HIDDEN FACES: ART IN THE ARTIST’S MIND

SIMON ABRAHAMS

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The July 2007 advertisement in *The Art Newspaper* revealed double-images in an engraving by Albrecht Dürer and a fourteenth-century altarpiece in Prague. Although on the surface each image presents an event in Christ's life as exterior reality, the hidden "face" implies otherwise. Ten years of independent research has revealed that the scene, as perceived by the artist, is on its deepest level a view inside the artist’s own mind. This is not obvious because both our senses and our common sense mislead us. However, once acknowledged, these faces and others to be shown here help place the magical appearance of Dante Alighieri’s profile in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in perspective. There are indeed far more of these metamorphic faces in Western art than art historians recognize, a problem that silently stymies the discipline. Until the prevalence of these double-images is widely recognized, art historians will continue to deny the presence of Dante in Michelangelo's work, leading to misinterpretation of not only his art but that of all those subsequent artists who have seen and followed his method.

This paper hopes to jump-start the process of revealing what has long been hidden: metamorphic faces in the work of varying artists across five centuries. Given space constraints, though, the focus here is on Dürer to demonstrate that he did not include a “face” on occasion but as a fundamental part of his compositional practice. Although no recent examples have yet been shown, in ads or online, the tradition continues to this day in the work of Lucian Freud and Philip Pearlstein, and probably others as well.

Most of these faces are so subtly suggested that on their own there is no way to demonstrate their existence convincingly. Only other painters were expected to perceive them. However, the ambiguity of them is important for both poetic and practical reasons. The practical ones, given that most great paintings in the Renaissance were commissioned and were subject to ecclesiastical approval, are obvious. The poetic ones will become apparent with time. However, the reason why many artists but no art scholar has recognized this important feature of art is probably related to the institutional framework within which academic art historians practice. There is a general bias against major discoveries that challenge the prevailing paradigm, particularly when proffered by those from outside the discipline. Moreover, when a brave art expert has revealed similar faces in the past as the quirk of an individual artist, as they do from time to time, they are by and large publicly denounced by their skeptical colleagues. Fear of such public derision, sometimes venomous, has no doubt kept many a scholar quiet.
In an attempt to avoid a similar fate, this article and the advertisements have focused on those images by Dürer and Michelangelo that are most obvious, hoping that the accumulation of undeniable double-images will inspire colleagues to re-think their position.
Dürer’s landscapes have always been admired for their accuracy and are considered the first true landscape drawings. Nevertheless, hidden faces have been seen in some because they are undeniable (figs. 1-2). Although the view of the hill-town above, for example, is based on a real scene that really does have a rock formation that looks like a face which can still be seen, Dürer still took great liberties in its portrayal changing, for instance, the direction of the face.\(^1\)

\(^1\) *The View of Arco*. See Felix Thürlemann “L’aquarelle de Dürer (fenedier klawsen): La double mimesis dans l’analyse picturale d’un lieu géographique”, *Revue de l’Art* 137, Sept. 2002, pp. 9-18. St. Jerome Penitent in the Wilderness (B.61) also includes faces as double-images in the rock and has been identified as such by three scholars. See
Elsewhere Jürgen and Michael Tietz identified the rock formation above St. Jerome’s head in *St. Jerome Penitent in the Wilderness* as a rocky repetition of a hidden “face” in an engraving by Schongauer. Thürlemann agreed. Though there is vague similarity, Dürer’s rock “face” has more resemblance to St. Jerome’s own face directly below the rock. Note, for instance, the shape of the nose, the eyebrows and the form of the long, bushy beard.

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Thürlemann did, however, recognize in another engraving by Dürer, *Penance of St. John Chrysostom* (figs. 5-7), that the left contour of the rocks is a repetition of the saint’s own face with long beard, way off in the distance. The saint who vowed to walk on all fours in penitence can be seen near the left margin. The tiny detail of his face is greatly enlarged at right (fig. 8). This kind of metamorphosis from one form to another is not only characteristic of the creative process but is, metaphorically speaking, the manner in which the mind (and vision) works. Our minds can only perceive an external object by connecting it to a form that is already there. Thus, the world in essence is perceived as a reflection of each individual’s own mind. This is an idea, that in one form or another, has been known since at least Plato and has been referred to by great artists and poets ever since. There are many other cryptic forms in this engraving, including Dürer’s eye, nose and phallus. Given lack of space here, they will have to be identified and their meaning explained elsewhere.
Most commonly mentioned in the literature on Dürer, and in the same vein, are the many faces he morphed out of the creases in some pillows, six of which he studied on a single sheet (fig. 9). In the detail at right one “face” looks up from the lower right corner of the left-hand pillow while, in the other, a larger “face” in profile faces leftwards with a hooked nose and protruding (fig. 10). There is, though, nothing novel about these semi-cryptic forms; they are merely an update of what artists had been doing with drapery for at least the previous century. The purpose of exaggerated drapery in Gothic images will be explained shortly.

3 Despite common agreement among scholars that the faces in Dürer’s pillows were intentional, a leading specialist recently suggested that he may have doubts about them. See Joseph Koerner, Dürer’s Hands (New York: The Council of the Frick Collection Lecture Series) 2006, p. 40
The remaining examples of hidden faces in this paper have, to the best of my knowledge, never been noted. The one above of a rock face (note the anthropomorphism of language itself) may even be based on Dürer’s own with its prominent nose and contrasting eyes (figs. 11-12). Although there is an “eyebrow” above the left-hand edge and a tuft of hair on top, which are unrelated to Dürer’s own, he too has an eyebrow that seems to grow upwards in defiance of facial convention. This drawing is not a study after nature, a mere copy of the exterior world; it is a work of art with meaning. This drawing conveys to the perceptive viewer that Dürer’s mind, like that of all great artists, is at one with nature and that divinity, most visible in the creative act of the artistic mind, is everywhere and in all things. Dürer tells us that his mind is as fertile as nature, capable of creation in even the most unpromising places, as the shrubs growing from the top of his head and the ledge of his eyebrow, suggest.

This view of the drawing is revolutionary. Dürer’s more than thirty landscape drawings are usually described as objective depictions of nature. They have been described as “aide-memoires”, visual Post-It notes, that he could use later in “public works.” This view holds
despite Dürer’s written warnings that only the intelligent can judge painting, or more restrictively on another occasion, that only good painters can. This ability, he wrote, “is denied to others, like a foreign language.”

He specifically referred to painting, without mention of the graphic arts, but his warnings should not be ignored for that reason alone. A meaning only understood by other artists is likely to be a function of visual perception, applicable in all media.

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Here, for instance, is an example in ink, The Death of Orpheus (fig. 13). Painters in the Renaissance were known as “mute poets” so Orpheus, the poet’s Ur-poet, would have been a natural subject for a painter’s mind. The proof is in the right contour where Dürer’s own profile can be seen, facing right from top to bottom (fig. 14). His main identifying mark is the hooked nose while the eye provides confirmation that the profile was intentional (fig. 15). It is formed by the circular start of the flowing scroll, the written message naturally emerging from the gateway to his mind: the painter as poet. This was how Michelangelo formed Dante’s giant profile in the Last Judgment many years later.
It has also never been noted before now that Christ himself in the *Last Judgment* is formed in a similar way from Michelangelo’s own profile, thus confirming the interpretation that Christ here is the symbol of the supreme artist and the divinity in Michelangelo’s own mind. His profile may be difficult for those unused to this form of visual perception to perceive which is why Dürer warned that not everyone can see painting. Nevertheless, a round chin and an indentation for the lips can quite easily be seen in Christ’s garment below his elbow (figs. 16-18). His arm is the nose with the contour of his forearm crossing the vertical line of the upper lip as the lower contour of nostrils do. The meandering line of the garment over Christ’s upper arm describes the artist’s broken nose while the oval ring of light and shade around Christ’s neck indicates his eye. With Christ’s head in his eye, Michelangelo’s underlying meaning is clear.\(^5\) Given the difficulty of composing a double-image such as this, its resemblance to Michelangelo himself is remarkable. I have only been able to

\(^5\) This discovery in 2007 was made long after Michelangelo’s Art Through Michelangelo’s Eyes was written (2005). Its presence is entirely in keeping with the prior interpretation.
find one sixteenth-century image of Michelangelo in profile (fig. 17) and, while the nose is less prominent there and the eye is further forward, its likeness can still be seen in Christ.

Those used to interpreting religious art in the Renaissance through the lens of Church doctrine and a patron’s wishes will probably resist the idea at first that these images are esoteric, reflections of inner divinity and the artist’s own spirituality. Christ is not an historical character to the great artists of the Renaissance but a symbol of the Perfect Man (and Artist) hidden inside each individual. In this month’s issue of The Art Newspaper the advertisement I ran showed an engraving by Dürer of Christ Entering Limbo in which a huge hidden head looks down into limbo from behind Christ. This is confirmed by the presence of a head in an engraving of the same subject by Schongauer where the artist’s identification with Christ is even clearer (fig. 19).

![Fig. 19 Schongauer, Christ in Limbo](image-url)
The rocks behind Christ form a large nose facing left with a mouth and chin below them formed out of the pathway and the leg of the devil (figs. 20-21). The artist’s eye is in the fabric of Christ’s garment by his thigh with a dark circular mark for the pupil. An artist’s identification with both Christ and the devil is unusually common; to great artists good and evil always seem to be two sides of the same coin. They often associate evil, as a symbol of chaos, with the creative process, the chaos of ideas in their mind. Christ and the good are identified with logic and reason, which in imposing order on the chaos, create great art. Michelangelo’s identification with Christ in the Last Judgment has many precedents.
Michelangelo used a different method, though, to form his self-portrait in St. Peter’s torso in the Last Judgment. Nevertheless, once again Dürer had used it before him, as will be shown now.

The shading above Christ’s navel in Dürer’s Lamentation is so strange that Dürer clearly had something else in mind beyond mimesis, accurate representation (fig. 22). This becomes clear when, with a change in perception, Christ’s abdomen is seen as Dürer’s prominent nose (figs. 23-25). The outer contour of his “face” is missing but the nose, its central feature, faces slightly to our left with Dürer’s mouth in the crease of Christ’s thigh. His eyes are, very appropriately, to either side of Christ’s (fertile) nipples, formed by Nicodemus’ hands holding the shroud. Nicodemus was thought to have been a sculptor present at Christ’s death and it was as Nicodemus that Michelangelo sculpted his last self-portrait (fig. 26). With the artist’s “face” in Christ’s torso, Christ’s head is in the artist’s mind.
The “face” just shown is “masculine” because it is formed from Christ’s torso and Nicodemus’ hands. Dürer, however, often indicates that his mind was androgynous. He does so here by including a second face linked to the first. Its eye, unclear in reproduction, is Mary Magdalene’s black sleeve with Christ’s left breast (doubling again) as the artist’s nose. The nostril is quite realistic (figs. 27-28). The Virgin, above the “eye”, is therefore wailing in the artist’s mind. The use of Mary Magdalene to represent the feminine side of the artist is quite common in sixteenth-century art. Every painter paints himself, after all, was how painters conceived of their practice and she sinned in “painting” her own face. Her cosmetic jar, which Titian even signed his name on, was thus a natural symbol for a pot of paint.

The manner in which Dürer here transforms anatomy into cryptic self-portraits using only parts of his face is thus very similar to how Michelangelo painted his self-portrait in St. Peter’s torso (figs. 29-30).  

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Two much-discussed drawings in Dürer’s graphic oeuvre are on either side of a single sheet of paper (figs. 31-32). From early in his career, one side shows what is thought to be the first introspective-looking self-portrait in Western art; the other is a scene of the Holy Family in a quite different style, more like that of Martin Schongauer than Dürer’s own. Although a leading scholar believes that the unusual position of Dürer’s hand was primarily intended to prop up his head during the long process of capturing his features in a mirror, the more likely – indeed, the real reason was to link his hand and eye, to symbolize how craft and intellect are combined in the mind of a visual poet. In this image Dürer conceives, thinking inwardly while observing outwardly. His cap and the rest of his figure are barely outlined because they were extraneous to the essence of his conception. The pose was used by subsequent artists in their own self-portraits and by Dürer himself in other figures. In those instances, when another figure adopts the pose, the gesture indicates that they represent the artist thinking, whatever the appearance of the figure suggests.

The image of the Holy Family on the other side has always been a conundrum, seemingly unrelated to the self-portrait in both style and subject matter. The problem might have been solved had more attention been given to the artist’s emphasis on the drapery which was clearly of more importance to the artist than the figures. Joseph Leo Koerner, the most highly regarded Dürer specialist in the English-speaking world today, wrote:

“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.”

Despite that recognition Koerner went on to ignore the many instances in Dürer’s oeuvre in which the drapery either overpowers the figures or seems to receive the lion’s share of Dürer’s attention. Three pages on he discusses the drawing below without any mention of the drapery where the same odd juxtaposition occurs (fig. 33).

![Fig. 33 Study Sheet with the Virgin and Child](image)

In 2006, thirteen years after the publication of his magisterial book, Koerner gave a speech in which he acknowledged that:

“To artists of Dürer’s generation, drapery was more than an embellishment. Comparable to the nude in High Renaissance painting, it was an entire visual register expressive of meanings, emotions, values, and skills.”

Still there was no suggestion of what the meaning is or how to read them. This short essay is no place to introduce a second argument that challenges the existing paradigm because it is first necessary to grasp the importance of these underlying faces. The purpose of elaborate drapery in Gothic and Renaissance images

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but it is not mere decoration or comparable to the later nude, as Koerner suggested. Elaborate drapery is a
depiction of the artist’s mind, often with his own features jumbled up: a nose here, a mouth there, an eye
over there. Occasionally an entire face can be made out. To give an idea of how important the meaning in
elaborate drapery is, consider Cubism. Despite the myriad of competing claims about the origins of
Cubism I am now certain, after ten years of study, that Cubism was a modern adaptation of Medieval and
Renaissance drapery. All great artists have always portrayed the interior of their own minds and in order to
do that in earlier times, without being recognized by the public, artists hid references to their own features
in drapery. The jumbling and distortion of features, though useful in keeping the secret, had a more
important reason. Mental images are jumbled in any event, as Surrealism showed us. In drapery
Renaissance artists portrayed their minds at the moment of creation while hiding the meaning and method
from their public. Let us look again at Dürer’s drawing.
The drapery under the Virgin is a metamorphosis of his own self-portrait on the other side which he would have been able to see reversed through the sheet (figs. 34-35). The drapery is not traced and its overall form is on a different scale to Dürer’s head but the forms of his head on one side are repeated in the drapery on the other. Despite additional creases, some suggestive of other “faces” too, Dürer’s face is replicated in the Virgin’s dress. A large crease, strangely resembling a “smile” near the lower edge, suggests the curve of his chin. The position of his fingertips is marked by the Virgin’s hand at the same angle and the line of her cloak, running diagonally down to the right, mirrors his own wrist and hand resting on his head. Out of his head then emerges his conception of the Virgin, Christ and Joseph. The figures are loosely drawn in Schongauer’s style, not because Dürer thought little of Schongauer’s figures, but because they are on a different level of reality, a thought in his head, a drawing in conception. His looser treatment of the figures conveys this. The Virgin’s womb and its product, Christ, not only symbolize the divinity and fertility of the artist’s mind but double as his figurative conception too. Joseph, the artisan and carpenter, rarely mentioned in the Bible doubles in Dürer’s conception as the artist himself admiring his “Virgin and Child.” Joseph appears as a self-representation of the artist in many other works by other great masters. As a further indication that the subject matter of this drawing is specifically about Dürer, the Virgin and Joseph are shaped like his initials: the Virgin as an “A” for Albrecht; Joseph as a slightly distorted “D” in mirror-image.
In the other drawing of the Virgin and Child, also in Schongauer’s style, Dürer’s hand on the sheet once again signals that the subject matter is self-referential and about art (fig. 36). This time the main face in the drapery appears to be in semi-profile looking upwards, with the Virgin again above and between his eyes (fig. 37).

Clearly the length of this paper does no justice to the significance of its subject. It is but a brief glance at the work of two important artists, shining a light on a little-known method. Knowledge of the method helps
reveal the meaning of their art which in turn changes the whole nature of aesthetic appreciation and our understanding of art in general – and what art is. Stay tuned. There is much more to come.

Fig. 37 Diagram of fig. 36