



Albrecht Dürer:
*Coat of Arms
with Skull*, 1503
Engraving
22.1 × 15.9 cm

The Art Summer after Dürer

I was already reading this book several months ago. It begins with incredible suspense. It's about Dürer and his most important patron by far: the merchant Heller, who lived not in Nuremberg but in Frankfurt. From a distance, and without knowing the merchant personally, the highly ambitious Dürer sought to create a work of exceptional quality—something valuable in every respect, both for himself and for his patron. But he knew no financial bounds and later demanded a somewhat indecent price. Heller, for his part (being a merchant), was not overly impressed. He didn't want to pay more, but he also didn't want to accept anything less in quality. Thus, this story of passion—and of anxiety as well, since Dürer had staked nearly everything on this one card—is told over a good hundred pages with great thoroughness. There's something to be learned along the way. And you find yourself thinking: who might be a present-day Dürer? Actually, though there's not quite enough time to make the case, perhaps only Jeff Koons fits the bill. **In any case, it would have to be someone who manages to cast everything they do in the light of art, who shows up everywhere—in other cities, and especially in the company of notable collectors—only as an artist; someone burning with the desire, as Dürer once was, not just to be an artist, but to become the great central figure, even for people who understand little about art, perhaps because they're tied to small markets or living abroad.** With inimitable works, with a gift for artisanal, commercial, and conceptual perfection, even if only limited editions or multiples are being produced and sold at lower prices. And then one reads on. Gradually, page by page, the narrative moves away from Dürer. As you read, the old saying comes to mind: history doesn't repeat itself. In the next generation, Dürer's fame becomes a search for Dürer, an intensified trade in Dürer, a circulation of stories about Dürer, depending on who had known him a little or was merely passing on secondhand hearsay. Then come chapters in which we find ourselves decades later, still in the same geographic region, yet unmistakably in another era. **Intermediaries—yes, advisors—begin to appear. They promise a Dürer, though they don't actually have one at hand. They exert exemplary influence through their particularly high level of education; they suggest to the prospective client that a second Dürer, or at the very least an enchanting young fledgling, still not fully hatched in its perfect shell, is already practically assured.** They present themselves as well-informed connoisseurs, and that reputation is, to some extent, justified. More and more buyers, under these new conditions, are willing to believe in the illustrious model of Dürer, and also to believe that further glorious, promising works will be and must be forthcoming.

Suddenly, we've arrived in the next century, the seventeenth, and Dürer is no longer mentioned in the book at all. The narrative now revolves increasingly around a single, rather successful connoisseur, though given the vast generational gap, there could never have been any direct contact between him and Dürer. We now follow a traveler, see him knocking on doors, hear of the offers he makes, not to everyone, but to quite a few: an agent who, in various cities and at rural princely courts, was permitted to give and receive a great deal. **A bit like a Larry Gagosian of the past, he had a sharp eye, and whatever hung on a wall or stood on a commode in a castle, he would remember and later offer, with ambition and not without risk, to other noble houses or intermediaries, without the consent of the previous owners.** Thus ends a book about Dürer—a good deal more than a century later—in a cultural environment where acquiring a major work by Dürer has long since become impossible. But art continues to be traded, perhaps there's more hoping and suffering than ever, and time and again, sums of money are invoked that don't really exist: sums desperately longed for, despite or perhaps because of looming debts and significant burdens. Ulinka Rublak's book, *Dürer in the Age of Wonder*, is in fact barely about Dürer, but instead, and at inordinate length, about art brokerage and investment. Reading it was a torment, because it does not make clear from the outset that Dürer is discussed on scarcely a quarter of its pages. Instead, it focuses and touches upon all manner of things, chiefly the ups and downs of the art world, which today, surely more intensely and far more complexly than in the seventeenth century, has the power to draw thousands of people under its spell, without the actors ever necessarily encountering the meaning of art. **What they encounter instead is their own daily yearning to capture and possess something extraordinary—or, in some cases, to encounter themselves in the hope, as rather privileged participants, of being someone extraordinary themselves.** When, all of a sudden this summer—after Art Basel 2025—two major galleries, Peter Blum in Los Angeles and Adam Lindemann in New York, shut their doors, and when auction houses like Sotheby's seem on the brink of madness—because, from a logistical, psychological, and financial standpoint, it has become nearly impossible to enter into the adventure of art with any real prospect of success, especially given how far we now stand from Dürer and from truly great masters—then we begin to sense that something unpleasant is looming. Hopefully not a second Thirty Years' War. But it will be a life that continues without Dürer—thankfully not a life without art or books. **The reason for the tragically growing distance from the greatest art, and for an ultimate rude awakening without money, is rising costs, which, like drug use, have been ignored for too long.** In 1972, the brilliant conceptual artist Günther Saree attempted to book a one-week vacation on Mallorca not for himself, but for the word Now. This, predictably, led to an entirely different kind of problem. He wanted to pay for a seat on the airplane on which the word would be placed, written on a slip of paper. At the hotel (the room, without breakfast, didn't even need to have been prepared), the word Now was simply to lie on the pillow, without explanation. The problem was the travel agency. It flatly refused to accept 700 Deutsche Marks for what it did not recognize as a legitimate work of art.

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