

Published by Scholastic
under the direction of
the National Gallery of Art

art & man

Dürer
and the
Reformation



The Man from Nuremberg

"When I could work neatly, my liking drew me rather to painting than to goldsmith's work," Albrecht Dürer later recalled. "So I laid it before my father; but he was not well pleased, regretting the time lost while I had been learning to be a goldsmith." Dürer's obvious talent for drawing, seen in an amazing self-portrait (far left), "made from a mirror while I was still a child," must have made it much easier for him to convince his father that he should not simply spend the rest of his life as a craftsman.

Even at this early age Dürer displayed the restless power of mind that was always to be one of his outstanding qualities. "His only fault,"

remarked a contemporary who knew him well, "was a unique and infinite diligence, often too harsh a judge of his own self." He was born in Nuremberg, the third child of a humble, artisan-class, and deeply religious family. "My father endured much and worked hard all his life," Dürer wrote, "for he had nothing for his support, save what he earned with his hands for himself, his wife, and his children."

It would have been easy for Dürer to follow in his father's footsteps, in the time-honored fashion of the Nuremberg guilds. Choosing to be independent, to be an artist rather than a craftsman, he gave up a secure profession, but he also placed

himself among the progressive thinkers of his day, and became a leader in the Northern Renaissance.

Nuremberg was an exciting city in which to grow up. It stood along a main route between the Northern countries and Italy, and was one of Germany's leading centers of thought, crafts, and trade. "I have chosen Nuremberg for my place of residence," explained Johannes Müller, the mathematician who developed trigonometry, "because there I find without difficulty all the peculiar instruments for astronomy, and there it is easiest for me to keep in touch with the learned of all countries. For Nuremberg, thanks to the perpetual journeyings of her mer-



Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Self-portrait at 13, 1484. Albertina, Vienna.



Self-portrait, 1493. Robert Lehman Collection. (Enlarged detail on cover.)



Self-portrait, 1493. Louvre.

chants, may be counted the center of Europe."

Dürer was strongly influenced by this expansive atmosphere. Observant, curious, and ambitious, he used his enormous skills as painter, draftsman, and printmaker to explore not only the world around him, but his own character. He continued to create self-portraits at different times throughout his life and was the first Northern artist to devote so much attention to himself.

At 22, he sketched his head and hand (second from left) on a sheet of paper that already contained a meticulous sketch of a crumpled pillow. The face is that of a young, not yet mature, but already serious artist

who is aware of his worth but not yet secure in his position. His first painting of himself (left center) seems to have been done in the same year, and shows him fine-featured and elegant, just before his marriage. By the time he was 27, he was famous, worldly, and aristocratic. His self-portrait of that year (right center) is appropriately stylish, but although his clothes are evidently modish and expensive, they contrast with the strained look of the eyes, and the self-mockery about the lips.

The following year, Dürer did a most puzzling portrait of himself as Christ (second from right), with heavy shining ringlets of hair, and long, elegant fingers barely touching

his robe. Perhaps Dürer meant to convey that the artist's power is a gift from God, to communicate the glory of creation, and the tragedy and triumph of Christ's passion. But we cannot tell for sure.

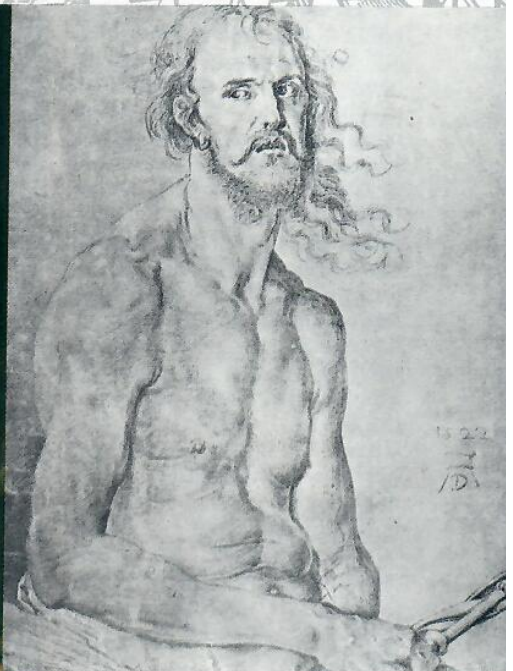
Dürer's voyage of self-exploration continued to the end of his life. "I drew this face in my sickness," he wrote on his last self-portrait (far right), four years before his death at 56. Prematurely old, his once-powerful body sagging and wasted, he again identified himself with Christ—this time as the tormented "Man of Sorrows." As before, it is the product of a complex, probing mind that could not interpret itself or the world in simple, easy terms.



Self-portrait, 1498. Prado.



Self-portrait, 1500. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

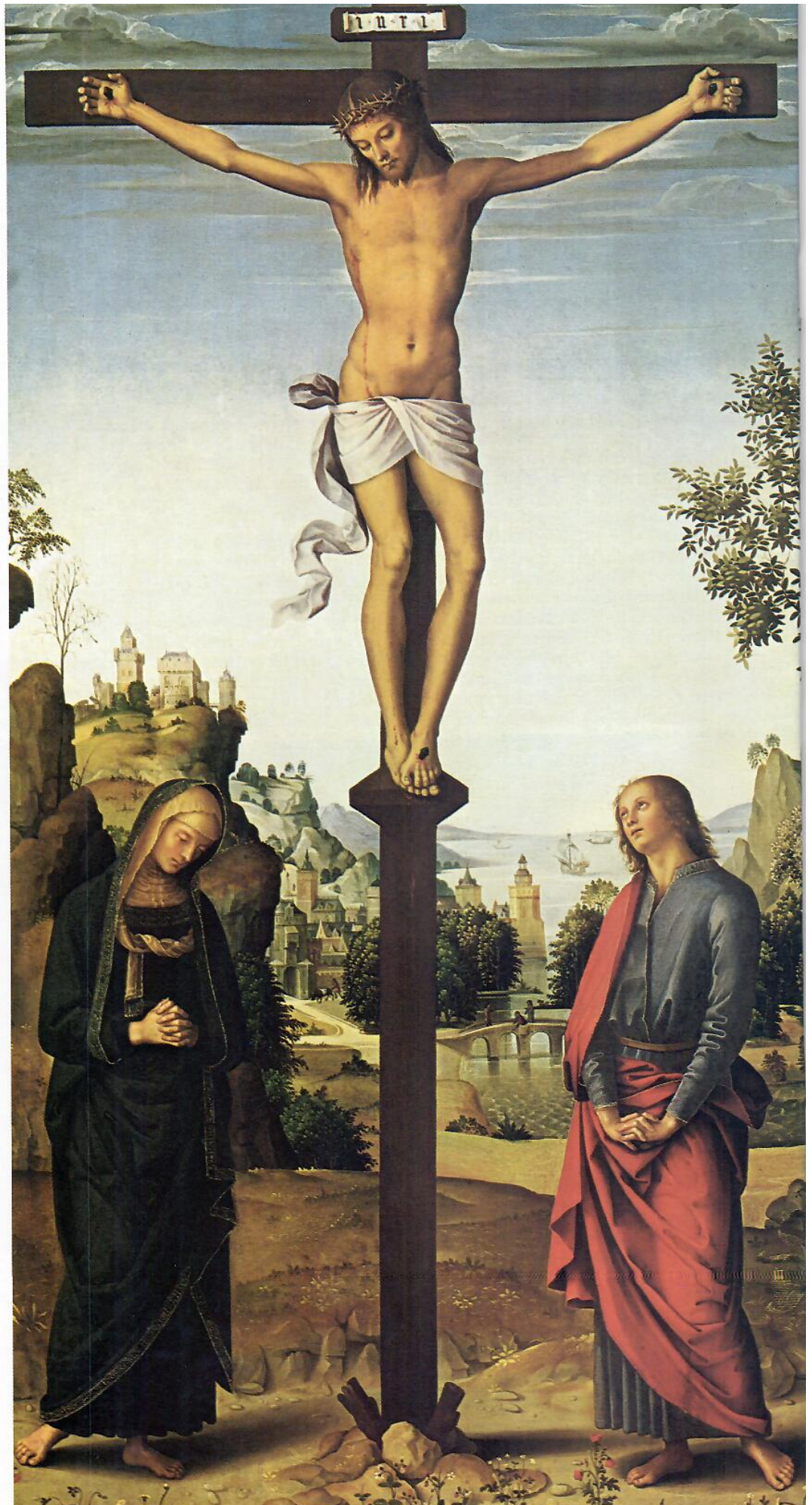


The Man of Sorrows, 1522. Kunsthalle, Bremen.

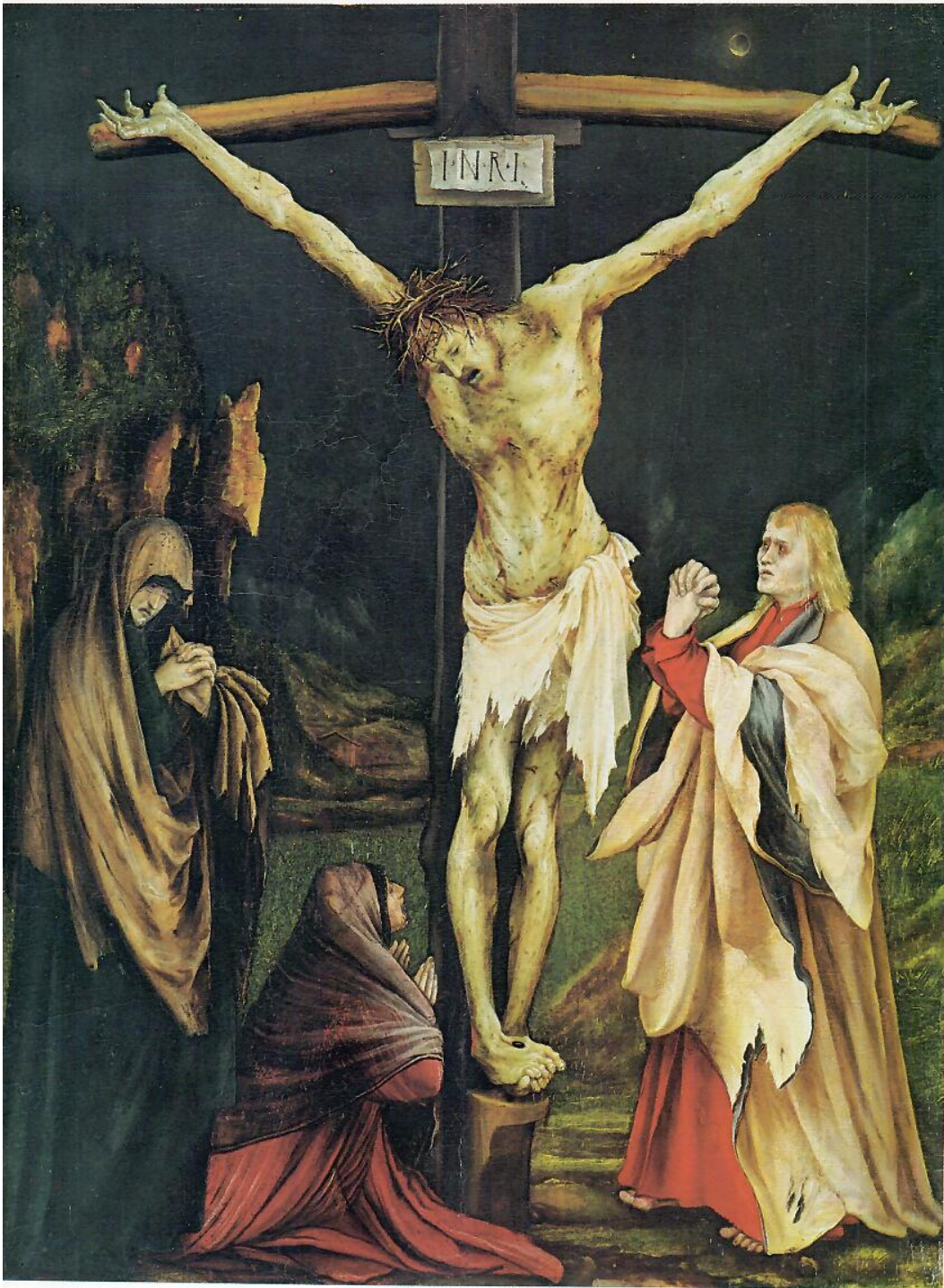
The Crucifixion is the central symbol of Christianity. But if you were going to tell its story, either in words or pictures, how would you go about it? What would the event mean to you? Would you think of it primarily in a philosophical way, as an allegory or redemption? Or would you emphasize the emotional side of the experience, its human sorrow and agony?

The Italian Renaissance, with its strong belief in reason and its love for classical philosophy, saw the world essentially as an understandable place, with man at its center. But in Dürer's Germany, the Middle Ages still exerted a strong hold. Men felt their limitations even more keenly than their powers. The Italian Renaissance celebrated the joy of life. In the North there remained a constant awareness of death. These were two very different ways of looking at the world, and they deeply influenced the course of art, of religion, and of politics, not only in these countries, but in the whole Western world.

When we look at a typical Italian painting of the Crucifixion (right), we may well be struck by how peaceful it looks. In this example, by Perugino, the landscape stretches for miles, the sky is clear, the light is a warming glow. An atmosphere of gentleness and calm seems to envelop us. Christ is represented as a noble, weightless hero, whose death is to be accepted because it is only temporary. His skin is soft and smooth, the expression on his face is one of peaceful resignation. This is the reasonable world of the Southern Renaissance.



Two Views of the World



The view that the German painter Grünewald gives us (left) could hardly be more different. Here the artist wanted us to feel the pain and anguish of violent death. The scene takes place at night, illuminated by a hard, cold light like a flash of lightning. Pain is an intensely physical sensation. Mary and John cry out, overcome with grief, and wring their hands. Christ's body hangs limply from the cross—green, putrid, and covered with sores. His features are not idealized but those of a real person, as if the artist had used a friend as a model. While the hands of Christ in the Italian painting are composed and symmetrical, Grünewald has made them larger than life; distorted claws that express the agony of dying.

Dürer, like many men of his age, was aware of both these traditions, and saw the values in both. Drawn to the noble intellectual harmonies of the Italian Renaissance, he was still bound to the deep emotional fervor of his own German background. It was his hope and ambition to combine both of these basic approaches in his own work—an enormously difficult and often frustrating task. For these two different ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling could not be easily reconciled, and the conflict between them was to have overpowering historical consequences in the future.

For the National Gallery of Art: J. Carter Brown, Director; W. Howard Adams, Assistant Administrator; Richard McLanathan, Consulting Editor. For Scholastic Magazines, Inc.: M. E. Robinson, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer; J. K. Lippert, Vice-Chairman of the Board; Gray Williams, Jr., Project Director. Art & Mon., Vol. 2, No. 3, December 1971. Published monthly by Scholastic Magazines, Inc., under the direction of the National Gallery of Art, eight times in the school year from October through May. Second-class postage paid at Englewood, New Jersey 07632. Copyright © 1971 Scholastic Magazines, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Subscription prices: for 1-19 subscriptions, \$3.00 each per school year; \$2.00 each per year for 20 or more subscriptions to the same address. Teacher edition, \$5.00 per year. Office of publication and address for correspondence concerning subscriptions: Art & Mon., 902 Sylvan Avenue, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632. Editorial and General Offices: Art & Mon., 30 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. 10036. Canadian address: Scholastic TAB Publications, Ltd., Richmond Hill, Ontario. Postmasters: send notice of undeliverable copies on form 3579 to Art & Mon., 902 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 07632.

PAGE 4:

Pietro Perugino (probably 1445-1523). *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, St. John, St. Jerome, and St. Mary Magdalen*, about 1485. National Gallery of Art, Andrew Mellon Collection.

ABOVE:

Mathis Grünewald (about 1465-1528). *The Small Crucifixion*, about 1510. National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

"To Pour Out New Things"



Giovanni Bellini (about 1430-1516). *Madonna and Child with Saints*, about 1490. National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

From his youth Dürer dreamed of going to Italy. He wanted to be able to paint like the Renaissance artists he admired, and to study Classical antiquity as they were doing. And when he finally got an opportunity to go there, at the age of 22, he was not disappointed. To his friend Wilibald Pirckheimer, who lent him money for the trip, he wrote: "I wish you were here at Venice! There are many fine fellows among the Italians: wise scholars, good lute players, pipers, connoisseurs of painting, and many noble minds."

Dürer was more than a tourist. He didn't want simply to paint in the Italian manner, but "to pour out new things which have never before been in the mind of man." He was determined to be as learned as the most learned of Renaissance men, and to be admired in Italy as he was in Germany. He studied the anatomy of the human body, collected antique sculpture, and generally sought the company of the famous artists and intellectuals of his day.

He especially liked Giovanni Bellini: "He is very old, but still the best painter of them all." Dürer admired Bellini's assured compositions

and richly atmospheric colors. Bellini could turn out superb paintings of the Madonna and Child, such as the one illustrated above, with no apparent effort. Serene and distantly beautiful, the Madonna gently holds the infant Christ, a well-proportioned and well-behaved child modeled after Classical statuary.

When Dürer painted his own version of the subject (below), he used the rich colors of the Venetians, but he could not resist his own more realistic tradition. In place of the idealized, classic Christ child, he painted a fat, large-headed baby who hangs heavily on his mother's neck. His Madonna is also more realistic, a down-to-earth woman trying to control her wriggling infant, rather than the gentler and more perfect image of Bellini. Instead of taking his models from ancient sculpture, or even from the Italian Renaissance, Dürer appears to have brought in the neighbors.

Dürer learned to take from the South what he admired, yet still preserved his identity as an essentially Northern artist. This mixture appears quite clearly in his famous engraving, *The Knight, Death, and the*

Devil. The hero, with his faithful horse and dog, moves unafraid through a dark and frightening forest. Death on a cadaverous horse, a horned and swinish devil, and other monsters beset his path, but he moves on unperturbed, secure in the protection of God. Except for his German armor and weatherbeaten face, the knight on his handsome steed has the proportions and grace of a Renaissance general or Roman emperor. But no Southern hero would have found himself in such a forest of phantoms and spooks, which come straight out of the world of medieval fantasy.

Dürer's imagination was richer than that of his Italian colleagues; and he brought to printmaking in particular all the energy, devotion, and skill that were to make this medium the most advanced and effective mode of visual communication of his era. But the blend of styles could not always be accomplished without strain, and Dürer himself was often conscious of falling short of his ambitions. His was a noble, even heroic, effort to bridge two different worlds, but the worlds remained far apart.



LEFT:

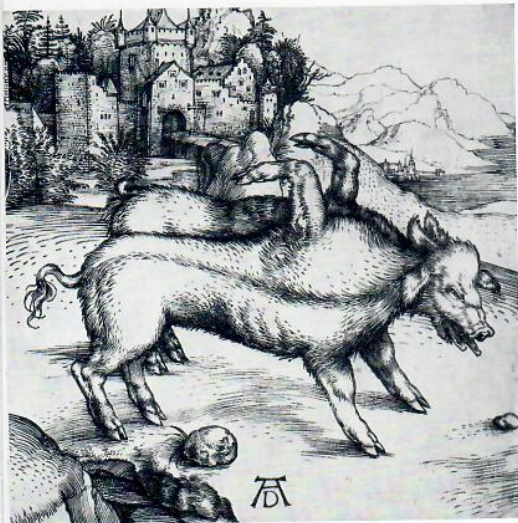
Madonna and Child, about 1505. National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

RIGHT:

The Knight, Death, and the Devil, 1513. National Gallery of Art. W. G. Russell Allen Collection.



A Passion for Looking



ABOVE:
The Monstrous Pig of Landser, probably 1496. National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection.

RIGHT:
The Great Piece of Turf, 1503. Albertina, Vienna.

PAGE 9 (top):
Head of a Young Man, 1503.

PAGE 9 (bottom):
Sketches of Animals, 1521. Both Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, Williamstown, Mass.

On an early morning walk in the fields outside Nuremberg, Dürer dug up and brought home a small chunk of meadow turf. Then, before its dandelions, plantains, and wild grasses could wilt, he preserved it as a delicate, yet scientifically detailed watercolor (center). Though the subject was a humble one, his work made it a poem of celebration for the richness of God's creation.

Like many men of the Renaissance, Dürer was eager—even greedy—in his curiosity about the new, the different, the unknown. His drawings and nature studies are among his most fascinating works, for they combine his enormous technical ability with his passionate enthusiasm for discovery. They make plain one particular quality of Dürer's art: his fascination with specific, concrete details—sometimes at the expense of the overall image he was portraying. In drawing the head of a young man (upper right), for example, Dürer appears to have caught every facial quirk of his subject, such as the off-balance eyes and the slightly swollen lower lip. But the overall expression is ambiguous, fleeting, mysterious.

Animals were among Dürer's favorite subjects. He liked to illustrate not only the way they looked but also the way they felt—the distinctive textures of fur, horn, and hide. On a trip to the Lowlands he visited the Brussels zoo and made the quick but polished sketches shown at the lower right, including lions (which he had never seen before except in pictures), a skittish chamois, and a crimson-rumped baboon.

Dürer could even take an animal he had never seen and make you believe in it. He saw a crude woodcut of a pig born in the town of Landser (lower left), with four ears, two bodies, eight feet, and two tongues (it undoubtedly died at birth). Nevertheless, he created an engraving showing the pig as clearly as if it had grown to maturity.

Dürer's time was the Age of Discovery: of strange lands, of unknown facts of nature, and, above all, of fresh ideas. Yet the knowledge that men pursued so eagerly would also put their old comfortable assumptions and beliefs in doubt. Men like Dürer became more aware of the complexity of the world, even as they sought to unlock its secrets. Their powers of observation and reason created a restlessness of spirit that would never give them peace.







The Anguish Of Reason

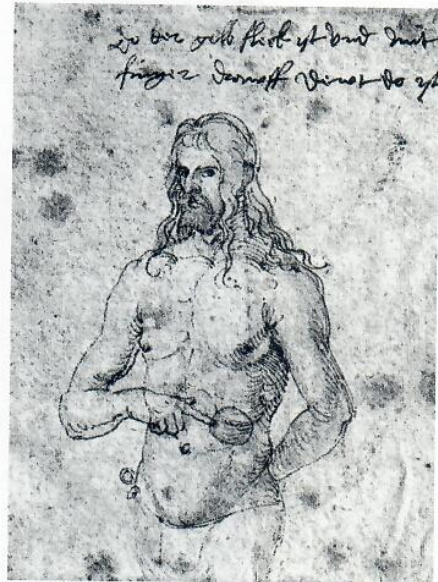
If you have ever felt depressed, paralyzed with self-doubt, and have given up on something because you were unable to achieve what you really wanted, then perhaps you can feel something of the mood that hangs over Dürer's most enigmatic work, the engraving *Melancholia I*, or *Melancholy*. Experts argue over the precise meaning of its many symbols. Yet they generally agree that this work reflects something of Dürer's own feelings, and the artistic problems he faced.

Wearing large wings, a woman sits among tools of carpentry, science, and mathematics: among them a compass, an hourglass, a balance, a polyhedron, a sphere, a hammer, a plane, a saw, nails, and a number puzzle in which all the columns add up to 34. These suggest that the figure might be meant to personify Geometry. But her sad, thoughtful face is in darkness, and the compass rests useless in her hand. A squealing bat and a pathetic emaciated dog further contribute to the air of oppressive gloom.

The figure is in fact Dürer's representation of Melancholy, one of the so-called Four Humors. At that time it was believed that man's body and mind were conditioned by four fluids, or humors, related to the classic four elements—fire, water, air, and earth. In a healthy person, the humors were in relative balance, but a severe excess of any of them was thought to produce sickness of body and mind. Melancholy, the humor of earth, was thought to inspire artistic creation, but too much of it produced depression, which hindered action and decision, and could then lead to insanity.

Dürer himself wrote of this work, "Keys mean power, purse means wealth." But Melancholy's purse and keys hang useless by her side. She will be neither rich nor masterful. Among other things, she symbolizes the state of an artist who cannot get beyond the limits of his craft, and here we approach Dürer's own feelings. The skillful draftsman, the meticulous observer, the keen student of optics and perspective wanted also to reach another world—the world of inspiration and the

ideal—and often felt he could not. "What absolute beauty is, I know not," he admitted sadly. "Nobody knows it except God." At times he felt that his very skill and knowledge got in the way of his art. "The lie is in our understanding," he wrote in one of his moods of depression, "and darkness is so firmly entrenched in our mind that even our groping will fail."



Self-portrait, 1510. Kunsthalle, Bremen.

Dürer's contemporaries would probably have understood this engraving more easily than we do, for they were more familiar with the symbols he used. But they might not have been aware of its personal meaning. *Melancholia I* is in a way the most telling of Dürer's self-portraits. Rather than a portrait of his appearance, it is a portrait of his soul.

Tragically, there was a relationship between Dürer's mental anguish and his physical sickness. In 1512, he drew a sketch of himself, possibly to send to a doctor he could not visit. His index finger points to the spot where he felt pain. The spot is the spleen, where the Melancholy humor was supposed to originate. The pain in his body might have been a warning of the illness that finally killed him. But he would also never recover from the torment he felt in his mind.

Melancholia I, 1514. National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection.



"Here I Stand"



RIGHT (above):
Lucas Cranach (1472-1553).
Martin Luther, 1529.
Uffizi, Florence.

RIGHT (below):
Frederick the Wise,
Elector of Saxony, 1524.
National Gallery of Art,
Rosenwald Collection.

"O God, if Luther is dead, who shall henceforth so clearly expound to us the Holy Gospel?" wrote a distressed Dürer in 1521, having heard rumors (which proved false) that Martin Luther had been assassinated. Dürer, like many other Germans, was deeply attracted to the ideas of the fiery reformer, without quite realizing that they would split the whole civilized world.

At the beginning, Luther's struggle had been simply an inner one. Tormented by conscience and by doubts of his own spiritual worth, he came to question whether the Church, or any human agency, could help save him from hell. Luther found an answer for himself in simple, personal faith. He concluded that salvation and the forgiveness of sins had to come directly from God.

Luther also based his views on close study of the Bible, which was for him the

main source of God's truth. He was to make a brilliant translation of it from Latin into German, so more people could read it for themselves. Books written in commonly spoken languages, and made available through the newly invented printing press, had an enormous impact on the age. This perhaps explains Dürer's enthusiasm for printmaking—a medium of both art and communication.

What drove Luther to make a public stand, in 1517, was a large sale of indulgences. People were allowed simply to buy forgiveness for their sins—even sins not yet committed. For the Church, it was a perfectly reasonable extension of papal powers. For Luther, it was a basic violation of conscience. Summarizing his ideas in the form of 95 theses for debate, he nailed them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Word of mouth and the printing press carried the news throughout the country.

Many people had mixed feelings about both Luther and the Church. One of Luther's most influential supporters was Frederick, the Elector of Saxony (below), who is best remembered for having spirited Luther away to Wartburg Castle when he was in danger from his enemies. Frederick was a cultivated patron of scholar-



ship and the arts, who refurbished the town of Wittenberg and founded its famous university. But much of his income came from pilgrims visiting his collection of 17,000 holy relics — the kind that reformers often attacked as superstitious rubbish. And Frederick also stood for the purely political resistance to the Church—the widespread German resentment that so much freedom and money was taken away by an Italian-dominated papacy.

"O Erasmus of Rotterdam," wrote Dürer, "where will you take your stand?" Dürer's outcry was to be echoed by Protestants all through Europe. But Erasmus, one of the most respected thinkers in the West, refused to take Luther's side, and eventually turned against him.

Even before Luther, Erasmus had challenged the practices of fasting, celibacy, pilgrimages, confession, the veneration of relics, the sale of indulgences, the burning of heretics, and prayers to the saints. Nevertheless, revolution was in Erasmus' mind rather than in his heart. Dürer made an oddly impersonal engraving of him (right), which stressed his quiet reserve and academic tastes rather than his humor and sensitivity. Erasmus didn't much like it. Nevertheless, deep down he was a man of restraint, who felt that the chaos of



LEFT (above):

Erasmus of Rotterdam (detail), 1526. National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection.

LEFT (below):

Willibald Pirckheimer, 1524. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvey D. Parker Collection.



revolution was far worse than injustice or corruption.

Willibald Pirckheimer (left), Dürer's best friend, was, despite his sleepy looking features, one of Nuremberg's leading intellectuals. He also was torn between admiration for Luther's aims and affection for the rational spirit of Italy. Eventually he became displeased with the excesses of Protestantism, and at the end of his life was to make his peace once more with the Church.

What stand would Dürer have taken, if he had not died prematurely in 1527? He probably would have been horrified at the growing gap between Protestants and Catholics. It was his own aim to reconcile the conflicts in his world. But that world increasingly rejected compromise. The spirit that came to prevail—on both sides—was expressed in Luther's declaration: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."



The Gathering Storm

And I looked, and beheld a white horse; and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him; and he went forth conquering....

And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth...and there was given unto him a great sword....

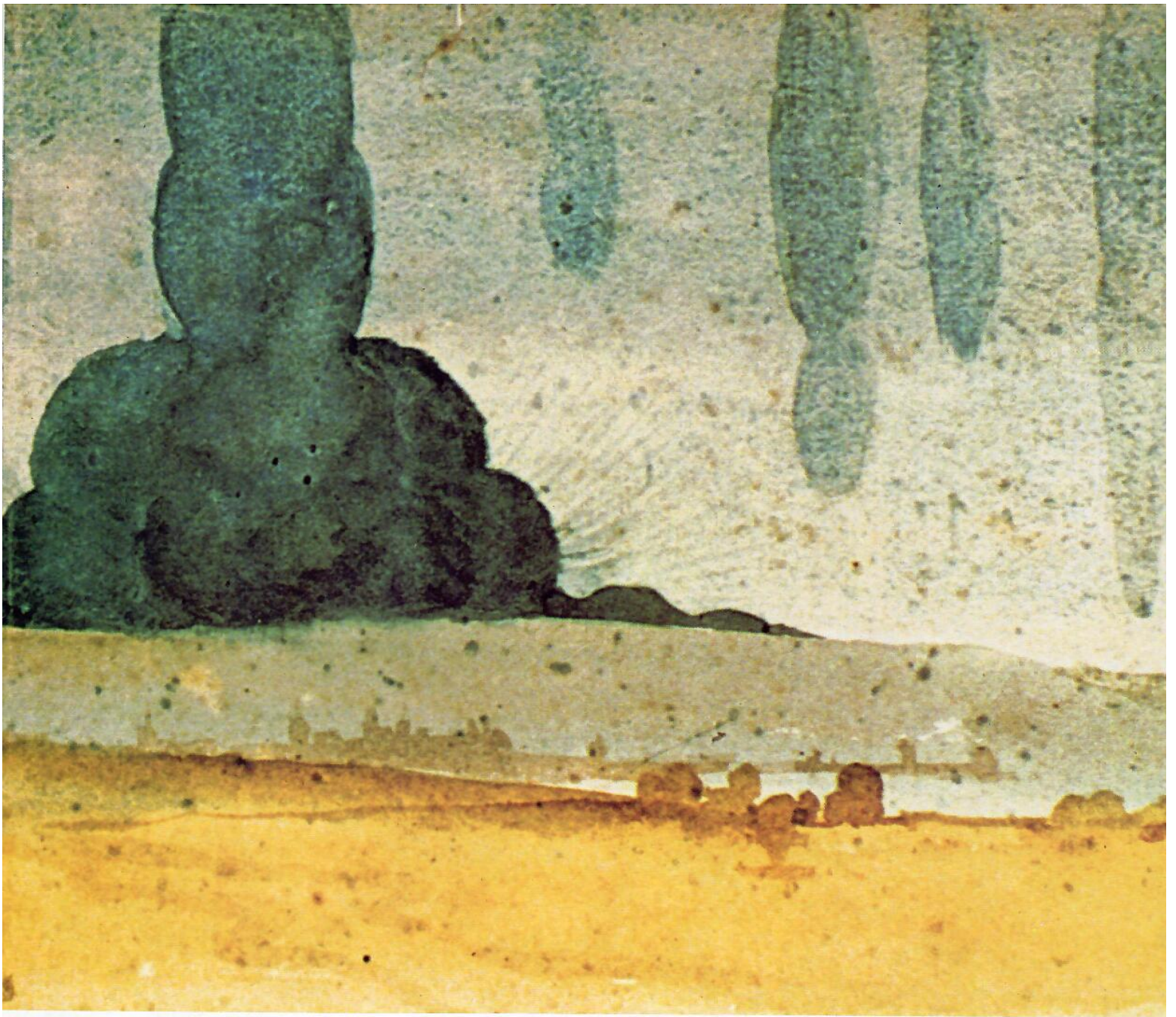
And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances....

And I looked, and beheld a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.

This passage quoted from Revelations is one of the most memorable visions in world literature, so powerful that it has given the word *apocalyptic* to our language. And Dürer's interpretation of it (back cover) is in turn the most famous version in art. War, Pestilence, Famine, and Death ride uncaring over the earth, leaving a path of terrible devastation. Men and women fall helpless before them; a bishop is devoured in the great jaws of Hell. Part of the power of this woodcut comes from its almost brutal realism. This is direct, popular art, designed to hit its viewers hard, even if they could not read. Equally powerful are the tensions of its bold black lines, with brisk parallels and hatchings con-

trasted against dramatic scallops and curves. But the violence and dramatic rhythm of this woodcut may also have the strength of premonition. Though made years before the full storm of the Reformation descended on Germany, it foreshadowed the ruin that religious strife would bring.

Twenty-seven years later Dürer recorded a frightening, ominous vision of his own. "In the night" he wrote, "I saw this appearance in my sleep—how many great waters fell from heaven. The first struck the earth about four miles away from me with terrific force and tremendous noise...and I was so sore afraid that when I awoke my whole body trembled and for a long while I



could not recover myself." He hastened to record what he had dreamed, as accurately as possible, in the moody watercolor sketch shown above. Cascading waters tumble from the sky, falling upon the countryside like a huge explosion. This is no mere storm, but a deluge bringing the end of the world.

Dürer was deeply religious and a man of peace. He always believed that reform was possible without revolution. The gentle, positive virtues in which he believed seem to be expressed in his careful and sensitive drawing of hands in prayer (right). But in an increasingly complex, increasingly fragmented world, peace was impossible, and violent change inevitable.



ABOVE:

End of the World, 1525.
Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna.

LEFT:

"Praying Hands," 1508.
Albertina, Vienna.

BACK COVER:

*The Four Horsemen of the
Apocalypse*, probably 1497/1498.
National Gallery of Art,
Rosenwald Collection.

