

Albrecht Dürer



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Early life



Dürer was born on 21 May 1471. After a few years of school, Dürer started to learn the basics of goldsmithing and drawing from his father. Though his father wanted him to continue his training as a goldsmith, he showed such a precocious talent in drawing that he started as an apprentice to Michael Wolgemut at the age of fifteen in 1486. A self-portrait, a drawing in silverpoint, is dated 1484 (Albertina, Vienna) “when I was a child,” as his later inscription says.

Wanderjahre and marriage

After completing his term of apprenticeship, Dürer followed the common German custom of taking *Wanderjahre*, the period of time in which the apprentice learned skills from artists in other areas; Dürer was to spend about four years away. He left in 1490, possibly to work under Martin Schongauer, the leading engraver of Northern Europe, but he died shortly before Dürer's arrival at Colmar in 1492. It is unclear where Dürer travelled in the intervening period, though it is likely that he went to Frankfurt and the Netherlands. In Colmar, Dürer was welcomed by Schongauer's brothers, the goldsmiths Caspar and Paul and the painter Ludwig. In 1493 Dürer went to Strasbourg, where he would have experienced the sculpture of Nikolaus Gerhaert.

In early 1492 Dürer travelled to Basel. Very soon after his return to Nuremberg, on 7 July 1494, at the age of 23, Dürer was married to Agnes Frey following an arrangement made during his absence. Agnes was the daughter of a prominent brass worker (and amateur harpist) in the city.



The earliest painted
Self-Portrait (1493)
Louvre, Paris

First journey to Italy

Dürer left for Italy. He made watercolour sketches as he traveled over the Alps. Some have survived and others may be deduced from accurate landscapes of real places in his later work, for example his engraving *Nemesis*. These are the first pure landscape studies known in Western art.

In Italy, he went to Venice to study its more advanced artistic world. Dürer had learned how to make prints in drypoint and design woodcuts in the German style. Dürer probably also visited Padua and Mantua on this trip.



Weiher im Walde (1495)
British Museum, London

Return to Nuremberg



*St. Michael
Fighting the Dragon*

On his return to Nuremberg in 1495, Dürer opened his own workshop. Over the next five years his style increasingly integrated Italian influences into underlying Northern forms. His best works in the first years of the workshop were his woodcut prints, mostly religious, but including secular scenes.

His famous series of sixteen great designs for the *Apocalypse* are dated 1498, as is his engraving *St. Michael Fighting the Dragon*. He was soon producing some spectacular and original images, notably *Nemesis* (1502), *The Sea Monster* (1498), and *Saint Eustace* (ca.1501), with a highly detailed landscape background and animals. He made a number of Madonnas, single religious figures, and small scenes with comic peasant figures. Prints are highly portable and these works made Dürer famous throughout the main artistic centres of Europe within a very few years.

Dürer made large numbers of preparatory drawings, especially for his paintings and engravings, and many survive, most famously the *Betende Hände* (engl. *Praying Hands*, c. 1508 Albertina, Vienna), a study for an apostle in the Heller altarpiece. He also continued to make images in watercolour and bodycolour (usually combined), including a number of still lifes of meadow sections or animals, including his *Young Hare* (1502) and the *Great Piece of Turf* (1503, both also Albertina).



1505–1507

Second journey to Italy

In Italy, he returned to painting, at first producing a series of works executed in tempera on linen. These include portraits and altarpieces, notably, the Paumgartner altarpiece and the *Adoration of the Magi*. In early 1506, he returned to Venice and stayed there until the spring of 1507. By this time Dürer's engravings had attained great popularity and were being copied.

Other paintings Dürer produced in Venice include *The Virgin and Child with the Goldfinch*, *Christ disputing with the Doctors* (supposedly produced in a mere five days), and a number of smaller works.



The Adoration of the Magi
oil on panel (1504-05)
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

1507–1520

Nuremberg and the masterworks

Dürer was back in Nuremberg by mid-1507, and he remained in Germany until 1520.

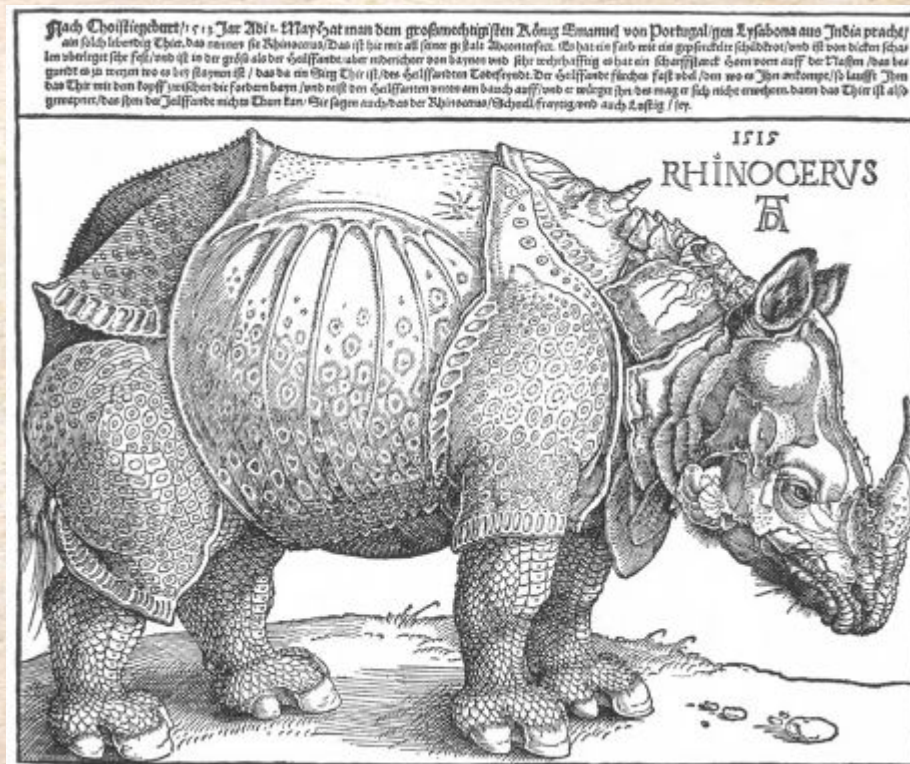
Between 1507 and 1511 Dürer worked on some of his most celebrated paintings: *Adam and Eve* (1507), *The Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (1508), *Virgin with the Iris* (1508), the altarpiece *Assumption of the Virgin* (1509), and *Adoration of the Trinity* (1511). During this period he also completed two woodcut series, the Great Passion and the Life of the Virgin, both published in 1511 together with a second edition of the Apocalypse series.

Other works from this period include the thirty-seven woodcut subjects of the Little Passion, published first in 1511, and a set of fifteen small engravings on the same theme in 1512. In 1513 and 1514 Dürer created his three most famous engravings: *The Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513, probably based on Erasmus's treatise 'Enichiridion militis Christiani'), *St. Jerome in his Study*, and the much-debated *Melencolia I* (both 1514).



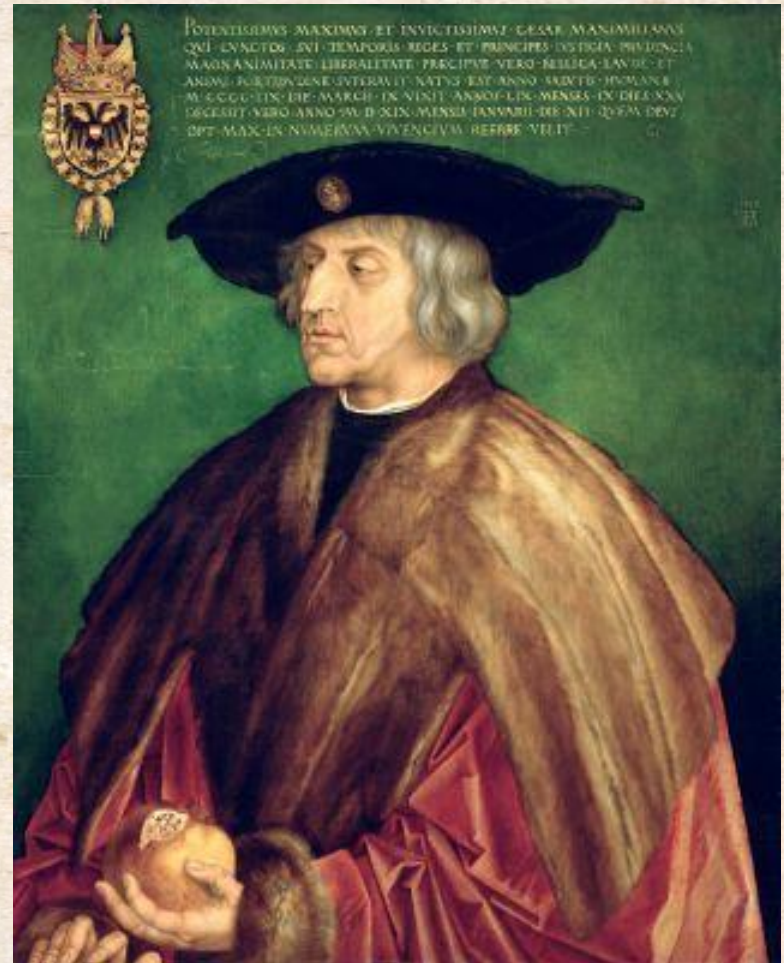
**The Adoration of the Trinity
(1511)**
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna

In 1515, he created his *woodcut of the Rhinoceros* which had arrived in Lisbon from a written description and sketch by another artist, without ever seeing the animal himself. An image of the Indian rhinoceros, the image has such force that it remains one of his best-known and was still used in some German school science text-books as late as last century. In the years leading to 1520 he produced a wide range of works, including portraits in tempera on linen in 1516.



Patronage of Maximilian I

From 1512, Maximilian I, became Dürer's major patron. His commissions included *The Triumphal Arch*, a vast work printed from 192 separate blocks, the symbolism of which is partly informed by Pirckheimer's translation of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*. Dürer worked in pen on the marginal images for an edition of the Emperor's printed Prayer-Book; these were quite unknown until facsimiles were published in 1808 as part of the first book published in lithography. Dürer's work on the book was halted for an unknown reason, and the decoration was continued by artists including Lucas Cranach the Elder and Hans Baldung. Dürer also made several portraits of the Emperor, including one shortly before Maximilian's death in 1519.



Portrait of Emperor Maximilian I (1519)
Kunsthistorisches Museum,
Vienna, Austria

Journey to the Netherlands

In July 1520 Dürer made his fourth and last major journey, to renew the Imperial pension Maximilian had given him and to secure the patronage of the new emperor, Charles V, who was to be crowned at Aachen. Dürer journeyed with his wife and her maid via the Rhine to Cologne and then to Antwerp, where he was well-received and produced numerous drawings in silverpoint, chalk and charcoal. In addition to going to the coronation, he made excursions to Cologne, Bruges, Ghent, and Zeeland. At the request of Christian II of Denmark Dürer went to Brussels to paint the King's portrait. Having secured his pension, Dürer finally returned home in July 1521, having caught an undetermined illness—perhaps malaria—which afflicted him for the rest of his life, and greatly reduced his rate of work.



Der Hafen von Antwerpen (1520)
Albertina, Vienna

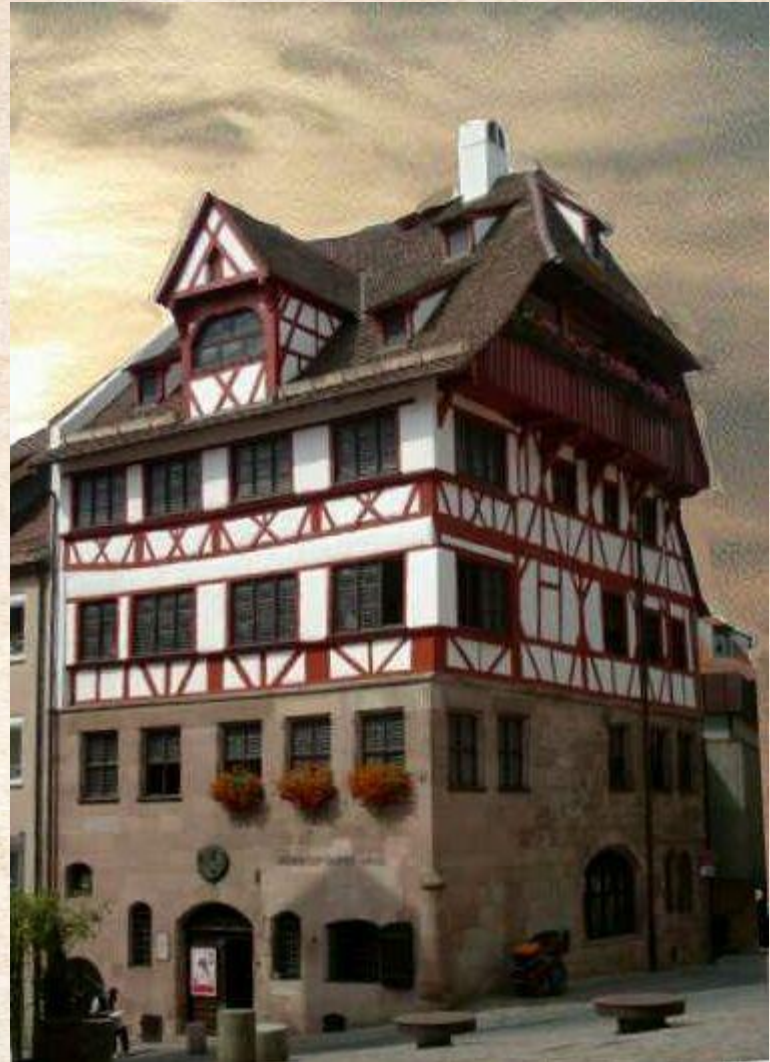
Final years in Nuremberg



However, one consequence of this shift in emphasis was that during the last years of his life, Dürer produced comparatively little as an artist. In painting, there was only a portrait of Hieronymus Holtzschuher, a *Madonna and Child* (1526), *Salvator Mundi* (1526), and two panels showing St. John with St. Peter in front and St. Paul with St. Mark in the background. This last great work, the Four Apostles, was given by Dürer to the City of Nuremberg. Dürer succeeded in producing two books during his lifetime. "The Four Books on Measurement" were published at Nuremberg in 1525 and was the first book for adults on mathematics in German, as well as being cited later by Galileo and Kepler. The other, a work on city fortifications, was published in 1527. "The Four Books on Human Proportion" were published posthumously, shortly after his death in 1528 at the age of fifty-six.

Dürer died in Nuremberg at the age of 56.

His large house, where his workshop was located and where his widow lived until her death in 1539, remains a prominent Nuremberg landmark. It is a museum now.



Albrecht Dürer's House in Nuremberg

Sources

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