an sant [illegible] dag [illegible]

sun[illegible] auff [illegible]ing

1516

AD


Albrecht Dürer

NORBERT WOLF

DÜRER

PRESTEL
MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK

CONTENT

Preface

The Raven Ralph calls out in fear: 'The end is near, the end is near!'" These lines by German poet Christian Morgenstern might seem more fitting as the motto for an epilogue than a prologue, all the more so since here they are not even meant to hint at the all too familiar fact that prefaces, written last, generally represent a final opportunity. The quotation thrust itself upon me at a very early stage of the project, as I gathered from a bibliography that the literature on Dürer had already reached the frightening number of 10,271 titles – only up to the year 1971. No one has counted how many have been written since then. The portent of an untimely end thus confronted me from the very start of my research; in light of the flood of publications, what sense could there be in writing yet another book on this "media star" of the German Renaissance?

But the raven soon fell silent, for there are in fact justifiable reasons for such a project. Even in recent years, scholarly discussions about this exceptional artist have not fallen silent, on the contrary, many – at times radical – new discoveries and theses have accumulated, and they have not yet been brought together in an overview. For this reason it seemed appropriate at the very least to introduce them. In addition, even well-known facts can yield unexpected perspectives when examined in the light of new, especially contextual questions. My goal is most definitely *not* to produce another Dürer biography, but rather to attempt to present and evaluate Dürer's art from a present-day perspective.

An updated survey reveals much more clearly the universal aspirations of the Nuremberg master, who devoted himself uncompromisingly to the ideal of the *uomo universale* propagated by the Italian Renaissance. For Dürer's work – to different degrees, of course – encompassed painting, drawing, the graphic arts, architecture, the design of glass windows, fortifications and sculpture, interior decoration, writing, music, and art theory, appraisal, and restoration. Representing this spectrum of creative output would be possible only for a group of authors; a single author is forced to concentrate on specific aspects that seem to him of particular importance. This is no less true of the present book. For this

Abbreviations:

A:	Anzelewsky 1991 (see Bibliography)
AP:	Alte Pinakothek
cat.:	catalogue of paintings in the present book, p. 224.
Exh. cat.:	Exhibition catalogue
fig.:	figure
FW:	paintings not included in the catalogue, p. 276.
GHS:	Goldberg/Heimberg/Schawe 1998 (see Bibliography)

reason, the focus here will be on the new interpretative approaches just mentioned, based on analyses of the relevant works, which help to explain the fascination this artist has inspired continuously to the present day.

It has long been *communis opinio* that Dürer is the greatest graphic artist in the history of Western art. The literature has always had much more difficulty in recognizing his abilities in the field of painting. Dürer's genius as a graphic artist and the graphic elements even in his paintings should not obscure the fact that he also had at his disposal significant painterly options. The most recent technical examinations have brilliantly verified his virtuosity with the brush. In addition, Dürer's theoretical treatise *On Colors* (of 1512–13 at the latest), unfortunately only fragmentary, shows just how interested he was in the problems of painting, both technical, in terms of workshop practice, as well as those of a general, optical nature. In order to do justice to Dürer the *painter*, the present book contains a painting catalogue with commentary. Its goal is to exclude works of doubtful attribution on the basis of the present state of knowledge, and, with the help of the surviving paintings unquestionably by Dürer, to allow the impressive achievements of his painted oeuvre to take undiminished effect.

The present publication would have never taken form without the encouragement of many colleagues and friends. I would like to mention two in particular, Ernst Rebel and Ulrich Reisser. Not only did our discussions never fail to cast light upon Dürer and his intellectual world, but – not least – they emphatically kept my joy and enthusiasm for the subject alive.

I would also like to thank Stefanie Penck and Eckhard Hollmann at Prestel Verlag in Munich, who supported the idea of this book project from the very beginning. And thanks are also due to all the Prestel colleagues who supervised the book's printing and assured that it could appear in this highly ambitious form.

GNM: Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum
KHM: Kunsthistorisches Museum
LCI: *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Engelbert Kirschbaum SJ and Wolfgang Braunfels (eds.), 8 vols., Rome, Freiburg, Basel, Vienna, 1968–1976
R I–III: Rupprich (see Bibliography)
SMPK: Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin
SMS: Schoch/Mende/Scherbaum (see Bibliography)

Introduction

Pablo Picasso, the quintessential artistic genius of the twentieth century, was obsessed with artistic metamorphoses. From this perspective, he wrestled with the universally famous paradigms of art history. It is well-known that his imaginary museum also included old German masters such as Grünewald and Lucas Cranach the Elder. But the fact that the Spaniard had, very early on, engaged in an intimate dialogue with a much more famous German artist has been almost completely ignored: in a 1902 self-portrait drawing (fig. 1), Picasso "mirrored" Dürer's Prado self-portrait (cat. 12), although dispensing with the distinctive identifying feature of the "Dürer locks."[1]

Profoundly influenced by German art and philosophy, the young Picasso chose to don the appearance of an "old master" who was viewed with respect – but scarcely enthusiasm – beyond the borders of the German-speaking regions. Even today this assessment has changed little in Latin Europe. And although the reception of Dürer in the United States and Great Britain rests upon a broader foundation – a lingering echo of Dürer scholars such as the Tietzes and Erwin Panofsky, who emigrated from Nazi Germany – in these countries too it is still possible to sense the same reservation described in 1971 by André Chastel as the "instinctive caution" with which foreign scholars approach the phenomenon of Dürer: "In France, and even in the Anglo-Saxon countries, explaining the art of the Nuremberg master is gladly left to interpreters of German culture, if not to the exegetes of the 'Germanic soul.'"[2]

Since the nineteenth century's Romantic national revelries, Dürer's alleged "Germanness" has been linked either to the cliché of the God-fearing and fervently humble artist – this is how he was depicted in 1828 by Joseph Wintergerst (fig. 4) – or, in complete contrast, to the Faustian disposition. In Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus*, begun during the Second World War, it is still Dürer who serves as Mephisto's principle witness to the German soul, placed in the "characteristic national" ambivalence between melancholic endangerment and longing for religious redemption.[3]

When Dürer introduced Italian Renaissance models into his German homeland, this cultural transfer inevitably – according to Hans Belting[4] – resulted in a personal crisis. Dürer, Belting claims, responded to the conflict by safeguarding himself with theoretical constructs – and by attempting to stabilize his imperiled identity with a vast number of self-portraits. And so the topos returns: Dürer as the German and thus "Faustian" seeker of meaning, his creative powers wrested predominantly from doubt. The question of why, long before any "Italian experience," the thirteen-year-old Dürer had already begun to intensively investigate his own features, remains unclear within such a context.

Most current research, however, refrains from characterizing Dürer as the "most German of all German artists"; on the contrary, it draws attention to an impressive internationalism, considering the full range of his work, and sees his consciousness of tradition as combined with the urge to abandon well-traveled paths.

Dürer's international standing, incidentally, was already ungrudgingly recognized by European artists and art theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

1 Pablo Picasso
Self-Portrait, 1902
Ink on cardboard
12.8 x 9.8 cm
Barcelona, Museu Picasso

2 Albrecht Dürer
Self-Portrait, 1498
Wood
52x41cm
Beneath the window the inscription: "1498/das malt Ich nach meiner gestalt/ Ich was sex vnd zwanzig jor alt/Albrecht Dürer/"; monogram
Madrid, Museo del Prado

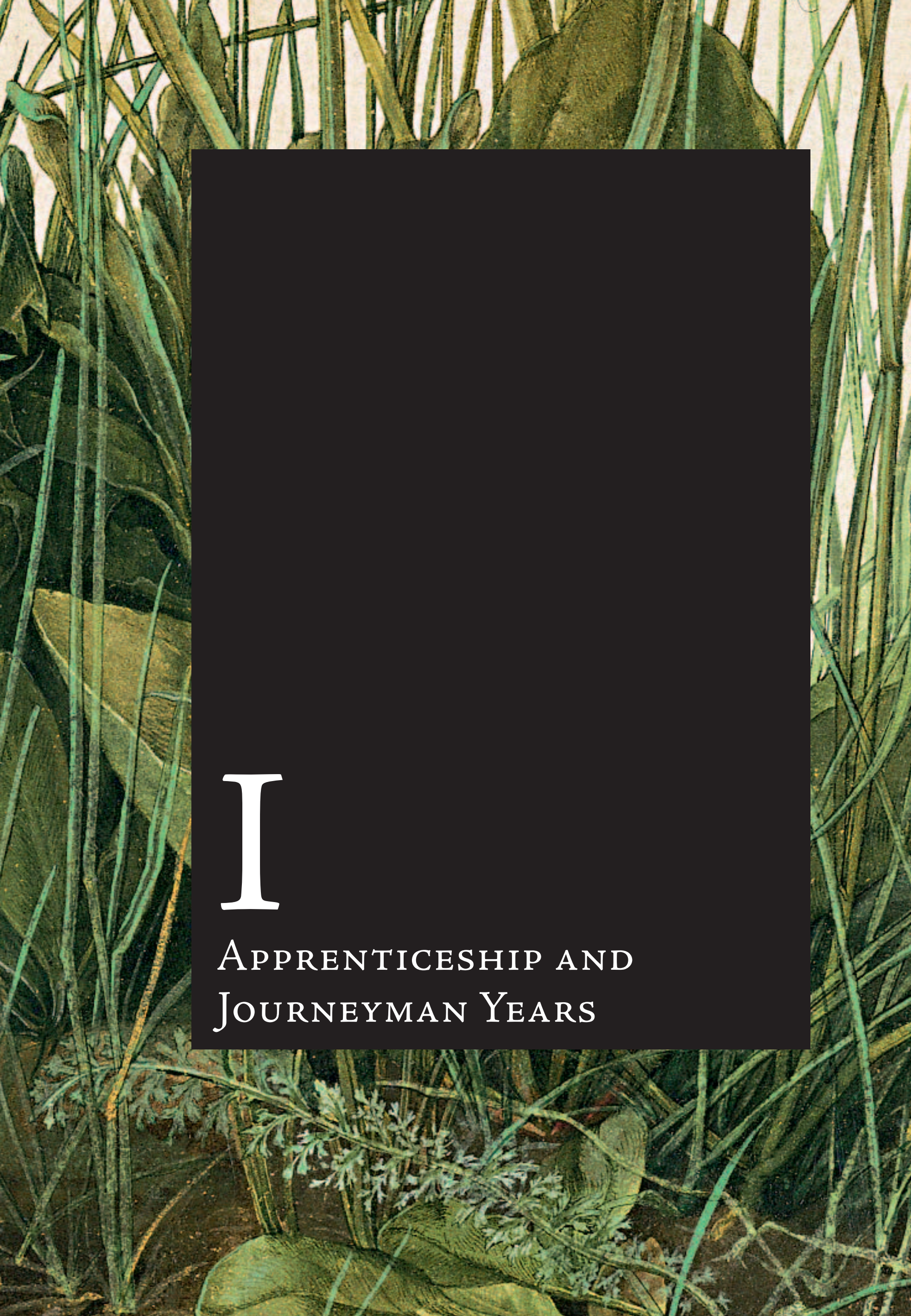
3 Albrecht Dürer
Madonna enthroned with child and two angels playing music, 1485
Ink drawing
Berlin, State Museums, Prussian Cultural Heritage

In his *Chronica* of 1531, the German chronicler and commentator Sebastian Franck, for example, put forth the idea that the most famous artist of antiquity, Apelles, was a "joke" compared to Dürer, for Dürer possessed a far greater universality: "Summa, there is no liberal art that the hand commands, which was largely unknown to him… For in many arts he surpassed many, indeed all, of his contemporaries, and even all those who preceded him." A similar note is struck in the verses placed by Nuremberg shoemaker and meistersinger Hans Sachs in 1528 beneath a woodcut of Dürer's profile portrait by Erhard Schön. For Vasari, Dürer was the perfect example of a *uomo universale* (see p. 187). In a postille to Vasari's *Vita* (*Lives*), the Bolognese Baroque painter Annibale Carracci reached the following judgment: "The great Albrecht Dürer is not to be placed last, after any other excellent Italian painter, and his works, well worth seeing, cannot be praised sufficiently." The first non-Italian history of the artists, Carel van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* (see p. 38), similarly emphasizes Dürer's universality, and describes the Nuremberg genius as a comet whose radiant light elevated German art all at once from the darkness of its medieval servitude. This vast choir of specialist voices is brought to a close with the words of French painter, etcher, and art theorist Roger de Piles, who wrote in his 1699 *Abrégé de la vie des peintres*: "No one has shown more wide-ranging and comprehensive skill in the arts than Albrecht Dürer. After trying his hand at almost all of them and practicing them for a time, he finally decided upon painting and the graphic arts." But, de Piles qualifies, and in this he follows Vasari, Dürer could have achieved even greater things had he, like the Italians, entered into an intense dialogue with the art of antiquity.[5]

Notes

1 On another assimilation of Dürer by Picasso, see p. 223.
2 An article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung*, May 15, 1971.
3 Lüdecke/Heiland 1955, p. 413ff.
4 Belting 1999, p. 37f.
5 The names and quotations (translated into German), in order, are in Lüdecke/Heiland 1955, pp. 54, 57, 83ff. and 111f., except the quotation by Carracci, which can be found in Grebe 2006, p. 22.

4 Joseph Wintergerst
An Angel Leads Albrecht Dürer to God the Father in Heaven, 1828
Watercolor
Nuremberg, Museen der Stadt Nürnberg, Grafische Sammlung



I

Apprenticeship and Journeyman Years

"My desire led me more to painting"

No other artist of the period between the Late Gothic and Early Renaissance is as well documented as Dürer, not least through his own *Gedenkbuch* of 1524, of which, however, only a fragment remains (with dates between 1502 and 1514); as well as through a family chronicle that gives a brief but informative account of his parents' origins up to their deaths and the deaths of his parents-in-law. From the chronicle we learn that Dürer grew up around his father's luxury craft of goldsmithing, and that his interest and inclination soon accordingly led him to painting and the graphic arts.[6] Compared to the craft of the goldsmith, Dürer thus chose a less respected career, and one at which Nuremberg, moreover, had seldom particularly excelled in the past.

Only three works have survived from Dürer's apprenticeship in his father's workshop (in which pattern drawings were also produced): the pen-and-ink drawing *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Two Music-Making Angels*, later signed by him and dated 1485, the chalk drawing *A Lady Holding a Hawk*[7] and, in an exceptional prelude, the silverpoint *Self-Portrait at Age Thirteen* of 1484 (fig. 5).[8]

The uncertain hand of the youthful draftsman in this last work is betrayed by a number of pentimenti as well as the passage where the hair and the tassel of the cap are almost indistinguishable. Despite these weaknesses, this private test piece reveals the self-confidence of a precocious talent. This is borne out already by the technique of silverpoint, which demanded great technical skill. Dürer always remained conscious of the groundbreaking achievement of this first self-portrait; it was not without reason that his later inscription emphasized the fact that in 1484 – while only a child! – he had drawn his likeness in front of a mirror.

As much as this kind of visual self-inquiry seems to capture Dürer's genius in a nutshell, it also foreshadows something that will accompany his later work, namely the enigmatic quality of many of his visual motifs. In the case of the drawing, the question is where the finger of the thirteen-year-old is pointing. Is it drawn from the stock of religious iconography, namely following the outstretched finger of a prophet or John the Baptist pointing at the crucified Christ, a detail "borrowed" as a formal model by the still uncertain apprentice? Is the hand pointing to an unseen mirror, the practical precondition for any self-portrait?[9] Or, as I would like to suggest for consideration, does the gesture make virtual reference to a pendant image?

For we know of a silverpoint drawing from approximately the same time, this one with the countenance of Dürer's father (fig. 6). Its authorship has been, and

5 Albrecht Dürer
Self-Portrait at Age Thirteen, 1484
Silverpoint on prepared paper
27.3x19.5cm
Vienna, Grafische Sammlung Albertina