Catalogue and Book Reviews

New (and Some Missing) Perspectives on Dürer

Armin Kunz

The Early Dürer, edited by Daniel Hess and Thomas Eser, exhibition catalogue, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 24 May–2 September 2012, London, Thames & Hudson, 2012, 604 pp., 406 col. and 29 b. & w. ills., €34.50 / £40.

'Der junge Dürer – The Early Dürer' was, for once, an exhibition not prompted by an anniversary. It was instead part of a three-year-long interdisciplinary research project, and the resulting show at the Germanische Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg during the summer of 2012 was accordingly impressive, presenting an in-depth reexamination of the early life and work of Germany's most renowned artist. Although limited in scope to the first three decades of the artist's life – the cut-off point was Dürer's departure for Venice in 1505 – it comprised 192 works and filled 604 pages in the accompanying catalogue.

There has never been any lack of new research and publications on Dürer. As early as 1877 the British weekly journal *The Academy* noted that 'Dürer, at the present time, certainly does not suffer from neglect. It is quite surprising to notice the mass of literature which has grown around him within the last few years.' It appears, however, that over the last decade or so a new generation of scholars has begun to pose a much wider range of questions. The catalogue provides them with a platform to present both these questions and quite a few answers too. The collaboration on the project of many young scholars from all over Germany and the United States also ensured a sufficiently objective distance from the project's all-too-local subject. The museum's decision to print an English edition in collaboration with Thames & Hudson – courageous given the intimidating size of the tome – will serve a wide and international audience beyond Germany.

Given the wealth of documentation on the artist and the survival of many of his personal notes, as well as the many metres of shelving space filled with books on Dürer, it is surprising to discover how much, on closer inspection, we do not know, and how much of what we surmise about the artist is merely (art) historical interpolation. This is especially true for the early years, and it is what ultimately prompted the focus of the exhibition.

For the readers of this Journal, the present review must necessarily be limited to those aspects of the show and catalogue that deal with Dürer's prints – but even this part of his oeuvre is not as uncontested as one might expect. The most important essay here by far is that of Peter Schmidt, who reexamines the question of Dürer's *Wanderjahre* in the Upper Rhine Valley and his alleged work as a designer of book illustrations in Basel and Strasbourg. While the artist created his first signed woodcuts only from c. 1496, and therefore after his return to Nuremberg, there is a fairly large body of earlier work that has been linked to Dürer ever since the original woodblock for the frontispiece of a Basel edition of the letters of St Jerome was discovered by Daniel Burckhardt in 1892, bearing the inscription 'Albrecht Dürer von nörmergk' on the back.

The inscription's authenticity has recently been doubted, and Schmidt makes a highly convincing argument that in the absence of other hard evidence, the stylistic attribution to Dürer of the design of the illustrations for Sebastian Brandt's *Ship of Fools* and other books published in Basel between 1492 and 1494, as well as of the woodcut of the *Crucifixion* used in a Strasbourg missal of 1493, is hardly tenable. He acknowledges 'that the graphic system apparent in [these books] has no tradition in the city; rather, it is indicative of the study of Nuremberg book illustration, which since the late 1480s had concentrated intensively on perfecting a linear framework and cultivating a narrative use of the woodcut medium'. Whoever the Basel designer was, he was undoubtedly familiar with the latest Nuremberg know-how. Ultimately, however, there is no compelling reason to assume that it could only have been Dürer. First, woodblocks were highly mobile; and second, recent research on late fifteenth-century draughtsmanship has shown 'that there were in fact artists active in Nuremberg book production whose abilities were the equal of what some connoisseurs thought only the budding genius of Dürer could achieve' (p. 150).

Schmidt is keenly aware of the wider contemporary context of book publishing, and it is from this angle that he questions the motivation behind Dürer's breakthrough

95. Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Riders of the Apocalypse*, 1497/98, 392 x 279 mm (Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

work: the *Apocalypse* of 1498, and even more generally, the artist's decision to choose printmaking as the main medium of his artistic production (fig. 95). Both Dürer's apprenticeship from 1486 to 1489 with Michael Wolgemut, whose workshop provided designs for book illustrations, and the fact that the publisher Anton Koberger was his godfather, gave him a solid basis for undertaking the *Apocalypse* project. Dürer's work on such an ambitious scheme also set him apart from contemporary makers of woodcuts in Nuremberg, mostly so-called *Briefmaler* or *Kartenmacher* who tended to lead precarious economic existences and could hardly have provided a career model for 'an aspiring artisan with the social and professional ambitions of Albrecht Dürer' (p. 147).[1] Further, the work of these craftsmen did not ap-

1. *Briefmaler* and *Kartenmacher* are only two of the many names given in contemporary documents to the makers of drawn or printed and usually hand-coloured images.

96. Albrecht Dürer, *Drahtziehmühle* (Wire-Drawing Mill) *on the River Pegnitz near Nürnberg*, c. 1490/95, watercolour, 286 x 426 mm (Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett).

proach the high standards Dürer was aiming for in his prints. *The Apocalypse* gave Dürer a vehicle for publishing large woodcuts in the far more lucrative context of the book world, thereby giving him a social perspective not modelled on the often untrained *Briefmaler* but on the successful book printer. The advantage of Schmidt's approach is that it is inclusive; it does not ignore the fact that it was Dürer's artistic genius that eventually enabled him to create a new form of the woodcut whose aesthetic concept was ultimately based on Schongauer's engravings more than on anything he could have seen in the contemporary woodcut production (see p. 158).

Through careful comparison, Lothar Schmitt examines in his essay the new visual language that Dürer develops in his early engravings. By setting them against the foil of the works of an earlier generation of printmakers, he observes nothing less than 'a categorical change in the understanding of the nature of images' (p. 161). Further, Schmitt looks closely at the local printmaking context in Nuremberg. The relationship between the work of the goldsmith and that of the engraver is an oft-repeated commonplace since the enchasing of a metal surface does indeed correspond to the engraving of lines onto a printing plate. In his highly stimulating introductory essay, Thomas Eser (together with Daniel Hess, one of the exhibition's main curators) intriguingly suggests 'that when it comes to the 15th century, the designation – north and south of the Alps – should not be the well-established *peintre-graveur* but more correctly *orfèvre-graveur*, among whom could be counted the young Dürer, with his completed goldsmith training' (p. 24).

Yet what is mostly overlooked in this context are 'all the steps that follow the production of the plate, without which there would be no print' (Schmitt, p. 166).[2] Schmitt draws attention to the work of Hans Schmuttermayer, whose *Fialenbüchlein* of 1489, depicting different forms of Gothic tracery, is one of the first books illustrated with engravings. The images stand in the tradition of the medieval model book, and while compositionally and stylistically they can hardly be compared to Dürer's complex engravings, Schmitt is right to remind us that Schuttermayer's prints are not dissimilar in their technical means of production.

As one might expect, one section of the exhibition addressed Dürer's relationship with the Colmar artist Martin Schongauer, but it is Stephanie Buck, in her essay on

2. The translation is my own and diverges from the translation in the catalogue, which here missed the author's main point.

97. Albrecht Dürer, *View of Trento,* c. 1495/1500, watercolour, 238 x 356 mm (Bremen, Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett).

Dürer's earliest figure drawings, who references the most recent scholarship on this subject by Stephan Kemperdick, Stefan Roller and Robert Suckale. It becomes increasingly clear that Schongauer was not an outside influence for Dürer, nor was he the only source for innovative developments derived from the Netherlands. Schongauer himself had absorbed stylistic lessons from an earlier generation of Nuremberg artists such as Hans Pleydenwurff or, as Guido Messling suggests, the anonymous Master of the Stötteritzer altarpiece (p. 99). Dürer apprenticed with Pleydenwurff's pupil and successor Michael Wolgemut and most likely had access to common visual sources before actually journeying to the Upper Rhine Valley in his – belated – attempt to meet Schongauer.

Beate Böckem reminds us that Dürer was also familiar with objects of Italian culture before he ever went to Italy: glass, majolica, precious textiles, jewellery, carpets – the sort of things his friend Willibald Pirckheimer asked him to look out for on his journey to Venice in 1505–07. While Böckem does not go as far as questioning the reality of the artist's first Italian journey in 1494–95, she points to the lack of verifiable facts. Thomas Eser, in his extremely useful detailed timeline at the end of the catalogue, bravely (and correctly) calls the evidence of the earlier journey 'speculative'. In his introduction he characterizes Dürer's landscape watercolours from these years as documents of a 'border experience' – all of them based on landscapes that were situated at the time along the language border between German and Italian (fig. 97). They never transcend the border, even if their inscriptions such as 'fenedier klawsen' (Venetian outpost) or 'welsch Schloss' (Italian castle) explicitly locate them on the Italian side. Equally important is Böckem's insistence that the watercolours are not accurate depictions of real landscapes similar to those found in the *plein air* painting of the nineteenth century. They are instead highly composed and artistically transformed works, intended to create motifs or atmospheres, not topographical records (p. 55). She also reminds us that it would be anachronistic to understand Dürer's trip or trips south as *Künstlerreisen*, pre-modern Grand Tours on which the young artist was seeking 'inspiration', and instead states flatly 'that his second Italian journey was first and foremost about making money' (p. 58).

It is this kind of fundamental questioning of those aspects of Dürer's life which began as assumptions and historical constructions and over the years have turned into taken-for-granted facts that makes the catalogue so stimulating and important for new research. It reminds us to always consider the historiographic context of the scholarship. A case in point is Böckem's review of the often-presented comparison between prints by Dürer and those by the Venetian painter and printmaker Jacopo de' Bar-

bari, who arrived in Nuremberg in 1500 for a year-long stay. Writing in 1898 about Dürer's engraving *Four Nude Women* and de' Barbari's *Victory and Fame*, Berthold Haendcke had concluded that Dürer's female nudes derive from the de' Barbari print, while Ludwig Justi, in his response soon after, postulated that it was Dürer who served as the model to the Italian printmaker.[3] According to Böckem, however, to see these prints as representing a competitive *paragone* is to miss the point; she argues that, in fact, in these works Dürer and Barbari, instead of copying each other, absorbed ideas from each other to expand on them creatively (p. 64).

It has become commonplace these days for exhibitions of old masters to include sections with technical autopsies of paintings. The whole gamut of available tools and technologies is typically deployed and the results displayed on densely covered panels of text and imagery. This exhibition was no exception and used the findings of a long-term project by the German Research Foundation (DFG) on Franconian panel painting before Dürer. For the reconstruction of the 'physical environment of the early Dürer as a space of experience' (this is the somewhat jargon-based title of Sebastian Gulden's essay) the curators made use of the extensive and still mostly unpublished research of the historian Karl Kohn on the history, inhabitants and location of all residential buildings in the Old City of Nuremberg (the Nürnberger Häuserbuch project); as a result Dürer's neighbourhood could be visualized in a Wiki available via the museum's website.[4] Another research project of 2011–12 examined the composition of the inks used in selected Dürer drawings; the results are also available as 'Tinten Wiki'.[5]

It is somewhat frustrating, therefore, to realize that a similarly probing examination of the prints themselves has not even begun. Granted, the monumental three-volume catalogue raisonné by Rainer Schoch, Matthias Mende and Anna Scherbaum of 2001–04 provides a comprehensive iconographical review. For all technical information on the states, editions and watermarks of the papers used by Dürer, however, one must continue to rely on Joseph Meder's seminal but outdated *Dürer-Katalog* of 1932. One wonders why museums are so reluctant to present these questions in the context of old master exhibitions. I firmly believe that curators need not be afraid to show different impressions of the same print next to each other. On the rare occasions this is actually done, at least some exhibition visitors seem to enjoy the challenge of spotting the differences; further, the public deserves to see prints the way the artist intended them rather than simply those that are the most readily available. These deficiencies are not limited to this Dürer show and its catalogue, however. All too often prints are the neglected stepchild within the art-historical discourse. In any decent art book the whereabouts of paintings, drawings and sculptures is listed and fully detailed; prints, however, tend to serve merely as illustrations and one is grateful to find even the reference number and the state of the impression.

While this is not a Europe-versus-America phenomenon, it has more often been American rather than European curators and academics who have addressed the technical aspects of printmaking. A ground-breaking start was Sylvester Rosa Koehler's exhibition of Dürer's prints at New York's Grolier Club in 1897. In the introduction to its catalogue Koehler succinctly noted that 'the important and distinctive feature of the exhibition is that of some of the prints two, three, and even more impressions are shown', therefore enabling 'the visitor to make the comparative study of the methods of printing adopted by Dürer which is quite necessary to the full understanding of the interest offered by these prints' and supplying 'the material for a chapter in the history of printing, hitherto … altogether too much neglected'.[6]

In 1971, the year of the 500th anniversary of Dürer's birth, it was the Boston Museum of Fine Art that compared different impressions of Dürer's most important prints in its 'Master Printmaker' exhibition. Could it be that the relative absence of this kind of research in Europe has to do with the different ways curators understand their primary role? In Europe, curators perhaps see themselves chiefly as preservers and guardians of long-standing collections, whereas in America they consider the task of actively building collections as more (if not most) important. They therefore also focus on acquiring a variety of impressions. The de-accessioning of so-called duplicates in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century further compounded the problem by leaving only one or very few impressions of any given print. Between 1922 and 1934, for instance, duplicates were sold from the hallowed collections of the Albertina in Vienna, with Joseph Meder himself, the foremost specialist in technical Dürer connoisseurship, providing the selection criteria. It was possible to revisit the results of this decision recently, when the Albertina lent most of its Dürer drawings and watercolours for an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and sent them together with impressions of the artist's most important prints. Perusing the 27 prints from Vienna, the ex-

3. Dürer, *Four Nude Women*, see A. von Bartsch, *Le Peintre-graveur*, VII, Vienna, 1808, pp. 89–91, no. 75 and J. Meder, *Dürer-Katalog*, Vienna, 1932, p. 97, no. 69. For de' Barbari, *Victory and Fame*, see Bartsch, op. cit., p. 524, no. 18 and A. M. Hind, *Early Italian Engraving: A Critical Catalogue with Complete Reproduction of all the Prints Described*, V, London, 1948, p. 157, no. 26.
4. http://duererforschung.gnm.de and link to 'Dürers Umwelt'.
5. http://duerer.gnm.de/tintenwiki/Tintenprojekt.
6. S. R. Koehler, *A Chronological Catalogue of the Engravings, Dry-Points and Etchings of Albrecht Dürer as Exhibited at the Grolier Club*, New York, 1897, p. xlv.

hibition's curator, Andrew Robison, was able to demonstrate during a study day that only those impressions that Meder repeatedly characterized in his catalogue as 'tiefschwarz, klar und gegensatzreich' (deep black, clear and with contrasts) and rewarded with his coveted 'Meder a' rating had been retained in the Albertina's collection.

The paper conservator Angela Campbell has recently suggested a new, more objective basis for the assessment of the quality of impressions. In her MA thesis for Buffalo State College, NY, she examined and documented microscopic scratches, evident in all of Dürer's *Meisterstiche*, that appeared and disappeared from the surfaces of the engraved copper plates over the course of printing.[7] By assessing more than 140 impressions (initially sixteen of the *Melencolia I*, but later including the *St Jerome in his Study* and the *Knight, Death and Devil*) with a 'point-and-shoot' digital camera modified to capture high-resolution magnified images, Campbell was able to establish a relative chronology for them. Her surprising result is that earliest does not necessarily mean best, if the term is meant to describe the most aesthetically successful printed impressions. Indeed, one might reasonably question efforts to define the best impression and instead attempt to understand the differences and variety represented by different impressions. To quote Koehler again: 'Even a 'smudged' impression, that is to say, one in which the tinting is still accidental, is not necessarily a bad one, more especially if considered a document in the history of printing' (p. xlv). One might have to agree with Koehler that Dürer intentionally varied the ink, method of inking and the paper for his prints, even if probably less elaborately than some later artists, most notably Rembrandt.

Whereas Peter Schmidt's essay in the catalogue demonstrates that considering Dürer's woodcuts within the context of book production can provide valuable new insights, Lothar Schmitt addresses the marketing aspects of the artist's engravings. In particular, he points out that a printing plate remained in the workshop and could be repeatedly reprinted. Here Schmitt touches on issues that could be more thoroughly examined through detailed technical research. Further, with the exception of creating reliable images of watermarks, this would not require complicated technology but mainly what might be called traditional print connoisseurship. Especially with regards to the 'young Dürer' it would reveal, for example, that truly early impressions of his engravings, printed immediately at the time the plate was made, with their rich, charcoal blackness and the deep, virtually sculptural relief in which the lines seemingly stand on the paper, look considerably different to those from a second 'edition' printed soon after 1500. Usually easily distinguishable through the watermarks of the papers used, there nevertheless exists no reliable census of these.

The research I have undertaken with my colleague N. G. Stogdon in recent years indicates that pre-1500 impressions are also surprisingly rare. It appears, therefore, that Dürer's initial 'editions' of his prints must have been very modest and that his growing fame increased demand and led him to repeatedly print his plates; it is indeed astonishing how ubiquitous Dürer's prints are relative to the small quantity of surviving impressions of works by such contemporaries as Lucas Cranach and Hans Baldung. By the early 1500s, his prominently displayed initials AD had become a veritable 'seal of quality'.

7. This research was later expanded during Campbell's stay as an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Emperor Maximilian I and the Age of Dürer

Charles Talbot

Emperor Maximilian I and the Age of Dürer, edited by Eva Michel and Maria Luise Sternath, with contributions by Manfred Hollegger, Friedrich Polleroß, Thomas Schauerte, Andrea Scheichl, Manfred Schreiner, Larry Silver, Werner Telesko and Elisabeth Thobois, exhibition catalogue, Vienna, Albertina, 14 September 2012–6 January 2013, Munich and New York, Prestel, 2012, pp. 414, 365 col. ills., $75.

An exhibition catalogue such as this will be familiar to readers acquainted with the genre as produced in recent years by big league museums. It is large, weighty and profusely illustrated, with many colour details expanding off the edge of the pages. It offers the equivalent of a volume of collected essays, eight in this case plus an explanatory preface, followed by catalogue entries contributed by no