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Albrecht Dürer's Large Passion: Art, History, and Theology

James W. Ellis¹

¹Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.

Correspondence: James W. Ellis, Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong. E-mail: jellis@yu.edu.

Abstract

This essay analyzes a series of woodcuts collectively entitled the *Large Passion* (of Christ), which the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer created between 1496 and 1511. The Passion illustrates the biblical story of Jesus Christ's betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. The essay explores various artistic, religious, and philosophical contexts that affected Dürer's imagery. The artist's identification as an Augustinian Catholic, his interest in Italian humanism, and the influence of Venetian Renaissance art played crucial roles in the iconography and style of Dürer's woodcut prints. The devotional known as the *Way of the Cross*, or *Stations of the Cross*, also impacted his subject matter. The artist used his *Large Passion* cycle to educate a wide spectrum of art collectors about Christian doctrine. The essay concludes by briefly examining each *Large Passion* image, using relevant Bible passages and Christian theology to help explain some of the messages Dürer's prints conveyed.

Keywords: Albrecht Dürer, Christian art, *Large Passion*, Nuremberg, Woodcut Print

1. Introduction: Albrecht Dürer

Albrecht Dürer was a graphic artist and painter and a leading figure of the northern European Renaissance (fig. 1). Dürer was born on May 21, 1471, in Nuremberg, a *Freie Reichsstadt* (or "free imperial city") within the Holy Roman Empire, in the southern German region of Franconia. He learned to draw from his Hungarian father, Albrecht Dürer the Elder (c. 1427-1502), who was a goldsmith and engraver. Dürer described his father as a patient, peaceful, thankful man who led an honorable Christian life, who earned the praise of all who knew him. "This man, my dear father, was very careful of his children to bring them up to honor God" (Severance 2010).

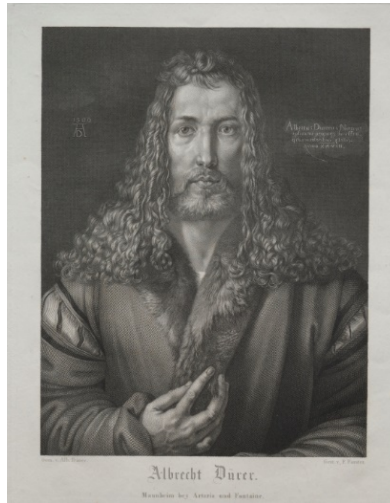


Figure 1. François Forster, *Portrait of Albrecht Dürer (after Dürer's Self-Portrait)*, engraving, 1822. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

Albrecht Dürer was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, and Christianity would be at the heart of his life and art. Dürer's first acclaimed work was a 1492 woodcut illustration for the cover of a German publication of the letters of St. Jerome (c. 347-420), who translated the Bible into Latin.

Dürer completed a three-year apprenticeship (1486-1489) with his godfather Anton Koberger (1440-1513). Koberger managed Nuremberg's leading print workshop. He produced woodcut illustrations for books and other publications, including *the Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493). The *Nuremberg Chronicle* was a *biblical paraphrase* and universal history of the Christian world from the creation through the early 1490s. The *Chronicle* contained geographical and historical information on many European cities, including Nuremberg, and hundreds of woodcut illustrations of religious themes and portraits of saints. Although scarce supporting documentation survives, historians believe Albrecht Dürer provided designs for *the Nuremberg Chronicle* (see Wilson 1976).

Dürer was one of many artists who lived through Nuremberg's transition from Catholicism to Protestantism. As part of the Holy Roman Empire, religion played an important role in Nuremberg's civic life. Every year, just after Easter, the city's holy relics (including the *Holy Lance* used to pierce Jesus' side as he hung on the cross and five thorns from Christ's *Crown of Thorns*) went on display in the market square. Pilgrims believed access to the relics could reduce their time in purgatory (Smith 1983: 28). Fifteenth-century dramatist, Hans Rosenplüt (c. 1400-1460) wrote of the piety of Nuremberg's citizens, and the city's many cloisters, monasteries, and benevolent organizations. According to Rosenplüt, Nuremberg was one of Christendom's five holiest cities, along with Jerusalem, Rome, Trier, and Cologne (Brockmann 2006: 19).

2. *The Large Passion*

Around 1495, Dürer set up his own workshop in Nuremberg. Although he was also active as a painter, during Dürer's early career he was preoccupied with three series of woodcuts: the *Large Passion* (also known as the *Great Passion*), of 1496-1499 and 1510-1511, the *Apocalypse* (1498), and the *Life of the Virgin* (1510). This essay focuses on the series Dürer began first, the *Large Passion*. The Middle English word *passion* is derived from the Old French term *passion*, which in turn is derived from the ancient Latin word *passio* (meaning "suffering"). Latin translations of the Bible used *passio* to describe the suffering Jesus Christ endured beginning with his betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives through his death on the cross.

The passion was a subject Dürer returned to repeatedly throughout his career. In total, he worked on six passion cycles: 1) the *Albertina Passion* (four woodcuts, the mid-1490s); 2) the *Large Passion* (title page illustration and eleven woodcuts, 1496-1499 and 1510-1511); 3) the *Green Passion* (twelve drawings on green-tinted paper,

1504); 4) the *Small Passion* (thirty-seven woodcuts, 1509); 5) sixteen small copperplate engravings (1507-1513); and 6) the *Oblong Passion* (an indeterminate number of drawings, 1520-1523).

The physical dimensions of the *Large Passion* exceeded those of the other series; hence, it was given its special designation: the “*Large*” *Passion*.

Dürer completed the *Large Passion* in two stages. He produced seven woodcuts between 1496 and 1500 (figs. 9, 11-16) and then produced four new woodcuts and a new title page illustration, in a somewhat different style, in 1510 and 1511 (figs. 7-8, 10, 17-18). The final four prints were *The Last Supper*, *The Betrayal of Christ*, *Christ Descending into Limbo*, and *The Resurrection of Christ*. Dürer published the entire *Large Passion* cycle in book form in 1511. Prior to finishing the complete cycle, Dürer sold the first seven woodcuts as single prints (Panofsky 1955: 60).



Figure 2. Hieronymus Höltzel (printer), *The Large Passion: Title Page*, 1511. Public Domain.

When bound together, Dürer’s illustrations faced a set of Latin poems printed on the back (or *verso*) of the preceding page. The title page also had accompanying poetry (fig. 2). A Nuremberg monk and poet named Benedictus Chelidonius (c. 1460-1521) wrote the Latin verses. Chelidonius was a linguistic scholar, poet, and abbot of the Benedictine *Schottenstift* (“Scottish Abbey”), which was founded in Vienna in 1155 and later relocated to Nuremberg. Medieval monasteries were storehouses of knowledge, and the *Schottenstift* was renowned for the literary achievements of Chelidonius, and, later, for the poems and hymns of Wolfgang Schmelztl (c. 1500-1564) and the biblical writings of Johannes Rasch (1540-1612). Chelidonius wrote his Latin poems in the *Christian humanist* tradition (Posset 2005: 86-87). The poems reflect on Christ’s suffering and the role of his sacrifice in salvation, however, Chelidonius based his verses on classical poetry and made certain concessions to pagan religions. For example, he lent Roman and Greek names to the Christian story; God became “mighty Jove” and Hell became “the Styx.”

Interestingly, Chelidonius was a close friend of the Scholastic theologian Johann Maier von Eck (1486-1543), a prelate, leader of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and important theological adversary of Martin Luther (1483-1546). Dürer, on the other hand, was sympathetic to many of Luther’s Reformation ideas.

3. An Augustinian

Benedictus Chelidonius’ poems blended Christian and humanist elements. Albrecht Dürer’s *Large Passion* images (in both their iconography and style) also blended Christian and humanist elements. As mentioned, Dürer was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and, as an adult, he attended services at Nuremberg’s *Sebalduskirche* (or “St.

Sebaldus Church”) The Sebalduskirche was built during the thirteenth century and was named for the patron saint of Nuremberg. Today, Sebalduskirche is a Lutheran parish church, but before the Reformation, it was an Augustinian Catholic church. Dürer would have been very familiar with the theology and philosophy of St. Augustine (354-430).

St. Augustine wrote about the Passion of Christ in his model of Christian instruction entitled the *Enchiridion*, also known as the *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love* (c. 420). In Chapter 53 of the *Enchiridion* St. Augustine wrote,

All the events, then, of Christ's crucifixion, of His burial, of His resurrection the third day, of His ascension into heaven ... were so ordered, that the life which the Christian leads here might be modelled upon them, not merely in a mystical sense, but in reality. For in reference to His crucifixion it is said: They that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with the affections and lusts. And in reference to His burial: We are buried with Him by baptism into death. In reference to His resurrection: That, like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life. ... Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God (Schaff 1887).

Like St. Augustine, Dürer hoped Christ's sacrificial life would serve as an exemplar for the lives of Christians later on, and he used illustrations of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection to teach that lesson. Dürer knew many influential theologians, and their ideas informed the subject matter of his religious art.

Johann von Staupitz (1460-1524) was Martin Luther's mentor and Vicar General of the German Congregation of Augustinians. Staupitz became Martin Luther's superior within the Augustinian Order and his father confessor around 1505. On several occasions, Staupitz delivered sermons at Sebalduskirche with Dürer in attendance. Staupitz's sermons often emphasized the relative importance, compared to good works, of Christ's atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness from sins (see Posset 1995: 279-300). Staupitz's messages moved Dürer, as they did Luther (Severance 2010). Dürer joined a religious study group called the *Sodalitas Staupitziana*, named for Staupitz, and he gave Staupitz some of his prints (Butterfield 2013), evidently including a few of the *Large Passion* woodcuts.

Professor Richard Viladesau, an ordained Catholic priest and art historian, wrote, Dürer was “an earnest and pious practitioner of the Catholic religion of his time, and he spent most of his life creating images that [were] antithetical to the spirit of the Lutheran reform” (Viladesau 2008: 143). Still, it seems Dürer hoped for reform of the Church and harbored some sympathy for Martin Luther who criticized the papacy. Dürer also admired Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), who broke with Luther (fig. 3). Perhaps Dürer, along with Erasmus, belonged in the early Reformation's “moderate camp,” a group that remained Catholic, but was “committed to the reconciliation of Catholics and Protestants” (Wisse 2002). Erasmus was an admirer and collector of Dürer's woodcut prints. In *De pronuntiatione*, Erasmus wrote, “What cannot Dürer express in monochromes, that is, by blacklines alone?” (Jardine 1993: 3). In spite of his friendship with Martin Luther, Dürer played a formative role in Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation art (Morris 2007; Fiore 2007), and the ecumenical Council of Trent (1545-1563), which clarified Catholic doctrines contested by Protestants, endorsed the didactic quality of Dürer's art and writings.



Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam*. Etching. 1526
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

4. A type of humanist

During the fifteenth century, Nuremberg became one of Europe's leading artistic and commercial centers. By 1500, Nuremberg's population was nearly 50,000, making it one of the European continent's largest cities. Paris was largest, with nearly a quarter million inhabitants, followed by Naples, Milan, and Venice (Bairoch, Bateau & Chevre 1988). Nuremberg began as a fortified settlement, but relatively quickly, it grew into "a vibrant center of humanism and one of the first to officially embrace the principles of the Reformation" (Wisse 2002). The city was home to many prominent artists, such as the painter Michael Wohlgemuth (1434-1519), sculptors Veit Stoss (c. 1447-1533) and Adam Kraft (c. 1460-1509), and the poet Hans Sachs (1494-1576). It was also the hometown of Albrecht Dürer's closest friend, Willibald Pirckheimer (1470-1530), an exceptionally prominent scholar and *Renaissance humanist* (fig. 4).



Figure 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Willibald Pirckheimer*, engraving, 1524.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The intellectual movement known as humanism began in fourteenth-century Italy and spread to the rest of Europe by the middle of the fifteenth century. Humanists thought *studia humanitatis*, or the studying and imitation of the philosophy, literature, and arts of classical Greece and Rome could generate a European cultural rebirth following the declines of the so-called *Dark Ages* (or migration period) of c. 500-1000. After the onset of the Reformation

at the start of the sixteenth century, humanism transcended Protestant and Catholic dissimilarities, as members of each group studied and emulated qualities they found in Latin and Greek classics.

Dürer learned about classical culture from Willibald Pirckheimer. Pirckheimer studied jurisprudence, antiquity, and music at the Universities of Padua and Pavia from 1489 to 1495. After his studies, he returned to Nuremberg and became a city councilor and a leading figure of the city's humanist movement. Pirckheimer had an extensive collection of classical literature, and his home was a gathering place for scholars and artists. Pirckheimer translated many Greek and Latin texts into the vernacular German for Dürer (James 2005: 82). He also introduced Dürer to Desiderius Erasmus—with whom Pirckheimer maintained a lifelong correspondence—and the reformers Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) and Martin Luther.

Among his many scholarly accomplishments, Pirckheimer translated the writings of the *Church Fathers* from Greek into Latin, though “like Erasmus, he paid less attention to a literal rendering than to the sense of his translations” (Löffler 1911). When the Reformation began in 1517, Pirckheimer initially sided with Martin Luther and attacked Luther's opponent Johann Maier von Eck in a 1520 satire entitled *Eckius dedolatus* (roughly translated as “the discovered corner”). Because of his attack on the papal representative, Pirckheimer was included among Martin's “supporters, adherents, and accomplices” in Pope Leo X's bull of excommunication, *Exsurge Domine*, of 1520. Luther was excommunicated the following year by the papal bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, after he refused to recant the propositions of his *Ninety-five Theses* or *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences* (1517). Like many other humanists, however, Pirckheimer turned from the Reformation movement and returned to the Roman Catholic Church. He was absolved in 1521, after stating under oath that Luther's doctrines were heresies (Löffler 1911).

5. A trip to Venice and a change in style

Humanism had a special impact on the visual arts, and that impact can clearly be identified in Dürer's *Large Passion* woodcut imagery. As mentioned earlier, Dürer completed the *Large Passion* in two stages. Seven woodcuts were created between 1496 and 1500 and four new woodcuts, and the title page illustration were created a decade later, in 1510 and 1511. In the interim, in 1505 and 1506, Dürer lived and studied in Venice, becoming one of very few northern European artists to absorb the lessons of the Italy Renaissance first-hand (Note 1).

Nuremberg was a transportation hub and a commercial conduit, and it established a trade agreement with the maritime Republic of Venice, 600 km to the south. During Dürer's lifetime, Venice was more than a simple seaport city; it was a sovereign state and international financial center spreading across Italy's northeastern coast. Dürer went to Venice in hopes of receiving a commission from the *Tedeschi*, the Venetian organization of German merchants. The merchants met in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* (literally “storehouse of the Tedeschi”), a Renaissance-style building on Venice's Grand Canal. Many of the German merchants worshiped at the nearby *San Bartolomeo* (or “St. Bartholomew Church”). Dürer did receive a commission that he completed in September 1506; an altarpiece to adorn San Bartolomeo entitled the *Feast of the Rose Garlands* (or *Rosary*).

When Dürer was in Venice, the Bellini family was recognized as a type of artistic dynasty. Jacopo Bellini (c. 1400-1471) began the dynasty, as a popular painter of traditional Gothic Madonna and Child devotional images. Jacopo oversaw a flourishing studio with his sons, Gentile (c. 1429-1507) and Giovanni (c. 1430-1516), who was often called Giambellino. Giovanni Bellini transformed Venice from a provincial artistic city into a Renaissance powerhouse to rival Rome and Florence. Giovanni's greatest students were Giorgione (c. 1476-1510) and Titian (c. 1485-1576), but many other outstanding painters worked in his studio. Dürer wrote from Venice to Willibald Pirckheimer in Nuremberg that although Giambellino was very old, in painting he was still the best. Dürer developed a particular appreciation for the older artist's graceful depictions of biblical characters, who invariably occupy spacious, harmonious compositions. Dürer spent his time in Bellini's studio closely examining the old master's finished works and preparatory sketches and copying figural types that he later incorporated into his own paintings and prints.

Giovanni Bellini was knowledgeable concerning the formal qualities of antique statuary. He also understood new Renaissance methods of showing ideally proportioned human bodies moving naturally in space. He encouraged Dürer to investigate “the classical heritage and theoretical writings of the region” (Wisse 2002). Dürer was inspired by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio’s (c. 70-15 BC) *De Architectura*, which reduced architectural structures to rational components based on the ideal human body. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) based his drawing *The Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490), which is sometimes called the “Canon of Proportions,” on Vitruvius’ writings and on the *Golden Ratio*. Dürer also read Leon Battista Alberti’s (1404-1472) aesthetic theories on harmonious anatomy in classical art (Sinisgalli 2011). Dürer saw how such principles were incorporated into the works of (Giovanni Bellini’s brother-in-law) Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), Antonio del Pollaiuolo (c. 1429-1498), and Lorenzo di Credi (1459-1537), painters known for their bold visual experiments with physiognomy, anatomy, and naturalism.

Exposure to the art theories and art of the Italian Renaissance changed the way Dürer conceived and composed his later *Large Passion* images. The style of the earlier woodcuts (figs. 9, 11-16) was typical of late German Gothic printmaking. In general, they featured 1) sharp linear designs, 2) an overabundance of details, and 3) swirling interrelationships of highly emotional characters. Relying heavily on dominant outlines and expressive lines, Dürer stuffed somewhat awkward characters into somewhat ambiguous spaces. There is an impression the characters might fall out of the early compositions. Like other northern medieval images, the early woodcuts do not reflect a close observation of life, but rather a deep understanding of previous northern religious art. The early *Large Passion* prints are decidedly Gothic; the late ones are Italianate.

When he returned to Nuremberg from Venice, and resumed working on the *Large Passion* series, Dürer’s characteristic later style emerged (figs. 7-8, 10, 17-18). The later woodcuts emphasize the interplay of *tones*, or lights and darks, which make two-dimensional imagery seem three-dimensional. Delicate, thin outlines and subtle *hatching* and *cross-hatching* blend figures and objects into their surroundings. The claustrophobic earlier spaces are transformed into more tranquil, harmonious, and unified compositions. Dürer’s later, Italianate woodcuts are “characterized by greater simplicity and economy of lines [and by] monumental figures that are comfortable within the picture space” (Cleveland 2019).

Northern Gothic artists did not primarily conceive of religious images in relation to the imitation of nature. Rather, Gothic art manifested well-understood theological ideas and visual precedents. Artists did not work *from life*, but from the image *in the soul* and from the works of other artists. Italian Renaissance artists, on the other hand, often embodied religious messages in direct and faithful representations of natural objects (Panofsky 1955: 243). Like humanist scholars, the Italian artists studied classical prototypes, including Greek sculpture and Roman painting, which stressed realism and autonomous, noble individuals, over stereotypes. Beginning around 1500, the people inhabiting Dürer’s images became less stylized and more natural. Around that time, he wrote, “the more accurately one approaches nature by way of imitation, the better and more artistic your work becomes” (Viladesau 2008: 142).

6. Iconographic sources of the *Large Passion*

The Passion of Christ illustrates Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, trial, suffering, and crucifixion. Christ’s resurrection is often included to add a greater context. For the same reason, the Last Supper—where Jesus foretold that one of his disciples would betray him—occasionally begins the cycle. In the Passion story, Christians recognize 1) Christ as the perfect example of self-sacrifice, 2) the *incarnation* of Christ (that God assumed human nature and suffered), and 3) Christ’s victory over earthly misery and death through his resurrection. Dürer’s *Passion of Christ* was based on accounts in the Bible’s four Gospel books (in Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, and John 18-19, KJV). However, Dürer would have also known of other historical representations of the Passion in literature, drama, and the visual arts.

Written commentaries on the Passion of Christ, outside the biblical versions, go back at least to the fourth and fifth-century writings of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and St. Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306- c. 373). St. Ephrem, writing in the Syriac language, described Christ's wounds and pain in graphic detail. The Bible accounts were elaborated on by medieval commentaries and biblical paraphrases, including Petrus Comestor's (died c. 1178) *Historia Scholastic* (c. 1173). *Historia Scholastic* was used as a textbook at Germany's oldest university, Heidelberg University, which was founded in 1386. The fourteenth-century German text, *Christi Leiden in einer Vision Geschaut* offered a mystic visualization of Christ's suffering.

Passion plays probably also inspired Dürer. Passion plays were medieval religious dramas, presented at churches and monasteries during the Easter season. Scenes of Christ's betrayal, trial, and crucifixion were performed with spoken gospel scriptures interposed. The earliest known passion play was performed during the twelfth century at the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, southeast of Rome (Sticca 1967: 215); German passion plays followed in the thirteenth century. By Dürer's lifetime, every major German city staged the annual dramatization, including Nuremberg.

7. *The Way of the Cross or Stations of the Cross*

The devotion known as the Way of the Cross (or *Via Crucis*) dates to the late medieval period and was derived from the gospel accounts and from the teachings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226), and St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217-1274) (Marini 2019). The Way of the Cross commemorates the events that occurred along the pathway known as the *Via Dolorosa* (a Latin term meaning "sorrowful way"). The *Via Dolorosa* in Old Jerusalem is the route Christians believe Jesus walked on the day of his crucifixion, from Herod's palace to the hill of Calvary. Since the fifteenth century, fourteen Stations of the Cross, or numbered stages of the Passion, have marked the pathway. Pope Clement VI (c. 1291-1352; Avignon Papacy 1342-1352) established Franciscan control over the route with the bull *Nuper Carissimae* (1342). Figure 5 shows a version of the Stations of the Cross in painted enamel.

Most of the events depicted in Dürer's *Large Passion* occurred along the *Via Dolorosa*, the exceptions being the first three: The Last Supper, Christ on the Mount of Olives, and The Betrayal of Christ. There are unambiguous biblical foundations for many of the Stations of the Cross and for many of Dürer's *Large Passion* scenes. The possible exceptions being The Lamentation of Christ and Christ Descending into Limbo. The Deposition and the Lamentation, which is called the *Pietà* when Mary is shown cradling Jesus' body, are often combined to form the thirteenth or fourteenth Station of the Cross. Lamentations first appeared in Byzantine art during the eleventh century and began to be seen frequently in early Italian Renaissance art and in northern Europe during the fourteenth century.



Figure 5. *Stations of the Cross*. Church of Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Normandy, France. c. 1550.
Wikimedia Commons. Tango7174 (no changes made). CC BY-SA 4.0.

During the fifteenth century, following the *Crusades to the Holy Land*, the Franciscans began creating replicas of the *Via Dolorosa*'s Stations of the Cross in Europe. Today, most people think of the Stations of the Cross as series of paintings or relief sculptures placed sequentially in churches, along the walls or on pillars, facilitating structured

meditation. However, Europe's earliest Stations of the Cross were often placed outdoors alongside paths and roads approaching churches and cemeteries. Albrecht Dürer would have known of one such series when he was creating his final four *Large Passion* prints. In 1505, a knight from Bamberg named Heinrich Marschalk von Rauhenack commissioned Nuremberg's stone sculptor and master builder, Adam Kraft to create a complete set of relief sculptures of the Stations of the Cross (fig. 6) (Drees 2000: 272). When Kraft completed his works two years later, they were placed on individual pillars along the route leading from Nuremberg to the medieval *Johannisfriedhof* (or "cemetery of St. Johann"). The series culminated at the cemetery with a Crucifixion and an Entombment, which stood over Rauhenack's final resting place (Först & Schmidt 2006). Perhaps Kraft's relief sculptures affected Dürer's later woodcuts.



Figure 6. Adam Kraft, *Jesus Falls* (Station of the Cross). Nuremberg. Wikimedia Commons. Ronald Becher (no changes made). [CC-BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Dürer portrayed scenes from the traditional Stations of the Cross in the first seven woodcuts he created for the *Large Passion* series (figs. 9, 11-16). However, three of the four woodcuts Dürer created after his journey to Venice are not traditionally included in the Stations of the Cross, namely *The Last Supper*, *Christ Descending into Limbo*, and *The Resurrection of Christ* (figs. 8, 17-18). Why did Dürer decide to include these subjects after his experience in Venice?

As mentioned, Dürer spent much of his time in Venice in Giovanni Bellini's studio, studying the work of Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian. Dürer saw well-known works by Bellini representing *The Last Supper* (Bellini 2019a), the *Decent into Limbo* (Bellini 2019b), and the *Resurrection* (Bellini 2019c). He also saw Giorgione and Titian's treatments of these subjects. Traces of the Venetian masters' paintings can be noted in the final *Large Passion* prints. Dürer also scrutinized the work of Bellini's brother-in-law Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506), although they never had the chance to meet. Like Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian, Mantegna had an impact on Dürer's style and his choice of subject matter. The recumbent soldiers of Dürer's *Resurrection* scene (fig. 18) were based on Mantegna's famed experiments in extreme perspectives and *foreshortening*, evident in his 1480 painting *Lamentation of Christ* (Mantegna 2019b). Furthermore, Mantegna's depictions of Jesus and his disciples in *Agony in the Garden*, of c. 1459-1465 (Mantegna 2019a), clearly affected the figures in Dürer's later woodcut *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (fig. 9). Perhaps without knowing it, many northern Europeans first learned about Italian Renaissance art through Dürer's *Large Passion* woodcuts.

8. Religious art as religious education

Unlike earlier artists, who relied upon wealthy patrons or the Church for support, Albrecht Dürer was an independent businessperson. The bulk of his income came from selling copies of his prints. In 1495, Dürer purchased his own press and began producing woodcuts and engravings in his workshop in Nuremberg. Customers purchased prints directly from his shop. In 1497, Dürer's agent, Contz Schwytzer started travelling from Nuremberg to the trade fair in Frankfurt, to sell individual *Large Passion* prints in one of Germany's major medieval marketplaces. Little more than a decade later, the complete, bound *Large Passion* was available throughout Europe.

Arguably, Dürer's largest cultural and social impact was through the widespread dissemination of his prints. When Dürer was young, artworks were rare, one-of-a-kind objects, locked away in inaccessible palaces, or attached to the walls of ecclesial buildings. Rather suddenly, innovations in printmaking made it possible to produce hundreds of identical and relatively inexpensive images that people could keep in their homes (James 2005: 84). In the fifteenth century, Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400-1468) invented a moving-type printing press, which allowed printed information, including illustrated Bibles, to circulate freely among societies and across borders. The *Gutenberg Bible*, a printed version of the Latin Vulgate, was available by 1454. By the time Dürer finished his *Large Passion* series, religious art, and religious books were obtainable by nearly every strata of society.

Dürer transformed printmaking by raising its status to that of an independent art form and a powerful Christian didactic tool (see Strauss 1979). Dürer's prints had spiritual depth and intellectual underpinnings. The Protestant Reformation, which began near Nuremberg in 1517 as a theological and doctrinal debate, commenced at a critical turning point in mass communication. Reformers and other theologians used printing presses to publish Bibles and religious treatises. Printed images, however, also shaped public opinion on religious issues (Severance 2010), without needing the intercession of a priest or interpreter. Although the Protestant Reformation divided Europe during his lifetime, Dürer remained a committed Catholic and used his popular *Large Passion* prints to teach gospel lessons and richly reflect a tradition of Christian theology.

9. The Individual Prints

The remainder of this essay will present the title page illustration and each of the eleven woodcuts of Dürer's *Large Passion* cycle. Relevant Bible passages will help explain the images' iconography and some of the messages the prints conveyed.



Figure 7. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion* title page illustration: *Christ, Man of Sorrows*, c. 1511. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

In the eighth century B.C., the messianic prophet Isaiah wrote,

[H]e shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; *a man of sorrows* [emphasis added], and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes, we are healed (Isaiah 53:2-5, KJV).

In Venice, Dürer studied a painting by Vittore Carpaccio (c. 1460-1526) entitled *The Meditation on the Passion* (c. 1490) (Carpaccio 2019). Dürer based Jesus' twisting, contorted pose on the Venetian artist's depiction of the biblical figure Job (Panofsky 1955: 93). Many theologians consider the tribulations of Job to be a *prefiguration* of the Passion of Christ. Job suffered sorrow and pain, yet maintained his trust in God. Similarly, Christ, the *Man of Sorrows*, endured the cross, yet maintained his trust in the father.

Benedictus Chelidonium provided an accompanying verse for the title page illustration (see Figure 2), which is translated,

I bear these cruel blows for you, o man,
And by my blood I cure your ills.
I take away your wounds by my wounds, your death by my death,
I, God, for you, a human creature,
And you ungratefully often stab at my wounds with your sins
Often I am flogged by your offences.
It was enough for me to have borne so many torments in the past
Under the Jewish crowd; now, freed, cease (Viladesau 2019: 146).



Figure 8. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: The Last Supper*, 1510. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The Last Supper was the Passover meal that Jesus shared with the apostles shortly before his crucifixion. Each of the Gospels describes the event. Jesus foretold his betrayal and coming death and instituted a memorial meal, known variously as the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. The Gospel of Matthew says,

[Jesus] sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. ... And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matthew 26:22, 26-28, KJV).

The Bible's Book of Exodus tells the Passover story. In the story, the Jewish slaves in Egypt marked their doorposts with the blood of a lamb "without blemish" (Exodus 12:5), a sign for the Lord to pass over the home and spare the firstborn living inside. Later, Jews celebrated the Feast of the Passover (or *Pesach* in Hebrew) to commemorate their liberation from Egyptian captivity. The apostle Paul equated Christ with the Passover lamb, a lamb without blemish "sacrificed for us," whose crucifixion freed humanity from the slavery of sin (1 Corinthians 5:7, KJV).

The Catholic Church celebrates the sacrament of the Eucharist (from the Greek word *eucharistia*, meaning "thanksgiving") during the liturgical service of the Mass. According to the doctrine of *transubstantiation*, the bread and wine of the Eucharist transubstantiate into Christ's Real Presence, his body and blood, though there is no change in the appearance of the bread and wine. Ancient and medieval theologians, including St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 50-c. 108), St. Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165), St. Augustine, and Hildebert de Lavardin (c. 1055-1133), elaborated the doctrine. Hildebert de Lavardin may have been the first to use the term transubstantiation. The doctrine was included in a decree of the Council of Trent (1545-1563).



Figure 9. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: Christ on the Mount of Olives*, c. 1497-1500. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The Gospel of Luke says after the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples went to the Mount of Olives (or *Olivet*), just outside the ancient city walls of Jerusalem.

And when [Jesus] was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation. And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, saying, 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.' And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:40-44).

Jesus visited Olivet three times during the last week of his earthly life: 1) during his *triumphal entry* (Luke 19:29, 37, KJV), 2) to deliver the *Olivet Discourse* (Matthew 24:3, KJV, and elsewhere), and 3) to pray after the Last Supper. After Christ's resurrection and ascension, two men "in white apparel," appeared to the disciples on the Mount of Olives and asked them, "Why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:10-11, KJV).



Figure 10. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: The Betrayal of Christ*, 1510.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

This image conflates three events that transpired during the betrayal of Christ: 1) his arrest, 2) Judas' infamous kiss, and 3) the violent attack by one of Jesus' disciples on a servant of the high priest.

After Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives, "a large multitude with swords and staves" arrived (Mark 14:43, KJV). Judas, one of the disciples, then kissed Jesus. This prearranged signal identified to the authorities the man they were to arrest. Dürer shows Judas' sinister face in the shadowy background behind Jesus. The Gospel of Luke says, "then Jesus said unto the chief priests, and captains of the temple, and the elders, which were come to him, Be ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves? When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:52-53, KJV). In Dürer's image, Jesus looks heavenward, perhaps remembering his earlier prayer, "not my will, but thine, be done."

A violent scene is in the right foreground. The Gospel of Luke says, "When they which were about [Jesus] saw what would follow, they said unto him, Lord, shall we smite with the sword? And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. And Jesus answered and said, Suffer ye thus far. And he touched his ear, and healed him" (Luke 22:49-51, KJV). The messianic prophet, Isaiah wrote that the coming *messiah* (from

the Hebrew *māshīah* meaning “anointed one”) would be the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6, KJV). The disciple’s violent act went against Jesus’ teachings on nonviolence, including his instructions to avoid resisting evil with evil: “whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:39, KJV).



Figure 11. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: The Flagellation*, 1496–1497.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The Gospels describe Jesus’ flagellation, or scourging. John wrote, “Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him. And the soldiers platted a Crown of Thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on him a purple robe, and said, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ and they smote him with their hands” (John 19:1-3, KJV). Matthew and Mark wrote that after Jesus had been scourged, Pilate delivered him to the people to be crucified (Mark 15:15, Matthew 27:26, KJV).

Christ stands in a calm *contrapposto* position (an Italian word meaning “counterpoise”), at the center of a whirling vortex of antagonists. As his weight rests on his right leg, his left leg rests. This stance causes one hip and one shoulder to dip slightly, creating a dynamic, opposing, and balancing effect on his anatomy. The ancient Greek sculptor and theoretician, Polykleitos, who lived during the fifth century B.C., revolutionized representations of the human figure through innovative animating techniques, including the *contrapposto* pose, and by formulating an ideal system of proportions. Polykleitos’ theories were summarized in his treatise entitled the *Canon* and demonstrated by his famed bronze statues, *Diskobolos* and *Doryphoros* (c. 450) (Moon 1995). The Italian Renaissance painters and sculptors emulated the ancient Greek methods, as did Dürer in this image.



Figure 12. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: Christ Shown to the People*, c. 1498. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The Gospel of John says,

Pilate, therefore, went forth again, and saith unto them, 'Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.' Then came Jesus forth, wearing the Crown of Thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, 'Behold the man!' When the chief priests therefore and officers saw him, they cried out, saying, 'Crucify him, crucify him.' Pilate saith unto them, 'Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him' (John 19:4-6, KJV).

In Dürer's image, Pilate presents Jesus on the porch of a palace designed in the *flamboyant Gothic* architectural style. A statue of a *satyr* decorates the palace façade. Satyrs were licentious, drunken, half men, half goats, woodland spirits of the Roman pantheon. St. Jerome described satyrs as symbols of Satan, and medieval artists used the characteristics of satyrs in representations of Satan (Link 1995: 44-45). Dürer portrayed the pagan rulers in Turkish clothes, a "survival of the medieval tendency to confuse Islamic and classical paganism." Dürer appears to have drawn the human figures first, and later added the architecture and background. That was the standard Gothic method of creating compositions, but the opposite of the Italian process of "determining space and then placing the figures therein" (Panofsky 1955: 60).



Figure 13. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: Christ Bearing the Cross*, circa 1498 – 1499. The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

After Pilate condemned Jesus he was led away to be executed. The Gospel of Luke says,

As they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus. And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him. But Jesus turning unto them said, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. ... For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?’ (Luke 23:26-28, 31-33, KJV).

Dürer showed Simon the Cyrenian directly behind Jesus helping to lift the cross’ central support. The Gospels do not say whether Simon was one of Jesus’ disciples, however, he is reminiscent of an earlier statement Jesus made to his disciples, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Among the Gospels, only Luke mentions the “Daughters of Jerusalem.” The *Early Church Fathers*, a group of influential ancient Christian theologians, thought the Daughters of Jerusalem included the *Three Marys* (Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of the Apostle James the Less, and Mary of Clopas). Dürer placed the three Marys on the far left of his composition, leaving Jerusalem’s city gates on their way to the crucifixion.

The woman kneeling in the bottom left holding a cloth is St. Veronica. *Sacred tradition* holds that Veronica of Jerusalem wiped blood and sweat from Jesus’ face as he carried the cross to Calvary and Jesus’ image was imprinted on her cloth, which came to be known as the Veil of Veronica, or *Sudarium* (see Clark 2004). The story evolved into an important icon in medieval France and Germany and is commemorated as the sixth Station of the Cross.



Figure 14. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: The Crucifixion*, c. 1497-1500.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

Dürer's crucifixion includes many standard figures and symbols, including Mary, the mother of Jesus, the Roman soldiers, and a cross and bones. Dürer also placed a small sun and moon at the top of his crucifixion scene (Savage 2018), which represent the darkness mentioned in the Gospels. The Gospel of Mark says,

[I]t was the third hour, and they crucified him. ... And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is, being interpreted, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' ... And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost (Mark 15:25, 33-34, 37; see also Luke 23:44-46, KJV).

The early Christian scholar and apologist, Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253) provided confirmation outside the biblical accounts that an unusual darkness occurred during Jesus' crucifixion (Roberts & Donaldson 1885). Luke used the Greek word *eclipontos* for the darkness that covered the earth, which led some to assume a solar eclipse occurred. However, many early commentators wrote there was no eclipse at the time of the crucifixion, and the cause was miraculous. For example, the third century Christian historian, Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 180-c. 250) argued vehemently the "darkness over the whole land" could have only had a divine explanation (Roberts & Donaldson 1886).

In Dürer's scene, angels use chalices to collect blood flowing from Christ's wounds, including a gaping wound on his side. The Gospel of John says, "[O]ne of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water" (John 19:34, KJV). The *Glossa Ordinaria* (Latin for "ordinary gloss") were Biblical annotations in the margins of the Vulgate, the late-fourth-century Latin translation of the Bible. The annotation for John 19:34 said the soldier who pierced Jesus' side "threw open the gates of life, from which flow out the sacraments of the church, without which there is no entering into life."



Figure 15. Albrecht Dürer,
The Lamentation of Christ, c. 1499.
The Cleveland Museum of Art.
Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).



Figure 16. Albrecht Dürer,
The Deposition, c. 1496–1497.
The Cleveland Museum of Art.
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The Lamentation of Christ, during which Jesus' friends and disciples mourned over his dead body, was a common subject for Christian art from the late medieval period onward. Though rarely included in the Stations of the Cross, it was often a part of other cycles such as the Passion of Christ. The Lamentation (from the Latin term for "crying") is called the *Pietà* (from the Italian word for "pity") when only Jesus and Mary are shown. In Dürer's Lamentation (and in his Deposition) the hill of Calvary is in the background; Jesus's cross is bare but one of the thieves, perhaps the *penitent thief* Luke mentioned (Luke 23:39-43, KJV), is shown still hanging on his cross. Jesus' mourners have removed his Crown of Thorns, and placed it at his feet.

Christ's deposition (from the Latin *deposition*, roughly translated as "internment" or "burial") is the Fourteenth Station of the Cross. The Gospel of John describes the Deposition.

And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred-pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand (John 19:38-42, KJV).

The Apostles' Creed, or *Apostolicum*, is a statement of faith recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. The Apostles' Creed, in Latin, says, "... *passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus; descendit ad inferna; tertia die resurrexit a mortuis ...*" This is translated, "[Jesus Christ] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead [or to Hell or Hades]. On the third day he rose again."



Figure 17. Albrecht Dürer, *The Large Passion: Christ Descending into Limbo*, 1510.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

Art historians and collectors often give Dürer's *Christ Descending into Limbo* the alternative title *The Harrowing of Hell*. As mentioned earlier, the Apostles' Creed says that after his crucifixion Christ *descendit ad inferna*; he descended to the abode of the dead. Medieval theologians conceived of limbo (from the Latin word meaning "border" or "edge") as a state or place where dwelled the souls of the righteous people who died before Christ's earthly life and sacrifice on the cross.

The Roman Catechism, or *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566), was a summary of Christian doctrine, "primarily intended for priests having care of souls" (Wilhelm 1912). The Roman Catechism summarized the Catholic Church's teaching regarding Christ's death, limbo, and his "liberation of the just." It said,

Christ the Lord descended into hell, in order that having despoiled the demons, He might liberate from prison those holy Fathers and the other just souls, and might bring them into heaven with Himself. This He accomplished in an admirable and most glorious manner; for His august presence at once shed a celestial luster upon the captives and filled them with inconceivable joy and delight. He also imparted to them that supreme happiness which consists in the vision of God (Charles 1982: 43).

In Dürer's image, a vicious, horned creature watches over the entrance to limbo and, though he holds a threatening pointed spear, he in no way impedes Christ or his mission.



Figure 18. Albrecht Dürer, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1510.
The Cleveland Museum of Art. Creative Commons Open Access (CC0).

The Gospels say that Pilate commanded his soldiers to secure Jesus' *sepulcher*, or stone-carved tomb, by sealing it so that the body could not be removed (Matthew 27:62-66, KJV). In spite of the precautions, the Gospels say the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples. The book of Acts says sometime after his resurrection, Christ was "taken up from [his disciples] into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11, KJV). Dürer's image seems to combine two separate events, the resurrection and the ascension, making both miracles visible simultaneously (Panofsky 1955: 136-137).

Dürer's composition follows French and Italian precedents by showing Christ rising miraculously above the tomb. Artists began to create this type of resurrection image in the twelfth century and it became quite popular from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries (Mâle 2013: 194). The spectator's point of view is that of the Roman soldiers responsible for guarding Jesus' tomb. The divine realm, demarcated by a band of clouds, reaches down to the earthly realm of the spectator.

Christ holds a cross staff with a triumphal banner, emblazoned with a symbol of the cross. Following his resurrection, the cross now represents his victory over death and the forces of evil. His other hand makes a gesture of benediction (from the Latin *benedicere*, "to bless"). The gesture was common in early Christian, Byzantine, and medieval art, particularly in images of *Christ in Majesty*, which showed the risen Christ as ruler of the world.

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Note 1.

Historians agree Albrecht Dürer was in Venice during 1505 and 1506. Some also contend Dürer went to Venice during 1494 and 1495, though they offer very little evidence. I agree with Katherine Crawford Luber that there is insufficient evidence to support the contention that Dürer was in Venice before 1505 (Luber 2005).