Strange world unfolds at the Clark

By John E. Mitchell
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Williamstown — German artist Albrecht Dürer lived in the 15th and 16th century, winning renown for his paintings and prints — he was a superior printmaker. What set Dürer aside from so many of his contemporaries was not just the exceptionally fine quality of his woodcuts and engravings, but the breadth of the mind behind them. Any given work of Dürer’s yields levels and levels upon which to study and appreciate it.

“It did this print called ‘The Cannon.’ What did a cannon look like then and why are there people from the Ottoman Empire and German soldiers? There’s so many strange and unusual things,” said Jay A. Clarke, Morton Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the Clark Art Institute.

“That’s part of the reason we decided to call it ‘The Strange World of Albrecht Dürer’ because, even from my 31st-century perspective, there’s a lot of really odd interesting things going on in his images and that’s part of the reason we’re still drawn to them, and part of the reason he is still being absorbed into popular culture 500 years later.”

The exhibit “The Strange World of Albrecht Dürer” opens at the Clark Art Institute on Sunday, Nov. 14, and runs through March 15.

For the show, Clarke says the museum focused on the idea that the world fashioned in Dürer’s work is a decidedly strange one that pulls from some more obvious outside influences, like The Book of Revelations in the Bible. It also emulates these topics with a varied and vast knowledge of other disciplines and the wild figures of his own imagination. While he was involved in the Protestant Reformation and many of his images pull from the Bible, Christianity wasn’t a singular influence, but more of a vehicle for narrative backdrops.

Dürer was a humanist intellectual who read Greek and Roman texts, and was in the regular company of other humans of the time, like Desiderius Erasmus, the subject of portraits by Dürer.

“He read a lot, he traveled a lot, and he was absorbing all different kinds of tradition, both literary and visual,” Clarke said. “He wrote a treatise on fortifications. He wrote a treatise on human proportion. He wrote a treatise on fortifications. He wrote a treatise on human proportion. He knew a lot of different things about animals. He was interested in a wide variety of intellectual pursuits — he was mathematical, as well. Although his imagery is mostly religious, there is a lot that is that is brought to bear on that religious imagery.”

There is also plenty of his work that seems to pull very little from religious sources, instead offering fantastic conundrums from his own mind. In his image, “The Neschis,” a nude woman stands on top of a globe, with a landscape beneath her — it seems to have little to do with any narrative test at all. In another, “Melancholia,” a seated woman looks dejected — the image is the subject of several books attempting to decode its meaning.

“Still today, people write about what in the world these images mean,” said Clarke. “He was an artist who was going beyond the normal bounds of originality and creating these kinds of images. That’s one of the things that draws me to his art, the fantasy and the imagination that came with it — they were so imaginative and they didn’t necessarily come from a textual source, and so that allowed people to see different things in the images.”

When Dürer did tackle Biblical stories, his images could be sober as in the series “The Life of the Virgin.” The print market at the time featured a great interest in images of Mary, and while Dürer’s image appear more straightforward, he used the work to further mine his spiritual interests.

“One of the things they show is Dürer’s interest in perspective,” Clarke said. “He was one of the first artists of his time period in the north to write about perspectival human proportion and the idea of this there being one recessive line, one point perspective, and each and every one of those images was set in a space that was designed and thought of in terms of perspective and human proportion.”

Other times, though, the wild excesses of the imagination loomed out, as in his “Apocalypse” series, among the most well-known of his work.

Dürer took moments from the Book of Revelations and transformed them into pieces of a fantasy epic that rival Tolkien for erudition and imagination.

“There’s one particular print that one would put with the apocalypse series. It’s called ‘The Beast With Two Horns Like a Lamb,’ and it’s the one where there’s this seven-headed monster coming up the water, and then there’s a sort of two-figure with two horns coming over,” said Clarke. “It’s very, completely fantastical images. The Bible may have said a seven-headed monster, but Dürer may have been a little less perhaps a supercolored creature, and each and every head is different — one had a crown, another looked like a rabbit. The Beast With Two Horns Like a Lamb is a literally like a lion with horns like a lamb, so the Biblical passage may have been somewhat vague, so Dürer was able to use his own imagination to create these images.

“Not as obvious through the images, but integral to his continued influence, especially in the world of illustration, was Dürer’s prowess as a businessman and a clever self-promoter. Noted for his charismatic personality, travel and interaction are cornerstones of Dürer’s experiences. Sometimes the journey was enacted to work on a commission, but often Dürer wandered for the purpose of learning about other countries. He did a number of self-portraits that became very well known, understanding that these were promotional tools for work and attention, and was the first artist of his time to actually sign his work, with his monogrammed initials ‘AD.’ Until Dürer, it was the subject matter that was the appreciated part with Dürer, the fact that he himself became important enough that others began to steal his imagery and knock off his ideas.

“He was promoting himself as an artist, which sounds so completely obvious, it’s not at all novel to us, but at the time, it was very unusual,” Clarke said. “After the turn of the century, after 1500, he traveled to Venice and tried to copyright some of his paintings because other artists were stealing them and making copies of them. He was very savvy about kinds of things.

“The exhibit, though, the museum has stepped back from picking on too much context, seeking to allow the images to speak to their own power. The show set up in separate rooms based on themes, with each of those sections offering exploration of the work as a whole — there is also some video, and some technical explanations about wood cutting and engraving — but the curatorial concern was to allow images from the 1480s and 1580s to come alive today. Framing the images in words did not seem the best way to do that.

“In some exhibits, you can read what each and every image means based on the curators’ perspective, but we want there to be a more visceral experience,” said Clarke. “Part of what I hope people get a sense of is the absolute wonder and amazing technical ability that this artist has, so there really isn’t much explanatory text. I didn’t want to give too much history because sometimes I think you can club people instead of allowing them to take what they want to from the images.”

The direct relationship between the viewer and the image — the emotional one that pushes away the academic — gives each visitor the chance to make the artwork their own, through a personal give and take with the substance of the work. Viewer and image team-up to create not only an appreciation of what is presented, but pathways to answers.

“I think that’s one of the things that is so powerful about Dürer, the pure, amazing, visceral reaction people have to his work, so we’ve tried to be quite minimal in terms of the interpretative material,” Clarke said. “We give people grounding because I think everyone needs a little bit of a hint, what was the artist’s time period like, but otherwise we’re going to let it be a very immediate experience. His images are puzzle-like.”