

DÜRER

1500

AD

Albrecht Dürer Noricus
ipsum me propriis in albis
gelatis coloribus quavis
anno. 1500.



MASTERS OF ART

DÜRER

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Albertina, Vienna (Detail, pages 66/67)

Frontispiece: Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, 1500,
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

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INTRODUCTION

Albrecht Dürer lived in a time of major upheavals and change. People were not only faced with a different world, they also had a very different world in their minds. Religion played a role to a degree that we can hardly imagine today. Much of what had become commonplace by the end of Dürer's life had not even existed when he was born: tea and coffee were still unknown, to be sure, but potatoes, tomatoes, sweet peppers, corn and chocolate had arrived in Europe due to the discovery of America, a continent undreamt of at the time of his birth.

The Nuremberger Martin Behaim constructed the first globe in 1491, needless to say without America, which was discovered only the following year by Christopher Columbus—though the latter never realised that it was a new continent. In 1498 Vasco da Gama circumnavigated the Cape of Good Hope and reached India by sea—which is what Columbus thought he had done. In 1507 Martin Waldseemüller drew the first world map that included the "new" American continent.

In 1506 Pope Julius II determined to build the largest church in Christendom, St. Peter's in Rome. Its controversial financing through the sale of letters of indulgence was one of the reasons which led Martin Luther to nail his Ninety-five Theses to the door of Wittenberg's castle church and with them trigger the Reformation, which plunged Europe into profound conflicts in the centuries to come. The world of art was also changing. It was only recently that in Italy the Renaissance had begun remaking art from the ground up. After the long period of the Middle Ages, during which, for religious reasons, the world was not considered worth picturing, artists were now developing techniques and genres that allowed them to show the world as it is. Central perspective was one of their most important achievements. It spread like wildfire from Florence in the 1420s and amounted to a virtual paradigm shift. It was a visible sign of the change from a theocentric to an anthropocentric worldview. Man was now the centrepiece. The art of the Renaissance was the visual expression of this philosophical and theosophical shift. But artists first had to rediscover nature for themselves and reconstruct it in art.

Albrecht Dürer was the first artist to paint watercolours of the landscapes he saw on his way to Italy. Landscapes were previously unknown. Dürer coined the term in 1521 in reference to his Netherlandish colleague Joachim Patinir, calling him a "landscape painter"—something he had long been himself. Still life was also still unknown as an independent genre. Very likely inspired by Dürer's masterly drawings of a bird's wing, hares and grasses, the first one was painted by Dürer's Venetian colleague Jacopo de' Barbari in 1504 (*Still Life with Partridge and Gauntlets*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich).

Dürer's ascent and success were also largely thanks to his having been born where he was. Nuremberg was a prosperous commercial centre and hub of European trade. And Dürer was fortunate to grow up in

a neighbourhood made up of the city's and country's most important intellectuals and entrepreneurs. But the centres of modern art lay in Italy, particularly in Florence and in Venice, the city of colour. Venice was a metropolis, a link between Orient and Occident as well as the Middle Ages and early modern times. For Dürer, who celebrated his greatest successes as a printmaker in black and white, this city was probably his greatest source of inspiration—but also his greatest challenge. The angular forms of the Late Gothic period still prevailed in Germany, while in Venice artists were producing the rounded, harmonious forms of a resurrected antiquity. In Venice Dürer got to know Italian Renaissance art and became Germany's mediator between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. And it was there that, in addition to the draftsman which he continued to be all his life, he emerged as the painter Albrecht Dürer.

With his handling of art and its themes Albrecht Dürer took the step from mere craftsman to artist that Italian painters had already accomplished. In Italy painters enjoyed a status as artists that German painters still lacked. In the north one looked virtually in vain for a painting simply presenting an artist's self-portrait. The first and for a long time only one was by the Netherlander Jan van Eyck in 1433 (National Gallery, London). Even after it painters appeared in their pictures at most as members of a group of figures (usually the one looking directly out at the viewer). But Dürer asserted himself in his self-portraits: I am somebody! And he would continue to do so in drawings and paintings, sometimes with the question: Who am I? Dürer produced many kinds of works that other artists simply hadn't: imposing self-portraits, faithful landscape drawings, still lifes, drawings of nude men and women, proportion studies. He created most of these works for himself, as workshop material and as pattern sheets for future clients. As a printmaker he had other aims. Here too his work was unprecedented but in this case, it was aimed at the public. His first artist's book, *The Apocalypse*, was a best seller; many of his prints were sold and copied throughout Europe by the hundreds and thousands—and became iconic patterns. Critical appreciation of Dürer has shifted over time from his printmaking to his painting, so that today it is difficult to judge how much his success, influence and importance were based on his work as a graphic artist. When in Florence in 1560 Cosimo I de' Medici amassed a collection of portraits of famous contemporaries and the finest artists, Albrecht Dürer was the only foreigner included. His surviving oeuvre includes 34 watercolours, more than 100 engravings, 188 paintings, some 250 woodcuts and more than 1,100 drawings. Who would have thought that of all of these a simple but brilliant drawing of two hands clasped together in prayer would become one of the best-known images in the world—and one of the most frequently requested patterns for tattoos.



LIFE

