



the strange world of alBRECHT DÜRER

NOVEMBER 14, 2010—MARCH 13, 2011

DÜRER at the CLARK

The earliest two works by Dürer entered the museum at its founding in 1955 as gifts from Sterling and Francine Clark, who purchased them from P. and D. Colnaghi in 1919 and 1923. The museum acquired the majority of its collection of more than 300 Dürer prints as a large group in 1968 from the collection of Tomás Joseph Harris (1908–1964) in conjunction with thirty duplicates from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A scholar, artist, and art dealer, Harris joined a branch of the British intelligence service that participated in Operation Garbo during the Second World War, supplying false information to the Nazis about allied plans for the invasion of Normandy. Following the war years, Harris continued his activities as an artist and became a scholar of Francisco Goya prints as he worked to build an esteemed collection of prints by Dürer, Goya, and Rembrandt. A handful of Dürer prints have been added to the Clark's collection since 1968.

Jay A. Clarke
manton curator of prints,
drawings, and photographs



This exhibition is organized by the
Sterling and Francine
Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown, Massachusetts

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THE CLARK

the strange world of albrecht dürer,

populated by monsters, witches, hybrid animals, and marauding soldiers, shares spiritual and social preoccupations with our own time. Dürer (1471–1528) was celebrated throughout the sixteenth century and is memorialized today for his innovative techniques in printmaking, his visionary imagination, and his theoretical writing, which transformed the study of human proportion. Deeply embedded in an age of religious reformation, scientific inquiry, and artistic innovation, Dürer created prints that reflected the tumult of his era.

The Strange World of Albrecht Dürer explores how and why his work was so powerful then, and why it remains so visually arresting to us more than five centuries later. This exhibition is arranged thematically in five groupings—The Apocalypse, War and Suffering, Enigma, Symbolic Space, and Gender Anxiety—encouraging twenty-first century viewers to consider the timelessness of Dürer’s intriguing prints.

BELOW: *Knight, Death, and the Devil*, 1513. Engraving. **RIGHT:** *The Beast with Two Horns Like a Lamb* from *The Apocalypse*, c. 1496–97. Woodcut.



the apocalypse

Dürer’s ***The Apocalypse*** series chronicles the end of the world as foretold in the Book of Revelation, the last section of the Christian Bible. The fifteen woodcuts included in ***The Apocalypse*** series are teeming with monsters, devils, angels, and saints drawn from the artist’s fertile imagination. In his woodcut ***The Beast with Two Horns Like a Lamb***, for example, Dürer merged several different textual motifs into one potent image: a seven-headed monster emerges from the sea to trample the worshipers who have assembled. Blood rains on the beast, and a god-like figure holds a scythe to cut down the blasphemous, accompanied by angels brandishing instruments of retribution. Originally published as a book in 1498, two years before a new century dawned, these woodcuts echoed the anxieties of a generation at a time when prophecies of impending doom circulated widely. Today, these prints retain their dramatic impact, exploring both the real and the unreal, giving visible form to religious anxieties and the monstrous beasts that dwell in the gothic recesses of our minds.

symbolic space

In many of his works Dürer carefully arranged the elements of an image to create the illusion of three-dimensional space, which served to intensify the drama of his narrative. This interest in carving out perspectival space is manifested in his 1511 series of woodcuts, *The Life of the Virgin*, and other prints created during this period. These works chronicle the life of Mary, from the courtship of her parents to her assumption into heaven. The narratives unfold in architectural and landscape settings, which frame the action and heighten its subdued drama. The interplay between outside and inside, inclusion and exclusion, and heaven and earth are key to understanding the events that unfold within these invented spaces. In *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother* this tension is symbolized by the three despairing women enclosed within the wooden structure while Christ moves away from them to confront his fate in the outside world. In contrast to the highly emotive and chaotic compositions of *The Apocalypse* woodcuts, these are calm, contemplative, and earthbound.



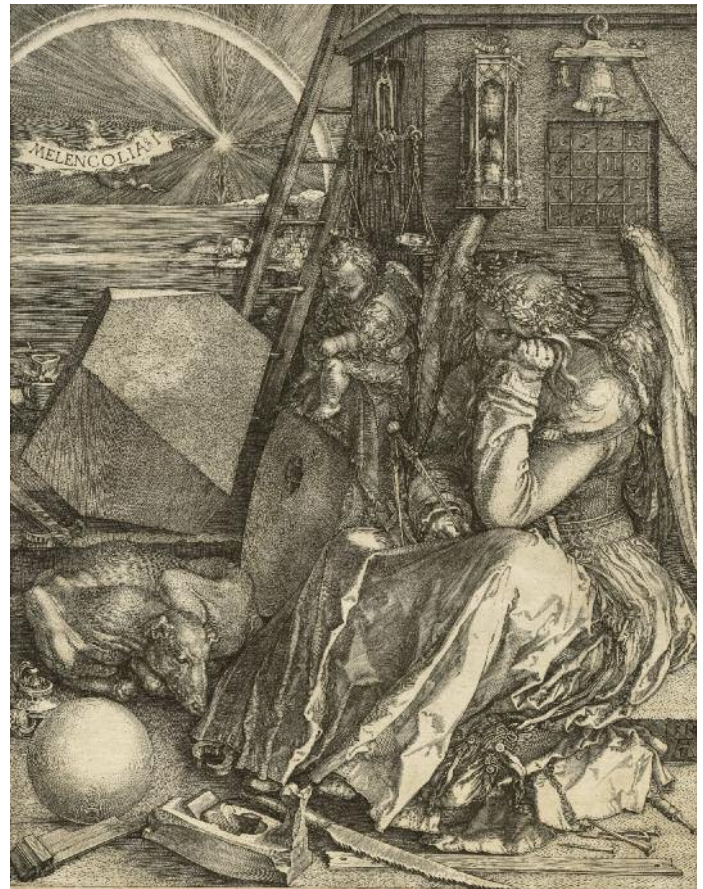
war and suffering

Throughout his career, Dürer explored the themes of suffering and violence, depicting Christ's torment and the horrors of war in narratives ranging from the classical, biblical, and contemporary eras, occasionally fusing various time periods in a single image. In the woodcut *Hercules*, the fur-clad demigod and an avenging fury from classical mythology prepare to attack soldiers dressed in an inventive combination of ancient and medieval armor. Regardless of what the scene depicts, its anguish is as potent today as it was in the sixteenth century. In the 1500s, mercenaries and knights were not simply popular social types but real-life presences during the Protestant Reformation, when religious wars raged across Europe. Just as the media in the twenty-first century reflects the pervasiveness of violence in our culture, Dürer's images mirrored his own society's fascination with human torment.

LEFT: *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother* from *The Life of the Virgin*, c. 1504–05. Woodcut.
ABOVE: *Hercules*, c. 1496. Woodcut.

gender anxiety

Dürer's focus on gender relationships ranged from Adam and Eve—the biblical first couple—to suggestive dream states, to violent and erotic mythological creatures. The tension expressed in these prints centers on the perceived power struggle between women and men and the threat of unleashed passions. The shifting meanings of these works is suggested by their frequently changing titles: the luminous nude **Nemesis** was titled **The Great Fortune** in the seventeenth century, and **The Four Witches**, which acquired its title in 1675, has also been referred to as **The Four Naked Women** and **The Judgment of Paris**. **Nemesis**, a winged figure floating above a panoramic landscape, has been described as symbolizing either retribution, luck, or both, depending on the cultural context of its viewer. The impact of these prints is no less powerful today, when issues of gender equality remain fraught with tension in every sphere of life.



enigma

The enigmatic nature of Dürer's prints—including **Knight, Death, and the Devil**; **Melencolia I**; **The Desperate Man**; and his series of knots has encouraged a wide range of interpretive analysis over the centuries. Recent scholarship has incorporated references to philosophy, popular culture, literature, religious doctrine, and feminism in attempts to fasten meaning on these curious images. The engraving **Melencolia I**, for example, has been the subject of countless studies deconstructing its contemplative protagonist and her surroundings. The search for disguised symbolism has been one of the most common methods used to unlock elements in Dürer's compositions, but this approach has its limitations. Whether a monkey symbolizes base passion or a dog suggests faithful devotion depends on the questions we bring to them. Dürer's vast imagination allows each successive generation to interpret these works anew.