INTRODUCTION

WHY A NEW BOOK ON ALBRECHT DÜRER? There is, after all, a more than ample supply of valuable scholarship devoted to his art, so much so that just peering into a bibliography can deflate even a hardcore researcher's spirit. A bibliography, published over three decades ago, lists some 10,271 items.1 That might be quite enough, one would think.

En route to becoming a comprehensive study, this project on Dürer's religious art started, innocently enough, by following two separate paths of inquiry: one going through the overgrown field of Dürer and the Reformation and the other cutting into the unplatted, but vast tract of textual complements to his art. The scholarly omissions in the second area have long puzzled me, for he designed a major portion of his oeuvre, well over a hundred images, for publication with religious texts, some of which are in folksy German doggerel and many of which are in intricate Latin meters.

An important perspective for looking at Dürer's religious outlooks across his entire career is the humanist movement. In the context of Dürer scholarship, Renaissance humanism, although a standard topic, has been construed too narrowly and also as being something extraneous to Dürer himself, something that informed him rather than something he helped form. It has never been the basis for analysis of religious sensibilities in his art—a fundamental oversight, as this book will show. By and large, for Dürer specialists, the study of humanism has meant documenting his visual reception of the Italian Renaissance and his personal connection to the
intellectual ferment in his native city of Nuremberg—both obviously matters of great significance. It is probably fair to say that Dürer’s humanism has often been portrayed as somewhat too Italian, too antique, and too esoteric, especially in our sometimes overly eager constructions of him as a “Renaissance man” from the North. As far as subject matter goes, we have portrayed his humanism with a dramatic close-up, limiting our frames in particular to the two specifics of antiquarianism and Neoplatonism, the latter occasionally elevated to the status of Dürer’s worldview. If we open the angle, we will see that these, while valid approaches, pertain to just one segment of the wide scope of Renaissance humanism in his work.

Dürer has received credit for inventing the first visual northern Renaissance aesthetic. As we will see in chapter 3, it initially appeared quite suddenly in some drawings after Italian engravings of mythological themes, executed in 1494, perhaps just before he set off on his first journey to Italy. Naturally, this visual experience was crucial for his development, but we should also realize that he had read a humanist style well before he ever saw one. The first exposure came through contacts with poets and scholars, initially through Sebastian Brant and soon through Conrad Celtis and Willibald Pirckheimer, to name the principals only. The literary origin of Dürer’s humanism has considerable importance, for it, unlike his imitations of Andrea Mantegna’s and Antonio Pollaiuolo’s bacchants and satyrs, introduced him to the issue of Christian imitation of antiquity and, especially through the efforts of Brant, to the goal of creating devotional art in a humanist style for a broad audience, both in the vernacular and Latin (as discussed in chapter 4). The origin of his aesthetic also left him with lasting affinities for literary art, a feature of his imagination that needs to be appreciated across the full span of his life. Each of the following chapters will engage an idea or a function of text in his work. This will often pertain to the Bible and Renaissance approaches to the study and presentation of the Bible and its authority. But it will also include Dürer’s many attempts to create unified religious artworks out of texts and images. The textuality of his religious art has been so neglected that it is now hard to find a description of a major work such as The Life of the Virgin that acknowledges that it is a printed book—with a text. Moreover, his literary orientation is so strong that I occasionally think of Dürer as something of a frustrated man of letters, at least until he achieved his first scholarly successes when his books started coming off the presses in 1525, just three years before his death.

So central was literary humanism to Dürer’s conceptualization of religious art that he developed a new genre, the illustrated humanist book of
faith, the subject of chapter 5. In 1511, he and Benedictus Chelidonius issued a hexameter (and heroic) Passion of Our Lord (now called The Large Passion), an elegiac Life of the Virgin, and a hymnic-lyrical Passion of Our Lord (now called The Small Passion), this last work being a tour de force of the new humanist style, using no fewer than twenty different classical meters and re-creating the feel of the religious and philosophical poems sprinkled throughout Horace's Odes. These books illustrate both the profound subjectivity of penitential discourse and its compatibility with a Christian humanist aesthetic. Dürer's audience experiences the heroic labors of the Christian savior but also the crushing torments of a purgatory on earth. From a religious perspective, this may sound like potentially effective stuff, but Dürer's ideology of penance, despite its emergence in his most innovative humanist project, exploits the violently anti-Semitic animus of his culture, a problem I will explore in a separate chapter (chap. 6).

Dürer simultaneously produced graphic art for the same kinds of devotional interests for less educated strata of society and also experimented with bilingual broadsides to bridge humanist and broader audiences. With the sixteenth century and especially the growing sophistication of vernacular culture, one can easily go wrong when postulating sociologically discrete audiences for particular types of religious art. Dürer's imagination was not constrained by, nor limited to, the precincts of humanist intellectualism. Especially in light of the wide reach of the inexpensive woodcut medium, it is important to acknowledge that his work mediates popular elements in religion and the humanist movement, an effort that is in operation in his devotional prints, broadsides, and representations of biblical philology. In this way, he not only drew upon but also contributed to the formation of German humanism. An interest in popular religion also informs many features of his altarpiece designs, his own composition of poetic prayers in the vernacular, and the frequent connections to the cult of the Virgin in his art.

The religious poems he composed for illustrated broadsides—compositions that have been totally overlooked—were created for appeal to a wide audience. They are also significant examples of religious broadsides from before the Reformation. Dürer, however, came to the broadside medium through his association with humanists who wrote Latin devotional works. A recently discovered broadside with a Latin poem by Brant and a woodcut by Dürer (1494; Strauss W appendix A, plate 13) demonstrates this, as does his early collaboration with Conrad Celtis on a broadside with a poetic prayer to St. Sebald in classical Sapphic strophes (ca. 1501). Dürer
later composed several German poems, some of which can be connected to religious observations at Nuremberg, and usually published them in bilingual versions, printing humanist Latin prayers along with his own German verses.

A special problem in studies of Dürer has been the urge to view his early work from the vantage point of his post-Reformation statements about the church. This has proven to be irresistible. The innocent reader of Dürer scholarship might think that the Reformation began in 1498 with the artist’s Apocalypse. Understandably, the revolutionary event of the Reformation has cast a long shadow on the study of pre-Reformation religious sentiment of Dürer and nearly everyone else of his generation. We can see this in casual remarks, such as the view that Dürer’s Apocalypse possesses “both the eloquence and the profundity of a Luther.”

While this kind of distortion can be downright egregious in analyses of the Apocalypse, an antiecclesiastical rhetoric has come to inform general commentaries on Dürer’s development of the new print media as well. The democratizing potential of religious printing, even of fine and often relatively expensive works of a peintre-graveur of Dürer’s stature, has encouraged the perception that such art would move beyond the sacramental church or the cloister to inform an individualistic piety, in ways comparable to the implications of Christian mysticism, which was then, to use Oberman’s formulation, in an “inflationary period.” One scholar has claimed that Dürer’s religious prints in general symbolize “the first great exodus of art out of the Church in Germany.” This pronouncement certainly has a dramatic tenor befitting characterization of the Reformation. But are the implications of such a description appropriate for an account of Dürer’s career? Does the liberating exodus sound too much like a post-Reformation anachronism and even a pro-Lutheran bias? This may have enabled the early Dürer to cut a colorful figure in twentieth-century scholarship, especially in the imaginations of Protestants, but it gives seriously scant notice to the vigor and diversity of pre-Reformation Catholicism. Dürer is, in fact, an outstanding example of the vitality of religious culture before the Reformation.

This criticism is a little too easy. An inherent difficulty lurks in the assessment of the social, economic, intellectual, and ecclesiastical tensions of the decades preceding the Ninety-five Theses. One of the few things all scholars of this period agree on is that the ecclesiastical revolts that began in 1517 did not erupt ex nihilo. One of the curiosities of the pre-Reformation period was that Christianity had never been so popular, despite widespread
dissatisfaction with many conditions in the church. During Dürer’s lifetime, Europe was experiencing an ever-expanding awakening of religious devotion. As can be seen in the numbers of pilgrimages, endowments for masses, commissions for ecclesiastical art, memberships in confraternities, and, of course, purchases of indulgences, participation in orthodox exercises of the faith was surging. At the same time, it is not hard to find church leaders in Europe around 1500 who pleaded for a moral rejuvenation of the clergy. Many more worried about superstition, commercialization of religion, and the spiritual and moral guidance coming—or, rather, not coming—from Rome. Girolamo Savonarola, Johann Geiler von Kaisersberg, Johann von Staupitz, and Desiderius Erasmus are just the tip of the iceberg of pre-Lutheran reformers who addressed what was probably the greatest concern of the average person in their culture—religious redemption.

It was in this context, complicated further by an enduring tradition of antipapalism (which had been articulated most violently in millenarian thought) and by ongoing pressure from conciliarists, that a youthful Dürer printed nothing less than images of the demise of the papacy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy in his first major publication, the Apocalypse (1498). This has been seen clearly by critics and has been the starting point for a number of speculative theses on his alleged ecclesiastical radicalism. What critics have not seen is that, in the very context of representing the destruction of the papacy, Dürer depicts a firm faith in the efficacy of sacramental salvation and in the church’s authority over the sacraments. This certainly qualifies any interpretation of antiecclesiastical fervor in Dürer, but it does not efface the antipapalism. In 1498, confidence in the church’s faith and skepticism about the church’s hierarchy, especially Pope Alexander VI, were simply not contradictory.

Issues concerning the Reformation have always commanded a lot of attention, even if they have eluded successful synthesis, a result conceded by most who have delved into the matter comprehensively. Dürer is the source of some arresting personal witnesses to the reception of the movement, including a unique jeremiad in reaction to the news—a false report, as it turned out—that Martin Luther had been murdered upon leaving the Diet of Worms. Yet the question of how his art engages Reformation topics or sensibilities has proven hard to answer. One often has the sense of looking through the proverbial glass, darkly, when examining his compositions for the impact of the Reformation, even if some major figures of the movement as well as one major book—Martin Luther’s translation of the New Testament—are visible in his art of the 1520s. But where is Luther himself?
The daunting complexity of the initial years of the Reformation has made it hard to grasp several facets of Dürer’s reception. Recently, a few scholars have tended toward the thesis that the Reformation is a red herring. Against a substantial corpus of evidence to the contrary, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation (1996) assures us that the late Dürer cannot be assigned to either the Protestant or Catholic faction, and the most recent English biography, an otherwise valuable resource, proposes that the question of whether or not Dürer became a Protestant is anachronistic on the grounds that he died before publication of the Augsburg Confession (1530). This position might appear to cut elegantly through a Gordian knot, but, for all its neatness, it merely responds to intricate questions of historical context with silence. The real questions are not whether Dürer became evangelical or whether central Lutheran doctrines were meaningfully clear by approximately 1523. There is just no room for doubt about those points. But, what within Lutheranism did he embrace and what did he ignore? How did he come to those positions? And did he contribute to the shaping of a new religious representation? Dürer is not only a compelling but also an instructive example of an intellectual who recorded an experience of the entirety of the early Reformation movement (roughly 1517–26). He raises important questions about the relationship of humanism to the Reformation in the minds of intellectuals and urban elites during this chaotic but also formative moment, and, as the concluding chapters will show, humanism and the early Reformation converged at several important points in Dürer’s work.