

## Albrecht Dürer - 550 Years

Philipp Grieb

This year, museums and media in Europe are remembering Albrecht Dürer (1471 - 1528), the German painter, graphic artist, mathematician and art theorist, who was born 550 years ago. With his paintings, drawings, etchings and woodcuts, he is one of the outstanding representatives of the Renaissance. Even during his lifetime, he was known throughout Europe. His fame has endured for half a millennium. He was not only convincing with great craftsmanship, he was also one of the intellectuals of his time, pursuing mathematical questions with scientific meticulousness, methodically investigating and describing the perspective

representation and proportions of the human figure. He was an open-minded, modern thinker who broadened his horizons on his travels and whose view extended far beyond the boundaries of his home city of Nuremberg.

Nuremberg was a prosperous free city of the empire at that time; crafts and trade were flourishing, favoured by its location in the centre of Europe. Together with Cologne and Prague, the city was one of the largest cities in the Holy Roman Empire, which at that time largely comprised the Central European territories.

Albrecht Dürer's father was a goldsmith. At the age of 13, Albrecht finished his schooling and his father took him into his workshop to train him as a goldsmith. A self-portrait of the thirteen-year-old dates from this time and reveals his great talent.

Later, he studied and worked for four years with the Nuremberg painter Michael Wolgemut before taking a long wandering tour with changing jobs.

In 1497 he became self-employed and was soon able to run a workshop with



Albrecht Dürer, signature and trademark

employees. Portraits and self-portraits from this period have survived. However, he mainly devoted himself to copper engraving and woodcutting. The possibility to reproduce his excellent works as prints and to distribute them far beyond Nuremberg proved successful. His business-minded young wife, whom he had married in 1494, successfully sold his printed works at markets far beyond Nuremberg and was a great support. His talent for self-presentation and modern branding with his trademark, the capital A above the small D, contributed to his success.

On a first trip to Italy in 1494/95, Dürer came as far as Lake Garda.

In 1505 he travelled to Italy for the second time and stayed until 1507 in Venice, where the greatest painters of the Venetian school were working at the time. Their colourful works made a lasting impression on him. He himself found the highest recognition in Venice with his works.

The German merchants around the rich Jakob Fugger ordered a large painting from him and the Venetian council wanted to hold him in the



Albrecht Dürer, self-portrait at 13, 1484, Albertina, Vienna.

city. But Dürer was driven back, where two years later his hometown of Nuremberg appointed him to its council.

Several times he worked for the Emperor Maximilian I, who granted him a regular pension. When Maximilian died, this pension promise was in jeopardy. He therefore set off for Aachen to attend the coronation of his successor, Charles V. and was able later to secure the continuation of the Emperors' patronage. He then travelled through the Flemish Netherlands, choosing Antwerp as his central base.

An exhibition in Aachen is devoted specifically to this journey (special exhibition "Dürer was here. A Journey Becomes Legend", 28 July - 24 Oct. 2021).



Melencolia, copper engraving, 1514, Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

The National Gallery in London will - also this year - additionally take up Dürer's travels in Italy and will show how his journeys stimulated the exchange of ideas with Dutch and

Italian Renaissance artists, fostered his curiosity and creativity and increased his fame and influence throughout Europe (Dürer's Journeys: Travels of a Renaissance Artist, 20 Nov. 2021 - 27 Feb. 2022).

Albrecht Dürer was productively active until his death in 1528. He perfected the techniques of woodcut and copper engraving and elevated his prints to works of art in their very own right. His sheets became known throughout Europe. He produced them in his own printing house



Self-portrait, 1500, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



Apostels John and Peter, 1526, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

and distributed them through the book markets. The multi-layered self-reflection in his self-portraits points to his own social status and the high value of fine art as an intellectual discipline at a time when it was still considered a common craft.

His high profile ensured that many of his outstanding works were preserved. Today they can be found in the world's most important museums.