## Knot(s) Made by Human Hands: Copying, Invention, and Intellect in the Work of Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer

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Between 1506 and 1507, during his second stay in Venice, Albrecht Dürer copied a series of engravings based on designs by Leonardo da Vinci to produce a set of six woodcuts (Figures 1-4). Scholars continue to puzzle over these ornamental patterns, yet their inquiries commonly focus on the prints' intended purpose. Their speculations are often intriguing, although they neglect to consider more important questions such as why Leonardo's designs appealed to Dürer, what compelled the northern Renaissance artist to copy them, and how one might understand these intricate patterns within the context of Renaissance invention. Additionally, since Dürer's impact on Renaissance print production tends to overshadow other artists' influences on his own work, these woodcuts provide a unique opportunity to consider how Leonardo's designs stimulated innovation in Dürer's later achievements.

Although there is no evidence that Leonardo ever made engravings or even made reference to them in his writings on art, these engravings undoubtedly represent his designs.<sup>2</sup> The designs almost certainly date between 1490-1500, and instances of similar interlaced patterns occur in his *Lady with an Ermine* (1489-90), in the Salle delle Asse's ceiling decoration from the Castello Sforzesco (1497-98), and in the *Mona Lisa* (begun in 1503).<sup>3</sup> The patterns are also prevalent throughout his notebooks dating from 1493-1508.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Vasari writes that Leonardo "spent much time in making a regular design of a series of knots so that the cord may be traced from

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- Wherever one finds Leonardo's designs or Dürer's woodcuts discussed or even briefly mentioned, one also finds a different opinion as to their purported function. For the most informative summaries, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Iconography of Dürer's 'Knots' and Leonardo's 'Concatenation," \*Art Quarterly 7 (Spring 1944): 109-128; Arthur M. Hind, "Two Unpublished Plates of the Series of Six 'Knots' Engraved after Designs by Leonardo da Vinci," \*Burlington Magazine 12 (October 1907/March 1908): 41-42; and Carlo Pedretti, \*Leonardo, \*Architect, trans. Sue Brill (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985) 296-298.
- Arthur M. Hind believes that it is somewhat strange that Leonardo, an artist who practiced and experimented in so many arts, "did not investigate the copper plate." Although we do not know who actually engraved the designs, Hind asserts that "the plates were certainly engraved after drawings of Leonardo." Arthur M. Hind, Early Italian Engraving, vol. 5 (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1970) 93.
- <sup>3</sup> Hind also cites the Cortile of the Casa Ponti as well as the sleeve of Young

one end to the other, the whole filling a round space. There is a fine engraving of this most difficult design, and in the middle are the words: 'Leonardi Vinci Academia.'"<sup>5</sup>

From the inscription, art historians once supposed that Leonardo directed a drawing school in Milan and that these engravings represented tickets to disputations held at the academy, prizes, or perhaps ex libris to be pasted in books from the Academy's library. However, such a school would not have existed in Leonardo's time and "Academia" could not have applied to an art academy, a type of school that was only introduced later in the sixteenth century by Vasari.<sup>6</sup> Because Leonardo incorporated the interlaced patterns within his portrait costumes, some scholars assume that the designs served as lace or embroidery models. Others have guessed that the engravings served as Leonardo's coat of arms since "Vinci," the town of his birth, also means "to bind" or "entwine." Many propose that these prints were conceived as textile designs, ornaments for pottery, labyrinths, or puzzle patterns for artists working in various crafts. But without further evidence it is impossible to know either Leonardo's intention for these engravings or Dürer's for his woodcuts. Although the possibilities are almost endless and the hypotheses engaging, what is of greater importance is why these interlaced patterns so intrigued Dürer. The designs exhibit extraordinary complexity, and they doubtless involved a great deal of time and concentration in their execution. Time was a particular concern

Woman's Profile (also known as Lady with a Pearl Hairnet) in the Ambrosiana (now attributed to Ambrogio de Predis). In addition, Paul Errara refers to the decoration of Cascina Pozzobonella (now in part demolished) in which he sees the same interlace pattern by Leonardo. Hind, Early Italian Engravings 93. Paul Errara, "L'Accademia di Leonardo da Vinci," Rassegna d'Arte (1901): 81.

- Windsor 12351, c. 1493-94; Codice Atlanticus 385, c. 1490; Codice Atlanticus 83, c. 1508; Codice Atlanticus 173, c. 1490; Codice Atlanticus 279, 1497-1500; Codice Atlanticus 23, 1485-87. Kim H. Veltman, Studies on Leonardo da Vinci, Linear Perspective and the Visual Dimensions of Science and Art (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1986) n.p.
- Giorgio Vasari in Leonardo, Paintings and Drawings, with the Leonardo Biography by Vasari, 1568, ed. Ludwig Goldscheider (1959; London: Phaidon Press, 1975) 12.
- A more likely situation is that of the first Platonic academy, where artists and intellectuals gathered informally to share ideas and discuss cultural activities. Nikolaus Pevsner credits Vasari as founder of the first "Accademia del Disegno" in 1563 in Rome. Nikolaus Pevsner, Academies of Art, Past and Present (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973) 25-40.

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of Dürer during his stay in Venice, and he often complained in letters to his close friend Willibald Pirckheimer about how much attention he had to devote to the commissioned altarpiece *Feast of the Rose Garlands*. Therefore, it seems certain that Dürer must have had compelling reasons to devote a significant measure of his precious time in Venice to copying Leonardo's intricate designs.

The six patterns are approximately uniform in size and all are based on similar schemes. Each design appears to consist of a single white thread that comprises several smaller units of repeating motifs on a black background. According to William Ivins, probably no one ever invented a wholly new and original ornamental design, and it appears as if Leonardo based his interlaced patterns on Islamic ornamented bowls that remained very much in vogue in Italy throughout the first half of the sixteenth century.8 Islamic metalworkers who had settled in Venice in the mid-fifteenth century produced similar complicated designs in gold and silver on brass or bronze bowls and trays. While the endlessly repeating motifs reminded the Muslim audience of God's indivisibility, the art of Islamic ornament also concerned itself with the science of geometry as well as advances in mathematics. Geometry seems to generate not only the basic motifs of circles that fit within squares, but the overall format of Leonardo's designs as well. Essentially, his patterns involve plane division, proportional systems, and methods of constructing various regular polygons. Thus, the original Islamic designs provided Leonardo with a means to observe how a compass, ruler, and strings could produce certain results, geometrical operations in which both he and Dürer shared a great interest. Both artists based their work on scientific systems in which geometry was a fundamental component, and both subscribed to the idea that artistic mastery resulted from a thorough command of geometry as well as skill or talent.9 As Dürer later claimed in his theoretical writings of 1512, "These two must be together, for the one without the other is of no avail."10

Geometry allowed artists to measure things and these measurements assured the rendering of objects in their correct proportions. Since the whole of Renaissance art concerned

- Dürer first mentions "a panel to paint for the Germans" (Feast of the Rose Garlands) to Pirckheimer on January 6, 1506. In his letter of February 7, 1506, Dürer mentions that he has only just begun to sketch in the picture since his hands were "so scabby" that he "could do no work with them." In his letter dated April 2, 1506, the artist writes: "I might have gained a great deal of money if I had not undertaken to paint the German picture. There is much work in it and I cannot get it quite finished before Whitsuntide." And on September 8, 1506: "I have earned much praise but little profit by [Feast of the Rose Garlands]. In the time it took to paint I could easily have earned 220 ducats, and now I have declined much work, in order that I may come home." Albrecht Dürer in William Martin Conway, Literary Remains of Albrecht Dürer (Cambridge, 1889) 47, 48, 51, 55.
- William M. Ivins, Jr. in Janet S. Byrne, Renaissance Ornament Prints and Drawings (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981) 11.
- According to Kim Veltman, "Geometrical patterns underlie the natural forms which Leonardo has mastered." And further, "geometrical coils and knots play a significant role in his [Leonardo's] natural representation." Studies

itself with faithful representation, one needed a thorough understanding of geometry in order to correctly represent threedimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. Additionally, within the theory and practice of perspective, plane geometry enabled the artist to work out the proper placement of objects in space. Plato's writings helped stimulate the rise of theoretical geometry during the Renaissance, and in the *Timaeus* he describes the genesis of geometric solids. Plato's account explains how God created a coherent universe out of chaos by assigning each of the four elements to the solids. Thus, He composed the cube for earth; the tetrahedron, or pyramid, for fire; the octahedron for air; and the icosahedron for water. However, since the fifth solid, the dodecahedron, cannot be constructed out of basic triangles, Plato writes that, God used the dodecahedron for arranging the constellations, or, translated literally, for "embroidering [the universe]." 1

In his *Painter's Manual*, begun in 1512 or earlier and published in 1525, Dürer demonstrates his comprehensive understanding of the Platonic solids by the fact that he represents them in a wholly original way. Instead of illustrating them more typically in perspective or stereographic images, he devised a method in which one could cut them out of paper and fold them along their facets to form an actual, three-dimensional model of the solid. He also developed tracery patterns based on the construction of regular polygons which he combined into "pavements;" these compositions anticipate Kepler's ideas of uniform polyhedra in his *Harmony of the World*. Italian geometricians of the later sixteenth century such as Galileo also absorbed Dürer's ideas, and Pietro Antonio Cataldi wrote a monograph in 1570 entitled *How to form pentagons*... as described by Albrecht Dürer. 12

The Platonic solids also fascinated Leonardo, who learned much about geometry from the highly respected mathematician Luca Pacioli. Pacioli, similar to many Renaissance artists, believed that mathematics was key to understanding nature and that geometry was particularly useful because it shared a common ground with art and science as well as the construction of the world. Leonardo purchased a copy of Pacioli's *Summa*, his monumental book on mathematics, algebra, and

on Leonardo da Vinci, 340-341.

- "Consummate mastery results, according to Dürer—and to all other thinkers of the Renaissance—from a perfect coordination of two accomplishments: theoretical insight, particularly a thorough command of geometry ('Kunst' in the original sense of 'knowledge'), and practical skill ('Brauch'). 'These two must be together,' Dürer says, 'for the one without the other is of no avail.'" Erwin Panofsky cites this quote from Dürer's preliminary draft of the introduction to his "Painter's Manual," later published in 1525. Erwin Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1955) 164.
- Plato, Timaeus, trans. H.D.P Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965) 77-78. E.H. Gombrich does not cite the edition of the Timaeus to which he refers, but it is interesting to note that he translates God's use of the dodecahedron, "for the universe in His decoration thereof." The Sense of Order, A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979) 67.
- Panofsky 257.

geometry published in Venice in 1494, and the two eventually met in 1496 at the court of Ludovico Sforza. The mathematician was also a member of the so-called "Leonardi Vinci Academia" and, in fact, he provides the only known contemporary record of the group's gathering at the Castello Sforzesco in February 1498.13 That same year Pacioli, who based his studies on Euclid's understanding of the five regular bodies, completed his De Divina Proportione, for which Leonardo supplied sixty illustrations, including designs of the five solids. In 1507 Dürer wrote to Pirckheimer from Venice that he hoped to travel to Bologna to learn the secrets of perspective, and many historians have suspected that Dürer is referring to studying with Pacioli, who was teaching at the University there.14 Pacioli's clear methods and procedures for solving mathematical problems would have attracted Dürer, who later wrote his own teaching manual in straightforward prose to explain abstract mathematical concepts. The fact that Leonardo had studied with Pacioli would also have appealed to Dürer. Although we do not know whether or not Dürer and Pacioli met, the artist did purchase a copy of Euclid's Elements before he left Venice.15

Dürer's interest in Leonardo had occupied him prior to his copying the ornamental engravings. In the early 1500s Dürer based a number of horse drawings directly on Leonardo's silverpoint and pen drawing Two Horsemen. 16 In Two Young Horsemen, Dürer mimicked the foreshortening, and in a series of subsequent drawings such as Animals Fighting he continued to copy the horses' heads.<sup>17</sup> Dürer's 1505 etching The Small Horse is his first work drawn in accordance with Leonardo's structural framework of a horse's proportions, and Dürer continued to rely on Leonardo's proportion studies in Knight, Death, and the Devil of 1513. While Leonardo's ideas may have reached Dürer through Pirckheimer, who was at Sforza's court in Milan concurrent with Leonardo, it is also possible that Dürer saw original drawings by Leonardo through Leonardo's patron and Pirckheimer's close friend, Galeazzo de San Severino, who visited Dürer's hometown of Nuremberg

- In his Divina Proportione (1509, Venice) Pacioli writes of an assembly of scholars, theologians, doctors, astrologers, and lawyers who participated in a "praiseworthy scientific duel" at the Castello Sforzesco on Februrary 19, 1498, where Leonardo's participation in the event "made his surname come true. That is, he wins out (vince) over every artist." Luca Pacioli in Pedretti 296.
- Dürer mentions a contact in Bologna whom he was keen to meet, "to learn the secrets of the art of perspective" in Conway 58.
- "This book [Euclid's Elements] I have bought at Venice for a ducat in the year 1507." Dürer in Conway 60.
- <sup>16</sup> Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England.
- 17 Two Young Horsemen, pen on paper, and Animals Fighting, Collection Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich.
- Dürer in Conway 56.
- Panofsky 153.

in 1502. However, Leonardo's ability to render in perfect proportions was not the only aspect of his work that attracted Dürer.

Leonardo's influence also appears in Christ Among the Doctors (1506), (Figure 5), a painting Dürer described to Pirckheimer as "the like of which I have never done before." 18 The work has few analogies in sixteenth century painting, and like his ornamental woodcuts, it is unique to Dürer as well, albeit amongst his painted works. Erwin Panofsky notes that Christ's head obviously goes back to a drawing by Leonardo, and although he does not associate it with a specific work, the doctors' heads clearly refer to Leonardo's Five Grotesque Heads from 1490.19 The use of half-length figures is typical of contemporaneous northern Italian painting, but here Dürer has arranged the figures so densely that one scholar describes them as forming a "wreath of heads." The painting's most striking feature is the central placement of the circular group of hands; from preparatory drawings it appears that Dürer conceived of the hands as an isolated motif from the very beginning.<sup>21</sup> When one considers that this painting is contemporary with the ornamental woodcuts, this strange configuration of twenty fingers becomes even more curious. Indeed, Heinrich Wölfflin likens the hands to late Gothic ornament, and Isolde Lübbeke contends that considering the arrangement of hands, books, and heads further entwined in a network of glances, one can perceive the fundamental influence of Leonardo's engravings in the painting's overall structure (Figure 4).<sup>22</sup> Because Dürer so proudly announced "Opus Quinque Dierum," or "the work of five days," on the bookmark in the painting's lower left corner, it has been suggested that Dürer emphasized his unusual speed as an allusion to Leonardo, who worked slowly and often left his paintings unfinished.<sup>23</sup> However, unlike Dürer's ornamental woodcuts or his horse drawings, this painting reflects neither his direct copying of Leonardo, nor is it a competition in skill. Instead, Christ Among the Doctors represents the artist's ability to learn by copying a master and in the process to arrive at unique

- Jane Campbell Hutchison, Albrecht Dürer, A Biography (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 88.
- 21 If one compares Dürer's Study of the Hands of the Twelve-Year Old Christ (1506), brush drawing on blue Venetian paper, to Christ Among the Doctors, it is obvious that the artist expanded the space between Christ's left hand fingers, adjusted the right hand in order to create more of a circular form in conjunction with the left, and eliminated the elliptical contour of Christ's sleeve to further emphasize the radial arrangement of fingers in the painting.
- Heinrich Wölfflin, The Art of Albrecht Dürer, trans. Alastair and Heide Grieve (London and New York: Phaidon, 1971) 153; Isolde Lübbeke, The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Early German Painting 1350-1550, trans. Margaret Thomas Will (London: Sotheby's Publications, 1991) 237.
- Scholars commonly agree that the "five days" may apply only to Dürer's actual execution of the painting and not to his planning of the composition in addition to preparatory studies. Lübbeke 237.

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inventions of his own. In fact, Dürer took the ideas that he discovered in copying Leonardo's ornamental designs and found new ways in which to incorporate them into his own work.

As Peter Parshall has so rightly noted, it is out of continuous practice in imitation that the artist cultivates endless new additions to the world.24 This involves not only adding original elements to a given composition, but also the ability to recombine images or parts of images into wholly new forms or ideas. This becomes apparent in close observation of Dürer's ornamental woodcuts. Mere copies repeat their source line by line; however, although Dürer paid meticulous attention to Leonardo's designs, he also made important additions to the latter's interlaced patterns. In each of the four corners Dürer turned Leonardo's simple outline into foliate motifs and appended closely symmetrical calligraphic flourishes. At first glance, one might think these additions are simple embellishments to Leonardo's original models. However, Dürer's later engravings suggest that these adornments are precursors to a type of bilateral symmetry in which the artist used line not only for ornamentation, but also as a way in which to create new images. An early instance of bilateral ornamentation occurs, aptly enough, in Dürer's 1512 Conjoined Twins of Ertingen (Figure 6), where he framed the twins' images with mirrorlike scrolls that mimic the abnormal configuration of the twins' conjoined bodies. Dürer expanded upon this idea even further throughout the 1515 Prayerbook of Maximilian where such calligraphic inventions are legion. On the page in which King David introduces the first Psalm of the Book of Hours, Dürer created a lion's face out of an apparently single continuous line (Figure 7) as an attribute of David's kingly power. On the page illustrating St. Apollonia, Dürer once again turned his calligraphic ornamentation into an image, this time of a man's face (Figure 8). These marginal decorations are loose, yet complex inventions that resulted from Dürer's mental as well as manual dexterity. They confirm that from copying Leonardo's designs, Dürer's work with a ruler and compass led to an art of pattern-making in which curving lines and the flourish of the pen could turn abstract designs into representational imagery.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, concepts such as symmetry, perspective, and proportion were not only descriptions of structure in the world, but also constructs of man's intellect. For instance, when Alberti tried to describe symmetry, he had to do so at length because he lacked the

Peter Parshall, "Albrecht Dürer and the Axis of Meaning," Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Bulletin, 50.2 (1997): 8.

developed critical vocabulary.<sup>25</sup> The same is true of Dürer, who resorted to expressions such as *Fischblase* (fish bladder) for ellipses or *Schneckenline* (snail line) for spirals since there were no exact words for such constructions in his lexicon. Thus, it took an artist of exceptional intellect to not only investigate these constructions based on mathematical premises, but to understand them so thoroughly that he could translate these ideas into new and inventive forms.

The poet Helius Eobanus Hessus' eulogy attributed Dürer's remarkable skill to the divine. Likewise, the artist's early biographer, Camerarius, also implies a direct link between Dürer's hand and the hand of God by his declaration that, "You might swear [Dürer] employed a rule, square, or compasses to draw lines, which, in fact, he drew with the brush, pencil or pen, unaided by artificial means."26 Joseph Koerner suggests that Dürer's 1500 Self-Portrait exemplifies an acheiropoeton, or an image not made by human hands, by virtue of its stillness, symmetry, and flawlessly smooth surface.<sup>27</sup> This analogy between God's hand and the hand of the artist was without precedent, and to equate or even compare an artist with God would have been blasphemous from Dürer's point of view. Instead, within the context of Renaissance ideologies and their new emphasis upon man, Dürer's achievements could only be acclaimed as expressions of human intellect and never of a divine hand.

To return to the earlier question of what attracted Dürer to Leonardo's ornamental designs, we can conclude with several possibilities. The Islamic motifs may have initially appealed to Dürer's taste for the exotic, and their intricate patterns posed a challenge to his draughtsmanship. The imprint, "Leonardi Vinci Academia," would have further prompted Dürer to copy the hand of a master. In his Netherlands diary, Dürer referred to the woodcuts as knots, which has led some historians to suppose that the designs were used in embroidery patterns.<sup>28</sup> However, the word "knot" also implied, as it does today, theoretical problems, and therefore his use of the word might have indicated that the designs presented geometrical complexities that Dürer wished to unravel or figure out. Dürer's ornamental woodcuts demonstrate his extraordinary aptitude as a graphic artist, but they also exhibit his ability to comprehend complicated geometric constructions and mathematical methodologies. While geometrical bodies could best illustrate the projection of forms in space, the more complex polygons such as the icosahedron and the dodecahedron actually played little part in the practice of painting, thus their

<sup>25 &</sup>quot;We must take great care to ensure that even the minutest elements are so arranged in their level, alignment, number, and appearance, that the right matches the left, the top matches bottom, adjacent matches adjacent, and equal matches equal . . . as though twinned." Leon Battista Alberti, On the Art of Building in Ten Books, ed. Joseph Rykwert and Haig Beck (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988) 310.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) 145.

<sup>27</sup> Koerner 80-126.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I gave Master Dietrich the glass-painter an Apocalypse and the 6 Knots." From Dürer's diary entry dated between December 14, 1520 and April 6, 1521 in Conway113. In the Middle High German, that is, the language of Dürer, "knoten" conveyed both literal and metaphorical meanings: "Verdickung, beim Menschen sind das die Hand- und Fußknöchel Verdickungen beim Holz und an Pflanzenstengeln." Alternately, "ist 'knode' schon im Mittelhochdeutschen auch ein Rätsel, eine Rätselfrage, ein hindernder Grund, eine Hauptschwierigkeit (a riddle, a puzzle, or a difficulty to overcome)." Karl Bartsch, Meisterlieder der Kolmarer Handschrift (Stuttgart, 1862) 268.

elaborate construction presented an intellectual challenge as well as an opportunity to display virtuoso mastery and skill. By examining Dürer's later prints, one can establish that the designs spurred his growing ability to understand mathematical premises, furthered his knowledge of geometric solids, and enhanced his instruction in proportion, but they also led to

the invention of his highly innovative symmetrical compositions. Perhaps divine intervention inspired Dürer's motives, but his woodcuts portray, inarguably, knots made by human hands.

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Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *Knot with a Heart-Shaped Shield*, c. 1506-7, woodcut, 272 x 211 mm. Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, The Leo Steinberg Collection, 2002.



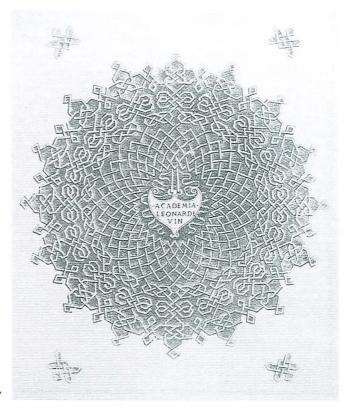


Figure 2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Knot with a Heart-Shaped Shield*, c. 1490-1500, engraving, 293 x 204 mm. Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

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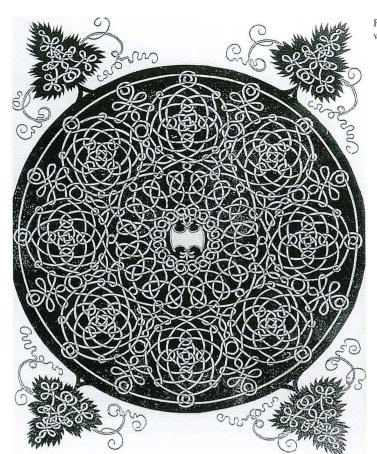


Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer, Knot with a Scalloped Shield, c. 1506-7, woodcut,  $272 \times 211$  mm. British Museum, London.

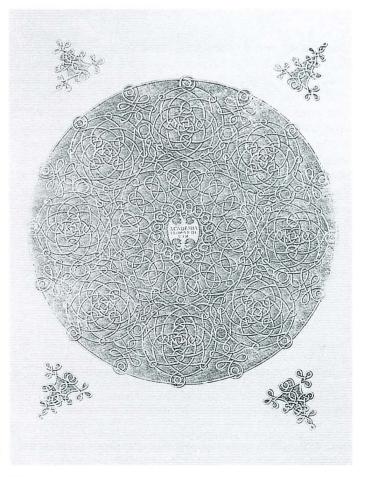


Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci, Knot with a Scalloped Shield, c. 1490-1500, engraving,  $292 \times 212$  mm. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



 $Figure \ 5. \ Albrecht \ D\"{u}rer, \ \textit{Christ Among the Doctors}, \ 1506, oil \ on \ panel, \ 65 \ x \ 80 \ cm. \ Museo \ Thyssen-Bornemisza, \ Madrid.$ 

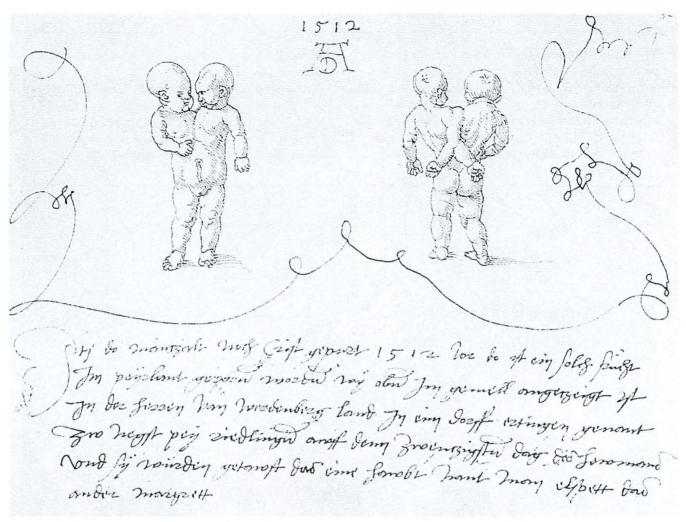


Figure 6. Albrecht Dürer, Conjoined Twins of Ertingen, 1512, pen and black ink, 158 x 208 mm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

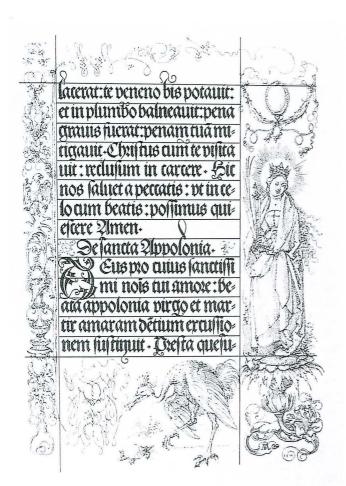


Figure 7. Albrecht Dürer, *The Book of Hours of the Emperor Maximilian I* (Prayer to St. Apollonia, folio 24r), *c.* 1515, pen and ink on vellum, 195 x 280 mm. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.

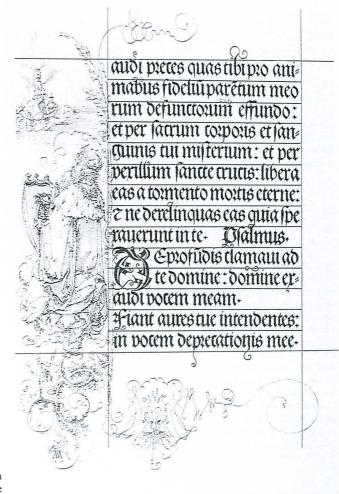


Figure 8. Albrecht Dürer, *The Book of Hours of the Emperor Maximilian I* (Psalm 130: 1-2, folio 16v), c. 1515, pen and ink on vellum, 195 x 280 mm. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich.