

# Dürer's Model

Reflections on *Durer and his Legacy*: an exhibition held at the British Museum 2002-3

Joseph Leo Koerner

The Romantics made a profession of yearning. They yearned for loves that couldn't be consummated, for distances that couldn't be reached, for pasts that couldn't quite be recalled, for flowers that were nowhere to be found, and even were these to be achieved, there would have to be remoter loves, horizons and histories after which to yearn.

In Germany, this yearning *for* yearning took a public, ritual form in the longing for Albrecht Dürer. Feeling an elective affinity with works by this artist, which for centuries had seemed stiff and remote, they experienced also an uncanny personal intimacy with him. Mingling together artistic, historical, and political aspirations, these yearnings were released in 1796 by an effusive text calling itself, indeed, *Effusions of the Heart*. Composed largely by Wilhelm Wackenroder and brought into print by Ludwig Tieck, this epoch-making little book centred on a miniature version of itself, in the form of an essay titled 'Honorary commemoration of our honourable ancestor, Albrecht Dürer.' And at the centre of *this* centrepiece, and therefore as the seed of Romanticism itself, stood a dream. Having spent the day in a 'magnificent gallery of pictures,' and having discovered there a 'close affinity to [his] heart' of two masters, Raphael and Dürer, the writer, Wackenroder, but in the medievalizing but also irredeemably modern persona of an art-loving monk, falls asleep in a huge gothic castle after midnight, and dreams of awakening there and of finding it filled with the paintings he had seen the day before. But now, their audience is instead the artists themselves, who, dressed in the old costumes they wore in their self-portraits, stand admiring their own creations.

And behold, there stood apart from the rest Raphael and Dürer, hand in hand, before my eyes, and they looked silently, in friendly repose, at their pictures which hung together. I hadn't the courage to speak to divine Raphael. But my Albrecht I wanted to greet at once, and to pour out my love to him. Only in that moment everything got mixed up in a confusion before my eyes, and I woke up with a violent start.

What was it, and what is it, that makes Dürer feel so close? Is it his self-portraits, seven of them painted, another six or so sketched – that seal his products to his person, endowing them with the face that Wackenroder felt encouraged to greet? Or is it those works themselves that, evidencing vividly both the *personality* and, in their calligraphic splendour, the corporeal *person* who made them, seem imprinted with Dürer even without the signatures, monograms, and autobiographical inscriptions he *also* adds to them? Circulating among the sheets on display in the 2002–3 British Museum exhibition, walking around those early study sheets filled front and back with his experiments, I had the distinct feeling not only of inhabiting his material remains, but of wandering through them in Dürer's own footsteps. For wherever I looked, whether at his first silver-point self-portrait with its later autobiographical gloss (Pl. 1) or at the comparative sheet by Schongauer, which he himself collected and labelled (Pl. 2), he,

this quintessential maker, seems already to have stood among these objects, as their first and model user. Curious about the character of his own art, appreciative of art that was different from it, and responsible and meticulous about dates and authorship, he is the first and most exemplary member of his own legacy. Which is indeed how romanticism finds him, gazing lovingly at his own paintings, and ready to be the rightful receptacle of that true effusion of the heart that Wackenroder, because of course he must wake, pours out to *us* instead in the book that launched Dürer's modern rival. The dream, then, is not only that one understands this artist but that the artist himself, were he able to hear us, would understand us.

What jolts me most rudely from this dream is its strange resemblance to past intimacies. Just as, in cinema, nothing looks more dated than old costume movies, so too in art, historical revivals, when viewed from a sufficient temporal remove, display the period quirks of the revivers more than the characteristics of the past they revive. Wackenroder's dream, with its spooky setting and erotic undercurrent, seems thoroughly Romantic; and its underlying conceit, which is to replace the religious piety that it admires in pre-modern art by an aesthetic devotion symptomatic of modernity, opens the chasm between itself and the past. And yet, encountering this now-obsolete revival, and surveying the other Dürer-Renaissances featured in the exhibition, I am also struck by how much they influence our own response; for who can claim that their appreciation of this artist is unmediated by the intervening legacy? As this show made powerfully apparent, Dürer's unique and personal artistry, to which we as viewers feel so close, comes to us refracted by a prism of prior immediacies. A few instances must suffice.

Just one year after publishing with Wackenroder the *Effusions of the Heart*, Tieck composed a massive novel set in Dürer's time. Early in the story, the hero, Franz Sternbald, embarked upon his wanderings, writes to his brother of a new print of St. Jerome 'by our Albert' (Pl. 3). To heighten the immediacy of looking at Dürer with period eyes, Tieck has Sternbald recognize in the print a portrait of the artist's home in Nuremberg. 'For I discern again the room, the table, the round window-panes that Dürer in this picture transcribed from his own house. How often have I gazed at those round panes, which sketch the sunshine on to the panel or ceiling; the hermit sits there at the Dürer's own desk!' Stripped of its novelistic embellishments Tieck's response is fairly predictable. Yes, Dürer captures the complexity of objects in the interior *and* the complex play of light on those objects. But banal art history gets refreshed by the fiction of a viewer hailing the real-world prototype and naively proposing that the windows, and not Dürer, originally sketched these effects. Yet in Tieck's text, these immediacy-effects are undone by our abiding recognition that the print thus described lays not before some aspiring painter from Gothic Nuremberg but on the desk of the aspiring poet Tieck, whose

every phrase exudes a Romantic view of art. Thus a few lines on, we hear, through Sternbald, of the ‘innocence, piety, and sweetness’ of the saint, qualities that have to apply more to Dürer’s art as Tieck sees it than to the saint as observed by a period-observer. For Tieck could and would never claim that Dürer himself intended to be an innocent. The novel’s portrait of Nuremberg c. 1500 is of a sophisticated metropolis regrettably at odds with its present situation, where frivolous fashions rule in the cultural sphere and where hope lies in recourse to an archaic aesthetic ideal. What Dürer stands for presently cannot be what Dürer originally was, since innocence must needs be naive of its own innocence. ‘Not witticized and not quibbled,’ wrote Goethe in 1776, ‘Not decorated and not scribbled, / The world should before you stand, / As Dürer drew it with his hand.’ The interest that Tieck’s text holds for me lies not in its anachronisms, however, but in the innocence with which it commits them.

Encountering Dürer in Romantic garb simultaneously displaces him to a remoter past and loosens our grip on chronology, since how certain can we be that our view of Tieck’s view of Dürer is not more anachronistic? We can observe this peculiar mingling of the original artwork with its reception in the marginal lithographs that Eugen Napoleon Neureuther made for Goethe’s ballads and romances (Pl. 4). Based on the lithographs produced by Johann Strixner of Dürer’s sketches for the *Prayer Book of Maximilian* (Pl. 5), these model Romantic arabesques approximate their 16th-century prototype in the playful movement they engender, in which the eye, caught upon in representation of flowers, grass, birds, insects, etc., gets transported into an abstract play of line that then enters and transforms the print texts itself, set in a self-consciously script-like *fraktur*. Meanwhile, Goethe’s ballads and romances were themselves conscious attempts to imitate naive folk songs. In the case of *Heidenröslein* this actually occurred, by way of its various musical settings. With the twisting arabesque, and through the familiarity of poems they frame, we pass back and forth between perceptions of innocence and irony. And this suspense of temporal difference allows us to experience the ironies and anachronism already present in Dürer’s prayer book, poised as it already was between manuscript and print.

Virtually wherever one enters the historical sequence of Dürer’s legacy, whether at the point of its full-blown mythologization in late-19th-century Germany or at its original enactment by Dürer himself, as he set about framing his own first production in a historicizing commentary, one feels a similar historical dislocation, in which the past seems at once irredeemably remote and absolutely contemporaneous. This holds also true for the so-called Dürer Renaissance of around 1600. On the one hand, Hans Hoffman’s handmade facsimile from 1576 (Pl. 6) merely repeats the museological gesture performed by Dürer c. 1520 on his childhood likeness, so that the difference between the artist’s paradigmatic view of himself and his fervent admirer’s all but vanishes. (In his *Family Chronicle*, by the way, Dürer projects esteem back a generation, boasting ‘My father took a special pleasure in me.’) On the other hand, Hoffmann’s sheet, in the peculiar form of its reverence, looks forward to the 19th century, when the veneration of Dürer took on quasi-religious overtones – seen, for example, in Friedrich Campe’s *Albrecht Dürer’s Relics*, 1928, and when the singularity of artistic genius was at once reified and exhausted by a new culture of the copy. In the 2002 exhibition, the pairing of Dürer’s

1508 drawing of a *Head of an Apostle* with the full-scale engraving of it by Aegidius Sadeler looks, likewise, forward and backward (Pls 7 and 8). As one of the world’s first reproductive engravings of a drawing as drawing, it looks ahead to the facsimiles of Strixner and Friedrich Lippmann; at the same time, what most captures our attention in this pairing is how, by way of Sadeler’s virtuoso translation into print of Dürer’s fluid line, we discover the quasi-engraved character of the drawing itself, which translates the mechanical perfection of meticulous burin work back into an athletic and now collectable performance of the brush.

The modernity of the Dürer Renaissance, its peculiarly art-historical character that befits the 19th century more than the time when it occurred, enables us to discern, or at least to dream about, the more original modernity of the master himself. For who else but Dürer, with his historically precocious, mobile, and ultimately unstable forms of artistic self-denomination could generate *both* Georg Schweigger’s 1642 honestone relief, with its detachable artist’s monogram hiding on the verso the sculptor’s own signature, *and* Richard Cockle Lucas’ ivory homage to Dürer as the sculpture’s true author (Pls 9 and 10). For had not Dürer’s contemporary imitators, artists like Hans Baldung Grien, Niklas Manuel Deutsch, and Urs Graf, already played similar tricks with Dürer’s monogram? See for example, Hans Baldung’s woodcut of the *Fall*, where the artist’s initials have been placed under Eve’s foot, where Satan’s head should be (Pl. 11). And who else but Dürer could have inspired Goltzius’s art-historical joke. At first passing off his own imitative *Circumcision* engraving (Pl. 12) as a previously unknown, and, because of its apparently preternatural modernity, also unsurpassed Dürer original, Goltzius proved, long-before Riegl, that age-value trumps art value, and that present productions are always overshadowed by the aura of the past, embodied by the AD monogram. Note, by the way, how implausible Goltzius’ hoax seems today, when every engraved fold and finger looks like it was made in 1590. This is because, in their day, styles are hard to see *as* styles, which is why forgeries are easier to spot in retrospect. But Goltzius’s point is *also* that, by manifestly mimicking and secretly updating Dürer, he also mobilized the earlier artist’s special appeal, which, again, lies in his simultaneous distance, as avatar of a vanished era, and his affinity with whatever present actively receives him. For Wackenroder and Tieck, too, Dürer’s model character consisted *both* in what they termed ‘his close affinity to my heart’ and in his historical estrangement from present tastes. When they celebrate his ‘obtusely ornamented’ style, they continue to see its otherness even as they make it their own.

Up until now I have discussed Dürer’s model only in the one grammatically-contorted sense, namely the example, or *model*, that this artist constituted for others. In other words, I’ve focused on the ‘legacy’ part of the 2002 exhibition. This legacy was predicated on Dürer’s copying his own work. A pioneer in the tactics and techniques of mechanical reproduction, the artist manufactured his *own* exemplarity by disseminating his productions as prints and by *attaching* himself to these copies through his artistic trademark. As the artist intended, the copyrighted copies served as the models for a huge variety of other productions. The trouble started when artists like Marcantonio Raimondi marketed their copies *as* the model (Pl. 13). Spurious Dürer-monograms, occurring within a few years of the launch of that monogram itself, testify to the

precocious emergence of another form of exemplarity, in which not just the products of the producer but the producer himself acquires a model status. Forgeries differ from facsimiles only in the authorship they claim. Implicitly or explicitly, they evidence the artist's original prestige. It would be interesting to study works from the Dürer Renaissance in terms of the bandwidth of originality available to them. Goltzius's hoax was intended, I think, partly to illustrate the paradox of a culture so devoted to Dürer's model, and more generally to the art of the past, that it became impossible to follow that model, since its exemplarity consisted in its not having followed a model. This paradox haunts Dürer's whole legacy. It reappears in the earliest debates about Romanticism. Opponents such as Friedrich Ramdohr assailed not so much the ruleless subjectivism of Romantic art, but its medievalism, which seemed contrary to the optimistic ideal that art gets better, rather than worse, over time. And indeed almost immediately Dürer's model shifted from *providing* a revolutionary impulse to *engendering* 19th-century 'museal Kultur'. I would date this tension back to the beginnings of Dürer's legacy, in the peculiar struggle his most talented assistant waged with him right under his own roof. Hans Baldung Grien, who kept shop while Dürer was in Venice, turned cryptic satire against the master's emblems of mastery. These emblems were, first of all, the particular iconographic motifs through which Dürer mythicized artistic control, for example in ideally-proportioned horses: depicting the perfect horses *perfectly* constituted an obvious analogy to physically handling the stallion himself (Pl. 14). It is this control that Baldung mocks in all his horse prints (Pl. 15). Baldung also knew that claims of mastery depended not only on myths but also on *marks* that linked the maker to his product. The artist's monogram and self-portrait thus stand toppled and debased before the unruly horse (Pl. 16). Already inside Dürer's shop, then, epigones overturn or 'demythologize' his legacy. Such gestures go down well among students of art history today, for whom mastery has become a taboo term. I've lectured on the public relations function of Dürer's self-portraits only to find undergraduates believing that the artist's *only* skill was in advertisement, and that what his works looked like counted for nothing.

For Dürer to function as model, he obviously needed not only the means of disseminating and marking his products, but also the talent to make them exemplary. This is not the time to assess why, from the point of view of the images he launched, Dürer became so influential. Obvious answers lie in the Dürer 2002 exhibition, where virtually every sheet by the artist represents a new and momentous beginning. What I want to do instead is to think briefly about the other meaning of 'Dürer's model,' namely the things the artist chose to portray, and more specifically, the models that, in deciding to draw them rather than other things, helped Dürer achieve his model-status.

Now as it turns out, this master's own first known model is himself. In his *Albertina Self-Portrait*, Opus 1, the 13-year-old Dürer proved to himself and his father that he was an artist by the skill – or neatness – with which he translated his features into lines. But beyond the emblematic project of self-portraiture proper, Dürer routinely turned to his own body as a model and as a problem-solving tool. For me, this was one of the most dramatic features of the exhibition. On the one hand, this is an artist who can master with his line virtually any visual form that presents itself to him, and in whatever graphic medium he chooses. His

huge impact rests partly his depictive mobility, since it was easier and safer to steal Dürer's solutions than to invent new ones. On the other hand, when he is confronted with a novel challenge, his own instinct is to return to the narrowest compass of his own lifeworld and to wage the critical struggle there, where things are nearest. Dürer's global reach rests upon a unique myopia.

This struggle with near and familiar stands deposited on a sheet of paper that Giulia Bartrum ingeniously installed in the exhibition, within the dividing wall between the first section on Dürer's image and the second on the artist's early years. On the recto of one of his most stunning early drawings, the artist models his sketch of the Virgin and child and his study of drapery on the art of Martin Schongauer (Pl. 17). Many of Schongauer's drawings concern themselves with the representation of drapery, as, for example, in the sheet in the show that Dürer collected (*Albrecht Durer and his Legacy*, G. Bartrum, London 2002, exhibition catalogue no 25). One of the chief strengths of the then-dominant medium of German sculpture in wood, *drapery* posed a special challenge to a print-maker like Schongauer, because in engraving, the volumetric coherence of a crumpled planar surface, with all its intricate folds, twists, and occlusions, has to be achieved by outline and hatching alone. Moreover, with drapery, the passages in highest relief, those undulating ridges that, projecting furthest into space, catch the ambient light, cannot be rendered in line except negatively, in reserve, as the amorphous interim between a sharp outline and shading that indicates the subsidence of the ridge. And all this *local* complexity must be registered while still preserving the spatial consistency both of the cloth as draped over an underlying body, and of that body's comportment in a surrounding milieu. In the upper part of the sheet, Dürer attacks the task of harnessing fiendishly complex local convolutions into the semblance of a single piece of cloth, while in the figural group below, he integrates such a display into the larger unit of figure and setting. Meanwhile, on the verso, he continues this exploration, perhaps utilizing as a guide the drawing on the recto, which has seeped through the paper; it's also possible that the recto was done first, hence the greater confidence in the drapery there. On the verso, a different challenge than drapery presents itself (Pl. 18).

In the upper left, Dürer practices the Virgin's right hand, getting the sleeve but then abandoning the hand. It is here that, instead of depending further on Schongauer's model, which may excel in drapery but not quite so much in hands, Dürer pursues his research by other means, enlisting his own body as available model. The awkwardness of portraying his left hand with his right produces the hand's strange pose. Note how, in seeking to look like someone else's hand, the thumb buckles inward while the little finger is raised. In a sense, hands and drapery pose similar graphic challenges. Like folds, fingers are discrete but structurally-linked volumetric entities, the projecting surfaces of which can be indicated only in reserve. Unlike drapery, though, which may or may not have been folded in the way it appears, and in which inconsistencies are hard to spot, hands are extremely difficult to fudge, since we know them so well. At once familiar and anomalous, physically near but formally remote, hands send Dürer back to himself, to his own person, to complete the project that he, elsewhere on the sheet (and Schongauer through his work) left unresolved. Similar research into hands motivated the *Erlangen Self-Portrait* (Pl. 19). This drawing, I believe, began as a study of the interaction of hand and cheek, and its novelty lies

more in this original purpose than in the seeming modernity of the resultant figure, redolent in ideas of melancholy and interiority though that may be. In any case, the artistic treasure at the centre of the exhibition depends on such experiments, since no one without a supreme command of hands could, for example, highlight those background thumbs while preserving the integrity of the fingers further forward.

Recourse to his own body as the solution to deep formal dilemmas occurs throughout the artist's career. On the *verso* of a drawing of the *Wise Virgin* in the Courtauld Institute Gallery (*Dürer and his Legacy*, cat. no. 30) Dürer tackles ankles and knees observed at difficult angles by performing two different poses with his left leg. It is with justifiable pride that the artist, turning the finished drawings upside down, dates them 1493 in the space left blank where his own torso would have begun. For it is hard to think of another German artist who attended to and mastered unrepresentative leg positions like these. Modern systems-theory teaches us that, in conditions of great complexity, a change to a single variable can effect a radical transformation of the whole. This is true not only for Dürer's development, which was revolutionized by modular achievements like these, but for the course of German art, as well, which was permanently altered by Dürer's paradoxically model-attention to visual quirks.

I would like to conclude with what is perhaps the most momentous *Handzeichnung*, as it were, in the show, the study sheet of the arms and hands of Adam (**Pl. 20**). By 1504, when this drawing was made, Dürer was more concerned with modelling bodies on prior measurements of proportion, for example, those of Vitruvius, than with observing and capturing their contingent forms live, through empirical observation. Moreover, the figure style that he submitted to such models had itself been modified by idealizing Italian examples, and particular by Mantegna, who, already by 1494, had replaced Schongauer as Dürer's model. Yet in his effort to produce a correct portrait of figure Adam for his engraved *Fall of Man*, the artist returns to the dilemma of hands. This he negotiates through a series of isolated studies, each of a distinct gesture and pose. I am tempted to imagine that Adam's right hand is Dürer's left hand observed in a mirror, rather as he

observes himself in his *Nude Self-Portrait* from just this period (Weimar, Schlossmuseum, Graphische Sammlung). But it is sufficient that, whoever the model was, whether himself or someone else, perhaps a member in his shop, those fingers were at the artist's command.

Dürer places special pressure on *this* manual action because it is the gesture of the Fall. According to Dürer, this is how Adam took from Eve the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The hand visualizes how it was that we took the apple, not yet greedily or lustfully or vainly, since we are not yet fallen. The artist's final settlement nestles between the sketch finalizing the outline of the arm, and the study detailing its veins and tendons. That gesture, which he discovers in his model – index and middle fingers outstretched, ring finger and little finger folded toward the palm – is at once active and relaxed, as is appropriate to the Fall, since stress, along with death, will arrive only afterwards, not in, but as a result of, the motion here performed. By recourse to a model that obeys *his* command, by closing in upon the things nearest to himself, Dürer models the origins of our condition. No wonder we wish to greet him in our sleep. No wonder he is always there before us, disappearing the moment we approach. Like so many of the drawings in the display, the study sheet is finally, also, a model of labour. On it alone, we discern several kinds of graphic work, including the practice of the pen's free play. To walk through the show and itemize all the forms of activity that Dürer performs with *his* hand is to enter a workshop not only of inventions, but of the re-invention of how one might invent. In this sketch, and in the engraving that benefited from what drawing itself discovered, Dürer attempts the ultimate labour: to imagine the Fall through fallen eyes. His restless curiosity about how hands move and look, and how best to draw them in outlines and shadows alone, reflects his kinship with Adam, for another maker with less thirst for knowledge would have been content with models he or others had already made. By way of all this labour, though, Dürer imagines that he can see way back to before his very need for labour, to the model of models, the perfect likeness of God in man. For that was Dürer's ultimate model, and perhaps also why he himself remained elusive as a model, too.





**Plate 1** Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait at the age of 13*, 1484. Silverpoint on prepared paper. Vienna, Albertina



**Plate 2** Martin Schongauer, *Christ Blessing*, c. 1469. Pen and black ink. Inscribed by Dürer, 'This was made by fine Martin in the year 1469'. British Museum



**Plate 3** Albrecht Dürer, *St. Jerome in his Study*, 1514. Engraving. British Museum



**Plate 4** Eugen Napoleon Neureuther, 'Briar Rose'. Illustration to *Randzeichnungen zu Goethe's Balladen und Romanzen*, Munich, 1829-30. Lithograph. British Museum

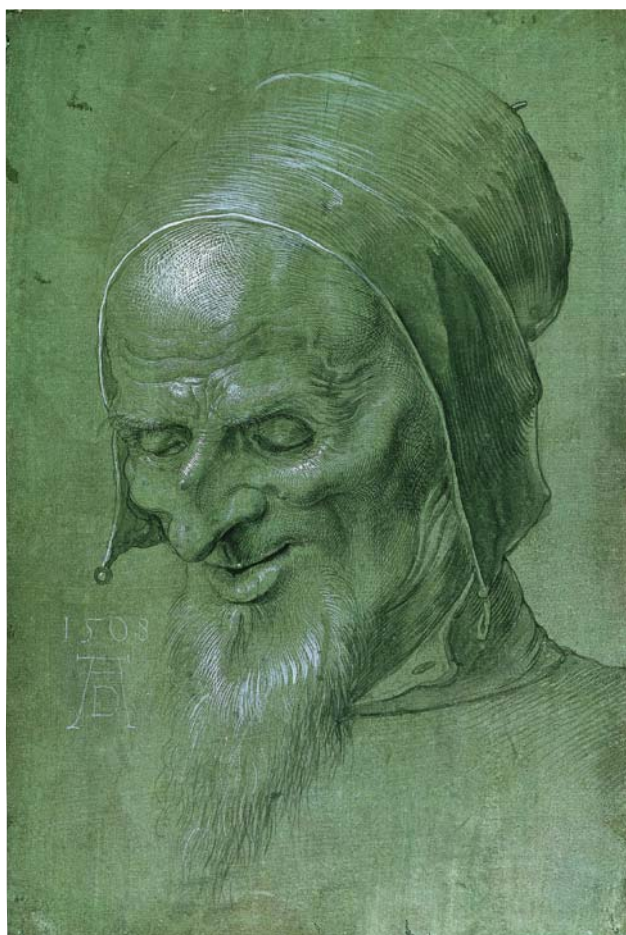




**Plate 5** Johann Nepomuk Strixner, *Soldier with Halberd, Fox and Fowl*. Illustration to 'Albrecht Dürers Christlich-mythologische Handzeichnungen' (the Prayerbook of Maximilian), Munich, 1808. Lithograph. British Museum



**Plate 6** Hans Hoffmann, *Dürer as a Child*, 1576. Brush and brown wash on prepared paper. British Museum



**Plate 7** Albrecht Dürer, *Head of an Apostle*, 1508. Brush and grey wash heightened with white on blue-green prepared paper. Vienna, Albertina

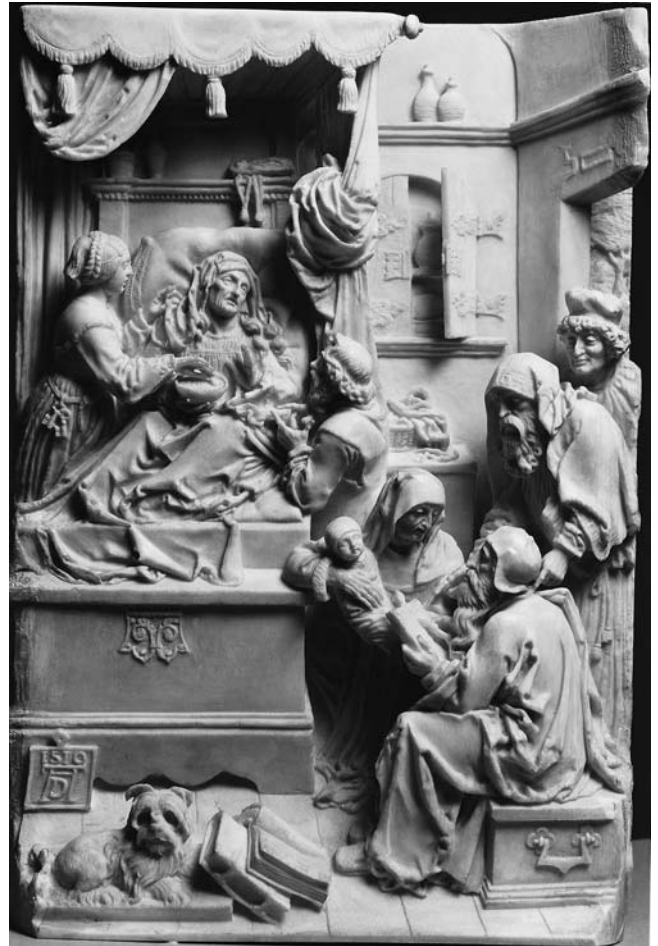


**Plate 8** Aegidius Sadeler after Dürer, *Head of an Apostle*, 1597. Engraving. British Museum





**Plate 9** Georg Schwegger, *The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist*, 1642. Honestone relief. British Museum



**Plate 10** Richard Cockle Lucas after Schwegger, *The Birth and Naming of John the Baptist*, 1845. Ivory. Victoria and Albert Museum

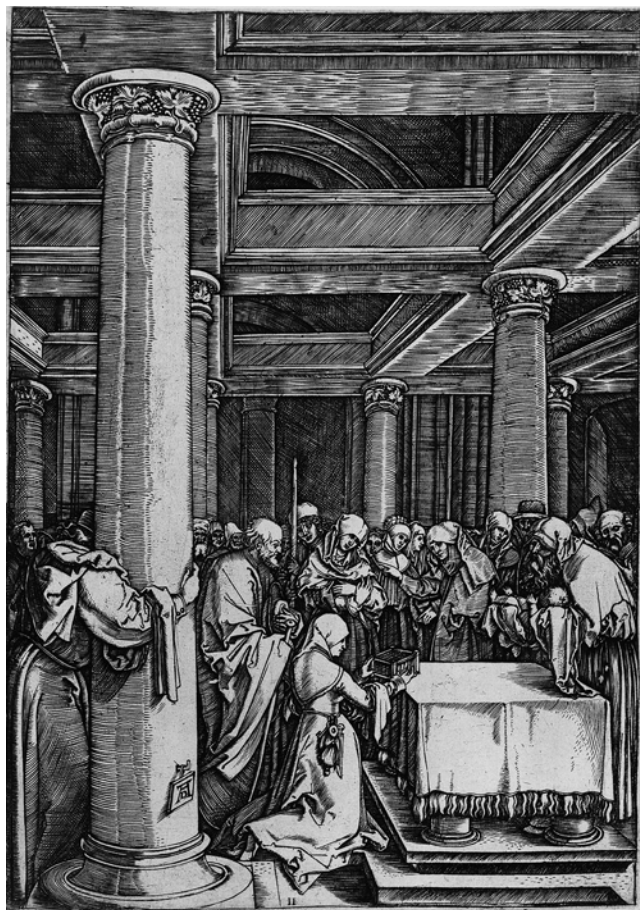


**Plate 11** Hans Baldung, *The Fall of Man*, 1519. Woodcut. British Museum



**Plate 12** Hendrick Goltzius, *The Circumcision*, 1594. Engraving. British Museum

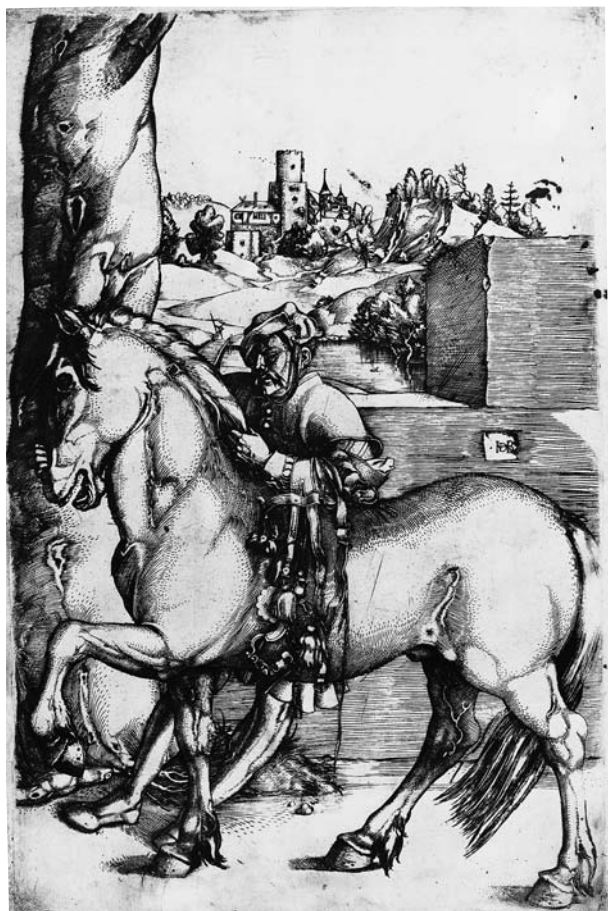




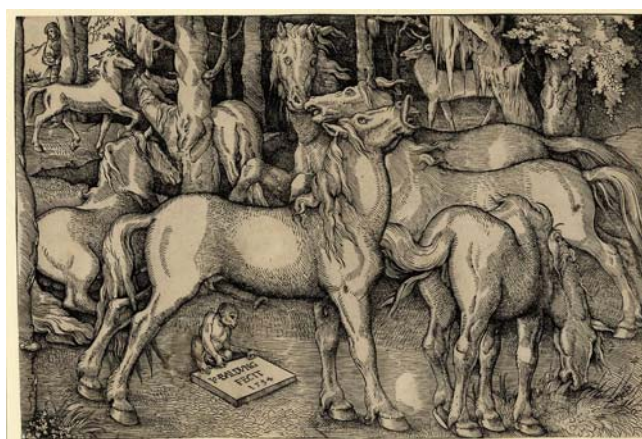
**Plate 13** Marcantonio Raimondi, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, c. 1505-6. Engraving. British Museum



**Plate 14** Albrecht Dürer, *The Small Horse*, 1505. Engraving. British Museum



**Plate 15** Hans Baldung, *Groom bridling a horse*, c. 1510-12. Engraving. British Museum



**Plate 16** Hans Baldung, *Wild horses with an aroused stallion approaching a mare*, 1534. Woodcut. British Museum





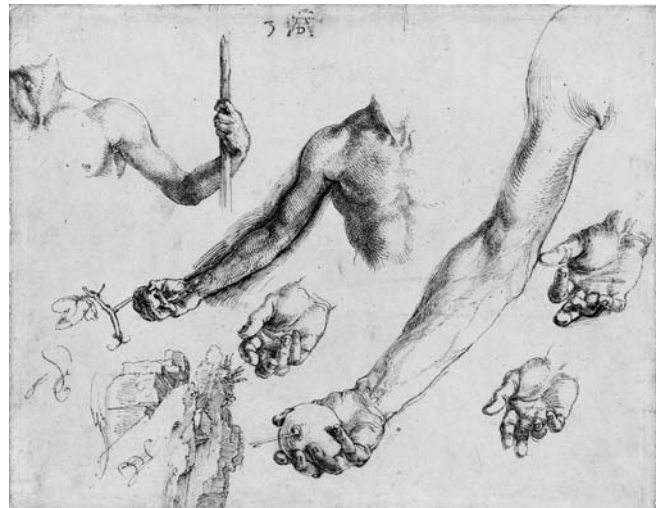
**Plate 17** Albrecht Dürer, *Seated Virgin and Child with drapery*, c. 1491-2. Pen and brown ink. British Museum



**Plate 18.** Albrecht Dürer, *Seated Virgin and Child with hand and arm*, c. 1491-2. Pen and brown ink, verso of Plate 17. British Museum



**Plate 19** Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait*, c. 1491-2. Pen and brown ink. Erlangen, Graphische Sammlung der Universität



**Plate 20** Albrecht Dürer, *Study for the hand and arm of Adam*, 1504. Pen and brown and black ink. British Museum