



Albrecht Dürer: *Coat of Arms with a Skull*, 1503  
Engraving, 22.5 × 16 cm

## Who is the Dürer of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

He was said to be homosexual, and his wife, Agnes, allegedly a Xanthippe, was reputed to have busied herself during his lifetime almost exclusively with the successful sale of his graphic works. Now we may have seen the last of such insinuations, for with an exhibition that closed in January 2020, the *Albertina* in Vienna has subjected the life and work of Albrecht Dürer to a painstaking scholarly examination. Dürer left almost a hundred paintings, about three hundred monogrammed prints of predominantly superb quality, as well as a treasure of nearly a thousand drawings—this much was known already. Even during his lifetime, he had the reputation, shortly after 1500, of being the most significant artist north of the Alps. In the German-speaking world, therefore, there was less a Renaissance than simply a “Dürer period.” **It is common knowledge that reproductions of the famous “piece of turf,” the “hare,” and the “praying hands” adorned the walls of many households for centuries and were considered the epitome of art by their owners.** Those folios, which should be seen in the original, still do not feel at all antiquated; rather, as is attested by the sumptuous catalogue as well, these are “miracles” on paper. The catalogue’s commentary on the first folio informs us that Dürer must have placed the “micro-biotope” on a table in his studio in 1503, instead of lying down outside. Thus, it became possible for the viewer to penetrate into the pictorial object “from the perspective of a crawling insect.” There is also clarifying information concerning an opulent dowry Dürer received when he married in 1494, enabling him to travel abroad for years and to establish his own workshop with a view to marketing his work. Networking, according to the stupendous texts by the curators Christof Metzger and Julia Zaunbauer, was Dürer’s second key strategy in addition to marketing. His meticulous notebook records how many contacts with colleagues and buyers he made internationally. Both strategies served a long-term objective that was equally important for Dürer: maintaining his own estate by assembling a large inventory of motifs and preserving his best works. **The most important works, among them the ones mentioned above, were never sold by the artist; instead, he kept them as teaching material and visual aids, as benchmarks.** The *Albertina* spoke of a treasure-trove “that would impress upon any visitor of his workshop that here was a God-given talent: a perfect proof of his artistry.”

If we, from our vantage 500 years later, look into our own period, an inescapable question presents itself: who is the Dürer of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Is it still Pablo Picasso, who died in 1981? Can Andy Warhol, with his brilliant mercantilism combined with a passion for product design, continue to exert his formative influence? Or would we have to go back to Claude Monet, a man of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, whose esthetic preeminence, despite the perpetual zenith of modern oil painting (evinced in Gerhard Richter's market values), has not been surpassed? With this question we are opening a door to speculation. While earlier, since 2018, our *Art Consult Newsletters* addressed the growing role of women, of people of color, of other, divergent cultures, or of China, this question is a new one. Who would impress him- or herself on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in such a way that relentlessly powerful collectors—like Kaiser Rudolf II, who in 1589 acquired two hundred drawings by Dürer and almost simultaneously a great number of paintings and graphic works by him, and the equally important books—would cause an epochal treasure of comparable significance to manifest? **The defining artist of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is neither a woman nor Chinese nor a person of color and is hated by many: his name is still Jeff Koons.** As in Dürer's case, his great gifts were already praised when he was a child. His father hung his pictures in the shop windows of his own furniture business and sold them when his son was ten years old. In an almost omnipotent sense, Koons, too, became the discoverer, designer, and salesman of an artistic world of make-believe from the age of 25 on, though in his case that world encompassed household items, sports equipment, *Nike* posters, Alcohol ads, kitsch figures and later love scenes with "Cicciolina," gift items and hand bags by *Louis Vuitton*. **Starting in 1989, with the simultaneous exhibition in three different venues of a show titled *Banalität*, the global art market acknowledged Koons's leading role.** Peter Schjeldahl's assessment, "He is the artist of the present age of Money," was not written later but already during that summer. Koons had previously worked as an advertising man at the *Museum of Modern Art's* membership desk. He had previously also traded shares for the financial institutions *Clayton Brokerage* and *Smith Barney*. The supreme technical perfection Koons, with the help of select assistants and craft businesses, brought to the production of prints, paintings, and sculptures aspires—decades after Warhol—to the ennoblement and institutionalization of commodity esthetics. One of Koons's core messages is that standards today are not set by art but by advertising and that the image media that employ the newest technologies will always be the most likely to succeed. The artist, born in York, Pennsylvania in 1955, will presumably continue to serve the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as a role model for as long as traditional capitalism and the glamor of commodities exist. Upon my soul! Whatever we may think of it.

DR. THOMAS KELLEIN  
*Managing Director Bergos Berenberg Art Consult*  
thomas.kellein@bergos-berenberg.ch

This publication is for information and marketing purposes only. The provided information is not legally binding and neither constitutes a financial analysis, nor a sales prospectus, an offer for investment-transactions, an asset management mandate or an investment idea and does not substitute any legal, tax or financial advice.