Betende Hande: Albrecht Durer's Self-Portrait as a Gothic Church

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Betende Hände: Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait

as a Gothic Church

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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March 2015

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ABSTRACT

Betende Hände: Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait as a Gothic Church

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In 1508 Albrecht Dürer, famed German printmaker and Nürnberg citizen, was commission by Jakob Heller of Frankfurt to paint a large altarpiece for a new church. The Heller Altarpiece was the second commission of the printer since his training in Venice, Italy (1504-1507) to paint like an Italian master. In order to prepare for such a commission, Dürer spent over a year creating drawings of black ink and white chalk on blue Venetian paper to serve as inspiration for the large painting. However once the painting was complete, the artist held onto these ink and chalk drawings as part of his personal collection of art. It is from this group of drawings, that the now iconic Betende Hände had its start. Today the image of two praying hands is appropriated for posters, pins, headstones, and even tattoos. The original context as a personal drawing kept by the artist, Albrecht Dürer, is completely divorced from its contemporary use.

It is thesis’s argument that Betende Hände was not only a very personal drawing for Dürer, but also a moment of self-fashioning, metaphorical experimentation, and abstract self-portraiture. Rather than simply representing prayer, Dürer’s Betende Hände captures his desire to become like unto Christ. The composition appears simple, but upon further inspection reveals a unique quality and form borrowed from the Gothic architecture of the German Hallenkirche. The fingers extend vertically like rib vaults from the palms only to touch at the points giving the hands an overall triangular composition. With this drawing, Dürer experimented with his metaphorical self beyond any other point in his career, and becomes like Christ. Only the form of Christ that Dürer choose after which to fashion himself was the architectural form of Christ or the Gothic Church. Therefore this thesis will trace the emergence of Dürer’s metaphor of body as architecture via the cultural environment of pre-Reformation Germany and popular religious texts that related the body of the worshipper to the church form. As a result, Betende Hände gives unique insight into the identity of a Catholic Dürer.

Keywords: Dürer, Gothic church, self-portraiture, pre-Reformation, Nürnberg, Betende Hände
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Introduction

“When the art is great, difficult and good, we must and we will return its great honor in praise of God.” –Albrecht Dürer

Tucked in between the pages of Albrecht Dürer’s personal drawings was a sketch of praying hands (Fig. 1). The brush drawing featured black ink and white chalk hands delicately shadowed on Venetian blue paper with a stark vertical orientation. Dürer sketched the fingers to arch up steeply, merely touching only at the apex of its triangular composition. The praying hands were an intensive study made for the foremost apostle in the center panel of the Heller Altarpiece in 1507-1508 (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, Dürer did not view the drawing as a study but as a complete work of art on its own merit. He preserved the study and kept the sketch in his own personal collection. The praying hands were originally part of a grouping of sketches on a large folio of Venetian paper. Dürer cut the drawing out from the large folio and kept the drawing independently as a personal work of art. After the death of the artist, the drawing was proclaimed a masterpiece. Eventually placed in the Albertina Museum, the drawing was entitled Betende Hände and quickly became the undisputed symbol of Christianity. Gentle yet arresting, Dürer’s perfect representation of worship became a universally recognizable image for prayer. Because of Dürer’s isolating and careful preserving of this drawing, Betende Hände has endured

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1 Hans Rupprich. Schriftlicher Nachlass (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1956), iii; Dann die Kunst ist gross, schwer und gut, und wir mügen und wollen sie mit grossen Ehren in das Lob Gottes wenden”.


4 Betende Hände’s provenance is not quite clear. It was in possession of the artist until his death. The sketch made its way to Vienna, because the work was first displayed in 1871 and was greatly admired by the public. Quickly the image was made famous by reproductions on postcards and medallions. For more information on Betende Hände’s public release see: “Dürer’s ‘Betende Hände’: Tausendmal Kopiert,” Focus, last modified November, 22, 2008, accessed January, 20, 2015, http://www.focus.de/kultur/kunst/duerers-betende-haende-tausendmal-kopiert_aid_350319.html.
beyond its primary purpose as a private sketch to become an icon. Today the image is replicated on mugs, t-shirts, and posters. Indeed *Betende Hände* has become a commercial emblem of prayer.

Dürer’s praying hands are not simply the visual “logo” of general Christianity; they have been completely removed from their original context. Rather than a generic image of prayer, Dürer’s sketch was intended to be highly personal and highly spiritual. Even as a simple study, *Betende Hände* was an intimate reminder of Dürer’s spiritual commitment to God. Dürer said his drawings expressed “the spiritual essence of an artist’s creative impulse.” This spirit in *Betende Hände* is what captivates viewers to this day. Yes, Dürer’s hands remain striking to all audiences because they universally represent prayer, but also because they are composed so uniquely. Structured architecturally, the hands steeple at the top and carefully part in the middle between the two smallest fingers. The composition meticulously mimics a German Gothic cathedral—specifically the Hallenkirche form. This paper will focus on *Betende Hände*’s architectural composition and discuss how it illustrates Dürer’s imitation of Gothic architecture in a representation of self within the context of a Catholic, pre-Reformation Nürnberg.

Dürer’s praying hands encompass his desire to architecturally elevate self to the level of Christ via the church. This paper will argue that in its original context, *Betende Hände* was a private sketch and was used as a devotional piece for Dürer. Therefore, *Betende Hände* is a corporal church in which Dürer shelters an awareness of his own spirituality and his personal

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6 Andersson and Silver, 16.

7 *Betende Hände*’s church-like composition caught the attention of scholar James Snyder. In his Northern Renaissance textbook, Snyder briefly discusses the sketch in terms of the hands “coming together like a church”. However, Snyder does not take the discussion of *Betende Hände* further. See James Snyder, Larry Silver, and Henry Luttikhuizen. *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2005), 323.
relationship to Christ. Since Erwin Panofsky’s seminal work on Dürer, every scholar has acknowledged that Dürer’s works have an extreme spiritual consciousness; however, they fail to fully explore this consciousness in relation to the experimental liberties Dürer takes with his self-portraiture. It has been recognized that Dürer created a metaphorical persona comparing himself to Christ in his self-portraiture. Even so, the metaphorical innovation in Dürer’s self-portraiture extends beyond the clear comparison between himself and Christ. Instead, the artist was much more experimental. *Betende Hände* is Albrecht Dürer’s investigation into the spiritual and metaphorical self, in which a simple preparatory sketch is a statement of self as a physical church.

This thesis will examine Dürer’s experimentation and innovation as he conflated his identity with the Gothic church. Already embedded within the Gothic church was a myriad of semiotic relations between corporality and spirituality. Metaphors between church body and Christ’s body, as well as church body in relation to its congregation were prominent ideologies during Dürer’s lifetime. These comparisons construct a highly symbolic atmosphere in which he could make a drawing of praying hands and have an alternate meaning beyond their function as merely a preliminary sketch. Additionally, religion in early sixteenth-century Germany was more open to personal interpretation due to the recent commingling of Gothic and Renaissance ideologies. The combination of Gothic mysticism and Renaissance innovation led Dürer to create multiple religious personas, one of which was himself as Christ. This rare mixture of social climate and Dürer’s metaphorical persona facilitated the ultimate statement of Dürer as church in *Betende Hände.*

The idea of Dürer as church is well established in art historical scholarship. The

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8 Many Scholars make the assertion that *Betende Hände* is a study of Dürer’s own hands, as they were private preparatory for the *Heller Altarpiece.* See Maslakowski, “Branding the Divine”.
celebrated artist and his works became a center of pilgrimage. After his death he was canonized, and his paintings became epicenters of pilgrimage beginning in the seventeenth century. Art historians such as Joseph Koerner, Larry Silver, and Jan Bialostocki have all traced the history of Dürer-centric pilgrimages focusing on his paintings as relics. In addition to being an object of pilgrimage, Dürer transformed himself into a worship-worthy being. Social art historian Jeffery Chipps Smith, along with other historians, studied Dürer’s proclivity to portray himself as Christ. Some question whether this was an indulgence for a large ego, but Dürer’s personal journal reveals this proclivity as a very personal and devotional endeavor. The contribution of this thesis is to explore how these two metaphors—Dürer as a center of pilgrimage and Dürer as Christ—are richer and more encompassing than has been previously suggested. They are two aspects of Dürer’s persona that feed into the fantastic metaphor present in Betende Hände. Dürer relates himself to the body of Christ, the body of Christ is then related to the body of church, and therefore Dürer relates himself to the architectural body of Christ: the church.

The argument will be made via a series of metaphors and assimilations made by Dürer in various works that will conclude in a full flowering of self as church in Betende Hände. Beginning with the most foundational metaphor, this paper will examine Dürer’s explicit and experimental self-fashioning as Christ—not by simply investigating Dürer portraying himself as Christ, but by investigating his distinctive use of hands in this portrayal. Following this investigation, there will be a comparison of Christ’s body and the physical church. Dürer actively participated with the metaphor of Christ as church through his print work. Next, the metaphors

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will peak at Dürer’s adaptation of his own body to the Gothic church. In support of this final metaphor, this paper will consider Dürer’s aesthetic preference for Gothic church architecture. This preference reveals Dürer’s intention not only to connect his body to Christ’s body, but Dürer’s body to Christ’s architectural body. Lastly, this paper will focus on Dürer within the narrative of the Gothic church. He actively participated in the Gothic narrative through his choice of medium for Betende Hände. By using paper, Dürer directly connected his corporal church to the practices and relics in German pilgrimages. Therefore, with this final section, the connection between Dürer and the Gothic church is brought to full fruition.

Dürer as Christ

One of the most prevalent topics in Dürer scholarship is Dürer’s use of himself as a metaphor for Christ. He spent his entire life crafting a Christ-like persona. In every image of Christ, Dürer approached the subject very empathetically, as seen in images like The Head of Christ. Representations of Christ become an emotional conduit for Dürer to connect personally to the subject matter. However, Dürer did not stop with projecting Christ onto himself through the creation of emotionally charged images of Christ. Instead beginning in the 1490’s Dürer physically imitated Christ in his own self-portraiture, not subtly but very audaciously. What is not as prevalent in the scholarly conversation is the specific use of hands in connection to Christ. In both his Self-Portrait of 1491 and his Munich Self-Portrait, Dürer replicates the compositional placement and gestures of hands associated with Christ. It is through hands as a physical and corporal symbol of Christ that Dürer’s Betende Hände becomes a metaphorical portrait of Dürer.

12 See this publication on Dürer from scholars in Germany: Thomas Eser and Daniel Hess, Frühe Dürer (Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum Nürnberg, 2012). The text includes the present theory applied to the artist, and in particular the development of Dürer’s persona. The prevalent topic is Dürer in relation to Christ and the Catholic Church. The theory applied includes both Self-Fashioning and Collective Memory in Nürnberg.
as Christ.

To begin with, it is well understood by historians that Dürer, as a Renaissance artist, created very expressive and personal images of Christ. Chipps Smith discusses the artist’s personal connection to Christ with Dürer’s painting of *The Head of Christ* (Fig. 3). The image is disturbingly intimate. In this simple charcoal sketch, Dürer places the viewer immediately below the dying Christ. As the viewer peers up, Christ’s neck cranes painfully back and continues the steep ascending composition. Set at this invasive angle, the features of Christ’s face are stretched and they brutally display his suffering. This view of Christ dying is not beautiful, but haunting and intimate. Chipps Smith says this intimacy with Christ is a result of Dürer’s constant focus on Catholic subject matter at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Consequently, Dürer completes his images of Christ with compelling realism and emotion, which makes the subject matter more personal. Regarding *The Head of Christ* Chipps Smith remarks “this is not the first or the last time that he [Dürer] identifies himself with Christ for artistic, devotional or physical reasons.” In fact, Dürer’s self-portraits display the artist identifying himself as Christ from a very young age into the apex of his career. While his self-portraits preserve the artist, they also relate self to Christ in a deeply personal manner.

When Dürer depicts self, he extends traditional empathy with Christ to direct imitation of Christ. His self-portraiture was almost always both religious and idiosyncratic, and his cultural environment supported this amalgamation of self and Christ. In the North, and particularly in Dürer’s Nürnberg, religion was personal. Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitatio Christi* was a popular text in Germany around 1500. The goal of the *Imitatio Christi* was to align oneself with God through

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13 Smith, 185.
14 Ibid.
imitating Christ. Dürer was drawn to this theological teaching and applied it via his self-portraiture. In doing so, Dürer explicitly sought to imitate Christ. This is portrayed through his imitation of the hand gestures associated with Christ iconography. Beginning with his *Self-Portrait of 1491* (Fig. 4), Dürer blatantly mimics the traditional imagery of “Ecce Homo” (Fig. 5). Dürer purposely places his hand in the composition, holding his head at a tilt just as Christ sorrowfully lays his head in his hand. This image, along with many others, displays a pattern that the artist will use the rest of his career, equating the image of Christ to his own body, spirit, and identity.

Continuing in this pattern, Dürer’s *Self-portrait of 1500*, or Munich Portrait, is his most bold embodiment of the image of Christ (Fig. 6). The arrangement of the frontal, bust-length Dürer with his hand brought up in a slightly parted “Salvator Mundi” gesture is a clearly calculated imitation of Christ. In fact, Dürer’s unfinished panel painting entitled *Salvator Mundi* is the exact form of Christ that Dürer uses for his own self-portrait (Fig. 7). In the *Salvator Mundi*, Christ’s hair is worn long and curled to his shoulders with blond facial hair. Dürer’s styling is similar in the Munich Portrait. He created this image of himself to fit the persona of the faithful, and it is a visual commitment of the artist to imitate the nature of Christ. The image


16 Alistair Smith, *Essays on Dürer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), 76. Albrecht Dürer will go on to portray himself as a “Man of Sorrows” type in 1522 continuing the religiosity of the artist, which Smith ties to a personification of his confession and suggests even that as Dürer continues to draw himself, the act of drawing becomes something akin to prayer for the artist. This mimicking of Christ by Dürer was made a precedent by the *Imitatio Christi*, which taught that good Christian’s grew in greater spirituality by imitating Christ by any means possible. The most important theology taught in the *Imitatio Christi* was creating a dialogue with Christ via shedding oneself of any earthly connection. Dürer would have unquestionably been very aware of the *Imitatio Christi*, as it was the most widely printed book from 1427-1650 next to the Bible. See: Thomas and William C. Creasy, *The Imitation of Christ: A New Reading of the 1441 Latin Autograph Manuscript* (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2007).
also functions as a representation of Dürer’s person, his spirituality, and his ideal self.\textsuperscript{17} The rich fabrics and furs in which Dürer drapes himself are a sumptuous display of power and piety. He strikes a balance in self-fashioning in which outward beauty reflects an inward goodness.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, as Dürer faces the viewer with his hands gesturing Christ’s saving blessing, Dürer’s self-portrait is a Foucaultian transformation of self—the image functions as a symbol and a ritual in the utmost theatricality.\textsuperscript{19} Dürer is not showing himself as an artist with his hands holding a tool of his vocation, but rather his hand participates in the ritual of blessing, and quite deliberately he turns that blessing inward, towards himself.

Dürer’s hands are essential to understanding his \textit{Self-portrait of 1491} and his \textit{Self-portrait of 1500}. The hands function not only for the purpose of a gesture in the images, but also form a sign of his spirituality and piety. The hand itself is the point in the composition where Dürer directly connected the subject matter, himself, to Christ. Dürer had begun associating Christ with hands in his private studies as early as the 1490s. On sketch paper, Dürer copied hand studies over and over again, perfecting their expressive gestures. In addition to practicing the emotive quality of hands in his sketches, Dürer also directly compared Christ to hands. In \textit{Study Sheet with the Virgin and Child} (Fig. 8), the artist placed Christ and Mary beneath a separate study of a hand. The hand is enlarged in scale so that it matches the size of the Virgin study, which emphasizes the artist’s interest in the holy as connected with the hand. They share both scale and physical proximity. Therefore, there is no hierarchy of subject matter; one is not more laden with spiritual importance than the other. In Dürer’s mind, the study of the Virgin and Child is

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 234.
comparable in significance to the study of a hand.

German art scholar Lola Sirptzoff elaborates on the connection between religion and hands, discussing the use of hands as a unique devotional language in German Renaissance painting.\(^{20}\) She makes the argument that only Germans employ hands in their compositions to create expressive transformations. One example Sirptzoff gives of Dürer’s use of hands is in the image of *Christ Among the Doctors* of 1506 (Fig. 9). Here Christ’s hands are delicately and gracefully posed as focal points to his divinity. Christ’s fingers softly touch as he ticks away his teachings in the *Digitis Computans*. In comparison, the doctors’ hands stand as a stark contrast to Christ’s—the doctors’ hands are caricatured, mangled, and greedily clasping the books they hold up against Christ as he teaches. They are the central focus that pulls the viewer in, and didactically teaches what the hands of the faithful look like, contrasted with the hands of the unfaithful. Hands are therefore how Dürer visually links the subject matter to Christ.

Even when an image is completely distilled to only hands, it still links Dürer to Christ. In *Betende Hände* the hands rely on symbolic depth beyond their seeming simplicity to connect Dürer to Christ. Dürer’s hands in the composition are intentional.\(^{21}\) They are painstakingly detailed and carefully composed so that the hands appear thoughtful, pious, and pensive. They are devotionally postured in prayer, and they thoughtfully curve up and only touch at the tips. The hands pensively hold that gesture of prayer while still maintaining a pointed-arch entry into the hollow of the cupped palms. This simple yet careful composition signifies to the sixteenth-century German viewer that the hands are no ordinary hands. They embody the visual character of the devout Christian, or even Christ himself. In this manner, *Betende Hände* is a piece laden

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\(^{21}\) Foucault, 164.
with symbolism—the symbolism of Dürer imitating Christ.

As previous scholarship has demonstrated, Dürer was an artist who very consciously connected himself to Christ. Yet it is not only that Dürer emotionally connected with his images of Christ, he also physically imitated Christ in his self-portraits. Furthermore, Dürer explicitly connected with Christ through iconography associated with hands. This is evident in his self-portraiture, his religious paintings, and his private studies. Dürer’s identity in *Betende Hände* is that of Christ. However, Dürer not only images himself as Christ but more specifically as the architectural embodiment of Christ. Just as Dürer connected himself to Christ’s imagery he also connected himself to the corporal imagery of Christ as church.

Christ as Church

Important to an understanding of Dürer’s identification with the physical church is a discussion of the traditional notion of Christ as the church. As already discussed, Dürer’s choice of hands as the subject in *Betende Hände* is directly related to Christ. Nevertheless, the composition of *Betende Hände* is also key because it directly mimics the architecture of a Gothic church. The vertically thrusting hands stand utterly perpendicular to the horizontal edge of the Venetian blue paper. The fingers in the image act like buttresses, supporting the structure and displacing the weight of the flesh into the palms of the hands. This architectural composition connotes an association between himself and Christ, but it also references Christ as the church. This metaphor in *Betende Hände* is supported by contemporary liturgical texts such as the *Minor Mundus*, which taught that Christ’s body was the literal blueprint for the cathedral.22 In addition, Dürer’s

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print work supports this connection and it expands on the iconography of Christ as a corporal church.

The metaphor between Christ’s body and the church relates to the concept of the microcosm. Plato and Aristotle looked to the corporeal body as the starting point to prescribe meaning on all material reality.23 These philosophers laid out how the body is the standard for all other realities—material and conceptual. The paradigm influenced western culture from pagan antiquity into Christian European tradition and on through the eighteenth century.24 The microcosm as a philosophical framework for architecture functioned beyond Classicism because it had fluidity and universality. If architecture was to have greater meaning, relating the stone to flesh was the best way to humanize the building. Therefore, when Christianity linked worshippers to their religious architecture, it did so through relating the stone body to the human body. This is the foundational teaching of the microcosm—or, in Christian terminology, the pagan word “microcosm” was exchanged for the Christian term Minor Mundus.

Moreover, historian Vesely Dalibor explains the relationship between body and architecture by stating that architecture structures human thought in religious contemplation, just like the body structures the human.25 Architecture is the mediator and the facilitator for human contemplation. In Minor Mundus, each element of a structure is encompassed in the formula of the body. Renaissance theorists like Alberti compared the columns, beams, and arches to bones

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23 Smith, 55. The Classical idea of the microcosm is contemporary to Dürer in his lifetime. Dürer first encounters Classical text in the workshop of Wolgemut. Wolgemut did begin a project for the Nürnberg Chronicle that involved creating and compiling prints for Classical texts. However, Dürer studies these texts more fully through the years of friendship and tutelage from neighbor and Nürnberg Humanist, Willibad Pirckheimer.
24 Dalibor, 31.
25 Ibid, 32.
and ligaments, and the walls to flesh. Without the human body to compare to the stone body, the architecture lacks intelligence and purpose. The human figure completes the purpose of architecture.

In the context of Christian architecture, Christ’s body was seen as the model for the structure of the church. A more specific example of Christ as the church is seen in Pietro Cataneo’s Vitruvian Man print from 1554 (Fig. 10). In this image, the theology of Minor Mundus made the body of Christ into a divine, architectural blueprint. The cross-plan cathedral traced the body of Christ laid out horizontally on the cross. The doors of the cathedral were compared to the pierced wounds on Christ’s hands, thus symbolizing his passion and the point where the worshipper entered his body. The rib vaulting was translated into the ribs of Christ, which encompassed the worshiper in his sacred body.

For the Late Gothic architect, Christ’s body was the ideal model. As the theme for the church, his body became a symbolic language that was reinforced by both structure and ceremony. In this way, just as the Eucharist transubstantiates from wafer into flesh, the flesh of Christ was translated into the stone of the church. Architectural semiotician Maurice Dilasser contextualized Christ’s body as the church in the Gothic mind by stating: “Christ’s body as the temple for God is ultimately what the physical church represents. Because Christ’s body on the cross was killed only to rise again incarnate, he is the physical temple of God”.

For Dürer, there was no separation between the physical stone and the metaphorical flesh.

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27 Ibid, 56.
30 Ibid, 3.
A clear example of this is found in Dürer’s prints. In the time immediately following his sketch of *Betende Hände* in 1508, Dürer again experimented with *Minor Mundus* in his image of St. Gregory’s Mass from 1511 (Fig. 11). In this print, Dürer created a heavenly and mystical space. He placed St. Gregory and his attendants not facing a stone sanctuary, but facing the body of Christ alone whilst being flanked by clouds. In Dürer’s *Mass of Saint Gregory*, Christ is the church, the sanctuary, and the Eucharist. The hagiography and teachings of St. Gregory himself inspired the artist to represent Christ as the physical church in this print.

The teachings and the vision of St. Gregory (Pope Gregory I) further the concept of *Minor Mundus* in declaring that Christ’s body is the church. St. Gregory taught that human bodies are like unto a temple: their upright position calls them to the heavens, in contrast to animals. The body laid down is the cruciform church, with a corresponding posture. The church acts in a manner similar to man. It blesses, exorcizes, and anoints. The miraculous vision of St. Gregory gave the faithful access to the body of Christ during the performance of the Eucharist. In his vision during the mass, St. Gregory was no longer placed within church architecture, but was merely juxtaposed to the body of Christ. St. Gregory’s message was to see beyond the physical church and its rituals to the actual body of Christ.

Correspondingly, Albrecht Dürer represented the mass of St. Gregory by having the body of Christ dominate the composition and replace the architecture. Rather than creating a visible, physical church, Dürer creates a mystical vision and metaphorical state. His replacement of the architecture of the church with the body of Christ is unprecedented. Traditional images of St. Gregory’s Mass were significantly different from Dürer’s conception. For example, Israel Van

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31 Ibid.
Meckenem’s 1490 print is a quintessential example of the typical iconography (Fig. 12). In his image, St. Gregory and some attendants are shown kneeling before a church altar inside the apse of a church, and Christ’s body appears in the center of the composition above the altar. Surrounding Christ are the Arma Christi, which symbolize his passion and give the viewer the opportunity to meditate on the tools of Christ’s sacrifice while within the church. Dürer’s image rejects this common model in multiple ways, but the most surprising is his complete elimination of the architecture. The body of Christ has become the church; for Dürer there is no difference between flesh and stone.

Therefore, both the religious context of the era and Dürer’s art solidified the symbolic connection between Christ’s body and the Gothic church. For generations, Christian theology had developed the concept of Christ as a blueprint for the church. However, Albrecht Dürer expanded this further in his print of St. Gregory’s Mass by completely integrating Christ’s flesh into the church’s stone. Dürer’s break with traditional iconography strengthens the metaphor of Christ as church, and it also informs the complicated metaphor in Betende Hände. Dürer’s interest in the metaphor of Christ as church also importantly led to a related notion of himself as church.

Dürer and the Church

For Dürer, the metaphor of Christ as church inspired a link in his mind between himself and the physical church. This concept was further strengthened by the writings of popular theologians. It will be shown that writings by Augustine of Hippo and Durandus of Saint Pourçain, for example, created immediacy between the human body and the church. This was accomplished through a likening of human prayers and bodies to the physicality of the architecture. In addition the
Devotio Moderna, or the Modern Devotion, taught that personal devotion was built by creating a persona of public piety during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Dürer made his spiritual persona public by furnishing prominent new churches in his community. Therefore the relationship between Albrecht Dürer and the Gothic church was both personal and public. In his sketches he embodied the church privately, but publically he built himself a civic persona by furnishing churches in his community. With this combination of personal and public personas, Dürer increasingly envisioned himself as a Gothic church.

Beginning with the theological foundation established as early as the fourth century, theologian Augustine taught that the cathedral symbolized a sacred tabernacle made flesh. As such, the flesh tabernacle should function organically in a righteous community and, like an organism, churches should continue to grow. Augustine’s ideas remained pervasive in late Gothic Germany. The church remained the central focus for all social activity and civic identity. In fact, at the opening of the sixteenth century, Nürnberg continued to support Augustine’s doctrine by building new churches. The Gothic cathedral was still an indispensable part of the culture. Political unrest in Germany at the end of the fifteenth century triggered a great anxiety within Germans to pilgrimage. Sites like the Shrine of the Holy Blood in Wilsnack or Niklashausen received abundant patronage from German pilgrims with amplified religious fervor. The influx of pilgrimage sparked the building of more churches. Wealthy citizens amply participated in the building of new churches. The church became a symbol of stability and positive growth. Dürer reflects Nürnberg’s cultural anxiety and heightened

34 Spitz, 7.
36 Ibid, 36.
religiosity in his own church-like composition of *Betende Hände*. The architectural hands provided stability for the artist within his private church.

In addition to advocating the building of churches, Augustine’s writings maintained that the church only functioned so long as prayer supported it. Encouraging the prayers of the worshipper strengthened the architectural stone body of the church. According to Augustine, just like a pier or buttress supports and maintains height, so do the prayers of the faithful support the church. Thus with the growth of prayer in churches and the growth of faith, the church is supported. Again Dürer’s *Betende Hände* then ties directly into the idea of supporting the church through the prayers of the faithful. The drawing is a dual image of prayer and the church. Dürer encapsulates both the action of prayer and the likeness of church as they support one another.

In another example of prayer structuring the church, the writer and philosopher Durandus discussed the architecture of the church as having a dual materiality. In other words, the church is both built by the hands of men with physical stone, but it is also built by the prayers of the faithful. It is by prayer that the church is built with “living stone.” Thus the church is built to be a living entity. The hands of the faithful first build the material structure, and then the hands of the faithful clasp in worship to build the immaterial structure. Dürer’s hands are no exception to this metaphor of building a living church. When looking at the formal composition of *Betende Hände*, the fingers are carefully composed in a manner not to crush the fingers down into a

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37 Dürer’s journal in which he wrote about his mother’s pleading for Dürer to faithfully attend church. Barbara Dürer lived with the artist after his return to Nürnberg and following the death of his father in 1504. Being a particularly zealous Catholic woman, the artist’s mother supplicated Dürer to turn more often to the church. Dürer recorded in the family journal that during this time of 1508, “she always upbraided me well if I did not do right, and she was ever in great anxiety about my sins and those of my brother”. Accordingly, the artist’s home environment fed into his transition into a more pensive and reposed mood, and also into a greater anxiety to connect to God.


horizontal, entangled compactness; rather, they are delicately and thoughtfully pressed at the tips with the smallest fingers bent out slightly like a church portal. The index fingers then align to create a steeple form allowing the individual fingers to fan down like ribbed vaulting. The skeletal vault thrusts the height of the architectural hands upward. Betende Hände was Dürer’s living stone.

In addition to Dürer’s living church, one of the most prominent theological texts, the Devotio Moderna, supported Dürer’s architectural building of himself in Betende Hände.\textsuperscript{40} Geert Groote’s text Devotio Moderna from the late fourteenth century, called for public display of religion in order to develop “exterior” spirituality.\textsuperscript{41} The exterior spirituality was a physical representation of one’s fervent personal piety. Part of a display of exterior spirituality could even include building churches. After all, the most visible form of devotion to God was the Gothic church. The writings of Groote trickled down from the North into the lowlands and eventually to the south, where Groote’s focus on interior devotion through external works of piety translated into an architectural zeal in southern Germany. Architecture was a very public model for Dürer to follow in creating a distinguishable devotion.

Moreover the theology of the Devotio Moderna taught one to expand interior devotion of God through the admiring of exterior forms. Groote taught, “Lack of interior vision, that is, of God … causes you to go outside your interior… and you spend your time admiring the exterior

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\textsuperscript{40} Geert Groote (or de Groote) created the Devotio Moderna as a way to reform devotion in monastic life. Much supported by ideas of the Imatatio Christi, the theology behind Modern Devotion aimed to create a personal relationship with God through the physical displays of love towards him. In addition to displays of love, the Devotio Moderna taught the importance of meditation. The meditation of physical objects, like relics, crosses, prayer beads, and the church itself elevated personal devotion to God. One can see how meditation of physical objects and displays of affection lead to the combination of creating new physical objects for meditation and devotion. For a more detailed description of Groote’s theology please see: Gordon S. Wakefield, The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality (1983); Jill Rait, ‘Devotio Moderna’, in Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (London: SCM, 1989).Translated by John H. Van Engen in Devotio Moderna Basic Writings. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).
\textsuperscript{41} Dilasser, 3.
\end{flushright}
forms”. Although Dürer did not think of himself as lacking interior vision, Dürer would not resist the opportunity to “spend time admiring the exterior forms” so that he could gain an even more profound vision of God. Groote’s teachings translated into Dürer preforming acts of public piety by adding to exterior forms like the church for others to admire. This included the building of churches in his community by furnishing art. Specifically, within the year of Betende Hände’s creation of 1508, Dürer furnished both the Zwolfbruderhaus chapel and the Dominikanerkloster. Through his participation in church construction, Dürer began his path of external devotion, which set the foundation for his persona as church.

In 1508, Dürer’s close friend Mattheus Landauer commissioned The Landauer Altarpiece (Fig. 13) for his Zwolfbrüderhaus in Nürnberg. Dürer was an essential participant in the building of Landauer’s Zwolfbrüderhaus, as he created an entire interior aesthetic based on his altarpiece. Dürer designed not only the altarpiece for the interior, but also the stained glass windows and the chapel sanctuary. Although Dürer was not the architect of the church, he participated in its creation, making an exterior persona of interior piety by doing so.

In that same year, Dürer furnished another altarpiece for a new church in Frankfurt. This church was the Dominikanerkloster and the altarpiece was the Heller Altarpiece commissioned by Jacob Heller. The Heller Altarpiece was the large commission for which Dürer made his study of Betende Hände for the foremost apostle in the right corner of the painting. Dürer used this apostle as the didactic foundation for the altarpiece. The apostle with his praying hands

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42 Railt, 180.
43 Smith, 194.
44 Erwin Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 125. At the same time that Dürer is working on The Heller Altarpiece, he is commissioned to create an altarpiece and stained glass designs for his nuremburg friends Mattheus Landauer and Erasmus Schiltkrot (the builders of a church in Nuremberg) building a chapel for a community in Vienna of Nuremberg merchants. It is through Panofsky’s research that we see Dürer’s involvement in church building surpasses altarpieces, and Dürer is an actual integral part in the design of the structure with the stained glass windows.
pulled the viewer’s gaze up toward the heavenly scene above, just as a Gothic church pulls the viewer’s gaze upward. The participation and contribution to another new church added to Dürer’s public persona, so much so that the process of furnishing churches influenced Dürer in the creation of Betende Hände. When he thought of building interior devotion, he turned to exterior forms like a church. Just as the steeples went up for the physical chapels in 1508, so did the corporal steeple go up in Dürer’s Betende Hände. Both are an expression of intimate devotion based on exterior forms.

Furthermore, Betende Hände is Dürer’s embodiment of self as Christ because the church is another form of Christ. Dürer simply embodied Christ through mimicking architecture, or rather Dürer fashions the hands to resemble architecture. Stephen Greenbalt describes the process of sixteenth-century self-fashioning to be one of distinct style or patterning. It is the symbolic imposition of self on another physical form.\(^\text{45}\) Christ, in his person and his forms, was one of the most typical models for self-fashioning. The theological foundation was laid for Christ’s corporal body to be the form of the church, so Dürer could fashion himself as the church because it was one of Christ’s forms. For Dürer this meant imposing himself on the physical form of a church. Dürer did this to artfully create a spiritual identity.\(^\text{46}\) Fashioning himself after Christ, and in particular Christ as the church, allowed Dürer to exhibit a spiritual precedence within his culture.\(^\text{47}\)

Jeffery Chipps Smith also comments on the public persona of piety in relation to churches in Dürer’s Nürnberg. As stated previously, public religion was an important aspect of

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 2. “Perhaps the simplest observation we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”\(^\text{46}\)
\(^{47}\) Ibid, 1: “The power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity”.
social identity in Nürnberg. Contemporary theology sustained the public practice of religious processions and feast days. Local relics were marched out of churches and through the town center. These public practices were an integral part of Nürnberg culture.\textsuperscript{48} In conjunction with this public practice, it was quite common for a family to establish public devotion in the cathedral itself.\textsuperscript{49} If a citizen was spiritually important, their presence was physically known within the church. The most standard way to demand a presence in the church was by designing a coat of arms to nail into the walls of the church itself.\textsuperscript{50} Dürer participated in the production of these objects. One example of this is his \textit{Coat of Arms of Michael Behaim} (Fig. 14). Creating a coat of arms was a sign of wealth and social ranking. Hanging that symbol of wealth in a church and becoming part of the interior added to one’s exterior persona. Dürer himself crafted a coat of arms and continued this tradition in his \textit{Coat of Arms from the House of Dürer} (Fig. 15). An extravagant display of woodcarving filigree and texture lauded the Dürer name and demanded public admiration. A coat of arms created a civic identity, but in Germany it also created a religious identity when it was placed in the church.

Thus Dürer significantly connected himself to the church through his art. He painted altarpieces for churches, participated in the designing of new churches, and created coats of arms to hang in churches. He did all of this in order to create a public persona of faith. But Dürer also created a private persona of faith in \textit{Betende Hände}. Because he was deeply involved in furnishing churches, Durer’s composition in \textit{Betende Hände} borrows many formal elements from Gothic architecture. The architectural hands reflect a desire to link himself to the church’s exterior form of piety. Just as Jacob Heller and Mattheus Landauer built literal churches for their

\textsuperscript{48} Smith, 185.
\textsuperscript{50} Smith, 186.
public reputations, Dürer used *Betende Hände* to build himself a corporal church as a display of his own internal devotion.

Dürer’s Aesthetic Preference for Architecture

Dürer’s act of envisioning himself as the architectural form of Christ in a pair of hands was both a conscious and an unconscious decision. The choice to compare himself to Christ was a very conscious decision made by Dürer. Furthermore, the ability to see oneself as a spiritual object, like a church, was a conscious act. Well known optical theorists like Nicolas of Cusa (1401-1464) and William of Ockham (1288-1347) taught that the process of seeing was spiritual, mystical, and conscious. Beyond this conscious vision, Dürer was also assisted by an unconscious aesthetic preference for architecture in *Betende Hände*. Two modern theorists, Ernest Gombrich and John Onians, provide an explanation for this type of unconscious architectural preference. Dürer associated himself with Christ in *Betende Hände* intentionally, but the architectural form of the hands was furthered suggested to his mind via an unconscious preference towards the design of the church.

Beginning with a conscious envisioning, theologian William of Ockham taught that vision itself was an abstract spiritual process. In Early Modern optics, the actual act of seeing and cognition were thought to be the light of God given to men to see spiritually.\(^5\)\(^1\) Spiritual vision was called extramission. In extramission, the ability to see is dependent upon an individual’s spirit distilling the light of God. The eye projects that light, which then allows the individual to see the world. The artist was considered to have an extra portion of the light of God, which facilitated the seeing of a greater range of the spiritual spectrum.

The belief of extramission prompted Dürer to render the world through his enlightened sight. According to Dürer, envisioning the godly was an amalgamated abstract vision of himself and God. When Dürer saw himself in his art, he saw an abstracted version of himself. Dürer said: “According to one view, it was possible to build an image of God in the mind because we are one with God, and that image, if true, is an abstracted image of ourselves already present within us”.52 Hence images of God, whether of Christ or of the church, were a divine and already abstracted version of Dürer’s self.

Vision was a spiritual and abstract process for Dürer even as he engaged with the rationalism of sight taught by Italian humanists beginning in 1504.53 This philosophical viewpoint meant that Dürer had the responsibility to depict life in a natural order. He was bound by proportion, geometry, and formulaic logical observations. It is because of this responsibility towards the rationalization of sight that Dürer redefined naturalism in German art. Although Dürer was a humanist, Dürer was also a German. He was a product of his German environment both visually and philosophically, which meant that he conflated Italian rationalism and Northern mysticism in his art. For Dürer, rationalization of vision meant a greater naturalism in art, but more importantly, a greater clarity from God. Dürer’s art was natural and proportional, but it was also symbolically abstract.

Rational observation was a spiritual gift for Dürer. Philosophers like Nicholas of Cusa wrote on the scientific rationalism of Renaissance sight as a product of mystic sight. Greater understanding of the eye gave Nicholas of Cusa the opportunity to understand the magnifying power of the lens, and then moralize it in his writings. Nicholas of Cusa made the argument that

52 Peter Parshall, “Graphic Knowledge: Albrecht Dürer and the Imagination,” Art Bulletin (September 2013), 393.
53 Dürer produced theory on the Geometry and proportion of the human body after learning about theory in Italy. This is an example of Dürer’s engagement with the rationalization of sight.
the artist had the greatest ability to magnify the world because he or she could reproduce it perfectly. The artist’s ability to magnify allowed him or her to look into an invisible world much like the all-seeing eye of God. According to Nicholas of Cusa, when Dürer saw, he saw objects with greater spiritual ability. Therefore, Albrecht Dürer retained both his rational vision and his spiritual vision in his art. He saw the physical structuring of the Gothic church; he very rationally understood the proportions of the skeletal vaulting and beams. He also saw himself spiritually; he abstractly translated the church’s proportions to those of his own body. By doing so Dürer engaged with Augustine’s three forms of seeing: the corporeal, the spiritual, and the intellectual. He could see the world, perceive it spiritually, and then consciously and intellectually conflate them into one, personal reality.

This conflation of reality and vision of Dürer as a church is only aided by his unconscious preference for church architecture. The study of aesthetic preference began with Gombrich’s idea of empathy theory. In his theory, Gombrich states that an object can be associated with an emotion. The empathetic link between object and emotion is a universal phenomenon created by human mental activity. The brain creates a network between objects and emotions through the way the object is experienced. This experience of empathy is always visceral and almost always visual. With Dürer, empathy for the German Hallenkirche shape began with his residency in Nürnberg. A prominent architectural feature in the city is the landmark Gothic church, the

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54 Scribner, 96.
55 Ibid, 98.
56 The artist was a member of a religious study group in Nuremberg called the Sodalitas Staupitziana, named for Johann von Staupitz, who was the vicar general of the Observant Augustinian order in Germany, and the spiritual adviser to Luther. Not only did Dürer attend Staupitz’s sermons when he preached in Nuremberg in 1516 and 1517, they dined together and Dürer gave him copies of some of his prints. See Andrew Butterfeild, “Dürer’s Devil within,” NYR Blog, May 20, 2013, accessed January 16, 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/may/20/durer-devil-within/.
58 Ibid, 160.
Frauenkirche (Fig. 16). Built in the fourteenth century, the Frauenkirche features a very unique massing of a steep triangular single hall and epitomizes the German Hallenkirche style. Nürnberg’s Frauenkirche is very much comparable to the massing of the church-like praying hands in Dürer’s *Betende Hände*. Unconsciously, Dürer created an empathy for the Hallenkirche shape through his daily visual intake of the church. The Frauenkirche is located on the city Hauptmarkt. It was also a daily part of Dürer’s young visual experience because he lived across from the Frauenkirche during the first years of his marriage.\(^{59}\) Undoubtedly, he had formed a preference for the aesthetic simply from constant visual interaction with the church.

Dürer’s preference towards an architectural imaging was unconsciously developed by means of neural plasticity. Such studies of neuroarthistory have been conducted by John Onians who makes connections between art and neurology.\(^{60}\) Onians’ neuroarthistory focuses exclusively on the visceral experience of seeing. It is through experience with sight and the mediation of neurons that aesthetic preferences for shape, line, color, and form are chemically produced in the synapses of the human mind.\(^{61}\) Theoretically, neuroarthistory depends less on dominating discourses or ideologies, and more on human nature and the chemical process of neural plasticity and sight. Applied to Dürer, aesthetic plasticity towards the Gothic church was formed a decade before *Betende Hände* when the artist was commissioned by the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, to reproduce cityscapes in drawing.

The church was an anchor in German civic culture, and particularly in the culture of the Holy Roman Empire under Maximilian I at the turn of the sixteenth century. Maximilian

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\(^{59}\) Smith, 42.
\(^{60}\) John Onians is a student of Ernst Gombrich and in particular the vein of Gombrich’s biological view of art and art history. For additional information regarding Onians and his theory see: Lauren Golden, *Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and the World Art Studies an Album Amicorum in His Honour* (Oxford, England: Archaeopress, 2001).
\(^{61}\) Ibid, 2.
championed a movement towards a stronger Christian and Germanic pride. To do so, Maximilian patronized the German arts. These arts were meant to celebrate German cities for their German-ness and their Christianity. Dürer, along with other significant German artists and writers like Celtis, Cranach, Bebel, and Sebastian Brant, participated in the cultivation of a more holy Germany under the unification of Maximilian I. Germany under Maximilian was focused on the individual cities, the different regions, and a celebration of a more Christian Germany.

Dürer painted multiple landscapes and cityscapes of different areas in Germany. One example of a cityscape is *Saint John’s Church* from 1489 (Fig. 17). In the watercolor, the church is a prominent feature of the image, and it demands the viewer’s attention above all other elements. This was the pattern for all of the German cityscapes that he completed. Each watercolor meticulously recorded the local architecture and region-specific foliage. The architecture, and more significantly the Gothic church, unified each city view with German Christianity. The church became the defining feature of the Holy Roman Empire in Germany. Dürer’s participation in recording and celebrating the advent of Maximilian’s Germany not only confirms Dürer’s awareness of his environment, but also solidifies his awareness of the prominence of the church in German identity. As Dürer painted each city’s church-dominated skyline, an aesthetic preference was formed for the Gothic structures via this important commission.

With neural plasticity, the process of forming new neural pathways through the act of seeing explains Dürer’s aesthetic preference for Gothic architecture. Though Dürer was

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Dürer’s thirty landscape watercolors of Germany was in coalition with Conrad Celtis: “Celtis’s plans for the *Germania Illustrata* and Dürer’s approximately thirty landscape watercolors, all of which are datable between 1494 and 1500, and all of which were done either in Nuremberg’s environs, or in territory that is now in Austria or northern Italy but which in Dürer’s day lay within the southern boundary of the Holy Roman Empire”.

63 Silver, “Germanic Patriotism in the Age of Dürer,” 49.
consciously very aware of his own steeple-dominated cityscape, the unconscious preference for
the church shape formed while vigorously painting region after region and church after church.
As Dürer studied and copied the Gothic church, he unconsciously built new cerebral pathways
and new aesthetic preferences towards the physical church form. Thus, both consciously and
unconsciously, Albrecht Dürer created an aesthetic preference towards the church and carried
this preference of form over into his drawing of *Betende Hände* just ten years later.

When he finally made *Betende Hände*, Dürer was guided by his aesthetic preference to
build an image of devotion. Rather than intertwine the fingers or collapse the fingers down into a
clump, his composition is much more carefully constructed and architecturally formed. Indeed,
the careful composition reads like a modern blueprint.

The science behind neural plasticity explains Dürer’s natural proclivity towards an
architectural style. However, a vision of hands becoming a Gothic church requires extreme
creativity on behalf of the artist. Dürer had to invent ways of reconciling rational humanistic
vision with mystic Gothic vision. The artist created his own visual dialogue in which the physical
representation of the church is rational, but the abstract and godly meaning is metaphorical. In
addition, Dürer replicated his hands in the distinct shape of a German Hallenkirche as an
extension of the personal and unconscious empathy he felt for the church. For Dürer’s *Betende
Hände* there is both the aesthetic preference for a church-like shape and a personal preference to
relate himself to the church. Dürer saw his hands as central to his personal identity, just as a
church is central to the German Christian identity.

Dürer’s Paper Relic

In this concluding section, the metaphor of Albrecht Dürer as the Gothic church in *Betende*
Hände will be brought to completeness. With its church-like composition, Dürer’s desire to be the form of Christ as church, the cultural context focusing on the corporality of the church, and Dürer’s aesthetic empathy towards Gothic architecture, Betende Hände is not lacking in artistic motivation. However, even the material used in Betende Hände embeds Dürer’s motives into the narrative of pilgrimage and further associates Dürer with the architecture of the Gothic church. Dürer purposely chose paper because it was the predominant medium used in the pilgrimage practice of Gothic Germany. Therefore, Albrecht Dürer’s comparison between himself and the church is further validated by its direct connection to pilgrimage. Dürer’s use of paper showed that he viewed his sketch as a private relic of his architectural self. For Dürer, there was meaning in material. It is significant that Dürer chose to translate his most experimental and personal vision of self onto a piece of paper, rather than panel. Dürer elevated paper to a material worth collecting and worth saving, just as the German pilgrims had done with paper relics. Paper was both very personal and very religious.

Larry Silver and Christiane Andersson write about the drawings of Dürer, and in particular the intimacy of the paper. They discuss how Dürer’s choice to constantly draw on paper is unique among other Renaissance artists. However, Dürer is unique as he was first and foremost a draftsman. Paper was his starting point for all inspirations and experimentations. The medium was generous to the artist. Paper as a material offers no obstacles to meaning; paper allows the most intimate view into Dürer’s intentions.\textsuperscript{64} The material was crucial to Dürer’s vision of self. For Dürer to see himself in the church-like structure of Betende Hände, he had to hold the paper, and in moments of intimate introspection, see himself as the church. The experience was tactile. Paper as a material provides the most premier outlet for these tactile

\textsuperscript{64} Andersson and Silver, 14.
processes. Likewise in the sixteenth century, vision was not merely the act of light hitting an optic nerve, but a tactile process. The viewer and the viewed met in touching; there had to be energy between the two. Again, because of paper’s inherent quality of being something that is held, it was the most intimate and tactile material to use in Betende Hände. But paper carries significance beyond its tactility and is embedded with meaning for Dürer.

Paper as a material created meaning for Dürer because he consciously chose each individual sheet for his drawings. Without a doubt, the paper’s haptic qualities attracted Dürer to the material and gave his drawings greater aesthetic perception. However, it is known that, throughout Dürer’s lifetime, the artist was particular about the paper he used. He would not purchase entire folios of paper for his own personal drawings, like a printer would for a book printing. Rather, Dürer spent time collecting single sheets of paper throughout his travels and lifetime. The paper’s weight, color, and texture were important to Dürer and therefore he only purchased and used the thinnest, whitest, and softest paper for his drawings. These collected single sheets of paper provided a spirit or inspiration for Dürer. That spirit coexisted with the drawing he would place on it. Dürer’s material practices with paper took on religious significance; the immaculate pieces of paper became the perfect source upon which to recreate God’s works.

Dürer’s paper also carries meaning in its distinct German iconography in relation to material practice of pilgrimage in Germany. The woodcut print brought relic and pilgrimage to a greater level of intimacy in Gothic Germany. The connection between religion and paper

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65 Scribner, 97.
67 Ibid.
shaped the religious culture of Germany into the Reformation era. Nevertheless, paper in connection to religion started in the Gothic era. Since the employment of the printing press in Germany, woodblock prints were circulated among pilgrims. Paper was not only economically efficient but also very personal as each pilgrim could repurpose the paper print as they liked.  

Paper was the personal connection to the church and pilgrimage.

In addition to this narrative, Dutch and German printmakers equated the act of printmaking to that of martyrdom. Just like the sheets of paper were put through the press and imprinted, so were martyrs imprinted by their cause. And just as the stories of the martyrs circulated and inspired, so the printed image was easily dispersed and the saintly deeds transmitted.  

This metaphor was so prevalent among printers that it is written about by Poirter in his “The society is made complete by adversity” in the seventeenth century. To a renaissance printmaker, paper was saturated with symbolic and historical meaning.

The pilgrimage metaphor with paper continues into Dürer’s own personal practices as well. The artist collected sheets of paper throughout his life for his personal works, but the artist also collected paper relics from the journeys he made in his lifetime. The clearest instance of relic collecting comes from the Dürer’s Wanderjahre or his trip to the Netherlands in 1520. He traveled to the Netherlands with the express purpose to secure patronage with the new emperor Charles, but with each city he visited, the artist had a distinct pilgrimage pattern: Dürer went to the city’s cathedral and exchanged a paper print with a local artist. Therefore Dürer collected

69 Ernst Gombrich, The Story of Art. 14th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985). The purposing of paper relics included personal journals, home décor, and even the very personal practice of wearing the prints. Women were known to sew the paper relics into their skirts and lining of clothing.
70 Melion, 5
71 Ibid.
72 Marnix Gijsen, Georges Marlier, and Albrecht Dürrer, Diary of His Journey to the Netherlands. 1520-21: Accompanied by The Silverpoint Sketchbook, and Paintings and Drawings Made During His Journey [Translated
paper similarly to the collection of a religious relic. Like a pilgrimage relic or souvenir, these traded prints held an image that encapsulated the city and the persons he visited. They were a reminder of his personal pilgrimage. Dürer’s practice of paper collecting is a reflection of his own German Gothic culture.

Albrecht Dürer’s Betende Hände was an image of Dürer as the Gothic church, but it also fulfilled the narrative of the German Gothic church. In alignment with the narrative and history of the church, his art became an intimate relic of pilgrimage. Dürer chose paper for Betende Hände because of its historical significance to the German pilgrimage. Paper had meaning because of its tactility and symbolism. Paper not only gave Dürer uninhibited intimacy with his drawings, but it also gave iconographic significance to his Betende Hände because of its prolific and poignant correlation to church architecture and the pilgrimages associated with it.

Conclusion

Dürer spent an entire lifetime dedicating himself to the church. He created his own personal and devotional object in Betende Hände to encompass this deeply intimate desire. Ironically, Dürer himself later became like unto a relic. Although Betende Hände was not a relic of pilgrimage or displayed in a church in Dürer’s lifetime, Dürer himself became a source of pilgrimage immediately following his death. Pilgrimages focused on Dürer and his art began in the sixteenth century and continued on through the Romantic era. With these pilgrimages, Dürer evolved from a highly gifted artist to a saint in the history of art through the writings of Romantics like Johann

Georg Hamann and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder. They expanded on the religiosity and saintly character of Dürer’s; Dürer became the mediator between the beholder and the abstract sacred idea represented by his art. For the Romantic scholars, Dürer’s actual paintings functioned as relics. But also by definition, Dürer was a relic. The most evident example of this is related to a lock of Dürer’s hair, which was passed from German artist to German artist as a relic of the master. The hair of Dürer acted as a religious object, endowed with the ability to give the artist in possession of it a piece of Dürer’s artistic gift.

Further more, Romantic writers aid in the connection of Albrecht Dürer and pilgrimage. The English philosophers such as Shaftesbury and Young doted on the idea of Dürer as a divine architect. The artist had the godly calling of Architect of Man because he gave shape and built meaning into the human body with his drawings. For these Romantics, not only did Dürer create relics for pilgrimage with his art, but he also built “Cathedrals of Men” through his role as divine architect.

Finally, Dürer was made into an architectural feature of a Gothic church in the Romantic era. The pilgrimage that surrounded Dürer and his art produced a group of inspired artists known

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73 Białostocki, *Dürer and His Critics, 1500-1971: Chapters in the History of Ideas, Including a Collection of Texts*, 115. Białostocki’s text on Dürer also includes information on the actual ritual and ceremony surrounding the Dürer pilgrimages and festivals that came out of the Romantic era. Białostocki focuses on the lack of rationality that surrounded these events and the engagement of “Dürer pilgrims” with his relics with extreme religiosity. Instead of observing the quality of Dürer’s paintings, the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century viewer engaged with the works like a relic: focusing on the emotional, religious, and sensual experience with the art. These Dürer festivals were also compared to Kermesses and followed similar iconographic programs.


75 Hutchinson, “Albrecht Dürer”: “Dürer’s life is more fully documented than that of any artist of his age. Physical records include, in his own words, his family history, travel diary, and personal correspondence; his remarkable series of self portraits, two early biographies written by younger contemporaries who knew him well; his Nuremberg house (now the Dürerhaus Museum); his tomb; and even a lock of his hair, with a colophon indicating that it was treasured by a succession of German artists beginning with journeyman Hans Baldung”.

76 Koerner, 251.

as the “Dürer kitsch Cult” who made works that lauded the artist and fashioned him into a saint.

Artist Franz Joseph Sauterleute produced Portrait of Albrecht Dürer and Scenes from his Life (Fig. 18) in 1829 to immortalize the artist in stained glass scenes, similar to Gothic scenes of the life of Mary or Christ. The glorification and canonization of Dürer after his death finally fulfilled the artist’s earthly aspiration. Dürer wanted to dedicate himself to God, and he did so by becoming a relic in his death. Nevertheless, he had already partially realized this aspiration in Betende Hände.

Indeed, Dürer created a very complex and large metaphor in which a simple preparatory sketch became a statement of spiritual self as physical church. The metaphor in which Dürer drew himself as the Gothic church was created through several iconographical experimentations. First and foremost were the experiments in self-fashioning and the artist taking on the persona and iconography of Christ. This experimentation reached its apex at the height of his career. In 1500, Albrecht Dürer epitomized Christ in his Munich Portrait. Dürer is no longer Christ-like in this self-portrait, but he is Christ. However, as one deeply examines Dürer’s self-portraiture, the iconography that specifically quotes Christ is made in the gestures of the hands. Undoubtedly, Dürer was looking to adopt the persona of Christ, and he did so through these gestures.

The second experiment was with the iconography of Christ as the church. In art and liturgy, Christ’s body was often placed over the church plan and thought to be the floor plan of the church. However, Dürer saw Christ’s body as the actual architecture of the church. Dürer’s Mass of Saint Gregory in 1511 perfectly demonstrates this. The traditional iconography of St.

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Gregory in a church apse was completely altered when Dürer replaced the stone apse with the body of Christ. Although the artist was capable of creating the architectural space, depth, and reality of a physical church, he chose to replace the architecture with the body of Christ. In this print, the church is no longer a metaphor for the body of Christ; it is Christ.

Dürer’s Gothic heritage contextualized these experiments with hundreds of years of historical and theological texts relating the microcosm to Gothic cathedrals. However, it was Albrecht Dürer who finally made no distinction between the metaphor and the actual body in his culminating experiment of *Betende Hände*. He recognized the church as an anchor for the identity of the faithful. Being sensitive to creating the most pious persona, Dürer turned to the exterior forms of piety around him. The church was the foremost example. With this exterior form, Dürer mimicked and built an interior devotion in creating a personal corporal church.

In creating a corporal church with *Betende Hände*, Dürer was aided by an aesthetic empathy for architecture. He constructed the praying hands to look like a church because he emotionally connected to its architecture and because he had formed an aesthetic preference for its form. In both the conscious empathetic connection to the church and the unconscious preference for its shape, Dürer had visceral experiences by continually viewing the church. He saw the church in his daily life, and it in his art. The church was an essential part of his cultural and personal landscape.

Lastly, *Betende Hände* came to full fruition through its connection to the historical practices associated with the Gothic church. Dürer chose paper, which was the singular pilgrimage media of Gothic Germany. Because of its inherent materiality, paper lent itself to becoming a personal relic. It was the most suitable choice of material for Dürer to envision himself as a Gothic church.
Overall, Dürer’s religious persona and metaphors of Christ were not a series of isolated iconographies, but a blending of a growing and adaptable vision of himself as Christ. When Dürer saw himself, he saw the image of Christ in all forms. Therefore in 1508, when Dürer sketched two intimately praying hands on paper, he encapsulated architectural piety. In this piety he associated himself with the church and ultimately with Christ. Betende Hände was and still is an extremely experimental and original visualization of himself as a corporal church. The artist thrived on originality. Dürer said, “I have to take into consideration the German mentality. Whosoever wants to build something insists on employing a new pattern the like of which has never been seen before.”80 In Betende Hände, the architectural style of the Gothic church drives Dürer’s composition so completely that it was never a simple sketch of prayer, but an architectural self-portrait.

80 Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, 3.
Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer. *Betende Hände*. 1508.
Figure 2. Albrecht Dürer. *The Heller Altar*. 1507-1508.
Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer. *The Head of Christ*. 1503.
Figure 4 Albrecht Dürer. *Self-portrait of 1491.* 1491.
Figure 5. Albrecht Dürer. *Ecce Homo*. 1493.
Figure 5. Albrecht Dürer. *Munich Portrait*. 1500.
Figure 6. Albrecht Dürer. *Ecce Homo*. 1493.
Figure 8. Albrecht Dürer. *Study Sheet with the Virgin and Child.* 1491-1492.
Figure 9. Albrecht Dürer. *Christ amongst the Doctors*. 1506.
Figure 10 Pietro Cataneo. *Vitruvian Man*. 1554.
Figure 12. Israhel van Meckenem. *The Mass of Saint Gregory*. 1490.
Figure 13. Albrecht Dürer. *The Landauer Alterpiece*. 1511.
Figure 14. Albrecht Dürer. *Coat of Arms of Michael Behaim*. 1520.
Figure 15. Albrecht Dürer. *Coat of Arms from the House of Dürer*. 1523.
Figure 16. Photograph of Nürnberg’s Frauenkirche. 1361.
Figure 17. Albrecht Dürer. *Saint John's Church*. 1498.
Figure 18. Franz Joseph Sauterleute. *Portrait of Albrecht Dürer and Scenes from his Life*. 1828.
Bibliography


