The Artist’s Eye

Did squinting cause the ‘Dürerblick’?

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During his working life, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) produced a number of oil paintings, over 400 prints and about 1200 drawings (Strieder 1982). His highly detailed and inspired woodcuts and copperplate engravings were brilliant.

Some of Dürer’s allegorical work, such as ‘Melencolia’ (Fig. 1), tempts its observers to make their own interpretations, but it has always refused to give up all its secrets.

Self-portraits

An explanatory text on the painting ‘Piper and Drummer’ (Fig. 2) (Polland 1991) states that the drummer is gazing toward the piper with empathy, and claims that the drummer is a hidden self-portrait of Dürer. This appears to be highly likely, as the figure bears a striking resemblance to those in other self-portraits. However, when we look more closely at this painting (Fig. 3), we see that Dürer’s right eye squints outwards and upwards, while his left eye stares straight ahead. Dürer suffered from a right-side exotropia and hypertropia. In the German literature on the subject, this look is referred to as the ‘Dürerblick’ (Strebel 1937) and it is seen repeatedly in his many self-portraits (Fig. 4). The fact that this is actually a case of a defective position of the left eye – because Dürer used a mirror to paint his self-portraits – is irrelevant in this connection.

A defective eye position is also seen in ‘Self-portrait with Bandage’ (Fig. 5), and, looking at this drawing, we may wonder why Dürer was holding his hand in front of his right eye. Could he have suffered from a paralysis with diplopia? If this were so, it would explain his compensatory turning of the head in the self-portraits and account for the fact that he holds his hand in front of his right eye. In any event, Dürer showed no sign of squinting at 13 years of age (Fig. 6), although the same defective position of the eye can be detected in a portrait of his mother (Fig. 7), which would imply that he might have inherited a tendency to squint. In contrast, no such defective position is seen in the well-known portrait of Dürer’s father that hangs in the National Gallery in London.

Was Dürer also nearsighted?

Dürer was a painter who idealized his subjects to a great extent; he was also marked by the religion of his time. He was a major theoretician and wrote many treatises on subjects such as perspective. He may have suffered from incomplete binocular vision due to his squinting. He may also have been
nearsighted in his squinting eye, which in many self-portraits appears to be larger than the other eye. In certain paintings, such as ‘Birth of Christ’ (Alte Pinakothek, Munich), the picture appears to be compressed, which could indicate some difficulty with binocular vision. It is also interesting that many of his paintings include extremely small, detailed figures. It would be difficult for a painter with normal vision to execute these miniatures, as well as his detailed copper plate engravings, without using a magnifying glass, which in all probability Dürer did not have. Possible nearsightedness in one eye would undeniably have made such painting easier.

References


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