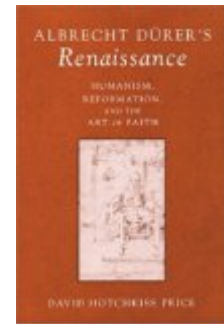


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Hotchkiss Price. *Albrecht Dürer's Renaissance: Humanism, Reformation, and the Art of Faith*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. xxii + 337 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11343-9.

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Compliments for Complements

David Hotchkiss Price convincingly demonstrates that Albrecht Dürer's art is best understood within the context of Christian humanist values. Price underscores this literary engagement because he argues that it provided the inspiration for Dürer to do for art what the Christian humanists were doing for biblical philology. Although not a humanist in the strictest sense of the word, Dürer, with his artistic productions, treatises on art, and correspondence with humanists, was an artist committed to creating a better society by harnessing classical art to the service of Christianity. According to Price, this philosophical approach permitted Dürer to synthesize the written and visual word into a new genre: the illustrated humanist book of faith. Thus, Price argues against the traditional view that Dürer was simply influenced by Renaissance humanism; instead, Price maintains that Dürer was an active contributor to the northern humanist movement.

By emphasizing the textual themes that accompany Dürer's work, Price gives a nuanced account of Dürer's own spiritual odyssey. He shows Dürer's early desire to reform Christian society by imitating Classical models of the human figure that would promote and portray late medieval devotional practices. Price also points out that it is clearly anachronistic to claim that Dürer's famous early works, such as his woodcut series *Apocalypse* (1498), are "Protestant." Instead, Price cogently places Dürer's earlier art within the context of late medieval reform efforts in which anticlericalism served primarily as a catalyst for reform, rather than as a rejection of sacer-

dotal hierarchy.

Price's consideration of Dürer's later belief in many of Luther's teachings is exemplified by his discussion of the images and accompanying texts in the artist's painting *The Four Apostles* (1526). The painting was a gift given to the newly Lutheran-dominated city council of Nuremberg, and the text from Luther's *Septembertestament* appeared at the bottom as a support for the apostles. The fate of *The Four Apostles* makes not only the strengths of Price's argument salient, but also the difficulties in confirming the level of significance of texts within images. Elector Maximilian of Bavaria, an ardent Catholic ruler and collector of Dürer's art, purchased this work in 1627 and had Luther's text at the base of the painting cut off. Price remarks, however, that despite such efforts by the Elector to purge the Protestant message, viewers could still see a depiction of John reading Luther's translation of his Gospel. Yet since Maximilian believed that the work was now sufficiently "cleansed," one wonders if viewers considered texts depicted within the art, as opposed to texts appended to the art, with the same level of concern as other visual images. Thus although Price emphasizes Dürer's desire to reach a broad audience and supports Bob Scribner's claim that the use of popular iconography allowed the illiterate to "read," this example raises the issue of the relative importance of texts as images. Nevertheless, it appears that Elector Maximilian's interest in Dürer's art is a testament to the artist's success in creating an art that was based on Christian humanist values and that had a devotional as well as aes-

thetic appeal that could resonate with both Catholics and Protestants.

The contribution of Price's work to Dürer studies is significant; he has filled the lacuna left by numerous scholars who have ignored the literary accompaniments to Dürer's works. By emphasizing Dürer's desire to combine the power of art and literature in order to elevate Christian society, he has placed Dürer within his time as not only a close friend of such eminent humanists as Willibald Pirckheimer, but also as a collaborator who helped define Christian humanism beyond the Nuremberg circle. Price has also been able to penetrate the religious worldview of Dürer more deeply than Erwin Panofsky did in his classical work *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*. He accomplishes this feat by applying his own research, along with that of other historians such as Heiko Oberman and Jaroslav Pelikan, to disprove Panofsky's claim that Dürer's religious views necessarily led to tension between the humanist and Lutheran worldviews.

Price also does for Dürer what Heiko Oberman did for Luther: uncover his subject's participation in common forms of early modern anti-Semitism. He manages this by examining those textual messages attached to Dürer's devotional art that promote penitential reform, especially the *The Small Passion* (1511). *The Small Passion* consists of thirty-seven woodcuts in book form, accompanied by poems arranged by the Christian humanist and fellow Nuremberger, Benedictus Chelidoniumus. Price argues persuasively that the poems reinforce the visual images in their attempt to incite hatred against Jews as Christ-killers. Price thus does a masterful job of portraying this passionate work as it would have been received

by Dürer's contemporaries: primarily as a vehicle for promoting penitential devotion and anti-Semitism rather than aesthetic admiration.

By painting Dürer "warts and all," Price's book offers a clearer image of Dürer's personality than we have ever previously seen. And just as Price has demonstrated how Dürer's textual messages complemented the artist's visual images, so Price's own text complements two important biographical portraits of Dürer: Ernst Rebel's *Albrecht Dürer: Maler und Humanist* (1996) and Jane Campbell Hutchinson's *Albrecht Dürer: A Biography* (1990). Rebel and Hutchinson are both art historians who make extensive use of Dürer's diary, family chronicle, and correspondence to elucidate our understanding of the man and his art. But Price offers us something new. By treating the long-neglected textual messages accompanying Dürer's art as complements rather than as inconsequential appendages, Price reveals the artist's active role in the development of Christian humanism. Price's work is thus a compelling example of the synergistic potential of interdisciplinary works. Indeed, it is an exquisitely illustrated book, and written with such eloquence and at such a high level of scholarship that it deserves recognition as a masterpiece in its own right.

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