

Albrecht Dürer

Five-Week Art History Lecture Series

January 19: Early Life and Education (1471-1490)

Born in the independent and prosperous city of Nürnberg, Albrecht Dürer was the third child and second son of the goldsmith Albrecht Dürer the Elder and his wife Barbara, who bore a total of eighteen children. Dürer began his training as a draftsman in his father's workshop. He displayed such a precocious talent, that in 1486, Dürer's father arranged for his apprenticeship to the local master painter and woodcut illustrator, Michael Wohlgemuth. Completing his studies after three years, the young journeyman set out on his travels, seeking commissions, and the perfection of his skills.

January 26: Wanderjahre, Wedding, First Trip to Italy, and Early Career (1490-1505)

Following the tradition of young journeymen, Dürer spent nearly four years visiting and studying with master artists in Alsace, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and other cities in Germany. Returning home to Nürnberg in 1494, he married Agnes Frey, the daughter of a local craftsman. Only a few months after the wedding, he left his new bride, crossing the alps into Italy, where he absorbed the advanced style and techniques of the most prominent Quattrocento artists. In 1495, immediately upon his return to his home town, he established his own workshop, and with it, a growing reputation.

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February 2: Second Trip to Italy and Mature Career (1505-1512)

Determined to assimilate the virtuosity of the Italian artists, Dürer spent another protracted sojourn in Venice, with shorter visits to other parts of Italy. Reluctantly returning once more to Nürnberg, he purchased a large house in the center of the city, and was elevated to membership in the parliamentary council. In a city where artists were regarded as mere craftsmen, Dürer's new status heralded an era of sovereignty, distinguished by the creation of his most celebrated masterworks.

February 9: Service to Maximilian I (1512-1519)

Such was Dürer's renown, that he was retained in 1512 as the chief artist for the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I. Dürer's greatest commission during this period was The Triumphal Arch, the largest woodcut ever produced, requiring 192 blocks. He collaborated with other prominent German artists to produce a Triumphal Procession, and to design marginal images for the Emperor's Prayer-Book. His many paintings from these years included several official portraits of the Emperor, the last one completed shortly before Maximilian's death in 1519.

February 16: Journey to the Netherlands and Late Work (1520-1528)

In the summer of 1520, Dürer and his wife set out for an extended journey through the Netherlands. Traveling to the major cities of the north, the now universally revered artist established close friendships with the greatest painters of the region. Never content to stop learning, he diligently studied the works of the 15th-century Flemish masters. Having contracted a mysterious illness on his journey, his health gradually began to decline. In his remaining years, he focused his attention primarily on theoretical writings and scientific illustrations. Yet some of his last paintings reveal a master at the peak of his genius. He died at the age of 56, leaving not only a massive legacy of work and a vibrant workshop, but also scores of imitators for centuries thereafter.

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