

September 2011 Spotlight Series

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

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Albrecht Dürer engraved *Melencolia I*, from 1514, at a time when the visual arts were undergoing a revision in status. From the lower position of craftsmen, artists of the Renaissance slowly raised themselves to the level of intellectuals by incorporating mathematics into their work, bringing the visual arts to a level equal to the liberal arts. In *Melencolia I*, one can see Dürer's participation in this process. Scholars commonly describe the image as a "spiritual self-portrait" of the artist, in which Dürer declares his melancholic despondency, thought to be a condition of genius.¹ With its multitude of objects, winged figures, and allusions to cosmic phenomena, *Melencolia I* can be understood further, I propose, as a deliberate product of Dürer's program to elevate the status of prints, printmaking, and his own stature as an artist, by altering the valuation of art from a material appraisal to a theoretical assessment.

In order to argue for his appraisal, Dürer turned to his contemporaries' ideas on creativity as an intellectual process. Renaissance theorists understood inspiration to be stimulated by the planet Saturn. The rainbow and comet in the print's background may refer to these astrological ideas, while the dog and the bat were animals traditionally understood to have Saturnian natures. The unfortunate side effect of Saturn's cosmic gift was interspersed bouts of frustrated inactivity and a corresponding depression, or melancholy. The engraving's title suggests, furthermore, that Dürer illustrated a specific type of melancholy—a first melancholy. Dürer's compatriot, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), proposed a popular theory of three types of melancholy in his book *De occulta philosophia*.² Agrippa described the first (related to the imagination), as affecting artists. The next two levels (related to reason and the spirit) he attributed to scholars and theologians, respectively. Whereas artists in their traditional craftsmen roles had previously been associated not with Saturn but with Mercury, who lent them a steadier disposition more suited to the practical nature of their work, Agrippa's explanation linked artists with the more traditional intellectual groups. The new, Saturnian artist, as described by Agrippa and illustrated



Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514. Engraving, 9 3/8 x 7 5/16". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Transfer from Olin Library, Washington University, 1977.

¹ The literature on *Melencolia I* is extensive; it has often been described as the most-discussed print in scholarship. I have limited the sources referenced here to a few key works in English that are among the most accessible. The "spiritual self-portrait" description derives from Erwin Panofsky, as does the iconographic reading given in the following two paragraphs, which is still the standard understanding of the print. See Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), esp. 156–71. For a general biography of Dürer, see Jane Campbell Hutchison, *Albrecht Dürer: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

² Agrippa finished the manuscript in 1509–10; it circulated widely before it was eventually published, in an altered form, in 1531. See Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, 168–69.

by Dürer, suffered occasional debilitating bouts of melancholy, but was rewarded with the advanced stature of those capable of intellectual discourse.³

In the engraving, the winged figure sitting with her head on her hand personifies that new artist. Yet while she sits stymied by intellectual inactivity, representing the melancholic frustration that accompanies true creativity, next to her a winged child, a putto, perched on a grindstone busily inscribing a tablet, engages in a lower, craft-level task that requires no thought, only physical work. The products and tools of these two figures further present this comparison. Dürer understood the key difference between artist and craftsman to be the former's mathematical knowledge, specifically of geometry, which offered an intellectual system to rationalize beauty. The adult holds the tool of the geometrician, a compass, as an attribute. The putto's grindstone, a tool for manual labor that meets only practical needs, meanwhile contrasts directly with the complex geometrical solid next to it. The latter shape is made of six pentagons. As a representative of geometrical knowledge, it is a product of the compass in the adult's hand and the intellect in her head. Similarly, the sphere in the lower left corner contrasts with the carpentry tools of the craftsman throughout: littering the foreground are a plane, a saw, and nails, while a hammer lies below the geometric solid. The tools of the craftsman lie discarded in favor of the learned application of geometry by the adult.

Other elements also attest to the print's call for geometry as a purveyor of ideal beauty. The bell, the hourglass, and the scale, for instance, represent measurement in various forms, to complement the compass. In fact, these three objects, as well as others such as the grindstone, the ladder, and the purse and keys, illustrate a second source of Dürer's: Plato's *Hippias Major* (c. 390 BCE), in which the ancient Greek philosopher argues for various forms of beauty.⁴ The grid of numbers above the winged adult's head, called a magic square, offers a conclusion to Dürer's argument for the beauty of mathematics. It too derives from Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, in which the author describes nine different magic squares, each associated with one of the planets. Dürer's square reverses Agrippa's second square, with its columns, rows, corners, and diagonals that each add up to 34. The middle two numbers in the lowest row then match the date of the print, 1514, making a very literal connection between the print itself and its theoretical basis.

The conveyance of geometry's importance for artists was ultimately Dürer's intention for *Melencolia I*. He worked most of his career to gain a working knowledge of mathematics and its artistic applications, in order to bring it to Germany and reform German art. Dürer traveled to Italy twice during his lifetime, once in 1494 and again in 1505, where he endeavored to learn the principles of the new, classically inspired Italian Renaissance art, such as linear perspective and proportion.⁵ He may have learned mathematics and perspective, for instance, from Luca Pacioli (1447–1517), a renowned geometrician who wrote a treatise on the subject illustrated with designs by Leonardo da

³ Panofsky, with Raymond Klibansky and Fritz Saxl, elaborated on these ideas in their *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

⁴ For more on the connection between this print and Plato's text, see Patrick Doorly, "Dürer's *Melencolia I*: Plato's Abandoned Search for the Beautiful," *Art Bulletin* 86 (2004): 255–76.

⁵ See Hutchison, *Dürer*, 43.

Vinci (1452–1519).⁶ Dürer illustrated some of his Italian learning in another print, *Adam and Eve* from 1504, in which the two nude figures are presented with classical proportions. Like the later *Melencolia I*, *Adam and Eve* disseminated Dürer's idea of how art should look, in hopes of influencing his fellow countrymen's work.⁷ The artist adopted this philanthropic idea of German cultural reform from his friends Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530) and Konrad Celtis (1459–1508). These two classical scholars, or humanists, along with Dürer, dreamed of altering the general view of Germany as barbaric, as depicted in classical writing and as still held in Italy.⁸ While the scholars pursued this program through their medium of writing, Dürer sought to use his prints to achieve similar goals.

Prints were a useful media for the visual dissemination of information given their relative inexpensiveness and multiplicity. Dürer and other artists used them for advertising and propagandistic purposes frequently. The Italian artist Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431–1506), for instance, much admired by Dürer, pursued the advertising potential of engravings at a very early stage of the medium's history to disseminate his own artistic style. Dürer took a cue from his predecessor, using prints not just to disseminate a proportional system as in the *Adam and Eve*, but also to portray himself in particular light, as in *Melencolia I*.

As Dürer sought to construct for himself an artistic identity as a learned intellectual, he included printmaking as a facet of it. The value of printmaking, to Dürer, lay in its creative freedom. The more traditional forms of art, painting and sculpture, were expensive in their materials, and artists made them primarily in response to commissions, which came with strictures on subject, iconography, and meaning. In the early sixteenth century, the value of such artworks lay not in the artist's handling of such strictures, but in their materiality. A painting was valuable mostly for the amounts of pigment, gold leaf, and other materials used within it. By contrast, artists could afford to make prints on speculation, and the market for their sale was burgeoning. Dürer could therefore pursue his own ideas about what to include and display within a print. However, their inexpensive materials meant that prints were valued less than painting and sculpture. As a printmaker, Dürer sought to change this system of appraisal, thereby increasing his stature along with his income. In *Melencolia I*, the composition as well as the objects reveal Dürer's idea that prints should be valued based upon their artistic qualities rather than their material. The polyhedron sits in front of a crucible, a tool used by goldsmiths for melting metals in a fire, while the needle end of a hand-bellows, used to stoke that fire, pokes out from under the winged adult's dress in the lower right corner. In both cases, the new intellectual value overtakes and replaces the old materiality of gold.

Engraving originated out of goldsmithing, in fact. The former borrowed the technique of inscribing lines into metal from the latter.⁹ Dürer himself shared these origins—his father was a prominent goldsmith in Nuremberg.¹⁰ The crucible and bellows then represent the past, both personally and artistically, for Dürer and his project. The print

⁶ See Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, 252, 259; and Doorly, “Dürer's *Melencolia I*,” 259–61.

⁷ See Charles Talbot, “Dürer and the High Art of Printmaking,” in *The Essential Dürer*, ed. Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 50.

⁸ See Hutchison, *Dürer*, 48–49.

⁹ The history of printmaking is also an extensively covered topic. Perhaps most appropriate to the current subject, see David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print, 1470–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ On Dürer's family history, see Hutchison, *Dürer*, 3–20, 23.

itself, through both its medium of engraving and its subject matter of melancholy, represents the present or, ambitiously, the future. In other words, while *Melencolia I* emphasizes what mathematical knowledge is required for making this new form of art, it also argues for a new valuation based on that theoretical substance. It offers Dürer as a new type of artist, an intellectual one, superceding the lower-status craftsmen of the past. And it disseminated this information within the very media for which it argued, in hopes of inspiring his countrymen to similar levels of learnedness and judgment.