**AP Euro: Chapter 12 Secondary Source**

**Albrecht Dürer -** Portrait of the artist as an entrepreneur

**How the greatest figure of the Northern Renaissance invented a new business model**

Source: The Economist Dec 17th 2011

IN JULY 1521, as Albrecht Dürer was packing up to return to Nuremberg from Antwerp, he received a message. Would he come at once to do a portrait of Christian II, King of Denmark, who happened to be in town? Naturally he dropped what he was doing, and went. One did not turn down kings. Dürer drew Christian's sad-eyed, fur-swathed figure in a charcoal sketch that still survives, kept in the British Museum. The king then asked, would he paint him in oils? Again Dürer said yes, and did so in record time, a couple of days. When it was done, he found 30 florins pressed into his hand. Soon afterwards, he left for home.

For Dürer, this was an unusual incident. Then 50, he had been for some years the most famous artist in northern Europe; but he was not in essence a court painter. He thought of such people as “parasites”, hanging round great men, waiting for a commission to fall from the lordly lips. He, by contrast, was an independent businessman. He made his money not by grovelling, but by selling copies of the woodcuts and engravings printed, since 1495, at his workshop in the centre of Nuremberg. He was not even a member of a guild, for there were no artists' guilds in the city: he was a free individual, unaffiliated, making money and a reputation purely for himself.

His journey of 1520-21 was simply a business trip. The bales he was packing up as he left Antwerp had originally been stuffed with printed engravings and woodcuts, loose or bound as books, which he or his agents were selling, or sometimes giving away, all over the Netherlands. Some of these—the “Nemesis”, with Great Fortune teetering on her globe, the “Melancholia 1”, with Melancholy surrounded by instruments of learning, and the “St Jerome”, with the saint sitting snugly in his cell with dog and lion—already qualified as bestsellers. Copies had been sent ahead to be sold before he arrived, building up excitement and publicity.

It was easy to meet demand, however high he fanned it. Though the fundamental work, carefully incised in mirror-image with knife or burin on the wood or copper plate, was every bit as laborious as drawing, it could then fly out in hundreds of copies. Dürer or his assistants just inked a wood or copper plate and cranked a lever. Thanks to the printing press he had bought, he was never in thrall to a publisher; his book of extra-large printed woodcuts of the Apocalypse, which had made his fame in Nuremberg, was the first to be both illustrated and published by a great artist.

He could now replicate and communicate his art. In 1520, for example, he sent a whole set of prints to Raphael's studio in Rome (he had hoped to impress Raphael himself, but the master had just died), and expected prints of Raphael's work in return. Artists no longer needed to meet, or ship precious works along dangerous roads, to show each other what they could do. Dürer was not the first artist to exploit the joy of the new medium, but he was the most assiduous and influential—and the best.

Painting, to be honest, rather bored him now. What was the good of slaving away for weeks over a panel, preparing the ground with layers of colour, paying half a stiver (at 24 stivers to the florin) for a porpoise-bristle brush, and two stivers to the boy who ground the colours, and a hefty 12 florins for an ounce of good ultramarine, if only a few could see it? Of course a fine altarpiece, installed in a commercial hub such as Frankfurt or Ghent (where he had silently worshipped Jan van Eyck's stupendous “Adoration of the Lamb”) could be a grand advertisement for a painter. But the public on the other side of the rood screen often couldn't see them, or had to pay, as he had to (one stiver to the sacristan) to view them. Painting was noble work, but it seemed suddenly elitist and restricted.

And slow. A good oil portrait, carefully done, might take a week and bring in, on average, ten florins. He could charge that for ten full-sheet prints, which took hardly any time on his press. Compared with that near-instantaneous wonder, the time and effort of painting suddenly seemed intolerable. A huge commission, such as the immense “Madonna of the Rose Garlands” of 1506 that now hangs, much restored, in Prague, could tie him up for months. To lay and scrape the ground alone took many weeks. “My picture… is well finished and finely coloured,” he wrote to a friend when the Madonna was at last complete; “[but] I have got…little profit by it. I could have easily earned 200 ducats in the time.”

Dürer was always keenly aware that he could make much more money by engraving. At a florin a sheet, or 12 stivers a half-sheet, or six stivers for his quarter-sheets of small Passion scenes, he could easily make about 400 florins a year. (The mayor of Nuremberg, at the time, enjoyed a yearly salary of 600 florins.) It was steady money, too, where painting was unpredictable. Dürer concluded, as he wrote to a customer in 1509, that “I shall stick to my engraving, and if I had done so before I should today be a richer man by 1,000 florins.”

The art market was widening rapidly, and he was doing much to widen it single-handed; his wonderful “Knight, Death and the Devil” could now be had for the cost of a rabbit-fur coat; his half-sheet of St Anthony reading, with Nuremberg's spires piled in the background (see illustration above), for the price of a basket of raisins. His quarter-sheet prints—some devotional, some hotly topical, concerned with comets or monstrous births—were being bought by market-goers, shopkeepers, even artisans, to mark the place in their prayer books, to give as new year cards, or simply to collect, as pieces of art. That had never been possible before; but in Nuremberg, a fine city of 50,000 people, there were plenty of would-be connoisseurs.

People bought from his shop directly, but he had branched out, too. By 1497 he was using Contz Schwytzer to handle his print sales in far-flung places. In Nuremberg Dürer's aged mother often sold his prints for him, keeping some of the money for her own small needs. To the Frankfurt fair he sent agents, but also his wife Agnes, a plain and untidy young woman on the evidence of his drawings, but apparently a willing business partner, and eventually the sole inheritor of the 6,874-florin estate he left when he died in 1528.

**A masterpiece for nothing**

This market, however, was evidently not one he could control. Though Dürer set a mental price for his work, based precisely on labour, materials and how good he thought it was (“a wonderful artist should charge highly for his art. No money is too much”), the buyer in the market—like the rich man in his hall, when his portrait was done—could still insist on paying only what he thought it was worth. Sometimes a recipient did not pay for a picture at all, seeming to think it had no cost, or was a present.

Occasionally Dürer used them that way himself, almost frittering them away, piling print on print to get something he wanted. His “works of art” (as he referred specifically to his printed woodcuts and engravings) were often simply exchanged for services, such as the help given by stableboys and servants, or the useful permit granted by the Bishop of Bamberg that enabled him to pass free through the dozens of town gates and customs points along the Rhine.

Art was currency in other ways, too. Hosts were thanked for hospitality with a quick charcoal sketch, which Dürer valued at a florin. Aristocratic or merchant customers bartered his works for rings or jewels, whose value he could only guess. The shrewdest could exploit Dürer's weakness for sweets (marzipan, candied citron, barley sugar, sugar canes “just as they grow”) and his equal weakness for curiosities—buffalo horns, bits of bamboo, spears from Calicut, monkeys, coral, parrots, or anything at all from Mexico, “the new land of gold”. He would often pay, or barter, over the odds for such things: a whole set of prints (30 florins to him) in exchange for an ivory whistle and “a beautiful piece of porcelain”. The bales that went home from his trips were stuffed with oddities, some of which can still be seen in his pictures.

Dürer's own estimate of what his work was worth was based, first of all, on his own skill. He knew he was good. He could do things that astounded other artists: as when the great Giovanni Bellini asked to see the “special brushes” with which Dürer painted long tresses of hair, and found they were simply common-or-garden half-stiver ones, floated over the paper to make rippling parallel lines. Dürer could depict like no one else the fur on a dog, the tiles on a roof, the inner life of a clump of grasses; but he could also infuse a scene with horror, piety or drama, through his mastery of human form. When he said he had done a work “carefully”, as he often did, he meant it. His “Praying Hands”, for example (right), wonderfully cross-hatched in white chalk on blue paper, was only one of dozens of preparatory sketches for an altarpiece that contained, in its central panel alone, 13 full-sized figures.

His pride in his own work extended to everything he did. (“How pleased we both feel when we think well of ourselves,” he wrote to his best friend, the humanist Willibald Pirckheimer, “me with my painting, you *con vostra* learning!”) At a time when artists did not sign their names, he put his, or more often his “AD” monogram, not only on finished pictures but even on the smallest, roughest sketches: an outline of a limb, a scribble of a pillow, a blur of brown and grey brushed quickly in his sketch book as he paused by a roadside quarry on a journey. The monogram was never forgotten. Again, he was not the first to do this; but no one else remotely did it to his extent. It was a necessary precaution, of course. Artistic rivals had long slandered each other and trashed each other's work; Dürer's enemies said he didn't know how to use colour, for example (“though I've shut them up…and everyone now says they have never seen such beautiful colours”). In Venice Dürer thought the Italian painters might try to poison him. But the new technology produced a much more pervasive danger: that an artist's printed output would be so quickly and thoroughly copied and pirated that his work would be diluted and his good name undermined. Clinging on to authorship, in an age of open access, was as hard then as now. Dürer twice went to court to defend his sole use of his trademark, in Nuremberg and in Venice, and twice won the case. The guilty parties were made to remove his monogram from their prints. Merely copying “AD”, however, was not adjudged a crime. The crime was to sell the fake print as an original. From then on, therefore, false monogrammed prints “after Dürer” kept appearing, confusing collectors to this day.

A trademark was not the only identifier Dürer put on his pictures. He left lines of commentary on the sketches, and gave the finished engravings elaborate marble tablets explaining his subject and his purpose. He wanted to tell the world that he, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg, had done this: that it was made, *gemacht*, with his genius and effort.

That word seemed to carry a particular weight and satisfaction with him. He made sure it applied to his prints, as well as his paintings. It went along with *Gewalt*, literally “control”, his special word for exercising his artistic power, first the limner and then the re-creator of everything he surveyed. “The imagination of a good artist”, he wrote, “is full of forms.” In his exquisite landscape watercolours of the 1490s—painted with a sense of light not seen again till Cézanne—his AD is usually placed at the centre top, commanding the scene like the sun.

Joking around once in a letter to Pirckheimer, he called himself (in very choice Venetian) *poltrone di pintore*, a poor fool of a painter. He didn't mean it. He knew that in Italy or the Netherlands he moved among masters, was “a gentleman” and was every bit the equal of “Roger” [van der Weyden], “Hugo” [van der Goes] or “Giambellin” [Bellini]. The treatment of artists as international celebrities, rather than mere journeymen, was very new; but Dürer's engravings had established his reputation all over Europe. In Bruges he was wined and dined on the town, given a tour, accompanied home with many torches and shown “great honour”, as he happily noted. In the Antwerp painters' hall, “where everything was of silver…as I was being led to the table, everyone on both sides stood up as if I was some great lord.”

This sort of thing still surprised him, but less and less. It was his due. His due, too, was a large pension. Though Dürer was not a court artist, the Emperor Maximilian I—whose magnificent hooked profile he drew in 1518 “in a little room high up in the castle” of Augsburg—had commissioned him to work on designs for a grandiose triumphal arch. All that drawing, Dürer reckoned, ought to be worth 100 florins a year, since “I have served him for three years at my own expense.” Maximilian, naturally generous beyond his means, granted him that sum for life. It was supposed to come from the imperial tax paid each year by the city of Nuremberg, but Maximilian died too soon to enforce it, and Dürer fought for years to be paid. Financially, he could probably have managed without it. As a matter of self-esteem he could not, and would not.

That self-esteem blazed from his pictures. Before Dürer, an artist would sometimes appear in his paintings half-hidden, as one of the crowd. Dürer, however, painted himself to fill the frame. That was new. He portrayed himself in 1493, just betrothed, holding sea holly (the betrothal flower) and with fashionable slashed sleeves; he painted himself, most famously, in 1500, gazing full-face at the viewer from a nimbus of long flowing hair (see the first illustration of this piece). This was not just the artist as Christ, but the artist as worthy of contemplation, worthy of attention in himself. It is perhaps unsurprising that his earliest surviving picture, drawn in silverpoint on paper at the age of 13 with astonishing facility, was also of himself.

That picture could be identified later because Dürer wrote on it, proudly, “This I drew myself from a mirror in the year 1484, when I was still a child.” With him, pictures were also self-exploration, a record of his feelings and experiences on a certain day at a certain time, the equivalent of the journals and personal letters that men and women were only just beginning to write. “I produced these two faces when I was ill,” he noted over two particularly anguished sketches of the head of the dying Christ, in 1503. “The colour marks where the pain was,” he wrote over a small, later drawing of himself in his underwear, pointing to his side. He drew himself with a headache as a teenager, and as a relatively old man, at 44, he drew his emaciated and completely naked body in savage, unsparing chalk.

Daily minutiae were noted too, since anything might be useful in a painting. A lumpy cushion was drawn several times. He recorded at length, in the Netherlands, the details of the walrus he drew and where it was caught. Most strangely, he also painted a watercolour, and appended a description, of a storm of rain in one of his dreams. The least event was interesting. The most inward, passing thing was of public consequence. Dürer often seems to be carrying on a conversation with the people he imagines looking in on his life, that day or in years to come: constantly updating his progress, his ideas and his image of himself.

Prints, by their nature, were less personal; but he also made sure he featured in those. His AD monogram was seldom confined to a corner. It swung from the Tree of Good and Evil in Eden, as Eve curiously and delicately took the apple from the mouth of the snake. It was scratched on the floor of the room where Gabriel appeared to Mary, and incised into the lid of the stone tomb that awaited the body of Christ. Most shockingly, it appeared on the nailheads hammered into Christ's hands on the cross. Dürer thus became an actor in the tableaux he had drawn, and especially in the sacred or biblical scenes. He lurked beside the fateful tree. He hurt Christ, or buried him, himself.

**Remember me!**

There was a Lutheran undertow to this. Dürer took a keen interest in “Dr Martin”, eagerly keeping up with his tracts, and writing pages of agonised invective in his journal when he heard, in May 1521, that Luther had been taken into custody. He remained a stalwart Catholic himself, eagerly queuing to see relics and with his rosary ever in his pocket, but he did not want the church (“the Gates of Hell”, as he thought) laying down the law in his life. Popes, church Fathers, doctrines were all obstacles to “the holy pure gospel” and Christ's redemptive grace, and they appeared in Dürer's prints under the hooves of his four apocalyptic horsemen, trampled in the mire.

Already, as if those hated objects had gone, he was making his own way through the Bible in his drawings and engravings. His avatar, with no churchman's voice to lecture him, could linger in the scenes he chose. This was what the new technology allowed everyone to do. The Vatican could ban books, as it banned Luther's. But it could not stop Dürer, as a free thinker, reading the ancient sacred words in a new way, and making his pictures accordingly. (He wrote often, too, of “free painting”, in which an inspired artist no longer needed to copy a master and could follow his own rules.) His own interpretation was as good as any bishop's: merely as a man, his thought and work had value.

Merely as a man, too—despite his spindly pain-racked body, and charcoal Death on his skeleton horse crying “Remember me!” into his ear—he could multiply those thoughts and works endlessly through the new world as well as the old. Perhaps as much as any other craftsman, even in the modern age, Dürer represented human talent and ingenuity made boundless by a machine.

**Qs to answer & discuss:**

1. In your opinion, was Albrecht Durer more of an artist or a businessman? Justify your opinion with evidence from the article.
2. How did Durer’s use of available technology impact the society of the time? What principle’s drove his behavior?
3. Synthesize Durer’s accomplishments with a current day arts – technology innovation by comparing the two in a short paragraph below.