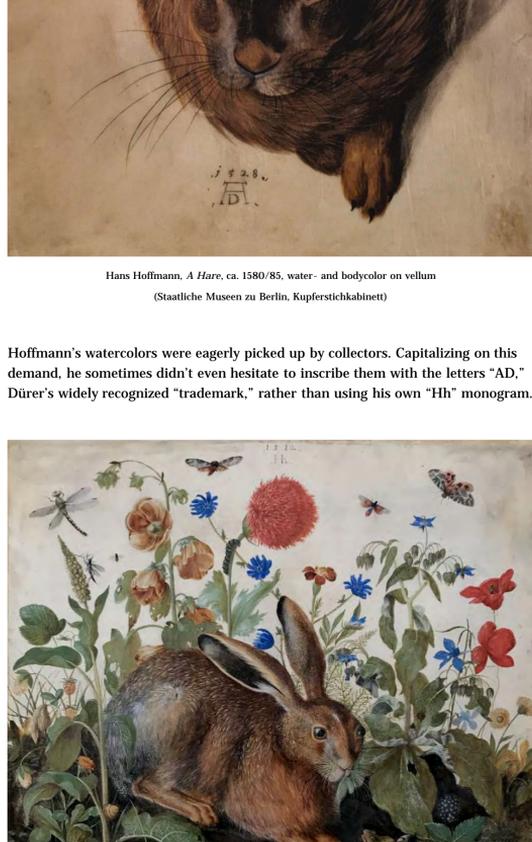


Distraction / Abwechslung

8 July 2022

On a recent escape to Europe, I once more traveled along the “Dürer trail,” visiting destinations that were both obvious and less so. Nuremberg definitely counts among the former, even if this time around, it was Dürer’s afterlife that provided the occasion. “Dürer Renaissance” is the term art history has coined for a period during the late sixteenth century when the artist’s fame reached astonishing heights, not least fueled by the interest developed for his art by Emperor Rudolph II and his Prague court. Its foremost master was Hans Hoffmann (ca. 1545/50–1591/92) whom the Germanisches Nationalmuseum is currently making the focus of an exhibition that presents him not only as a Dürer imitator but, as the show’s subtitle suggests, “a European artist of the Renaissance.” Imitations and emulations of Dürer’s watercolors were nonetheless Hoffmann’s speciality, at a time when the majority of the master’s originals were already locked up in a private collection. Most of them were assembled in a *groes puech* (large book) that was owned by the wealthy Nuremberg merchant Willibald Imhoff (1519–1580). Intended to represent the various aspects of Dürer’s art, its contents can be traced back to the artist’s studio, with many of the sheets bearing his own annotations—making Dürer thereby, in essence, the curator of his first retrospective. In 1588, the *Dürerbuch* was sold to Rudolph II in Prague, a deal negotiated by none other than Hoffmann, who acted as a trusted confidant and “lieber Freund” of the Imhoff family.



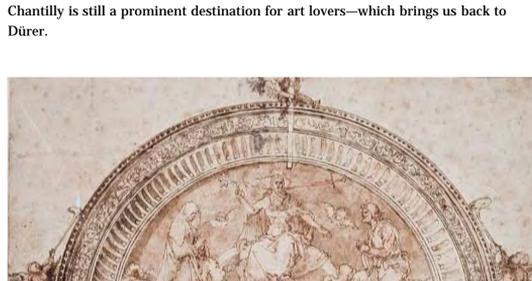
Hans Hoffmann, *A Hare*, ca. 1580/85, water- and bodycolor on vellum (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett)

Hoffmann’s watercolors were eagerly picked up by collectors. Capitalizing on this demand, he sometimes didn’t even hesitate to inscribe them with the letters “AD,” Dürer’s widely recognized “trademark,” rather than using his own “Hh” monogram.

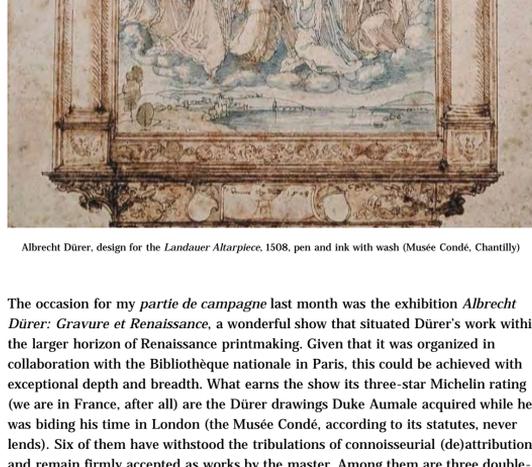


Hans Hoffmann, *A Hare Surrounded by Flowers and Insects*, 1582, water- and bodycolor on vellum (private collection)

While it is not clear why Hoffmann chose one monogram over the other in each case, Yasmin Doosry, the exhibition’s curator, suggests a fairly straightforward and rather pragmatic answer. In her view, the choice of signature was determined by the prospective market: collectors living far away from Nuremberg and without any direct knowledge of Dürer’s works could more easily be fooled than those closer by who might have actually seen the originals—a deception that was further enhanced by Hoffmann occasionally even “dating” his “Dürer” watercolors to the 1510s or 1520s.

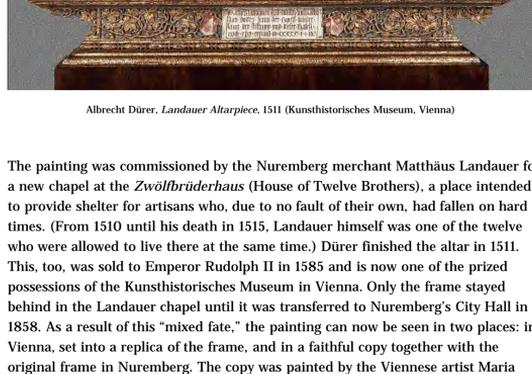


Unlike Nuremberg, Chantilly, a short train ride away from Paris, was a far less obvious place where one would expect to see works by Germany’s “Second Apelles”—a moniker bestowed on Dürer by the imperial poet laureate Conrad Celtes. Nonetheless, the two places have more in common than one might at first imagine, since neither is quite what it appears to be. Today’s Nuremberg is to a large extent a reimagining of the Renaissance city that had survived for 400 years until being destroyed in the bombings of World War II. If one has the chance to look at the Château de Chantilly on a sunny day in early summer, it is hard to believe that this, too, is largely a historical fantasy. Only one of its buildings, the Petit Château, is still comprised of parts that date back to the 1560s. The Grand Château, to the left in the photograph, was destroyed during the French Revolution and only rebuilt in the 1870s, after its royalist owner, Henri d’Orléans, the Duke of Aumale, had returned from London where he had been exiled since the Revolution of 1848. Wealthy from an early age, the duke had always been a voracious art collector and, as a result, Chantilly is still a prominent destination for art lovers—which brings us back to Dürer.



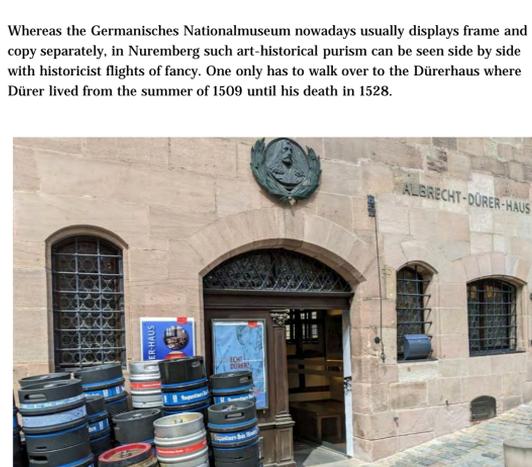
Albrecht Dürer, design for the *Landauer Altarpiece*, 1508, pen and ink with wash (Musée Condé, Chantilly)

The occasion for my *partie de campagne* last month was the exhibition *Albrecht Dürer: Gravure et Renaissance*, a wonderful show that situated Dürer’s work within the larger horizon of Renaissance printmaking. Given that it was organized in collaboration with the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, this could be achieved with exceptional depth and breadth. What earns the show its three-star Michelin rating (we are in France, after all) are the Dürer drawings Duke Aumale acquired while he was bidding his time in London (the Musée Condé, according to its statutes, never lends). Six of them have withstood the tribulations of connoisseurial (de)attributions and remain firmly accepted as works by the master. Among them are three double-sided silverpoint drawings from the sketchbook the artist kept during his journey to the Netherlands in 1520–21, as well as his design for the so-called *Landauer Altarpiece* of 1508, remarkable not least for its most elaborate frame.



Albrecht Dürer, *Landauer Altarpiece*, 1511 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

The painting was commissioned by the Nuremberg merchant Matthäus Landauer for a new chapel at the *Zwölflbrüderhaus* (House of Twelve Brothers), a place intended to provide shelter for artisans who, due to no fault of their own, had fallen on hard times. (From 1510 until his death in 1515, Landauer himself was one of the twelve who were allowed to live there at the same time.) Dürer finished the altar in the 1511. This, too, was sold to Emperor Rudolph II in 1585 and is now one of the prized possessions of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Only the frame stayed behind in the Landauer chapel until it was transferred to Nuremberg’s City Hall in 1858. As a result of this “mixed fate,” the painting can now be seen in two places: in the original frame in Nuremberg, and in a faithful copy together with the original frame in Nuremberg. The copy was painted by the Viennese artist Maria Schöffmann in 1891, who proudly added her self-portrait in the upper-left corner of the panel.

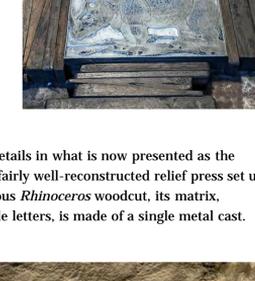
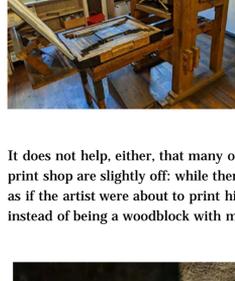


Maria Schöffmann, copy of the *Landauer Altarpiece*, 1891 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg)

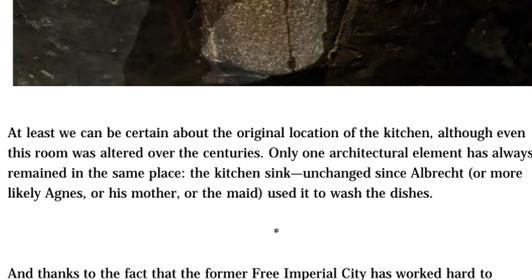
Whereas the Germanisches Nationalmuseum nowadays usually displays frame and copy separately, in Nuremberg such art-historical purism can be seen side by side with historicist flights of fancy. One only has to walk over to the Dürerhaus where Dürer lived from the summer of 1509 until his death in 1528.



The outside of the house still gives a fair idea of its original appearance. Since Agnes and Albrecht had no children, the house passed through many different hands until it was ultimately acquired by the city in 1826 in preparation for the celebrations of the quadrennial of the artist’s birth two years later. Most formative for the house’s interior look (and also the basis for most of the post-war reconstructions) were the interventions of the art professor Friedrich Wanderer. In the 1870s, Wanderer oversaw the elaborate decoration of two rooms in the neo-gothic style that reflected the way he and his contemporaries imagined that the *Stube* (living room with tile oven) and the smaller *Kammer* might have looked like in Dürer’s time. Pilgrims in search for the *genius loci* will nonetheless be disappointed that we have no way of truly knowing where in the building Dürer worked, nor where he made his prints.



It does not help, either, that many of the details in what is now presented as the print shop are slightly off: while there is a fairly well-reconstructed relief press set up as if the artist were about to print his famous *Rhinoceros* woodcut, its matrix, instead of being a woodblock with moveable letters, is made of a single metal cast.



At least we can be certain about the original location of the kitchen, although even this room was altered over the centuries. Only one architectural element has always remained in the same place: the kitchen sink—unchanged since Albrecht (or more likely Agnes, or his mother, or the maid) used it to wash the dishes.

And thanks to the fact that the former Free Imperial City has worked hard to recreate a semblance of its golden age after the devastating destructions of World War II, it is probably also fair to say that the view out of the front windows to the east is also not so very different from the one Dürer saw when he lived there.

