



Dürer, Albrecht (1471-1528)

by Peter R. Griffith

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Considered one of the greatest graphic artists in history, Dürer elevated printmaking to the level of painting through his unprecedented use of line and value. His works frequently express sexual themes and homoeroticism.

Dürer was born on May 21, 1471 in the Imperial Free City of Nuremberg, the third of his parents' eighteen children. His father was a jeweler and goldsmith. He was educated at the Lateinschule in St. Lorenz and also trained as a goldsmith by his father.

In 1486, Dürer was apprenticed to the well known Nuremberg artist Michael Wolgemut from whom he learned the fundamentals of painting and printmaking. Dürer possessed an insatiable intellectual curiosity and traveled around Europe to broaden his artistic knowledge.

He toured northern Europe between 1490 and 1494 to acquaint himself with German and Flemish art, and in late 1494 and again between 1505 and 1507 he journeyed to Venice. Before his first trip to Venice, Dürer married Agnes Frey, with whom he had a childless and unhappy relationship.

In Venice Dürer absorbed Renaissance ideas and forms and developed his lifelong concern with the figure and its placement in space. Returning to Nuremberg from his first Venetian trip in 1495, Dürer synthesized German, Flemish, and Italian influences and laid the foundation for the northern Renaissance in his first major print series, the *Apocalypse* (1498).

For the next several decades Dürer built his reputation with graphic works such as the *Large* and *Small Passion* and the *Life of the Virgin*, which were published in 1511, as well as by accepting painting commissions.

During his final years the artist became preoccupied with theoretical interests and published a book on mathematics for young artists, as well as the first of four books on human proportion. The other three books in the series were published after his death on April 6, 1528 in the city of Nuremberg.

While scholars have noted sexual themes in Dürer's canon, such as *Large Horse* and *Small Horse*, both of which date from 1505, none have explored the homoeroticism in his work in any depth.

Two letters, however, reveal that Dürer was aware of male-male sexual attraction and may have had a homosexual relationship. In a letter from Venice to his best friend, Willibald Pirckheimer, Dürer wittily comments that Pirckheimer would find pleasure in the beautiful Venetian soldiers running about. A few months later the Canon Lorenz Beham of Bamberg humorously writes to Pirckheimer that Dürer's "boy" surely does not like his beard. Unfortunately, Dürer and Beham do not comment further or make any other homoerotic remarks in their respective letters.



Two works by Albrecht Dürer:
Top: A self-portrait.
Above: *The Death of Orpheus*.

Although written evidence regarding Dürer's sexual interests is limited to these two letters, Dürer's work substantiates the artist's interest in male-male sexual relations. In the *Men's Bath* (1497), for instance, Dürer depicts a group of men in a public bath suggestively grouped together and watched over by a male voyeur.

Dürer also treats homosexuality in the *Death of Orpheus* (1494), which portrays the musician's murder in a woodland by a group of Thracian women. The artist announces Orpheus' crime in a banderole, or scroll bearing an inscription, placed in a tree above the musician's head: "Orpheus, the first pederast." Dürer may have been influenced by contemporary Italian events that made homosexuality and its punishment popular topics of discussion.

Dürer also eroticizes Christ's last days on earth in his *Green Passion* series. In the *Betrayal of Christ* (1503?) from the *Green Passion*, Dürer portrays Christ and Judas preparing for an intimate kiss; while in *Christ Before Caiaphas* (1504) from the same series Caiaphas and a soldier gesticulate to the Savior's exaggerated groin. For these scenes Dürer may have found inspiration in other contemporary sexualized images of Christ or may have been motivated by mystical ideas in which a spiritual union with Christ was expressed in physical terms.

In addition to these three images, Dürer also produced other works with a variety of sexual themes and homoerotic content throughout his career, demonstrating that while he may or may not have had a homosexual relationship, he was certainly drawn to the idea of intimate male contact.

Bibliography

Hutchison, Jane Campbell. *Albrecht Dürer*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Panofsky, Erwin. *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955.

Rupprich, Hans, ed. *Dürer Schriftlicher Nachlass*. Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956.

Strauss, Walter L.. *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer*. 6 vols. New York: Abaris Books, 1974.

Strieder, Peter. "Dürer." *Dictionary of Art*. Jane S. Turner, ed. New York: Grove, 1993. 427-445.

About the Author

Peter R. Griffith is an independent art historian and freelance translator. Formerly from New England, he now makes his home in the Netherlands.