

EXHIBITS

Renaissance and Reformation in Northern Art

From Schongauer to Holbein, Master Drawings from Basel and Berlin,” an exhibit at Washington, D.C.’s National Gallery of Art, is a wonderful opportunity to view nearly 200 drawings and watercolors by the greatest Swiss and German artists of the Northern Renaissance period (c. 1465-1545).

The exhibit, which includes works by Martin Schongauer, Hans Holbein, the Elder, Albrecht Dürer, Mathias Grünewald, Lucas Cranach, the Elder, and Hans Holbein, the Younger, among many other leading artists of the time, focusses especially on the work of Dürer and Holbein the Younger, both of whom, like other Northern masters, were strongly influenced by the Italian Renaissance. Dürer visited Italy twice, once in 1494-5, and again in 1505-7; and, although it is not known for sure whether Holbein ever travelled there, he was without doubt familiar with the work of the Italian Renaissance from paintings and prints, which were widely circulated in Germany, Switzerland, and The Netherlands at that time.

These drawings were produced in what was then the Holy Roman Empire,

during a period of tremendous religious conflict and bloody warfare: the Protestant Reformation (Luther posted his 95 Theses in 1517), the Peasant Wars (1524-26), the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the series of wars culminating in the mass-murderous Thirty Years War (1618-1648).

A number of the leading artists were directly involved in the events of the Reformation/Counter-Reformation. One of the most outstanding of these was Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553), who was a close personal friend of Martin Luther; the two were godparents to each other’s children. In 1505, Cranach

became court painter to the Elector of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, and his brother and co-ruler, John of Saxony. In 1508, Lucas was sent to The Netherlands on a diplomatic mission to the Emperor Maximilian I, an indication of his importance in the affairs of his day. By 1519, he was a member of the Wittenberg Council; later, in the 1540’s, he became Burgomaster of the city.

By 1534, Cranach was important enough to travel with the Elector John Frederick and Philipp Melanchthon, a leading scholar, to a religious disputation in Dresden that had been requested by Cardinal Albrecht and Georg, Duke of Saxony. Melanchthon was professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, where he met Martin Luther, for whom he wrote the Augs-

burg Confession of the Lutheran faith. During the 1520’s, Lucas had illustrated Reformation broadsheets with polemical woodcuts.

An excellent example of Cranach’s artistic and moral outlook is a sensitive portrait of a peasant, painted around 1525, or soon after the Peasant Wars began. It is a simple watercolor sketch, where the immediacy of the brush strokes, and the intimacy of the perspective, allow us to look directly into the soul of the man, through his eyes. The hint of a smile around the mouth, and the rough-hewn texture of his skin, suggest that the subject is a common man, a worker or peasant, with a strong character and an optimistic outlook on life, despite the tragedy unfolding around him.



Martin Schongauer, “The Madonna with a Pink,” c. 1475-1480.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett



Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kupferstichkabinett

Lucas Cranach, the Elder, “Head of a Peasant,” c. 1525.

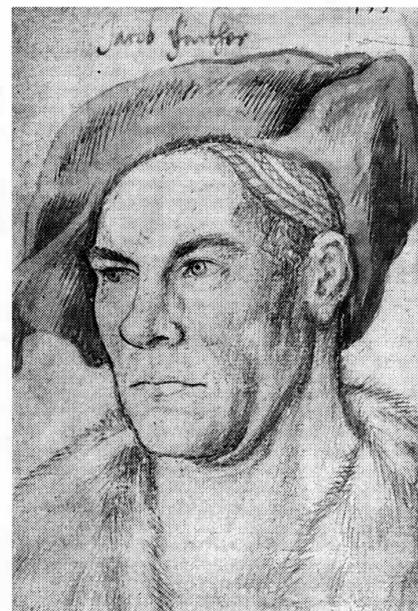
From Gothic to Renaissance

The earlier painter and engraver Martin Schongauer (c. 1450-91) is considered to be one of the most important Gothic artists before Dürer, who strongly influenced the latter.

One of the loveliest drawings in this exhibit is Schongauer's "Madonna with a Pink" (c.1475-80). The grassy bench on which the Madonna sits is a convention which would have been read as the "closed garden" (*hortus conclusus*), a symbol of Mary's virginity, while the pink (a carnation) represents the nails on the cross. Yet, the symbols themselves are subsumed by the ethereal light that pours in from the left side of the picture, almost dissolving the trellis which surrounds the flower pot, and causing the air around the head of the Virgin to shimmer. The Christ child is held both firmly and gently by the beautifully rendered hand of the Madonna, whose sweet expression is tempered by her

foreknowledge of the child's coming Passion. The baby Jesus allows himself to be protected, for now; but his eyes also see into the future. The paradox of past and future is underscored by the pink, which is at one and the same time a beautiful, fragrant flower, and a harbinger of the suffering to come.

Hans Holbein, the Elder (c. 1460/65-1524) also painted mostly religious altarpieces and portraits. He travelled to The Netherlands, where he saw the work of the great Flemish master Rogier van der Weyden, which afterwards strongly influenced his work. Holbein ran a large workshop in Augsburg and left behind many silverpoint drawings. These were mainly portraits, and occasional nature studies, and were produced as preparatory drawings for paintings, often religious altarpieces. Holbein used his drawings to capture individual characteristics (as opposed to idealized features), which he then used in the figures



Hans Holbein, the Elder, "Jakob Fugger (the Rich)," c. 1509.

who people his religious panel paintings; i.e., in the Italian Renaissance manner.

The drawing of Jakob Fugger ("the Rich"), c. 1509, was one of many portraits of the powerful banking family produced by Holbein. The Fuggers were bankers to the Hapsburgs, and financed the Holy Roman Empire's wars against Italy, France, and the Turks, as well as bankrolling the election of Charles V as Holy Roman Emperor. Under Jakob, the family reached its greatest renown. In this simple silverpoint drawing, Holbein tells us both that Fugger is rich, as attested by the fur hat and collar; but also that he is probably not very nice, judging by the hard expression of the eyes. In fact, the Hapsburgs were some of the nastiest oligarchs to have inhabited Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire.

A completely different mood is presented in the double portrait of Holbein's two sons, Ambrosius and Hans the Younger [SEE inside back cover, this issue], both of whom became artists in their own right. Hans, who would become by far the most important artist in the family, would have been about 11 years old, and Ambrosius 14, at the time their father portrayed them in 1511. Not at all sentimental, the portraits nevertheless reveal the emerging, and distinct,



Albrecht Dürer, "Spring in a Forest, with St. Paul and St. Anthony," c. 1500.

characters of each of the boys. [Works in the exhibit by Hans Holbein, the Younger are discussed on the inside back cover of this issue.]

Portraying the ‘Motion of the Mind’

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), unquestionably the greatest German artist of the Northern Renaissance of the Fifteenth century, was the son of a Nuremberg goldsmith, Albrecht Dürer the Elder. After learning his father’s craft, he studied in the workshop of the painter Michael Wolgemut.

In 1494, at age 23, Dürer set out for Venice, where he first encountered the works of Italian Renaissance masters Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, and Polaiuolo. Later, in 1505-1507, he made a second Italian pilgrimage. This time, after staying in Venice for a period, he travelled on to Bologna, Florence, and probably, Rome.

Dürer made other journeys to Switzerland and The Netherlands, and devoted the last years of his life to theoretical writings, influenced by Leonardo da Vinci (*The Teaching of Measurements*, 1525; *The Art of Fortification*, 1527; and *Four Books on Human Proportion*, 1528).

One of the exhibit’s most elegant draw-

ings by Dürer is “Spring in a Forest, with St. Paul and St. Anthony,” c. 1500, done with pen and black ink. It takes a few moments before you see both monks, sitting on the edge of a well in the left foreground, but if you look carefully, you will notice the two saints, one facing outward, the other seated sideways next to him. They are engaged in deep conversation. That the two monks have been identified at all, is owing to the presence, in the most minimal of sketches, of a raven above their heads. According to the “*Legenda aurea*,” when St. Anthony visited St. Paul in the Theban desert, a raven brought them bread each day, but, because they were so engrossed in intellectual discourse, they forgot to eat! Viewers familiar with Rembrandt’s etchings will be reminded of his “St. Jerome in an Italian Landscape,” executed some 150 years later. Surely, Rembrandt was familiar with this particular work of Dürer’s.

In his “Portrait of a Young Woman,” 1515, Dürer gives us one of the most thoughtful portraits of a young girl in art history. Children are always the repository of optimism, even in terrible times. Here, we can imagine her thinking happily, perhaps in anticipation of something about to happen, or perhaps of a special secret shared with a friend, as a slight smile plays about her lips. It is the “motion of the mind,” here so eloquently depicted, that draws us into the little girl’s world, and makes us wish to know her better.

One of the most striking of Dürer’s drawings is the “Head of the Evangelist Mark,” 1526. It is rendered on paper prepared with a brown wash, with lead-point, and its ghostly



Albrecht Dürer, “Portrait of a Young Woman,” 1515.

appearance immediately brings to mind St. Paul’s words, “for now we see through a glass darkly,” as Mark appears to us as if viewed through a dark glass, or through the mists of time. We are riveted by the expression in his eyes, which look off into the distance. Or is it the future he sees, with a strangely evocative suggestion of fear, hope, awe, and trepidation?

Mark’s Gospel begins poetically, with a quote from the prophet Isaiah, forecasting the coming of the Messiah:

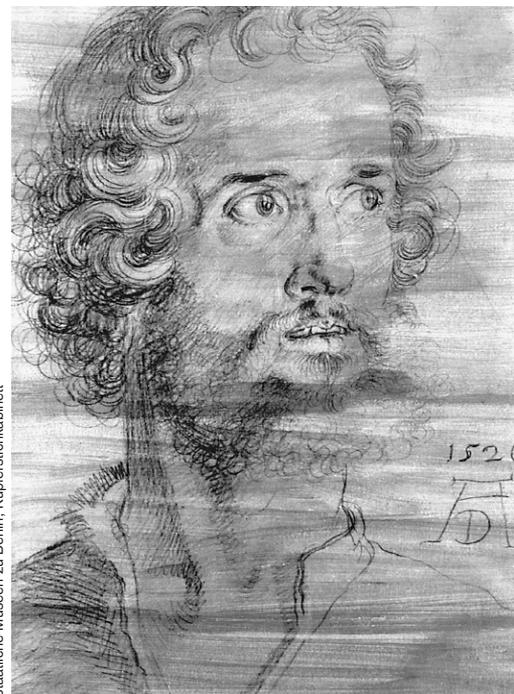
“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee,

“The Voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.”

Remember these words as you view the evangelist’s hauntingly beautiful face.

—Bonnie James

The exhibit is open from Oct. 24 to Jan. 9, 2000. All the works on display have been loaned from the Öffentilche Kunstsammlung Basel and the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



Albrecht Dürer, “Head of the Evangelist Mark,” 1526.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

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