Enter the Renaissance mind
Clark Art Institute opens major exhibit of its extensive Albrecht Durer collection

By TELLY HALKIAS

Clark Art Institute curator, Telly Halkias, talks about the exhibition "The Strange World of Albrecht Durer".

The show is a comprehensive overview of Durer's work, from his early woodcuts to his later oil paintings.

Durer was a master of printmaking and his works have had a lasting influence on art history.

The exhibition is on display until March 13 at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Albrecht Durer's 1514 engraving, "Saint Jerome in His Study" is one of 72 pieces of art on display at the Clark Art Institute from Nov. 14 through March 13 in an exhibit titled "The Strange World of Albrecht Durer." The artwork is from the museum's private collection, one of the most extensive Durer inventories in North America.

By merging various time periods in one image, Durer said today's visual media reflect the frequency of global violence, and Durer's images paralleled the same for his milieu.

"Not just war, but violence in general has been a constant in human history," Durer said. "The martyrdom of a saint or the death of a knight carried equal gravity in terms of the images Durer developed."

The third space carries some of Durer's most famous and enigmatic works, such as "Knight, Death and the Devil," and "Melencolia I," the name of his "Enigma." Recent scholarship has incorporated references to philosophy, popular culture, literature, religious doctrine and feminism in an attempt to understand these offerings.

Durer noted that Durer's art "might be the most frequently interpreted pieces to come out of the Renaissance."

The next theme examines Durer's illusion of three-dimensional space, called "Symbolic Space." His narratives are imbedded in landscapes and man-made structures, which serve to put action in context and enhance their resonance. The relationship between outside and inside, inclusion and exclusion and heaven and earth are vital to understanding the events that unfold therein. Unlike the frenzied compositions of the Apocalypse woodcuts, these are peaceful, reflective and still.

Finally, Durer seized upon Durer's fascination with the sexes, explicitly saluting a popular contemporary theme in the last gallery, named "Gender Anxiety." These prints hone in on the tension of the apparent authority struggle between women and men and the threat of uncontrolled passion. Even the gallery's carefully selected wall color of gray echoes the nature of today's gender equality conundrum.

"Gray is gender-neutral and gives a sense of an ongoing, unclear and unresolved effort," Durer said. "Even the details of the backdrop on which we're showing this in Durer's world is important to its portrayal."

Impressive collection
The show incorporates 72 works of art, all from the Clark's private collection, which is one of the most extensive Durer holdings in North America. The bulk was acquired in 1968 from Tomas Joseph Harris, a scholar, artist and dealer who served in the British Intelligence during World War II.

Also, the exhibit includes two of Durer's books, on loan from the William College Museum of Art, a contextual necessity that Durer noted would underscore that many of these works were in Durer's books, and that the artist himself was a prolific student of many disciplines, to include mathematics and military fortifications. There also will be multimedia displays, other reference works and the adroit offering of magnifying glasses to help visitors scrutinize the details of some of Durer's art.

"This was the Renaissance, and Albrecht Durer was the embodiment of a Renaissance man," Durer said. "The breath of his achievement is exceeded only by its far reaches into our world today, and this show intends to speak to that."

"The Strange World of Albrecht Durer" opens on Nov. 14 and runs through March 13 at the Clark Art Institute Institute on South Street in Williamstown. Admission is free from November through May. For more information, call 413-458-2303 or visit clarkart.edu.