

Exploring the Religious Nature of Renaissance Artworks: Taking Dürer's Works as an Example

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Abstract. Artists of the Renaissance created works under the influence of a strong religious atmosphere and humanistic spirit. Thinking about "man" and "God" was the main topic that artists of this period were keen to explore. This article takes Albrecht Dürer as an example and explores the religious concepts presented in Renaissance image works based on the analysis of religious art historical documents. Research has found that Dürer's religious concepts are dialectical, pluralistic, and multi-perspective. Dürer believes that when faced with difficulties beyond human power at the social level, God is both a judge and a symbol of hope; when faced with the trend of technological innovation at the artistic and scientific level, God is a prophet of inspiration and wisdom; when faced with the pursuit of ideals and beauty at the level of self-pursuit, God is a carrier. In his works, Dürer not only expresses the enlightenment and awe of religion that comes from suffering but also the desire that comes from ideals. He also actively expresses and presents religious themes in a personalized way

Keywords: Albrecht Dürer; Renaissance; Reformation.

1. Introduction

During the Renaissance, a large number of progressive works of art emerged, in which advanced humanistic ideas collided with the conservative religious ideas of the Middle Ages. Renaissance artists, represented by Dürer, were both Christians and humanists, and they showed the changes of the times through images. In this context, Albrecht Dürer created a large number of images based on the Bible or religious figures. The influence of Christianity on Dürer was long-lasting and profound. Ding Wenxing elaborated on the influence of the changing religious atmosphere on Dürer's creation in "A Perspective on the "New Era" from Dürer's Prints - A Discussion on the Influence of the European Renaissance and the Reformation on Printmaking in the 16th Century", while Zhou Shiting explained in "Dürer's Geometry - The Beginning of the Fusion of German Art and Science" that Dürer's exploration of art and science is inseparable from the background of religious beliefs. Current research on Renaissance images mostly focuses on the relationship between artists' exploration of technology and humanism, but religious ideas still greatly influenced artists' thinking during the Renaissance. So in what ways did religion influence the works of art during this period? Exploring this question is very meaningful for understanding the connotation of Renaissance works of art. This article will use the literature research method to review art history and basic Christian knowledge, use the image reading method to analyze the images and combine the religious background of the works to explain the religious concepts that are representative of the times embodied in Dürer's works. This article uses " *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* ", " *Saint Jerome in His Study* " and " *Adam and Eve* " as typical examples, respectively elaborating on the in-depth thinking of artists represented by Dürer on issues such as society and religion, scientific development and religion, artistic ideals, and religion, as well as the way these viewpoints are presented in their works, showing the Renaissance artists' thinking on religion.

2. Background

The Renaissance was a European intellectual and cultural movement that took place from the 14th to the 16th century. It began in Florence and its influence spread to surrounding areas. In the late Middle



Ages when wars and plagues were rampant, the influence of Christian theology remained strong. However, with the improvement of productivity and the development of the commodity economy, the seeds of capitalism were fostered in a strong religious atmosphere. Artists and scholars explored the answers to suffering, truth, and beauty in theological and humanistic thoughts.

3. Dürer's Life

3.1. Dürer's Background

Max Dvorak said in "History of Art as Spiritual History": "To understand Dürer, we must first look back to 15th century Germany and empathize with the artist and the spirit of that era." [1]. Albrecht Dürer was born in Nuremberg, Germany in 1471. His experience of learning from his father, a goldsmith, gave him solid drawing and metalworking skills [2]. Solid carving skills laid the foundation for Dürer's life-long creation, while the strong religious atmosphere in Germany greatly influenced Dürer's creative themes. Throughout his life, Dürer completed many works of art in the form of prints and oil paintings, with themes not limited to religious stories, self-portraits, etc.

Wilhelm Wetzolt, professor and art historian at the University of Berlin, commented on Dürer: "Dürer's religious art is the art of the Reformation period, but not Protestant art; it was born out of new spiritual piety but was still bound by old ideas and forms. It was formed during the religious revival and was perfected in pain and conflict, but it is by no means a vassal of any particular creed." [3].

3.2. Dürer and the German Renaissance

With the rise of the printing industry, humanistic thought gradually had an impact on Germany through printed materials and exchanges with scholars. Dürer's hometown of Nuremberg, as the center of printing and science in Germany at the time, brought together a large number of text and graphic works of Renaissance thought and gathered a large number of scholars and craftsmen who were at the forefront of German thought and technology at the time. In this context, Dürer was deeply influenced by the ideas of the Renaissance and therefore initiated a voluntary movement to change the social status of craftsmen.

Dürer visited Italy twice to study. In his early works, it can see the Gothic painting style and rigorous modeling adopted by Dürer. After his first visit to Italy, Dürer's works reflected the influence of emerging humanistic ideas [4]. In the middle and late stages of Dürer's artistic creation, he completed many works that combined scientific observation methods with religious themes. Among them, the application of perspective led German religious paintings to a new peak and made a huge contribution to the German Renaissance.

3.3. Dürer and the German Reformation

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted the "*Ninety-five Theses*" in Germany, officially opening the prelude to the Reformation. The religious views of artists and scholars were once again impacted by new ideas. The profound influence of the idea of "religious freedom" can also be seen in many of Dürer's works. Dürer's expression of divinity gradually became personalized. In Dürer's religious works, one can often see the painter using new metaphors to present his understanding. In his later years, Dürer also drew many illustrations of the Protestant Reformation for Martin Luther, providing strong support for the German Reformation in terms of image communication.

4. Analysis

4.1. Dürer's Apocalypse

4.1.1. Image Analysis

The content of "*Revelation*" comes from the doomsday scene written by Saint John as revealed by God in the New Testament of the Bible: when the Lamb fights the beast, the seven seals are opened one by one, and a large number of disasters befall the world. Among them, "*The Four Horsemen*" illustrates the scene of the Lamb opening the six sealed seals. Dürer described the horror that John saw through the Four Horsemen as follows: "Power was given to him who sat on them," "He who sat on them had a balance in his hand," and "His name was Death, Hades, and he followed him." [5]. This immediately shows how terrifying it was that "power was given to them to kill a fourth of the inhabitants of the earth by the sword, by famine, by plague, and by wild beasts." [5].



Figure 1. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse [6]

It is worth noting that Dürer designed the distribution of characters on the page. The four horsemen, symbolizing disaster, are undoubtedly one of the focuses of the description of the picture, occupying most of the lower half of the page, while the suffering people occupy a small part of the picture, and the symbol of God is planned in the upper half of the picture. Although the scale of the characters is much smaller than *The Four Horsemen* (Figure 1), they are undoubtedly the most important part of the picture in terms of both position and overall space. The absolute emphasis on God in *The Four Horsemen's* work is not only reflected in the volume and position of the layout but also the center of gravity design and visual sequence. From a two-dimensional perspective, the movement of the sword, which symbolizes disaster, spreads from the center of the picture to the lower left and right. Dürer cuts off the halo of God so that the eyes of God appear at the top center of the picture, looking down to the center of the picture and the implicit connection with the movement of the sword. From a spatial perspective, Dürer designed a strong posture of accumulating power for the four knights and a posture of releasing power for the people at the lower edge of the picture. This contrast creates an effect of instantaneity, movement, and interactivity in the lower half of the picture. The upper half depicting God is completely the opposite. All the angels and God have quiet and beautiful postures, and the angels are symmetrically guarding God, presenting a steady, solid, and focused visual guidance effect. In contrast to the relative stillness of the upper half of the painting, the lower half presents a huge dynamic tension. As the title of the work suggests, the Four Horsemen are the first choice of attention, but after carefully reading the painting, the readers' sight will undoubtedly eventually focus on the eyes of the supreme God.

4.1.2. Religiousness in Images

Dürer completed the Apocalypse cycle when he was 29 years old. At this time, the Black Death, wars, and religious constraints plunged ordinary people into deep panic. The social background of disaster and turmoil made people project both fear and hope on theology. As Otto Benesch said in the book

"*The Northern Renaissance*" about Dürer's print "*Apocalypse*", "... this is the dream in the eyes of the evangelists, which is consistent with the world they see in a state of confusion." [6]. The doomsday scenes presented in the "*Apocalypse*" series of paintings reflect the contemporary thinking of the people on theology under the impact of Renaissance thought.

Dürer's observation and exploration of nature made him more humanistic than most artists of his time. His creative motivation based on his emotional framework for the people made him equally passionate about reality and metaphor. Multi-layered expressive motivations enabled Dürer to use biblical stories to simultaneously present the concrete and majestic image of gods and the reflection of the suffering and chaotic reality, expressing his examination of reality and questioning the status quo.

Through his works, Dürer expressed his understanding of the social predicament of the period and sought answers to his suffering from God. As one of Dürer's most popular works, "*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*" reflects the artists' compromise between humanistic care and religious beliefs in the context of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

4.2. Dürer's Saint Jerome in His Study

4.2.1. Image Analysis

Saint Jerome was an important pioneer in the Latinization of the Bible [7]. In the artworks of the same period, the image of Saint Jerome often combines the image of a scholar and a devout believer [7]. Dürer left behind works related to Saint Jerome at different stages of his creative career.

St. Jerome's path of exploration was undoubtedly arduous, and his persistence in preaching was undoubtedly pious, so St. Jerome is often associated with themes related to exploration, progress, and the exploration of new things. Renaissance artists and scholars including Dürer believed that the motivation for exploring science and humanity was closely related to religious beliefs and that devout faith could inspire research. For example, in geometry and perspective, the Book of Wisdom says that God is the great geometer: "He created all things with measurements, numbers, and weights [8].

"*Saint Jerome in his Study*" mainly depicts the saint praying in the early morning. The early church father Clement of Alexandria (150-215) said: "Prayer is to be with God." [9].



Figure 2. Saint Jerome in His Study [9]

From the picture (Figure 2) can see that in 1514, Dürer used an off-center perspective composition and complex light sources in this painting, and constructed an accurate situation through proportion and measurement to reveal the stable order of nature. Light enters the room from the left, and thoughts fill the entire study space, with the viewpoint almost overlapping the rightmost edge of the image. The application of accurate scale in "*Saint Jerome in His Study*" relies on the understanding of perspective light and shadow, and the application of technical expression illustrates Dürer's state of mind when painting "*Saint Jerome in the Study*".

Dogs, lions, and skulls are common metaphors in works based on the theme of Saint Jerome. The curling plants symbolize the complex thoughts of scholars, while the objects placed on the back wall symbolize the tools used by scholars during their research process. St. Jerome sought inspiration from God before the cross, just as Dürer saw the cognitive method of geometry as a gift from God. A large number of metaphorical symbols explain Dürer's purpose in painting "*Saint Jerome in His Study*".

4.2.2. Religiousness in Images

"*Saint Jerome in His Study*" was completed in 1514. At this time, Dürer had just completed his trip to Italy, collected a large number of mathematical works conducted research, and had initial results in the study of perspective light and shadow. As Dürer said in his notes: "I will base my understanding on measurement, numbers and weight." [8]. Dürer concretized geometry and gave mathematics three forms [10]. Dürer believed that nature is the basis of art, mathematics is a tool for understanding nature, and measurement and perspective are the mathematical foundations of painting [11].

The scene in "*Saint Jerome in His Study*" where Saint Jerome ponders under the enlightenment of God is Dürer's metaphor for exploring the state of technological innovation. It is also the common state of mind of many scholars and artists who explored science in a religious context during the Renaissance. Through his works, Dürer expressed his exploration of the techniques for presenting real nature and used the image of Saint Jerome to express the piety, awe, and desire of scholars and artists who sought inspiration from God and pursued truth and wisdom under the tide of the times.

4.3. Dürer's Adam and Eve

4.3.1. Image Analysis

Adam and Eve (Figure 3) come from a very well-known *Bible* story. According to the Bible - Genesis, God took Adam's rib to create Eve. Under the temptation of the snake, the two developed free will and took the initiative to eat the forbidden fruit. They were later expelled from the Garden of Eden and became the ancestors of mankind. The theme of Adam and Eve was popular during the Renaissance, expressing an aesthetic awareness of how things based on different foundations can be cleverly integrated into a perfect whole [11].



Figure 3. Adam and Eve [11]

The work is influenced by Italian art and is in the style of an altar screen. Eve's posture is graceful and feminine, with her left hand stretched out in a relaxed manner, her right hand placed in a static and solid position, and her feet dancing and dramatic, emphasizing the beauty of curves and movement. Adam has a distinct Greek style, with a more solemn and steady posture, holding a fruit in his left hand and swinging his right hand naturally backward. The two images complement each other, forming a contrast in terms of movement and stillness, joy and sorrow, hardness and softness.

4.3.2. Religiousness in Images

Adam and Eve have always had a strong metaphorical orientation in the field of literature and art. From ancient times to the present, a large number of artists from different regions have explored sex,

desire, original sin, the connection between man and God, and the relationship between free will and religious belief by depicting the images of Adam and Eve. Dürer's *Adam and Eve* are relatively eclectic and relatively real and natural among their contemporaries. Dürer believed that God created Adam and Eve perfect in body and soul and that the Fall demonstrated original sin and the imperfection of soul and body [11].

This was due to Germany's relatively conservative religious concepts at the time and Dürer's pioneering Renaissance ideas. After the trip to Italy, under the influence of Dürer's eclectic theology of the time, Adam and Eve were not only the human body with ideal proportions but also the concentrated expression of Dürer's natural aesthetics. The proposition of "Adam and Eve" is equivalent to asking artists questions about human nature and artistic ideals, and urging artists to carry their aesthetic concepts on religious genres.

5. Conclusion

As one of the representative painters of the Renaissance, Dürer made great contributions to the dissemination of images of humanism and religious reform against the backdrop of the collision between humanistic thought and religious background. Dürer's pictorial works reflect his dialectical attitude towards religion. In "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", Dürer uses religious scriptures as a medium to question social dilemmas. For believers in the Renaissance, when faced with social difficulties beyond human control, God is both judge and salvation. In *Saint Jerome in His Study*, Dürer projected God as a knower who gave inspiration and answered questions. Faced with the trend of technological innovation at the art and science level, artists represented by Dürer endowed knowledge and wisdom with divinity, thereby gaining the driving force to explore technologies that are close to real nature. In *Adam and Eve*, religious figures serve as carriers of ideals and beauty, becoming concrete artistic concepts that present the artist's personality. In his images, Dürer shows that his attitude toward divinity encompasses both piety and criticism, the pursuit of knowledge and expression.

During the Renaissance, religious humanism prevailed, and a large number of scholars and artists who were influenced by humanistic thought created works related to religious themes within the boundaries of traditional religious concepts. What is extremely contemporary is that works from the same era, the same region, or even the same creator often show different religious concepts due to differences in themes and periods. The understanding of the diverse and multi-faceted religion presented in Dürer's works covers almost most of them. It is this spirit of constant exploration of the relationship between religion and society, art, ideals, and humanity that has created a large number of works with vigorous vitality and technological innovation, and the spirit of the Renaissance is embodied here. Religious themes were not only the main genre of works during the Renaissance, but also the focus and main driving force for Renaissance artists to hone their creative self. The exploration of religious propositions in Renaissance artworks still influences later creators with the same inspiring spirit of speculation.

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