

The Aesthetics and Religiosity of Artworks in the Renaissance: Dürer's *The Four Apostles* as an Example

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Abstract. Dürer was the most representative painter of the German Renaissance. He was born, lived, painted, and died in his hometown of Nuremberg. He was deeply influenced by the Protestant movement and responded to the changing times through artistic expression. When Nuremberg formally converted to Protestantism in March 1525, Dürer did not follow the trend but presented one of his paintings, *The Four Apostles*, to the city in 1526, which expressed his longing for a secular government and his hope that it would lead the people back to a harmonious and stable life. Focusing on Renaissance Germany, this study takes into account the influence of the German Reformation and the Peasants' War and examines Dürer's interaction with the social environment. The study employs documentary analysis to find and read relevant information and literature, and visual analysis to interpret *The Four Apostles* in detail. The advantage of these methods is that they can well analyse the social environment in which the art was created, as well as understand the inner psychology of the painter when he created the art. The ultimate goal of this study is to better understand the inextricable relationship between Renaissance aesthetics and religious beliefs.

Keywords: The Renaissance; Albrecht Dürer; *The Four Apostles*; Aesthetics and Religiosity.

1. Introduction

Albrecht Dürer was born in 1471 in Nuremberg, a wealthy imperial city in central Germany. The two Gothic churches are a testament to Nuremberg's importance as the political, economic, and cultural center of Germany, and reflect the fact that the city's citizens, like the city and its architecture, valued religion, culture, art, and honor.

Although modern scholars recognise Dürer as one of Renaissance Germany's most celebrated humanists or an epoch-making master of the art, he was essentially a civic painter concerned with the welfare of the people. As Nuremberg's foremost painter, Dürer loved the city and, with his close friends such as Willibald Pirckheimer and Lazarus Spengler, lived through the sweeping Reformation movement that swept the country [1]. In 1526, Dürer donated one of his most important works, *The Four Apostles*, to the municipal government, which was the culmination of his life's artistic exploration, and also demonstrated the artist's distinctive humanist ideology.

Focusing on the broad theme of Renaissance aesthetics and religiosity, this study analyses the artwork *The Four Apostles* as a starting point. Firstly, the background of the creation of the work is meticulously analysed through literature analysis, showing the influence of the Reformation and the Peasant Revolutionary Movement on artistic creation in Germany, and focusing on the interaction between painters and the social environment. Secondly, *The Four Apostles* is analysed visually to examine how art and religion are integrated. Finally, it explains the extent to which religion and art were linked during this period.

2. Background

When Luther posted the *Ninety-five Articles of Discourse* in 1517, Dürer was already a great painter whose reputation had been enjoyed for thirty years. Although Dürer never met with Luther or painted his portrait, his support for Luther was obvious and firm. As Nuremberg's greatest and most important painter, how did Dürer interact with Luther? What were his views and attitudes towards Protestantism?



The answer can be found in a letter from Luther to Christoph Scheurl, legal advisor to the Nuremberg City Council. In this letter, written on 5 March 1518, Luther mentions Dürer for the first time. From the content of the letter can get two messages. Firstly, Dürer was friendly and supportive of Luther and sent him gifts. The gifts included some woodcuts and engravings that he had made. Secondly, the Syllabus mentioned in the letter was the same Syllabus of the Ninety-five Articles that had created such a furor in Germany and even in the whole Western European world. Dürer likely read the Syllabus and the proverbial translation that Schuyler sent to Luther.

Two years later, in a 1520 letter to Spalatin, a mutual friend of the two men, Dürer asked him to thank the Elector of Saxony on his behalf for the gift of Luther's works, saying, "If God would let me see Martin Luther in person, I would surely inscribe him on a copper plate as an everlasting reminder of the Christian who helped me to overcome my great fears." [2]. In his diary, Dürer mentions that on White Sunday in 1521, he learned of Luther's abduction on the return journey from the Council of Worms, and after describing Luther's being plundered by ten knights, he then wrote a large diary entry in which he blessed Luther and expressed his opinion: "He was a man enlightened by the Holy Spirit and a follower of the true Christian faith. I do not know whether he is alive or has been killed by his enemies, but I do know that he suffered so much for the sake of seeking the truth of Christ, and because he blamed the non-Christian popes who sought to restrict the freedom of Christ with heavy earthly laws they took away our hard-earned money. This man wrote more clearly than any work of the last 140 years than anything written in the last 140 years. The Holy Spirit he has is greater than all. Also unrivalled O Christians, ask God for help." [2]. Obviously, Dürer was familiar with Luther's work and recognised his methodical approach.

Professor John Dillenberger of the University of Berkeley, California, USA, believes that Dürer himself identified with Luther and that some of his early works reflect that Dürer felt the need for reform. His friendship with Pickheimer, and his life among a group of Nuremberg humanists who supported Luther, somehow reflects the possibility that Dürer was always the first to know about Luther's ideas and works. Professor Steven Ozment, a professor of history at Harvard University, has mentioned that before Dürer died in 1528, he had a collection of all of Luther's previously published works, some of which were given to him by George Spalatin, court secretary to the Elector of Saxony [3]. In Dürer's most important work of his later years, *The Four Apostles*, each of the apostles is accompanied by a biblical text below, which, according to the English art historian William Martin Conway, was apparently taken by Dürer from Luther's 1521 translation of the *New Testament* into German [3]. This had to be the first and last wonderful collaboration between the two men. As Wilhelm Waetzoldt, a professor of art history at the University of Berlin, Germany, has pointed out, the Renaissance strengthened and deepened German devotion to the faith Whereas the beginning of the Italian Renaissance was expressed in terms of form, the beginning of the German Renaissance was expressed in terms of the *Bible* to express it.

The year 1525 was an extremely important one for Nuremberg. Firstly, on 10 January, three Nuremberg painters were arrested by the city council for spreading the ideas of radical social reformers such as Andreas Carlstadt and the Peasant War leader Thomas Müntzer and were expelled from Nuremberg after a trial [4]. Between 3 and 14 March, the city council convened in the mayor's hall for the famous "Nüumberger Religionsgespräch" in the Mayor's Hall from 3 to 14 March, before formally deciding to accept the Protestant doctrines and declaring Nuremberg the first Protestant city in the Holy Roman Empire. Subsequently, the municipal council took jurisdiction over all religious matters from the Bishop of Bamberg, and the monasteries that had supported the Reformation, such as the Augustinians, were taken over after gradually handing over their property to the municipal council. Some monasteries that refused to convert to Protestantism, such as the Franciscans, were ordered to stop recruiting new novices, and those who left voluntarily were to receive a pension from the city council. On 24 May the Nuremberg city council issued a new calendar, in which Catholic traditions, as well as 49 religious festivals set out by the Bishop of Bamberg at his synods of 1491 and 1506, were drastically cut back [4]. On 12 November, the Protestant reformer Philipp

Melanchthon came to Nuremberg to establish a Gymnasium, employing a headmaster and teachers who were all Lutherans.

The German Peasants' War of 1525, which swept through central and southern Germany, added to this series of events. While the Nuremberg municipal authorities, hoping to keep all dangers outside the walls of Nuremberg, endeavoured to purge the influence of Müntzele and at the same time to suppress those who sympathised with and supported the Peasants' War, the common people of the city began to support the insurrectionists of 1525 in various ways, and Dürer, as usual, demonstrated his popular stance. In 1525, when the German Peasants' War was suppressed, he painted the *Memorial of the Peasant's War* to commemorate the occasion. Dürer's ideas encouraged his students, three of whom mocked the Church and the city's aristocracy, cast doubt on religion, and were interrogated by the city authorities. During the interrogation, the students remained outspoken in their stance and were consequently expelled from the city by the city council. This event, ostensibly directed at the students, is actually a warning to Dürer and an insult to him.

It was against this background that *The Four Apostles* was created, and in the autumn of 1526 Dürer sent this elaborate work to the Nuremberg City Council. In a letter to the Town Council, Dürer said, "For a long time I have wanted to express to the wise Town Council my respect for you, and therefore send this humble painting as a remembrance." The city council accepted the gift and also paid Dürer something for the painting.

3. Visual Analysis

The Four Apostles are painted on two narrow wooden panels, divided into two symmetrical parts, left and right. On the left, John and Peter are depicted; on the right, Paul and Mark. In the painting, the young John, clad in a red cloak and wearing a light green undergarment, is intently reading the Gospel, looking calm and collected. Peter, who is in charge of the golden key of heaven, is standing on the left side of John, as if he is looking at the Gospel in John's hand with full attention, and also as if he is in a state of closed-eye contemplation, with his wise forehead high and full, and his overall expression pious and solemn. These two figures are like seekers and discoverers of the truth who are pursuing the truth, with a scholarly temperament. On the right side of the picture, Paul is wearing a light-coloured cloak, holding the Bible in one hand and a sword in the other, with his eyebrows crossed, showing determination, boldness, and cynicism. On one side, Mark, holding a scroll of Scripture in his hand, looked around with angry, alert eyes. They seem to be the image of defenders of truth and justice, tolerating no trace of evil and ugliness on earth. In the lower part of the painting, there is a passage that roughly reads, "In these troubled times, may all those in power be on their guard and not regard falsehoods as oracles, for God never adds or subtracts a single word to his own words. For this reason, I wish you to listen to the counsels of these four messengers of the Most High and the Most Good." It can be seen through this passage that the painting is imbued with the painter's strong feelings of love and hatred. At the time when the artist created this painting, the Reformation movement was divided into many sects and the country was in chaos. Through the portrayal of the four disciples of Jesus, the artist conveyed his passionate praise and promotion of the promoters and defenders of the truth of the German social reforms, as well as his call for justice and truth on earth and his strong accusation and condemnation of the forces of evil.

Dürer's artistic treatment is extremely clever, with strong contrasts between the left and right sides of the picture, with the characters on the left being calm and cool, and the characters on the right being melancholic and irritable; the colours of the left side of the picture are bright and warm, while the right side is dark and cold. However, the careful composition and the bright and rounded colour treatment make people feel that it is not abrupt, but more thought-provoking. The characters in the painting have distinctive personalities, with different facial expressions and movements, and it is no wonder that later generations have been able to position the four characters as mucous, polycythemic, bilious, and depressive, which are typical of their personalities.

As a whole, the characters in the painting have changes in their simplicity, and there is harmony and unity in the changes, integrating the beautiful and elegant characteristics of the characters of the southern Italian painters and the delicate and refined artistic components of the northern painters. It shows the painter's high painting skills of eclecticism and integration of North and South. The painter has always endeavoured to combine the Northern Gothic tradition with the Venetian artistic style, and it has been proved that he has done so.

4. Discussion

The German historian Gerhard Pfeiffer has shown that the Four Apostles in Dürer's painting refer to his contemporaries, for example, St John represents Melanchthon, and St Paul is Joachim Camerarius, headmaster of the newly established grammar school in Nuremberg. Other scholars see in the painting Dürer's remembrance of the Reformation and believe it to be a religious propaganda painting against the Holy See. Whatever the meaning of the painting, Dürer's behaviour firmly reflected that as a citizen of Nuremberg, especially after the Reformation and the Peasants' War, he longed for a stable social order and supported the Nuremberg municipal authorities in their efforts to lead the people from chaos to stability. Dürer was a great painter who believed that politics and religion could be merged in art and that both had to be worked on by the municipality before they could hope to be realised [5].

What's more, Dürer gave the four apostles different images and personalities to glorify the promoters of German society and the defenders of truth, who represented just truth and wisdom. He not only expressed the natural beauty of classical art but also retained the simplicity and solemnity of the spirituality of the Northern Gothic tradition [6]. The true essence of the German religious spirit embodied in the painting is also the deepest expression and statement of Dürer's heart.

To sum up, Dürer's religious art is Reformation art, but not Protestant art. It was born out of a new piety of the heart but was still bound by the old ideas and forms. It was formed in a period of religious revival and perfected in pain and conflict, but it was by no means an appendage to any particular creed [7]. The connection between his art and Luther's achievements was not intentional but derived from their agreement like a spiritual experience.

5. Conclusion

By meticulously retracing the history of the creation of *The Four Apostles* and analysing it visually, this study reveals that the creator, Dürer, had a deep insight into the realities of Renaissance Germany and demonstrated his strong sense of social engagement in the artwork. This study demonstrates a way of understanding artworks through the lens of aesthetics and religiosity. On the one hand, works of art are the outward manifestation of a painter's subjective spiritual world constructed through his or her personalised painting techniques. On the other hand, artworks are also a mapping of social reality and are closely related to social ideology. This study provides some valuable lessons for future research in this direction, of which the most important is that art history research should have an interdisciplinary and integrated vision, using both rigorous historical research and deep aesthetic insight. At the same time, the aesthetics of art is not only related to religion; under different historical and spatial and temporal conditions, works of art present deep connotations, which need to be carefully discovered by researchers. Of course, there are still some shortcomings in this study, mainly two: firstly, only from the religious perspective makes the background analysis a little thin, and should be supplemented with some examination of the socio-political perspective. Secondly, the analysis of the social impact of *The Four Apostles* is missing. Future research should start more from the social environment in which artworks are generated, examine the painter's creative psychology, and then combine it with analyses of the visual creation itself to comprehensively interpret the vitality of artworks.

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