PREPARATORY DRAWING ON A PANEL BY DÜRER

By HARRY B. WEHLE
Curator of Paintings

The recent cleaning of Dürer’s Salvator Mundi (at one time less appropriately entitled Christ Blessing) has removed from the face and hands the nineteenth-century repainting which was added shamelessly for the purpose of completing Dürer’s unfinished work. The elimination of the foreign pigment has brought to light passages of drawing on the white gesso ground that are admirable in themselves and are furthermore decidedly interesting as revealing Dürer’s technical method at one period in his development. On the question of which period produced the Salvator Mundi most present-day scholars are in fairly close agreement. When the picture came to the Museum some years ago as part of the Michael Friedsam collection a note about it was printed in the Bulletin. Some of the facts then published will be repeated here for the sake of convenience, together with a few additions based for the most part on the clearer view afforded by the removal of the repainting.

In the sixteenth century the picture belonged to Wilibald Imhof of Nuremberg, a grandson of Dürer’s friend Wilibald Pirkheimer. In Imhof’s inventory, made in the year 1573, the picture is listed as “ein Salvator, so Albrecht Dürer nit gar ausgemacht hat, Kost mich Selbst 30 fl.” (a Salvator, which Dürer didn’t quite finish, cost me thirty florins). By 1588 Imhof was dead, and his widow and sons were sending some of his paintings to Prague in the hope that the Emperor Rudolf II might wish to buy them. In a letter on the subject which Frau Imhof sent to Rudolf she lists our picture thus: “ein Salvator, ist das letzte Stuck so er gemacht hat” (a Salvator which is the last thing he made). Evidently Rudolf did not add
the Salvator to his famous collection. Instead it was acquired by one Haller of Nuremberg and remained in the possession of his family for nearly three centuries. It was in the Nuremberg art market in 1863 and brought forty florins—ten more than Imhof had paid. Five years later when it was lent to the Munich exhibition of old masters (no. 60) it is reported to have borne a written statement on the back of the old frame, "Dies Bild von Albrecht Dürer hat Imhof vom Birkheimer und ich vom Imhof. [signed] Haller von Hallerstein." The claim that the picture had once belonged to Pirkheimer is questionable, as such an interesting fact would probably have been mentioned in Imhof's inventory of 1573 and also in his widow's letter to Rudolf. At least we know that if Imhof got the picture from Pirkheimer it was not by inheritance, for he tells us he paid thirty florins for it.

The statement of the widow Imhof that the Salvator Mundi was Dürer's last painting is also questionable and doubtless rested simply upon the incomplete state of the work itself. Scholars nowadays agree that it must be one of Dürer's comparatively early works. Thau- sing in 1884 recognized in it the influence of Jacopo de' Barbari, an influence which Dürer's work reveals most clearly about the year 1503. Hans Tietze agrees with this dating, and Eduard Flechsig dates it two years later for considerations apart from its style, as we shall see.

The composition of Dürer's Salvator Mundi harks back to an engraving by the Master E.S. (Lehrs 57) in which the Saviour's head is similarly inclined, his right hand bestowing the blessing and his left holding the orb of sovereignty. But the gentle face with the sensuous parted lips which Dürer presents is virtually a composite of Jacopo de' Barbari's several pictures of Christ. One of these is, indeed, a Salvator Mundi, painted in 1503 or not long before.

There has been considerable speculation upon Dürer's reason for leaving his Salvator "nit gar ausgemacht." It was Flechsig who first noticed the fact that two unfinished panels by Dürer in the Bremen Kunsthalle, representing respectively John the Baptist and Onuphrius, are exactly the right size to have been intended as wings to flank our Salvator Mundi. All three panels are 227/8 inches (58 cm.) high. The Salvator is 181/2 inches (47 cm.) wide against 161/2 inches (42 cm.) for the combined wing panels, allowing two inches for the width of the two extra moldings constituting the wing frames.

Flechsig finds an explanation for the incomplete state of the three panels in Dürer's sudden departure for Italy late in the year 1505. Upon his return to Nuremberg a year and a half later Dürer is known to have been engrossed in the execution of two important commissions. Add to this rush of work an alteration in his artistic ideals, the result of his sojourn in Venice, and we have sufficient reason for Dürer's abandoning a stale project.

Such an agreement in dimensions as we have noted, taken together with the unfinished state of the panels, makes it difficult to deny an intentional relationship, and if the three pictures seem to us to constitute a somewhat odd ensemble we must remember that Dürer's Dresden triptych showing Saint Anthony and Saint Sebastian in the wings is equally strange.

A fresh complication for our reconstructed altarpiece presents itself, however, if we renew our study of the Salvator Mundi now that it is clean. When the picture figured in the Munich exhibition of 1868 it was owned by the artist F. R. Reichardt. In 1863 it had been cleaned by the famous Dr. Hauser of Bamberg, who later testified that it was not he but Dechslor of Augsburg who had brashly undertaken to complete Dürer's work. The already soft type of Christ which Dürer had borrowed from Jacopo de' Barbari was now carried to a point of unbearable sentimentality. Dechslor (if it was indeed he and not the owner Reichardt himself) must be credited with a certain respect for Dürer's work, since the completion of the head and hands was accomplished by means of transparent glazes which still permitted the spectator to perceive, though indistinctly, the drawing which Dürer had put directly upon the gesso preparation.

Now that these nineteenth-century glazes
Head of Dürer’s Salvator Mundi. About 5/8 actual size
A typical drawing by Dürer. Formerly in the Locker-Lampson collection, London
About 5/6 actual size
are removed this careful drawing, which some critics had supposed to be largely modern, is revealed to be entirely Dürer's own. And how surprising it is to find an artist of first-rate technical ability preparing for the painting of a figure almost life size by means of such finely elaborated, almost pedantic, pen drawing! The picture could almost be dated by the workmanship in the drawing alone, for it corresponds closely with some of Dürer's drawings on paper made before his second Italian sojourn. A typical drawing dated 1503, the head of a young man, formerly in the Locker-Lampson collection, offers a close parallel, especially in the finely crosshatched shadow beneath the chin and in the elegant detail of the curly hair.

In our Salvator Mundi one can trace pas-
sages of penmanship even in some of the shaded parts of the draperies, and this calls attention to a second surprising aspect of the picture. Though the head and hands are expressed by nothing firmer than delicate drawing with a sharp quill pen, the curly locks of the Saviour and his glorious red and blue garments have been carried to the uttermost state of completion, built up over the solider paint with a succession of translucent glazes. Who but Dürer would have proceeded with his work in such a fashion instead of completing the key portions first, or at the very least carrying forward all the parts abreast? In at least one other instance Dürer proceeded in a similar way. An early state of his famous engraving of Adam and Eve, dated 1504, shows the most highly elaborated forest background.
with the human figures still suggested in bare outline. Only Adam’s left leg, from foot to
hip, is shaded and that in full detail. A later state of the engraving shows the second leg
completed—and so the labor progressed!

A fresh comparison of Dürer’s Salvator Mundi with the two panels in the Bremen
Kunsthalle reopens questions of time and place. Flechsig’s theory that the main panel
was brought to its present degree of comple-
tion before Dürer departed for Italy still
stands, and it may well be that it was one
of the several paintings that Dürer is known
to have taken with him to Venice. But it
now becomes clearer than ever that profound
stylistic discrepancies exist between the Sal-
vator Mundi and the smaller panels. Instead
of the piecemeal, tail-first procedure revealed
in the Salvator painting the Bremen saints
present a degree of incompletion which is
equal all over. Furthermore we find in them
just the sort of understated color which is cus-
tomary in underpainting as against the brilli-
ant super-finish seen in the Salvator’s robes.
Preparatory drawing is visible in the Bremen
panels as in our larger work but much less
of it, and in these smaller panels it is carried
out with broad, effective crayon strokes in the
Italian manner as opposed to the North Euro-
pean engraver’s penmanship that we see on
our own panel.

The freer manner of drawing is most clearly
seen in the head of Saint Onuphrius. Despite
their diversity of style, probably no more than
a year or two had intervened between the ex-
cution of the large and the smaller paintings,
for the most reasonable supposition we can
make is that the Bremen panels were painted
during the sojourn in Venice. It is in that
phase that we see Dürer most Italianate,
greedily absorbing each new impression and
personality that came his way as though he
had been unremittingly starved until that
hour. After his return to Nuremberg we see
him resuming most of the rigors of his earlier
exactitude. Aside from the broadening of his
style in drawing, as observed in the Bremen
wings, a relationship has been noted, too close
for mere coincidence, between Dürer’s figure
of Saint Onuphrius and Bellini’s figure of San
Gioffe in the celebrated San Gioffe altar-
piece (cf. p. 164). Indeed it is possible that it
was Job and not Onuphrius that Dürer in-
tended to represent, for the attributes of these
two wizened anchorites do not make a clear
distinction between them.

That Dürer should borrow one of Bellini’s
figures ought not to surprise us greatly if we
have read his letters from Italy. It was the
work of Bellini and Mantegna that impressed
Dürer most. He was too late to meet Man-
tegna personally, but Bellini he knew and
reverenced and it was apparently Bellini more
than anyone who weaned Dürer away from
his infatuation for Jacopo de’ Barbari. In a
letter to Wilibald Pirkheimer dated February
7, 1506, Dürer refers to the jealousy which
most of the Italian painters showed him. “But
Giovanni Bellini,” he writes, “has praised me
before many nobles. He wanted to have some-
thing of mine, and himself came to me and
asked me to paint him something and he
would pay well for it. And all men tell me
what an upright man he is, so that I am
really friendly with him. He is very old, but
is still the best painter of them all . . . .”
Further along in the same letter he adds in
frank surprise, “You must know too that there
are many better painters here than Master
Jacob [Jacopo de’ Barbari].”

Yet we must not take too literally the state-
ment that Dürer had lost his German flavor,
even temporarily. His Italianism was in fact
never more than relative, and the unshakably
German temper of the man can hardly be
demonstrated better than by a comparison of
that tough old hickory Onuphrius of his with
the courteous elderly gentleman who has
obligingly doffed his clothing in order to play
the part of Job in Bellini’s San Gioffe altar-
piece.

Acknowledgments: The drawings in this
article have been reproduced from Zeichnun-
gen von Albrecht Dürer (1883), ed. F. Lipp-
mann, nos. 99 and 509.

References: Katalog der Ausstellung von
Gemälden älterer Meister . . . in München
Detail of the panel of Saint Onuphrius in the Kunsthalle, Bremen