

Dürer, Metallurgy, and Social Mobility

Andrew Robert Keast

This paper seeks to understand Albrecht Dürer's use of the metallurgical arts as an agent of social mobility. On at least two occasions late in his career, Dürer arranged for Nuremberg artisans to render his likeness on a commemorative medal. Two surviving medals — one cast by Hans Schwarz in 1520 (Figure 1) and another by Matthes Gebel in 1527 (Figure 2) — represent not only Dürer's efforts at documenting his likeness for posterity, but also Dürer's knowledge of the medium's possibilities for enabling and affecting social mobility. At the turn of the sixteenth century, Nuremberg's status as a free imperial city within the Holy Roman Empire made it both a center for the production of luxury objects and a nexus of political and intellectual life. The city's status often allowed the former to enable the latter. Medals, plaques, and other metallic objects produced at the Nuremberg workshops of Schwarz and Gebel were in high demand at the time of the production of Dürer's medal portraits.

Aside from a small number of catalogue entries and reviews of select medals and coins in private collections, the social dimensions of portrait medals from this time and place remain largely unexplored: Georg Habich's 1906 study of German medals is the canonical example; Maximilian Martens has written on the social self-representation of artists in the Low Countries of the fifteenth century; Johann-Christian Klamt has discussed artisan self-portraiture in relation to social status in northern Europe; regarding German portrait medals specifically, William Milliken has written of the large demand from the burghers of Augsburg

and Nuremberg throughout the sixteenth century, and of the tremendous competition among medalists in that time for burghers' commissions; Jeffrey Chipps Smith has written on the iconographic and social origins of portrait medals in southern Germany, discussing the roles of humanists Konrad Peutinger and Willibald Pirckheimer, artisans Hans Burgkmair and Hans Schwarz, and the emulation of Italian and Imperial Roman models in the development of the portrait medals.¹

Social mobility in northern Europe took multiple forms, one of the most prominent in the scholarly literature being education. In the late medieval and early modern periods, university education was both a means and an agent of social mobility. Education was a means of mobility in that it allowed entry into a specific professional field — such as law or medicine — which brought one financial benefits. Education was also an agent of mobility in that it allowed one greater prestige within a specific social sphere. Such prestige in turn often stemmed from social performance. Between 1570 and 1620, for instance, the city of Prague accorded the rector of its university the power to promote teachers to positions in larger cities based on their performance.²

Like early modern education, individuals were able to use the production of luxury objects toward similar ends. As agents of social mobility, portrait medals were specific to a social structure. One can distill a framework — within which to view Dürer's particular social structure — from the writings of medievalist David Herlihy, social theorist Max Weber, and historian M.L. Bush. Herlihy has criticized the

The idea for this essay originates from discussions led by Dr. Catherine B. Scallen in a 2007 graduate seminar on Albrecht Dürer and Hans Holbein the Younger at Case Western Reserve University. Dr. Charles Burroughs of Case Western and Jon Seydl of the Cleveland Museum of Art offered unique advice regarding the metallurgic arts. The art history faculty and graduate students at the University of Arizona — namely Dr. Pia F. Cuneo, Dr. Julie Plax, Emily Cammack, and Miranda Metcalf — offered many comments and suggestions that informed this essay significantly. The art history faculty and participants of the 28th Annual Graduate Student Symposium at Florida State University — namely Dr. Jack Freiberg, Dr. Paula Gerson, Dr. Lauren Weingarden, Kathleen McCampbell, Brianne Cohen of the University of Pittsburgh, and Yelena Kalinsky of Rutgers University — also offered comments that informed this essay.

¹ Georg Habich, "Studien zur deutsch Renaissance-medaille" *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 27 (1906): 13-69; Maximilian P.J. Martens, "The Position of the Artist: Salaries and Social Mobility," in *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the*

Late Middle Ages, ed. Wim Blockmans and Antheun Janse (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 387-414; Johann-Christian Klamt, "Artist and Patron: The Self-Portrait of Adam Kraft in the Sacrament-House of St. Lorenz in Nuremberg," in Blockmans and Janse, *Showing Status*, 415-443; William M. Milliken, "German Portrait Plaques of the Sixteenth Century," *Cleveland Museum of Art Bulletin* 15, no. 7 (1928): 154, 156; Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "A Creative Moment: Thoughts on the Genesis of the German Portrait Medal," in *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal*, ed. Stephen K. Scher (New York: Garland, 2000), 177-199; and Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *German Sculpture of the Later Renaissance c.1520-1580: Art in an Age of Uncertainty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 323-5.

² Paul F. Grendler, "The Universities of the Renaissance and the Reformation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2004): 9-10. See also Rab Houston, "Literacy and Society in the West" *Social History* 8, no. 3 (1983): 269-293; and Jacques Revel, "The Uses of Civility," in *The History of Private Life*, ed. Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3:183.

notion of medieval society as one of noble estates where social mobility is either discouraged or not possible. Weber wrote extensively on the distinction between classes and estates. According to Weber, the social positions for members of a particular class were defined by market activity, and the social positions for members of an estate were defined by honors conferred, arbitrarily, by others. For Weber, one's *Lebenstil*, or "lifestyle," revealed one's social position. Therefore, property and consumption conferred status.³ Bush wrote of nobility in the early modern period. According to the author, nobility was not always a birthright, and social structures of the nobility admitted new members, including commoners. One way a commoner could acquire nobility was by acquiring the conventional trappings of nobility — usually a manorial estate or an "appropriate occupation."⁴

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Nuremberg was in a unique position to allow this type of social mobility to take place. Until 1349, the city was beholden to the medieval guild system. It was in that year that the craftsmen's rebellion took place, causing the city to abolish their artisan guilds. Beginning in the latter half of the fourteenth century, Nuremberg's city council controlled the production of luxury objects. However, the city's merchant class and nobility controlled the council. It was also in the latter half of the fourteenth century that Nuremberg began to experience an increase in metalworkers. The city's council rolls of masters record an increase from 74 masters in 1429 to 165 masters in 1496.⁵ Further, Nuremberg was a free imperial city, which owed no political allegiance to any lordship — only the Holy Roman Emperor. Due to these circumstances, one could therefore view Nuremberg as a city offering "appropriate occupations" whereby a commoner could acquire a certain *Lebenstil* through consumption of the luxury arts.

How did Dürer do this? Medals such as those containing Dürer's portrait are what were known as *Schaumünzen*, or "show coins." These medals had no commercial value and were not intended as monetary currency.⁶ *Schaumünzen* were typically larger than a commercial coin but could still be held in one's hand, and usually depicted the profile or quarter-length portrait of a sitter. While the exact number of original casts of each medal containing Dürer's portrait is unknown, metallurgists tended to produce *Schaumünzen* in small quantities. Several extant medals from the 1510s and 1520s containing portraits of humanists, princes, and wealthy patricians from southern Germany survive, which suggests

a rise in popularity for the medium in that time among an exclusive audience.

Portrait medals made throughout the 1510s and 1520s in Germany were conducive to social mobility for at least two reasons. The first reason for this is that unlike a wall painting or most large-scale sculpture, a medal is not site-specific; the physical portability of the object and viewer scrutiny of the portrait featured on the object are both inherent in its design. The second conducive aspect to social mobility is that unlike a coin, a medal had no monetary currency save the value of the raw material from which it is cast; therefore, an alternate purpose for the object is also inherent in its design and is also closely associated with the emulation of classical culture in the Italian peninsula. Portrait medals had been common in Italy well before they first emerged in Germany. A small bronze relief of Leon Battista Alberti from the 1430s (Figure 3) that portrays the artist in the fashion of a Roman patrician attests to this fact.

Each medal was the product of a process that involved the drawing of an image, the carving of a wood model, the fashioning of a cast from that model, and the casting of a metal alloy. When one reviews the entire process from start to finish, one must acknowledge that Dürer's efforts amounted to only a small part of this process: specifically, the commission of the medals. By the 1520s, Dürer had established himself throughout southern Germany and abroad as an accomplished draughtsman and printmaker. His relationship to the metallurgic arts (or to sculpture as a whole), however, was limited. Dürer was the son of a goldsmith and received training in the practice of metalworking from his father as a youth. Dürer collaborated with Nuremberg goldsmiths Ludwig Krug and Hans Krafft the Elder, and preliminary drawings for these collaborations exist.⁷ Dürer's early training and collaborations suggest that he could have executed the casting of the medals himself. The reasons why he did not do this are topics of speculation. Metalworking requires a larger amount of workshop space relative to that needed for printmaking or painting, as well as a rudimentary knowledge of the chemistry of metal alloys. Dürer may not have had these resources at his immediate disposal.

Nevertheless, Dürer saw the work of both Hans Schwarz and Matthes Gebel at the Imperial Diet of Augsburg in 1518, and in 1519 may have planned at least one self portrait in metal form.⁸ The medal portraits of 1520 and 1527 were not cast by Dürer, but by Schwarz and Gebel, respectively. Hans

³ Max Weber, "Class, Status, Party," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. Hans Heinrich Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 186-7.

⁴ David Herlihy, "Three Patterns of Social Mobility in Medieval History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3, no. 4 (1973): 624; M.L. Bush, "An Anatomy of Nobility," in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. M.L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992), 26-7.

⁵ William D. Wixom, "The Art of Nuremberg Brass Work," in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg, 1300-1550*, ed. Ellen Schultz (New

York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 76-7.

⁶ Jeffrey Chipps Smith describes the difference between a coin and a medal at this time and place in *German Sculpture*, 322.

⁷ Smith discusses Dürer's experience with sculpture at length in "Dürer and Sculpture," in *The Essential Dürer*, ed. Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 83-6.

⁸ Smith speculates that Hans Burgkmair, Jakob Fugger, and others also would have shown their portrait medals to Dürer while visiting Augsburg in "Creative Moment," 182.

Schwarz was a woodcarver and medalist from Augsburg. He trained as a sculptor under his uncle Stephan Schwarz in 1506, and perhaps learned portraiture in the studio of Hans Holbein the Elder. He eventually arrived in Nuremberg, where he worked briefly from 1519 to 1520. Art historians tend to view Schwarz as the artisan responsible for the “breakthrough” of the portrait medal in southern Germany. This breakthrough is due primarily to Schwarz’s clientele, the most prominent among them being members of the Imperial Diet at Augsburg,⁹ which is also ironic in that Schwarz had no training in metalwork, and likely collaborated with the goldsmith Krug while at Nuremberg.¹⁰ Yet Dürer had specifically requested that Schwarz carry out the casting of the 1520 medal. An excerpt from Dürer’s journal documenting his visit to the Low Countries dated to September 1520 alludes to this request.¹¹

The original drawing for the 1520 medal is lost. While fewer portrait medals by Schwarz’s hand survive, over 130 of his sketches for those medals do. One could therefore assume that Schwarz made the original drawing himself.¹² A pearwood model by Schwarz, likely based on this drawing, for the 1520 medal survives (Figure 4). Thus, one could argue that Dürer had no technical influence on the appearance of the medal, and, consequently, place him more securely in the role of patron. One can view Dürer’s patronage, then, as an attempt to acquire the trappings of nobility.

The 1527 medal was executed by Matthes Gebel, a silversmith, goldsmith, and sculptor. He probably came from Wiener Neustadt near Vienna and acquired citizenship in Nuremberg in 1523. Gebel was prolific, having produced over 350 objects in his workshop. He was also popular and had carried out commissions for elite patrons, including members of the Imperial Diets at Speyer in 1529 and at Augsburg.¹³ A letter from Andreas Rüttel to Willibald Pirck-

heimer dated to 1530 mentions this particular medal as the work of Gebel.¹⁴

The fact that correspondence between prominent figures such as Rüttel and Pirckheimer mentions the production and authorship of portrait medals is significant for both the medium and for humanist culture in southern Germany. Humanist circles both in Germany and Italy strove for autonomy and exclusivity, which would occasionally manifest itself in writing. The writing of national histories was common in Europe by the fifteenth century, and the translation of Roman histories, such as Julius Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* and Tacitus’ *Germania* into German, was common by the turn of the sixteenth century. Christine Johnson has argued that numerous German translations of Tacitus’ *Germania* contain embellishments that heighten the social or intellectual status of northern Europeans. Larry Silver has remarked on humanist Conrad Celtis’ efforts to establish German cultural autonomy at the turn of the sixteenth century through his *Germania generalis*, which first appeared in 1500, and noted the way in which Dürer’s *Self-Portrait*, also of 1500, implies a new sense of nationalistic confidence.¹⁵

Dürer strove for German cultural autonomy in his writing as well, and this is evident in both his written correspondence to Willibald Pirckheimer and what would eventually become the introduction to his posthumously-published *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (“Four Books of Human Proportion”). In the written correspondence, Dürer alluded to the status of the Venetian artist and compared it to that of the German artisan, favoring the former. This admiration for the heightened status of the Venetian artist is evident in Dürer’s writing: “This art of painting is made for the eyes, for the sight is the noblest sense of man. Some I know will be curious about these matters because they have neither seen nor heard of such things in our land before.”¹⁶ In the

⁹ Smith, *German Sculpture*, 399; Peter Volz and Hans Christopher Jokisch, *Emblems of Eminence: German Renaissance Portrait Medals, the Age of Albrecht Dürer* (Munich: Hirmer, 2008), 29; *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg* (see note 5), 474.

¹⁰ Smith, “Creative Moment,” 181, cites *Des Johann Neudörfer Schreib- und Rechenmeisters zu Nürnberg Nachrichten von Künstler und Werkleuten daselbst aus dem Jahre 1547 nebst der Fortsetzung des Andreas Gulden*, ed. Georg W.K. Lochner (Vienna, 1875), 124-125; and Volz and Jokisch, *Emblems of Eminence*, 29.

¹¹ A reproduction of Dürer’s journal appears in *Dürer schriftlicher Nachlass*, ed. Hans Rupprich (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956), 1:157. The excerpt reads: “Jch hab 2 gulden an gold dem Hans Schwarzen für mein angesicht beÿ den Fockrischen von Antorff in einem brief geng Augspurg geschickt.” See also Hermann Maué, “Hans Schwarz, Medal of Albrecht Dürer,” in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg* (see note 5), 417.

¹² *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg*, 474; Giulia Bartrum, *Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy: The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist* (London: British Museum, 2002), 84.

¹³ Volz and Jokisch, *Emblems of Eminence*, 129; *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg*, 473.

¹⁴ A reproduction of the letter appears in *Dürer schriftlicher Nachlass*, 3:458-9. The excerpt reads: “...ut illa effigies etiam numo aereo exprimatur, quemadmodum Alberti Dureri, laudatissimae memoriae hominis, imago exculpta est; id autem commodissima fieri poterit, si tu Matheum illum statuarium, qui Durerium fecit, ad te vocaveris ac rem diligenter ei, ut soles, demandaveris.” See also Hermann Maué, “Matthes Gebel, Medal of Albrecht Dürer,” in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg* (see note 5), 420.

¹⁵ Ingrid D. Rowland addresses written polemics of Humanists in Germany toward those in Italy in the late fifteenth century in “Revenge of the Regensburg Humanists, 1493,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 2 (1994): 307-322. Also see Christine R. Johnson, “Creating a Usable Past: Vernacular Roman Histories in Renaissance Germany,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40, no. 4 (2009): 1076, 1086; Larry Silver, “Germanic Patriotism in the Age of Dürer,” in *Dürer and His Culture*, ed. Dagmar Eichberger and Charles Zika (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 40-1, 49. Silver also cites Dieter Wuttke, “Dürer und Celtis. Von der Bedeutung des Jahres 1500 für den deutschen Humanismus: Jahrhundertfeier als symbolische Form,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 73-129.

¹⁶ Albrecht Dürer, “Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion,” in *A Documentary History of Art*, ed. Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 312.

same document, Dürer also discussed how painters residing in the “German nation” were “in need of instruction.”¹⁷ These writings suggest that Dürer saw his craft as one whose practitioners might use as a means of acquiring elevated status, or at least use as an agent of social mobility.

Patrons used *Schaumünzen* as agents of social mobility by acquiring and displaying them, and by spreading and enhancing the reputations of the portrait subject — whether it was their own portrait or portraits of others. As handheld objects, they would have functioned in a manner similar to prints. Like portrait medals, prints were portable and meant, in many instances, to be held close to the face and scrutinized. The accumulation of prints for use in initiating conversation between members of learned circles, such as Dürer’s engraved portrait of Willibald Pirckheimer from 1524 (Figure 5), was common at this time. We know that Hartmann Schedel, the author of the *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1493, collected prints in order to decorate the books in his library. Prints were sought after by numerous consumers, and not necessarily for their primary functions.¹⁸

The movement of *Schaumünzen* among nobles and intellectuals throughout southern Germany took place through a complex social exchange. Like prints, Schwarz’s medals passed between members of Nuremberg society.¹⁹ A bronze medal from about 1520 by Peter Vischer the Younger of Johannes Stabius, an Austrian historian and mathematician, illustrates this social exchange. We know that Stabius came into contact with Emperor Maximilian I in Vienna in 1497 and accompanied him to Nuremberg in 1512. It was at Nuremberg that Stabius collaborated with Albrecht Dürer on the design of the Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I. Hermann Maué has suggested that Vischer’s portrait medal of Stabius is perhaps based on a design by Dürer.²⁰ Whether the design of Vischer’s medal was specified by Stabius — who sought to emulate the design in his own portrait — or by Vischer — who would have had several design templates from which to work — is unknown. Nevertheless, the collaboration between Dürer and Stabius — and Dürer’s possible design influence on Stabius (or Vischer) — reflects a social exchange between the two men.

One might even say that the medal reflects a social relationship between Dürer and Stabius. Dürer’s social

relationships with German humanists were also many and are well documented. In his *Libellus de laudibus Germaniae* of 1508, Christoph Scheurl described Dürer as “cheerful, friendly, pleasant, and imbued with a high sense of propriety, for which he is greatly admired by all esteemed citizens.”²¹ In the foreword to his 1532 edition of the *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, Joachim Camerarius wrote of Dürer: “His manner of conversation was so pleasant and appealing, that his listeners regretted more than anything else his ceasing to speak.”²² The 1520 medal contains an inscription that reads similarly to Dürer’s accolades: ALBERTVS.DVRERVS. NORICVS.PIC.OM (“Albrecht Dürer, Nuremberg painter, of all these the greatest”).

Writings such as those by Scheurl and Camerarius suggest to the reader a humanist culture preoccupied with social status. Jacques Revel has framed the earliest decades of the sixteenth century as a time of tremendous effort to control “social intercourse” and a preoccupation with self-representation. One can therefore interpret objects such as the portrait medals as a collective index of civility.²³ Further, Scheurl and Camerarius’s descriptions of Dürer suggest the self-representation and demeanor of a courtier as Baldesar Castiglione describes one in his *Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528. Castiglione’s book contains a speech attributed to Gaspare Pallavicino, which implies the accessibility of noble culture: “I do not believe that nobility of birth is necessary for the courtier...we should all be of the same character, since we all had the same beginning; nor would anyone be more noble than another.”²⁴

By examining individual workshop practices, humanistic aspirations, and the social structure of this time and place, one arrives at a better understanding of the relationship between Nuremberg medalists and their patrons — and that relationship’s bearing on the social mobility of a Nuremberger such as Dürer — at the start of the sixteenth century. The absence of guilds, the cultivation of humanist and intellectual circles, and the new social functions attributed to media over the course of the previous century allowed Dürer to place himself in the role of patron rather than artisan, and in the role of noble rather than commoner.

University of Arizona

¹⁷ Ibid., 313.

¹⁸ See the early passages in Peter Parshall, “Art and the Theater of Knowledge: The Origins of Print Collecting in Northern Europe,” *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin* 2, no. 3 (1994): 7-9.

¹⁹ Volz and Jokisch, *Emblems of Eminence*, 44.

²⁰ Hermann Maué, “Workshop of Peter Vischer the Younger, Medal of Johannes Stabius,” in *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg* (see note 5), 406.

²¹ Christoph Scheurl, *Libellus de laudibus Germaniae* (1508). The excerpt is reproduced in Peter Strieder, *Albrecht Dürer*, trans. Nancy M. Gordon and Walter L. Strauss (New York: Alaris, 1989), 366.

²² Joachim Camerarius’ foreword to *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion*, reproduced in Strieder, *Albrecht Dürer*, 366.

²³ Revel, “Uses of Civility,” 167, 182-4.

²⁴ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 55.



Figure 1. Hans Schwarz, *Portrait Medal of Albrecht Dürer*, 1520, bronze, 2 3/16 inches diameter. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, MED 9401.

Figure 4. Hans Schwarz, *Model for Portrait Medal of Albrecht Dürer*, 1520, pearwood, 2 3/10 inches diameter. Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig.



Figure 5. Albrecht Dürer, *Portrait of Willibald Pirckheimer*, 1524, engraving, 7 1/2 x 4 13/16 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund 19.73.119.