

EXHIBITS

# Dürer's *Passions* Bring The Renaissance to Germany

*"After we have taken all that we can adduce from Classical Greek culture, such as that of Plato, into account, that does not account for the Renaissance, for the birth of modern, globally extended European civilization. There is a special, efficiently superior universal principle embedded within what might seem otherwise the mere bare historical fact of Jesus Christ. It is a universal principle implied . . . by a corresponding ontological paradox. . . ."*

*"In first approximation, the difference lies in the personal relationship of the Christ of the Crucifixion to the most destitute and otherwise most oppressed victims of Roman and other evil tyrannies. It has been the personal bond of that oppressed individual, even in death, to the personality of the crucified Christ, which has been the essential spark, the compelling passion, upon which all of the temporal achievements of globally extended European civilization have depended. . . ."*

*"This points already toward a still deeper principle. The crucial conception, the idea of ideas, which makes that connection comprehensible, is the notion of 'the simultaneity of eternity.' There lies the key to the challenge of that great metaphor, the historical mystery of Christ."*

—Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.,  
"Jesus Christ and Civilization"

Over the course of the second decade of the Sixteenth century, during which time the Protestant Reformation was born (Luther posted his Theses in 1517), the greatest of the German Renaissance artists, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), initiated his own revolution, by bringing to Germany the marriage of art and science, especially geometry, which he learned from the Italian Renaissance. He disseminated these new ideas through his art, especially his many prints—woodcuts and copperplate engravings—of which the most important were those of Christ's Pas-

sion, the central story of Christianity. The significance of the Passion story for the Renaissance, is that it expresses, in the most concentrated way, the idea that man is created "imago Dei"—in the image of God—and "capax Dei"—that he shares in the continuing creation of the Universe.

Although Dürer is often described as the leading artist of the German Reformation, his work transcends the



Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gray Collection of Engravings Fund

"Agony in the Garden," *Small Passion*, 1508-1510.

bitter religious struggle that engulfed Europe in his time. Dürer used his art, especially his prints, to spread the Renaissance idea that man—all men—are created in the image of the Creator (the very idea enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence!). Dürer's prints circulated throughout Europe,

and beyond. Rembrandt, working 150 years later in Amsterdam, owned complete sets of two of Dürer's woodcut series, the *Passion*, and the *Life of the Virgin*.

## Trips to Italy

Albrecht Dürer was born in Nuremberg, Germany. He travelled to Italy, the birthplace of the Renaissance, once in 1494, and again in 1505-07, including to Venice (then, the center of book publishing), where he met the leading artists Giovanni Bellini and Andrea Mantegna. On his second trip, he reports that he travelled to Bologna, to learn "the secret art of perspective"

from the mathematician Luca Pacioli, the teacher of Leonardo. Back in Nuremberg, he read Euclid's *Elements*, and Vitruvius's *On Architecture*, as well as the writings of the Renaissance genius Leon Batista Alberti. In 1520-21 Dürer travelled to The Netherlands. Soon after, he published his three theoretical works: *On Measurement*, *On Fortification*, and *On Human Proportion*.

Dürer was celebrated in his own lifetime as one of the most creative figures of his day. His friends included many prominent thinkers and artists of his time, not only in Germany, but in Italy and the Low Countries as well. Al-

though Dürer executed many paintings, including beautiful watercolors of his trip over the Alps to Italy, he is best known for his prints, with which he created an artistic and social revolution. These images were highly valued, and praised by such figures as the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam.

The technology of printing, using movable type, was then coming into widespread use, making books and printed images affordable and widely available. Dürer's father, who had emigrated from Hungary, was a goldsmith, a trade which required fine engraving, which skill Dürer would later put to good use as a maker of prints. Further, Albrecht's godfather, Anton Koberger, was the most successful publisher in Europe, a contact that placed Dürer at the center of a European-wide network of Renaissance humanists and artists. Willibald Pirckheimer, Dürer's lifelong friend, was among the most important humanists of the time.

### 'Dürer, Inc.'

The 81 prints in the Fogg Art Museum exhibition "Dürer's Passions," comprise less than 20 percent of Dürer's graphic output; and, there were hundreds, even thousands, of copies of each print. What's more, Dürer was a pioneer in marketing. He dispatched his wife to fairs and markets with them, while prints were also sent off to a *colporteur*, an early type of book dealer (prints were also needed to illustrate books). He was so successful in marketing his work, that one art historian refers to him, only half jokingly, as "Dürer, Inc."

Dürer's woodcuts sold for the price of a pair of shoes, and were thus affordable for many people. While paintings were usually commissioned by wealthy patrons, prints were intended for the "masses." Moreover, the artist himself determined their subject matter. For Dürer, the subject he turned to, over and over again, throughout his lifetime, was the Passion of Christ.

Dürer fully exploited the potentialities of both the woodcut and copperplate media, to draw the viewer into the events he was depicting. He saw graphic images as "letters for the unlettered." Although the printing press had come into use in the 1450's, the vast majority of the population was still illiterate; therefore, to reach them, Dürer (who owned his own press) combined the power of Classical art, and the new printing technology, to uplift and ennoble the common man.

### Scenes from the Passion

While Dürer deployed all of the considerable armamentarium of the early Sixteenth-century Renaissance artist, including the science of linear perspective, to situate the viewer with reference to the unfolding drama of the scene, he invented a new style of narrative, to draw, especially the unlettered, into the unfolding of "the greatest story ever told." In his unpublished treatise on painting, Dürer stated that representing Christ's suffering was one of art's very purposes.

In the *Small Passion*, a woodcut series of 37 prints, Dürer propels the viewer through the entire cycle, as though he were "reading" a book. Every aspect, metaphorical and visual, leads the view-

mankind. Christ is facing left, or back in time, to the scenes of earthly life, which he is reluctant to leave. This directionality is reinforced by the formal elements in the print, including even the lines used for shading, not to mention Dürer's prominent signature, the "AD," in the left-hand corner.

In the next scene, the "Betrayal," Christ has turned around, both physically, and psychologically, to confront his fate and the future as it will unfold in the following scenes. Now, all elements of the picture lead our eyes forward, or to the right. Even the "AD" has moved to the lower right-hand corner, and is turned to point the way ahead. A phase change has occurred in the life of Christ, which Dürer expresses, metaphorically, through his art.

Now, contrast these woodcuts with the depiction of the same subject, the "Agony in the Garden" [SEE inside back cover, this issue], from the *Engraved Passion*. (Both series were done between 1508 and 1510.) The first thing you will notice, is that the engraving technique allows for considerably more detail and refinement of shading—the many "colors" between white and black—which permits the artist a greater freedom of expression. Look now at the composition itself: It is fully self-contained. The figure of Christ curves slightly into the space of the picture;



"Betrayal of Christ," *Small Passion*, 1508-1510.

er from one episode to the next. For example, the two contiguous episodes, "Agony in the Garden" (Christ on the Mount of Olives), and "Betrayal of Christ": In the first, Christ prays to his Father in Heaven to release him from his destiny—to suffer and die on the Cross, which is necessary to redeem

his right hand directs your eye to the upper left-hand corner, to the angel carrying the cross; the angel's motion is both inward, toward Christ, and downward, toward the sleeping Apostles, whose bodies form another curve, back, and inwards toward the figure of Christ. A large oval shape is thus

Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gray Collection of Engravings Fund

formed, virtually filling the picture plane, such that there is no motion beyond the frame. (Again, Dürer uses his own “presence,” in the form of his signature “AD,” to keep your eye from wandering out of the picture frame.) Only 15 episodes are depicted in this series, each one meant to be read as a self-sufficient chapter in a longer narrative.

### The Last Supper

Dürer’s conception of the Passion evolved over time, and reflected his growth as an artist-intellectual. This can be seen very clearly in two woodcut versions of the Last Supper, one from the *Large Passion* of 1510, and the second from Dürer’s *Oblong Passion* of 1523. Although both prints indicate that Dürer had seen Leonardo’s revolutionary treatment of the subject in his famous mural in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan (most likely, as a reproduction), Dürer’s handling of the subject, in both cases, bears his stamp of originality.

In the *Large Passion* of 1510, the composition is starkly symmetrical, with Christ placed dead center, a starkness which is reinforced by the sharp *chiaroscuro* (contrast of light and dark). The architectural elements conspire to highlight and reinforce Christ’s central role, and, as in Leonardo’s “Last Supper,” the moment is that just after Christ has announced, “One of you will betray me.” Even Dürer’s famous “AD” is placed to reinforce the central axis of the composition. So, despite the dramatic tension of the moment, and the turmoil of most of the



“Last Supper,” *Large Passion*, 1510.

Apostles in response to Christ’s shocking words—a turmoil which is heightened by the severe black and white contrasts—there is an aura of calm radiated by the

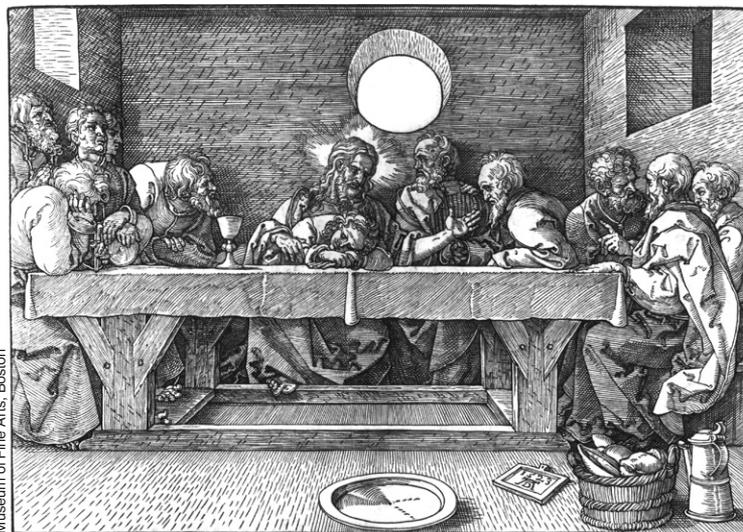
ing, of course, the telltale signature.

Dürer has reinvented the iconography of the “Last Supper,” such that the contemplation by the Apostles (the “ordinary men,” just like you and me) of their future actions, becomes the subject.

—Bonnie James

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“Dürer’s Passions”: An Exhibit at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass. Several of Dürer’s Passion series (the suffering of Christ between the night of the Last Supper and his Crucifixion), were exhibited at the Fogg Art Museum through December 3. The exhibit opened September 9, and will not travel.



“Last Supper,” *Oblong Passion*, 1523.