

*The Moment of
Self-Portraiture
in German
Renaissance Art*

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Prosopopoeia

What is the moment of self-portraiture? At what point in history, at what juncture in their tradition or their biography, do artists set about fashioning images of their own physical appearance? And what instant in the bodily life of the artist will these images articulate? In an ink drawing produced about 1491 and preserved now in Erlangen, the twenty-year-old Albrecht Dürer peers out at us from the moment of self-portraiture. His furrowed brow and the squint of his asymmetrical eyes register the strain of someone seeing in order to draw (fig. 1; W. 26).¹ Ourselves now fixed in the artist's gaze, we behold not simply Dürer's likeness, but rather something temporally more specific: Dürer as he appeared "just then," in the instant of the drawing's production, absorbed in the act of observing and sketching himself. Before we can write its history or motivate its context, the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* draws us toward the *Augenblick* of its own making. As a document of the artist's struggle to perceive and to capture himself as the visual image's origin, the sketch can be for us the lapidary starting point for understanding the moment of Dürer's self-portraits.

The Erlangen drawing reads less as a picture of Dürer's physical appearance than as the study sheet of a body at work. With the help of a convex mirror (flat mirrors were not yet available to Dürer),² the artist observes himself performing a reflexive operation that can be described only in awkward, involuted phrases: Dürer drawing himself drawing—or seeing himself drawing himself drawing. Unwilling simply to portray his body isolated from the activity that occupies it, his struggle will continually compound itself. For the more Dürer strains to behold and to represent his mirrored likeness, the more the strain of looking will alter the features of his face. Thus confounded by the essential mutability of his subject, it is no wonder the artist looks troubled as he gazes toward us at the end of his labors. There is something unsettled and unsettling, for example, about that right eye³ that, looking straight out of the picture, represents Dürer's active eye. As if to represent with his pen the activity of looking—as if, that is, to render his gaze visible to our sight—Dürer concentrates on his eye's material contours, laboring over



1. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1491, pen and dark brown ink, Universitätsbibliothek, Erlangen.

its shadows and encircling its limits so that it seems finally to stand out from the rest of the face. This dense concatenation of lines, as well as representing an eye, thus chronicles a pursuit: the artist's hand seeking to capture its controlling agent, the originary and seeing eye.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* is its deft formal conjunction of hand and eye. Dürer's highly evocative gesture of propping his head against

his hand so that his left pupil just borders on the edge of his palm relates in part to the difficult operation of self-portraiture. As his own model, the artist must maintain a still pose even as parts of his body are actively observing and sketching. Dürer himself complained of an "unrest in painting" caused by the mobility of an artist's gaze, which can never observe anything from a fixed point.⁴ Such motion would frustrate self-portraiture particularly, since here the artist cannot move his eye without also altering his object. In the Erlangen drawing Dürer seems to solve this problem by holding his head in place with his hand, steadying thereby both his gaze and its object. Dürer is not disturbed that his hand, pressed firmly against the skin of his cheek, has obscured and even distorted features of his face. For what occupies him is not a flawless rendition of his likeness, but rather the anatomy of tensions and relations that attend the double activity of looking and representing. The Erlangen drawing is perhaps the first self-portrait to thus celebrate the moment and conditions of its making.

This is not to say that Dürer's *Self-Portrait* wholly *explains* those conditions. The artist attends to the two traditional centers of pictorial interest in portraiture, the face and the hand, conjoining them at the center of his sheet. Yet he leaves the rest of his body unfinished and omits altogether any indication of surrounding space. We are left to guess, for example, whether Dürer's left elbow really rests on some supporting surface, as his raised shoulder suggests, or whether he holds his hand up to his face to observe a particular conjunction that interests him visually. This uncertainty raises difficult questions about the occasion of the Erlangen sheet. Did Dürer begin his sketch as a self-portrait, depicting his likeness conveniently supported by his left hand? Or was it rather his hand's interaction with his cheek that he first studied, the self-portrait being merely a fortuitous afterthought? It is not enough to say that both may have been intended, or that Dürer's original intention is of no importance to us today. For as we shall see, the interpretation of Dürer's drawing will already rest on how we read this gesture—how, that is, we come to terms with the privileged and, at 1491, novel practice of self-portraiture.

Dürer presses palm against cheek, yet the hand does not integrate itself easily into the self-portrait. The dark line indicating the hand's contour on the right, passing down the length of Dürer's face and silhouetted against the merest indication of hair and hat, stands out from the drawing. Although it is difficult to view Dürer's face without perceiving the hand that frames it, the hand is easily discernible as a discrete object, disconnected from the face it overlaps. This results in part from a disparity in the drawing's graphic style, which delineates the face more loosely and informally than the carefully outlined hand. The imaginable disjunction between hand and face anticipates Dürer's slightly later *Self-Portrait* drawing, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (fig. 2; W. 27). Here the abrupt juxtaposition of portrait likeness and hand, stationed above a crumpled pillow, registers not only two separate body parts depicted as mere objects in different scales, but also two distinct methods by which an artist can view his own person. Whereas Dürer observes his face in a mirror, he draws his left hand directly, holding it in position before him. What jars us most in the Metropolitan *Self-Portrait* is that this hand, really Dürer's left, reads like a greatly magnified image of his right hand as it would be seen beside his

face and reflected in a mirror. Its size suggesting proximity to the mirror or the picture plane, the hand would mime what will always escape self-portraiture: the artist's active right hand wielding a pen between thumb and fingers.

In the Erlangen drawing, Dürer checks the hand's ambiguity in the specular moment of self-portraiture, its capacity to be represented both directly and through a mirror, by insisting that it made physical contact with his face. The fold of skin pushed up just below his left eye attests to a real dialogue of Dürer's body with itself. Even if Dürer's hand may block, distort, or overpower his likeness, this fold, represented by a line barely larger than a comma, provides testimony that the image we see is all of one flesh.

Self-portraiture is a bodily activity here. At the very center of the visual field, Dürer conjoins hand and eye as tools of the artist's trade. They recall a deeper conjunction we cannot see: the relation between Dürer's active right eye and his right hand that has fashioned the image before us. The always mobile right hand constitutes a lacuna in self-portraiture, for in it the artist's two roles of maker and model become irreconcilable. In the Erlangen drawing, Dürer resurrects his hand in its works. In the drawing's loose, spontaneous style, in the equal handling of outlines and modeling, the artist insists that his right hand show itself within the visible marks that make up the image. This will be true of Dürer's graphic style generally: the pen's free play on the page has value because, by registering the actual bodily and temporal event of human making, it attests to the authentic presence of the artist in the work of art.⁵ We need only compare the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* with drawings by other German masters of an earlier generation to discern the novelty of the young Dürer's style.⁶ In Hans Holbein the Elder's (c. 1460–1524) drawing of *Kungspers Nicias*, for example, produced in Augsburg as part of a sketchbook of portrait likenesses, every line rendering the boy's likeness is set down to be final and true (fig. 3).⁷ The finished sketch is made to betray no evidence of the human and therefore fallible labor that went into it. Once established, the body's contours will only be traced and retraced until they are veritably etched into the white prepared ground—note the scratched surface around the heavy outline of the boy's chin and jaw, as well as his whole right contour. Holbein controls the calligraphic potential of his line even in rendering the boy's hair. Restricted to outlining individual locks, his silverpoint studiously avoids ever interweaving its lines. When the artist wavers, as he does in rendering the position of the bent forefinger at the right and in outlining the sitter's collar, he takes care to conceal this process under dense hatching.

Dürer, on the other hand, utilizes the effects of error, allowing all lines, failed and successful, to energize his self-portrait. The several lines that differently render his thumb, or the dense jumbles of marks that describe his chin and wrist, make Dürer's likeness mobile and alive. These many lines, read together, document the *work* of representation. They are an intrinsic part of that project, enacted also in the posture and expression of the represented sitter: Dürer representing his body in labor and motion, sketching himself in the act of sketching. Self-portraiture takes place here as much in the spontaneous activity of the artist's right hand as in the likeness steadied by the left. Dürer unites his roles of maker and model within one irreducible moment.



2. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait at Age Twenty-two*, c. 1493, pen and brown ink, Robert Lehman Collection, Metropolitan Museum, New York.



3. Hans Holbein the Elder, *Portrait of Kungspers Nicias*, c. 1511, silverpoint on white grounded paper with gray ink wash, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

In his important 1934 monograph on Dürer's self-portraits, Hugo Kehrer discovers in the Erlangen drawing a "moment" of a very different kind. For Kehrer, the drawing represents "more than an individual likeness. This representation of the I is at once a spiritual self-analysis and self-dissection. One could say, in that hour of Dürerian self-observation the German Renaissance awoke."⁸ In Kehrer's reading, representative of nearly all scholarly accounts of Dürer's self-portraits, the moment of self-portraiture has been elevated to an epochal turning point in the history of Western culture. The particular arena of change the Erlangen drawing inaugurates is that of an emergent self-consciousness. Dürer's momentous celebration of what Kehrer calls "the limitless abundance of a most intricate and polymorphic inner life" makes him a precocious representative of the modern age. We need not yet address Kehrer's assertion that Dürer observes and anatomizes his "inner" self in the Erlangen sketch. It is a view shared by most of the drawing's interpreters, from Heinrich Wölfflin and Wilhelm Waetzoldt to Erwin Panofsky,⁹ and it belongs to a tradition of historiography reaching back through Jacob Burckhardt to Jules Michelet and Hegel, which celebrates the modernity of the Renaissance in its discovery of the individual self.¹⁰ What interests us here is the particular hyperbole with which Kehrer expresses the *originality* of Dürer's drawing: "In that

hour of Dürerian self-observation the German Renaissance awoke." In the tense features of Dürer's face, and in the nervous lines that render the likeness, we are asked to discern not only the heightened temporality of an artist capturing his own body in labor, but also the very instant in which the Renaissance, which is to say modernity, first occurs in Germany. So new, so original is that moment of self-portraiture that Dürer performs in it the start of our age.

Kehrer's interpretation of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* makes at least two extravagant claims. First, by narrowing the inception of the German Renaissance to a singular "hour" of one painter's practice, Kehrer hyperbolizes the belief that historical epochs have precisely datable beginnings. The Erlangen drawing becomes a momentous demonstration of Western history in the making. In it Dürer launches the Renaissance with a flourish of his pen. Second, by locating the start of the Renaissance in one painter's self-portrait, Kehrer valorizes the individual human self, most fully embodied in a great artist like Dürer, as history's prime mover. In the radical disparity between the little sketch in Erlangen, produced by one person and intended for a very limited audience, and its colossal historical significance, Kehrer underscores the absolute sovereignty of the artistic self.

It would be easy to historicize Kehrer's own position, to regard it, say, as a belated expression of the romantic cult of genius. Yet I am convinced that the sources for Kehrer's notion of self and epochality also lead back to Dürer and to the culture of the German Renaissance. Dürer, we shall see, proclaims himself the incarnation of a new era in his monumental *Self-Portrait* of 1500. And it is Dürer, in what he himself calls his "strange saying,"¹¹ who first proclaims that a small, quick sketch of a great master is far more important than a year's labor of a lesser talent. It makes little sense today to argue, with Kehrer, that Dürer's self-portraits inaugurate the Renaissance in Germany. Yet as representational practice, self-portraiture provided a place wherein such a nascent conviction as the self's sovereignty, or a culture's epochality, could be reified, celebrated, questioned, or dismissed.

Certainly the plot of self-portrayal can celebrate the originary powers of the human subject. In the specular moment of fashioning one's own likeness, one installs oneself at once as viewing subject and as thing viewed, as representation's origin as well as end. The picture can therefore claim autochthony, isolating itself from any source, human, historical, or divine, beyond what it already represents. Self-portraits can exemplify the notion of an "autonomous" likeness, such as was being theorized for painting during the Renaissance. In his treatise *De sculptura* from 1504, the Paduan humanist Pomponius Gauricus wrote that a portrait must depict its subject *ex se*, out of itself.¹² Portraiture must renounce a referentiality that would turn the sitter into a mere representation of something other or more general than himself.¹³ This fiction of autonomy is heightened in a painting in which the represented person is also the work's creator. For in the self-portrait, the *uomo singulare* has himself given rise to his own likeness *ex se*. Displayed in

both his appearance and his works, the artist stands self-contained and complete, freed of any functions or references beyond self-denomination.

Such a picture presents the interpreter with a problem. How can we motivate a suitable context for self-portraiture? How, that is, can we write its history without threatening an autochthony that the image might propose about itself? Kehrer's exaggeration of the epochality and self-assertion of the Erlangen drawing articulates what self-portraiture might well write about itself: the individual self, master of its representations, is in command of a history that it alone inaugurates. Thus far my account of the Erlangen sketch has followed this plot. It introduces my study of self-portraiture neither because it exemplifies my methods nor because it surveys my material, but because it allows Dürer's drawing to articulate itself fully *as* introduction: introduction to the project of self-portraiture and its epoch, the Renaissance in Germany. How true is this reading, though, to the moment of self-portraiture?

On the recto of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait*, Dürer has drawn a very different work: the Virgin, seated on a bench, cradles the Christ child while Joseph peers at them from behind, supported by a cane (fig. 4, W. 25). The Holy Family was a popular motif in late fifteenth-century German art, partly because it expressed the sacred in terms of a domestic intimacy that appealed to a predominantly bourgeois audience. Dürer produced at least three drawings of the Holy Family during his travels as a journeyman (1490–1494).¹⁴ In the Erlangen drawing Dürer embroiders this traditional scene with a subtly construed Joseph, articulating in his stooped but agitated form an old man's feelings of bafflement mixed with wonder. But Dürer's interest in this drawing is less in the gestures of subjectivity than in the formal qualities of an elaborately crumpled drapery. Garments dominate the composition, creating a relief surface that cascades diagonally down the sheet and gathers in deep hairpin folds at the lower right. Outlined in heavy, aggressive lines and modeled in an ordered system of hatching, each fold becomes a unique and fully architectural object in shallow space. Compared with this, Dürer's treatment of the Virgin's face and the Christ child appears awkward and summary. One would imagine, for example, that the artist who could so elegantly construct the gothic twirl of cloth above the Virgin's right knee would take more care in depicting Christ's right arm. The Erlangen *Holy Family*, however, has a more narrowly defined focus. The young Dürer is building his decorative repertoire by concentrating on the free play of a bent, folded, and twisted surface.¹⁵

Although the folded garments themselves appear unpredictable in their configurations, Dürer's graphic style is highly controlled and systematic throughout. The movement that animates the Virgin's robe is conveyed by measured and stiff pen strokes, some of which appear to have been made with a straightedge. We are far from the calligraphic style of Dürer's *Self-Portrait* on the verso, where accidents of line occur not in the represented object, but in the spontaneous movement of the artist's pen. The drapery in the *Holy Family* stands closer to the studied manner of Holbein's *Kungspérgs Niclas* (fig. 3), in which outlines are clean, final, and without visible error. Some scholars regard the Erlangen *Holy Family* as the copy of a lost work by Martin Schongauer.¹⁶ This might explain



4. Albrecht Dürer, *Holy Family*, c. 1491, pen and dark brown ink, Universitätsbibliothek, Erlangen.

Dürer's cautious draftsmanship. Whereas in the *Self-Portrait* on the verso his hand freely traces the lines of his own body, in the *Holy Family* he is struggling to learn the line of his predecessors.

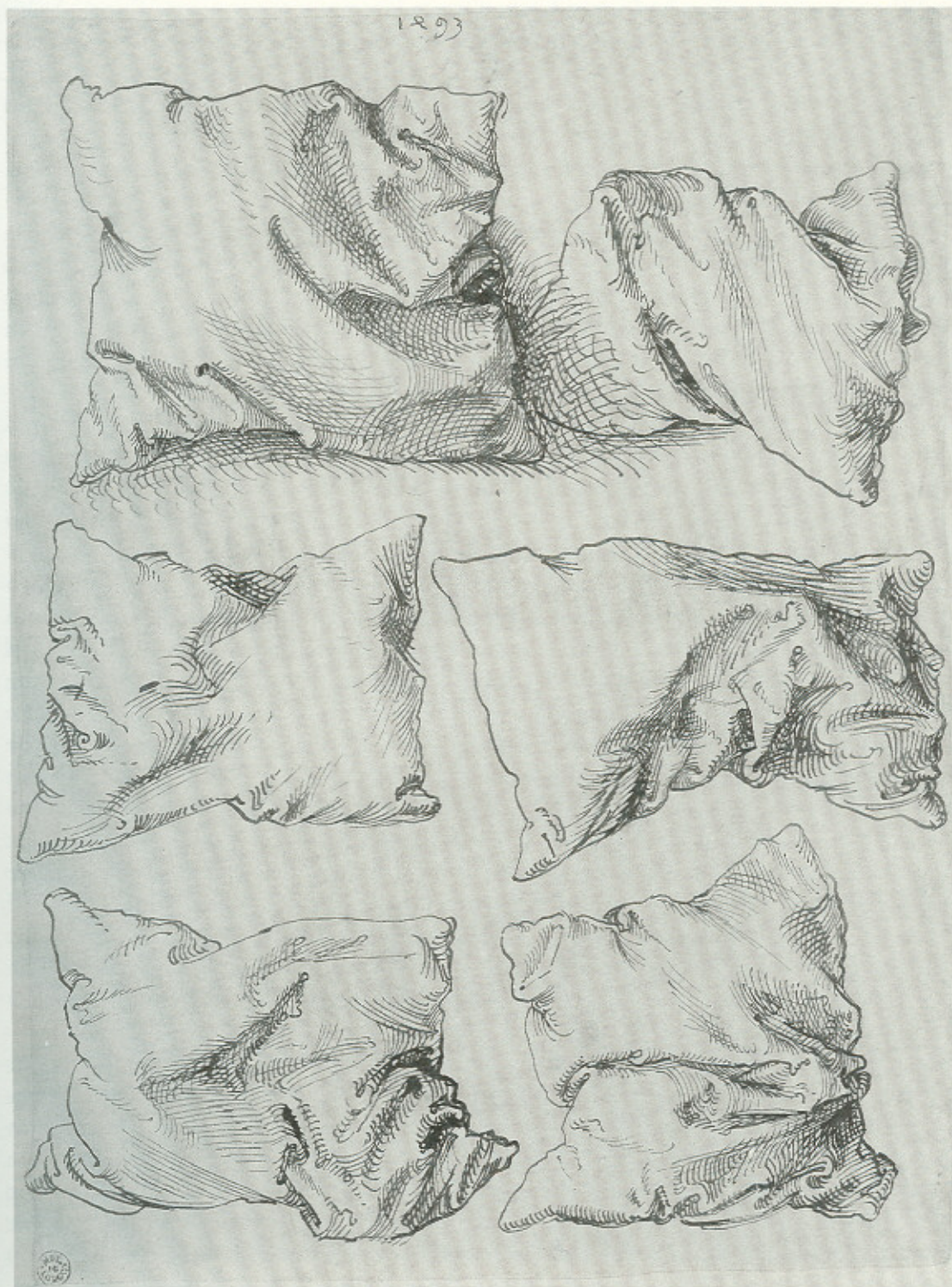
Differences between the two sides of the Erlangen sheet reflect the range of pictorial exercises out of which Dürer's famous likeness emerged. Self-portraiture begins within a highly varied practice. The young artist sketches both from nature and from earlier art, experimenting all along with different graphic styles and pictorial formats.¹⁷ Much later, in his theoretical writings, Dürer affirms the importance of drawing to an artist's work and training. A sketch can provide the model for a finished composition, enabling the

artist to foresee and, if necessary, correct his final work: "In order to portray such things [as the specific appearance of people] it is useful, before one starts a work, to sketch with outlines the picture as one intends it to be, so that one can see if there is something in the figures that might be improved."¹⁸ But even before that, drawing is central to an artist's education. By learning to translate any object, in whatever position it shows itself, into a convincing and pleasing likeness, the aspiring painter can acquire the manual dexterity and visual acuteness necessary for producing finished works of art: "That is why it is necessary for every artist to learn to draw well. For this is useful beyond measure in many arts, and much depends upon it."¹⁹ Here the individual sketch functions not as a preparatory model for a finished painting, but rather as an exercise to train the hand and eye generally. The goal of this pedagogy is the "free, practiced hand,"²⁰ a hand so trained that it can accurately paint anything the artist sees without need for a preparatory sketch.²¹

The verso of Dürer's *Self-Portrait* in the Metropolitan Museum displays an extraordinary example of the young Dürer's diligence as an aspiring artist (fig. 5; W. 32). The artist has filled the sheet with six studies of crumpled pillows. Except for the top two, no pillow overlaps another, nor do they cast shadows on any surface outside their own. Unadorned and silhouetted against a neutral ground, each pillow is captured in its volume and coherency as a separate object, even as it is distorted from its essential square form. A pillow is the simplest of things: two surfaces enclosing a volume. Yet Dürer delights in the passage from simple to complex, from smooth to tortuous, as he pens the structural logic of his motif. Far more than in the drapery of the earlier *Holy Family* drawing in Erlangen, we sense the artist's bodily relation both to his object and to his work. One supposes that the six pillows are really permutations of a single pillow that has been punched, twisted, and arranged by the artist himself. And once created, these pillow sculptures will be rendered in supple lines expressive of the twisting movement of sketching itself. Note the impossible little spiral fold at the left edge of the pillow at center left. Contours have been transformed into flourishes, pillows into paraphs, in the attempt to render the pure object in line.

In *Six Pillows*, Dürer learns to master the thing in itself—here the unformed clump potentially infinite in variation—by translating its shape into the movements of his pen. The recto of the sheet charts this operation (fig. 2). The artist's gaze, depicted in the self-portrait, conjoins with his hand (here Dürer's left hand projected to the right) to confront and represent an object: the crumpled pillow below. This pillow may well have been the first of the series. It still has commerce with its surroundings, balancing oddly on some curved surface that appears to slope upward to the right. By the time he sketches the seventh pillow at the base of the sheet's verso, Dürer has learned to isolate his object, depicting the pillow as a volume that, however complex, remains legible, stable, and self-contained. Viewed thus as the chronicle of a movement from face to pillow and from subject to object, the Metropolitan sheet tells a story of the self's mastery over things seen.

And yet the work can sustain quite the opposite reading. Dürer's likeness, arranged



5. Albrecht Dürer, *Six Pillows*, c. 1493, pen and ink, Robert Lehman Collection, Metropolitan Museum, New York.

on the page with a pillow and a hand, has been reduced to a thing among things. In his own features the artist has discovered merely another appearance to master, another surface whose folds and contours he can control with his pen. And from the looks of it, Dürer found his own face less interesting than the dumb folds of the pillows that hold his attention through six sketches on the verso. We are far from Kehrer's account of the moment of self-portraiture. The artist's face is merely another available object for training his visual and manual skills.

But let us return now to the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* and work out its place within the young artist's practices as draftsman. I hypothesized earlier that Dürer's interest in this drawing lies less in rendering clearly his own characteristic features than in studying a face (which just happens to be his own face) in a particular attitude and posture. As in the sketch of *Six Pillows*, the Erlangen drawing studies specifically a folded and distorted object: the flesh of Dürer's cheek pressed up against the edge of his palm. Dürer's attention to this specific subject may involve more than a random appetite for difficult pictorial tasks. For in a slightly later drawing of the *Holy Family*, now in Berlin, this motif appears copied in the figure of Joseph at the right (fig. 6; W. 30).²² With his head propped against his hand, Joseph can lean toward the seated Virgin and child while still maintaining his distance. This separation is meaningful, for as the garden wall in the middle ground at the left and the closed gate at the right suggest, Mary's virginity is expressed in an image of closure, here the *hortus conclusus*. Joseph's hand, together with the grassy bench and the hem of Mary's garments, acts as a visual barrier between himself and the Virgin and suggests the isolating psychic state of inward contemplation or sleep. The Berlin drawing thus relates to problems already raised by the *Holy Family* on the recto of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait*, in which Joseph, again separated from the Virgin by the bench and by an extension of drapery, retains an enigmatic relation to the mystery of Christ's birth through gesture and pose. In the Berlin drawing, and later in the pen and watercolor sketch of the *Madonna with a Multitude of Animals*, the Christ child points his right index finger at Joseph as if to reiterate the mystery of his paternity. For Joseph is both a father and not a father, a human origin that has been elided by the Virgin birth. Dürer himself practiced this pose in his earliest extant work, the silverpoint *Self-Portrait* from 1484 (fig. 19). The pointing finger responds here to the hand of Dürer's own father, which, in the silverpoint *Self-Portrait of Dürer the Elder* (fig. 22), holds the product of its labor: a silver statuette.

Working on the Erlangen *Holy Family*, Dürer confronted the figure of Joseph in all its semantic complexity, as model of piety and as cuckold, as player in biblical history, as extraneous observer, and as mere illusion of origins. In drawing his own self-portrait on the verso of the sheet, the artist perhaps sought to devise a more effective visual formula for Joseph, invoking the interiorizing gesture of a head propped up by hand. Having performed and observed this gesture himself, Dürer was then able to use his sketch for other drawings. We can observe such a practice in one of Dürer's very earliest extant works: the *Virgin and Child* now in the British Museum (fig. 7; W. 22). Mary's right hand, supporting the Christ child from below, is somewhat clumsily drawn, and Dürer seems



6. Albrecht Dürer, *Holy Family*, c. 1492–1493, pen and ink, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.



7. Albrecht Dürer, *Study Sheet with the Virgin and Child*, c. 1491, pen and ink, British Museum, London.

to have practiced this form in a separate sketch at the sheet's upper left. The drawing of a hand at the upper right might have had a similar function, although it solves different formal problems and might belong to another project. The position of the wrist, the slightly splayed minimus, and the direction of the arm suggest that this could be Dürer's own left hand twisted in toward himself.²³ Taken as a whole, the sheet proposes a fluid process of creation, in which work on a traditional motif, here the Virgin and child, presents certain pictorial difficulties that Dürer solves in separate studies, always ready

to use his own body as a model. Similarly, in the Berlin *Holy Family*, the “representation of the I” (Kehrer) of the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* is transferred to a more traditional image, serving there to express a subjective relation—Joseph’s—to the epochal event par excellence, the birth of Christ.

In his 1514 preface to the illustrated prose history of Emperor Maximilian I, Max Treitzsaurwein describes the book’s unfinished state in terms instructive to our understanding of Dürer’s drawings. Treitzsaurwein, who was secretary to the emperor and editor of the *Weiß Kunig*, explains that the book collects autobiographical passages by Maximilian himself that still await revision: “This book is now only material [*ain materi*] and an incomplete work and nothing else. It is a form that the most all-illuminating . . . emperor Maximilian has preliminarily supplied, in order that out of it, through the delightful eloquence of the German language, through the proper order of human reason, and with all the trimmings necessary for the royal truth, a completed work can be made.”²⁴ In the *Weiß Kunig*, as in all the emperor’s literary projects, autobiography provides merely the raw material out of which a fictionalized and partly allegorical biography will later be fashioned. Dürer’s Erlangen *Self-Portrait* represents, similarly, an “incomplete work.” The *materi* it provides finds its way into other, more “complete” creations. We have observed this in the Berlin *Holy Family*, where all that remains of the moment of self-portraiture is Joseph’s hand. And it occurs again in a small panel of the *Man of Sorrows* dating from very early in Dürer’s career, in which Christ gazes out at the viewer, chin propped in hand (fig. 8). The particular distortion of Christ’s cheek, as well as many features of his face (his left eye and the shape of his mouth), bears a close resemblance to Dürer’s Erlangen likeness. Far from capturing the whole personality and appearance of the sitter *ex se*, then, the Erlangen *Self-Portrait* functions as preliminary sketch for details in more traditional works.

Such a reading transforms our original visual experience, shifting our attention away from the image’s aspect as self-portrait. The picture no longer seems to emanate from the artist’s originary gaze as represented in his likeness. Rather, the darkly outlined hand asserts its priority within the genesis of the image, and Dürer’s face consequently appears merely as a belated appendage. The drawing falls among the artist’s many hand studies from this period, such as the *Study of Three Hands* in the Albertina (W. 47) and the sketch at the top of the London *Virgin and Child* (fig. 7), only in the Erlangen sheet has Dürer chosen to depict his object in context, pressed against the surface of a face. Thus interpreted, thus itself contextualized within Dürer’s practice as a late medieval painter, the moment of self-portraiture appears as happenstance within more traditional artistic projects. Where at first we had discovered in Dürer’s face the radically originary power of the self, now we find only an afterthought of pictorial attention.

And yet the gesture that Dürer performs, observes, and draws in the Erlangen sheet connotes a state of heightened subjectivity. Resting his head against his hand, the artist strikes the pose, present in art from antiquity to the present day, of someone absorbed