Since its publication in 1943, Erwin Panofsky’s *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* has cast a long shadow over subsequent scholarship on the Nuremberg master. Panofsky’s interests in valorizing classical ideals and in exploring the iconographic intricacies in Dürer’s art offered stimulating alternatives to the prevailing preoccupation with issues of connoisseurship. Yet, according to David Price, Panofsky’s neglect of Dürer’s literary activities resulted in an incomplete picture of the artist. Dürer, after all, authored letters, poems, and theoretical treatises in addition to his images. This makes him unique among artists in Germany. To be fair to Panofsky, he wrote brilliantly on the artist’s treatises but only very selectively on the other texts. Since Panofsky’s monograph, scholars have learned much about the cultural and religious milieu in which Dürer worked. Price’s newest book seeks to restore the balance in the universe of Dürer scholarship. Trained as a specialist in German literature, history, and religion, he tackles and contextualizes the writings. Rest assured that this is more than just an excellent philological study, since the author often exhibits great sensitivity to Dürer’s prints and drawings. Price’s goal is to understand Dürer’s humanistic and religious roots.

Chapter 1 opens with the statement “The emblem for this book, and consequently for this approach to Albrecht Dürer’s religious sensibility, is the will of his wife” (p. 7). In 1538 Agnes Frey Dürer established a scholarship at the University of Wittenberg to fund the son of an artisan who wished to study theology. Agnes’s endowment insisted that the recipient must have “already studied the liberal arts for four years,” a stipulation that certainly reflected her husband’s regard for the benefits of a humanistic education as preparation for theology (p. 8). This chapter considers Dürer’s own education and subsequent intellectual preoccupations, notably his mastery of geometry and arithmetic. Knowledge, especially as articulated in his prints, was Dürer’s route to personal and social advancement. From his early association with the patrician Willibald Pirckheimer to his participation in the *Sodalitas Staupitziana* around 1516, Dürer moved among an elite circle. His varied contributions were valued by his contemporaries. In his *Elements of Rhetoric* (1531), Philipp Melanchthon described Dürer’s art as the visual equivalent of the sublime level of writing in the Greco-Roman divisions of style.

In 1498 Dürer published his first book, the *Apocalypse*, which combines fifteen monumental woodcuts (c. 39 x 28 cm.) and accompanying text, available in either Latin or German. In Chapter 2, Price has two objectives. First, he is intrigued by Dürer’s decision to make a book since, as he notes, this is perhaps the “first book of any kind that was designed, illustrated, and published by an artist” (p. 32). Whether Dürer was inspired by Anton Koberger, his godfather whose *Koberger Bible* of 1483 supplied the German translation of the Apocalypse; or by Michael Wolgemut, his teacher who illustrated the *Schatzbehalter* (1491) and *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493); or by Pirckheimer and his scholarly circle cannot be decided with absolute certainty. His choice of the book format and language options is rooted in the literary world of Nuremberg’s humanists, a point that Price could have explained more thoroughly. Second, he questions modern scholars searching for the seeds of the artist’s later Lutheran beliefs in these early images. Price correctly argues that Dürer’s imagery, such as including a dying pope in the *Breaking of the Fifth and Sixth Seals*, was
thoroughly consistent with current attitudes about the Church and with the text of Revelation 6:16, which tells how the Apocalypse will affect all ranks of society. Elsewhere God is dressed in the pluvial of a priest, hardly an argument for anti-clericalism. Price’s comments on Dürer’s belief in sacramental salvation could make fuller use of the woodcuts’ imagery.

Chapter 3 (“Christian Humanism and the Art of Imitation”) is perhaps the book’s finest. German humanists knew antiquity mainly through classical texts. The Pirckheimers and Konrad Peutingers of the age favored inscriptions and literature over actual Roman statues and other visual models. Students and scholars, especially since Petrarch in the fourteenth century, learned their Cicero and Seneca by reading and then imitating their writing or rhetorical styles. Erasmus’s Ciceronianus (1528) is a prime example of this approach. This fundamentally literary appreciation of antiquity, as championed by Pirckheimer, Dürer’s best friend, and by Conrad Celtis, shaped the artist’s own dialogue with the past. With just a few possible exceptions, Dürer rarely sketched classical art directly. He depended on contemporary Italian artists, such as Andrea Mantegna and Jacopo de’ Barbari, as visual intermediaries. Dürer’s debt, as evidenced in his Adam and Eve (Fall of Humanity) engraving of 1504, is well known. Adam looks to the Apollo Belvedere and Eve looks to a Venus Pudica or Diana type. Price connects this form of emulation with the humanists’ practice of imitation. In texts such as the Ode to Apollo (1486) and Quattuor Libri Amorum (1502), the latter with a woodcut by Dürer or his circle, Conrad Celtis championed the German-speaking lands as the heirs to the culture and greatness of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Dürer’s art, while rooted in imitation, is itself highly inventive. It can be characterized as pictorial humanism. Yet Dürer’s humanism, like Erasmus’s, is ultimately Christian. He even models a few of his self-portraits in direct emulation of Christ.

Chapter 4 (“Popular Devotions”) opens with a discussion about the appeal of Dürer’s art to both the educated elite and the broader laity. Price notes that some of the greatest contemporary German authors, such as Celtis, wrote in Latin rather than the vernacular. This assured them the possibility of a more international readership if the text possessed any artistic or intellectual merit. Other authors, such as Hans Sachs of Nuremberg, favored German for his more local audiences. Price aptly warns against dividing Dürer’s audiences too rigidly since his prints have a universal appeal or, to use the author’s term, a “bilingualism” (p. 100) independent of the language of any accompany texts. Dürer does, however, adjust his style to match the ambition of the project at hand. Price nicely contrasts two Crucifixions from the Small Passion series of 1511 and from a broadsheet entitled Seven Hours of Prayer of 1510. The former is printed with thirty-seven Latin poems by Benedictus Chelidonius, a Benedictine monk and teacher at St. Egidien’s in Nuremberg, which present “a pompous display of virtuosity in no fewer than twenty different classical meters” (p. 99). The latter image comes with a poem in German doggerel by Dürer. In this instance, Dürer constructed a simple scene of Mary and John the Evangelist flanking Christ on the cross. By contrast, the visual and emotional complexities of the Small Passion’s Crucifixion in some ways match the complexities of Chelidonius’s poems. It is also one of thirty-seven woodcuts in this rich narrative cycle rather than a single, stand alone image.

After a section on the display of the imperial relics and regalia in Nuremberg, the chapter considers Dürer’s devotional broadsheets. Price chides many scholars for failing to reproduce the images in their textual settings; for failing to consider these textual settings in their interpretations of the prints; and for failing to recognize the artistic merits of Dürer’s poetry and prose writings. About two dozen poems, using a four-stress line, survive mainly in a nineteenth-century copy of a now lost small manuscript of Dürer’s poetry and in several illustrated broadsheets published starting in 1509. Although Dürer’s poems prompted some good-natured ribbing and, on one occasion, a correction by his friend Lazarus Spengler, secretary to the Nuremberg city council, he was obviously proud of his compositions. Price offers an excellent analysis of several of these poems, which are filled with aphorisms (e.g., “Diligently avoid all gossip mean / So that you thereby win esteem. / You’ll then be better than the others / Who speak evilly of their neighbors.” [p. 119]). The Seven Hours of Prayer, mentioned above, stresses both the drama of the passion and the grieving of the Virgin Mary, features consistent with contemporary religious piety in Germany. On the poems and broadsheets, I also recommend the recent analyses in Heike Sahm’s Dürers kleinere Texte: Konventionen als Spielraum für Individualität (Tübingen, 2002, pp. 87-116).

In Chapter 5 (“Humanist Books of Faith”) Price urges scholars to study The Large Passion, The Life of the Virgin, and The Small Passion as coherent books rather than simply as print series. The connections between texts and images are too often overlooked. Chelidonius composed distinctively different types of Latin poems for each. The Large Passion, a large folio format (woodcuts c. 39.5 x
28.5 cm.), employs grand epic dactylic hexameters. *The Life of the Virgin*, a modest-sized folio tome (woodcuts c. 29.8 x 20.9 cm.), is written as an elegy. *The Small Passion*, a small quarto (woodcuts c. 12.7 x 9.7 cm.), is lyric in style. As Price notes (p. 135), these are the three main classical genres for poetry, evidence of the humanistic conception and the overall ambitions of the three books. In the case of the latter two books, the poems are printed on the verso and face their corresponding woodcuts on the recto of each page. This layout encourages the reader to link word and image. Whether many of Dürer and Chelidonius’s contemporaries would have owned all three books and/or understood their literary pretensions is harder to prove. Artist and author had religious goals in mind. For *The Small Passion*, their mutual friend Johannes Cochlaeus wrote an introductory poem (p. 133) alerting the reader that Chelidonius’s lyre, unlike that of Pindar, Sappho, or Horace, “sings of the torments of the cross.”

One of the most interesting sections of Price’s book is his discussion of classical style and Dürer’s efforts to match his woodcuts with the respective literary forms or, conversely as I would argue, Chelidonius’s picking his poetic styles to match the woodcuts (pp. 140-146). For example, the artist imbues *The Large Passion* with the “gravitas of classical heroism” (p. 141). Price describes the triumphant Christ after the Resurrection as an Apollonian “sun god.” Elsewhere he remarks that the gloomy chiaroscuro of *The Small Passion* complements the “shadowiness of Chelidonius’s odes” (p. 146). Missing from this discussion, however, is a consideration of the collaborative relationship of artist and poet. Which came first–the woodcut or the poem? Was Dürer responding to Chelidonius’s poems or vice versa? Since Dürer’s own Latin was fairly rudimentary and, we can probably assume, Chelidonius’s understanding of the aesthetic subtleties of woodcut styles was equally rudimentary, it is easy to envision extensive discussions between the two men. One successful project led to a second and then a third joining of their respective talents. It must be noted, however, that Dürer frequently produced the woodcuts of these series without the accompanying texts and independently even years earlier as single prints. This plus the stress on Dürer’s name over Chelidonius’s in the title pages would argue for the primacy of the print over the text.

Dürer might glorify Christ and Mary yet, as Price discusses in Chapter 6 (“Anti-Semitism and the Passion”), his texts and images reflect his culture’s anti-Jewish sentiments. Price observes rightly that this feature of his art is scarcely noted in the Dürer literature. Perhaps the horrors of the Nazis’ treatment of Jews dissuaded scholars from looking more closely at Dürer’s attitudes. During his lifetime, many Christians still blamed the Jews (and their modern descendants) for Christ’s death. Nuremberg expelled its last Jews in 1499. Dürer’s art follows contemporary conventions for depicting Jews using exotic costumes and physical caricatures, especially when cast as Christ’s tormentors. Is Dürer’s emphasis on Christ’s suffering, as seen on the title page of *The Small Passion* with its melancholic Christ and accompanying epigram (“O vile man, cause of so many pains, look at the sacred body of Christ everywhere lacerated”), rooted in his anti-semitism, his empathetic narrative of Christ’s passion, or both? Price cites Chelidonius’s anti-Jewish comments and, later, derogatory lines from some of Dürer’s poems; however, Dürer’s prowess as a skilled story teller, who used many means to enliven these scenes, should be considered more thoroughly.

Chapter 7 ("Representing Sacred Philology"), perhaps an apt alternative title for Price’s entire book, explores Dürer’s many renderings of St. Jerome. The Latin Church Father was the patron saint and role model for many humanists, including Erasmus and, more locally, Hartmann Schedel, author of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*. Dürer’s depictions stress the scholar—not the penitent–Jerome. Price remarks that “part of the attraction of Jerome to Dürer would have been the opportunity to introduce Italian Renaissance representations of him to the North” (p. 199). Unfortunately, this comment reveals the author’s unfamiliarity with the long tradition of depicting the scholar-saint in Northern European art. A relevant essay, not cited by Price, is Peter G. Bietenholz’s "Erasmus von Rotterdam und der Kult des Heiligen Hieronymus."[1]

The cleverest title is "Engraving a Portrait of Martin Luther" for Chapter 8. Dürer, of course, never portrayed the reformer even though he stated that he wished to do so. The men may have met when Luther visited the *Sodalitas Staupitziana* in Nuremberg in October 1518, a point that Price had brought up early but neglects to mention again in this chapter. Price recounts Luther’s growing influence on the artist, who owned at least sixteen published tracts by the Wittenberg theologian. Price examines how Dürer’s art changed in response to his growing Lutheran sensibilities, especially how he shied away from the sorts of religious themes that typify his early career. Dürer turned to portraiture including engraved portraits that emulate ancient Roman sculptural memorials. Although it is beyond the author’s literary approach to
Dürer, the artist’s cooler, less sensuous style reflected his response to contemporary criticisms about religious art. Since other scholars have explored this subject at great length, I found it rather difficult to distinguish Price’s additions to this dialogue, though his comments are most appropriate for the book’s broader goals.

Price is especially comfortable in Chapter 9 (“The Reformation and the Bible”) since many of his own recent publications address biblical humanism and the rapid rise of new Latin and vernacular editions of the Bible. His and other scholars’ efforts to “find” specific Lutheran content in Dürer’s art focus upon his Last Supper woodcut of 1523 and the so-called Four Apostles painting of 1526. Price challenges the traditional interpretation of the Last Supper as espousing communion in both forms, bread and wine, since he finds no clear Eucharistic allusions. Can the chalice instead refer to John 13:26 where Jesus dips the bread, given to the now absent Judas, in the wine? Price proposes that the woodcut shows an episode after Judas’s departure in which Christ says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will recognize that you are my disciples insofar as you have love one another” (John 13:34). Price stresses Luther’s emphasis on Christian love, including the insertion of this passage in the preface of his September testament published in September 1522. He sees Dürer’s print depicting a “growing sense of joy—gradually overcoming the sadness … and confusion over the previous announcement of the betrayal—as a reaction to the promise of salvation and the ethical doctrine of love” (pp. 257-258). This suggestion is attractive though it is just as easy for another viewer to read the apostles’ reactions as ones of shock and depression—not joy.

The rest of the chapter relates the Four Apostles to Lutheran ideas. Dürer presented the two large painted panels to the Nuremberg city council on October 6, 1526. Price stresses the inclusion of biblical passages in German from the September testament; the selection and relative position of the four figures (John, Peter, Mark, and Paul); and the artist’s warning to the council, which had embraced Lutheranism a year earlier, to be vigilant against false teachers. Or as Price nicely phrases it, “From a cultural historical perspective, it is revolutionary that The Four Apostles is religious art that does not seek to support worship, veneration, or piety. Although Protestant in the extreme, it ironically does not elicit the faith or piety of an individual believer. Instead, it connects biblicism to civic authority and denies legitimacy to challenges to an official exegesis” (p. 273). Although Price does not add much new to the debate about this picture, the section provides a fitting culmination to the evolution of Dürer’s religious ideas and their pictorial expressions over the course of his career. One correction needs mentioning. It is Hieronymus—not Lazarus–Holzschuher who is portrayed (and identified) in Dürer’s painting in Berlin (Fig. 9.8) and who, as a member of the Inner Council in 1526, paid the artist an honorarium in conjunction with the Four Apostles. While Price’s book was in press, another more detailed examination of this painting was published.[2]

In the brief Chapter 10 (“A Concluding Perspective: Nuremberg and Durer, 1526”), Price tells about Philipp Melanchthon’s speech inaugurating the new Protestant school at St. Egidien’s in Nuremberg and the humanities curriculum, which he devised. During the last years of his life, Dürer labored above all on his own literary legacy. His Art of Measurement (1525, with continued work on a second expanded, posthumous edition that appeared in 1538) and Four Books of Human Proportions (1528) are his most sustained, humanist-styled books. Having dabbled with words and images throughout his career, Dürer authored the first true theoretical texts in German, an appropriate replacement for the lost tracts by classical artists whose names alone had come down to Dürer’s time. A discussion of these treatises was, unfortunately, beyond the religious focus of this book.[3]

David Price’s Albrecht Dürer’s Renaissance is a superb, well-argued book. Although other specialists have examined the Nuremberg master’s writings, Price makes an excellent case for the necessity of studying Dürer’s impressive literary and artistic outputs together. Dürer’s grounding in the humanistic and religious discourses of pre-Reformation Nuremberg are now a bit clearer. As Price has nicely demonstrated, Dürer apparently wanted his words, as well as his art, to endure into the future.

Notes


