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# LITERARY TRADITIONS, GENRE CONVENTIONS AND AUTHOR AUTHORITY IN EARLY MODERN ARTISTS' BIOGRAPHIES – THE CASE OF ALBRECHT DÜRER

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Albrecht Dürer (Nuremberg, 1471–1528) is the most frequently mentioned German artist in literature worldwide, both in art historical writings as well as in popular literature.<sup>1</sup> Dürer is outstanding not only in a quantitative but also in a qualitative sense inasmuch as he became a canonical figure in literature already during his lifetime as well as a reference figure for the literary portrayal of other artists. In many respects, the literary “discovery” of Albrecht Dürer and the shaping of his biography ran parallel to the emergence of literary genres and academic discourses in the early modern period, including artist biographies and art literature in the narrower sense.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, his reception in literature is a mirror of how the artist was perceived at a certain

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<sup>1</sup> The first Dürer bibliography by H. W. Singer already contained 1315 entries: Hans Wolfgang Singer, *Versuch einer Dürer-Bibliographie* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1903). In 1971, M. Mende listed 10271 publications: Matthias Mende, *Dürer-Bibliographie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> According to J. Schlosser the notion encompasses art theoretical and art historical sources, including technical, poetical, and historical texts as well as travel literature, see Julius Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur: Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte* (Vienna: Schroll, 1924), 1. On the history of the genre, see Caecilie Weissert, “Kunstliteratur,” in *Metzler Lexikon Kunstwissenschaft: Ideen, Methoden, Begriffe*, ed. Ulrich Pfisterer (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2003), 211–14. The editors of the specialized online portal *Fontes* have a broad definition which includes all textual sources and pictorial compendia which contribute to the discourse on art; “Fontes: Text-und Bildquellen zur Kunstgeschichte 1350–1750,” *Arthistoricum.net*, accessed September 3, 2024, <https://www.arthistoricum.net/publizieren/fontes>.

time. On the other hand, it has itself significantly shaped the image of the artist and the perception of his work. While most painters of his time were forgotten over the decades, the written transmission of Dürer's life and work did not cease after his death but even increased and broadened over the centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Nuremberg painter is one of the best documented artists of his time and has even left some autobiographical writings, many facets about his life remain unknown.<sup>4</sup> Today's knowledge of the artist's life and work relies on a relatively thin historical source base. Already his contemporaries tended to replace biographical uncertainties by topoi and to model Dürer's vita along established literary traditions in order to shape a favorable image of Dürer's as a German national artist.<sup>5</sup> Later authors continued and gaps were substituted by legends and stereotypes – be it to praise Dürer or to criticize him.

This process of substituting knowledge with legend is particularly typical of hagiographic literature. In their *Legend of the Artist*, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz highlighted the connection between the medieval idea of the “Deus Artifex” and the notion of the “Divino Artista” characteristic of early modern artist biographies and described this as part of the “heroization” of the artist.<sup>6</sup> In Dürer's case, some early modern authors indeed transformed the heroization into a sacralization and mystification of the painter, who is stylized from a national hero to a saint of art.<sup>7</sup> The literary “canonization” of Dürer did not begin in the Romantic period, as is often assumed, but rather immediately after the artist's death.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Anja Grebe, *Dürer: Die Geschichte seines Ruhms* (Petersberg: Imhof Verlag, 2013), esp. chap. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Florian Windhager et al., “Traveling with Albrecht Dürer: A Case Study for Uncertainty-Aware Biography Visualization,” in *Biographical Data in a Digital World 2022* (BD 2022), 2022, [https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610508120\\_9](https://doi.org/10.3986/9789610508120_9).

<sup>5</sup> Jan Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics 1500–1971: Chapters in the History of Ideas Including a Collection of Texts* (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 1986); Anja Grebe, “The ‘Other Apelles’ and the ‘Painter with the Bushy Beard’: Dürer as a Subject in German Literature around 1500,” in *The Early Dürer: Exhibition catalogue*, ed. Daniel Hess and Thomas Eser (Nuremberg: Verlag des Germanischen Nationalmuseums, 2012), 78–89.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979; original edition in German, Vienna, 1934); Anja Grebe, “Albrecht Dürer als deutscher Kulturheros und Nationalheld,” in *Künstlerhelden?*, ed. Katharina Helm, Hans Wolfram Hubert, Christina Posselt-Kuhli, and Anna Schreurs-Morét (Merzhausen: ad picturam, 2015), 87–108.

<sup>7</sup> Grebe, *Dürers Ruhm*, chap. 2; Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 91–143.

<sup>8</sup> On the Romantic reception of Dürer, see Volker Pirsich, “Die Dürer-Rezeption in der Literatur des beginnenden 19. Jahrhunderts,” *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der*

Dürer's reception in literature, which spans over a period of more than 500 years, ranges from some brief mentions to multi-volume biographies and to free literary adaptations of his life and work in poems, plays and novels. In all categories, there are works of a sometimes strongly interest-driven or even ideological orientation alongside texts in which a factual perspective predominates.<sup>9</sup> All facets are equally important for the development of Dürer's biographical counterfeit. The abundance of brief mentions, sometimes comprising only a few lines, underlines Dürer's canonical position just as clearly as the multifold references in art literature in the narrower sense.

Until the 19th century, the "knowledge of Dürer" was primarily compiled, processed and passed on in various genres of biographical literature – above all in collections of vitae, in biographical encyclopaedias and, from the 18th century onwards, also in monographs. It was not until the end of the 18th century that separate approaches to his life and oeuvre emerged with the creation of the first *catalogues raisonnés* on the one hand and publications of his biography on the other.<sup>10</sup>

A complete survey of all biographical mentions of Dürer does not exist. The most important positions have been gathered by Julius von Schlosser 1924, Hans Rupprich 1956, and Heinz Lüdecke and Susanne Heiland 1955.<sup>11</sup> For several years, the virtual research network Duerer.online hosted by the

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*Stadt Nürnberg* 70 (1983): 304–333; Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 189–218, 243–263.

<sup>9</sup> Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 219–242; Ute Kuhlemann, "The Celebration of Dürer in Germany during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy: The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist. Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Giulia Bartrum (London: British Museum Press, 2002), 39–59; Anja Grebe, "'Dürer als Führer': Zur Instrumentalisierung Albrecht Dürers in völkischen Kreisen," in *Völkisch und national: Zur Aktualität alter Denkmuster im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Uwe Puschner and Georg Ulrich Großmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 379–399; Michael Roth, ed., *Dürer für Berlin: Eine Spurensuche im Kupferstichkabinett. Exhibition catalogue* (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Anja Grebe, "Zur historischen Genese von Werkverzeichnissen," in *Handbuch Werkverzeichnis – Euvrekatalog – Catalogue raisonné*, ed. Ingrid Pérez de Laborda, Aya Soika, and Eva Wiederkehr Sladeczek (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 36–48. On the first catalogue raisonné of Dürer's engravings, see Gerhard Kölsch, "Vom 'Raisonnierenden Verzeichnis' zum 'Menschen-Spiegel': Zwei wiedergefundene Manuskripte des Dürer-Werkkatalogs von Henrich Sebastian Hüsgen," in *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts* 2020 (2021): 7–75, <https://doi.org/10.46500/83533815-001>.

<sup>11</sup> Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur*, 179–180, 231–242, 561; Hans Rupprich, ed., *Dürer: Schriftlicher Nachlass*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956–1969), esp. vol. 1; Heinz Lüdecke and Susanne Heiland, *Dürer und die Nachwelt: Urkunden, Briefe, Dichtungen und wissenschaftliche Betrachtungen aus vier Jahrhunderten* (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1955).

University of Heidelberg has offered open access to a wide range of biographical literature and art historical writings on Dürer up to the mid-20th century.<sup>12</sup>

Based on the anthologies of Schlosser and others, scholars began to take an interest in the history of biographical writing on Dürer only a few decades ago with the first monographs on the subject of *Dürer's critics* by Donald B. Kuspit and by Jan Białostocki.<sup>13</sup> Kuspit's and Białostocki's term "critic" covers the entire range of written reception: "The image of the artist is shaped in history in two ways. First – by scholarly research which attempts at establishing historical facts and relations [...]. But then the image of the artist is also shaped by all that which was ever felt and said about him and his works. [...] Both Dürer-nonsense and Dürer-scholarship belong to the history of ideas [...]."<sup>14</sup> A contextualized approach with regard to the development of literary genres *From vita to artist's biography* is taken by Karin Hellwig who analyses Dürer as one of her core examples.<sup>15</sup> A synthesis of the earlier approaches as well as an extension to unpublished sources and shorter biographical mentions was published as part of the author's monograph on *The history of Dürer's fame* in the early modern age.<sup>16</sup>

This paper illuminates the most important steps in the development of biographical writing on Dürer with a special focus on the first two hundred years after his death. It starts with the earliest biographical mentions published during the artist's lifetime which laid the foundation for his later literary reception and ends with the publication of the first biographical monograph in 1728. Special attention is paid to the often interest-driven shaping of Dürer's image as a German national artist between the poles of "knowledge" and "legend," praise and critique, historiography and hagiography.

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<sup>12</sup> "Virtuelles Forschungsnetzwerk Albrecht Dürer," Duerer.online, Accessed September 3, 2024, <https://sempub.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/duerer.online/>.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Burton Kuspit, *Dürer and His Northern Critics, 1502–1572* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1971); Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*.

<sup>14</sup> Białostocki, *Dürer and his Critics*, 12–14.

<sup>15</sup> Karin Hellwig, *Von der Vita zur Künstlerbiographie* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), esp. 23–59.

<sup>16</sup> Grebe, *Dürers Ruhm*, esp. chap. 2.

## FIRST BIOGRAPHICAL MENTIONS

The first example of a both strongly topical and interest-driven reference to Dürer is also his very first mention in literature: four epigrams on the artist composed by the German “archhumanist” Conrad Celtis (1459–1508),<sup>17</sup> which Dieter Wuttke discovered in a collection of *One Hundred Epigrams*.<sup>18</sup>

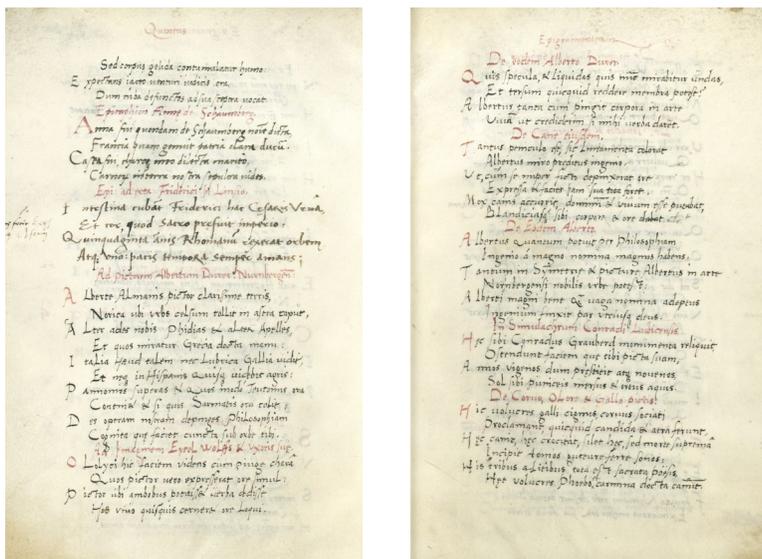


Figure 4.1. Konrad Celtis, Epigrams on Dürer, in *Libri Qvinqve Epigrammatvm*, fol. 69v–70r. Source: Universitätsbibliothek Kassel – Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, Kassel.

<sup>17</sup> Jörg Robert, “Celtis, Konrad,” in *Verfasserlexikon: Deutscher Humanismus 1480–1520*, vol. 1–2, ed. Franz Josef Worstbrock (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 375–427; Josef Worstbrock, “Konrad Celtis. Zur Konstitution des humanistischen Dichters in Deutschland,” in *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Susanne Kölbele and Andreas Kraß (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2005), 264–289.

<sup>18</sup> Conrad Celtis, *Libri qvinqve epigrammatum*, [Vienna], ca. 1500–1502, 2<sup>o</sup> Ms. poet. et roman. 7, fols. 69v–70r, Manuscript, Universitätsbibliothek Kassel – Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, Kassel; Dieter Wuttke, “Unbekannte Celtis-Epigramme zum Lobe Dürers,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 30 (1967): 321–325; Grebe, *Other Apelles*.

An epigram (ancient Greek “ἐπίγραμμα” = “inscription”) is usually a short, pointed and factual poem.<sup>19</sup> Celtis himself defined the “Poema Epigrammatum” in his verse theory *Ars versificandi et carminum* (1486), as “an inscription on objects, combined with mockery and wit.”<sup>20</sup> Although the collection, which was compiled around 1500–1502, remained unpublished, its contents were probably spread among German humanists. Celtis’ poetic praise of the artist formed the nucleus of the “legend of Dürer.” Instead of giving any fact-based details of his early years, Celtis links him to protagonists of art and science from antiquity and the Middle Ages, thus designing an ideal genealogy for Dürer. He positions him in the succession of the ancient Apelles as described, among others, by Pliny and entitles him as both the “new” Apelles and the “new” Albertus Magnus. For Celtis, the thirty-year-old artist becomes the perfecter of both lines of tradition embodied by the ancient artist-hero and the medieval scholar-saint.<sup>21</sup>

Thanks to their prominent author and to their programmatic orientation, the epigrams laid the foundation for Dürer’s reception in the German humanist world.<sup>22</sup> The poems also represent one of the earliest pieces of evidence for the elevation of painting to the rank of “ars” and as a part of “philosophia” in German learned discourse.<sup>23</sup> Even if Dürer’s work around 1500 was rather far away from the theoretical aspirations of his later oeuvre; thanks to Celtis’ rhetorical enhancement, German humanists continued to associate his name with the programmatic claim of a “learned art.” The topos that Celtis coined

<sup>19</sup> On the history and definition of the genre, see Peter Hess, *Epigramm* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Conrad Celtis, *Ars versificandi et carminum* (Leipzig: Kachelofen, 1486), fol. CIIr; Jörg Robert, *Konrad Celtis und das Projekt der deutschen Dichtung: Studien zur humanistischen Konstitution von Poetik, Philosophie, Nation und Ich* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003), esp. 19–103; Franz Josef Worstbrock, “Die ‘Ars versificandi et carminum’ des Konrad Celtis: Ein Lehrbuch eines Humanisten,” in *Studien zum städtischen Bildungswesen des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit: Bericht über Kolloquien der Kommission zur Erforschung der Kultur des Spätmittelalters, 1978 bis 1981*, ed. Bernd Moeller, Hans Patze, and Karl Stackmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 462–498.

<sup>21</sup> Jörg Robert, “‘Aemulatio’ und ästhetischer Patriotismus: Dürer-Bilder zwischen Humanismus und Frühromantik,” in *Aemulatio. Kulturen des Wettstreits in Text und Bild (1450–1620)*, ed. Jan-Dirk Müller, Ulrich Pfisterer, Anna Kathrin Bleuler, and Fabian Jonietz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 135–163.

<sup>22</sup> Dieter Wuttke, “Dürer und Celtis. Von der Bedeutung des Jahres 1500 für den deutschen Humanismus,” *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 73–129.

<sup>23</sup> On the humanist concept of the “learned artist,” see Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

of Dürer as the ideal German artist, who was as virtuoso as he was learned, was taken up by subsequent authors. Although other contemporary authors used the Apelles epithet to promote artists in their circles, only in Dürer's case the designation became quasi accepted as a synonym of the artist far beyond the borders of Nuremberg.<sup>24</sup>

One of Dürer's most prolific, although not disinterested promoters was his fellow citizen Christoph II Scheurl (1481–1542).<sup>25</sup> After studying law in Bologna, where he also met Dürer during the artist's trip to Italy in 1506, Scheurl served as rector of Wittenberg University from 1507 to 1511, before successfully applying for the position of a legal advisor of the city of Nuremberg, which he fulfilled from 1512 onwards. As an active member of the Nuremberg humanist circle, he authored numerous books, essays and letters on various legal, religious, and historiographic topics.<sup>26</sup> Scheurl was the first to entitle Dürer explicitly as "German Apelles" in a Wittenberg university speech of 1508, in which he compared Dürer to the Greek artist-hero.<sup>27</sup> He repeated his programmatic claim several years later in the biographical notes on Dürer inserted in the obituary of the Nuremberg provost and art patron Anton Kress, who died in 1515.<sup>28</sup> The passage on the then almost 45-year-old "Germanum Appellem" is the most extensive biographical account of Dürer that was printed during his lifetime. Scheurl gives detailed information on the artist's family background, training period and journeyman's travels, which he had noted

<sup>24</sup> Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 15–35; Grebe, *Other Apelles*.

<sup>25</sup> Philipp N. Bebb, *Christoph Scheurl's role as legal adviser to the Nürnberg City Council, 1512 to 1525* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1971); Christoph A. Stumpf, "Scheurl, Christoph (II.)," in *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 22, ed. Otto Graf zu Stolberg-Werningerode (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005), 715–716, accessed September 3, 2024, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118754815.html#ndbcontent>; Franz Fuchs, "Scheurl (Schewrllius, Scheuerleyn), Christoph (II.)," in *Verfasserlexikon: Deutscher Humanismus 1480–1520*, vol. 2, ed. Franz Josef Worstbrock (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 840–877. On Scheurl in Wittenberg, see Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg 1485–1517* (Nieuw-koop: de Graaf, 1975), esp. 44–75.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Grossmann, "Bibliographie der Werke Christoph Scheurls," *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 10 (1969): 373–395.

<sup>27</sup> Christoph Scheurl, *Oratio attingens litterarium praestantiam nec non laudem ecclesiae collegiatae Vittenburgensis* (Leipzig: Martin, 1509). Scheurl gave the original speech on November 16, 1508 in the Wittenberg Castle Church. The *Oratio* was reprinted in the widely spread *Opera* (1610) of Willibald Pirckheimer, where the speech served as a testimony to the life-long friendship between the artist and the humanist.

<sup>28</sup> Christoph Scheurl, *Vita Reuerendi patris Dni. Anthonii Kressen [...]* (Nuremberg: Fredericus Peypus, 1515).

down according to alleged reports from the artist. However, Scheurl's account is rather vague and incorrect in many respects and the heroising stylisation of the artist considerably exceeds the documentary content of the passage. Among others, he mentions a certain book by Dürer "on the art and theory of painting" which he compares to the (lost) one written by the ancient Apelles. Scheurl thus created a new legend by suggesting that Dürer's treatise, which only survived in handwritten drafts, was already finished.

Dürer is the only contemporary of Kress to be given more detailed recognition in the obituary, which indirectly underlines the exceptional position that Dürer held in Nuremberg's intellectual and patrician circles at that time. The painter served Scheurl to demonstrate the late provost's interests in art, although no art commission from Kress to Dürer is known. The *Kress Vita* is dedicated to Dürer's closest patrician friends, the Nuremberg aldermen Willibald Pirckheimer and Hieronymus Ebner. It can be assumed that Scheurl intended to use his laud of Dürer to promote himself in the shadow of his famous contemporary.<sup>29</sup>

Both the example of Celtis' and Scheurl's praise of Dürer show that the mentions of persons close to Dürer must be critically examined with regard to the authors' intentions as well as the respective literary traditions as many details are more topical than fact-based. It is therefore all the more surprising that here, as in most cases, Dürer did not rectify the inaccuracies either directly in his later writings or indirectly through the voice of some befriended humanist.<sup>30</sup>

## POSTHUMOUS DEVELOPMENT OF THE DÜRER BIOGRAPHY

After Dürer's death in 1528, the "knowledge of Dürer" was compiled, edited and passed on primarily in various forms of biographical literature. These had to be developed first. A major challenge for the authors laid in the fact that a specific discourse on art and artists did not exist and first had to be generated on the basis of ancient and medieval literature. Albrecht Dürer was one of the

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<sup>29</sup> Grebe, *Dürers Ruhm*, 122–125.

<sup>30</sup> Grebe, *Dürers Ruhm*, 121–122, 125.

few visual artists of his time to be regarded as “worthy of biography” and his biographical records took on a prototypical character.<sup>31</sup>

In 1532, Joachim Camerarius’ (1500–1574) preface to his posthumous Latin translation of Dürer’s *Theory of Proportion* was the first biographical account of the artist not to be integrated as a chapter in another text or book.<sup>32</sup> Although the name of the author is not mentioned, Camerarius is unequivocally accepted as the originator.<sup>33</sup>

The widely distributed Latin edition made Dürer’s life and work known to an international audience for the first time. Albeit the humanist had known Dürer in Nuremberg during his final years, he took his content largely from previously published Dürer literature or referred to topoi from ancient artist legends. The first independent biography of Dürer should therefore be read less as a realistic than as a metaphorical portrait of the artist. Following the example of panegyric texts, Camerarius begins with a justification of his subject, which quickly turns into a laud of the artist:

*I am also well aware that his merits do not await our praise, especially since his excellent works glorify him with eternal fame; nevertheless, we have considered it appropriate [...] to set down in writing the life and way of thinking of the excellent man so dear to us [...] this should make the skill and unique genius of the artist and man known to the wider public, but also give readers no small pleasure.*<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Hannes Schweiger, “Biographiewürdigkeit,” in *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, ed. Christian Klein (Stuttgart, Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2009), 32–36.

<sup>32</sup> [Joachim Camerarius], “Aequis et studiosis bonarum artium lectoribus,” in Albrecht Dürer, *De symmetria partium humanorum corporum* (Nuremberg: Agnes Frey [Dürer], 1532), fol. AIIr-AIIIr. On Camerarius, see Frank Baron, ed., *Joachim Camerarius (1550–1574): Beiträge zur Geschichte des Humanismus im Zeitalter der Reformation. Essays on the History of Humanism During the Reformation* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1978); Carol Annette Staswick, *Joachim Camerarius and the Republic of Letters in the Age of the Reformation* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1998); Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, “Zur Wahrnehmung der Bildenden Kunst durch Literaten im Umfeld Dürers: Eobanus Hessus im Vergleich mit Joachim Camerarius,” in *Künstler und Literat: Schrift- und Buchkultur in der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. Bodo Guthmüller (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), 75–96.

<sup>33</sup> Peter W. Parshall, “Camerarius on Dürer: Humanist Biography as Art Criticism,” in *Joachim Camerarius*, ed. Frank Baron, 11–29.

<sup>34</sup> [Camerarius], *Aequis et studiosis*, fol. AIIr (transl. Anja Grebe).

Based on the patterns of ancient and medieval artist vitae, Camerarius continues with an introduction to Dürer's family origins and a description of his pleasant outward appearance and virtuous character, which is allegedly reflected in his works. According to Camerarius, Dürer never painted "indecent" motives, instead, "he always was most conscientious about purity of life and modesty [...] expressed through the grandeur of his paintings that he was undoubtedly aware of his importance, but in such a way that even in his smaller works nothing is to be rejected."<sup>35</sup>

His praise of the artist's exemplary character is followed by a detailed description of Dürer's virtuoso painting and drawing techniques, enriched by various anecdotes. It is striking that Camerarius' comprehensive introduction to Dürer's life and work does not mention a single specific work of art and he presents the artist's life without a single date.

Camerarius models his description of Dürer's outer appearance and inner nature according to the ancient ideal of the correspondence between body and mind, which one can achieve through study and bring to perfection in art. His literary portrait enables Camerarius to offer Dürer the highest praise as an artist and human being, who was rightly admired at home and abroad for his achievements. By emphasising the virtue and morality of his person and work, Camerarius' biographical preface also provided yet another basis for the posthumous exaltation of the artist. Despite its vagueness and topical modelling, Camerarius' text was read as an authentic portrait of the artist by later biographers such as Karel van Mander or Joachim von Sandrart, who used it as a basis for their own biographies and as well as a guideline for the characterization of Dürer's work.

## BIOGRAPHICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA

At the beginning, the literature on Dürer was almost exclusively in Latin and embedded in the contemporary (German) humanist discourse. Around the middle of the 16th century, new genres of biographical literature like biographical encyclopedia emerged, now also in the vernacular. An early example is Heinrich Pantaleon's (1522–1596) multi-volume *Teutscher*

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<sup>35</sup> [Camerarius], *Aequis et studiosis*, fol. AIIv (transl. Anja Grebe).

*Nation Heldenbuch* (1568), whose third part covers the late Middle Ages and the early modern period.<sup>36</sup> The volume includes approximately 1700 entries on renowned people written by various authors.

Dürer is the only visual artist who was honored with an entry in the entire *Heldenbuch*. Under the heading *Albertus Dürer maler zu Nürenberg* [Albertus Dürer painter from Nuremberg] the author briefly mentions the key biographical data and continues with a list of the various arts in which Dürer was active, in particular painting and drawing. The largest part is dedicated to Dürer's three theoretical works which are highlighted as his most important achievements. With his artistic genius and his theoretical legacy Dürer substantially contributed to the development of the various arts in Germany: "So it happened that Albrecht made his fatherland / so adorned with many artistic trades / greater through his high understanding / and was in great authority [...]."<sup>37</sup>

At the end of the article, the abbreviation "Con. Gess." refers to the renowned physician, natural scientist and bibliographer Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) from Basel as Pantaleon's main source. Pantaleon had used Gessner's *Bibliotheca universalis* (1545) – a comprehensive catalogue of all books in Latin, Greek and Hebrew published since 1450 – also as a basis for other entries.<sup>38</sup> Gessner's knowledge of Dürer was primarily based on Dürer's theoretical writings and the respective prefaces, especially Camerarius' biographical foreword. Gessner was also familiar with several of Dürer's prints as he had used, among others, Dürer's *Rhinoceros* woodcut of 1515 as a model for the rhinoceros' illustration in the first volume of his *Historia animalium* (1551).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Heinrich Pantaleon, *Der Dritte theil Teutscher Nation Heldenbuch [...]* (Basel: Nicolaus Brylingers Erben, 1568), 157–158; Hans Buscher, *Heinrich Pantaleon und sein Heldenbuch* (Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft, 26) (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1946).

<sup>37</sup> Pantaleon, *Der Dritte theil*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> Conrad Gessner, *Bibliotheca universalis* (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1545). See Buscher, *Heinrich Pantaleon*, 140–141, 279–282; Urs B. Leu and Mylène Ruoss, eds., *Conrad Gessner 1516–2016: Facetten eines Universums* (Zurich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2016); Iris Ritzmann, "Der Stadtarzt als Universalgelehrter. Conrad Gessner als ein Phänomen seiner Zeit?" in *Conrad Gessner (1516–1565): Renaissance der Wissenschaften. The Renaissance of Learning*, ed. Urs Leu and Peter Opitz (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), 323–334, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110499056-017>.

<sup>39</sup> Conrad Gessner, *Historia Animalium liber I. de quadrupedibus viviparis* (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1551), 953. See Daniel Hess, "Der neue Blick auf die Welt: Natur und Kunst

## DÜRER'S RECEPTION IN EUROPEAN ART LITERATURE

The Latin editions of Dürer's theoretical writings published in Paris in 1532–1535 and their respective prefaces and epilogues helped to familiarise an international humanist audience with Dürer's life and work, and they also introduced them to the univocal praise of his artistic achievements by German authors.

Just as in the German humanist texts, certain topoi emerged early on an international level and continued to dominate the image of Dürer in the following centuries. The persistence of these topoi can be explained by the fact that they were often either linked to the names of eminent rulers, like emperor Maximilian, or placed in the mouths of prominent Renaissance artists, like Raphael, and thus had an authoritative status from the outset. The patriotic-to-nationalist rhetoric, which had marked biographical writing on Dürer since the very first mention, also continued at an international level. Authors generally judged the “German Apelles” from the perspective of their country's own artistic tradition. Although most authors acknowledged his artistic and theoretical achievements, they often used Dürer as a contrasting foil to highlight the artistic excellence of their own nation.<sup>40</sup>

This applies, for example, to the Italian “founding father” of artists' biographies, Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), and his account on Dürer in the second edition of his influential *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* [The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects] (1568).<sup>41</sup> Regarding the textual context of the *Vite*, it should be noted that the Nuremberg artist was not granted an own biography, which in principle only Italian artists received. Rather, Dürer's virtuoso prints, which were admired and often imitated by Italian artists, were the immediate reason for Vasari to include a several-page long biography of the German artist as an

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von Dürer bis Gessner,” in *Conrad Gessner*, ed. Leu and Ruoss, 30–33; Alex Rübel, “Conrad Gessner als Zoologe,” in *Conrad Gessner*, ed. Leu and Ruoss, 146–47.

<sup>40</sup> Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 37–72; Grebe, *Dürers Ruhm*, esp. chap. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori, scritte e di nuovo ampliate [...] con l'aggiunta delle vite de' vivi e de' morti dall'anno 1550 infino al 1567* (Florence: Giunti, 1568), 295–99; Katja Burzer, Charles Davis, Sabine Feser, and Alessandro Nova, eds., *Le Vite del Vasari: genesi, topoi, ricezione* (Collana del Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max Planck Institut, 14) (Venice: Marsilio, 2010); Thomas Sherrer Ross Boase, *Giorgio Vasari: The Man and the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

insert in the *vita* of the engraver Marcantonio Raimondi. Although physically embedded in Italian art history, the length of Dürer's biography makes it almost equivalent to an independent *vita*.

According to his own statements, Vasari's biographical knowledge of Dürer was based, among others, on information in letters from the Flemish painter Lambert Lombard, who had summarized the German humanist literature for Vasari,<sup>42</sup> and his contacts with Raphael's pupil Giulio Romano. Just how imprecisely Vasari treats Dürer's life is shown by his classification of Dürer as a Flemish artist from Antwerp, whereas he mentions him as a German in his *vita* of Raphael. Vasari's biography of Dürer is above all a description of his printed oeuvre. He is the first author to extensively comment on Dürer's work and tries to trace his artistic development. However, Vasari himself was only familiar with prints by Dürer, which he also owned personally. He pays unreserved tribute to these for their inventiveness, realism, and technical virtuosity. At the same time, he criticizes their lack of beauty and grace, that was inherent only to Italian artists – as a native Italian, Dürer would have been “the best painter of our country.”<sup>43</sup> The imperfection topos became the leitmotif of Vasari's image of Dürer and of many later authors. The almost exclusive knowledge of Dürer's art in the form of his widespread prints reinforced the negative reputation of stylistic harshness, which also found expression in Vasari's corruption of his name as “Alberto Duro.”

Due to its authoritative position, Italian art literature played an opinion-forming role on a European level and also influenced French art literature of the 17th century, for example.<sup>44</sup> Foreign criticism in turn provoked northern Alpine authors to defend Dürer's merits – such an apologetic attitude can be seen in the biographies composed by Karel van Mander, Joachim von Sandrart, Henrich Conrad Arend, and others.

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<sup>42</sup> See the extract of Lombard's letter of April 27, 1565, in Lüdecke and Heiland, *Dürer und die Nachwelt*, 74–75, 291–292.

<sup>43</sup> Vasari, *Le Vite*, 296. See Günter Schweikhart, “Novità e bellezza: Zur frühen Dürer-Rezeption in Italien,” in *Festschrift für Herbert Siebenhüner*, ed. Erich Hubbala and Günter Schweikhart (Würzburg: Schönigh, 1978), 111–136.

<sup>44</sup> See Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics*, 37–72.

## DUTCH AND GERMAN BIOGRAPHIES OF DÜRER

Karel van Mander's (1548–1606) *Schilder-boeck* (1604) comprises the first vita of Dürer to be exclusively dedicated to him.<sup>45</sup> Van Mander's *Life of Dürer* deliberately sets itself apart from Vasari's picture of the artist, but also from previous German art literature, in that it almost completely dispenses with a direct Italian *paragone*. In contrast, he emphasizes Dürer's merits for the development of the arts north of the Alps and calls him a "guiding star." In terms of facts regarding Dürer's life, his report does not go much further than Vasari's account. However, the Dutch author adds some anecdotes that serve to emphasise Dürer's fame and esteem among princes and artists. In contrast to Vasari, van Mander only deals briefly with Dürer's prints, instead he pays detailed tribute to his paintings and drawings. Van Mander was to know Dürer's painted oeuvre at least partially thanks to his stays in Nuremberg, contacts with artists at the imperial court in Prague and access to Dutch private collections. He was also the first to point out the existence of paintings by Dürer in Italian and Dutch collections.

Despite many inaccuracies, van Mander's Dürer vita continued to be used by later biographers as the basis for their own writings.<sup>46</sup> This is the case, for example, of the German painter, art theorist and biographer Joachim von Sandrart (1606–1688) who published an extensive chapter on Albrecht Dürer as part of his multi-volume account of German art, *Teutsche Academie* (1675).<sup>47</sup>

Although in some cases he corrected or updated the information given by van Mander, especially when he became aware of new locations of works

<sup>45</sup> Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, from the First Edition of the "Schilder-boeck" (1603–1604)*, ed. and transl. Hessel Miedema, 2 vols (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1994–1995), vol. 1, 88–91. On van Mander's sources, see Miedema's commentary in vol. 2, 294–316; Peter Strieder, "Albrecht Dürer in Carel van Manders Schilderboek," in *Festschrift Otto Schäfer zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Manfred von Arnim (Stuttgart: Dr. Ernst Hauswedell & Co., 1987), 11–19.

<sup>46</sup> Karin Hellwig, "'Vidas' y biografías de Alberto Durero desde Van Mander hasta Thausing," in *El siglo de Durero: Problemas historiográficos*, ed. María del Mar Borobia Guerrero (Madrid: Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2008), 57–82.

<sup>47</sup> Joachim von Sandrart, *L'Academia Todesca della Architectura, Scultura & Pittura: Oder Teutsche Academie der Edlen Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste*, vols. 2–3 (Nuremberg: Jacob von Sandrart; Frankfurt am Main: Matthäus Merian, 1679), 222–229, accessed September 3, 2024, <http://ta.sandrart.net/de/text/438#idx438.1>.

222	II. Theils III. Buch.	Albrecht Dürer von Nürnberg/ Malter.	III. Capitel.
<b>Das III. Capitel.</b>			
<b>Albrecht Dürer / Malter / Bildhauer / Kupferstecher und Baumeister von Nürnberg.</b>			
<b>Inhalt.</b>			
<p>XIV. Albrecht Dürer von Nürnberg / Malter / Bildhauer / Kupferstecher und Baumeister: Lernet bey Michael Wolgemut: Seine Kupferstiche in der Jugend: Andere seine Werke / die Tugenden vor Gerichte / und andere köstliche Stück: Ein S. Bartholomäus, der von Venedig nach Prag Kommen: Seine Contrafät. Dieses Künstlers rühmliche Wissenschaften: Sein Ansehen bey denen Römischen Käisern: Unterschiedliche seine Zeichnungen: Seine Gemähde: Andere seine Werke zu Prag / zu Frankfurt / zu Wien / zu München / in dem Sandrartischen Kunst-Buch. Sein ganzes Opus von Holschnit und Kupferstichen / und andere fast unzählbare seine Werke: Unterschiedliche Contrafäte: Besucht die Künstler in Niederland. Seine Tugenden / Grabschrist und Ehren-Lob. Copey etlicher Sendschreiben / welche Albrecht Dürer abgehen lassen: Albrecht Dürers des älttern Herkommen / Leben und Sterben / von ihm selbst Anno 1524. beschrieben / darinnen die ganze Dürerische Familie begüßten. Extract etlicher Episteln Erasmi Rotterodami an Willibald Pirckheimer. Extract eines Schreibens Herrn Georg Hartmanns an Herrn Büchlern.</p>			
<p>X. IV. 21 Albrecht Dürer von Nürnberg Malter Kupferstecher und Baumeister.</p>		<p>Es nun Italien / durch die Fürstlichkeit unterschiedliche vollkommener Malere / einen so hohen Ruhm erlangt / sinde auch Feurschland an / seine Finstermisse abzulegen / indem es durch ein herrliches großes Licht / welches alle Zeichen- und Maß-Kunst mit seinem Glanz und Fürstlichkeit beschienet / ohne daß es anfänglich einige Stralen von den Italiänischen oder Griechischen alten Meistern entlehnet hat / beleuchtet worden / diß geschah bey des fürstlichen Albert Dürers Geburt zu Nürnberg Anno 1471. Sein Vater waere ein herrlicher Goldschmid / bey deme Albert / laut seiner hernachfolgenden Hand-Brieffe / in seiner Jugend auch das Goldschmid-Handwerk gelernt / und mithin das Kupferstechen bevriffen / weilm man nicht befindet / daß er in seiner Jugend etwas gemahlet habe / bis er die Maler-Kunst bey Michael Wolgemut zu Nürnberg / Anno 1486. zu begriffen auf drey Jahr gedinet worden / wie hiervon folgende beglaubte Zeugnisse mit mehrern besättigen / daß also Carl von Mander nicht recht informirt gewesen / indem er gemeldet: Es habe Albrecht bey Martin Schön (den die Niederländer den hüßlichen Marten genandt) die Kunst erlernt / dann obßhen er dieses Fürnehmens gewesen / starbe doch Martin vor Alberts Ankunfft / so daß er nachmalen bey erweidtem Wolgemut in die Lehr geschan worden.</p> <p>Als er nun die Lehr-Jahr mit großem Fleiß durchgebracht / hat er sich vier Jahr in Niederland aufgehalten / und nachdem er von dar wieder zu Haus ankommen / unter andern drey oder vier nahefende Frauen in Kupfer gestochen / so etliche für die drey Gracien / sich aber für Heren / gehalten / weil ein Todren-Kopf / Todren-Gebeln / Hölle und Teufels-Gespensier darbey gebildet / die er dem Jraetl von Mecken nachgeschossen haben soll / über diesen Weibern ist eine Kugel mit dem dato 1497. zu welcher Zeit er 26. Jahr alt war / und folgende Buchstaben O. G. H. die von etlichen angeleget werden für: O Gott hüt / uns von Zaubereyn. Sein ältester Mann mit einem Todren-Haupt in den Waffen hat die Zahl von 1503. Sein fürstlicher Adam und Eva, 1504. Drey Pferde 1505. Seine Paffions-Kupfer / die sehr artig von Zeichnung und wunder-sauber gestochen / sind von unterschiedlicher Zeit / als 1507. 1508. und 1512. der Herzog von Sachsen von 1524. Melanchthon von 1526. welches Jahr auch das letztere / so man in seinen Werken findet / übrige aber sind unnötzig zu ersehen / weil sie bey den wahren Kunst-liebenden überall genugsam bekandt sind. Er besaße sich / in allen seinen Sachen / dem Leben bäst-möglichst zu folgen / mit großer Sorgfältigkeit das schöne von dem nachschöner und allerhöchsten zu untercheiden / wie auch alle berühmte Antiche gelehrt waren / die eben darmit denen Italiänern bey Zeit die Augen geöffnet haben.</p> <p>Es haben sich viele fürstliche Künstler über die Vollkommenheit und Sauberkeit unsers Alberts / die er mit seinem Grabstüchel gebrauchet / verzuwendert / danhero auch seiner Manier / so viel sie gekunt / gefolget: Ja es haben viele / und zwar die berühmteste Italiänische Künstler selbst / nicht allein sich seiner ordnanzen / Historien / Kleidungen / Figuren und anderer Zierathen bedienet / sondern wol gar ganze Bilder / und fast völlige Historien / ihre schon oben gedachte worden / nach Albert Dürers Kupferstichen und Holschnitten in ihren Gemähen nachgefolgt / weil diese scharfsinnende Nation, eben wie auch andere / diesen Künstler höher / als alle andre Teutsche / ætirmirt haben /</p>	
<p>Kernet des Michael Wolgemut.</p>	<p>Andere feine Werke.</p>		
<p>Seine Kupferstiche in der Jugend.</p>	<p>ben /</p>		

Figure 4.2. Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie*, 1675, Beginning of the Dürer vita. Source: Photo by Monika Runge. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

from his own experience, he also repeated his predecessor's errors and topoi regarding Dürer's biography.

Sandrart, who spent many years in Nuremberg, was the first of the Dürer biographers to refer not only to statements by third parties, but also to previously unpublished testimonies by the artist himself or by people close to him, which he printed in the extensive appendix to his description of Dürer's life.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, the author does not seem to have made use of the rich Nuremberg local tradition and many works in private ownership in Nuremberg, which would certainly have been accessible with little research effort. Sandrart's biography of Dürer, which at first glance appears more independent, ultimately contains hardly any substantial corrections to van Mander's biography. His account is only seemingly more documentary and suggests a scholarly basis, but in fact, like all his predecessors, Sandrart contributes in many aspects to the propagation of the "legend of Dürer" and his image as founding father of German art and "prince of artists."<sup>49</sup>

### THE "ENLIGHTENED" DÜRER – HENRICH CONRAD AREND'S MEMORIAL OF HONOURS

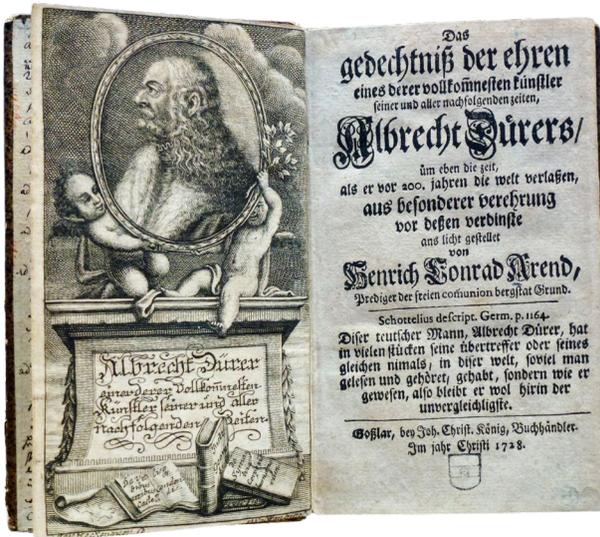
Whereas Sandrart's account of Dürer's life and works still falls within the tradition of *vita* literature, Henrich Conrad Arend's (1692–1736) *Gedechtniß der Ehren [...] Albrecht Dürers* [Memorial of Honours of [...] Albrecht Dürer] is the first Dürer biography in the modern sense.<sup>50</sup>

Published in Goslar in 1728, the 142-page octavo volume is also the first ever printed monograph on a German artist. It contains a dedication to Duke Ludwig Rudolph of Brunswick and Lüneburg, from whom the author Hinrich

<sup>48</sup> Sandrart, *L'Academia Todesca*, 226–229.

<sup>49</sup> Title of the epitaph Sandrart had dedicated to Dürer in 1681 and placed on his grave in Nuremberg, see Joachim von Sandrart, *Academia Nobilissimae Artis Pictoriae [...]* (Nuremberg: Froberger/Frankfurt: Michael & Johann Friedrich Endter Erben, 1683), 214.

<sup>50</sup> Henrich Conrad Arend, *Das gedechtniß der ehren eines derer vollkommnesten künstler seiner und aller nachfolgenden zeiten, Albrecht Dürers, um eben die zeit, als er vor 200. Jahren die welt verlassen, aus besonderer verehrung vor deßen verdinste ans licht gestellet* (Goslar: Joh. Christ. König, 1728); Matthias Mende, "Nachwort," in Henrich Conrad Arend, *Das Gedächtnis der Ehren Albrecht Dürers* (Goslar, 1728; repr., Unterschneidheim: Uhl, 1978), unpaginated; Anja Grebe, "Sammler-Sichten und Wissenstraditionen: Zur Dürer-Rezeption in der Frühen Neuzeit," in *Welfen sammeln Dürer: Exhibition catalogue*, ed. Klaus Niehr and Judith Tralles (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2019), 67–89, cat. no. 45.



**Figure 4.3.** Heinrich Conrad Arend, *Gedechniß der Ehren [...] Albrecht Dürers*, 1728. Title page and frontispiece. Source: Photo by Monika Runge. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg

Conrad Arend hoped to obtain a better position. Arend was obviously aware of the novelty of his undertaking. At the beginning of the 18th century, monographic biographies were in principle reserved for persons of rank. Arend justified his endeavour by emphasising Dürer's nobility of virtue and exemplary role as the "most perfect" artist and human being, based on the humanist praise of Dürer also repeated by Sandrart.<sup>51</sup> The textual genre also represents a novelty as to the literature on art and artists. Originally, the "Ehrgedächtnis" as a literary genre of the Baroque period was not a vita or biography in the true sense of the word, but a Christian funeral or memorial sermon written in close proximity to the date of death of the honored person, almost exclusively a prince, noble and person of rank.<sup>52</sup> The speeches, composed in a superlative style, usually included information on the life, work, social context, illness and death of the honoured person as well as a laudatory description of his or

<sup>51</sup> Arend, *Das gedechtniß der ehren*, § 1.

<sup>52</sup> Rudolf Lenz, ed., *Studien zur deutschsprachigen Leichenpredigt der frühen Neuzeit* (Marburg: Schwarz-Verlag, 1981).

her virtues and exemplary character. Arend's *Ehrgedächtnis*, however, was no longer a funeral sermon, but a literary monument published on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the artist's death which at the same time claimed validity as an autonomous biography of the artist. The frontispiece designed by the Wolfenbüttel court engraver Jakob Wilhelm Heckenauer, which represents a monumental pedestal with a dedication to Dürer crowned by a self-portrait of the artist held by two putti, pays tribute to this new, expanded meaning of Arend's *Memorial of honours*.

In terms of content, Arend's anecdote-rich account continues the tradition of early modern *vita* literature in many respects. In terms of form, however, he was already on the path to modern artist biography through the balance between life and work as well as his scholarly approach, mirrored, among others, through references in the form of footnotes. Arend did not come up with new sources, but with an extensive annotation apparatus for the first time. The disclosure of sources and explicit reference to conflicting opinions, contradictions, and uncertainties was a novelty that by no means became the standard in subsequent Dürer biographies, including many modern accounts of his life. Arend's *Memorial of Honours* thus occupies a key position in German art literature also beyond the narrower subject of Dürer.

## CONCLUSION: DÜRER KNOWLEDGE AND DÜRER LEGEND AS REFLECTED IN LITERATURE

Around fifty years after Arend, the critic Johann Heinrich Merck (1741–1791) published an article entitled *Einige Rettungen für das Andenken Albrecht Dürers gegen die Sage der Kunst-Literatur* [Some rescues for the memory of Albrecht Dürer against the myth of art literature] in the literary journal *Teutscher Merkur* [German Mercury] in 1780.<sup>53</sup> The essay is more than a simple apology by the artist against the falsehoods and slander that various, mainly French, authors had levelled against him. Rather, Merck undertakes an extremely lucid analysis of the effect of biographical writing

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<sup>53</sup> Johann Heinrich Merck, "Einige Rettungen für das Andenken Albrecht Dürers gegen die Sage der Kunst-Literatur," in *Werke*, ed. Arthur Henkel (Frankfurt, Main: Insel-Verlag, 1968), 423–430; Walter Schübler, *Johann Heinrich Merck, 1741–1791: Biographie* (Weimar: Böhlau, 2001).

on the image of Dürer, which is often modelled more on the authors' imaginings and aspirations than fact-based:

*[the image of the artist is modeled] according to the archetype which the critics had in mind and to which the merits of the man they wish to characterise should now resemble. In order to make the comparison fitting, they cut off, add, distort and conceal whatever they deem appropriate; and thus the "loci communes" arise. [...] The judgement made by previous authors about a man's merits is so convenient for those who come after him that it is repeated for centuries; or the later authors do not consider it worth the effort to refute it.<sup>54</sup>*

Merck's comments refer above all to the classicist critics of Dürer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who, taking up Vasari's judgment, accused Dürer of having a poor style and taste. Merck attempts to refute them by pointing to a certain, positively connoted contemporary national style (the general character of the age), which also characterised Dürer's work. In addition, he argues that the perception of Dürer's oeuvre had been obscured by numerous copies, which had significantly influenced his stylistic image, particularly with regard to the negative aspects of which he was accused. Together with the literary bias, a lack of connoisseurship had created a false image of Dürer. Merck also clearly identifies the problem of the (auto-)biographical tradition of Dürer: "It is astonishing that we know so little that is actually true about the history of this great man [...]."<sup>55</sup>

At first glance, Merck's analysis, which is now more than 240 years old, seems to correspond exactly with the argument of this paper regarding the literary tradition of Dürer in the early modern period. In his essay, however, Merck only deals with the critical voices and in this way paints himself a false picture of the literary reception of Dürer. However, his comments on the principles of tradition also apply to the positive criticism of Dürer. The latter clearly outweighed the negative voices, as the extensive literature on Dürer from the 16th century up to the modern times shows.

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<sup>54</sup> Merck, "Einige Rettungen," 423 (translation into modern English, AG).

<sup>55</sup> Merck, "Einige Rettungen," 428.

Two factors were decisive for the continuing literary tradition of Dürer: firstly, the large number and Europe-wide distribution of his prints and, secondly, his theoretical writings and their translations, thanks to which Dürer became an established figure in scientific literature and art literature across all national borders. Among other things, his theoretical publications contributed to Dürer being listed in the “scholars” section of biographical encyclopaedias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which visual artists were generally not included.<sup>56</sup>

The “history of knowledge” of Dürer must always be seen as part of the general history of literature and science and especially of (art) historiography. Only in this way can the reception of Dürer in literature be analysed not only in terms of its significance as a source for the respective individual, group- or period-specific perception of Dürer and for its impact on the development of today’s image of the artist, but also regarding its role in art history as a specialized field in general.

From the very beginning, the literary tradition of Dürer was largely determined by *topoi*. In fact, even the texts written by his closest acquaintances paint a picture of the artist that is modelled more on (antique) artist legends than on his actual life circumstances and personality. The texts by Dürer’s contemporaries were considered particularly authentic and their statements on Dürer’s life, work and character were often uncritically adopted by later authors, including modern Dürer biographers. Because early biographers like Christoph Scheurl or Joachim Camerarius also claimed that his works reflected his character, one-sided interpretations of his works were subsequently used by other authors as the basis for their biographies – and vice versa. The double biographical circular reasoning became a basic model of the “invention” of Dürer in literature, which in turn had an impact on the early modern modelling of the “legend of Dürer.”

Literary heroisation played a decisive role in turning Albrecht Dürer from an internationally renowned and esteemed artist into a German national hero during his lifetime and posthumously into a saint of art. With regard to

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<sup>56</sup> For example, see Melchior Adam, *Vitae Germanorum philosophorum, qui seculo superiori, et quod excurrit, philosophicis ac humanioribus literis clari floruerunt* (Frankfurt am Main: Nikolaus Hoffmann, 1615), 66–71; Paulus Freher, *Theatrum virorum eruditione clarorum in quo vitae & scripta theologorum, jureconsultorum, medicorum & philosophorum, tam in Germania superiore & inferiore [...]* (Nuremberg: Johannes Hofmann, 1688), 1439–1440.

Dürer's repeatedly emphasised pioneering position, it should be noted that he not only became a founder of modern art in Germany through his artistic work and his writings, but also indirectly contributed to the foundation of art literature as the subject of biographical and art-historiographical literature. His example was used to develop new genres of art historical writing and to elevate artists in Germany to persons worthy of biography in the first place. By turning Dürer into a projection screen for personal and collective goals – as mirrored in nationalist discourses – which sometimes only have a very indirect connection with art, his biography and character are modelled according to these interests.

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