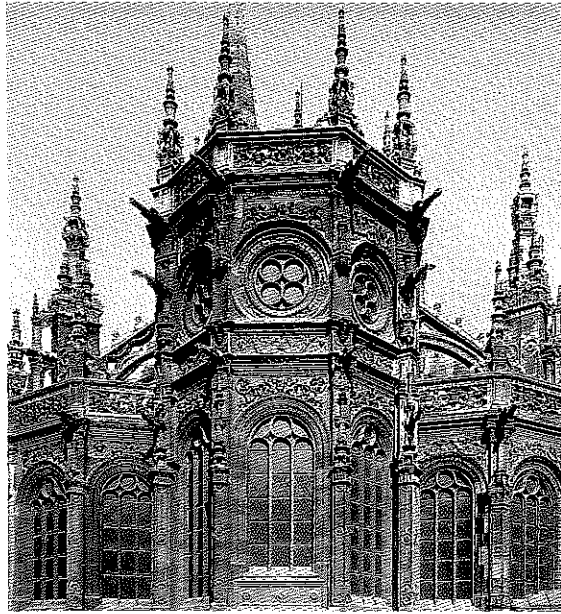


## THE NEW LEARNING SPREADS

*Germany and the Netherlands, early sixteenth century*

The great achievements and inventions of the Italian masters of the Renaissance made a deep impression on the peoples north of the Alps. Everyone who was interested in the revival of learning had become accustomed to looking towards Italy, where the wisdom and the treasures of classical antiquity were being discovered. We know very well that in art we cannot speak of progress in the sense in which we speak of progress in learning. A Gothic work of art may be just as great as a work of the Renaissance. Nevertheless, it is perhaps natural that to the people at that time, who came into contact with the masterpieces from the south, their own art seemed suddenly to be old-fashioned and uncouth. There were three tangible achievements of the Italian masters to which they could point. One was the discovery of scientific perspective, the second the knowledge of anatomy – and with it the perfect rendering of the beautiful human body – and thirdly the knowledge of the classical forms of building, which seemed to the period to stand for everything that was dignified and beautiful.

It is a fascinating spectacle to watch the reactions of various artists and traditions to the impact of this new knowledge, and to see how they asserted themselves – or as sometimes happened, how they succumbed – according to the strength of their character and the breadth of their vision. Architects were perhaps in the most difficult position. Both the Gothic system, to which they were accustomed, and the new revival of ancient buildings are, at least in theory, utterly logical and consistent, but as different from each other in aim and spirit as two styles could possibly be. It took a long time, therefore, before the new fashion in building was adopted north of the Alps. When this did come about, it was frequently on the insistence of princes and noblemen who had visited Italy and wanted to be up to date. Even so, architects often complied only very superficially with the requirements of the new style. They demonstrated their acquaintance with the new ideas by putting a column here and a frieze there – in other words, by adding some of the classical forms to their wealth of decorative motifs. More often than not, the body of the building remained entirely untouched. There are churches in France, England and



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Pierre Sohier  
 Choir of the church of  
 St-Pierre, Caen,  
 1518-45  
 Gothic transformed

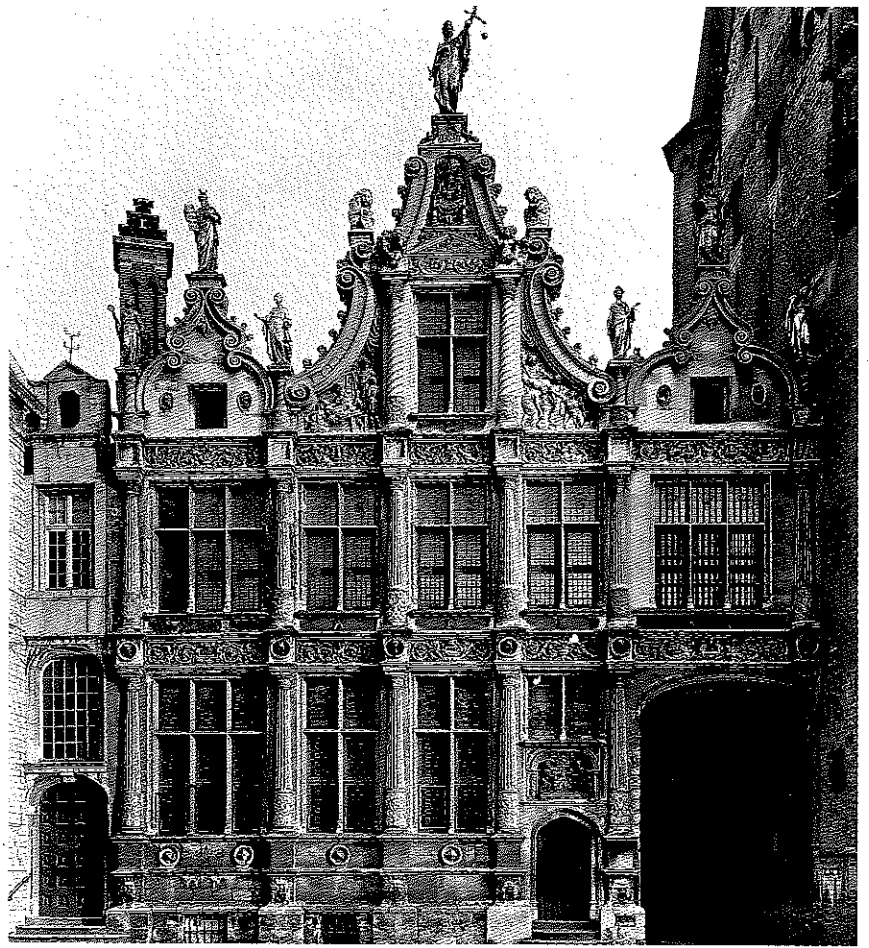
Germany where the pillars supporting the vault are superficially turned into columns by having capitals affixed to them, or where the Gothic windows are complete with tracery, but the pointed arch has given way to a rounded one, *figure 218*. There are regular cloisters supported by fantastic bottle-shaped columns, castles bristling with turrets and buttresses, but adorned with classical details, gabled town houses with classical friezes and busts, *figure 219*. An Italian artist, convinced of the perfection of the classical rules, would probably have turned away from these things in horror, but if we do not measure them by any pedantic academic standard we may often admire the ingenuity and wit with which these incongruous styles were blended.

Things were rather different in the case of painters and sculptors, because for them it was not a matter of taking over certain definite forms such as columns, or arches, piecemeal. Only minor painters could be content with borrowing a figure or a gesture from an Italian engraving which had come their way. Any real artist was bound to feel the urge thoroughly to understand the new principles of art and to make up his mind about their usefulness. We can study this dramatic process in the work of the greatest German artist, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), who was throughout his life fully conscious of their vital importance for the future of art.

Albrecht Dürer was the son of a distinguished master-goldsmith who had come from Hungary and settled in the flourishing city of Nuremberg. Even as a boy, the young Dürer showed an astonishing gift for drawing – some of his works of that time have been preserved – and he was apprenticed with the largest workshop for altars and woodcut illustrations. This belonged to the Nuremberg master, Michel Wolgemut. Having

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Jan Wallot and  
Christian Sixdeniers  
*The Old Chancellery*  
(*Le Greffe*), Bruges,  
1535–7  
A Northern Renaissance  
building



completed his apprenticeship, he followed the custom of all young medieval craftsmen and travelled about as a journeyman to broaden his views and to look for a place in which to settle. Dürer's intention had been to visit the workshop of the greatest copper-engraver of this period, Martin Schongauer, *pages 283–4*, but when he arrived at Colmar he found that the master had died some months earlier. However, he stayed with Schongauer's brothers, who had taken charge of the workshop, and then turned to Basle in Switzerland, at that time a centre of learning and of the book trade. Here he made woodcuts for books, and then travelled on, across the Alps into northern Italy, keeping an open eye throughout his journeys and making watercolours of the picturesque places in the Alpine valleys, and studying the works of Mantegna, *pages 256–9*. When he returned to Nuremberg to marry and open his own workshop, he possessed all the technical accomplishments a northern artist could expect to acquire in the South. He soon showed that he had more than mere technical knowledge of his difficult craft, that he possessed that intense feeling and imagination which alone make the great artist. One of his first great works was a series of large woodcuts illustrating the Revelation of St



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Albrecht Dürer  
*St Michael's fight  
 against the dragon,*  
 1498

Woodcut, 39.2 × 28.3 cm,  
 15 × 11 1/4 in

221

Albrecht Dürer  
*Great piece of turf,* 1503

Watercolour, pen and ink,  
 pencil and wash on paper.  
 40.3 × 31.1 cm, 15 7/8 ×  
 12 1/4 in; Albertina, Vienna

John. It was an immediate success. The terrifying visions of the horrors of doomsday, and of the signs and portents preceding it, had never before been visualized with such force and power. There is little doubt that Dürer's imagination, and the interest of the public, fed on the general discontent with the institutions of the Church which was rife in Germany towards the end of the Middle Ages, and was finally to break out in Luther's Reformation. To Dürer and his public, the weird visions of the apocalyptic events had acquired something like topical interest, for there were many who expected these prophecies to come true within their lifetime. *Figure 220* shows an illustration of Revelation xii.7:

*And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.*

To represent this great moment, Dürer discarded all the traditional poses that had been used time and again to represent, with a show of elegance and ease, a hero's fight against a mortal enemy. Dürer's St Michael does not strike any pose. He is in deadly earnest. He uses both hands in a mighty effort to thrust his huge spear into the dragon's throat, and this powerful gesture dominates the whole scene. Round him there are the hosts of other warring angels fighting as swordsmen and archers against

the fiendish monsters, whose fantastic appearance defies description. Beneath this celestial battlefield there lies a landscape untroubled and serene, with Dürer's famous monogram.

But though Dürer had proved himself a master of the fantastic and the visionary, a true heir of those Gothic artists who had created the porches of the great cathedrals, he did not rest content with this achievement. His studies and sketches show that it was also his aim to contemplate the beauty of nature, and to copy it as patiently and as faithfully as any artist had ever done, since Jan van Eyck had shown the artists of the North that their task was to mirror nature. Some of these studies of Dürer have become famous: his hare, *page 24, figure 9*, for instance, or his watercolour of a piece of turf, *figure 221*. It seems that Dürer strove for his perfect mastery in the imitation of nature,



not so much as an aim in itself but as a better way of presenting a convincing vision of the sacred stories which he was to illustrate in his paintings, engravings, and woodcuts. For the same patience which enabled him to draw these sketches also made him the born engraver, who never tired of adding detail upon detail to build up a true little world within the compass of his copper plate. In his 'Nativity', *figure 222*, which he made in 1504 (that is, about the time when Michelangelo amazed the Florentines by his display of knowledge of the human body), Dürer took up the theme which Schongauer, *page 284, figure 185*, had represented in his lovely engraving. The older artist had already used the opportunity to depict the rugged walls of dilapidated stables with special love. It would seem, at first glance, that for Dürer this was the main subject. The old farmyard with its cracked mortar and loose tiles, its broken wall from which trees are growing, its ramshackle boards in place of a roof, on which birds are nesting, is thought out and rendered with such quiet and contemplative patience that one feels how much the artist enjoyed the idea of the picturesque old building. Compared with it, the figures seem, indeed, small and almost insignificant: Mary, who has sought shelter in the old shed and is kneeling in front of her Child, and Joseph, who busies himself hauling water from the well and pouring it carefully into a narrow pitcher. One must look carefully to discover one of the adoring shepherds in the background, and one almost needs a magnifying glass to detect the traditional angel in the sky who announces the glad tidings to the world. And yet no one would seriously suggest that Dürer was merely trying to display his skill in rendering old and broken walls. This old, disused farmyard, with its humble visitors, conveys such an atmosphere of idyllic peace that it calls on us to ponder the miracle of the Holy Night in the same mood of devout meditation as went into the making of the engraving. In engravings like this, Dürer seemed to have summed up and brought to perfection the development of Gothic art, since it had turned towards the imitation of nature. But, at the same time, his mind was busy grappling with the new aims given to art by the Italian artists.

There was one aim which Gothic art had almost excluded and which now stood in the foreground of interest: the representation of the human body in that ideal beauty with which classical art had endowed it.

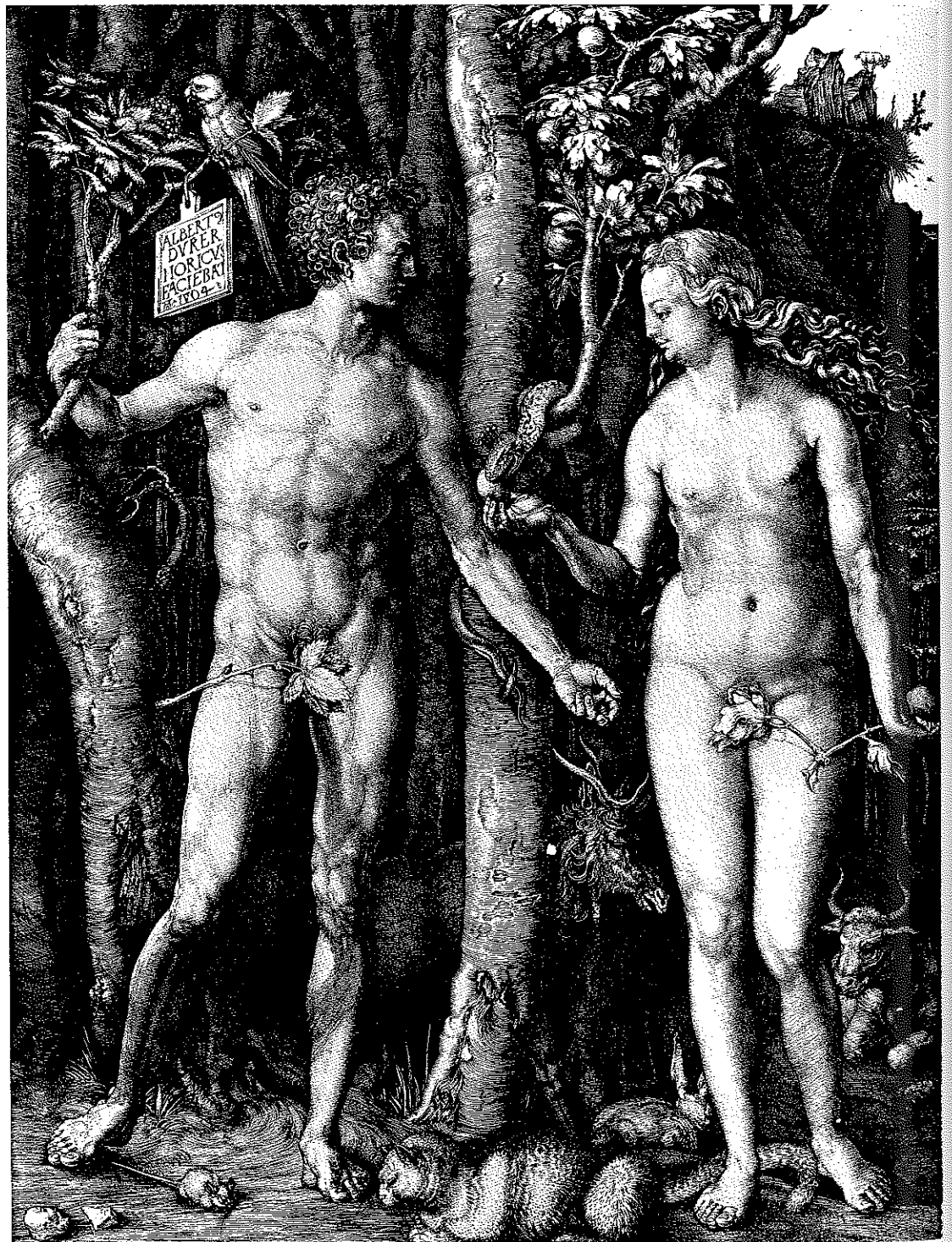
Here Dürer was soon to find out that any mere imitation of real nature, even when done as diligently and devotedly as Van Eyck's Adam and Eve, *page 237, figure 156*, would never be sufficient to produce the elusive quality of beauty that distinguished southern works of art. Raphael, when confronted with this question, referred to the 'certain idea' of beauty that he found in his mind, *page 320*, the idea that he had absorbed during years of studying classical sculpture and beautiful models. To Dürer, this was no

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Albrecht Dürer  
*The Nativity*, 1504  
 Engraving, 18.5 x 12 cm,  
 7/8 x 4 7/8 in



simple proposition. Not only were his opportunities for study less wide, but he had no firm tradition or sure instinct to guide him in such matters. That is why he went in search of a reliable recipe, as it were, a teachable rule which would explain what makes for beauty in the human form; and he believed that he had found such a rule in the teachings of the classical writers on the proportions of the human body. Their expressions and measurements were rather obscure, but Dürer was not to be deterred by such difficulties. He intended, as he said, to give the vague practice of his forefathers (who had created vigorous works without clear knowledge of the rules of art) a proper teachable foundation. It is thrilling to watch Dürer experimenting with various rules of proportion, to see him deliberately distorting the human frame by drawing overlong, or overbroad, bodies in order to find the right balance and the right harmony.





Among the first results of these studies, which were to engage him throughout his life, was the engraving of Adam and Eve, in which he embodied all his new ideas of beauty and harmony, and which he proudly signed with his full name in Latin, ALBERTUS DURER NORICUS FACIEBAT 1504 ('Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg made [this engraving] in 1504'), *figure 223*.

It may not be easy for us to see immediately the achievement which lay in this engraving. For the artist is speaking a language which is less familiar to him than that which he used in our preceding example. The harmonious forms at which he arrived by diligent measuring and balancing with compass and ruler are not as convincing and beautiful as their Italian and classical models. There is some slight suggestion of artificiality, not only in their form and posture, but also in the symmetrical composition. But this first feeling of awkwardness soon disappears when one realizes that Dürer has not abandoned his real self to worship new idols, as lesser artists did. As we let him guide us into the Garden of Eden, where the mouse lies quietly beside the cat, where the elk, the cow, the rabbit and the parrot do not fear the tread of human feet, as we look deep into the grove where the tree of knowledge grows, and watch the serpent giving Eve the fatal fruit while Adam stretches out his hand to receive it, and as we notice how Dürer has contrived to let the clear outline of their white and delicately modelled bodies show up against the dark shade of the forest with its rugged trees, we come to admire the first serious attempt to transplant the ideals of the South into northern soil.

Dürer himself, however, was not easily satisfied. A year after he had published this engraving, he travelled to Venice to broaden his horizon and to learn more about the secrets of southern art. The arrival of so eminent a competitor was not altogether welcome to the minor Venetian artists, and Dürer wrote to a friend:

*I have many friends among the Italians who warn me not to eat and drink with their painters. Many of them are my enemies; they copy my works in the churches and wherever they can find them; and then they decry my work and say it was not in the manner of the classics and therefore it was no good. But Giovanni Bellini has praised me very highly to many noblemen. He wanted to have something I have done, and he himself came to me and asked me to make something for him — he would pay well. Everyone tells me how devout a man he is, which makes me like him. He is very old, and still the best in painting.*

It is in one of these letters from Venice that Dürer wrote the touching sentence which shows how keenly he felt the contrast of his position as an artist in the rigid order of the Nuremberg guilds compared with the freedom of his Italian colleagues: 'How I shall shiver for the sun,' he

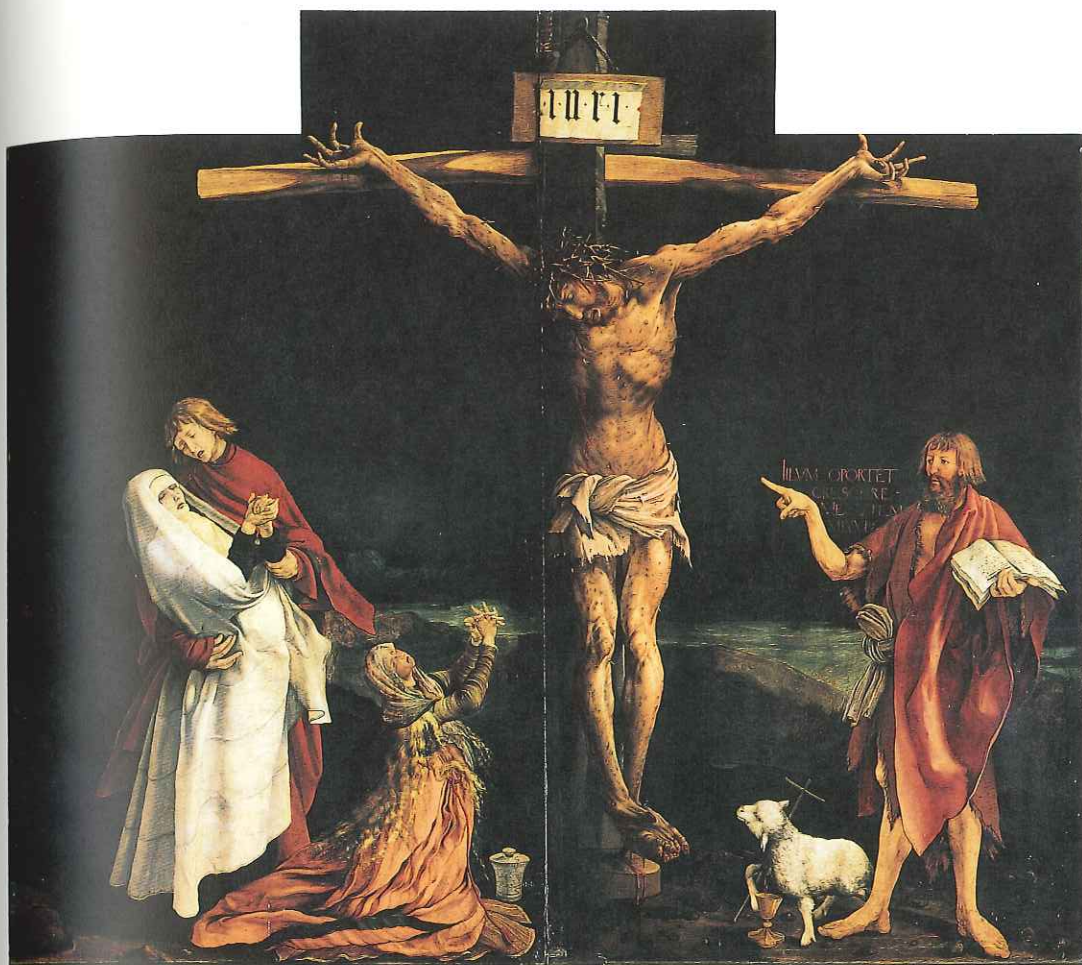
223

Albrecht Dürer

*Adam and Eve*, 1504Engraving, 24.8 × 19.2 cm,  
9 7/8 × 7 1/2 in.

wrote, 'here I am a lord, at home a parasite.' But Dürer's later life does not quite bear out these apprehensions. True, at first he had to bargain and argue with the rich burghers of Nuremberg and Frankfurt like any artisan. He had to promise them to use only the best-quality paint for his panels and to apply it in many layers. But gradually his fame spread, and the Emperor Maximilian, who believed in the importance of art as an instrument of glorification, secured Dürer's services for a number of ambitious schemes. When, at the age of fifty, Dürer visited the Netherlands, he was, indeed, received like a lord. He himself, deeply moved, described how the painters of Antwerp honoured him in their guild hall with a solemn banquet, 'and when I was led to the table, the people stood, on both sides, as if they were introducing a great lord, and among them were many persons of excellence who all bowed their heads in the most humble manner'. Even in the northern countries the great artists had broken down the snobbery which led people to despise men who worked with their hands.

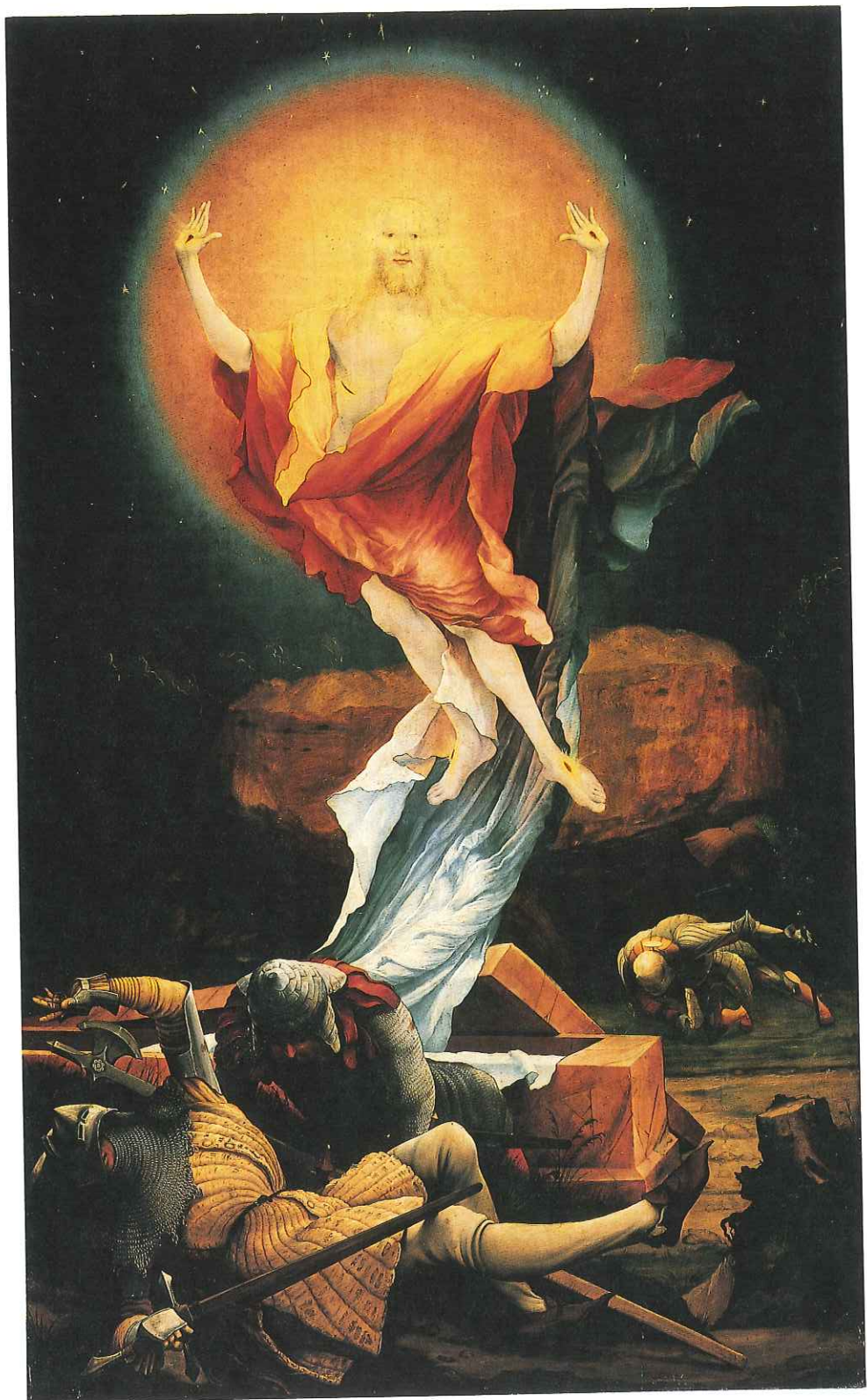
It is a strange and puzzling fact that the only German painter who can be compared with Dürer for greatness and artistic power has been forgotten to such an extent that we are not even quite sure of his name. A writer of the seventeenth century makes rather confused mention of one Matthias Grünewald of Aschaffenburg. He gives a glowing description of some paintings of this 'German Correggio', as he calls him, and thenceforward these paintings and others which must have been painted by the same great artist are usually labelled 'Grünewald'. No record or document of the period, however, mentions any painter of the name of Grünewald, and we must consider it likely that the author had mixed up his facts. Since some of the paintings ascribed to the master bear the initials M.G.N., and since a painter Mathis Gothardt Nithardt is known to have lived and worked near Aschaffenburg in Germany as an approximate contemporary of Albrecht Dürer, it is now believed that this, and not Grünewald, was the true name of the great master. But this theory does not help us much, since we do not know very much about that master Mathis. In short, while Dürer stands before us like a living human being whose habits, beliefs, tastes and mannerisms are intimately known to us, Grünewald is as great a mystery to us as Shakespeare. It is unlikely that this is entirely due to mere coincidence. The reason why we know so much about Dürer is precisely that he saw himself as a reformer and innovator of the art of his country. He reflected on what he was doing and why he did it, he kept records of his journeys and researches, and he wrote books to teach his own generation. There is no indication that the painter of the 'Grünewald' masterpieces saw himself in a similar light. On the contrary. The few paintings we have of his are altar-panels of the traditional type in major



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Grünewald  
*The Crucifixion*, 1515  
 Panel from the Isenheim  
 altarpiece; oil on wood,  
 269 × 307 cm, 105½ ×  
 120½ in; Musée  
 d'Unterlinden, Colmar

and minor provincial churches, including a large number of painted 'wings' for a great altar at the Alsatian village of Isenheim (the so-called Isenheim altarpiece). His works afford no indication that he strove like Dürer to become something different from a mere craftsman or that he was hampered by the fixed traditions of religious art as it had developed in the late Gothic period. Though he was certainly familiar with some of the great discoveries of Italian art, he made use of them only as far as they suited his ideas of what art should do. On this score, he does not seem to have felt any doubts. Art for him did not consist in the search for the hidden laws of beauty – for him it could have only one aim, the aim of all religious art in the Middle Ages – that of providing a sermon in pictures, of proclaiming the sacred truths as taught by the Church. The central panel of the Isenheim altarpiece, *figure 224*, shows that he sacrificed all other considerations to this one overriding aim. Of beauty, as the Italian artists saw it, there is none in the stark and cruel picture of the crucified Saviour. Like a preacher at Passiontide, Grünewald left nothing undone to bring home to us the horrors of this scene of suffering: Christ's dying body



is distorted by the torture of the Cross; the thorns of the scourges stick in the festering wounds which cover the whole figure. The dark red blood forms a glaring contrast to the sickly green of the flesh. By His features and the impressive gesture of His hands, the Man of Sorrows speaks to us of the meaning of His Calvary. His suffering is reflected in the traditional group of Mary, in the garb of a widow, fainting in the arms of St John the Evangelist, to whose care the Lord has commended her, and in the smaller figure of St Mary Magdalene with her vessel of ointments, wringing her hands in sorrow. On the other side of the Cross, there stands the powerful figure of St John the Baptist with the ancient symbol of the lamb carrying the cross and pouring out its blood into the chalice of the Holy Communion. With a stern and commanding gesture he points towards the Saviour, and over him are written the words that he speaks (according to the gospel of St John iii. 30): 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

There is little doubt that the artist wanted the beholder of the altar to meditate on these words, which he emphasized so strongly by the pointing hand of St John the Baptist. Perhaps he even wanted us to *see* how Christ must grow and we diminish. For in this picture, in which reality seems to be depicted in all its unmitigated horror, there is one unreal and fantastic trait: the figures differ greatly in size. We need only compare the hands of St Mary Magdalene under the Cross with those of Christ to become fully aware of the astonishing difference in their dimensions. It is clear that in these matters Grünewald rejected the rules of modern art as it had developed since the Renaissance, and that he deliberately returned to the principles of medieval and primitive painters, who varied the size of their figures according to their importance in the picture. Just as he had sacrificed the pleasing kind of beauty for the sake of the spiritual message of the altar, he also disregarded the new demand for correct proportions, since this helped him to express the mystic truth of the words of St John.

Grünewald's work may thus remind us once more that an artist can be very great indeed without being 'progressive', because the greatness of art does not lie in new discoveries. That Grünewald was familiar with these discoveries he showed plainly enough whenever they helped him to express what he wanted to convey. And just as he used his brush to depict the dead and tormented body of Christ, he used it on another panel to convey its transfiguration at the Resurrection into an unearthly apparition of heavenly light, *figure 225*. It is difficult to describe this picture because, once more, so much depends on its colours. It seems as if Christ has just soared out of the grave, leaving a trail of radiant light – the shroud in which the body has been swathed reflecting the coloured rays of the halo. There is a poignant contrast between the risen Christ, who is hovering over the scene, and the helpless gestures of the soldiers on the ground,

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Grünewald  
*The Resurrection*, 1515  
 Panel from the Isenheim  
 altarpiece; oil on wood,  
 269 × 143 cm, 105¾ ×  
 56½ in; Musée  
 d'Unterlinden, Colmar



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Lucas Cranach  
*The rest on the Flight  
 into Egypt*, 1504

Oil on wood, 70.7 × 53  
 cm, 28 × 20¾ in;  
 Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche  
 Museen, Berlin

who are dazzled and overwhelmed by this sudden apparition of light. We feel the violence of the shock in the way in which they writhe in their armour. As we cannot assess the distance between foreground and background, the two soldiers behind the grave look like puppets who have tumbled over, and their distorted shapes only serve to throw into relief the serene and majestic calm of the transfigured body of Christ.

A third famous German of Dürer's generation, Lucas Cranach (1472–1553), began as a most promising painter. In his youth he spent several years in southern Germany and Austria. At the time when Giorgione, who came from the southern foothills of the Alps, discovered the beauty of mountain scenery, *page 328, figure 209*, this young painter was fascinated by the northern foothills with their old forests and romantic vistas. In a painting dated 1504 – the year when Dürer published his prints, *figures 222, 223* – Cranach represented the Holy Family on the Flight into Egypt, *figure 226*. They are resting near a spring in a wooded mountain region. It is a charming place in the wilderness with shaggy trees and a wide view down

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Albrecht Altdorfer  
*Landscape*, c.1526–8

Oil on parchment,  
mounted on wood,  
30 × 22 cm, 12 × 8¾ in;  
Alte Pinakothek, Munich



a lovely green valley. Crowds of little angels have gathered round the Virgin; one is offering berries to the Christ Child, another is fetching water in a shell while others have settled down to refresh the spirit of the tired refugees with a concert of pipes and flutes. This poetic invention has preserved something of the spirit of Lochner's lyrical art, *page 272, figure 176*.

In his later years Cranach became a rather slick and fashionable court painter in Saxony, who owed his fame mainly to his friendship with Martin Luther. But it seems that his brief stay in the Danube region had been sufficient to open the eyes of the people who lived in the Alpine districts to the beauty of their surroundings. The painter Albrecht Altdorfer, of Regensburg (1480?–1538), went out into the woods and mountains to study the shape of weather-beaten pines and rocks. Many of his watercolours and etchings, and at least one of his oil-paintings, *figure 227*, tell no story and contain no human being. This is quite a momentous change. Even the Greeks with all their love of nature had

painted landscapes only as settings for their pastoral scenes, *page 114, figure 72*. In the Middle Ages a painting which did not clearly illustrate a theme, sacred or profane, was almost inconceivable. Only when the painter's skill as such began to interest people was it possible for him to sell a painting which served no other purpose but that of recording his enjoyment of a beautiful piece of scenery.

The Netherlands, at this great time of the first decades of the sixteenth century, produced not as many outstanding masters as they had done during the fifteenth century, when masters like Jan van Eyck, *pages 235-6*, Rogier van der Weyden, *page 276* and Hugo van der Goes, *page 279*, were famous throughout Europe. Those artists, at least, who strove to absorb the New Learning as Dürer had done in Germany were often torn between their loyalties to old methods and their love for the new. *Figure 228* shows a characteristic example by the painter Jan Gossart, called Mabuse (1478?-1532). According to the legend, St Luke the Evangelist was a painter by profession, and thus he is represented here making a portrait of the Virgin and her Child. The way in which Mabuse painted these figures is quite in accordance with the traditions of Jan van Eyck and his followers, but the setting is quite different. It seems that he wanted to show off his knowledge of the Italian achievements, his skill in scientific perspective, his familiarity with classical architecture, and his mastery of light and shade. The result is a picture which certainly has great charm but which lacks the simple harmony of both its northern and Italian models. One wonders why St Luke found no more suitable place in which to draw the Madonna than this ostentatious but presumably draughty palace courtyard.

Thus it came about that the greatest Netherlandish artist of the period is not found among the adherents of the New Style but among those who, like Grünewald in Germany, refused to be drawn into the modern movement from the South. In the Dutch town of 's Hertogenbosch there lived such a painter, who was called Hieronymus Bosch. Very little is known about him. We do not know how old he was when he died in 1516, but he must have been active for a considerable time since he became an independent master in 1488. Like Grünewald, Bosch showed that the traditions and achievements of painting which had been developed to represent reality most convincingly could be turned round, as it were, to give us an equally plausible picture of things no human eye had seen. He became famous for his terrifying representations of the powers of evil. Perhaps it is no accident that the gloomy King Philip II of Spain, later in the century, had a special predilection for this artist, who was so

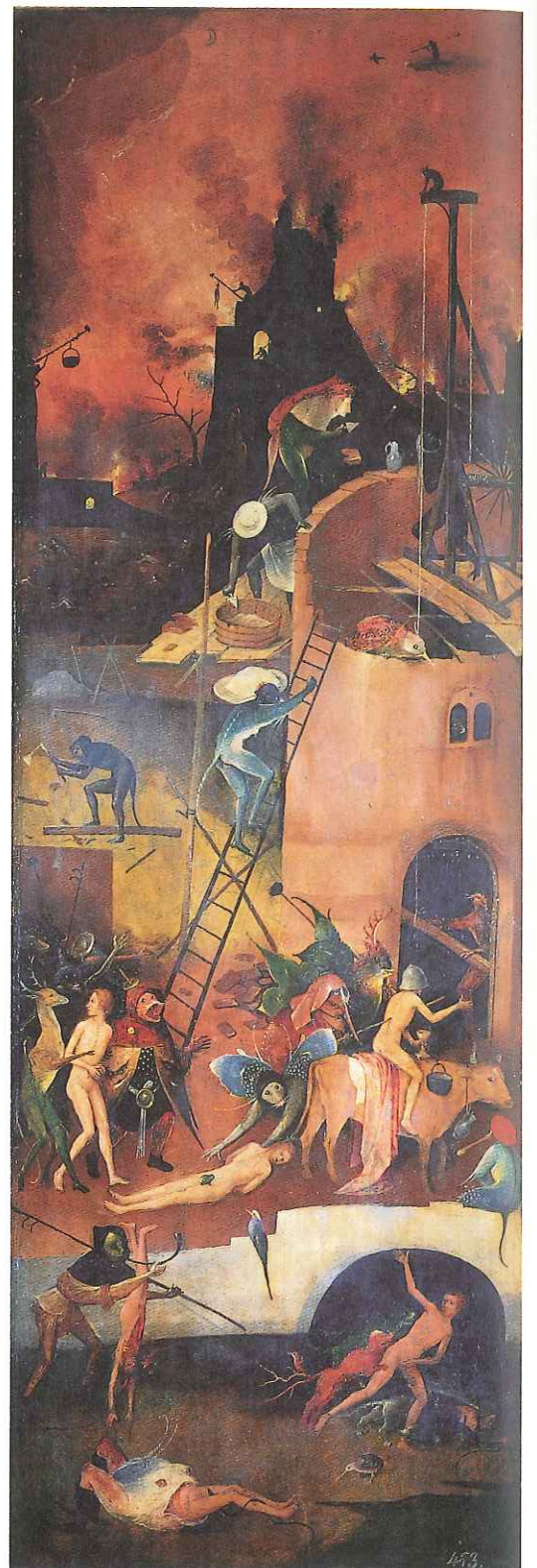
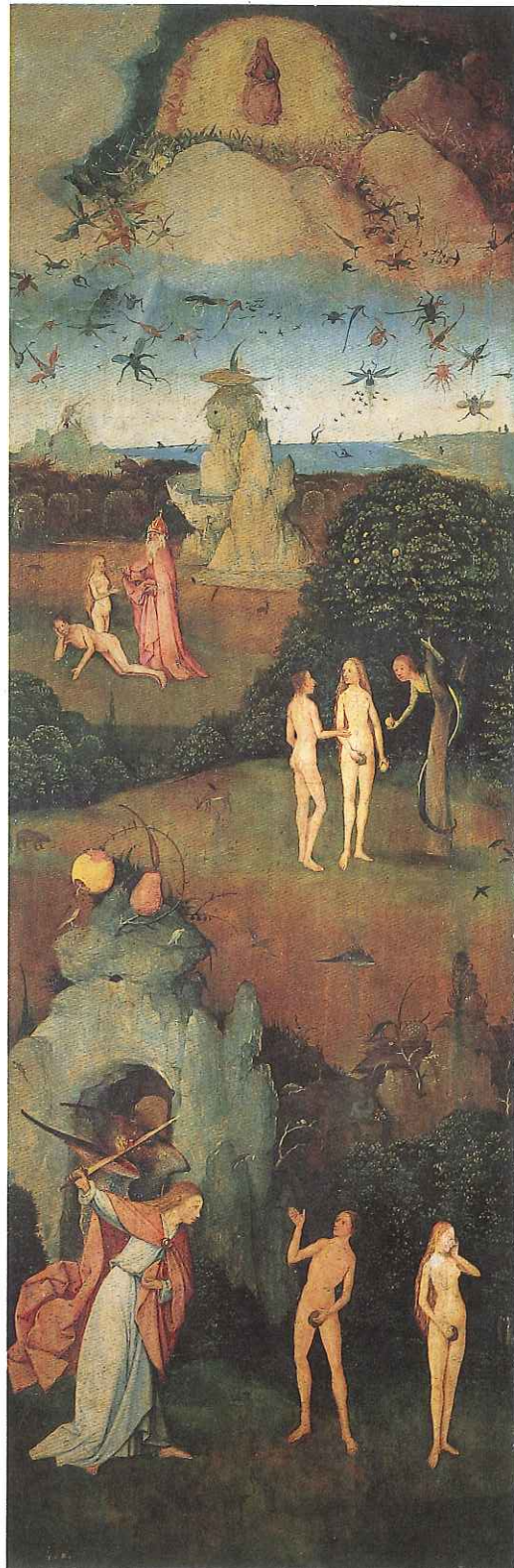
228

Mabuse  
*St Luke painting the  
 Virgin, c. 1515*

Oil on wood, 230 × 205  
 cm, 90½ × 80¾ in;  
 Národní Galerie, Prague







229, 230

Hieronymus Bosch  
*Paradise and Hell*,  
c. 1510

Left and right panels of  
a triptych; oil on wood,  
each panel 135 × 45 cm,  
53¼ × 17¾ in; Prado,  
Madrid

much concerned with man's wickedness. *Figures 229–30* show two wings from one of Bosch's triptychs he bought and which is therefore still in Spain. On the left we watch evil invading the world. The creation of Eve is followed by the temptation of Adam and both are driven out of Paradise, while high above in the sky we see the fall of the rebellious angels, who are hurled from heaven as a swarm of repulsive insects. On the other wing we are shown a vision of hell. There we see horror piled upon horror, fires and torments and all manner of fearful demons, half animal, half human or half machine, who plague and punish the poor sinful souls for all eternity. For the first and perhaps for the only time, an artist had succeeded in giving concrete and tangible shape to the fears that had haunted the minds of man in the Middle Ages. It was an achievement which was perhaps only possible at this very moment, when the old ideas were still vigorous and yet the modern spirit had provided the artist with methods of representing what he saw. Perhaps Hieronymus Bosch could have written on one of his paintings of hell what Jan van Eyck wrote on his peaceful scene of the Arnolfinis' betrothal: 'I was there'.

*The painter studying  
the laws of  
foreshortening*, 1525

Woodcut by Albrecht  
Dürer; 13.6 × 18.2 cm, 5¼  
× 7¼ in; from Dürer's  
textbook on perspective  
and proportion,

*Vindeneysung der Messung  
mit dem Zirckel und  
Richtscheyt*

