

Dürer's Self Portraits, Submitted by Bruce L. Johnson [indybruce1@yahoo.com]

The late Dulcie Apgar mounted an award-winning philatelic exhibit about Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), the first artist in both European and German art history, who first created self-portraits. Although most of them have not appeared as postage stamps, those that have make an interesting story. This one-page exhibit is presented to honor Dulcie's memory.

Dürer drew this self-portrait in 1484, at the age of 13. It's a silverpoint drawing, now in the Albertina Museum, Vienna. It is the artist's oldest known surviving drawing, one of the oldest extant self-portraits in European art, as well as one of the earliest children's drawings. It was completed two years before Dürer left his father's apprenticeship to study under Michael Wolgemut (1434-1519). Throughout his life Dürer expressed resolute self-confidence. He celebrated himself through his drawings and writings. It was signed at some unknown later date (probably in the 1520s) with the words "This I drew myself from a mirror in the year 1484, when I was still a child. Albrecht Dürer." His other known self-portraits were all completed before he entered his 30s, and so they predate his mature period. As with the other self-portraits, this work can be interpreted as having recorded Dürer's awareness of, and confidence in, his great-yet-still-developing artistic powers. Dürer wrote in the 1520s that even his simple sketches expressed "the spiritual essence of an artist's creative impulse"—since a talented artist could express more in a simple line-drawing than a mediocre artist could express in a year of painting. By the time he made this statement, the artist was looking back at his production, including early works like the silverpoint self-portrait that had been made before he entered formal training as an artist under Wolgemut. From this retrospective point of view, the drawing becomes proof of Dürer's inborn genius, though at the time of its creation it had a quite different purpose. That it was preserved, however, proves that Dürer's family, most likely his father, saw fit to collect his son's output.



Gabon, Scott #C213

Albania used another of Albrecht Dürer's self-portraits for this issue; it was executed in oil on wood panel in 1498, after his first trip to Italy. In the depiction, Dürer elevates himself to the social position he believed suited to an artist of his ability. He presents himself in half length, under an arch, turned towards the viewer. He bears an expression that seems to betray the assured self-confidence of a young artist at the height of his ability. His presence dominates the pictorial space, from his hat which almost reaches the top of the canvas to his arm positioned on the lower ledge, where he rests his fingers enclosed in fine rich gloves. Until sometime in the 19th century the painting was hung with and kept as a companion piece with a portrait of Dürer's Father; in 1636 the two paintings were gifted as a pair to Charles I of England by the city of Nuremberg, and this work was later acquired by Philip IV of Spain. Today it is in the Museo del Prado in Madrid.



Albania, Scott #1359



Romania, Scott #2292

The self-portrait on this issue was rendered in 1500, just before Dürer's 29th birthday; it is the last of his three painted self-portraits. Art historians consider it the most personal, iconic, and complex of his self-portraits, and it would later become his most famous. Dürer posed himself squarely toward the viewer, a pose usually reserved at that time for images of Christ. Dürer was known as a fervent Christian, and he believed being like Christ was his mission and duty as a believer. "Help us to recognize your voice, help us not to be allured by the madness of the world, so that we may never fall away from you, O Lord Jesus Christ," he wrote. Some scholars suggest that the year the self-portrait was painted brings a hidden meaning to it. In 1500, as in any 00 year of each century, humanity once again expected the end of the world. So, this self-portrait implies a kind of a spiritual testament by Dürer.