

**Romedio Schmitz-Esser, Um 1500. Europa zur Zeit
Albrecht Dürers, Darmstadt (Wissenschaftliche
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This book is both about and not really about Albrecht Dürer. Rather the Nuremberg artist and his art provide a framework for exploring life in Western Europe in the decades around 1500. Romedio Schmitz-Esser, a historian at Heidelberg University, devised a very clever structure for investigating a wide range of topics. Each of the fifty short chapters begins with an illustration of a painting, drawing, or print by Dürer. These serve as entry points for the subjects raised in the respective chapter. Collectively, these short essays guide the reader through the lifecycle from birth to death and burial. In between, the author explores dozens of issues of everyday existence from family, education, marriage, and gender roles to the economic, social, legal, and religious dynamics within a city like Nuremberg. Others tackle topics such as food, poverty, entertainment, nature, and contacts with the extra-European world. Chapters on health, hygiene, sickness, and old age lead inevitably to discussions about dying and death.

The choice of Dürer as the vehicle for exploring a changing world is appropriate. We are far better informed about the Nuremberg master's life than for any other early modern Northern European artist and for most other contemporary historical figures. In addition to his vast artistic output, Dürer penned a remarkable literary corpus including family documents, personal letters, an extensive Netherlandish journal (1520–1521), theoretical treatises, and even poetry. Dürer's personal observations about the people he met and the world he encountered provide a unique window into his age or, to use the author's words, »through the eyes of Dürer« (454).

Schmitz-Esser packs each chapter with a wealth of insightful observations. Chapter 1 (»Birth«) is illustrated with a drawing of the Nativity that Dürer authored around 1492/93 while he was a journeyman on the upper Rhine. The author does not discuss the sketch beyond using its subject to delve into the realities of being born at that time. Statistically, one in five children died either in birth or before the age of five. Dürer's mother, Barbara Holper, bore eighteen children. Of these, only Albrecht and his brothers Endres and Hans survived to adulthood. Such losses occurred regardless of social class. For instance, only two of the six children born to Eleonora of Portugal and Emperor Friedrich III lived. The author delves into the roles and civic regulation of midwives as well as into the first books on obstetrics. Given the mortality rates, there was a *Nottaufe* or rush to baptize the newborn. It was believed that the soul of an unbaptized child would be consigned to Hell.



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Church and civic records commonly listed baptism, not birth, dates. Yet Albrecht Dürer the Elder, the artist's father, documented the day, hour of birth, name, and godparent for each of his eighteen children. Schmitz-Esser asks whether this detail marks the worth of an individual's life in new ways. Others used such precise birth information to chart horoscopes to understand the influence of stars and planets on one's life and, through the humors, one's body (see also chapter 44 on the four temperaments). Because of high death rates, certain names might be given more than once within a family. Dürer's parents named three sons Johannes (or Hans) and two Sebald. Certain names might be carried over for generations in families. Other children were named often after their godparents, name-day saints, or a popular saint, such as Catherine. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of methods for introducing cow's milk if the mother died or could not produce milk. Alternatively, a wet nurse might be hired. This short summary typifies the variety of topics considered within a single chapter.

Dürer's woodcut of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse introduces chapter 33 on poverty. Schmitz-Esser cites the city of Florence in 1427 where forty percent of the populace was too poor to pay any taxes. The poverty level was defined as anyone earning less than 14 gulden annually. Most workers in European towns were day laborers who were paid on average about 20 gulden per year. Only a few individuals enjoyed a guaranteed salary. So that economic insecurity or uncertainty was a real concern for much of the populace. Wills and last testaments often included the donation of alms in exchange for prayers for the soul of the deceased. Towns and the Church attempted to aid the poor. Wealthy individuals, such as Jakob Fugger who founded the *Fuggerei* in Augsburg and Matthäus Landauer who established the Twelve Brothers' House for impoverished craftsmen in Nuremberg, highlight private actions to help the less fortunate. Schmitz-Esser discusses civic efforts to identify the worthy poor. This included the regulation of beggars; those approved sported a *Bettlerplakette* or civic plaque. Education was recognized as an invaluable means of moral integration and social advancement. Nuremberg's four Latin schools accepted poor students after the parents were interviewed to confirm the child's need. Deserving local poor students wore a yellow symbol on their clothing while non-local students displayed a white symbol. According to Nuremberg's school ordinance of 1505, these children could be imprisoned if caught begging or singing for money. The peasants or rural poor often lived under worse conditions.

On a lighter note, Schmitz-Esser examines music, festivals, and theater in chapter 35. Dürer's woodcut for the title page of Terence's *Comedies* with its musicians and actors introduces the various roles music played in religious and secular cultures. Nuremberg's school ordinance of 1505 designated times for music and singing. The town's famed *Meistersingers* were craftsmen performing in the plays of Hans Sachs. While the patricians held their dances in special dance halls or, in Nuremberg's case, in the *Rathaus*, their expected physical decorum contrasted with the

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unruly dancing of the peasants. Dürer recorded his impressions of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary celebration in Antwerp in 1520 with its procession of guild members and its theatrical features. Nuremberg, like most towns, had its own religious pageants as well as its Schembart or carnival festival. Such events shaped the rhythm of daily life.

Schmitz-Esser provides an excellent introduction to this fascinating period. As these three examples illustrate, every chapter is filled with interesting historical and topical observations. There is nothing new presented about Dürer, but his world is contextualized nicely. The book is aimed mostly at general readers and students though the author has much to offer to the curious specialist. Since the brief endnotes are limited mainly to citing quotation sources, readers must turn to the bibliography, which is ordered by chapter or groups of related chapters, for relevant literature.

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