

# Albrecht Dürer

## 1471 - 1528

### German Renaissance Painter



*Self-Portrait at 28 (Self-Portrait in Furcoat)*  
Oil on panel,  
67 x 49 cm (26 1/4" x 19 1/4");  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich

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**Colorado Dept. of Education- Visual Arts Standards:** The Dürer lesson meets the following standards:

- ✓ **Observe and Learn to Comprehend**
- ✓ **Envision and Critique to Reflect**
- ✓ **Invent and Discover to Create**
- ✓ **Relate and Connect to Transfer**

#### KEY IDEAS

- The Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century) was a rebirth or revival of the ideals, scientific curiosity, and individualism of the Greeks and Romans. A “renaissance” person is one who is intensely interested in everything and who becomes a master of many things.
- The German Renaissance differed from other regions because of its emphasis on printing, laying the foundation for graphic art. Dürer was particularly adept at drawing, engraving, and woodcut printing.
- Dürer visited Italy and the Netherlands and brought back ideas inspired by what he saw. He began using more color in his paintings after his first visit. He wrote essays and books on color, perspective, and proportion, and teaching children to draw.
- He used line, including cross-hatching, varying widths and feathering techniques, in a new way to enhance his woodcuts and engravings with textures, depth, and more realism. He achieved shading gradations of gray to black, which gave depth to the picture.
- Dürer, like most great artists, constantly practiced his craft. He sketched wherever he went. He would make several labor-intensive print carvings before he was happy with the results. He was one of the first artists to paint directly from nature and not just from memory.

- Even after 500 years, Albrecht Dürer remains one of the greatest “realists”. In his lifetime, he created over 1,000 drawings, 250 woodcuts, and 70 paintings, produced over 100 engravings, and authored many books.

## BACKGROUND

Albrecht Dürer lived in time of rapid change as the Middle Ages ended and the Reformation and Renaissance began. Independent thinking, creativity and invention had stagnated for 400 years during the Middle Ages. The Renaissance, a French word for “rebirth” occurred between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and was prompted by several events:

1. War between the church and state over a long period shifted the power from the Catholic Church to European royalty.
2. Exploration of the world brought new understanding of our world and our place within it. New ideas, dress, animals, plants and beliefs prompted people to think differently about things, challenging the old ways and doctrines.
3. Increased world trade contributed to the rise of a middle class of entrepreneurs including bankers, ship captains and merchant guilds. A new demand for paintings, prints and illustrated books aided the careers of artists and craftsmen.
4. The invention of the printing press allowed people to obtain books and other materials in their own language. Presses were also used to create art prints, bringing art to common people. More books were produced in the first 50 years of the 15th century than in the previous 400 years.
5. The works and ideas of Greece and Rome, including the ideas of order, natural law, the ideal man, proportion, depicting reality and causality were examined and expanded upon.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION



*Unlike some artists living 500 years ago, we know a lot about Dürer’s life because both he and his father kept diaries.*

Albrecht Dürer was born on May 21, 1471, in the Imperial Free City of Nuremberg (now in Germany). Albrecht was the third child and second son of 18 children. Unfortunately, many of his brothers and sisters died in childhood. His father, Albrecht Dürer the Elder, was a goldsmith in the town of Nuremberg, who had emigrated from Hungary. His mother was frequently ill.

Dürer attended school, and in the tradition of the time, became apprenticed to his father at the age of thirteen when his older brother died. Traditionally, it was the oldest son who learned his father’s trade or inherited his businesses and land. He showed great skill with the delicate, exacting work of engraving with an etching tool called a “burin”.

Dürer’s father wanted him to continue in his footsteps. Goldsmiths were highly respected in Germany, but he had a burning desire to be a painter. As a young boy, he was attracted to drawing and painting. His boyhood and life-long friend, Willibald Pirckheimer, was from a wealthy family with many books. Dürer loved to sit with the books, sketching and painting the pictures in them. Willibald

is reported to be the first to urge Albrecht to become a painter. Dürer's father was not keen on the idea. Later, when Dürer proved himself as a painter, his father regretted the time his son had lost learning the art of goldsmithing.

After his painting apprenticeship ended, Dürer decided to travel to Italy and the Netherlands. He learned from the artists he met. The German painting tradition used a dark palette and was very somber in subject. In Venice, Dürer saw another way to paint, using brighter, softer colors and tackling subjects from everyday life instead of huge religious themes or portraits of emperors. He also started experimenting with oils.

Leaving Italy reluctantly, Dürer returned home to Germany. In 1498, he married Agnes Frey. She was the daughter of a wealthy factory owner. According to some sources, Agnes was a peaceful and good wife who suffered from the neglect of a famous husband. According to others, she did everything in her power to make his life miserable and practically brought about his death by forcing him to work incessantly to increase their income. All parties agreed this childless marriage was a very unhappy one. She apparently had little interest in his work and did not get along with his friend, Willibald. Dürer preferred Willibald's company and spent much time in his home, meeting distinguished scholars and writers from many countries and having many lively discussions about art, philosophy, and religion. Frau Dürer does not appear very often in her husband's paintings.

In 1505, Dürer returned to Venice, but not as a wandering youth. He had works to sell and was accepted into the homes of noblemen and the rich because they had heard of him. He earned enough money painting portraits to return to Nuremberg and purchase a large home in 1507. The house still stands in that city and opens to the public for tour. He gained respect from the community and was elected to the city council of advisors.

Dürer became a favorite in the court of Duke Maximilian I. The Duke, who became Emperor, however was slow to pay Dürer and reneged on an agreement to provide the artist with a retirement pension. Dürer attended the coronation of the new emperor, Charles V in 1520. Charles chose to grant Dürer a life pension.

Despite his retirement worries, Dürer was a successful, wealthy man. His studio had many assistants to help meet his commissions. Dürer had his own press so he could publish the woodcuts and engravings he carved.

Dürer was a hard-working artist. His curiosity and drive probably contributed to his death. After hiking through a swamp to get to a site he wanted to explore and sketch, he contracted a high fever from which he did not recover. He died at the age of 57.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY AND WEB RESOURCES**

- Albrecht Dürer's home in Nuremberg <http://museums.nuremberg.de/duerer-house/index.html>. <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Biographies/Dürer.html>
- <http://www-groups.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Dürer.html>
- <http://www.worldprintmakers.com/masters/Dürero/Dürer.htm>
- <http://www.oir.ucf.edu/wm/paint/auth/Dürer/>
- <http://www.albany.net/~oradnio/Dürer.html>

## POWERPOINT INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS:

**ALBRECHT DÜRER. (DER)** Albrecht Dürer was a German artist who lived about 500 years ago. He was a painter and an engraver (a person who creates designs in metal or stone.)

Dürer's father was a goldsmith (a person who creates jewelry and other objects out of gold.) When he was still very young, he was sent to school to read and write and also began working in his father's shop. He became a regular worker there when he was 13. Dürer learned to work cleanly and delicately with a steady hand on tough metal. There was no way to erase mistakes. He later used those skills to create very detailed paintings and prints.

- 1. SELF PORTRAIT, AGE 13:** 1484: *Silver point etching*: (Albertina Museum, Vienna) This picture was done when Dürer was 13 years old. Although he looked in the mirror as he did it; he felt he didn't draw the eyes quite right. Dürer believed the eyes and hands tell about the soul of the person. Make special note of these two features when you look at Dürer's portraits. Notice your own hands; are there scrapes or scars that tell a story about you?
- 2. PORTRAIT OF BARBARA DURER (1490) and ALBRECHT DÜRER THE ELDER:** 1490: *Oil*: 48" X 36 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) The first oil painting portraits he created was of his parents. What kind of people do you think his parents were? Do you think their eyes and hands tell a story about them?
- 3. VIEW OF ARCO:** 1495: *Watercolour and gouache on paper*, 221 x 221 mm Musée du Louvre, Paris Dürer was one of the first artists to paint in watercolor. In this painting, he shows the Italian town of Arco nestled below a dramatic hilltop castle. One of the curiosities of this painting is the hidden image of a scowling man which can be seen on the left side of the hill.
- 4. Dürer: Self Portrait:** 1500: (Pinakothek, Munich) Dürer was 29 years old when he painted this painting of himself. Some critics think he deliberately styled himself in the likeness of Christ. Other critics believe Dürer was trying to show himself as a man entrusted with a very special gift from God. The inscription at the bottom reads, "I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg painted my own portrait here in the proper colors at the age of 28."
- 5. YOUNG HARE:** 1502. *Watercolour and gouache on paper*. Albertina, Vienna, Austria. Dürer was a student of nature and took many trips to draw and sketch animals. Dürer's portrait of a hare is so carefully painted that one can almost count the hairs around its eyes and nose. Details such as ears, fur and toenails almost bring the hare to life!  
To begin the work, Dürer lightly drew the image and painted a base coat of watered down brown watercolor paint. He then patiently built up the texture of the fur with a variety of dark and light brushstrokes in both watercolor and gouache (a kind of paint that is "opaque", it does not allow light through it.) Gradually, he completed the painting with fine details such as the whiskers and the reflection in the hare's eye. Finally, the artist dated and signed the work with his famous monogram - a mark of his approval.

**6. THE GREAT PIECE OF TURF:** 1503: *watercolor: (Albertina Museum, Venice)* He was one of the first artists to paint directly from nature and not just from memory. Even after 600 years, he still remains one of the greatest “realists.” Notice the grasses and leaves; do you recognize some of the plants? Where do you think Dürer was standing when he creating this painting? Could he have been lying down?

**7. BOY’S HANDS:** 1506. 73” x 81”. *(Private Collection).* Again, Dürer has illustrated hands. What makes this drawing unusual? Dürer, like most great artists, constantly practiced his craft. He sketched wherever he went. He would make several print carvings before he was happy with the results. We don’t know who the boy was. Although Dürer married, he never had any children. His house is in his hometown of Nuremberg, Germany and is open to visitors.

**8. HANDS OF THE APOSTLE (also known as “praying hands”):** 1508: *Wood block print: (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest)* Dürer carved a wood block using a sketch he had made for a large church painting about the apostles. He would often create several versions of a drawing before painting or etching it into a wood block. Many people have copied this painting because they liked Dürer’s version so much. A fire destroyed the large painting this image was a study for; this sketch is all that remains.

**9. THE LITTLE OWL:** 1508: *(Albertina, Vienna, Austria)*  
This is an amazing image of a young owl. Notice the fine details. Dürer illustrates the owl as if it were as important as a person, it is a portrait.

**Note: a 2 minute “youtube video” is included in the power point about this image; it helps if you open the video before beginning your presentation so that it has time to load.)**

**10. WING OF A ROLLER,** 1512. *watercolor and gouche on vellum 20x20cm or about 8” x 8”, (Graphische Sammlung, Vienna)*  
The ‘roller’ is a bird that lives in southern and central Europe. Dürer painted this painting of the upper side of the left wing, probably in actual size. The fine detail of the painting makes it possible to see how the shorter feathers overlap the longer ones, how, as they approach the bone, the green feathers become more numerous and downy, and how the brown feathers near the breast hang down in tufts.

**11. MELANCHOLIA:** 1514. *Copper etching:* Dürer loved his mother very much and when she died he was very sad. Many people who studied this painting don’t understand why he included all the symbols in it. He did not tell us. There is a magic square in the corner. A “Magic Square” is made up of rows, columns, and diagonals that all add up to the same number. All the columns add up to 34, his age when his mother died.

**12. DUKE MAXMILLAN: Woodcut:** 1519: This was the first portrait to be published in many copies. The Emperor Maximilian declared: "He, who makes no monument to himself during his lifetime, will have no monument after his death, and such a man will be forgotten as soon as his passing bell has ceased to toll." Painters and sculptors held the key to the fame in their hands. They could erect a monument to a man and they were well aware of it. The Duke loved art, but he often could not pay for what he commissioned.

**TRIUMPHAL ARCH OF MAXMILLAN:** 1515: *Serial wood block print: 10' X 11'* (192 panels) This is the largest serial woodcut ever assembled. Duke Maxmillian felt he did not have enough money to build a real triumphal arch, so he designed one out of paper. It consists of 192 different, intricately carved sections with infinite detail about battles that never happened and animals that never existed. The Emperor's family tree is in one section; however, 24 panels do show real events in the Emperor's life.

**13. RHINOCEROS:** 1515, *woodcut (British Museum)* In Dürer's time, there were no cameras or zoos. Few people had ever seen wild animals from places far away. He made this sketch based on a description from someone who had traveled to India and captured the animal for the King of Portugal. How close did he come to the real thing? Notice the different types of lines he used: straight, curved, circles, and lines that cross one another. He really put a lot of detail into his drawing, didn't he?

**14. DEMONSTRATION OF PERSPECTIVE:** *(from the Artist's Treatise on Geometry, 1525)* Durer was more than an artist; he was also an engineer and a mathematician. He studied in Italy and brought back information to teach others what he knew.

A "woodcut" is a form of printing. An artist carves a design into a block of wood, which is then inked and pressed onto paper to make an image. This woodcut was made for a book on perspective. He demonstrates how to use a frame, string, compass, etc. to copy an object. By passing the string through the holes in the middle, one can make a pattern of dots to outline the shape to reproduce, in a sense the first copy machine.

**15. SELF PORTRAIT AT 26:** 1498 (140 Kb); *Oil on panel, 52 x 41 cm; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid* In his later years, Dürer spent more time writing books about math and geometry and less time creating art. However he still enjoyed exploring nature and sketching what he saw. He died at the age of 57 because of an illness he got from hiking in a swamp.

Albrecht Dürer created over 1000 drawings, 250 woodcuts, 70 paintings, and over 100 engravings. He also authored many books. Dürer's etchings, prints and paintings are found in museum collections all over the world.

## FEATURED PROJECT

Your school is supplied with paper. Students may use their own pencils for the project.



**Drawing Hands:** Dürer was skilled at portraying life in great detail and with startling realism. His image of “Hands of the Apostle” is quite famous and much imitated.

Have students closely observe their own hands, paying attention to wrinkles, lines, fingernails, etc. Students will draw **WHAT THEY SEE**; it isn’t important that their hand-drawings are perfectly proportioned. The emphasis should be simply to **LOOK** and draw what is there. Encourage students to draw more than one hand position, posing their own “other” hand and drawing it as they see it.

**KINDERGARTEN AND 1<sup>ST</sup> GRADE ADAPTION:** Either have students trace their own hand or help them to trace it. Then ask students to really look at their hand and draw all the details—what shape are their fingernails? Do they have that “moon” shape at the base of their fingernails? How many lines are there at each knuckle? And so on... If a student is successful and wants to do more, have the student draw the palm side of their hand (tracing, the hand palm-up.)

## ALTERNATIVE PROJECTS:

**Observation:** Dürer sketched constantly and was very observant. This is a learned skill. Practice this skill with some of these activities:

- Sketch a scene on the playground or in the class. View the same place 30 minutes later. What has changed?
- Sketch something you like (your soccer ball, a teddy bear, your shoe.) Add ALL the detail you can see.
- Look at a scene or view from your school desk. Take a minute each day to make a journal note about what you see. Use sketches as well as words. If you did not make a daily observation, would you remember how something was two weeks ago?
- Divide a piece of ground into 5'X 5' squares with tape or plastic tape. Each child should sit on their plot for 15 minutes and try to sketch or record everything they see.
- How do we see things? How have the theories or light and sight changed? People thought what we saw were light rays coming off of all the objects as opposed to reflection of light. Why things get hazy in distance? -Sfumato
- Make studies of body shapes, proportions, placement, and details of features. Do folded paper portraits, scribble sketches of poses, measurements with thumb, hand, forearm, etc.
- Construct a device similar to the one in the slide showing perspective. Draw something using it. Talk about proportions and ratios of size and distance as something walks away.

## ***Printmaking***

-Use modeling clay and empty cans: "...we have taken cans and removed the tops and bottoms, rolled out a sheet of modeling clay, smooth over the can, make impressions and use the 'wheel' for printing - you can put a dowel or rolling pin in the can to print - actually last for a few runs (we print one color on a large sheet of paper, overlapping and intersecting the lines.)" By Ellen, art teacher.

"I love using old modeling clay for printmaking. I give the students small pieces and have them roll it into a ball, and then form it into a square. I place all kinds of "junk" on the tables such as old marker tops, toothpicks, buttons, paperclips, etc. (anything that will make an interesting impression) and have them press them in the clay making a design. Then they dip their "stamp" into different colors of paint and print patterns on their paper. Each student rinses the paint off their clay and places it on a paper towel to dry. I then put all the little balls back into the large coffee can I store them in. I've had the same clay for 6 years now...Crayola. These stamps also work beautifully for repeat design impressions into clay, especially if the clay body is soft.".. GLENDA MOORE, art teacher-

**Monotype Printing:** Have students paint with tempera paint on any smooth surface (students' desks, aluminum foil, plastic, report covers...) They'll need to work fairly quickly, so paint doesn't dry out. Lay down clean paper over paint and press with hands or a brayer, pull paper up to see students' monotype print! Students may paint again without cleaning surface, and then pull subsequent prints each time they paint.

