



ALBRECHT DÜRER 1471-1528

The sixteenth century Reformation in Europe centered primarily on theology and doctrinal debate. But the Reformation was also a turning point in the history of mass communication, particularly related to the advent of the printing press and the new capacity it brought for the rapid circulation of ideas. Print would be used primarily to publish words, but it was soon discovered that pictures could also have a profound effect on the shaping of consciousness. One who most helped advance that awareness was Albrecht Dürer, a fellow German and contemporary of Martin Luther.

You know the familiar "Praying Hands" that you see in gift shops and other places? The creator of the original drawing was done by Albrecht Dürer. Born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1471, he was the oldest son and third of eighteen children. His father was an honest, patient man who raised Albrecht to honor God as he apprenticed in his father's goldsmith shop. At age fifteen he left to apprentice with one of Nuremberg's best illustrators exhibiting an early gift for drawing and engraving. Influenced in style and approach by trips to Venice and Italy (in 1494 and again in 1505), Dürer produced internationally famous works by the time he was 30 years old. He drew just about everything, and with extraordinary skill. He produced hundreds of paintings, thousands of drawings, nearly 400 woodcuts and more than 100 engravings and etchings. He portrayed everyday objects, broad religious themes, his family and himself, and all of his work was characterized by a mastery of form and detail.

His earliest major work, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" was a series of large prints illustrating the book of Revelation, with Scripture on the reverse side. His work used larger, full-page-sized blocks of hardwood, which held detailed and energetic illustrations. This was followed by a series of large and small illustrations of the "Life of Mary" and the "Passion of Christ." These became important tools for Christian laymen, many of whom could not read.

Dürer also did many portraits of famous people of his day, one of which was Friedrich the Wise, Elector of Saxony who had founded the University of Wittenberg. There Dürer began attending the sermon services given by Martin Luther's mentor, Johann von Staupitz. Dürer was as deeply moved as Luther had been with Staupitz' emphasis on Christ's passion as the only key to forgiveness from sin. When Dürer again returned to Nuremberg he devoted almost all of his work to biblical subjects such as "The Four Holy Men," about Sts. John, Peter, Mark and Paul. Below that painting Dürer wrote, "All worldly rulers in these dangerous times should give good heed that they receive not human misguidance for the Word of God, for God will have nothing added to His Word nor taken away from it. Hear therefore these four excellent men . . . and their warning."

After 1512 Dürer had official duties under Emperor Maximilian I and his successor, Charles V, and was known to have associated with luminaries such as Erasmus, Martin Luther and Raphael. He died of typhus fever in 1528 leaving a legacy as one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance.