



Albrecht Dürer, "Self-Portrait as Christ," 1500.

Foreword: The Reuchlin Affair

The year was 1510. Germany was on the eve of the Protestant Reformation and the seemingly endless wars of religion which followed it. The Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I, goaded by a zealous Jewish convert, Johannes Pfefferkorn, himself under the control of the Inquisition's Dominican Order of Cologne, ordered Jewish books confiscated throughout the realm. More than 2,000 volumes were seized in the various German cities. The Jews, aided by Christian humanist supporters, petitioned Maximilian to reconsider, and the Emperor established a council to look into the matter and advise him.

Among the members chosen for the council was the noted jurist and scholar Johannes Reuchlin [SEE Figure 1], a Classical humanist, and one of very few Christians who had mastered the Hebrew language, along with Latin and Greek. Reuchlin's opinion was published under the title, "Recommendation Whether To Confiscate, Destroy, and Burn All Jewish Books."

Although he lived under the shadow of

Albrecht Dürer: The Search for the Beautiful In a Time of Trials

by Bonnie James

the Inquisition, Reuchlin had been inspired by the fresh winds blowing from south of the Alps in Renaissance Italy. He was associated with the networks of the religious reform movement, the Brothers of the Common Life, whose commitment he shared to discovering the truth from original sources. He had travelled to Italy several times, including to Florence, where he spent time studying at the Platonic Academy with Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and others. It was the passionate belief of these intellectuals that knowledge, especially of the Classics, must be open to all.

Moreover, as Christians, their commitment was to read the Scriptures, including the Old Testament, in their original languages—that this could only strengthen their faith. And Reuchlin believed that knowledge of the Jewish writings would also improve the Christians' power to convert the Jews.

Ironically, those who called for destruction of the Jewish books, had themselves never read them! Since the time of St. Jerome (c. A.D. 340-420), who had translate the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek Scriptures, the Church had relied on his Latin Bible (the Vulgate), and few, over the next thousand years, had thought it necessary to revisit the matter.

Until Reuchlin, who was determined to learn Hebrew. The opportunity arose when, in the critical year 1492, he was sent by his patron the Elector Eberhard of Württemberg to the Emperor on legal business, and there met Frederick III's Jewish physician, Jacob Jehiel Loans. Loans became his Hebrew tutor. Reuchlin's knowledge of Hebrew, and his familiarity

with works including the Talmud and the mystical Kabbala, soon lead him into conflict with the Inquisition, its Inquisitor General Jacob Hochstraten, and his fanatical acolyte, Pfefferkorn.

When defending himself for having found errors in the Vulgate of Jerome, Reuchlin declared, "Though I honor Jerome as a holy angel . . . I honor truth more."

In arguing against burning the Jewish books, Reuchlin ridiculed those who issued the order without being able to read the works they condemned: "If someone wished to write against the mathematicians, and were himself ignorant in simple arithmetic or mathematics, he would be made a laughingstock," he wrote in the "Recommendation." He said that, if some were offended by the Talmud, "that is their own fault, and not the fault of the book! Goats graze on bitter weeds and make sweet milk of it, and from the selfsame flower do honey bees derive their sweet honey, and spiders their deadly poison. This is not the



FIGURE 1. Johannes Reuchlin (1445-1521).



FIGURE 2. Philip Melancthon, engraving by Dürer, 1526. Inscription: "Dürer was able to picture the features of the living Philip, but his skilled hand was unable to picture his mind."

fault of the blossom or the flower, but rather the characteristic and nature of those creatures that feed on them." Reflecting his Christian humanist outlook, Reuchlin wrote, "The Jew is as worthy in the eyes of our Lord God even as am I."

Reuchlin urged that his fellow Christians, instead of burning books, engage the Jews in reasoned discourse, and in that way, win them over to what he regarded as the true faith. He proposed that German universities hire lecturers to teach Hebrew. He also urged

Jews to rent their books to Christians, until copies of the Hebrew texts could be produced. "I assure you that not one of the Latins can expound the Old Testament, unless he first becomes proficient in the language in which it was written," Reuchlin wrote. "For the mediator between God and man was language, as we read in the Pentateuch; but not any language, only Hebrew, through which God wished his secrets to be known to man."

Reuchlin prevailed, and the confiscated books were returned to their owners.

However, with the publication and wider circulation of his "Recommendation" in 1511, Reuchlin came under suspicion by the Holy Office. He was labelled a heretic, and worse. In 1514, Reuchlin's most bitter enemy, Cologne's Inquisitor General Hochstraten, ordered his writings to be burned at the stake. By 1520, the Pope himself, the Venetian cat's paw Leo X, condemned Reuchlin's works. It is likely that only his death two years later saved Reuchlin, still loyal to the Church at Rome, from the flames.

Among those who came to Reuchlin's defense were the leading religious reformers and Classical scholars of Europe, representing diverse and often bitterly opposing viewpoints: in Germany, his nephew and student, the theologian Melancthon [SEE Figure 2]; the man who spearheaded the Protestant Reformation and break with Rome, Martin Luther; the most prominent Christian humanist intellectual in Europe, Erasmus of Rotterdam [SEE Figure 3]; in England,



FIGURE 3. Erasmus of Rotterdam, engraving by Dürer, 1526. Inscription: "His writings present a better picture of the man than this portrait."

John Colet and Thomas More; in Italy, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.

The historian Heinrich Graetz would later write of the "Reuchlin Affair," in his seminal "History of the Jews" (published in the 1870's): "We can boldly assert that the war for and against the Talmud aroused German consciousness and created a public opinion, without which the Reformation, as well as other efforts, would have died at the hour of their birth, or perhaps would never have been born at all."

As the 1400's, the century of the "Golden Renaissance," drew to a close, Europe was plunged into a profound crisis, from which it did not begin to emerge until the middle of the Seventeenth century. Beginning with the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain, at the order of the Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, and ending with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which brought an end to the Thirty Years' War—the final phase of this prolonged nightmare—the period was characterized by the destruction and depopulation of entire regions across Europe. While this era is often referred to as the Protestant Reforma-

tion and Catholic Counter-Reformation, these labels tend to obscure the true nature of the upheaval that took place. The extended social-cultural-political devastation that overcame Europe was the intended outcome of Venice's murderous war against the Renaissance. What the Venetian oligarchy did not know, was how it would end—with the emergence, albeit long-delayed, of the sovereign nation-state, established on the principle of the sacredness of each individual human life.

At the start of this turbulent historical period, an artist emerged in Nuremberg, Germany, named Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), who would bring the Classical

philosophical, scientific, and humanist ideas of Fifteenth-century Italy to Northern Europe, and thus help to set in motion a new phase of the Renaissance. And, at the end of these 150 years, the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) would give voice through his art to the principle of Westphalia: that human relations must be based on "the advantage of the other." Notably, both artists would rely on the medium of the print—woodcuts, etchings, and engravings—to disseminate these ideas to the widest possible audience.

Through his hundreds of revolutionary prints, Dürer both chronicled and transformed his time, such that today,

when one thinks about those years, the images he created are the visual metaphors that come to mind. The power of these images was reaffirmed in a superb exhibition this past fall at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, where 83 of the master's greatest woodcuts, etchings, and engravings were on display. Accompanying the works, were two excellent pedagogical displays: one on printmaking, and another on Dürer's famous perspective experiment [SEE Figure 4], in which the visitor was invited to reproduce that experiment for himself.¹

Education of a Humanist Artist

In 1494, Dürer made his first trip to Italy. He had already, following his apprenticeship with Nuremberg's leading painter, Michael Wolgemut, made an extended tour (1490-1494) through Germany, to Basel, Switzerland, a center of humanist activity; to Alsace, where he stayed with the sons of the painter Martin Schöngauer; and to Strasbourg and the Low Countries as well. There he met Sebastian Brant and produced several woodprints for his book, *The Ship of Fools*. One of these prints presents St. Jerome in his studio with books in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Nuremberg was then one of the leading cities in Germany; by 1520, its population would rise to 50,000, and it boasted a large and thriving class of artisans and merchants. Dürer's father Albrecht was a skilled goldsmith (like the fathers of many Florentine artists, including Brunelleschi), who had emigrated with his family—Albrecht was third of 18 children!—from Hungary to Nuremberg to seek a better life.

The humanist intelligentsia of Northern Europe was, in significant degree, the product of the long-term education project of the teaching order, the Brothers of the Common Life, founded in 1374 by Gerard Groote (1340-1384) of Deventer in the Low Countries. The purpose of the Brotherhood was to uplift the population—especially the vast numbers of the poor—in the wake of the devastation wrought by the Black Death, which peaked in the mid-Fourteenth century, and recurred in waves after that.

Among the outstanding leaders who

were later educated in the schools of the Brotherhood were Nicolaus of Cusa and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Groote's work was carried on and expanded by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), born in a small town near present-day Düsseldorf in Germany. Kempis's widely read book, *The Imitation of Christ*, called on his students to live their lives in imitation of Christ, i.e., to be willing to joyfully sacrifice everything on behalf of a higher purpose than mere mortal life, or in Christian terms, to be willing to drink from the cup of Gethsemane. He writes, "If you bear [the] cross against your will, you will make a great burden for yourself . . ." but, "if you gladly bear this cross, it will bear you . . ." Rejection of worldly wealth, in favor of a community founded in imitation of the simple and compassionate life of the Jesus of the Gospels, was understood as an attempt to reform the feudal institution of the ultramontane Church and Papacy.

These ideas would later be powerfully expressed in Dürer's *Passion* series of woodcuts and engravings.

In line with the idea of the "imitation of Christ," was the education program of the Brothers, aimed at bringing learning to children of all social classes. The Brothers' primary objective, the educa-

tion of the children of the poor, was an expression of their commitment to the principle of the common good—an idea expounded directly by Brotherhood student Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa (1401-1464) in his *Concordantia Catholica*, where he argued that the legitimacy of government derives from the consent of the governed. To accomplish this, the Brotherhood promoted translations of the Classics into the vernacular languages (Brotherhood schools already focussed on the copying of manuscripts, exposing students to the original Latin and Greek sources). The Brotherhood translation program followed in the footsteps of Italy's Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321), whose *Commedia*, written in an elevated Tuscan vernacular of his own invention, had launched the literary and political Renaissance in Europe.

The influence of the Brotherhood extended well into Dürer's time, in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries. Brotherhood schools across Northern Europe enrolled as many as 1,000 students each. When Erasmus (1466-1536) attended the school in Deventer, its enrollment was over 2,000 students.

The Brotherhood also played a central role in the explosion of literacy made possible by the invention of the

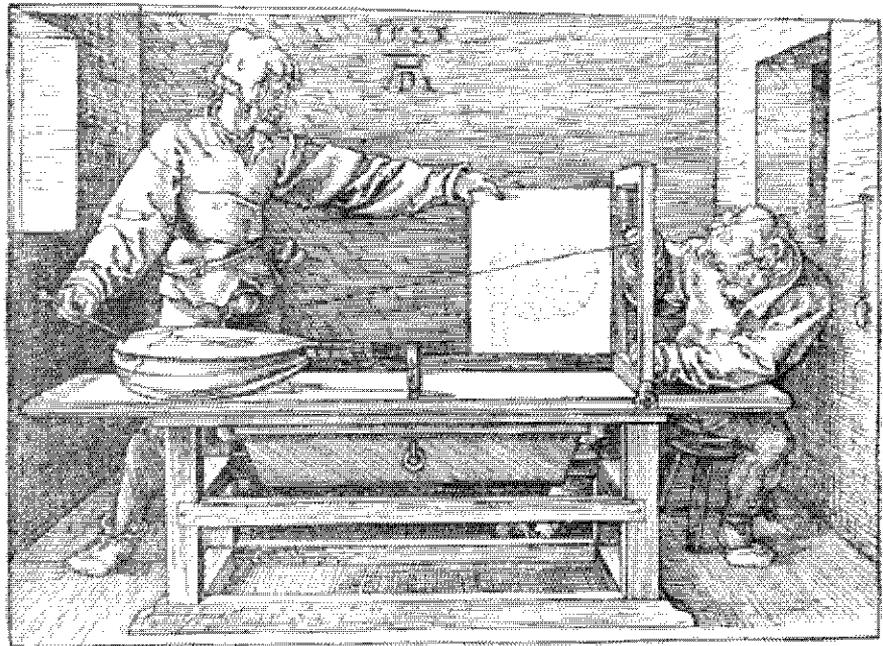


FIGURE 4. Albrecht Dürer, illustration to "Underweysung der Messung" ("Treatise on Measurement"), Book IV, 1525.

printing press *circa* 1450. Johannes Gutenberg, its inventor, was a Brotherhood associate, and trained many of the order's laymen in the new science of printing.² Dürer's mass-circulation of prints was an extension of this idea.

Fifteenth-century Nuremberg

Dürer's godfather, Anton Koberger (1445-1513), was also a goldsmith, but soon after Albrecht's birth, he established a printing business. By 1484, about the time that Dürer began to study painting, Koberger's firm had become one of the most important printing enterprises in Europe. Nuremberg was one of the first cities in Europe to have printing presses; it also boasted laboratories that produced fine scientific instruments. Its libraries were centers of humanist studies, and attracted scholars, mathematicians, geographers, and theologians.

The finest Classical library in Nuremberg belonged to Dürer's lifelong friend and patron Willibald Pirckheimer [SEE Figure 5], scion of a wealthy and accomplished family, and the city's leading humanist scholar.³ Pirckheimer's grandfather was a friend of Nicolaus of Cusa, and studied with him in Padua, where Willibald later attended the university. Dürer also was a follower of the mathematician and astronomer Johannes Müller, known as Regiomontanus (1436-1476), himself a follower of Cusa. Pirckheimer acquired Regiomontanus's extensive library, which included works by Archimedes, Euclid, and Alhazen, after his death in 1496; Dürer had access to this library, and perhaps it was here that he first learned about perspective, from the works of the great Florentine architect and mathematician Filippo Brunelleschi. Christopher Columbus reportedly sailed with the star maps of Regiomontanus.

In 1509, Dürer purchased a house (now known as the Dürer House) in Nuremberg, which had belonged to a disciple of Regiomontanus, Bernhard Walther (1430-1504). Walther's equipment remained in the house (which still retains the window through which he sighted the heavens), as did his library, bought by the Nuremberg city council and made available to practitioners of astronomy. In 1514, the mathematician and astronomer Johannes Werner used



FIGURE 5. Willibald Pirckheimer, engraving by Dürer, 1524. Inscription: “Man lives through his intellect; all else will belong to death.”

this library while writing a treatise on conic sections.⁴

It was Pirckheimer who introduced Dürer to the leading circle of humanists in Europe, including Erasmus, who was Pirckheimer's lifelong correspondent; to Melancthon and Martin Luther; and to the powerful as well—the Habsburg Emperor Maximilian I, and later, his grandson Charles V. Not only did Pirckheimer open his unparalleled library to Dürer, but he also translated many works from Greek and Latin into German for him.

On his two known visits to Italy, Dürer collaborated with the leading artists of the time, including Raphael.⁵ Similarly, the Italian artist Jacopo de' Barbari visited Nuremberg in 1500, and met with him. It is quite possible that de' Barbari spoke with Dürer about the work of Leonardo, who was at that time beginning his studies with the famous mathematician Luca Pacioli, as during his second trip to Italy in 1505-07, Dürer wrote to Pirckheimer that he would travel to Bologna (just 65 miles north of Florence), “to learn the secrets of the art of perspective, which a man is willing to teach me.” This would most likely have been Pacioli,

who had himself learned geometry from Piero della Francesca, and who taught it to Leonardo. Leonardo drew the illustrations of the Platonic solids for Pacioli's mathematical treatise, *De Divina Proportione*, published in Venice in 1509, which Dürer studied. In this work, Pacioli argues that scientific perspective entitles painting to be considered a mathematical discipline, like music.

Venice, where Dürer stayed for some months in 1494-95, was then the center of world trade and commerce, with strong ties to Nuremberg. Venice was also the center of intrigue, the seat of the ancient and evil Black Nobility descended from the old Roman aristocracy, which was determined to eradicate the impact of the Italian Renaissance, especially the ecumenical spirit exemplified by the work of Cusa and the 1437 Council of Florence, by unleashing a war of “each against all.”

The youthful Dürer took in everything he could of the Italian Renaissance, and was deeply affected by the brilliance of its accomplishments. Dürer was especially interested in the science of perspective and human anatomy, which the Italians had revived from Greek Classical art, as well as Platonic science and philosophy. He forged an especially close relationship with the Venetian painter Jacopo Bellini, and his sons Gentile and Giovanni. Along with Andrea Mantegna (who married Jacopo's daughter Nicolosia), they were the foremost exponents of the Renaissance in northern Italy; thus Venice, through this Bellini-Mantegna-Dürer connection, ironically became the transmission belt of Renaissance art into Northern Europe.

Dürer was interested in the work of the best Italian engravers of his time, especially Mantegna, who was the greatest artist of northern Italy at the end of the Fifteenth century. At the time of Dürer's first visit to Venice, Mantegna was still alive and active as court painter to the duke of Mantua. While in Venice in late 1494, Dürer copied two of his prints in pen and ink. Dürer was profoundly influenced by Mantegna's prints, because of their Classical subjects and dramatic perspective [SEE Figure 6]. Mantegna was the only first-rank Italian painter to have engraved a significant number of copper plates. He would cer-

tainly have recognized in Dürer's engravings the work of a consummate master; but, before Dürer could reach Mantua, Mantegna died. It has been reported that Dürer considered this to be the saddest event of his life. His disappointment was so profound, that Pirckheimer saw fit to mention it in Dürer's funeral oration in 1528.

Later, the works of both Mantegna and Dürer would have a profound effect on the greatest artist of the Seventeenth century, Rembrandt van Rijn.

Dürer Becomes a Platonist

'This great art of painting has been held in high esteem by the mighty kings many hundred years ago. They made the outstanding artists rich, and treated them with distinction, because they felt that the great masters had an equality with God, as it is written. For a good painter is full of figures, and if it were possible for him to live on forever, he would always have to pour forth something new from the inner ideas of which Plato writes.'

—Albrecht Dürer⁶

By 1504, the year before Dürer's second trip to Italy, Pirckheimer boasted to Nuremberg's poet laureate Conrad Celtis, that he possessed all the Greek books that had been printed in Italy up till that time (Pirckheimer himself had translated more than 35 Greek works into Latin and German, and had studied law in Padua and Pavia). His library, and especially his original translations from the the Greek of Plato, opened the world of humanist knowledge to Dürer.

Plato's *Complete Works* were first printed in 1484, in a Latin edition based on the translation completed by Marsilio Ficino some 15 years earlier. The first printed Greek edition of Plato's works was published by Aldus Manutius, the leading printer in Venice, in September 1513. Pirckheimer owned copies of both books.

Dürer also became acquainted with the works of the Roman architect, engineer, and scientist Vitruvius, who was widely respected by Italian humanists—think of Leonardo's "Vitruvian Man"—not least because he looked back to the Greeks and Egyptians for inspiration.

Dürer asked Pirckheimer to mention, in the preface he wrote to Dürer's *Four Books on Human Proportion*, "that I give the Italians very high praise for their nude figures and especially for their perspective." In a draft introduction to that treatise, Dürer revealed how his interest in "human measurement" had been awakened:

"I found no one who has written about a system of human proportions except [Jacopo de' Barbari], a native of Venice and a lovely painter. He showed me how to construct man and woman based on measurements. When he told of this, I would rather have come into possession of his

knowledge than of a kingdom. . . . But Jacopus I noticed did not wish to give me a clear explanation; so I went ahead on my own and read Vitruvius, who describes the proportions of the human body to some extent."

In the introduction to *De Architectura*, Dürer would have encountered Vitruvius's advice on the education of the architect. His knowledge, Vitruvius wrote, "is born of both practice and theory. . . . Neither natural ability without instruction, nor instruction without natural ability can make the perfect artificer. Furthermore, the architect should be lettered, so that he may leave a lasting memorial in his treatises; know how to draw; be instructed in geometry; and know history, philosophy, music, medicine, law, and astrology [astronomy –BJ]." For the next quarter-century, Dürer sought instruction in these topics, which enriched his practice as an artist. In particular, he pursued beauty through *Messung* ("measurement"), Dürer's word for perspective, proportion or commensurability, and geometry. The fruit of this research appeared in two treatises, *Instruction in Measurement with the Compass and Straight Edge of Lines, Planes, and Solid Bodies* (1525), and the *Four Books on Human Proportion*, published posthumously.

In the preface to Book III of his *De Architectura*, Vitruvius introduces Socrates, whom "Apollo had pronounced through his priestess at Delphi to be the wisest of men." Vitruvius suggests that, in writing "on the excellence of our science," he was following Socrates' advice. While still in Venice, Dürer bought a copy of the first Latin translation of Euclid's surviving Greek texts, including the *Elements of Geometry* and *Optics*, to increase his access to the discoveries of Greek mathematics.

Dürer's Prints: Mass Organizing For the Renaissance

Dürer was the first artist of Northern Europe to understand the significance of the Italian Renaissance, especially its foundations in the Greek Classics, and particularly the ideas of Plato and Socrates. He took as his *mission*, to bring the ideas of the Renaissance to the North, and to spread them, not only to his fellow artists,



FIGURE 6. Andrea Mantegna, "St. James Led to Execution," Eremitani Church, Padua, c. 1453/7.



FIGURE 7. "The Prodigal Son and the Swine," 1496.

but to the population at large. Never before had an artist used the medium of printing to express the most advanced and sublime ideas through graphic images, and to disseminate them so widely. As we have seen, Dürer was walking in the footsteps of the followers of Groote and Thomas à Kempis, in his commitment to reach out to the lowliest strata of the population with the revolutionary ideas of the Renaissance: that each person is created *in imago Dei*, in the image of the Creator, and is capable of developing himself or herself, to participate in the continuing creation of the universe.

Until Dürer's revolution, the only exposure ordinary people had to great art was through the works that adorned their churches. Now, Dürer's masterpieces could be reproduced in large numbers, and sold for pennies in the marketplace.

Dürer invented an entirely new language to express his ideas, a metaphorical language which could be "read" even by an illiterate population. At this time, only a tiny percentage of the population could read at all; most people lived a miserable existence as serfs, poor peasants who lived as virtual slaves on the large estates of the feudal landlords,

with few remedies to the injustices that characterized their daily lives. The oppression of the population would soon fuel the peasant revolts that shook Central Europe in the first decades of the Sixteenth century.

As the new century approached, Dürer began to put the lessons he had learned in Italy to work. In 1496, he produced an engraving of the parable of the Prodigal Son [SEE Figure 7], which already shows the originality of his thinking, and reflects his determination to uplift his fellow man by employing the vivid language of the Bible, familiar to the most humble peasant, but giving the familiar stories a new interpretation that would catch the viewer by surprise, showing him some-

thing he had not seen before.

The story of the prodigal son appears only in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32), and tells of God's mercy for the repentant sinner. Traditionally, the story is depicted by the "happy ending," when the son returns home and is welcomed and forgiven by his father. Dürer, instead, shows the son at the moment of his epiphany, as he kneels in prayer, asking God's forgiveness among the pigs in the barnyard (a condition that would have been familiar to Germany's peasants). The son's long nose and chin resemble the swine who feed around him, while their expressions mimic the bestiality of the man who would reject the Good. Dürer's message is clear: Man can uplift himself from the level of the beasts, only by becoming man in the image of God.

Dürer's rendering of

the son also displays his new-found mastery of human anatomy, which he had begun to study in Italy. The "Prodigal Son" became one of the most popular of Dürer's prints during his lifetime, and was copied by at least six Italian engravers. Its fame in Italy alone is attested by its inclusion in Giorgio Vasari's famous Sixteenth-century *Lives of the Artists*, where it is praised as one of "Alberto Duro's" most charming and successful prints."

The 'Apocalypse' Series

As the new century approached, Dürer published, beginning in 1498, his first woodcut series: the "Apocalypse," based on the Revelation of St. John. This became the most celebrated event in the history of printmaking. In fact, it was the first book to have been designed, published, and illustrated wholly by an artist. We can be sure it was intended by Dürer to be a major weapon in his campaign to bring the Renaissance to Northern Europe.

The carefully planned release of the first prints, which were circulated in limited numbers prior to the release of the



FIGURE 8. "The Four Horsemen," *Apocalypse series*, 1498.

full set, was intended to intersect the heightened interest in end-times themes that was reaching a fever-pitch amongst the fervently religious and highly superstitious population with the approach of the year 1500.

Because, for the first time, Dürer served as his own publisher, purchasing the paper, and paying for the printing, he personally received the credit, and the financial profits realized from the publication of the woodcuts. This also gave him complete artistic control over their production, and in so doing, established the potential of the woodcut as an art form. It made its creator an international celebrity.

The actual printing of the “Apocalypse” (and most likely of most of Dürer’s other woodcuts) was done at the firm of Dürer’s godfather Anton Koberger. An excerpt from a German text of the Book of Revelation was printed on the reverse of each print.

The “Apocalypse” was to be the first of the three groups of woodcuts that Dürer called his “Three Great Books” (together with the “Large Passion” and “Life of Mary” series).

The most famous of the “Apocalypse” series is “The Four Horsemen” [SEE Figure 8], executed in 1498. The text from Revelation reads,

“Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder: ‘Come!’ And I saw a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering.

“When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, ‘Come!’ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

“When he opened the third seal, I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; and I heard what seemed to be a voice saying, A quart of wheat for a denarius.

“When he opened the fourth seal, I saw a pale horse, and its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by

wild beasts of the earth.” (Rev. 6:1-8).

In Dürer’s rendering, we find all the elements described in the Bible text. Yet, the very fact that the terrifying images have been brought to life by the hand of the great artist, is proof that the mind of man is more powerful than the fear of the unknown! Dürer, by confronting the fear of the oncoming “apocalyptic” year 1500, has shown the way to overcome the terror.

It is highly significant that the series was reprinted in 1511: This was the year that the League of Cambrai—the alliance of European states against Venice and its controlled Papacy—failed. It was an enormous setback for the humanists, an event which fuelled the process leading to the religious wars of the following century.

The Master Engravings

The “*Meisterstiche*” (Master Engravings) were Dürer’s three most complex prints: “Knight, Death, and Devil,” “St. Jerome in his Study,” and “Melencolia I,” produced between 1513 and 1514. Since they were all done around the same time, and are nearly equal in size, they have always been grouped together, as a kind of counterpoint to Dürer’s three great books of woodcuts. They also stand out among Dürer’s works for their complex subject matter. Whereas most of Dürer’s prints were meant for a wide audience, these three were aimed instead at a more elite circle of humanist collaborators and artists. The exact meaning of each—especially “Melencolia”—has been debated since they were first published.

The three *Meisterstiche* rank among the great masterpieces of Renaissance art, in part for Dürer’s skill as an engraver, but also because of their poetic quality. Each is filled with fascinating



FIGURE 9. “Knight, Death, and Devil,” 1513.

details and amazing effects of texture and light.

In “Knight, Death, and Devil” [SEE Figure 9] (1513), Dürer salutes the great humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose portrait he drew in 1520. The subject of “Knight,” is derived from Erasmus’s 1503 *Handbook of a Militant Christian*, which was part of his project to educate the princes of the realm and of the church, as well as the common people, in how to live a more Christian life. Dürer’s Knight, wearing “the full armor of God,” sits upright on his horse, steadily advancing through the grim landscape, his faithful dog scampering underfoot. He is neither tempted nor distracted by Death, who rides alongside, taunting him with the hour-glass that symbolizes man’s mortality. Behind them follows a beastly, horned Devil, ever ready to pounce, should the Knight stray from the path. In the distance, Dürer has given us a beautiful Renaissance “city on a hill”—Jerusalem, or Augustine’s “City of God.” We have no doubt that Dürer’s Knight will arrive there safely.

In the *Handbook*, Erasmus writes: “This then is the only road to happiness:

first, know yourself; do not allow yourself to be led by the passions, but submit all things to the judgment of the reason. . . . Nothing is harder than for a man to conquer himself, but there is no greater reward or blessing.”

It is tempting to think that Dürer would have had reformers like Johannes Reuchlin in mind, as the devout Christian who risked his life to speak the truth, and to shine the light of reason into the darkness of prejudice and ignorance, regardless of the consequences.

‘St. Jerome in His Study’

St. Jerome was the epitome of the Christian scholar. He was a particular favorite of Dürer’s, who portrayed him at least seven times. The publication of this famous print [SEE Figure 10] in 1514, may have been intended to coincide with the appearance of a German edition of St. Jerome’s biography, translated by Lazarus Spengler, a close friend of both Dürer and Willibald Pirckheimer. This was also the year that Johannes Reuchlin’s books, including his corrections to Jerome’s Bible, were ordered burned at the stake.

The setting of St. Jerome’s study closely resembles the upper rooms of Dürer’s own house in Nuremberg. The amazing, complex effects of light must surely have been observed from an actual interior (note, for example, the projection of the glass panes on the inside of the window arch, and the shadow cast by St. Jerome’s desk).

St. Jerome’s chamber, where we may assume he is working on his translation, contains many visually suggestive details. A skull on the windowsill and an hourglass on the wall remind the saint of mortality, of passing time and the urgency of his task. The lion in the foreground, befriended by St. Jerome when he pulled a thorn from its foot, metaphorically represents man’s ability to conquer nature, and bring it into harmony with the higher aims of mankind; the little dog sleeping next to the lion reinforces this idea. The huge gourd

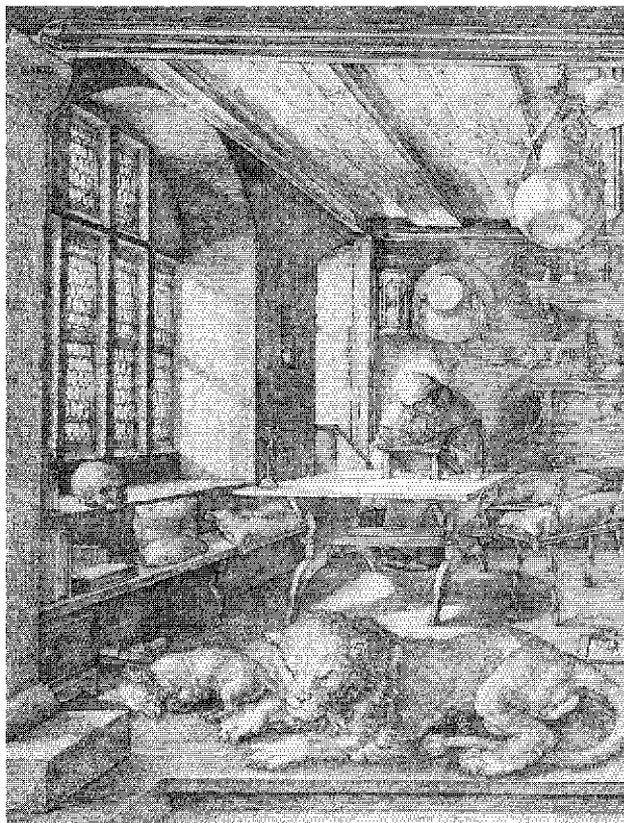


FIGURE 10. “St. Jerome in His Study,” 1514.

hanging from the ceiling has been explained by one German writer, with reference to a *Book of Nature* published in 1500 by Konrad von Meggenberg, as a “mellow, ideal fruit; the struggles of its period of bloom are forgotten, and it is the symbol of the Saint who has renounced the world.” Meanwhile, images of learning and literacy include St. Jerome’s books, and the classroom hornbook (writing slate) on which Dürer has inscribed his initials and the date.

Every detail in the painting suggests the serenity of the contemplative life (in contrast to the active life portrayed in “Knight, Death, and Devil”). St. Jerome, whose image is based on the famous, late self-portrait in red chalk of Leonardo da Vinci, is placed in the rear of the study, reinforcing his remoteness from the world. His table is bare, save for the tiny writing desk, inkpot, and centrally located crucifix. Hanging conspicuously on the wall above his head is a cardinal’s hat; the saint’s uncovered head is illuminated by a halo, as sunlight streams in from the window and falls on his face and the table. Engrossed in his writing, he is

blissfully alone with his thoughts, and with his God. Jerome’s cell, which was usually portrayed as a wilderness cave, has now become a warm, comfortable study, suitable for scholarly pursuits.

‘Melencolia I,’ 1514

Few works of art have been studied, interpreted, analyzed, commented on, and written about, as often, or in so much detail, as “Melencolia I”⁷ [SEE Figure 11], the most complex and enigmatic of Dürer’s three Master Engravings. Every imaginable interpretation of each and all of the objects in the print has been offered, from alchemy, to Kabbalistic numerology, to pseudo-Platonic gibberish. Some are more insightful—for example, various writers have noted Dürer’s debt to Luca Pacioli, pointing to the truncated rhombohedron and the magic square as evidence. Since these interpretations are readily available, I

will instead focus on an intriguing philosophical argument which coheres with the idea of Dürer as a Platonic Renaissance intellectual, and which I believe gets closest to the real conception that Dürer intended to communicate.

The power of “Melencolia” to continue to fascinate for over 500 years (it is, by the way, quite small, only about 9.5×7.5 inches), is that it works on several levels: in the “complex domain” of ideas; as metaphor; and as symbol. And also, as a beautiful and provocative work of art. It is a multiply-connected manifold.

“Melencolia I” is, first of all, a metaphorical self-portrait. The year is 1514—in fact, the year appears twice, once carved, with Albrecht’s initial AD, on the face of the stone step under the angel, and again in the “magic square” above her: the numbers 15 and 14 appear in the bottom row, center.

Consider the historical moment: It is just three years since the defeat of the League of Cambrai, the alliance of nations against Venice, which was betrayed by Pope Julius II, thus opening the door to Venice’s manipulated break-

up of the Church, and effort to prevent the emergence of sovereign nation-states in Europe. By 1514, it has become increasingly difficult for the Christian humanists, such as Erasmus and Thomas More, to effect reforms with the increasingly corrupt Church. Luther will post his Ninety-Five Theses three years later, beginning the process that will lead to the formal break between Protestants and Catholics, and setting the stage for the religious wars of the following century.

Here, then, is Dürer's winged figure, a beautiful woman, or angel, surrounded by the instruments of science, geometry, mathematics—in short, the armamentarium of the active, intellectual life. She is clearly a creative spirit; yet, she is also deeply distressed, a troubled genius, as the sands of the hour-glass on the wall above her fall inexorably. Her gaze is directed toward the threats that appear to be on the horizon: the “hell-bat,” and the comet that speeds towards Earth. But is it a comet? No comet ever looked like this. The bright light in the night sky is something unnatural, not to be found in nature. Arching above is a beautiful “moonbow,” for it is nighttime. The hell-bat seems about to fly out of the picture. Dürer creates a tremendous tension between a creative potential for good, of something not yet seen, and impending doom.

Art historian Patrick Doorly⁸ argues convincingly that Dürer's masterpiece is not about melancholy at all, but rather, is about his yearning for the Beautiful. In support of this hypothesis, Doorly offers Plato's dialogue *Greater Hippias*, in which Socrates engages in a discussion with the sophist Hippias on the question, “What is the Beautiful?”

While Doorly identifies the source of many of the particular objects in “Melencolia” as deriving from passages in the *Greater Hippias*, far more important is his discussion of the Beautiful, which for Plato and Socrates, is also the Good.

In the dialogue, Socrates poses this question to Hippias,

who repeatedly replies by identifying *things*, such as a “beautiful woman,” which have the quality of beauty. But nowhere in the dialogue is the question, “What is the Beautiful?” answered. Clearly, the Beautiful, the *One* as a concept, the idea, is not found in any of the many objects that could be described as “beautiful.” As in his other dialogues, Plato leaves the resolution of this paradox (the *One* and the *Many*) to the mind of the reader.

The dialogue concludes with Socrates responding ironically to Hippias's final attempt to define the Beautiful as “the ability to produce a discourse well and beautifully . . . to convince the audience, and to carry off, not the smallest, but the greatest of prizes, the salvation of oneself, one's property, and one's friends.”

Socrates replies, tongue firmly in cheek, that Hippias is blessed by knowing “the things a man ought to practice,” while he, Socrates, is “possessed by some accursed fortune, so that I am always wandering and perplexed, and, exhibiting my perplexity to you wise men, am in turn reviled by you in speech whenever I exhibit it.” Socrates concludes the dia-

logue by observing that “I think I know the meaning of the proverb, *beautiful things are difficult*” [emphasis added].

Like Socrates, Dürer's Melencolia appears “perplexed”: How, with all the beautiful accomplishments of Renaissance art and science—the poetry of Dante and Petrarch, the revival of Classical learning—how could European civilization be headed into a Dark Age? How could the comet be headed towards Earth?

Dürer leaves this question unanswered, just as Plato leaves the question of “What is the Beautiful?” unanswered. Yet, he includes in the drama a little putto, sitting at the center of the composition, between Melencolia and the evil portents in the dark sky. The putto is seated on a millstone, a humble thing that seems out of place among the objects of science and mathematics. But there is also a millstone in the *Greater Hippias*. At one point, Socrates becomes so exasperated with the sophist's Aristotelean mutterings, that he exclaims:

“Are you not able to remember that I asked for the beautiful itself, by which everything to which it is added has the property of being beautiful, both stone and stick and man and god and every act and every learning? For what I am asking is this, man: *What is the beautiful itself?* and I cannot make you hear what I say any more than if you were a stone sitting beside me, and a millstone at that, having neither ears nor brain.”

Look again at Dürer's engraving. While Melencolia's face is darkened in shadow, the child's is lit by a light coming from the right side of the picture; we don't know what it is, except that it is a metaphor for the idea of Reason, the Good, the Beautiful. The putto, so enlightened, is concentrating on what he is engraving (his instrument is a graver, like one that Dürer would have used to make this print—a not-too-subtle reference to Dürer himself). His mind and his body are active, as opposed to Melencolia, who holds in her hand a compass which doesn't

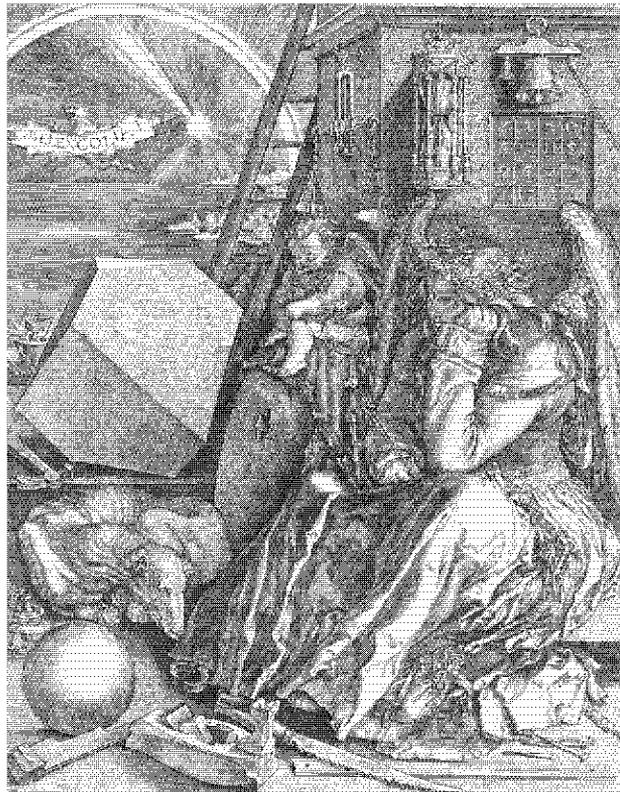


FIGURE 11. “Melencolia I,” 1514.

move, and on her lap, a book which is firmly closed. She is immobile. But the two are linked by the line of sight: from the angel's eyes, across the forehead of the putto, into the bright light in the Heaven. And above the putto's head are a set of scales; they are balanced, reinforcing the sense of tension between salvation and doom.

Although we don't know what the putto is engraving, we sense that he will know what he needs to know, to resolve the paradoxes of the present: He is the Future.

In 1512, Dürer wrote drafts for the text of what would become his own essay on beauty, the "aesthetic excursus," which was printed in Book 3 of his *Four Books on Human Proportion*, which survive among his manuscripts. In these essays, Dürer returns repeatedly to the subject of beauty. Included is this passage:

"There lives also no man upon earth who could give a final judgment upon what the most beautiful shape of a man should be; only God knows that. How beauty is to be judged is a matter of deliberation. One must bring it into every single thing, according to circum-

stances, for in some things we consider that as beautiful which elsewhere would lack beauty. . . . What the beautiful is, I know not, though it adheres to many things. When we wish to bring it into our work we find it very hard"

And, in his dedication to Pirckheimer of the *Four Books on Human Proportion*, Dürer wrote that the art of measurement ("*die Kunst der Messung*") is the correct grounding of all painting. Dürer had, by now, become a committed Platonist:

"But if we were to ask how we are to make a beautiful figure, some would give answer: according to the judgment of men. Others would not agree thereto and neither should I. For who will give us a right understanding in this matter without true knowledge? . . . Truth alone comprehends that which might be the most beautiful form and measurement of a man and nothing else."

In the summer of 1521, following his trip, with his wife Agnes, to The Netherlands, Dürer returned to Nuremberg, most likely to escape persecution (an ordinance of May 1521, issued by the Habsburg Emperor Charles V, branded as a heretic any person who read or printed a Bible in the vernacular). Here he

continued to produce his wonderful prints, which were given wide circulation throughout Germany and beyond. Although his health began to decline, he continued to work on the *Four Books* (they were published posthumously by Pirckheimer), and on a treatise on fortifications, his 1525 *Unterweysung der Messung*, on perspective and geometry, which is available in English translation as the *Painter's Manual*. Erasmus was one of the first to receive a copy, sent by his friend Pirckheimer.

Dürer died on April 6, 1528, and was buried in the churchyard of Johannis-kirchhof in Nuremberg. He was eulogized by Catholic and Lutheran scholars alike. His dearest friend Pirckheimer placed on his tomb the words, "Whatever was mortal of Albrecht Dürer is covered by this tomb." What was immortal of him is ours to cherish still today.

Toward the end of his life, Dürer wrote, "God often gives the ability to learn and the insight to make something good to one man, the like of whom, nobody is found in his own days, and nobody has lived before him for a long long time, and nobody comes after him very soon."⁹

AFTERWORD

Dürer, Rembrandt, and the Peace of Westphalia

One hundred years after Dürer's death, a young Dutch artist who would be profoundly influenced by Dürer was just beginning his career. Although there is no conclusive evidence that Rembrandt van Rijn (1609-1669) ever travelled outside The Netherlands, he became an avid collector of the works of many artists, among them the prints of Dürer and Mantegna, both of whom he prized highly, and whose influence can be discovered in his own work. Following in their footsteps, Rembrandt became the greatest printmaker of his day.

Included among the albums of prints and drawings owned by Rembrandt (which were catalogued when he was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1657/58),

was Dürer's book on human proportion (*Vier Bücher Menschlicher Proportion*), which was published posthumously by Pirckheimer, and subsequently translated into Latin (1532), Italian (1591), French (1557 and 1613), and Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch (1622). The Dutch painter Karel van Mander, in his *Book of Painters* (1604), which was also in Rembrandt's library, wrote of Dürer's contribution, "Just as his forerunners in his land followed nature, so did he. . . . The

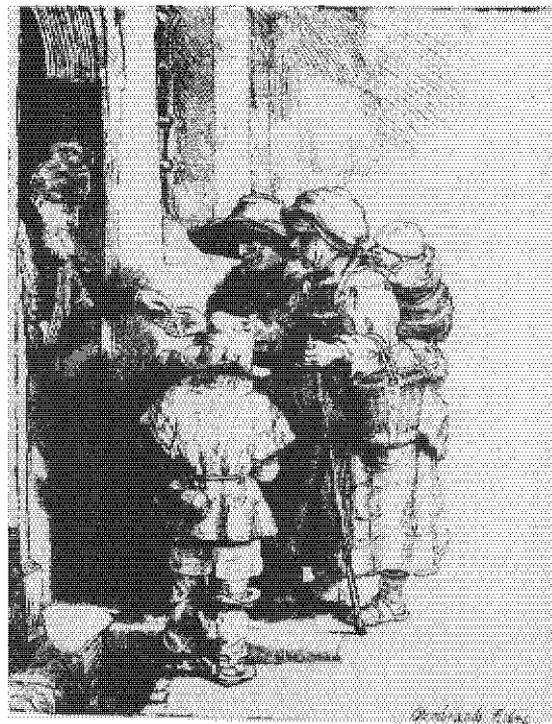


FIGURE 12. Rembrandt van Rijn, "Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door of a House," 1648.

Italians opened his eyes to Greek and Roman art, and to understanding the beautiful. Dürer learned beauty from nature. . . . He was learned in literature, art, the sciences, mathematics, architecture, and perspective, and wrote books on proportion, and on perspective and architecture.”

As Dürer’s art so powerfully represented the conflicts of his time, so Rembrandt’s did his.

Rembrandt is the artist who most perfectly expresses the ideas of the Treaty of Westphalia, which in 1648 ended the Thirty Years’ War. Rembrandt’s homeland, The Netherlands, had fought a continuous struggle for its independence against Habsburg Spain from 1566 to 1648, when the carnage was finally ended. It has been estimated that,

in just the final 30 years of warfare, 1618-1648, between 7 and 8 million people died—approximately one-third the population of the Empire.

The Treaty of Westphalia called on all parties to put behind them the nightmare of war, and to look ahead to the future, by forgiving their enemies, and putting the “advantage of the other” (*agapē*) in place of the desire for revenge.

Rembrandt’s etching of “Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door of a House” [SEE Figure 12], executed in 1648, the year of the Westphalia Treaty, gives us a glimpse of what he might have been thinking in that hopeful moment. Here, an elder, with a kindly face, gives alms to a poor family, who have apparently knocked on his door. They are beggars;

the father appears to be blind—his eyes are hidden in shadow. The young mother, with her child on her back, reaches out a hand to receive the gift, as the son, whose back is to the viewer, teeters on the edge of a steep gutter. The interplay of the two hands, illuminated by a bright light, unite the poor family with the benevolent almsgiver. The beggar family is imbued by Rembrandt with great dignity—one can imagine that Amsterdam, with its great wealth, and also the waves of immigrants arriving from European lands devastated by war, would have seen many such scenes as this one. But Rembrandt, in a graphic image born of the Brothers of the Common Life, of Nicolaus of Cusa, and Erasmus, tells us that the generous gesture of the old man is a harbinger of better times to come.

NOTES

1. *Albrecht Dürer: A Renaissance Journey in Print*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Oct. 15, 2004-Jan. 9, 2005.
2. For more on the Brothers of the Common Life, see William F. Wertz, Jr., “The Brotherhood of the Common Life,” *Fidelio*, Summer 1994 (Vol. III, No. 2).
3. The library was still in existence a century later. As reported in *The Thirty Years’ War*, ed. by Geoffrey Parker (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 146: “At Nuremberg, the ambassador (Thomas Howard, earl of Arundel) purchased the fabulous Pirckheimer library, with manuscripts illustrated by Dürer and other masters, for 350 thalers because

his owner was short of money, ‘in consideration of the hard times and the difficulty of obtaining food.’”

4. Patrick Doorly, “Dürer’s Melencolia I: Plato’s Abandoned Search for the Beautiful,” *Art Bulletin*, June 2004.
5. Dürer records in his *Diary of a Journey to the Low Countries* that, during his second trip to Italy, he wrote to Raphael, enclosing a self-portrait on linen, which some 25 years later Raphael’s pupil Giulio Romano showed to Vasari. Vasari reports that Raphael had judged it to be a “cosa meravigliosa” (marvelous thing), and had sent Dürer in return “many drawings by his hand.” According to Dürer’s *Diary*, when in Antwerp in 1520, following Raphael’s death, he gave Tomaso Vincidor, a Bolognese painter

who had been sent to Flanders by Pope Leo X, a whole set of his prints to be exchanged in Rome for engravings after Raphael.

6. Cited in Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1999).
7. One explanation for the unusual spelling of “Melencolia” is given by David Ritz Finkelstein in his essay “The Meaning of Melencolia” (School of Physics, Georgia Institute of Technology, Nov. 30, 2004)—that it is an anagram for the Latin words, “*limen caelo*,” or “gateway to heaven.” Through a complex argument, Finkelstein ties the “l” following Melencolia to the anagram.
8. Doorly, *op cit*.
9. Honour and Fleming, *op cit*.

ADDITIONAL WORKS CONSULTED

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- Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1943).
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Karel Vereycken, “How Erasmus’s Folly Saved Our Civilization,” February 2004 (unpublished).

On Johannes Reuchlin

- “Great Reformers—John Reuchlin,” *Manas*, Dec. 15, 1948.
- Rob Barrett, “Johann Reuchlin, Philologist and Mystic: The Christian Rediscovery of Hebrew,” Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., Aug. 13, 2001.
- Johannes Reuchlin, *Recommendation Whether To Confiscate, Destroy, and Burn All Jewish Books*, trans. by Peter Wortsman (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

Robert W. Synder, “A Voice Against the Flames,” *America* (The National Catholic Weekly), Sept. 17, 2001.

On Rembrandt van Rijn

- Clifford S. Ackley, *Rembrandt’s Journey: Painter, Draftsman, Etcher* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003).
- Amy Golahny, *Rembrandt’s Reading: The Artist’s Bookshelf of Ancient Poetry and History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).
- Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).