The Birth of the Author

CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD ON “ALBRECHT DÜRER: MASTER DRAWINGS, WATERCOLORS, AND PRINTS FROM THE ALBERTINA” AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART IN WASHINGTON, DC

IN HIS TREATISE on human proportions, published in the year of his death, 1528, Albrecht Dürer (born 1471) wrote that “one man may sketch something with his pen on half a sheet of paper in one day . . . and it turns out to be better and more artistic than another’s great work at which its author labors with the utmost diligence for a whole year. And this gift is miraculous.” With this “strange speech,” which “only powerful artists will be able to understand,” Dürer defined his own activity no longer as the artisanal, labor-intensive crafting of splendid objects, but rather as the ongoing inscription of his own perceptions and inventions. The content of art, according to Dürer, is the consciousness of its creator. The artwork has its authority on loan from the artist. And while the sovereignty of the singular artist has been challenged countless times in the intervening five hundred years, by academies, artists’ collectives, industrial authorship, and the aesthetics of the ready-made, serialization, appropriation, and sampling, to this day Dürer’s immodest thesis has lost little of its appeal.

That thesis can be tested this spring when the Albertina Museum in Vienna lends ninety-one drawings and watercolors by Dürer—the bulk of its peerless collection—to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. This is an extraordinary event. The watercolors in particular are vulnerable to light and are rarely exposed. Many of the Albertina’s Dürers come from the collection of the Hapsburg emperor Rudolf II. Rudolf bought the drawings from the Imhoff family, descendants of Willibald Pirckheimer, the Nuremberg lawyer and scholar and Dürer’s closest friend. This means there are few doubts about authenticity. The handmade works will be supplemented by twenty-seven of Dürer’s woodcuts, engravings, and etchings from the Albertina’s holdings, which are the most brilliant impressions of these multiples. For prints, like photographs, are all identical and yet not identical, susceptible to variations in the “developing” and printing processes. The exhibition will also include nineteen works by Dürer and others from the collection of the National Gallery.

To break the hold of pictorial convention, Dürer described with pen and brush random, unpublished forms. Rock Cliffs in a Landscape, ca. 1493, depicts a packed mass of creased, scooped monoliths. It is not clear whether the artist observed or invented these liberating shapes. He generated randomness by draping a thick robe on a chair and letting it cascade to the floor: Drapery, a study on blue paper, 1506. Dissatisfied with the hackneyed formulas handed down by the painting tradition, he limned with the point of his brush every blade and stem of a clump of undergrowth—dandelions, yarrow, grass—in translucent layers of green (The Great Piece of Turf, 1503).

But Dürer’s wanderings in formlessness were caught up short whenever he found pattern in nature. Witness the study of the torn-off, unfurled bird wing, a rainbow of blue and green feathers (Left Wing of a Blue Roller, ca. 1500–12). Here he stopped to marvel.

The works on paper open a window onto an intimate sphere. As an adolescent prodigy, Dürer made a self-portrait in silverpoint, Self-Portrait at Thirteen, which he inscribed later with the date 1484. About ten years later, he drew his own left hand three times on a sheet of paper. In 1514, he portrayed his younger brother Endres, a goldsmith like their father: a slender, fugitive presence in lost profile.

Many of these drawings also pointed forward to public paintings, for example the large altarpiece of the Assumption for the Frankfurt cloth merchant Jacob Heller. Several preliminary studies for this work survive, transcriptions of heads and creased piles of drapery, as well as the famous Praying Hands (1508). These were excerpts from the physical world that would later be imported into the painting. But Dürer’s style, the ductus of his pen line, gathered the data and permitted the drawings to stand alone as works of art.

In the watercolors, Dürer seems to want to sink back into the forms of life and merge with them. Here, the artist’s intense attentiveness fuses with the vital forces that persist even in the broken bird wing. With the pen, by contrast, he takes possession of his subjects. His supersensitive line, the direct trace of the hand guided by the dominating eye, spreads like a net over the world. In Antwerp, Belgium in 1520, far from home, a celebrated visitor feted by the local painters’ guild, he drew the fishing boats and barges lined up in the harbor. On the return trip, on a boat on the Rhine, he drew his wife, Agnes, on the same page on which he had already depicted a local girl notable for her headdress. This work recalls the astonishing drawing of 1494 inscribed MEIN AGNES (My Agnes), a study of his pensive nineteen-year-old bride. If an oil painting conceals its own fabrication process, such a drawing is transparent, almost reconstructible. You can count the strokes of the pen, about two hundred of them. The sitting cannot have lasted more than five minutes.

Here, Agnes Dürer is not a studio model. She is not being asked to disappear inside a role, as were the workshop apprentices and others who posed for the Heller altar. Her portrait has what those cold, staged drawings lack: interiority. Her husband’s pen pins her to the page, and yet with every stroke she retreats deeper into a hidden sphere where art cannot go. Dürer’s subjective artistry has met its counterpart—and its limit—in the subjecthood of the other. The pen portrait of Agnes, the merest of artworks, is the record of such a forestalled communication. This incompleteness is the secret of his drawings’ permanent actuality.

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