**Altdorfer, Albrecht**

**Altdorfer, Albrecht** (b. c.1480, Regensburg, d. 1538, Regensburg). German painter, engraver, architect and graphic artist working in Regensburg, of which town he was a citizen from 1505 onwards, the leading artist of the so-called Danube School of German painting. His most outstanding works are biblical and historical subjects set against highly imaginative and atmospheric landscape backgrounds.

The exact date and place of Albrecht Altdorfer's birth are unknown, although he was associated with the Bavarian city of Regensburg for almost all of his life. He is first documented there in 1505 when he acquired citizenship rights and was called a "painter from Amberg", a small town north of Regensburg. Since one could become a citizen in Regensburg at age sixteen, it is possible for Altdorfer to have been born as late as 1488, although an earlier date, circa 1480, seems more likely. Altdorfer became a citizen of Regensburg in 1505 and bought a house there in 1513, another in 1518 and a third in 1532; he also owned several vineyards. From 1517 he held seats on the outer and inner councils of Regensburg and represented the city on important official business. A portrait of Altdorfer is found in an illumination in the Freiheitenbuch (1536; Regensburg, Stadtmus.) by Hans Müelich, which represents him in minute profile among Regensburg's city councillors.

There is no record of Altdorfer's early training or travels, but it has been suggested that his father was the painter and miniaturist, Ulrich Altdorfer, last mentioned in Regensburg in 1491. Albrecht Altdorfer's signed and dated engravings and drawings first appeared in 1506 and were followed, in 1507, by several small paintings. Woodcut production began in 1511.

His early work was influenced by Cranach and Dürer's art too was known to him through the woodcuts and engravings. Mingled with these German impresions was a knowledge of the art of Mantegna, perhaps through the mediation of Michael Pacher.

Early works: the strengh of a mysterious and overwhelming vegetal nature

In the first period of his work, 1507-11, his paintings are often filled with witches, wild men and other weird apparitions. Nature is depicted as mysterious, and vegetals are represented as human hair or beards, enveloping and penetrating everything from humans to rocks and buildings, often left over as ruins. In St George in the Forest, the human form is completely absorbed by the thickness of the forest. Fantastic light effects provide a sense of mystery and dissolve the outline of objects.

Altdorfer was one of the most talented painters in the whole of German art. He achieved, through his color modulation, completely new ways of expression directed at the emotions. His tendency towards the 'romantic' is particularly obvious in his landscapes. He was the first European artist to paint a 'pure' landscape, and in many of his other paintings figure and landscape merge in such a way that the scenic becomes the background: St. George in the Forest (1510).

Altdorfer's skill as a graphic artist entitles him to a place among the so-called Little Masters, a group of 16th-century German engravers noted for their expert execution of designs on a small scale. His prints include an outstanding series of 9 etched landscapes and a set of 40 engravings collectively called The Fall and Redemption of Man.

In 1510 Altdorfer traveled in the Alpine countries. It seems highly probable that he also went to Italy; the 'Italian influence' could be sensed in his brilliant handling of spatial construction in the St. Florian Legend of St. Sebastian and the Passion of Christ altar panels. Although there is no evidence for a trip to Italy, it is evident that Altdorfer utilized Italian niello work and the engravings of Marcantonio Raimondi and Andrea Mantegna.

On or around 1509 he received a commission for the wings of an altarpiece for the monastery of Saint Florian in Enns (Linz), Austria. The series occupied Altdorfer until 1518, the date on one of the panels. In works such as the altar for St. Florian or the Christ Taking Leave of His Mother (National Gallery, London) he achieved a wonderful unity of mood between action and landscape.

The sculpted portions of the altar of St Florian have been lost; however except for two items the paintings have been kept on-site: the predellas depicting the resurrection and entombment are currently located in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Closed, the altarpiece displayed, on four panels, the legend of St. Sebastian; the sides when opened displayed eight paintings of the Passion. According to the date on the resurrection panel, the altarpiece was completed in 1518. The size of the work and changes in style could indicate that work had already started around 1512. Style reasons would hint that the Passion of Christ paintings were completed before the Legend of St. Sebastian. The altarpiece includes a number of night scenes, unusual for that time.

On the first of January, 1513, Altdorfer bought a house in Regensburg, and it was around this time that he began working for Maximilian I. He participated in group projects such as the marginal drawings in Maximilian's Prayer Book (kept in Besançon, France), the woodcuts of the Triumphal Portal, both c. 1515, and the woodcuts of the Triumphal Procession, c. 1517/1518. The artists and his shop also produced a series of illuminations depicting the victorious battles of Maximilian.

**The first 'pure' landscapes of Western painting**

Yet in spite of these varied influences Altdorfer's style always remained personal. Most of his paintings are religious works, but he was one of the first artists to show an interest in landscape as an independent genre during the third decade of his work, maybe as a reaction to the altar of St. Florian which included large human beings. Two pure landscape paintings (without any figures) by him are known (National Gallery, London, and Alte Pinakothek, Munich), along with 9 etchings and 2 aquarelles.

Throughout his life Altdorfer was involved in the municipal government of Regensburg. In 1517 he was a member of the "Ausseren Rates", the council on external affairs, and in this capacity was involved in the expulsion of the Jews, the destruction of the synagogue and in its place the construction of a church and shrine to the Schöne Maria that occurred in 1519. Altdorfer made etchings of the interior of the synagogue and designed a woodcut of the cult image of the Schöne Maria.

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Altdorfer placed biblical and historical scenes into German landscapes, and the figures were represented in contemporary dresses. As an example, this well-known biblical scene takes place in the garden of a Renaissance palace.

**His second major work, The Battle of Alexander at Issus**

In 1525 and 1526 he held important positions on the city councils for external and internal affairs, and was elected mayor in 1528. The town council, however, granted him time off to finish a painting promised for Duke Wilhelm IV of Bavaria. It is assumed that the painting in question was The Battle of Alexander at Issus (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), dated 1529, a cosmic landscape with miniature-like figures that is probably Altdorfer's most famous work. Thousands of tiny figures in a wild, craggy landscape are seen from high in the air against a fiery sunset. Part of a large series of famous battle-pieces from Classical antiquity, with its dazzling light effects, teeming figures, and brilliant colors, it is one of the finest examples of Altdorfer's rich imaginative powers. His patrons included the emperor Maximilian and Louis X, Duke of Bavaria.

In 1526 he was appointed city architect of Regensburg, a job he pursued until his death. He constructed a municipal slaughterhouse and a building for wine storage. In 1529-30 he was also charged with reinforcing certain city fortifications in response to the Turkish threat.

No architectural work by him is known, but his interest in architecture and his skill in handling intricate problems of perspective are demonstrated by his Birth of the Virgin (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). It is possible that he was involved in the design of the pilgrim church Zur Schönen Madonna (now the new Neupfarrkirche) at Regensburg. Although none of his architectural projects survive, the influence of Venetian, Milanese and Lombard architecture, and to a lesser extent that of Bramante, can be seen in the prominent structure in his 1526 painting of Susanna in the Bath and the Stoning of the Elders. In his extant works there is a nearly pantheistic synthesis of man and nature that has been compared both the writings of Paracelsus and the Neo-Platonists. His paintings assert the primacy of landscape, his figures are rarely individualized, and he produced only a handful of portraits. While Altdorfer seems to have had a large workshop, few individual members other than his brother, Erhard (c. 1480-1561), and Hans Mielich are identifiable.

**Prefiguring the 17th century**

In his later works Altdorfer moved towards Mannerism. Two years after The Battle of Alexander at Issus, a radical change in style occured. Rendered with atmospheric nuances, the landscape of the Allegory of the Royal Trip, painted in 1531, already prefigures the 17th century. His last works, partially kept frescoes in Regensburg's bath house, and Loth and his Daughters reveal these changes. The human body, unlike the weird depictions of the first decade, now conforms to the Italian model and dominates the picture with frank colors. He was also a pioneer of copper etching.

This fragment of a fresco was executed for the decoration of Kaiserbad in Regensburg. (Other fragments are in the Städtishes Museum, Regensburg). The importance is given to these fragments by the fact that no wall other wall paintings survived from the masters of the Danube school, except a damaged fresco by Wolf Huber in Neuburg am Inn.

On 12 February 1538 Albrecht Altdorfer died in Regensburg after making his last will and testament. The inventory of his estate, which ran to twenty pages, indicated that he was one of Regensburg's more prosperous citizens. Except for the will he dictated on the day of his death, there are no surviving papers or letters by him; nor are there contemporary writings about him.

The corpus of Altdorfer's surviving work comprises c. 55 panels, 120 drawings, 125 woodcuts, 78 engravings, 36 etchings, 24 paintings on parchment and fragments from a mural for the bathhouse of the Kaiserhof in Regensburg. This production extends at least over the period 1504-37. Most of the early works are dated: engravings 1506-11, woodcuts 1511-13; and although after 1513 Altdorfer ceased dating his prints, most, it would seem, and most of the surviving drawings, were executed by 1522. Therefore, with the notable exception of the Battle of Alexander at Issus (1529; Munich, Alte Pinakothek), the works on which his reputation rests derive predominantly from a concentrated period of activity, 1506-22.