THE PERSONALITY OF ALBRECHT DÜRER, PRINCE OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY CRAFTSMEN: BY ESTHER MATSON

Despite our popular arts and crafts revival we are as yet far away from such a splendidly diffused love of beauty as made those rare places, Florence and Nürnberg, forever famous. Such rejoicing, so the story goes, did the Florentines of the region of the Santa Maria Novella make because of the gift of a picture to their beloved church, that ever after that section of the city was known as the "Joyful Quarter." So noted was the little German city on the Pegnitz for the lovely products of its handicraftsmen that one ancient writer made mention of it as "that Nürnberg whose hand is in every land."

If today anything could send our sophisticated citizens into raptures, it is impossible for us to fancy it being any great work of art, but rather some novel racing machine or the invention of the so much longed for practical air-vehicle. To be sure, you may say, we do lavish great expense and some decorative fancy to boot, on our skyscrapers—but why? Is it not, forsooth, from a motive of competitive advertising—not at all from a love of beauty for its own sake?

The biggest, the highest, the most sensational,—how often are these the objects of our quest. And this is why we need so urgently every mite that helps toward the truer, finer appreciation; why we need again and again to hark back to whatever of goodness and truth and encouragement there is in the examples of the ancients.

"Nothing" declared that wisest of emperors, Marcus Aurelius, "nothing delights so much as the examples of the virtues." Delights, yes, but also, we know, tends toward the eventual betterment of our particular conditions. Only in the hurly burly of every day we forget and let pass unheeded many a life either of the past or of the present that might give us inspiration.

The personality of Albrecht Dürer is one of these examples. Nevertheless, it is to discussions and to more or less vain attempts at interpretation of his art that we oftenest apply ourselves, not remembering what gain might be to us, aside from that handwork of his, in the mere reality of his simple, yet strenuous; his homely, yet cultured, life.

It is not the common way, we are aware, to look at the art and the personality of the artist together. We have fallen into a habit of believing that great genius and great virtues cannot occupy the same human body at the same time. Discoveries of frightful abysses in
THE PERSONALITY OF ALBRECHT DÜRER

supposedly noble characters appall us, and indeed our much talk of the artistic temperament is always to the effect that we must "make allowances."

Whether such reasoning be true or false, at least there are some notable instances of a different sort, some cases where an artist’s thirst for beauty is exquisitely balanced by his thirst for righteousness. When such is the case it is an ungrateful critic who will not cry out aloud to us to lend our ears.

THAT Dürer did accomplish—arrive, to put the thing in modern phraseology—there is no questioning. We know that he attained to the titles of goldsmith, of craftsman, of artist and of citizen. We know him as acknowledged father of German painting, master of engraving, forerunner of the art of illustration, and not seldom called the prince of artists.

We have to stand and marvel at his technique, at his precision of line, at his knowledge of perspective and his mastery of the principles of proportion. And all this aside from, and in addition to, his strange power of haunting symbolism, that distinctly northern trait of his that bade him grapple with the problems of the hinterwelt, that lured him to try to translate into terms of matter the invisible and intangible things of the mind and soul.

Far as he was from that "graciousness" as Pater calls it, which seems to have been innate Nature’s godmotherlike gift to the Italians, Dürer’s creations have nevertheless much of the same spectral, unforgettable power that we find in the work of such a painter as the Italian Da Vinci.

Southern art, even at its most solemn moments, is ever pensive rather than actually and incorrigibly sad. The glow of the southland sun bears in its rays some mysterious balm, whereas in the north the cold sky carries naught of healing; rather on the northern temperament the spiritual gloom, as in vast hemlock forests the material gloom, sits impenetrable, unconsolable.

In Dürer this typical northern unrest, this longing to penetrate the veil of matters hidden, this melancholy that is the inevitable effect of the discovered inability to do so—all is accented and intensified. These traits, unsoftened by any sun, are etched into his character, bitten into his art, even as bare winter boughs are etched against a frosty sky. And these are the very qualities that make his appeal to us moderns the more searching.

Because of such qualities, and also because of yet one other trait,
THE PERSONALITY OF ALBRECHT DÜRER

his love of nature. In that again he makes appeal to us of today, and in connection with this particular side of his character it is not a little interesting to look at his theories of art. Those theories of his were very definite. Couched in wordings as quaint as the city and the age in which he lived, the great mass of his manuscripts and books would prove rather curious than actually agreeable reading. Yet there are many passages which, could they be collected for us in convenient shape, would ring as true and clarion-clear today as when they were written, now nearly four hundred years ago.

Such a volume of extracts as we might get would help us to recall how Dürer was among the first of those theorists who urged formally and insistently on what we now term nature study. It was he who declared for study of the object, the tree, the hill, the horse, the human figure, from the thing itself. It was Dürer, moreover, who first going far beyond the hintings in that direction of the earlier brothers Van Eyck, gave us real landscape. Indeed it is a curious fact, so indomitable was his nature love and so individual his exposition of nature scenes, that there are certain kinds of landscape which we can describe in no other way than by calling them Dürer-esque.

Among his “Instructions” are some of the very germ thoughts which later the word painter, Ruskin, clothed in such radiant language. “The love of Nature,” said the earlier Gothic craftsman, “makes known the truth of all these things: therefore gaze upon her intently, and do not deviate from her to follow your own opinions as if you could imagine that you could find out better for yourself, for you would be misled. For truly art lies in Nature, and he who can draw her out, obtains her.”

Again he tells us “it is decreed that no human being can, of his own imagination, even make a beautiful picture, and so he must fill his mind full of beauty by many an imitation, and then it is no more called his own, but has become art, which has been mastered and acquired, which sows itself, grows, and bears forth fruit of its kind. Thereupon the collected and secret treasure of the heart becomes manifest through the work, and the new creature which is created in the heart is the form of a thing.”

And once again see how he emphasizes his point.

“If all beauty is enclosed in Nature, the greatest difficulty is for human power to recognize it and to reproduce it in a picture.”

Of the four books on Human Proportion which Dürer planned he lived to see only the first actually in press, but the manuscript notes
for the others are carefully preserved and may yet be given, in part, to the public. If they are brought out we shall hope for one or two more episodes illustrating the peculiarly naïve and human side of the man. We shall hope for more stories on the order of those two well-known ones concerning his friendship with the aged Bellini and his relations with the Emperor Maximilian.

One gets the happiest glimpse of his sense of humor in the famous retort, made when the Emperor showed annoyance because in his own unskilled fingers the crayon which he tried to use kept breaking into bits; “But, gracious Emperor,” said Dürer, “I would not have your Majesty draw as well as myself. I have practised the art and it is my kingdom. Your Majesty has other and more difficult work to do.”

Then what a pleasant touch we get, what a hint of naïve, excusable egoism, in that anecdote of his admiration for Bellini. It was of the ancient painter that Dürer wrote home, you remember, those memorable words, “Everyone tells me what an honorable man he is, and that he likes me: he is very old, but still the best painter.”

Every evidence goes to show that Dürer was liked in Venice and in Florence, that indeed more than a little pressure was brought to bear on him to induce him to settle in some one of the so highly cultured cities of Italy. But the Northman’s strength of mind was in keeping with his strength of drawing; the fact of the case he stated simply enough—he chose to “live in a moderate manner in Nürnberg rather than to be rich and great in any other place.” The sentiment perhaps is as uncommon as the character of the man who expressed it. However else it be, it is a sentiment that illuminates a character like a flashlight.

After all it is no slight thing, in any age or place, to prove oneself worthy the titles of craftsman, artist and citizen. The last this “prince of artists” deemed of more than passing high rank. Indeed we suspect that no tribute could ever have given Albrecht Dürer greater pleasure could he have known it, and certainly no tribute could be imagined more suggestive, than the simple and sincere assurance of Melanchthon when he heard of the painter’s death, that here was “a wise man in whom the artistic element, prominent as it was, was still the least.”
THE HALLWAY IN THE HOUSE OF ALBRECHT DÜRER, NÜRNBERG.