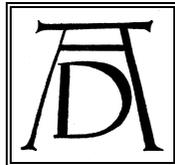


THE NAME GAME / ALBRECHT DÜRER

Although the history of Western Art may be told in terms of the increasing autonomy of the artist, this does not necessarily mean that all artists necessarily possess self-consciousness or *Selbstbewußtsein*. It is just that the practice of art requires special conditions and provides the means and materials by which the self, as likeness and presence, may be experienced, explored, and expressed. Unlike doing it with mirrors, the visual arts also leave a trace of this process.



Self-aware artists are often quite self-absorbed, self-assured (or not) and may be recognized by their indulgence in self-portraiture, pseudonymy and signatures. Due to common psychological processes like *identification* and *projection*, they tend to exert a great appeal and draw a lot of attention. A good example is Albrecht Dürer, who left not only a large body of pictorial works, but also theoretical and autobiographical writings (*Familienchronik*, 1524).

If Rembrandt seems to have been an impulsive and imperious signer, Dürer was a compulsive and conscientious one. There seems to be little that he did not sign or inscribe. Albrecht, the third-born of 18 children (three of whom survived to adulthood), was named after his father (and grandfather) and seems to have portrayed himself and signed his drawings early on, as in his silverpoint Self-portrait at the age of thirteen (1484), which suggests the use of a convex mirror. With a little imagination, we can see the head and hand in this drawing as pictorial equivalents of the letters "A" and "d" (an isomorphism that appears vertically in the hieratic Self-portrait dated 1500, see next page).

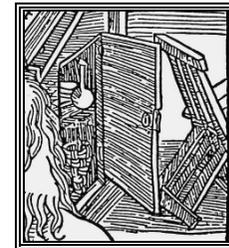
As for the development of his signature: from a cursive, full-name form (using the spelling "Dürer" instead of "Dürer"), he seems to have quickly settled for the initials "A d," giving the "A" a definite emphasis, then carried this feature over into the final "AD" monogram, which he established in 1497 and often represented illusionistically (as if carved in stone or on a wooden plaque). Strictly speaking, this was more a sign than a signature.



Apart from the head/hand isomorphism mentioned above, two things strike me about the monogram; its formal qualities and the association of the letters. Dürer's "AD" monogram was so often combined with the date, and the phrase "nach Christi geburt /date../ Jahr" ("year... after the birth of Christ") occurs so often in connection with important events in his autobiography and official documents, that it is difficult not to connect these letters with the current abbreviation for "Anno Domini." This association becomes all the more plausible in the christlike Self-portrait from 1498, which Dürer deliberately inscribed with the landmark date 1500 in gold lettering (above and opp.). The second feature, the emblematic form of the monogram, may be accounted for by the etymology of the name "Dürer," which stems from the German words "Tür" ("door") and "Tor" (in the sense of "gate").



That Dürer had a pictorial conception of his name is evident in the coat-of-arms that he designed for himself in 1523, the main device of which is an open gate that forms an "A" (below). Much earlier in his career, in his unsigned St. Jerome woodcut of 1492 (detail, right) he had provided both a visual pun and a forerunner of the monogram in pictorial terms: the open cabinet door on the right (making an A) butting against an X-shaped chair cut off by the edge (making a D).



Dürer integrated his monogram completely in his compositions, often showing it inscribed on a plaque, but objected when Marcantonio Raimondi reproduced it in his copies of his engravings and took steps to forbid this practice. I owe this information to A.J. Adams (in her 1992 article, see entry 21), who owes it to Vasari.

