

Zurich, 11 November 2024

Press Release

## **Albrecht Dürer: Defying Norms, Setting Standards**

**4 December 2024 – 9 March 2025**

Opening: Tuesday, 3 December 2024, 6.00 pm

**‘To think of Dürer is to love, to smile, to remember’, wrote Thomas Mann in an essay from 1928. And to this day, the name Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) still elicits an immediate response from most people. To close one’s eyes and think of Dürer is to see something – whether it be his self-portrait of 1500, in which he dared to present himself as an iconic, Christ-like figure, or his watercolour rendering of a piece of turf, in which he elevated the ground under our feet to a pictorial subject in its own right, or his engraving of the naked Adam and Eve, the summation of his study of human proportions and at the same time proof that an artist like himself needed no colour to surpass nature itself.**

**The exhibition at the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich presents more than 100 works by the German Renaissance artist, drawn from its own holdings. The selection focuses on Dürer as an artist who, especially in his printed oeuvre, succeeded not only in defying norms, but also in setting new standards.**

In terms of both quality and quantity, the Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich holds an enviable collection of prints by Albrecht Dürer. Among the exhibited pieces, visitors will discover a number of familiar icons from Dürer’s oeuvre – such as *Melencolia I*, a work ennobled by art historians as the quintessential ‘thought-image’ (*Denkbild*), which has never ceased to serve as a source of inspiration for artists. Characteristic of this work is its stubborn resistance to final, comprehensive interpretation despite the astonishing clarity of its individual elements.

Yet *Melencolia I* is by no means the only print in the exhibition that has driven many a zealous interpreter to despair. All who would like can try their hand at Dürer’s first dated engraving, *The Four Witches* of 1497, adding another chapter to the centuries-long debate over the proper interpretation of the work. Are the four nude women really supposed to represent witches? What does their provocative sensuality mean? Why is there a skull at their feet, and what do the letters ‘O G H’ on the sphere above their heads signify?

*The Men’s Bath*, created around the same time, is also notable for its erotic potential and numbers among Dürer’s most famous woodcuts. The print exemplifies Dürer’s mischievous delight in evocative details. For example, it is only seemingly by chance that the water spout coincides with the genitals of the man standing at the post, opening up a wide range of meaningful allusions that play on theories about rampant syphilis as well as commonplace synonyms and symbols for the male member.

Another of Dürer’s much-admired qualities is his ability to capture interpersonal resonances and represent feelings in an empathetic way: from blunt rage, cruelty, and vulgarity, to sheer desperation, grief, and sympathy, to mercy and deeply felt happiness and affection. In the exhibition, this quality is especially

manifested in the series of images devoted to the Passion, which hauntingly depict the sufferings of Christ. Two of Dürer's Passion series are on view in their entirety: the **Large Passion** (1496–1510), executed in woodcut, and the so-called **Engraved Passion**, created between 1507 and 1512.

Dürer's status as a sought-after portraitist of famous personalities of his time is evidenced not only in his paintings, but also by the numerous portraits he created in the medium of woodcut and engraving. The exhibition shows a total of six portraits, including the much-admired and oft-copied engraving **Erasmus of Rotterdam** from 1526.

The goal of the exhibition, however, is not simply to feature well-known highlights, but also to illustrate the impressive range of Dürer's oeuvre in the medium of printmaking. Accordingly, the show also includes lesser-known works by the artist, such as two of his purely ornamental woodcut images of **Knots** (1507). Many viewers may also be surprised to learn that Dürer not only made woodcuts and engravings, but also experimented with acid processes, as evidenced by two prints in the exhibition created using the medium of iron etching: **Study with Five Figures** (1515) and **Abduction on a Unicorn** (1516).

The extent of an artist's impact beyond the elite circles of art lovers is measured by whether his or her work can also be encountered outside the hallowed halls of the museum. Reproductions of Albrecht Dürer's pictorial creations have taken up residence in every imaginable place, from schoolbooks to grandparents' bedrooms – and even, most recently, public swimming pools, since his *Praying Hands* and enigmatic *Melencolia I* now belong to the standard repertoire of every tattoo studio. The exhibition thus also takes the opportunity to show **photographs of tattoos** by international tattoo artists based on Dürer's **Apocalypse** (1496–98) and **Rhinoceros** (1515).

The opening reception will feature a live tattoo performance with tattoo artist Myriam Black from Bristol.

### Exhibition Information

Curator:	Susanne Pollack, Graphische Sammlung ETH Zurich
Program and Events:	For program and event details, visit <a href="http://www.gs.ethz.ch/agenda/">www.gs.ethz.ch/agenda/</a>
Opening Times:	Daily, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Closed: Mon, 23 Dec. 2024 – Fri, 3 Jan. 2025
Admission:	Free
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