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# *Freedom and Resistance in the Act of Engraving (Or, Why Dürer Gave up on Etching)*

**By Brian D. Cohen**

It's axiomatic that there is a close relationship between what an artist chooses to hold in their hand, what they materially create, and what they hold to be the purpose of art. Engraving is a resistant and difficult medium capable of a precision and detail unequaled by any other manual art. The medium was defined by those qualities for centuries, with Albrecht Dürer setting the *ne plus ultra* standard. The technique of etching arose in the middle years of his career, bringing with it a new autographic immediacy that engraving could not offer. Dürer seems to have been eager to explore its possibilities—the first clearly dated etching, made in 1515, is by him—but three years later, after making only six known etchings (all but one completed between 1515 and 1516), he abandoned the technique.

Dürer's brief foray into the new medium, and his subsequent return to the rigors of engraving, can be seen as both a response to the formal and material characteristics of what was then a fresh, experimental technique, and also to the philosophical implications of experimentalism itself.

Engraving had ancient antecedents in stone, bone and metal, though printing from engraved metal plates arrived in Europe only a generation or so before Dürer's birth. Dürer learned the technique when apprenticed at age 13 to his father, a goldsmith, and refined his skills under the printmaker Michael Wolgemut. Ambitious, observant, inventive and possessed of uncommon draftsmanship abilities, by his mid-20s Dürer had done more to establish printmaking as an independent and commercially viable fine art than any predecessor or contemporary.

Engraving uniquely incorporates physical strength, tactile sensitivity and bodily engagement in marking a matrix—every mark or line is intimately characterized by movement, depth, and pressure—a sublimation of force. The combination of strength, exactitude and large-muscle control is quite unlike the kinesthetic action of writing or drawing. The burin is held fairly firmly (but not clenched) in the palm of the hand, not upright as a pencil, and is aimed steadily in one direction. The engraver's hand and arm are held in alignment close to the upper body. The plate is turned on a cushion against the burin as the point is driven into the metal at a slight angle to the surface of the plate. It is the angle of approach to the plate that creates the depth and quality of a line; the finest lines are achieved by engaging the metal nearly parallel to the plate, and a steeper angle plunges the burin deeper into the metal for a darker mark, though too high and the burin will bury itself into the copper and come to an abrupt stop. With each stroke, a curved sliver of metal is displaced. Each engraved line marks continuous contact with the metal, a gesture with a characteristic swelling trajectory from the entrance to the exit of the burin.

Controlling the progressive differences in line to achieve consistency through passages and to create the illusion of volume and texture requires extreme precision.

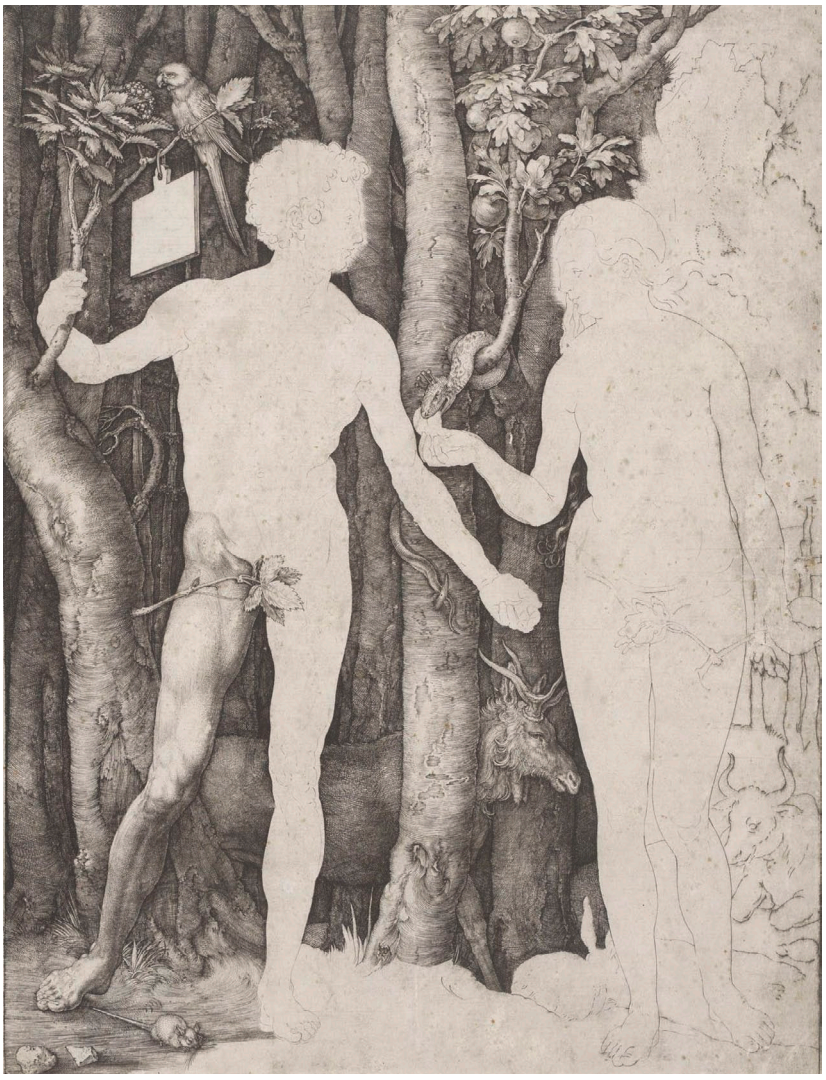


Fig. 1. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Adam and Eve*** *(1504), engraving, 25.6 x 19.4 cm. The Albertina Museum, Vienna.*

# *Freedom and Resistance in the Act of Engraving (Or, Why Dürer Gave up on Etching)*





***Left:*** Fig. 2. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Adam and Eve*** *(1504), engraving, 25.1 x 20 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.* ***Right:*** Fig. 3. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***The Agony in the Garden*** *from the* ***Small Engraved Passion*** *(1508), engraving, plate 11.7 x 7.4 cm. Collection of the Yale University Art Gallery.*

Dürer was both precise and deliberate: he left little to chance or improvisation in his engravings, creating elaborate preparatory drawings before he began to work in metal. In the case of his 1504 engraving *Adam and Eve* (Fig. 2), we have evidence in the form of two early states which show that he took four years to move from the initial studies to the final print.[1] Rehearsals of every detail of pose, composition and iconography—and significantly, the reversal of the image—were complete before he even picked up the burin. Dürer engraved progressively across the surface of the plate from one direction, and from background to foreground (Fig. 1).

The process of creating an etching is very different. The stylus used to draw through the acid-resistant ground on the plate is held just like a pen, flexible and familiar, and acid does the work of incising the lines. This allows for more spontaneous and improvisatory mark making, and also enables much more rapid development of a plate. But an etched line tends to be of a single and unvaried depth and width throughout and often betrays a slight irregularity within the line from the action of the acid.[2] A further drawback in Dürer's day was that etchings were done, not on the smoothly hammered copper used most commonly in engraving, but on iron, which was prone to ragged lines, frequent foul (accidental) biting, and rust.

Daniel Hopfer (1470–1536) is usually credited with having shown the technique to Dürer, who used it first to revisit themes he had undertaken in engraving a few years earlier. This allows us to compare his treatment of the same subjects in the different techniques. Though his hand shows the practiced stroke of the engraved mark in his contour and modeling in his etchings, he does not altogether mimic his approach to engraving. Dürer's 1515 etching *Agony in the Garden* (Fig. 4) follows his engraving of the same subject from the *Small Engraved Passion* (1508) (Fig. 3), as well as in woodcut in *The Large Passion* (1496–97) and *The Small Passion* (ca. 1509). In each, Dürer depicts Christ's weariness, dismay and terror the night before his execution—a moment of inner drama may have appealed to Dürer, a devout but questioning Christian living in an era of religious upheaval and reform.

As Peter, James and John slept nearby, Christ withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.[3]

The 1508 engraving is set in a rolling nocturnal landscape, its quiet broken by the angel, set in near silhouette against a flash of holy light that illuminates Christ's face, arms and body, and glances on the sleeping apostles. Christ throws up his arms in a gesture of despair as the angel fortifies him and reaffirms his mission. The engraved lines follow the intricacies and convolutions of the rocks, drapery


Fig. 4. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Agony in the Garden*** *(1515), etching, 23.4 × 16.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.*

and curls, while untouched areas of white surround the angel and spotlight Christ. It is rare in engravings of this period to see uninked areas of paper so powerfully imply a source of light. Dürer here seems to presage the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt, who made his own powerful print of this subject over a century later.

The engraving is tiny—only 4 1/2 by 2 7/8 inches—and one of its pleasures is the great variety of width and weight of line, most following contours, that sweep rhythmically through the print, modulating and subsuming form and incident within the overall context of light and shadow. The whole is calibrated to the finest line and smallest detail: what at first look like stray marks (on the right, just past Christ's hip) are the torches of approaching Roman solders following a path that will lead straight to Christ's arrest.

The etching that followed seven years later is more than four times the size of the engraving, and as Erwin Panofsky noted, gives the impression of a pen drawing, "rough and impetuous."[4] The line seems unwilling to cling to any one form, but flickers and shifts as the light fractures and disperses; nowhere does it define broad forms. The whole is anxious, unruly, brittle and unsettled; the space is

Fig. 5. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Melencolia I*** *(1514), engraving, second state, 24.3 x 18.9 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.*

indeterminate and difficult to assimilate. The light source and narrative interaction of Christ and the angel are oddly compressed toward the right, unusual in Dürer's work, where light and composition consistently move from upper left to lower right. Peter Parshall points out that from 1504 to the end of his career, left-to-right lighting dominates in 50 prints against only 10 in which light moves from right-to-left—and of those 10, 5 are etchings or drypoints).[5]

It would be tempting to think that the reversal of light in the *Agony in the Garden* etching occurred because Dürer extemporized the image directly onto the etching plate in the accustomed orientation, which was then flipped in printing. But there is a preparatory drawing for the print (Fig. 7) that shows him carefully planning the composition and intentionally reversing the image in the final print. Directionality had symbolic significance, and in the Renaissance, light from the left was predominant and exceptions rare. In Dürer's great engraving *Melencolia I* of 1514 (Fig. 5), the harsh light entering from the right creates a sense of weight, opposition and imbalance central to the meaning and impact of the print. A number of compositional drawings exist for *Adam and Eve*, the most complete of which shows Adam and Eve in the reverse position from the final engraving (Fig. 6), with Eve on Adam's left, his sinister side, and Adam in the position of moral righteousness. In the case of the *Agony* etching, it's hard not to conclude that, as in *Melencolia I*, Dürer intended the entry

of the light from the right as an expressive device, of a piece with the nervous marks, enhancing the sense of doubt and anguish. The preparatory drawing, interestingly, is more coherent, balanced and nuanced than the etching.

Examining details from a similar passage in the etching and the engraving—the rocky outcrop over which the angel hovers (above the midpoint and toward the left of the engraving, and in the upper right in the etching)—we can observe distinctions in Dürer's marks and hand movements. The engraving (Fig. 8) shows a variety of marks—tapered, abbreviated, dotted, stippled and clustered, always moving in concert or coordinated opposition. Lines are crosshatched neatly, discretely and only occasionally. The etched passage (Fig. 9) is jumbled, unsorted and a bit meandering, and most lines are unvaried and undifferentiated. There is very little crosshatching, as the density of lines is such that another set of marks in a different direction would risk sinking the entire passage below the plate surface and losing clarity (this issue, called a *crevé*, is a particular problem in etching that does not occur in engraving). The larger plate used for the etching offered greater graphic freedom, but the nature of the medium denied the variety, intimate control and calligraphic variation of line, and limited Dürer's ability to modulate tone precisely from one passage to another, which he had so consummately mastered in engraving. One can imagine he would have found this loss frustrating.

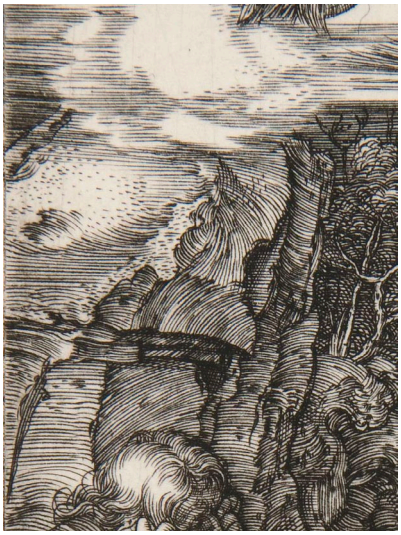
Dürer never explicitly repudiated etching, but after 1516 he returned to it only once, to create *Landscape with a Cannon* (1518). Clues to the reasons behind this lack of interest can be gleaned from some of his writing between 1513 to 1515. In drafts reflecting on the nature of representation (eventually published posthumously as an appendix to the third of the *Four Books on Human Proportion*), Dürer revealed his fascination, ambivalence and discomfort with imaginative improvisation. He expresses moral rectitude and self-vigilance, and is concerned to present theoretical justifications for the correctness of his approach. By the lights of his austere spiritual convictions, free imagination presented a hubristic challenge to nature as God created it: "do not depart from nature arbitrarily, imagining to find the better by thyself, for thou wouldst be misled . . . therefore, never put it in thy head that thou couldst or wouldst make something better than God has empowered."[6]

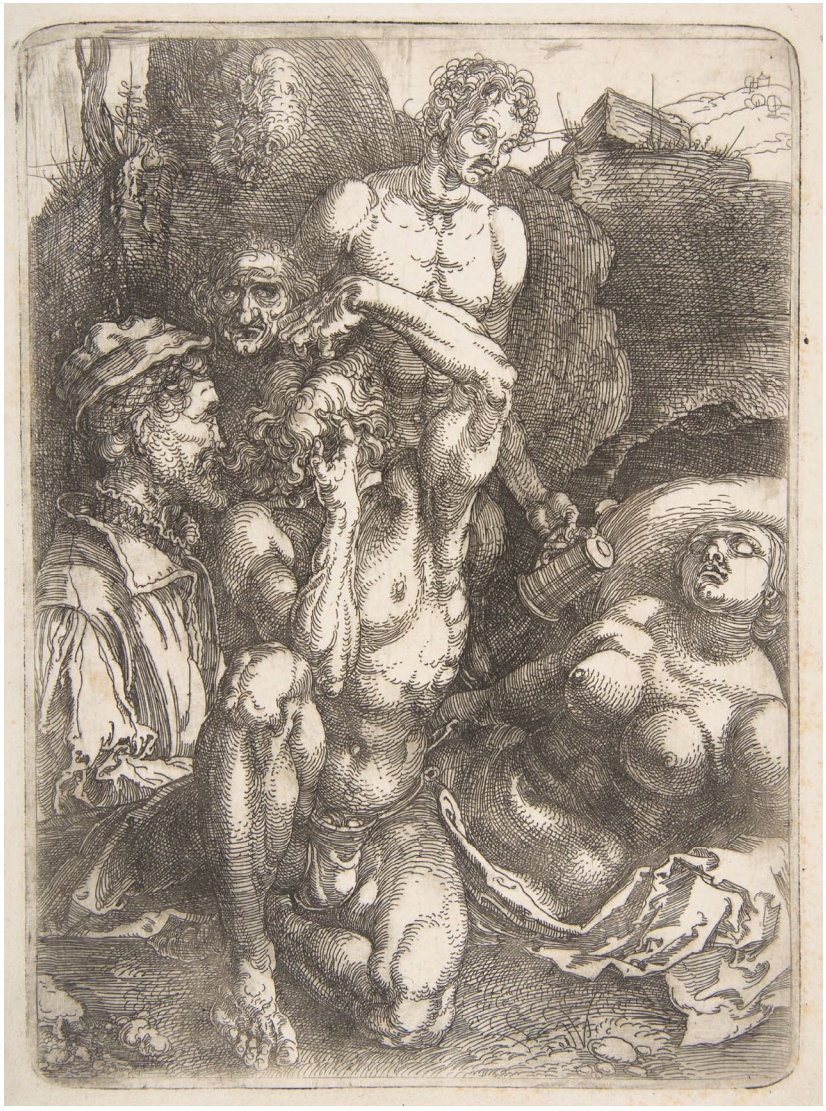
Interestingly though, Dürer seems to carve out an exception for "dream work" (*traum-werck*) and the intentional hybridization of existing forms into new combinations from a storehouse of memories and observations. Speaking of a skilled master, he writes: "through the power of God he would daily spill out and make new forms of men and other creatures that nobody has ever seen or thought of before."[7] There are many fascinating examples in Dürer's work of compelling chimeras within iconographically defined contexts.

Back in 1515, during his initial exploration of etching, Dürer created a bizarre and inchoate image with no precedent or parallel in his oeuvre (nor really in Western art until Courbet): the plate known as *Desperate Man* (Fig. 10). The print, which survives in a significant number of posthumous impressions, is feverish, erotic and tormented. Its iconography is muddled, its spatial composition inconsistent,



***Left:*** Fig. 6. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Adam and Eve*** *(1504), pen and brown ink, brown wash, corrections in white, 24.2 x 20.1 cm. The Morgan Library & Museum, purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1910.* ***Right:*** Fig. 7. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Christ at the Mount of Olives*** *(1515), drawing in brown ink, 29.6 x 22 cm. The Albertina Museum, Vienna.*





***Above left:*** Fig. 8. *Detail of Fig. 3.* ***Below left:*** Fig. 9. *Detail of Fig. 4.* ***Right:*** Fig. 10. *Albrecht Dürer,* ***Desperate Man*** *(ca, 1515), etching, 18.7 x 13.7 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1919.*

and it appears to relate to no engravings or preparatory studies. Panofsky surmised that Dürer had drawn directly on the plate on the spur of the moment to test the possibilities of the unfamiliar new medium; if so, it would seem that etching provoked exactly the qualities of mind Dürer most distrusted.[8]

The crisis of artistic conscience articulated in Dürer's writing had coincided with the advent of a new technology in which printable imagery could be drawn freely and directly, without the discipline and premeditation that engraving and woodcut required and rewarded. His discomfort with etching seems to spring from both a theoretical aversion and material frustration. He probably found the visual properties of etching simplistic, uninflected, difficult to finesse and far from satisfying. He may also have believed that etching too readily rewarded the ill-conceived, uncontrolled, and exploratory, bypassing classical order, clarity, decisiveness, and spiritual verity. Wary that such license marked a deviation from the righteous path, he reverted to a deliberate, methodical medium with which he was intimately familiar and unrivaled in accomplishment. There has been nothing like his engravings since. ■

*Brian D. Cohen is a printmaker, painter, writer and educator.*

***Notes:***

*1. David Landau and Peter W. Parshall,* The Renaissance Print, 1470–1550 *(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 313.*

*2. The line* may *be shaped by use of particular tools, such as Callot's é*choppe.

*3. Luke 22:41–44.* The Holy Bible, *New International Version.*

*4. Erwin Panofsky,* The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, *with a new introduction by Jeffrey Chipps Smith (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 196.*

*5. Peter Parshall, "Albrecht Dürer and the Axis of Meaning,"* Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin *1, no. 2 (1997), 15.*

*6. Panofsky,* Dürer, *279.*

*7. Quoted in Peter Parshall, "Graphic Knowledge: Albrecht Dürer and the Imagination,"* The Art Bulletin *95, no. 3 (September 2013): 393–410.*

*8. Panofsky,* Dürer, *194.*