

Albrecht Dürer's Praying Hands: The Hand Is Art

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Albrecht Dürer was a pivotal artist of the sixteenth century German Renaissance. Like da Vinci, he was a student of human proportions, but unlike da Vinci, Dürer's work was finished.¹ In one of his most popular pieces, *Praying Hands* (c. 1508), Dürer displayed an allegiance to the ideal of nature as beauty, even when the object was unsightly or grotesque (Fig. 1). In his diary, he remarked,²



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *Praying Hands*. ca. 1508. Brush, gray and white ink on blue prepared paper. ©The Albertina (Vienna, Austria) All Rights Reserved.

Neither must the figure be made youthful before and old behind, or contrariwise; for

that unto which nature is opposed is bad...
The more closely thy work abideth by life
in its form, so much the better will it ap-
pear; and this is true.

In *Praying Hands*, Dürer strayed from the style of his contemporaries in the High Italian Renaissance. Instead of celebrating the perfection and monumentality of the human form, the model's fingers are slender, askew, and bony. His hands are veiny and, true to Dürer's style, are sketched with cross-lines which give them a distinctly coarse appearance. Dürer was not averse to depicting maladies.² Indeed, one of his earliest woodcuts graphically portrayed a man plagued with syphilis.³ In one portrait, he drew himself pointing to a site in the lower abdomen, with an inscription reading, "The yellow spot to which my finger points is where it pains me," perhaps to send off for a physician's diagnosis of the illness which would later cause his death.⁴

In his time, Dürer was known as an artist for the people.⁵ Even now, *Praying Hands* is portrayed throughout our culture, from the tombstone of Andy Warhol, to the covers of hip hop albums, to the tattoos of celebrities. Though the model for the piece is not known, a popular belief is that the painting was meant to be a commemoration of Dürer's brother, who himself desired to become an artist.⁶ He forfeited this endeavor to instead work the mines and financially support Dürer's apprenticeship. His hands became afflicted by arthritis from years of wear, making him unfit to become an artist. This would not be the first work thought to

depict arthritis in the members of Dürer's family.⁷ Regardless of the hands' origins, Dürer has left many viewers to speculate, at times with levity, as to the medical mystery clasped between the *Praying Hands*.^{8,9}

Notes

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