

SPECIAL REVIEW

Albrecht Dürer. Christof Metzger, ed.
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Albrecht Dürer.

An exhibition at the Albertina Museum, Vienna, 29 September 2019–6 January 2020.

The Albertina in Vienna is one of the largest museums of graphic arts in the world. It is also one of the few museums that regularly manages to turn arts-on-paper exhibitions into mass events with visitor numbers of one million or more per year. Its last monographic *Albrecht Dürer* exhibition, displayed from 20 September 2019 to 6 January 2020, attracted more than 422,000 visitors. This was, however, some 50,000 less than the Albertina's last single exhibition on Dürer in 2003, with around 470,000 visitors. The number is nevertheless remarkable in view of the relatively high frequency of major Dürer shows in the past twelve years, starting with *Dürer e l'Italia* at the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome in 2007, curated by Kristina Herrmann Fiore; the Thyssen-Bornemisza's *Durero y Cranach* in 2007–08; *The Young Dürer* at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg in 2012; *Dürer: His Art in Context* at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt in 2013–14; *Albrecht Dürer: Master Drawings, Watercolors, and Prints from the Albertina* shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 2013; and *Dürer e il Rinascimento tra Germania e Italia* at the Palazzo Reale in Milan in 2018.

In contrast to many other monographic blockbuster exhibitions, the Albertina's beautifully hung *Albrecht Dürer* was far from being just another Dürer show. True, practically all the museum's own highlight pieces were on display, including much cherished early masterworks on paper such as the *Young Hare*, the *Great Turf Piece*, or the *Self-Portrait as a Boy*. There were probably many visitors who only came to the show to see these works face-to-face again. But *Albrecht Dürer* offered much more than a reunion with the artist's most beautiful drawings. Dr. Christof Metzger, curator of German art, head of the curatorial department, and an internationally renowned expert on German Renaissance art, spent several years of intense research on the museum's rich Dürer holdings. The results of his research are laid down in the exhibition catalogue, together with essays by Julia Zaunbauer, Andrew John Martin, and Erwin Pokorny.

Metzger's new insights into the complex provenance history of the Albertina's Dürer holdings, however, were less prominent in the exhibition itself. At first sight, the show appeared to be a classical retrospective with works aligned according to the biography of the artist, starting with a section on "The Early Dürer" and ending with his "Late Masterpieces." Within the biographical thread, focal points were embedded on specific groups of works, such as *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* or *Christ among the Doctors*

(cat. no. 104) and their respective preparatory drawings, or on specific subjects like the early nature studies. In this respect, the exhibition very much resembled the 2003 *Albrecht Dürer* show, which took place in almost the same succession of exhibition halls on the first floor of the former Habsburg residence in central Vienna. The 2003 show also opted for a biographical approach and for a more or less chronological hanging of the works, mixing works on paper and related paintings.

For those who had hardly expected more than déjà vu, the 2019 *Albrecht Dürer* turned out to be full of fresh looks on the artist's oeuvre and the Albertina's masterpieces in particular, although probably not every scholar will agree with the (re)attributions and datings proposed by Metzger and the other authors. In addition to reevaluating the provenance of the Albertina's Dürer pieces, Metzger focused on reassessing his watercolors and studies on parchment. Whereas Dürer's famous nature studies on paper, such as the *Young Hare* (cat. no. 59) or the *Great Piece of Turf* (cat. no. 55), have never been seriously contested as Dürer autographs, his animal and plant studies on parchment have been at the center of long-standing debate. Visitors who had been to the 2003 *Albrecht Dürer* exhibition in Vienna or had read its catalogue might have been surprised to see nature studies on vellum like the *Violets* (cat. no. 45) or the *Small Piece of Turf* (cat. no. 49) now reattributed to the Nuremberg artist.

Since the Albertina's own groundbreaking exhibition on *Albrecht Dürer and the Animal and Plant Studies of the Renaissance*, curated by Fritz Koreny in 1985, both pieces, as well as many other nature studies that had been considered to be authentic works by Albrecht Dürer for centuries, were then sorted out and regrouped as "German school, second half of the 16th century" (Koreny, *Albrecht Dürer und die Tier- und Pflanzenstudien der Renaissance* [1985], 180, 218). Already, Hans Tietze and Erica Tietze-Conrat had doubted Dürer's authorship of the *Violets* and similar pieces on parchment in their inventory catalogue of the Albertina, *Die Zeichnungen der deutschen Schulen bis zum Beginn des Klassizismus*, published in 1933, although the publication of their finds did not lead to a reorganization of the collection at that time, in part due to the emigration of this Austrian Jewish couple to the US in 1938. After Fritz Koreny's exhibition and catalogue, only a handful of the Albertina's nature studies once considered to be among Dürer's finest drawings remained in the core group—though the museum's shop continued to sell postcards of the *Violets* as an authentic work by Albrecht Dürer. The 2003 *Albrecht Dürer* catalogue followed Koreny's argument by reiterating the latter's objections concerning "the style and qualitative criteria" of the contested works (Heinz Wiedauer in Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Maria Luise Sternath, eds., *Albrecht Dürer* [2003], 272).

With regard to their provenance history, the nature studies long seemed to be beyond any doubt, as they (or at least identical pieces) were already listed in the so-called *Kunstabuch* of Albrecht Dürer, which the heirs of the Nuremberg patrician Willibald Imhoff sold to Emperor Rudolph II in 1588. Koreny, who published the archival sources related to the sale of the Imhoff collection in the appendix of his catalogue,

however, pointed out that a provenance from the Imhoff collection does not automatically prove the authenticity of a work, as both Willibald Imhoff's own inventories and the *Secret Memorial Book* (*Geheimbüchlein*) of his grandson Hans Hieronymus Imhoff mention numerous copies or uncertain works, many of them with an admittedly false Dürer monogram, in the collection.

Metzger does not expand on this complex issue. In his introductory essay "From Albrecht Dürer's Legacy" (51–67) he meticulously retraces the history of the Albertina's Dürer collection and especially of the drawings, beginning with Dürer's workshop in Nuremberg and his heirs and early collectors (the early modern German term *geschafft* means "to bequest," not "to present"). The examination then turns to Emperor Rudolph II's bulk purchases from the Imhoff and Granvelle collections in 1588–89, and follows the fate of the works, rebound in several albums, in the imperial collection through to their purchase by Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen in exchange for his large print collection. Metzger details the results of scholarly research on Dürer's afterlife as well as his own interpretation of the sources. He also expands on the losses of important parts of the collection during the French occupation of Vienna (ca. 1809). Once "entombed in princely cabinets of art," as Metzger formulates (51), with recourse to Dürer's Baroque biographer Heinrich Conrad Arend (who wrote the first monographic study on the artist and his work in 1728), Dürer's artistic legacy is now part of "a new and lively chapter" (65) of art historical discourse. Drawing on this metaphor, the 2019 *Albrecht Dürer* exhibition and its catalogue indeed offer a kind of imaginary leafing through the contents of the once famous imperial Dürer albums and, to come to Metzger's main thesis, through Dürer's own reference collection.

According to Metzger, the majority of the drawings that once belonged to the Imhoff and Granvelle albums sold to Rudolph II were more than simple study material commonly used in an artist's workshop. As a matter of fact, their highly finished character; their rather large formats; the use of costly materials, such as parchment or gold; the fact that many of the drawings bear monograms, dates, and further inscriptions; along with the overall good condition of the sheets showing very few signs of wear, has often led art historians to question their function. For example, the Imhoff *Art Book*, the annotated inventory of which is reproduced in the catalogue's appendix (466–71), consisted of 108 drawings, ranging from the charcoal *Portrait of Maximilian I* (cat. no. 173) and other large portraits to studies of saints on colored paper and studies related to the Nuremberg *Imperial Portraits*. Added to this were the large nature studies, mostly on parchment; costume studies; drawings of monuments; nudes; further saints and animal studies, as well as, according to the compiler of the sales list, "curious phantasies" (471); and, finally, the *Triumph of Maximilian* and preparatory studies for the wall paintings in the Nuremberg town hall.

Though a good number of sheets can be related to a concrete painting or print, Metzger does not merely see them as study material but assigns them a much larger, longer-lasting function as collectibles and reference works of Dürer's artistic

achievements: “As such, it appears as if Dürer was the first collector and curator of his own works with the workshop also serving as a kind of collection site. His concerns about these precious holdings are evident in the inscriptions he made, proving that he regularly sifted through them, classifying, arranging, and probably reassessing them as well. . . . It even seems as if Dürer had introduced an elaborate ordering system, meaning that early collectors were able to access complexes of works he had structured himself. . . . Dürer’s drawn oeuvre should be discussed less as a group intended to serve needs involved in the production of paintings and prints but rather as coequal artistic achievements” (45–46).

In his catalogue essay “Dürer, the Draftsman” (37–49), Metzger brings in the notion of autonomy. Originally a concept related to modern art, Stephanie Porras introduced autonomy as a central concept to understand Dürer’s work in her essay for *The Early Dürer* exhibition catalogue of 2012 (Porras in *The Early Dürer*, ed. Daniel Hess and Thomas Eser [2012], 245–59). As Porras argues, it is difficult to exactly determine whether we are confronted with a genuine “drawing for drawings sake” (*The Early Dürer* [2012], 246)—the core understanding of “autonomous”—or whether the drawing was originally intended for a practical use in any kind of creative process. For Porras, the ultimate proof for defining autonomy in a work, besides the artist’s “subjective presence” through various kinds of inscriptions (*The Early Dürer* [2012], 256), lies in its self-reflexive manner both related to artistic and intellectual practices—an idea taken up by Metzger for his argument. According to Porras, the latter approach could yield results far beyond the limits of the workshop: “Beyond visualizing humanist ideas, the very act of drawing becomes a humanist practice, a way of learning from the world while positing new ideas as an author. For Dürer, drawing is an autonomous practice, a subjective method of thinking and commenting” (*The Early Dürer* [2012], 258). While Porras concentrates more on the idea of the autonomous drawing as a means of artistic self-definition and self-assessment, Metzger contemplates the discursive potential of the works, which he understands as “conversation pieces, physical manifestations of the master’s consummate artistic abilities whose purpose is to demonstrate this capacity to every visitor to the artist’s workshop” (46).

With regard to Dürer’s drawings, the exempla idea is not entirely new. Metzger himself refers to Thomas Eser’s introductory essay “A Different Early Dürer” in the Nuremberg catalogue of 2012 (*The Early Dürer* [2012], 18–28), in which Eser places a special focus on the artist’s early landscape drawings. In the same volume, Dagmar Hirschfelder explores the question of Dürer’s painted self-portraits as “demonstration pieces” and, drawing on an earlier thesis by Thomas Eser, as “‘visible certificates of his high skills as portraitist’ for potential clients” (*The Early Dürer* [2012], 113–14). The idea is tempting, but, as Metzger reminds us, one has to remain cautious as there is no documentary evidence—neither of Dürer’s everyday workshop routine, nor of visits of clients or of a presentation of exempla, nor of any humanist discussion circle gathered around his workshop. With high-ranking patrons such as Emperor

Maximilian I, Dürer usually communicated through agents or other intermediaries. Metzger cites Dürer's patron Jakob Heller, but here again, the sources leave open whether the Frankfurt merchant really visited Dürer's workshop during his stays in Nuremberg and, if so, whether he indeed flipped through Dürer's supposed collection of exempla, as Metzger suggests. We do not know if Heller or any other patron or visitor to the Dürer house understood the presumed discursive dimension and humanist issues of his works. The same is true for Rainer Schoch's suggestion of Dürer's workshop as a kind of humanist art academy, which would even predate the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, founded in Florence in 1563, by several decades. Schoch's idea, which is referred to by Metzger (44), is enticing but remains speculative and without evidence.

The exhibition catalogue and its excellent reproductions provide an invaluable basis for any further research into Dürer's work and especially his graphic art. Looking at the various essays and catalogue entries (reduced to a mere "List of Works" at the end of the volume), one remarks a general tendency toward an early dating of Dürer's drawings, not alone of the animal and plant studies but also of his landscape drawings and nudes. Among the works discussed more extensively is the peculiar *Nude Self-Portrait* in Weimar (cat. no. 1), which Erwin Pokorny dates around 1499 and hence some ten years earlier than Christine Demele, who in her doctoral thesis on the *Nude Self-Portrait* published in 2012 suggested a date around 1509. Whereas most scholars see the emergence of Dürer's preoccupation with the construction of the human body in connection with his famous engravings of the *Nemesis* (ca. 1503) and *Adam and Eve* (1504), Metzger's technical investigation of the Albertina's *Reclining Female Nude* (cat. no. 87), dated 1501, points toward an earlier beginning (218–19). Closer inspection reveals construction lines in silverpoint guided by compass and ruler, which testify to a mathematical construction of the figure.

Another nice find is Metzger's identification of the Franconian village in the background of the engraving *Landscape with Cannon* (1518, cat. no. 45), which for more than a century was believed to be Kirchehrenbach near Forchheim. Metzger convincingly identifies the place as Eschenau, located some twenty kilometers toward the south, where Dürer's patron Jakob Muffel had a residence. With regard to Dürer's landscapes, the exhibition and its catalogue will probably generate discussions around the making of and the dating of his famous landscape studies connected to his first journey to Italy. The drawings were already subject to a heated debate after Catherine Crawford Luber published her general rejection of Dürer's first Venetian journey, generally believed to have taken place in 1494–95. Ulrich Großmann's discovery of the completion date of the Heraldic Tower in Innsbruck, which Dürer shows still under construction in his *View of Innsbruck from the North* (cat. no. 36), however, suggests Dürer's presence in Innsbruck in 1496. In contrast to Großmann, who in his essay in *The Early Dürer* catalogue postpones the entire journey and hence dates all related drawings to 1495–96 (*The Early Dürer* [2012]: 221–35), Metzger reverts to an early dating of the landscape studies and rejects any doubts about the artist's journey. With the sole exception of the

View of Innsbruck, the dating of which he leaves with a question mark, all other views of places in Tyrol and Trentino are dated to 1495. According to Metzger, Dürer was back in Nuremberg at the end of 1495 at the latest, where he continued his interest in landscapes with views from Nuremberg and its surroundings (133–38).

At first sight, the Albertina's *Albrecht Dürer* seems to be more conservative than previous Dürer exhibitions and catalogues. In addition to the works already mentioned, Metzger and the other authors not only reassess the *Christ among the Doctors*, recently contested by Thomas Schauerte, within Dürer's autograph oeuvre, but also the much discussed *Green Passion* (cat. nos. 148–60). The authors base their argument on stylistic reasons as well as on technical observations and—admittedly hypothetical—conceptual issues such as the question of autonomy or the use of exempla. In this respect the Albertina exhibition is less conservative than provocative. The future will show if art historians will accept the catalogue's reattributions and proposed dates of Dürer's drawings and work groups. Nevertheless, this exhibition and accompanying catalogue will mark a new milestone in research on Dürer and German Renaissance art.

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