

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

Albert Durer

Novel experiences while on diplomatic missions and in quest of professional business, observations of the student, the pedestrian, the traveler for pleasure, – have formed the subjects of delightful papers by various members of the club during the past year. It was noticeable that beside the interesting observations made on strange customs, the beauties of natural scenery, and the monuments of past ages, the most numerous of the latter, the works of pictorial art, collected in numerous galleries forming perhaps the most conspicuous of recognized “sights” in the majority of European cities were as a rule but alluded to in the rather unsatisfactory generality “galleries of beautiful paintings.” The point of “beauty” so indiscriminately conceded, testifying rather to a desire to set the matter, which may have been the cause of some ennui, and as quickly as possible.

I hope I am not discourteous in expressing this surmise but pictures, it must be confessed, especially old ones, hardly command universal interest attached to the actions, thoughts and natural surroundings of foreign people, yet it seems to me that the very fact of the great number which meet the traveler at every hand makes them important enough for consideration even with those not especially interested. Besides, Cincinnati having lately opened a Museum, the self-imposed duty of many of her cultural systems of at least affecting a decent interest in art matters, it is becoming through the agency of her daily papers a requirement of good citizenship.

Because of this omission, I have ventured to think that the observation I have made with myself and the few it was my privilege to observe that a due appreciation of the paintings of the earlier Renaissance was largely wanting from lack of familiarity with them, and the difficulty of placing oneself beyond the unessential but annoying details incident to an early work without some little special study; and this is best accomplished by reviewing the feelings and traditions of the time of their origin, and endeavoring to trace them in the life of a painter most characteristic of the time. This man seemed to me to be Albert Durer.

Many of our American travelers brought face-to-face with works of the van Eycks, G[i]otto, Ghirlandajo, Andrea Mantegna, are seriously at a loss how to view them. Those to whom the names are not unfamiliar often find it hard to realize that an art-value still attaches to these works, that they are more than steps in historic growth, and interesting as such only. Others, not knowing of the men or their times, are induced to think the importance in which their works are held an affectation, or at least an exaggerated reverence for things aged, that would in the same right belong to any relic of the same period. – Unfortunately, this misunderstanding of the general public is rather heightened than removed by students of the subject through the strain of unqualified enthusiasm that the majority fall into. As a natural result, weak people, unable to follow these devotees in their rhapsodies yet fearing to expose their lack of what seems to be considered a requirement of good breeding, namely, an intelligent appreciation of classical works of

art, are content to echo sentiments they do not understand.

This in itself is no crime, but it is a form of that snobbishness that the conventional conception of polite learning brings with it. The mischief these good people do, is in disgusting vigorous minds that rebel against senseless platitudes, closing on these the doors of what might have become a source of deep and intelligent enjoyment, if a discriminating intellect had pointed out to them when their interest was aroused, how to separate the grain of these works from the chaff. – Through the ascetic spirit attending the introduction of Christianity, attributing all evil to the flesh, the Greek feeling for the beauty and dignity of the human body, which had spread with their art over all the civilized world, and even that self love of the Roman which developed portraiture among them, and made it such an important branch of their art, – was entirely suppressed. But not so the art in which those feelings had found expression: for the fathers of the church and its later ecclesiastics appreciated too well its value upon people to whom the written word was unintelligible, and especially upon the groveling masses, unable to retain, in their feeble imaginations that picture of their spiritual benefactor which they wished them to retain.

It was a picture of direct misery, of the bitterest self-sacrifice yet through all the agony of the Christ must be made apparent the utter worthlessness of the body he was throwing away; that earthly body, the indulgence of whose passions and even natural desires, was the cause of man's perdition, even now was making the sacrifice that the Deity in his clemency had made for him, vain. – This feeling reached its climax in that sect of devotees who followed the ghastly example of St. Simon Stylites, and finally stopped up the source of artistic inspiration in the generally vague belief that even looking at the naked body was sinful; which became an outspoken doctrine in one of the monkish sects.

No one will call upon us to admire or even seek an inspiring thought in a carved or painted picture of that time; however intense the motive that prompted its production, its central feeling is so opposed to all that inspires us, that we cannot look upon it but with repulsion, or wonder, perhaps that such a monster could have served a necessary or useful purpose in its time – But can we wonder that this thought so long and so strenuously insisted upon at a time when our forefathers, leaning on the arm of a broken and tottering civilization, were emerging from the childhood of barbarism, produced an impression that in its outward forms lasted long after its spirit was gone? – The art of painting had become so much a matter of traditional form that when the ascetic spirit was entirely dead, and new thoughts presented themselves for representation, the artist, feeling the inadequacy of his method, knew not whither to turn for help. The secret of success of the great artists that began the new era, lay in an almost unconscious inspiration from nature which before, religious zeal had entirely tramped out. Although the works of a Giotto scarcely seem to us so much above what had been done before his time, yet his contemporaries felt the change most vividly, without, perhaps, suspecting the cause.

The key to this study of nature was found in the remains of antique art that the revival of classic learning was instrumental in bringing to light. Yet how slow was the process, how long did it take before men could realize, in the very presence of their classic models that the true, the only source of artistic inspiration was nature. – This sounds like a truism and yet it was none then.

At the end of the 15th Century, Albert Dürer, who as a young man had chosen as his life work to establish the ideal proportions of the human body for artistic portrayal, turned time and again from his assiduous studies from nature in the belief that the revelation would never come to his unaided judgment. Fully understanding this feeling, and attesting how common it was, Jacopo de Barbari, a man in every way inferior to the ardent young German, made him believe that he possessed a knowledge of those proportions, a tradition from the antique, that classic art could alone reveal, and which he held as his professional secret. Babari's figures do not show us that he possessed a perfect theory of human proportions, or in fact uniformly practiced any theory, but that traditional forms and the influence of a better understanding of nature, each strove for the mastery without either gaining the upper hand. His slender figures with the soft features that he borrowed from the antique, the affected look of inspiration that they bore, were well calculated to impress the young artist of Nuremberg under the influence of the humanist learning of the day; and Hans von Kulnbach and Bulding Grein never concealed his influence. – First attracted, then repelled by him, Dürer finally felt that his course had been the right one: that his studies from nature were immeasurably superior to the ideals of Jacopo, and he published his convictions in his celebrated engraving of 1504: the Adam and Eve, proudly signing it in full Albertus Durer, Novicus faciebat.”

The art of this time, clothed though it was in forms of a previous age, is full of thoughts that appeal to us to-day; and it, too, would appeal to us with these thoughts expressed in the freshness and intensity of new revelations, if greater familiarity had taught us to overlook what is after all but extraneous. – It is contemporary with the works of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas More, – the beauties of which we all enjoy, without feeling repulsed by such modes of expression or peculiarities of thought characteristic of their age, yet strange and even repulsive to ours which they contain in as full a measure as the works of pictorial art. Why then, are not these as widely understood and appreciated by us? In their own time they were far more so, for they appealed to a much larger public, and, reacted on by it, gave, within the limitations of the pictorial work, a far truer portrayal of the time than those. – An apparent reason may be found in the fact that almost all the pictures seem to serve the purpose of religion, and ours not being a religious, or better perhaps an ecclesiastical age, finds their range of thoughts inscribed in too narrow limits and devoted often to the glorification of saintly heroes that died for a cause that can not inspire us with emulation, or even awaken our interest. This objection, however, is only apparent. The culture of the all-ruling church has absorbed so long the services of pictorial art that it was difficult for people accustomed for ages to obey her precepts, to realize that it was no longer a votive picture alone that they required, but one that expressed the satisfaction and interest they felt in the walks of their temporal life and pursuits. The artists instinctively felt this; they knew how to strike the popular chord without perhaps realizing how great the digression from a strictly votive picture in the sense of the earlier works of Christian art was, for Dürer, in one of his letters defines the province of painting to be the “Execution of pictures for the service of religious worship and the fixing of human likenesses for the benefit of later times and generations.” – Portraiture was therefore the only other recognized demand on pictorial art, all others still coming under the head of ecclesiastical works, however ill they conformed to the

title. – Paul Veronese, for instance combined his own desire to portray a brilliant gathering of Venetian ladies and gentlemen with the popular demand for a biblical painting by naming the work in question “The Marriage of Canaan,” and introducing a figure or two to make the scene conform outwardly to the subject Dürer gave his celebrated wood cut of a company of busy Nuremberg housewives waiting on a sick mother and her newborn baby the salable title “Birth of the Virgin.” In every other instance that might be cited, the daily life and thought is the true subject, the religious garb is but extraneous given by force of habit, or perhaps the excuse for its making. – Why need a hollow title then, only an outward appendage to the work even at the time of its production interfere with our enjoyment of it today? Its spirit is as true now as then, although its garb is strange. Our sense of scientific exactness it is true, was sadly lacking then, but what of it? Is that beautiful portrayal of motherly affection Raphael's "della Ledia” unenjoyable because tradition having dubbed it “Mary and Christ-child,” the features are not Hebrew, and the figures are not clothed in the rags of Eastern peasants.

We are not so exacting in the more familiar field of literature. Who is there that would quarrel with the most delightful little comedy, the “Midsummer Night's Dream,” because Shakespeare has given it a classic dress, fashionable in his day, and made those most English Swains Nic Bottom and Peter Omind sit at Athens before his no less English Lordship Theseus? When illiteracy was common, indeed, almost the rule, the offices of the picture as the only channel of human thought always open to all that could see were indispensable, and the church wisely seeing how far-reaching was its value, appropriated it to its own use. In the church, the common assembly of all, its influence was felt by the learned as well as ignorant. The iconoclastic tendency of Protestantism foolishly discarded the effects of art, at a time when the dangers of idolatry was long past. Dürer, the devout follower of Luther, the intimate friend of Melanchthon and of Lazarus Spengler, and Pirckheimer, who assisted the spread of the Reformer's doctrine by their learning and wit, and shared the ban of excommunication directed against him, notes this with some bitterness in the preface of his book on the Art of Measuring. Thus the picture lost that influence over many which is the result of constant acquaintance; and with the spread of literary knowledge, the pictures of the imagination drove out the sense for those of the bodily eye.

The popular demand for new works of art being gone, they became luxuries of the rich. Thus unfamiliarity brought about apathy. Public museums, easy of access to all are of comparatively recent date, and even they, useful as they are, cannot do the general good that their works would if scattered in churches, schools, and places a public meeting, where they would appeal to all times without the special effort of going with the avowed purpose of seeing them. These influences have so completely driven art from its rightful field, that we are everywhere stared at by blank walls, or worse than blank walls, where former generations were wont to see such works of real art as the individual means of a single person could not command, for the adornment of this private habitation. What wonder, then, that so many are repulsed by outer forms instead of attracted by the inner worth of works that are old. The artist in whose works these external peculiarities stand side-by-side with forms most natural to us, explaining the feeling of the time in its broadest sense was Albert Dürer.

This name better known, his influence more widely felt, in his own time than that of any other artist during the first 25 years of the 16th Century when the art of the epoch reached its climax, he still held firmly to forms of an earlier age. He liked to clothe his figures in the stiff crumpled silken drapery of the Flemish artists, and to paint fantastic figures of his imagination or strange freaks of nature. He selected his models for form of expression rather than for physical beauty. A life of unremitting study from nature alone, brought him to an understanding of her beauty and simplicity in all her walks bringing his ideal nearer to us than the formal beauty of the contemporary Italians who saw nature but through the help of the antique. Bred to the trade of a goldsmith in his father's shop in Nuremberg, the latter rather unwillingly gave in to the wish of his son to change his trade for that of an artist, for the expense of letting him learn two trades bore heavily on the father, burdened with the care of a large family. Even had he not consented to the change, the trade of goldsmith would have become an art under Dürer's hands, against which that of the great but erratic genius Buonvvenuto could scarcely have held its first place. However this may be, it is not likely that in the drudgery of the goldsmith shop under the influence of his careworn father, though the latter was well known and highly respected, Dürer would have formed those valuable acquaintances who did so much to further his genius by the intellectual intercourse their friendship offered him. For though Dürer profited little by his limited association with a high and mighty of the world at this time, and had no Julius the Second, Leo the Tenth, Francis the First, a Bentivoglio, Medici or Sforza to assist him in the execution of great works, yet he was the intimate friend of the prominent doctors of humanist learning and mathematical sciences of his day, and corresponded with the great men of the Reformation with whom he was in sympathy, and by whom he was held in the highest esteem. Nuremberg was the center of the rage for publication that was characteristic of the time and especially of Germany. In the large printing house of Anton Koburger, Dürer's god-father Dr. Hartmann Schedel published his "New Chronicle of the World," the largest of any lay works printed up to that time. The numerous woodcuts for the publication were executed in the shop of Michael Wolgemut from drawings of Wolgemut and his assistant Pleydenwerff, and here also the prints were colored. It was in the shop of the successful artist, to whom came orders from all parts of Germany, for altar-paintings, illustrations for lay and clerical works, who published on his own account engravings on wood and copper, that Dürer served his apprenticeship. – It was here that circles of artists and savants up to that time separated with almost the strictness of caste, first began to associate for united publications. It was here that the intimate friendship of Wolgemut and that learned archaeologist Hartmann Schedel, the predecessor of Winkelmann was the cause of the more celebrated friendship of their respective scholars Dürer and the young patrician Willibald Pirckheimer which opened to the former the houses of the best citizens of that Venice of the North, Nuremberg. –

But not alone from the acquaintances it brought him was the shop of Wolgemut valuable to Dürer. Wolgemut was a man well-deserving his popularity. Strongly influenced in his earlier works by the Flemish and Rhenish schools, in which he probably studied, his vigorous personality soon gave him a style decidedly his own in which his realistic tendency played a prominent part, and in which he particularly influenced Dürer. The fanciful views of cities in Wolgemut's woodcuts of the "World's Chronicle" above mentioned belong to the first published attempts at landscape, in which field Dürer

afterwards reaped so rich a harvest. Of the diligent studies Dürer made in this direction during his journeyman years many have been preserved, and his engravings show how cleverly he understood to apply them which made them so much sought after by the Italian artists, even the greatest of whom used these subjects freely in their own pictures. Thus Dürer's just claim as the founder of landscape painting must be traced to the influence of this excellent master. – Strange to say the greater celebrity which the pupil attained so eclipsed Wolgemut, that in spite of his restless activity into the eighty-fifth year of his age, and the many and various works sent out from his large workshop, his unsigned paintings were forgotten; he was only accredited with the mechanical engravings of the wood-cuts distinctly mentioned in the published works as his, and his engravings which alone he was accustomed to sign with the initial W., were ascribed to the goldsmith Wenzel von Olmutz. It was an achievement of modern research and art criticism that this error has been cleared and we have learned to understand the love and veneration Dürer entertained for his old master. –

It is noteworthy that the two other artists whose works influenced Durer, Martin Schongauer of Colmar, and Andrea Mantegna of Padua each died shortly before he could make it possible to see them, and he was compelled to fall back on the study of their works, instead of receiving the personal instruction he so much coveted. – The active commercial relations that existed between Venice and Germany at the beginning of the 16th Century, took many Germans to Italy, numerous students following in the wake of the merchants to the Universities of Padua and Bologna. – Venice itself, isolated in many respects from the rest of Italy, was much subjected to German influence. It was here that the Flemish discovery of oil painting was first successfully introduced into Italy in fact, the Venetian school of painting was founded by a German Johannes Allemarnus or de Allemannia as he called himself. Among the merchants of Augsburg and Nuremberg who presided at the tables of the merchants in the “All of the Germans,” “Fondaco die Tedeschi” at Venice, Dürer had many influential friends. But in his letters from Venice which are still preserved, there appears no particular reason why Dürer should have spent the year 1506 there, unless it was to satisfy his unrelenting instinct of perfecting himself for which Italy might seem to offer advantages. There may also be some truth in the story that the gossip biographer of the Renaissance artists, Giorgio Vasari tells, that Dürer came to Venice to secure copyright privileges of the Signoria to protect him against the copy and publication of his works made by Marc Anton Raimondi, Raphael's engraver. And indeed, it appears from the Venetian archives that Dürer obtained copyright privileges from it, for all but his own prints of his works were forbidden to be sold in the Republic unless the same were characterized as copies. It shows in how great demand his works were when a man like Raimondi himself an engraver of renown, found it profitable to counterfeit his works with their signatures, or even, as he did afterwards, to copy them with his own. – Is no wonder that when his presence became known in Venice, he was courted by artists and nobility; but above all, he felt honored by the friendship of Gian Bellini, the veteran leader of the Venetian school.

The jealousies of the younger artists who said it was true he was the best draftsman but could not be a painter, he silenced with his painting “Feast of Roses” that he executed for the church of St. Bartholomew belonging to his German brethren.

Dürer did not allow the intentions he received to interfere with the prosecution of the studies on the proportions of the human body, for which purpose he could obtain better models in Venice than at home and for this purpose he finally went to Bologna to obtain theoretical instruction from Luca Pacioli. – The number of larger paintings Dürer executed was comparatively small, as he enjoyed no great patronage. Indeed, he worked too long at those he did make, finishing them as Leonardo did his, with the greatest care in the minutest detail; so that he complained of losing money on them, and turned eventually to wood and copper engraving alone. Indeed, it was through this that his fame became so widespread, –the active commercial relations carrying German publications far and wide. – No one perhaps took so novel and shrewd an advantage of this as the Emperor Maximilian who conceived that better than erecting a local statue to his own memory, he would place a monument to himself in easy reach of every subject of his scattered empire by the help of the printed publications that enjoyed all the popularity of newness. – With the help of his learned flatterers, the publication of a triumphal procession on a before unheard-of scale was decided upon. The triumphal car bearing the Emperor and his family was to be surrounded by allegorical figures, testifying to the many graces and excellent qualities of the Imperial highness. It was not flattering alone that prompted the pompous phrases and learned conceits with which the work was decked out, for Maximilian, in spite of his poor success as a diplomat and warrior, and his proverbial poverty which made him contemptible to the potentates of Italy, Spain, and France, was through his pleasing personality and courtly behavior the idol of his people, and his memory still lives in folk song and story. To Albert Dürer, as the only artist befitting so important a work the drawing and supervision of the engraving of the great wood cuts was entrusted. But almost as difficult as the execution of this task was the securing of the pension that his suave but non-paying Majesty had promised as his revenues were generally so mortgaged as to make it difficult to wedge in a new claim. The death of the Emperor made the renewal of Dürer's claim by his successor Charles the Fifth necessary. The plague breaking out at Nuremberg about the time that Charles was expected to land in the Netherlands en route to his crowning at Aix la Chapelle, Dürer with his wife and maid set out for Antwerp. Through the friendship of the elector-bishop of Mayance, he was freed from the exacting tolls of the Rhine, while his journey through the art-loving country of the Netherlands was indeed a triumph that genius seldom experiences. Received with open arms by the artists and people in every city he visited, he formed many valuable friendships that his broad culture and genial wit enabled him to secure for his own personality aside from his art.

Dürer's influential friends securing his Imperial pension he was enabled, together with a very respectable fortune he had amassed from his publications to spend the greater part of the remainder of his life in the literary pursuits for which he had been collecting data and making theoretical studies in the fields connected with the practice of art, during his whole life. The art of this broad-minded and cultured man whom Fortune placed in the company of the most advanced thought of his age who was himself an actor in its greatest event and early stepping-stone to the understanding of the contemporary art, and that from which he learned and drew his inspiration. We cannot but feel in a study of his life how near he stands to us and our modern thought; and yet he was not a genius living in advance of his age; he enjoyed his greatest popularity during his own life; and it was not local but extended from Stockholm to Rome, from London to Krakau. Proud of the

citizenship of his little Republic, he sought no patronage and served his Imperial master only because of the sense of duty to him which every German felt. Differing from his selfish and politic friend Erasmus of Rotterdam, his relations to the Crown did not prevent him from making firm and open acknowledgment of his religious convictions, though it might have cost him his pension. This independence of action which he also maintained in the selection of his subjects for study, and which brought him into the channel in which modern art still strives for its ideal, makes us feel in sympathy with his works, causing us to overlook peculiarities which in others would seem unpleasantly prominent.

The fatality of the time incident to the frequency to death from war and pestilence also found expression with him but in the seriousness of modern feeling never in the ghastly derision of the "Death Dances", common in his day. His pictures also contain a protest against the debauchery of the Holy See by Alexander the Sixth but not in the bitter caricature of the "papalars" of a Wolgemut. Living at a time when the demands upon art were greatest, he saw the knowledge spread by the recently discovered method of facilitating intellectual discourse withdrawing its chief office; while the professors of Protestantism overreaching themselves in their strained efforts to bring about a moral and religious reform laid to its charge a sin already obsolete. The commandment against the worship of the "graven image" is still recited in our Sunday Schools with a solemnity almost comic; but there is no longer any doubt as to the universal usefulness, aye necessity of art though the doubts of Luther and the precepts of Calvin lasted quite to our day. It is not our privilege yet in America of having great works of art common among us; as it was not Dürer's in his little Republic of executing many such for which his genius fitted him; but the prints that made his name so popular are the form of art flourishing most with us; and that through the spread of literary knowledge which he feared would abridge their usefulness. The physical appearance of nature could hardly have changed in historic times. The ways of looking at however certainly have, and with them the opinion of what was the most worthy of portrayal for the instinct of picturing something has always existed. The reaction of early Christendom against the acute sense of physical beauty, so intense amongst the Greeks lead us near to a separation of body and spirit as was possible in art leaving the beholder to find the spiritual beauty from a little of the unworthy earthly envelope as could convey the idea.

Dürer the child of the latter feeling worked to advance the movement towards a recovery of the noble realism of antiquity and placing the man of his creation in the frame of the landscape in which nature puts him, made the most decisive strides toward the standpoint we now hold.

Karl Langenbeck

Oct 2nd 1886