



# Dürer and His Legacy

An exhibition of the British Museum's unparalleled collection of prints and drawings by Albrecht Dürer, the core of which was bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane in 1753, will examine the German Renaissance artist's achievements and afterlife. **Giulia Bartrum.**

The British Museum is staging the first exhibition in this country for over thirty years to be devoted to the major German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528). It will focus on the superlative collection of Dürer prints and drawings in the British Museum which, along with those in Berlin and Vienna, is one of the finest in the world. The Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin and the Albertina in Vienna have generously agreed to lend a few drawings of prime importance which have never been displayed in this country before, including the 'Self-portrait as a thirteen-year-old', the 'Praying Hands' (both from Vienna) and a striking study on blue paper, 'Portrait of an Architect' (Berlin) to complement the existing holdings of the artist's work in the British Museum. Other major drawings by Dürer from the Royal Collection, Windsor Castle and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford will be displayed, as well as the only painting in the exhibition, a small devotional panel of 'St Jerome' from the National Gallery.

The exhibition plays a significant role in the commemorative events which will take place in 2003 in connection with the 250th anniversary of the British Museum. The foundation bequest of Sir Hans Sloane, who died in January 1753, included a volume of 138 drawings by Dürer and his school, which forms the core of the collection of 16th-century German drawings in the British Museum. Sloane also bequeathed four volumes of Dürer's writings, mostly relating to the artist's theoretical works, which are today in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Library. Together with books, maps and two drawings, the British Library will be lending one of the famous letters written in 1506 by Dürer in Venice to his close friend Willibald Pirckheimer in Nuremberg, in which much is learnt about the jovial nature of this productive and influential artist: 'My French mantle, my doublet and my brown coat send you hearty greeting. I should be



Above: 'View of the Castle at Trent', pen and black ink with watercolour, c. 1495.

Opposite: 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse', woodcut, 1498. From Dürer's first series of woodcuts, 'The Apocalypse', published three years after he opened his workshop.

glad to see what great thing your headpiece can produce that you hold yourself so high.'

The core of the exhibition will examine Dürer's major achievements as a draughtsman and printmaker. The display opens with a section entitled 'Dürer and his Image' which examines the artist's strikingly innovative approach to self-portraiture and also shows later representations of him, including medals. The following sections chronicle the sequence of Dürer's life, with an emphasis on a particular period or project in each. They cover his family background and early apprenticeship in Nuremberg; his first visit to Italy, which stimulated him to produce in c. 1495–6 the earliest group of watercolour landscapes to have survived, including the 'View of the Castle at Trent' and the 'Landscape with a Woodland Pool'. The production of his engraving 'Adam and Eve' in 1504 is discussed in connection with a number of related





Design for a large table fountain, pen and brown ink with watercolour, c. 1499–1500. Dürer probably designed this elaborate object for his father-in-law, Hans Frey, a brassworker who specialised in table-decorations.

will also be a section on Dürer's three master prints of 1513–14, 'Knight, Death and the Devil', 'Melancholia' and 'St Jerome in his Study' and their related drawings. The final part devoted to Dürer's life looks at the journey that he made to the Netherlands in 1520–21 which he described in a detailed diary and illustrated with views and portraits drawn in a sketchbook.

The final sections of the exhibition discuss Dürer's after-life: the variety of ways in which he influenced later artists and craftsmen up to the mid-19th century was vast and wide-ranging. Not only were his ideas absorbed into the style of later artists such as Rembrandt and Caspar David Friedrich, but his graphic work was also a constant source of inspiration to producers of decorative works of art; and examples of ceramics, enamels, small sculpture and plaquettes, drawn from the collections of the British Museum and other British public institutions as well as two private collections, will be shown to illustrate this side of his legacy. Examples of the graphic work of his pupil, Hans Baldung, and his famous Dutch contemporary, Lucas van Leyden, will be shown, as well as drawings by Florentine mannerist artists such as Jacopo da Pontormo.

A drawing by the Persian miniaturist Abu'l Hasan, copied from Dürer's 'Engraved Passion', illustrates the extent of his influence around 1600. The phenomenon known as the 'Dürer renaissance' of the late 16th and early 17th centuries was a period of particularly obsessive interest in Dürer and his style, largely created by the fact that original works by the master were no longer available on the market. Consequently, glossy pastiches and elegant copies of his work became highly sought after by collectors, and artists such as Hans Hoffmann became well known for their skill at producing them.

The penultimate section focuses on the extraordinarily long-lasting influence of Dürer's 'Rhinceros'

studies which reveal his interest in the proportions of the human body, as seen in his drawing of Apollo and Diana. His famous series of 'Large Passion' woodcuts published as a book in 1511 is included in its entirety; and there will be a special focal point for his iconic image of 'Praying Hands', which was made as a study for an apostle on the Heller Altarpiece in 1508. There

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and its interpretation in a variety of media. A highly unusual piece of Meissen porcelain has been loaned from the collection of the Duke of Northumberland. The exhibition concludes with a section examining Dürer's legacy in the 19th century, particularly the way in which his work was interpreted by the Romantic artists, such as Caspar David Friedrich who is represented by a self-portrait drawing loaned by the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen; and how the artist became an object of veneration celebrated in elaborate festivals.

The accompanying publication includes four essays on different aspects of Dürer's influence in addition to a catalogue of the works represented in the display. The writer's essay describes the very early impression made by the artist on literary figures of the day. Their rhetorical prose laid the foundations on which the Dürer myths of subsequent centuries were based. The article by Joseph Leo Koerner, a leading authority on the German Renaissance, discusses the impact of Dürer's style and trademark practices on 16th-century artists and how they managed to respond creatively to his art. Ute Kuhleemann's essay describes the Dürer legacy during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The final essay by the German writer Günter Grass, 'On Stasis in Progress: Variations on Albrecht Dürer's engraving, Melencolia I', was initially a lecture delivered by the author at the commemorative Dürer

festivities in Nuremberg in 1971, and then published a year later as the final chapter of his book *From the Diary of a Snail*. The book is set against the background of the German election campaign of 1969, in which Grass took an active part on behalf of the Social Democratic Party and its leader Willy Brandt. The juxtaposition of his campaigning with the planning of his lecture, his consideration of Dürer's prints and of the inert, brooding figure of Melancholia in comparison with the social state of Germany in the late 1960s, provoke much thought about the continued use of Dürer's images for political means.

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'Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy: the graphic work of a Renaissance artist', sponsored by Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering, is at the British Museum 5 December 2002 – 23 March 2003.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book of the same name, by Giulia Bartrum, published by the British Museum Press, price £35 (published in the US by Princeton University Press).

'The Rhinceros', pen and brown ink, 1515. This is Dürer's study for the famous woodcut of 1515.

