

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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Albrecht Dürer (Nuremberg 1471-1528)

Portrait of Philipp Melanchthon

Signed by the artist in monogram (lower centre):
'AD'; inscribed and dated in plaque at bottom of
sheet: '1526/ VIVENTIS . POTVIT .
DVRERIVS . ORA . PHILIPPI / MENTEM .
NON . POTVIT . PINGERE . DOCTA /
MANVS'

Engraving on laid paper

State A

6 ½ x 5 in. (16.7 x 12.8 cm.)

Executed in 1526



Provenance

Private collection, France.

Comparative literature

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Campbell Dodgson, *Albrecht Dürer, Numerical Catalogue of the Engravings, Etchings, Dry-Points with Technical Details*, London 1926. no. 102.

Hans Tietze and Erika Tietze-Conrat, *Kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke Albrecht Dürers*, vol. 1, Augsburg 1928; vol.2, Basel and Leipzig 1937; vol.3, Basel and Leipzig, 1938, no. 960.

Joseph Meder, *Dürer-Katalog: Ein Handbuch über Albrecht Dürers Stiche, Radierungen, Holzschnitte, deren Zustände, Ausgaben und Wasserzeichen*, Vienna 1932, p.113, no. 104.

Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton, 1943, p.238, no. 212.

F.W.H. Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts, c.1400-1700*, Volume VII, Amsterdam, 1954, no. 104.

W.L. Strauss, *The Intaglio Prints of Albrecht Dürer*, New York, 1977, p.218, no. 104.

Walter L. Strauss, ed. *The Illustrated Bartsch 10 (Commentary): Sixteenth Century German Artists, Albrecht Dürer*, New York, 1980, pp. 230-232, no.105

Giulia Bartrum, *German Renaissance Prints 1490-1550*, London, 1995, pp.60-61, no. 47

R. Schoch, M. Mende and A. Scherbaum, *Albrecht Dürer. Das Druckgraphische Werk. Band I: Kupferstiche, Eisenradierungen und Kaltnadelblätter*, Munich, London, New York, 2001, pp.241-242, no. 101.

Giulia Bartrum ed. *Albrecht Dürer and his Legacy - The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist / with contributions by Günter Grass, Joseph L. Koerner and Ute Kuhlemann*, London, 2002, p. 218, no.166.

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This early state engraved portrait of the great church reformer, Philipp Melanchthon, was one of the last portrait prints Dürer executed. This is the earliest portrait depiction of Melanchthon, who would sit for four artists in his life: Dürer, Hans Holbein the Younger, and both Lucas Cranach the Elder and Younger. The occasion of this portrait was one of great significance: Melanchthon's address on May 23rd, 1526, at the inauguration the new Academy in Nuremberg, which Melanchthon had been instrumental in establishing. In this speech Melanchthon asked *'For what brings greater usefulness to the whole human race than the humanities and their study?... Unless you preserve the humanities religion and good law cannot endure.'* Dürer encapsulates this humanist idea in his representation of Melanchthon as a standard bearer of intellectual force.

Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560) was one of Germany's leading scholar of biblical languages in the first part of the 16th century and Luther's most important colleague in the promotion of his theological reforms. Melanchthon was a vital German reformer, the first systematic theologian of the Protestant Reformation, intellectual leader of the Lutheran Reformation, and an influential designer of educational systems. He stands next to Luther and Calvin as a reformer, theologian, and agent of Protestantism, and was the greatest Humanist scholar of the Wittenberg Group.

Dürer and Melanchthon probably first met in 1518, while the scholar was visiting their mutual friend and prominent figure of Nuremberg society, Willibald Pirckheimer. Between November 1526 and May 1526, Melanchthon worked in Nuremberg, founding a new secular school on behalf of the city council, as part of programme of education reform. During his visit, he stayed again with Pirckheimer, who was Dürer's closest friend, and the two became better acquainted through the host and the city's wider humanist circle. The relationship between the scholar and artist intensified over the course of 1525-26, culminating in this print.

This print also represents an important component of Dürer's oeuvre. In the last decade of his life, Dürer expanded a new genre into his repertoire: the engraved portrait. The more austere yet stereometric compositions evoke Roman cenotaph memorials, while the poses of the subjects and Latin inscriptions also suggest the format of the Renaissance medals and bronze statuettes. This is a particularly fitting form to employ when depicting Melanchthon, who was a Greek scholar and great admirer of classical antiquity. These late portraits are famous for the freshness and directness with which they communicate

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not just the presence of the sitters, but also the comprehensive and insightful rendering of personality. The individuality of the subjects in these portrait prints is powerfully concentrated, surpassing conformity to the demands of the Netherlandish portrait-bust formula of the period. This individuality is designed to ensure not simply remembrance of the sitters, but the respect of posterity.

As he had done in his earlier portrait prints, such as his 1519 engraving of *Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg* (Bartsch 102; Meder, Hollstein 100), and 1524 *Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony* (Bartsch 104; Meder, Hollstein 102), Dürer made a bust portrait of his subject, which he placed over a fictive stone plinth bearing a Latin inscription. In a departure from these earlier portraits, however, Dürer chooses to place Melanchthon against a dappled background which suggests sky. Rather than being enclosed within a confined area, Melanchthon thus appears in the open, giving an illusion of space rather than restriction. This open air setting particularly recalls Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1522 woodcut of *Luther as Junker Jorg* (Hollstein, VI.107.132). In this setting Melanchthon stands exposed, directly before God.

Dürer's inscription (which translates as 'Dürer was able to depict Phillip's features just as in life, but the skilled hand could not portray his mind') is a 'compact masterpiece'¹. It reflects Melanchthon's own views on images, which he believed served as valuable signs and prompts to religion, but which were not interchangeable with the subject (and thus in the field of religious imagery could not be the object of worship themselves). The inscription also incorporates another layer of contemporary debate: the discourse that raged in sixteenth century artistic circles about the extent to which a work of art could portray the essential reality of its subject. This debate, or *paragone*, was centred on the degree to which the painted image could imitate the natural world and could represent not just external visual characteristics, but deeper qualities - the soul and spirit of the figures represented. This inscription notes Dürer's skill as an artist through a conventional observation on the limits of artistic representation. Melanchthon's image, the inscription states, is a good likeness, facilitating remembrance of the sitter, but it does not bear his essence and therefore falls short of being the man himself. This is a form of praise for Melanchthon, whose brilliant mind, Dürer tells us, is beyond artistic portrayal.

This Melanchthon portrait is also one of the last occurrences of an important motif in Dürer's religious portraits: the vision, or reflection, of the cross in the subject's iris. Dürer deployed this in his 1500 *Self*

¹ Harry Vredeveld, 'Lend a Voice: The Humanistic Portrait Epigraph in the Age of Erasmus and Dürer', *Renaissance Quarterly* Vol. 66, no. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 509-567, p. 541.

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Portrait (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), and in the 1519 representation of his wife Agnes, as St Anne in the *Virgin and Child with St Anne* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). The reflection of the cross in Melanchthon's portrait is striking as it juxtaposes his supposed outdoors location. It is therefore an allegorical assertion: the humanist, like any true Christian, keeps the cross ever before him. It is also a nod to Melanchthon's ideology of introspection, which stated that through looking inwards, one could have intimate knowledge of the soul, and by extension, God.

Dürer's depiction also accords strongly with the 'common man' orientation of Melanchthon's Protestant rhetoric. Melanchthon appears before us as an average, pious citizen, lacking status identifiers such as scholars' robes. This seems to reflect the fact that Melanchthon was the only major Wittenberg reformer to have always been a layperson, and was thus considered the most Erasmian of his contemporaries. In this respect, Dürer promotes the scholar as the new emblem of the intellectual authority of the Reformation movement. Dürer substitutes the spirituality of the *Andachtsbildt* (devotional image) with academic authority rooted in bible studies, which incarnates Melanchthon an intellectual visionary, and thus the future of the new faith.