Albrecht Dürer’s Melencolia I: A Portrait of the Genius Artist’s Inner Struggle

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Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I*: A Portrait of the Genius Artist’s Inner Struggle

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Many centuries ago the great art of painting was held in high honor by mighty kings, and they made excellent artists rich and held them worthy, accounting such inventiveness a creating power like God’s. For the imagination of the good painter is full of figures, and were it possible for him to live forever he would always have from his inward ‘ideas’. Whereof Plato speaks, something new to set forth by the work of his hand.1

- From a draft of Albrecht Dürer’s Treatise on Painting, 1512

A winged female slumps dejectedly, her eyes gazing sharply into the distance. A small putto inscribes upon a slate as he sits perched atop a millstone. A dog lies in lethargic indifference amongst an array of tools and instruments of geometry. A ladder leads to nowhere. A great dot of light illuminates the sky and just beside it, a bat holds a telling scroll that reads, “Melencolia I.” These are just a few of the symbolic elements that permeate the space in Albrecht Dürer’s eminent engraving, Melencolia I (fig. 1). The engraving is often considered one of the most extensively studied and written about works in all of art history, naturally generating a variety of theories assuming its meaning. However, its rich array of complicated iconography and symbolism make it nearly impossible to decipher entirely or allow for a consensus of its genuine meaning. Although scholars and art historians have debated for centuries over the intended significance of the mysterious engraving, and innumerable interpretations have been published, the print still remains extremely enigmatic.

Theories

The question that pervades the art historical world is simple: Why did Albrecht Dürer create Melencolia I? Since its erection, Dürer’s contemporaries and modern scholars alike have found countless ways of interpreting the piece. For example, both the German classical scholar Joachim Camerarius the Elder and Walter L. Strauss, an expert on the art of the Old Masters, agree that concepts of mathematics and geometry greatly intrigued Dürer, illustrated

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within the engraving through elements such as the magic square and the geometric stone. Others, such as art historians Karl Giehlow, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl attribute its significance to the growing Humanist movement of the time and a philosophical allegiance Dürer held to Platonism. While the piece certainly includes elements that can be related to both of these theories, the most widely accepted interpretation of the engraving is that made by Karl Giehlow over one hundred years ago. Giehlow’s theory is based on Florentine Neo-Platonic thought as expressed within Marcilio Ficino’s *De vita triplici* (1489), which claims, “Outstanding individuals were prone to melancholy and subject to the planetary influence of Saturn.” It is not yet determined whether or not Dürer had read Ficino’s book, but it is likely he was exposed to another book expressing similar ideas that was floating among humanist circles in Germany just a few years prior to the creation of the engraving. This book was Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim’s *De occulta philosophia*, which most likely influenced Dürer’s interest in the bodily humors and the effects of Saturn on the condition of melancholy.

Subsequently, in 1923 Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl expanded upon Giehlow’s theory, concluding that the engraving functions as a “spiritual self-portrait of Albrecht Dürer”. This indicates that the artist recognized the melancholic affliction caused by artistic and intellectual struggle, a notion Agrippa discusses in his text, as something with which he himself was suffering. The theory that the engraving is a visual embodiment of melancholy, one that especially intelligent and creative people are subject to, has become the most widely

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4 Ibid.
6 Doorly, “‘Melencolia I,’” 255.
accepted interpretation. However, this essay will argue that while the image was principally created as a reflection of Dürer’s own melancholic condition, the engraving is riddled with symbolism alluding to such a wide variety of concepts and origins such that the purpose of the piece seems aimed to partially confuse the viewer. In doing so, the piece causes the viewer to experience a version of the intellectual exertion that leads to the depicted ailment of melancholy from which Dürer himself suffered.

**History of a Young Genius**

Dürer was born to parents Albrecht the Elder and Barbara Holper in Nuremberg, Germany on May 21, 1471. His father, Albrecht the Elder, was a successful goldsmith under whom Dürer began learning the goldsmith’s craft after he had completed some schooling. Dürer however, did not take to the art of the goldsmith as his father had hoped. While it was customary for a son to follow his father’s trade, Dürer instead expressed a keen interest in painting. At the age of thirteen about mid-way through his goldsmith apprenticeship, Dürer drew an exceptional *Self-Portrait* (fig. 2). Completed in silverpoint, this first known self-portrait of the artist expresses the impressive skill and motivation he already possessed at such a young age.\(^7\) Drawings like this one eventually convinced Dürer’s father that his talent was remarkable and that he would make a better painter than a goldsmith. Thus, in 1486 Dürer began an apprenticeship with the successful Nuremberg painter, Michael Wolgemut. With him, Dürer learned the techniques of drawing, painting, and composition, and worked on woodcuts for well-known books, such as the *Nuremberg Chronicle*.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) May it be noted that many of the techniques Dürer used in his work most likely were developed during his early goldsmith studies where he would have learned how to think three-dimensionally, draw designs, and work with metal cutting tools, which prepared him for the copper engravings he created in the future. Smith, “The Young Dürer,” *Dürer*, 23-26.

\(^8\) Ibid., 28-31.
After finishing his apprenticeship and marrying a woman named Agnes Frey, Dürer traveled to Italy in 1494, where he was exposed to the Italian Renaissance. Upon returning home to Nuremberg, he was ready to incorporate everything he learned in Italy, including humanist ideas and the art of perspective, into his work. Unfortunately, his marriage to Agnes quickly became a loveless one, for his knowledge and intelligence far surpassed that of his wife.\(^9\) Other negatives also began to pervade Dürer’s life, such as the death of his father, godfather, and mother.\(^10\) Following the subsequent deaths of his family between the years 1502 and 1513, Dürer began to create a series of works now referred to as his “Meisterstiche” (master engravings), the third of which was *Melencolia I*.\(^11\)

**Examining the Work**

*Melencolia I* is a copper engraving dated 1514 that measures 24 by 18.6 centimeters. Despite its small scale, the work includes a diverse assortment of contradicting iconographical elements symbolizing everything from principles of science and geometry to the death of Dürer’s mother.\(^12\) In an attempt at a successful interpretation of the piece, it must first be dissected by means of its allegorical composition and symbolism. Seated on the right side, in the foreground of the picture, is a winged female figure with her head against her clenched fist, staring somberly yet sharply into the distance. In her right hand she holds a pair of compasses and, against the deep folds of her dress, a set of keys and a purse dangle from her

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\(^9\) The idea that Dürer’s marriage was unhappy originally comes from pp.283-8 of Hans Rupprich’s *Dürer: Schriftlicher Nachlass*, where he claims Agnes Frey thought she had married an ‘honest craftsman’, but to her dismay he was too caught up in art being an intellectual achievement requiring a “liberal culture”. Panofsky also concludes that the marriage was unhappy, based on the information that Dürer normally traveled alone, he and Agnes rarely ate dinner together, and a series of letters from November 1530 between Dürer and Willibald Pirckheimer that include disparaging comments about Agnes. This information is gathered from Smith, “Dürer’s ‘Wanderjahre’”, 51-52.

\(^10\) Ibid., 51-53.


belt. Judging by the compass in her hand and the objects that surround her, the woman can be linked to two of the seven liberal arts: Geometry and Astronomy.\textsuperscript{13} It has been determined by scholars, such as Panofsky and Günter Grass, that a clenched fist is a sign that a melancholic person has reached a point of insanity due to the notion of grasping at a concept that does not really exist. Grass expressively expands on this, saying,

> Amid rigid immobility the propped left arm and the clenched fist supporting the head become a gesture signifying thought after so much futility. Once the void opens and words lose their meaning in vast echoing spaces, the head demands to be supported, the fist clenches in helplessness.\textsuperscript{14}

Dürer illustrates a person with a clenched fist previous to \textit{Melencolia I} in a 1494 sketch of his downcast looking wife (fig. 3). In the sketch, his wife is also shown with her back hunched over, a standard position of a melancholic person; being so lost in their thoughts, they cannot remember to sit up straight. By placing his wife and the female figure in the same position, Dürer draws a parallel between his ailment of melancholy and his wife. Panofsky describes her clenched fist to mean, “she does not hold onto an object which does not exist but to a problem which cannot be solved.”\textsuperscript{15} This can allude to the unsolvable nature of the piece in its entirety, implying that perhaps the woman is stumped and frustrated by the intellectual puzzle Dürer has created.

On a sketch Dürer produced as a study for the winged putto he wrote, “keys mean power, purse means wealth.”\textsuperscript{16} According to Giulia Bartrum, keys and a purse are traditional symbols of the god Saturn, who is considered to be the controller of the melancholic

\textsuperscript{13} Smith, “Masterly Prints”, 244.

\textsuperscript{14} Grass notes that this is not a new motif in artistic representation but is visible in mythological portraits of Hercules, Kronos and Saturn, as well as religious portrayals of God after creating the world. It is, however, more central in Dürer’s piece than in previous models. Günter Grass, “On Stasis in Progress: Variations on Albrecht Dürer’s Engraving Melencolia I.” in Giulia Bartrum, \textit{Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy} (London: The British Museum Press, 2002), 69.

\textsuperscript{15} Giulia Bartrum, \textit{Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy}, 189.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
condition. The woman wears a wreath of watercress on her head as a curative for the influence of the planet Saturn and the dry feeling of melancholy it creates. However, the dark shadow cast upon her face indicates her gloom, which she shares with Dürer, signified through the shadow that also rests on his monogram. Although she holds the power and wealth of the keys and purse, she possesses neither because she is wrapped up in the surrounding chaos of art, mathematics, and the humanities. Deep within her state of melancholy, her eyes are still sharp, indicating that she is mentally alert. The woman functions as the personification of melancholy, especially Dürer’s own melancholic affliction, by expressing at once all that causes Dürer’s melancholy. She conveys the frustrations of an artist genius that is so close to solving a problem, and yet becomes inflicted with a melancholy that roots her in place despite the fact that she has wings.

Key to the interpretation of Melencolia I is Dürer’s use of astronomical pretensions and Saturn’s role in the development of melancholy. Some believe that Saturn is depicted in the sky at the top of the picture, right at the line of sight. Its planetary rays shoot through the seascape, issuing not only melancholy upon the scene, but also creativity. As informed by the humanist ideas proposed in Agrippa’s De occulta philosophia, Dürer deduces that artists are especially vulnerable to the effects of melancholy, which are in part said to be caused by an excessive amount of black bile in the spleen area. Black bile is also thought responsible for the gift of genius, and thus too much black bile results in a condition from which

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17 Ibid.
18 Smith, “Masterly Prints,” 245.
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
especially imaginative and creative people suffer.\textsuperscript{22} In 1513, Dürer brought a sketch to his physician entitled \textit{The Sick Dürer} (fig. 4). The image depicts him pointing a finger to a yellow colored area around his spleen, liver, and gall bladder. At the top of the sketch, the artist wrote a note reading, “There where the yellow spot is and the finger points, there it hurts me.”\textsuperscript{23} Through this action Dürer is attempting to describe his melancholy. Up until the nineteenth century, “peasant calendars referred to Saturn as a peevish, sick planet that caused disease of the liver, gall bladder and kidneys.”\textsuperscript{24} Since these organs were controlled by the energy of Saturn, any discomfort within them was determined to be an affliction of melancholy.\textsuperscript{25} Even before humanists adopted the thought, ancient Greeks understood melancholy as one of the four humors, which have since been related to the elements—earth, air, fire, and water. These elements correlate to the temperaments of the human body that determine if a person’s character is in balance. An excess of one of the temperaments, like melancholy, can lead to an imbalance in the body and result in illness.\textsuperscript{26}

Hanging from the wall of the mysterious architectural structure above the female figure of Melancholia is a series of mathematical instruments. These instruments can undoubtedly be linked to the five different disciplines of mathematics as discussed by the Italian mathematician and Franciscan friar Luca Pacioli. The scale represents the arithmetic of weighing and measuring; the hour glass is representative of the astronomy of time keeping; the bell is the music of rhythm and sound; and the magic square, perhaps the most perplexing of all elements in the piece, represents the geometry of lines, squares, and triangles that are

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\textsuperscript{22} Balus, “Melancholy and the Undecidable,” 18. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Grass, “On Stasis in Progress,” 67. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. \\
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configured within it.\textsuperscript{27} Dürer’s fascination with mathematics can conceivably be linked to his fascination with the Italian art of perspective. The theories surrounding the intended meaning of the magic square are endless, but Dürer’s desire to thoroughly understand the art of perspective presents some valuable clues. Dürer uses the exact same square that appears in Pacioli’s manuscript, \textit{De virbus quantitus}, and, in 1506, he traveled to Italy specifically to discuss the art of perspective, of which Pacioli was a master. Dürer had written of his plans for a meeting in Italy concerning perspective and, although he did not write of whom he was meeting, it is speculated that he visited Pacioli, and, thus, obtained his idea for the magic square.\textsuperscript{28} In this specific square the numbers are arranged from 1 through 16 and add up to 34 in every direction. According to \textit{Plato’s Republic}, this was deemed a square of Jupiter and was thought to be healing because it had no equivalent known in nature. The magic square of Jupiter’s power lay in countering the effects of Saturn, which were said to be cured by distractions like games and puzzles, not unlike the magic square.\textsuperscript{29}

In addition to being a cure for the melancholic effects of Saturn, the square functions as a practice of perspective, illustrated through the equally perplexing detail in the piece: the large geometrical shape on the left side above the dog, known as a polyhedron. The front orthogonal elevation of the stone was found to fit perfectly into a square of sixteen cells, the same as the magic square.\textsuperscript{30} While the stone is a practice of perspective, it also disrupts the linear perspective of the piece as a whole. Instead of being able to gaze freely into the seascape background as atmospheric perspective allows, the sharp edges of the stone point in

\textsuperscript{27} Pingree, “A New Look at Melencolia,” 257.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 19.
various directions, obstructing the viewer’s focus and drawing attention to the many other objects within the image all at once.\textsuperscript{31} This, however, may have been purposeful, seeing as Dürer had such a keen eye for perspective, as Wojciech Balus demonstrates by comparatively using Dürer’s \textit{Saint Jerome in His Study} as an example (fig. 5). Dürer chose to obstruct the gaze in \textit{Melencolia I} in order to inhibit the viewer from focusing on one object so as to stimulate an examination of the chaos and disorder of a melancholic mind conquered by art, mathematics, and profound thought.

As Balus discusses, the compositional chaos of \textit{Melencolia I} contrasts significantly with \textit{Saint Jerome in His Study}, another of Dürer’s master engravings. Both works are concerned with humanist ideas of divine creativity; however, \textit{Saint Jerome} depicts a serene, contemplative philosopher-type seated in a neat study as opposed to the disorderly, ambiguous seascape in which \textit{Melencolia} is set. The peaceful dog in \textit{Saint Jerome} is nothing like the emaciated version portrayed in \textit{Melencolia}. Light seeps through the window, illuminating Saint Jerome and allowing his mind to roam freely, unaffected by the torment of the melancholic condition. Created in the same year, \textit{Saint Jerome} is a picture of perfection in comparison to \textit{Melencolia}. It successfully emulates the way people view the world around them through its precise use of the optical principle of vision, as illustrated by the beams of light that follow along direct lines of sight, elucidating the old man in his study. The order of objects and architecture elicit a sense of harmony and impression of solidity, as well as expert use of principles of tectonics. Dürer’s acute attention to the rules of geometric perspective in \textit{Saint Jerome in His Study} epitomize perfect order, including that of Saint Jerome’s soul.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Balus, “Melancholy and the Undecidable,” 12.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 12-14.
Melencolia I is a picture of the genius’ struggle, then Saint Jerome in His Study is an intentional opposite, instead showing the achievement of comprehending complex ideas.

The chaos depicted in Melencolia I can also pertain to the humanist’s “foreseeing disintegration and disruption, war and chaos” owing to humanist historical studies that predicted a societal collapse.³³ In humanist terms, the ambiguous structure and ladder either represent the building being unfinished or being repaired after a disaster. The ladder that seems to lead to nowhere has also been interpreted as an intellectual ascent; however, melancholy restricts the ability for one to even begin the climb. The allegory of artistic genius that is expressed in the print’s iconography depicts one immobilized by incomprehensible ideas or creative thoughts that cannot be transformed into a work of art. The winged putto, scrawling on a slate resembling Dürer’s monogram in Saint Jerome in His Study, provides hope for Dürer as a representation of his young genius. Sitting on a millstone with the scales of Libra behind him, the putto possibly symbolizes labor as a cure for the artist’s self doubt.³⁴

Among the multiplicity of questions regarding Melencolia I that still remain, there is a particularly mysterious one that begs an answer: why the “I” after Melencolia? It seems Dürer’s primary source for enlightenment on the melancholic condition was Agrippa’s De occulta philosophia. In the manuscript, Agrippa divides genius into three separate categories: mind, reason, and imagination. Imagination stands in the first group, reigning predominantly over both mind and reason. The first group, the imaginative version of melancholy, naturally intrigued Dürer because it is the form that affects artists and those of special creative genius.

³³ On page 71 of Günter Grass’s “On Stasis in Progress”, Grass explains that Dürer did not necessarily intend to predict a societal collapse, but saw the limitations of his age and the inadequacy of much common thought in his period.
Thus, by entitling his engraving *Melencolia I*, Dürer refers to the first of Agrippa’s groups, therefore establishing the piece as representative of his artistic melancholy.\(^{35}\)

It is impossible for one to understand the contradictory nature of *Melencolia I* without thoroughly dissecting and interpreting its great range of symbolism and iconography. Because the melancholic nature is one full of contradictions, Dürer naturally included a range of varied elements, in turn leading to conflicting theories of the engraving’s meaning. The way melancholy is depicted is not unlike the effect the piece has on one after an intensive evaluation; the print leaves the viewer lost, with an inability to find answers to numerous questions, just as the melancholic condition leaves the artist. The most plausible “answer” to the complex puzzle of symbols Dürer created seems to be that of art historian, Joseph Koerner. He concludes that the “engraving’s obscurity is partly the artist’s intention. […] Instead of mediating one meaning, *Melencolia I* seems designed to generate multiple contradictory readings, to clue its viewers to an endless exegetical labour until, exhausted in the end, they discover their own portrait in Dürer’s sleepless, inactive personification of melancholy.”\(^{36}\) *Melencolia I* is permeated with emblems of abandoned and contradictory solutions. Its multiplicity of ideas reflects those of artistic genius, concerned with mathematics, humanities, and the arts. However, the sheer number of ideas the artist genius possesses is enough to cause a state of chaos and insanity, resulting in a melancholic affliction that locks the artist in a period of stasis. In creating *Melencolia I*, Dürer aimed to reflect on his own state of melancholy, while creating a piece so exasperating to decipher that it would mimic the exact melancholic state that Dürer represents in the engraving. Dürer’s artistic

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\(^{35}\) Bartrum, “Dürer and his Legacy,” 188.

genius is visible in all 970 of his drawings, 105 intaglio prints, and 346 woodcuts—but only does *Melencolia I* truly portray the inner struggle of the artist genius.


Bibliography


