

Anatomical Studies of Renaissance Art: A Case Study of DÜRER'S Artworks

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Abstract. This essay examines to what extent was Albrecht Dürer's nude figures influenced by Venetian artists' philosophy on human anatomy. During Albrecht Dürer's lifetime, he traveled twice to Venice to obtain more knowledge and development on human anatomy. This study will be led out from 3 different aspects: the comparison of Albrecht Dürer's early (before his first/second travel to Venice) works and his later works- the comparison between the engraved and painted versions of Dürer's Adam and Eve, how did Dürer embed the Venetian way of portraying nude bodies into his art – how was Dürer's relationship with Giovanni Bellini affect his way of painting and constructing his painting of human figures, and to what extent did Leonardo da Vinci influence Albrecht Dürer due to Leonardo's high reputation in Venice as Leonardo was highly influential in Venice for his anatomical studies and his technical design were highly appreciated by the artists and artisans in Venice.

Keywords: Albrecht Dürer; Venice; Anatomy; Human Proportion.

1. Introduction

Albrecht Dürer's second travel to Venice elevated his artistic pathway, as during this period of time he had taken on the technics/ theory of Venetian way of construction of nude human figures. In the North (Germany), where Dürer is from, there were not many anatomical studies being produced, so Dürer wanted to enhance his skill in the presentation of human figures. Therefore, he climbed over the Alps and set his foot on the Venetian ground. He first arrived in Venice at the end of 1494. During this stay, he gained knowledge of South Renaissance humanism (study of antiquity) and anatomical knowledge which highly influenced his later works. However, he was not satisfied, after he did his engraving of [Adam and Eve] he traveled again to Venice in 1505. This time, he had seen more mature and idealized body forms, as Venice had been pushed into the High Renaissance. During Dürer's second stay in Venice, his ways of constructing the human nude had been altered. It was leaning more towards the idealised body which was praised by the Venetian artists. This essay begins with a discussion of the early engraving of [Adam and Eve] that Dürer had produced before his second travel to Venice can be seen in Figure 1, comparing it to the painted version of [Adam and Eve] that Dürer produced after his trip to Venice can be seen in Figure 2. This will explore the differences between the two works produced, in their posture, the harshness of the contour line and sfumato, the adaptation of chiaroscuro, and bodily proportion.



Fig. 1 Adam and Eve (Engraving) [1]



Fig. 2 Adam and Eve (Oil on panel) [2]

2. Theory

Dürer's interest in realistic and naturalistic human features can also be seen in the [Symmetry of the Human Body] By Dürer. In this, he compared many different body shapes of all humans, including children. In the book Dürer also embraced the different shapes and sizes of people, he compared the overweight to the skinny figures, and he had also taken recordings of colored men as well, this

recording can be seen in Figure 3 [Head Recording of Negro]. This reflects his curiosity and professionalism as an artist as he explored different ones of the normal rather than solely discovering the perfect proportion in the human body but also taking account of the diversity of humans. Exploring and recording a variation of size and race. However, Dürer was not easily satisfied, he had a broader vision for human bodies, due to his obsession over the state of perfection in human figures. Therefore, he traveled over the Alps to study the Italian Renaissance figure and “secrets of Southern art.” [3]. Dürer had a close relationship with Giovanni Bellini as Dürer had written in one of the letters that he sent back to Germany from Venice had mentioned that Giovanni had “...highly praised me before many nobles...” [4]. This way Dürer had the first-hand influence of Giovanni Bellini and the Venetian workshop under which he had studied.

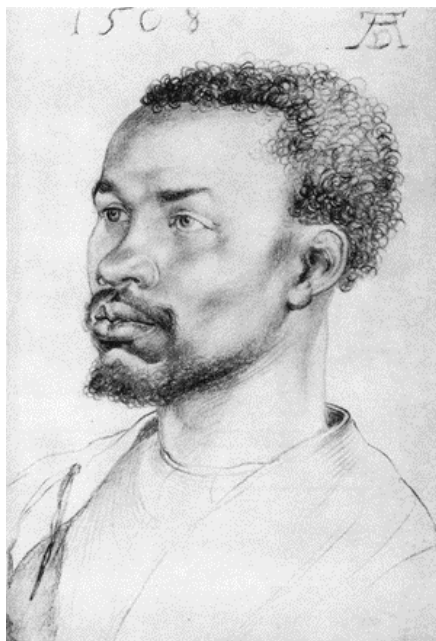


Fig. 3 Head of a Negro [5]

3. Features of Artwork

The turning point for Dürer's composition on nude bodies is after the 2nd trip to Venice from 1505-1507. As he was highly influenced by Venetian Artist. Albrecht admired and sincerely praised all the works by Giovanni Bellini [6]. During his time of stay, he studied under an artist called Antonio Pollaiuolo, to create more fluent and delicate bodies. The later paintings by Dürer, can identify some Venetian features in his art and show a distinctive opposite to some of his earlier works. This alternation can be detected in the engraving and painting on the same subject of Adam and Eve.

3.1. Sculpture

In the Engraving of Adam and Eve, it can be seen the two human figures standing in a near-symmetrical position of contrapposto, and the harmonious form had been achieved by the usage of compasses and rulers to define the perfect geometrical elements to construct the body features. However, they are very different from the idealized body forms that had been presented by the Italians and antiquity [3]. The over-perfection of the body forms shapes such as the symmetrical circle around the female breast and the heavy contour lines to emphasize the muscular structure of the male, perhaps too heavy that the male figure looks almost like an anatomical study of a human rather than a portrait of a living human. This over-perfection had created a heavy-looking and stationary figure. Therefore, there is a feeling of awkwardness at first sight. On the other hand, this feeling would soon disappear due to the audience being able to identify some realistic bodily imperfections in the two figures and

that Dürer had not declined the real human shapes to worship or be in favor of the idealized and new human idol.

3.2. Painting

In comparison to the Engraved version of Adam and Eve, the painted version of the same topic demonstrated a very distinctive alternation in Dürer's way of figurative construction, which may have been impacted by the Venetian artist's philosophy towards human bodies. In the painted version of Adam and Eve, Dürer portrayed more affable figures as the contour lines had become gentler and are more embedded into the painted skin of the figure so there is a more gradual change of tone in the painting than the rigid dark shades in the Engraved version of Adam. In addition, this subtlety of figures is also created by the increased use of Curvilinear lines defining their body shapes, this is expressed in the constant flow of the waistline and the decrease in the appearance of bold anatomic muscular structure, in which pronounced staggered-ness and isolation within figure, to produce a more harmonious and softer visual appearance for the viewer. This is in contrast with the sharp and discontinuous body outline around the figures in the engraved version, as the continuity of the lines had been interrupted by the anatomic-like muscular feature on the male and the sharp break between the waist and the hip bone in the female figure, therefore creating a harsh and conflicting appearance for the audience. But also emphasize the staggered sensation of the figures.

The soft and delicate features could also be identified in the painting by Giovanni Bellini [Naked Young Woman in Front of the Mirror] produced in 1515 this painting can be seen in Figure 4. The soft and lightweight skin texture shown in Giovanni's painting is also replicated in the Eve figure under Dürer's brushwork. This fragile effect had been created through the use of a pinkish flesh tone and the flow of streams of highlights on Eve's body to give an accent to the more pronounced and outstood parts of her body. In other words, the highlight on the breast and hips, this way the feminine breast and hips had been emphasized as a symbol of fertility. The delicacy of Eve is elevated by the distinctive contrast between the black background and Adam's skin tone which is more yellow than the female skin color. Also, the redness of the apple that Eve holds in her right hand has drawn a parallel with the red on her cheek, this highlights the timid and beauty of the female figure. This way, the topic of desire has been brought onto the table, as Eve is looking directly towards Adam in a fairly seductive manner. This semantic field of seductive eye contact is a regular element in Venetian paintings. In other words, in the painting by Titian, [Venus of Ubrino], the painting is displayed in Figure 5, from this painting Venus tilted her head sideways and looked directly into the viewer, breaking the fourth wall between the painting and the audience to create a sense of withdrawal. Therefore, hook up the inner desire of the audience. This seductive and idealized way of portraying the female body may have been one of the reasons for the "... hedonistic ..." [7] and lustful reputation, as Venice had a "... more liberal treatment of sexual relationships ..." [7] than other countries. Another feature that has changed is the breast display of the female figure. As in the engraving, the audience is able to see the feminine breast being portrayed in a very settled state, and not much emphasis had been brought to the feature. However, in the painted version of Eve, her breast had been enlarged and emphasized with chiaroscuro, in comparison to the belittled breast in the engraving, the painted version had added more dimension and volume to the breast. This way the sense of softness and amiableness of women are elevated.



Fig. 4 Naked Young Woman in Front of the Mirror [8]



Fig. 5 Venus of Urbino [9]

4. Analysis

In addition, the presentation of the male feature had also been alternated into a more linear and elongated figure. In contrast to the presentation of Adam in the Engraving, the painted version had a decrease in the definition of the anatomic muscular feature, and there was emphasis on the long limbs of the male body. Dürer may have been influenced by the Venetian way of bodily portrait, as able to see some distinctive parallel between Dürer's painted version of Adam and the work of art by Giovanni Bellini called [Polyptych of San Vincenzo Ferreri] This is seen in figure 6. The painting in this panel displayed an almost gothic-like figure, due to the elongated body and the extended limbs this is because Venice's "culture was more deeply influenced by the Byzantines [10]." rather than antiquity due to various political and geographical reasons. Due to the prolonged bodily composition, this forms a more linear and overwatched effect for the viewer. The extended linear body form from the Venetian art had been taken on broad by Dürer and used in the painted version of Adam as the head-to-body proportion of the painted version of Adam is roughly 1:7.8 which could be seen in Figure 7, but in the engraved version of Adam the head to body proportion is 1:6 which could also be seen in figure 6 the sketch by Dürer of Adam's figure, Dürer had extended the length of the figure's thigh to achieve this increase of head to body ratio. From the diagrams of proportional analysis of both

paintings, the gnudi annotated diagram, a distinct difference between the increase of the head-to-body proportional ratio is shown. Furthermore, in the printed version of Adam, Dürer portrayed the male body with less Chiaroscuro to emphasize and pronounce the anatomical muscular strength of the male gender. Instead, he embedded the contour line to create a more blurred and gradual change between light and dark, producing a more amiable and softer male feature.



Fig. 6 Tempera on panel [11]

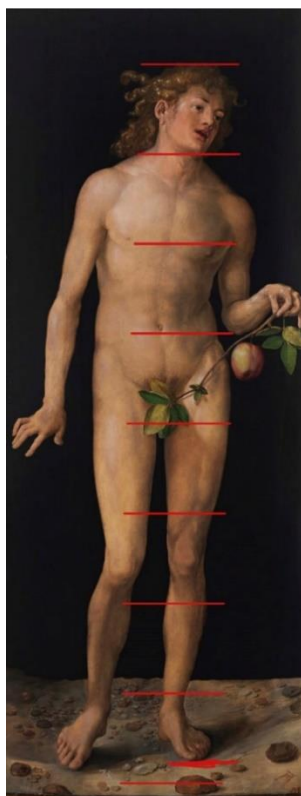


Fig. 7 Oil on pine panel [12]

As well as the less defined anatomical body features, Dürer had also softened the appearance of the hair. As seen in the engraving, the hair is being engraved as a string of hair, conveying heaviness and weight of appearance for the hair, on the other hand, in the painted version of Adam and Eve. Their (Adam and Eve) hair is portrayed in a blurred-out and grouped coordination, this provides the hair with a sense of flow and motion. This motion of movement had drawn harmony to the contrapposto position in which the two figures are. The idea of contrapposto may have been influenced by antiquity, as there is evidence present, showing that Dürer had taken a sketch of the Roman statue of Apollo. This sketch of antiquity may have been done under the influence of other Italian Renaissance artists who are not from Venice such as Leonardo da Vinci because Venetians “introduced oil painting to the city, and the works of Leonardo were also influential.” [13]. So, Dürer may have seen and studied Leonardo’s anatomical studies as some scholars argue that Dürer saw and copied some works of art from Leonardo as “Between 1506 and 1507, during his second stay in Venice, Albrecht Dürer copied a series of engravings based on designs by Leonardo da Vinci to produce a set of six woodcuts” an example of this can be seen from figure 8 and 9. Therefore, a theoretical guess could be presented that, Dürer may have seen Leonardo’s anatomical studies and been influenced by them.

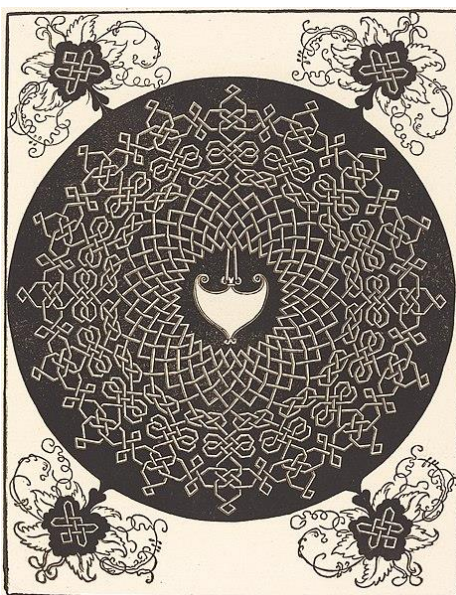


Fig. 8 Knot with a Heart-Shaped Shield (Woodcut) [14]

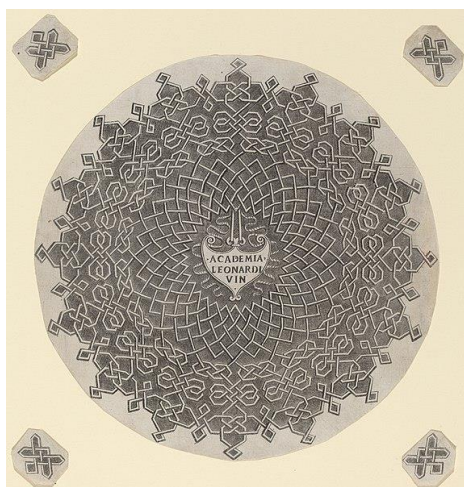


Fig. 9 Knot with a Heart-Shaped Shield (Engraving) [15]

From the sketch of [Self-Portrait in the Nude] which is seen in Figure 10, there are many similarities in connection with the sketch of Adam in the heavy contour lines between light and dark.

Especially, the feeling of motion in the sketch, and the almost symmetrical pose between Adam and Apollo. This re-emphasizes Dürer's longing and desire to achieve the perfect state of human features. But also, to a degree reflects the amount of influence that had taken on board from the Italian Renaissance.

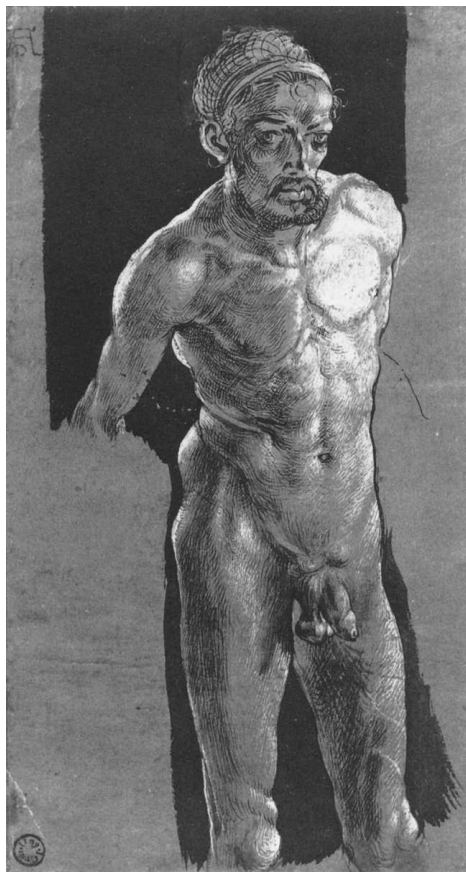


Fig. 10 Self-Portrait in the Nude [16]

5. Conclusion

From this dissection of the evolution of Dürer's presentation of the human nude in this essay, there is a clear demonstration of the embracement of the artistic understanding from the artists of Venice. It can see the increase in bodily proportion and more soft chiaroscuro used. All these features show Dürer's take on the Venetian Artists. From the painting of [Adam and Eve], Dürer had embedded some parallels that could be drawn to varieties of Venetian artists such as Giovanni Bellini and Titian, from the soft and fluent line of the female body, and the elongated limbs. The leaner gnudi and the decrease in the anatomical muscular features had all shown similarities to the Venetian artists. This essay may have an effect on future studies on Durer and how he was influenced by Venetian anatomy. May also provide a more straightforward answer to the extent to which Durer was influenced. This way able to understand why there was an alternation in Dürer's art style and provide the modern-day audience a peek hole decodes Dürer's life philosophy and his obsession towards perfection as he wanted to fulfil his knowledge and understanding about human anatomy, therefore, producing a more advanced and ideal human nude.

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