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### **Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portraiture**

In today's society, celebrities and social media influencers use the mass circulation of carefully crafted images to create a public image of wealth, beauty and success. Great care is taken to present their looks, their lifestyles and their achievements exactly how they wish themselves to be seen. A simple "selfie" will not do, and great care is taken to set the stage precisely. Not all that long ago a paparazzi photo of a female celebrity without makeup or a male celebrity without a muscular build was a hot commodity. Those caught looking anything less than perfect were ostracized in the entertainment press. While many celebrities have relaxed a bit about presenting a perfect image 24 hours a day, the pressure is still there for them to somehow be better looking, live better and be all around superior to so-called normal people.

I propose that German master Albrecht Dürer perfected this over-the-top form of self-promotion. He was not the first artist to use his work to improve his public image, but he certainly was one of the most prolific. He embraced the concept of self-portraiture earlier in his career than most. He used his undeniable skills to present himself exactly as he really was at different times in his life, in apparent contradiction to his generally accepted goals. I think it would be very possible to look deeply into his references to his own mental state as the reason he may have been willing, possibly even compelled, to present the two conflicting sides of his own

image – the real and the desired. The scope of Dürer's oeuvre and specifically, known self-portraiture, is too enormous to address the many possibilities it presents about the man in a single paper. Even books devoted to his work are forced to be selective, due to his prolific production. In this paper I will compare and contrast his two personas in the period of time around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Dürer's extensive self-portraiture was created in numerous formats and served multiple purposes. Sometimes it served as a signature, with Dürer tucked into or aside from a larger scene, sometimes mere documentation of his current state or studies for use in other works, and sometimes as a marketing device. Many were realistic. Some were not flattering. Dürer's three known painted self-portraits with himself as the sole subject were created with an obvious eye towards cementing his public image as a learned, successful gentleman – more of an idealized projection of how he wished to be seen, than a reflection of how he truly may have been at that exact moment in time. Dürer was certainly handsome and accomplished, but those images convey an extraordinary level of perfection. Unlike most male artists of his time, Dürer embraced the genre of self-portraiture early in his career. He is credited with producing around 50 self-portraits, both paintings and drawings.

Dürer's first known self-portrait was a silverpoint sketch completed in his youth, while he was training to follow his father into the family craft of goldsmithing. His untrained work, created simply by observing himself in a mirror, was far more expertly executed than the work of many who had studied the skill. His father was not particularly supportive of his son leaving his goldsmithing workshop to become an artist. Still, Dürer the Elder recognized his son's

exceptional skill and agreed to allow young Albrecht to study with Michael Wolgemut, Nuremberg's most successful painter at the time.<sup>1</sup>

At that time in Nuremberg, a goldsmith held a position of higher esteem than painters. However, Dürer the Elder was a fairly recent immigrant, having moved to Nuremberg from Hungary only 15 years before his son's birth in 1471. It is hypothesized that Dürer recognized early on the social mobility his work as a painter might offer to him and to his family. It is also possible that as his proficiency grew, he saw using his skill with that purpose in mind as a way to make up for leaving his father's and grandfathers' trade. Dürer was set to become a very talented goldsmith before he felt called to the arts.<sup>2</sup>

Dürer's career path turned out to be well chosen. He is considered to be one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance. Famous for his woodcuts and engravings, he also wrote and published books and, of course, painted.<sup>3</sup> His fame as a self-portraitist is so great, he was famously included alongside Picasso, Rembrandt and Van Gogh in Norman Rockwell's *Triple Self-Portrait*, 1960. That work has been interpreted as Rockwell's attempt to place himself among a higher class of artists – world renowned self-portraitists.<sup>4</sup> Dürer's talents have assured him a place in history, but his need to rise above his status as a “mere craftsman,” and to improve his family's social status may have fueled, at least in part, his extraordinary volume and quality of self-portraiture.

The higher social status of artists in Italy might have been another inspiration. After his travels to Italy in the late fifteenth century, Dürer became more aware that it was possible for artists to rise up in the ranks of the social structure. His more formal, painted self-portraits appear

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Dürer* (London & New York: Phaidon Press, 2012), 25-28.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Wilson, “Enframing Aspirations: Dürer's Self-Portrait of 1493,” *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 126 (1995): 150.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, *Dürer*, 77.

<sup>4</sup>Omar Calabrese, *Artist's Self-portraits* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2006), 166-167.

to be a series of declarations of his skill, achievements, education and belonging among the upper class. This may have been further fueled by his friendship with Willibald Pirckheimer, a learned young man of the upper class, who was also familiar with Italian society. Pirckheimer offered Dürer access to elite members of society, as well as a large number of international scholars.<sup>5</sup>

Comparisons between contemporary artists and ancient masters became commonplace during Dürer's time among those academics. In the course of their studies of the classics, contemporary humanists sought to link themselves and their society to the ancient masters. This societal trend may have fueled Dürer's attempts to mimic the antique master, Apelles, in his quest for improved social standing and establishing the sort of colossal historical legacy Apelles enjoyed. Dürer mimicked the master in a number of ways. Apelles was believed to have written a great, yet lost, dissertation on the art of painting. It is probably not a coincidence that Dürer became an expert on the topic of art, as well as an accomplished artist.<sup>6</sup>

According to Pliny in his famed tome, *Natural History*, Apelles contributed more to painting than all of the other artists in history combined. Pliny predicted that his inventions would benefit all artists to follow. The single invention of Apelles that benefited no one else was his dark varnish. The formula for the varnish was lost to the ages and no painter since had been able to recreate his exact formulation. Apelles used the varnish to mute the color, preventing them from being too powerful and offending the viewer's eye. Apelles was the first artist known to employ the style of "less is more." In keeping with this theory of subtlety, Apelles's greatest works were created with a palette of just four colors. Apelles was known to take broad artistic

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<sup>5</sup>Smith, *Dürer*, 78-82.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 80-81.

license, changing the facts of a subject in keeping with his vision. Legend has it that Apelles went so far as to dare to change the complexion of Alexander the Great, rather than break from his artistic vision. Apelles's subtle approach seems to be something Dürer embraced gradually. His earlier, painted self-portraits, *Self-Portrait* (1493) and *Self-Portrait* (1498) utilize brighter paints and do not appear to have been varnished, or at least not varnished to the same degree. By *Self-Portrait* (1500) Dürer had fully encompassed this color palette and varnishing method in his work.<sup>7</sup>

It is possible that Dürer himself may have instigated others calling him the “second Apelles.” His work was already mimicking and being compared to that of the great master's work but writings about the 1500 self-portrait spread the moniker beyond Nuremberg. Dürer's own friends used it in their praise of the painting. One invented the story that Dürer's dog licked the painting thinking it was Dürer himself, leaving tongue marks in the paint, as a testament to its unrivaled realism.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1500 self-portrait Dürer is attired like a well-dressed gentleman - his usual self-presentation in his painted self-portraits. Created at the time of the recognized age of passage into adulthood, twenty-eight years old, its intent was quite likely to record his appearance at his physical and mental peak for posterity.<sup>9</sup> This image accomplishes both a presentation of his desired image, but also his incomparable skill. Dürer's dazzling skillfulness is on display in the entire painting. His luxurious locks, the realistic fur, the perfectly recreated hand and the beautiful face all clearly show his skill as an artist. It would be challenging to dispute that this

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<sup>7</sup>Margaret A. Sullivan, “Alter Apelles: Dürer's 1500 Self-Portrait,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 1177-1178.

<sup>8</sup>David Hotchkiss Price, *Humanism, Reformation, and the Art of Faith* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 92.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 66.

self-portrait is anything less than an impeccable model of mastery of painting, as well as self-presentation.

Dürer's skillfully rendered hand gestures towards his idealized self's collar. The painted Dürer's hand shows every crease and vein of a real human hand. The positioning of the fingers draws the viewer's eye up and into the image, like a subtle arrow, bringing you first to his collar. The pelt appears soft and supple, as if you could reach out and feel its smooth, furry texture. Every single strand of fur is accounted for in perfect detail. The shading perfectly expresses the flexibility a collar of fur would have, as it draped around its wearer's neck and shoulders. There is no subtlety masking Dürer's intent. He is establishing his skill, while leading us deeper into the work, to absorb his full message.<sup>10</sup>

His hair is a masterpiece in its own right, both in reality and in this image. Who but the most masculine of men could grow - not to mention recreate in paint - such a glorious mane? Like the pelt of his collar, every single strand is depicted in his entwined, curly tresses. Highlighted with a tint of gold, it brings to mind the mane of a virile and fierce lion. Dürer's whole self-image could easily be characterized by his meticulous depiction of his beard and hair: beauty, virility and skill. Dürer was mocked by his own friends for his excessive attention to his hair in real life. In the 1500 self-portrait, he takes ownership this conceit about his hair and puts its result on display. Hair can be something extremely personal, part of a person's innermost self-image, while broadcasting a message to those nearby with its appearance and changing style to suit the situation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Koerner, *Moment*, 169.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 169, 251.

Unlike his self-portraits of 1493 and 1498, his clothing is not a prominent feature of this work. He is obviously attired in the clothing of the well-off, but the more mature Dürer displays the art of subtlety in both his choice of attire and artistic style. Gone are the bright red accents and loose tassels of a bachelor of his 1493 image. While more subtly colored than 1493, his 1498 image presents a giddy young man attired in celebration clothes of great contrast with rich ornamentation. The details and textures are rich but the colors border on monochromatic. The majority of the image is rendered in black, white, greys and browns, with the only subtle splash of color employed in the landscape viewed through the window. By the self-portrait of 1500 his clothing is rich, but barely of notice in the overall image. His use of restraint in his color choices have reached an apex. As noted earlier, Dürer's progression of palette selection was keeping with his growing quest to buttress his reputation as the second coming of Apelles.

In the 1498 self-portrait, Dürer portrays himself as a nobleman but makes sure to include an inscription that clearly conveys his authorship. The inscription reads, in part, "This I painted after my own image."<sup>12</sup> In the self-portrait of 1500, he makes a grander effort to fortify his position as a learned gentleman. Dürer's use of Roman letters as well as the Latin language communicate his place among the intellectuals and academics of Nuremberg. Dürer's Germanic monogram employs a certain style generally found in the finer letterpress output of the time – a product that would most likely only be accessible to those of the educated and wealthy classes. His monogram to the left, his own self-image in the center and the Latinized inscription on the right reflect balance and symmetry utilized by an artist who is knowledgeable in geometry and

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Dürer*, 77-80.

shapes as tools of artistic design. Dürer's placement of his lettering at the subject's eye level, and most likely the viewer's eye level as well, demands attention to his message.<sup>13</sup>

Across these three images, peaking in the self-portrait of 1500 we see the self-portrayal of an assured, successful, sophisticated artist of abundant cleverness, exactly as the author intended for us to see. Yet, the image presented in *Nude Self-Portrait* (c. 1500-1505) created around the same time as the self-portrait of 1500, tells a much different story.

In the nude, created in pen and brush on green paper, there are no flowing locks, no fine garments and no indication of social status. All that is presented to the viewer is an exposed man, as he is, or at least less impressive than he was in the self-portraiture of the recent past. The focus is no longer solely his face, but his body. What remains is the unequaled skill of a master while the subject matter stands in stark contrast to the self-assured gentleman of 1500. One can write pages about the plentiful details of the more formal, painted self-portraits, while the nude leaves us with far less to consider.

Dürer's mane is tucked up under a hair net. The net does not appear to hold the voluminous ringlets portrayed in 1500. The lion's mane is not just downplayed, it doesn't appear to exist at all. The locks displayed in 1500 would take up a considerable amount of space, even piled up in a hair net and that is not shown here.

His face is gaunt, almost skeletal – the face of a much older or sicker man than the masculine 28-year-old presented in the self-portrait of 1500. His cheekbones are prominent. His countenance is not one of confidence, but one of pronounced intensity. Perhaps the result of

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<sup>13</sup>Erika Boeckeler, "Painting Writing in Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portrait of 1500," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 28, no.1 (2012):32-35, 42.



concentrated study of the mirror used to see his subject, his direct, almost accusatory gaze is unsettling.<sup>14</sup>

His chest and abdomen have some mass, more similar to the remnants of lost muscular definition, than to current fitness. The skin hangs more loosely than it should on a fit man of around thirty. His upper arms still bear some developed muscle, but immediately give way to slender lower arms. The lower portion of his arms and hands are not illustrated. His legs, shown only to his knobby knees, are thin. Whether a remaining hint of conceit or loyal representation of reality, his genitals have as much definition and prominence in the overall design as his face.

Dürer's portrayal of himself has moved from a self-glamourizing construct to a realistic portrait. This is possibly the self-critical act of a man realizing his body is changing due to age or illness, or of the melancholic in a fit of ill-ease with himself. A seemingly informal sketch by Dürer is still far and away more masterful than the work of others. From the clear representation of the lines on his face to the veins in his leg, his accuracy is uncanny. His dramatic use of chiaroscuro throughout the image, most prominent in his navel and groin, is intense and effective. It gives the entire piece a forceful realism with an eerie and otherworldly feeling. This work is nothing like his earlier painted self-portraits.

After *Self-Portrait* (1500) Dürer never again painted himself as grandly or as the sole subject of a portrait but continued to portray himself in a positive light in paintings created for public viewing. In some paintings like *Feast of the Rosary* (1506) and the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (1508) Dürer included himself as part of an overall scene. His presence in these images was not accurate according to history or mythology but identified his authorship. In *Feast of the Rosary*, he depicts himself holding a scroll with his signature, the date and a claim that it

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<sup>14</sup>Smith, *Dürer*, 154-155.

was completed in a mere five months. In the *Adoration of the Holy Trinity* (1511), he takes this contrivance further. He includes himself in the painting but completely removes himself from the action. He stands alone on a hill, a mere human, with a banner declaring his authorship, while the mythic action occurs above him, among the clouds, much larger than Dürer. His outwards gaze towards the viewer's plane of existence in these images joins the two worlds on some level. The artist utilized this same tool in his three painted self-portraits, seemingly wishing to communicate with viewers beyond time and space. His doppelgängers' ostensible awareness of the world outside their crafted realms give the artist's alter egos a unique quality, constructing Dürer as a sort of visual narrator.<sup>15</sup>

Although Dürer left behind more personal papers than many, no one can know for sure what internal battles the artist was waging with himself, playing them out visually for the world to see. There is no way to be certain how much was advertising; how much was self-criticism and how much was reality. Was Dürer the man portrayed in his painted self-portraits or the more realistic man portrayed in his nude sketch? It is highly unlikely that he was as perfect as his paintings. It is possible that even the nude sketch was idealized, although much less so than the earlier paintings. Dürer's extensive self-portraiture gives us a much deeper look at who he might have been than most artists of the period, but much like modern celebrities and their image driven fame, we will only ever know that which they want us to know.

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<sup>15</sup> Calabrese, *Self-portraits*, 70-74, 216.

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