

*Delighting in Folds*

*Drapery in the Graphic Work  
of Albrecht Dürer*

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The figure of the Virgin in Dürer's engraved *Madonna by the Wall* of 1514 (fig. 1) sits in calm tranquility, despite the squirming body of the Christ Child on her lap and the visually active folds of drapery surrounding her form. Folds ripple from her veil, falls in stiff crinkles from her mantle, and settles in heavy layers over her feet. More than a simple costume, the drapery engulfing this figure alternately functions to reveal the body beneath and to frame and focus on the Virgin Mary, while digressing into folds whose apparent purpose is to inspire fascination with fabric for its own sake.

A quiet presence, often overlooked, drapery is an aspect of art that challenges even master artists. Throughout Albrecht Dürer's career, which encompassed a wide range of subjects, drapery played a subtle but significant role, for his constant delight in the complexity of folds of fabric never diminished. An exploration of this involvement can reveal much about this major artist's attitude towards his art.

## Introduction

"It is somewhat curious that this important subject should have received so little attention from writers upon Art."

—G. Woolliscroft Rhead, *The Treatment of Drapery in Art*, 1904

In his 1904 textbook *The Treatment of Drapery*, G. Woolliscroft Rhead, an artist and scholar, lamented the lack of attention to drapery in art schools and in the study of art history.<sup>1</sup> A century later, Gen Doy pointed out that, with a handful of exceptions,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Woolliscroft Rhead, *The Treatment of Drapery* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1904), 4.

nothing significant had changed in scholarship on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, studies that treat drapery as anything more than a stylistic identifier are almost nonexistent. Very few of these authors take the time to shed the art historical connotations of the word “drapery” to remind themselves of what the word really refers to—a flat panel of cloth.

It is the hand of the artist that transforms the flatness into depth, that manipulates the inanimate object into a meaningful presence within the work. Without the artist’s arrangement, fabric—like a sheet of paper—is nothing more than a two-dimensional object. Once actively shaped into form, the common substance of fabric becomes an endlessly variable material. Unlike static objects, its response to gravity shows the invisible presence of wind. Moreover, each type of cloth reacts to natural effects in a different way. Though often found arranged over the human figure, drapery can be studied without a human body beneath it. What makes drapery more than simply fabric is that it can be studied on its own, with or without the figure beneath it.

Its treatment and use varied throughout the centuries. For the classical Greeks, clinging fabric served as a mechanism to reveal the beautifully perfected bodies they revered. In the Middle Ages, column-like blocks of drapery hid the

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<sup>2</sup> Gen Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2002), 1-2. Doy, 21, summarizes the lectures on aesthetics that philosopher Georg Wilhelm Hegel delivered in the 1820s, which focused mainly on drapery’s ties to the Ancient Greeks. Cecil Gould’s *The Draped Figure* (Oxon: H. Stone & Son, 1972) gives a brief overview of the “dialogue” between cloth on the human body in the Renaissance and Baroque. Anne Hollander’s *Seeing Through Clothes* (New York: Viking, 1975) has much more breadth, but ultimately views drapery only through a stylistic lens. Doy’s study remains one of the only ones that presses scholarship beyond a stylistic/historical relationship and into a deeper reading.

material solidity of the human form, encouraging viewers to reflect on the world beyond, rather than the here-and-now. In the Renaissance, a time when antique form and values were being revived, Humanistic values as applied to Christian imagery changed drapery's function once more.

Once mastered, then, drapery, with its multiple connotations, can be a powerful tool for the artist. With the dramatically wind-blown robe of an angel, he or she can heighten narrative or devotional intensity, or soften the mood by allowing a mantle's delicate rolls of cloth to tumble downwards. Because of its intricacies, drapery is a challenge to depict; but for a master artist, it can offer a welcome opportunity to display his virtuosity.

In the minds of certain artists, this challenge may become something of an obsession—an occurrence that was certainly the case for Albrecht Dürer. Both Domenico Ghirlandaio and Leonardo da Vinci, two artists with whose work Dürer was familiar, executed numerous drapery studies that illustrate two of the most common ways in which drapery was treated in the mind of an artist. Ghirlandaio's sketches, like those of many Renaissance artists, were collected into a portfolio, used throughout his career by his workshop, and repeated in a number of his works.<sup>3</sup> Shortly afterwards, the ever-inventive Leonardo explored the subject with a more scientific eye, in order to explore and understand how cloth functions under

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the drapery on the figures in his workshop's so-called "Grassi Sheet" (*Two Female Figures*, unknown private collection) is repeated and adapted in three scenes in the Tornabuoni Chapel in S. Maria Novella, Florence and in his Sistine Chapel fresco, *Calling of Saints Peter and Andrew*. In turn, the original sketch was probably derived from Fra Filippo Lippi's *Miraculous Birth of the Virgin*. See Francis Ames-Lewis, "Drapery 'Pattern'-Drawings in Ghirlandaio's Workshop and Ghirlandaio's Early Apprenticeship," *Art Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (Mar., 1981: 49-62), 50, 53.

different conditions of lighting and arrangement over the human figure specifically; his famous *Drapery Study for a Seated Figure* (late 1470s, fig. 2) in the Louvre is an example. For Ghirlandaio, drapery was a necessary tool in clarifying his narrative and compositions; for Leonardo, it was also something to dissect, comprehend, and master for its own sake. For Dürer, it was both, and more.

Throughout his life, Dürer focused intently on mastering its depiction and exploring its possibilities to the utmost. Significantly, it is always the aspect of the composition that is most developed in his unfinished works and incomplete sketches. In the early sketch of the *Holy Family* in the Erlangen Graphische Sammlung der Universität (c. 1491-2, fig. 3; verso of self-portrait sketch), the bodies of Joseph, Mary, and Christ are sketchy and only tentatively rendered, yet the drapery is completely articulated.<sup>4</sup> The upper body of a later Madonna (1514, fig. 4) is drawn so lightly that she seems almost ghostlike compared to the bundle of cloth that is her lap. Drapery was often the focus even in unfinished paintings by the artist, as in the *Salvator Mundi* (c. 1504, fig. 5) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in which Christ's robe and hair are worked through almost to completion, while all else is left as preparatory underdrawing.

In 1493, the twenty-two-year-old Dürer made a self-portrait drawing with an unusual and striking series of sketches that explore the behavior of cloth (fig. 6),

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<sup>4</sup> As Joseph Koerner suggests, this drawing is probably a copy of a print or drawing by Martin Schongauer, whose work Dürer admired greatly. Nevertheless, even when copying from another artist, Dürer was compelled to depict only the part in which he was most interested: the drapery. See Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 10.

that illustrates inventiveness, an important quality in a young Renaissance artist.<sup>5</sup> The recto shows Dürer's hand and a pillow, and sketch on the verso (fig. 7) elaborated on the pillow's simple form: it has been punched into six different shapes. The simplicity of this soft object—two flat sheets of cloth sewn together, with stuffing between them—provided a unique form whose seemingly endless possibilities for complicated shapes clearly fascinated the young Dürer. These stuffed sheets become imbued with a liveliness that foreshadows Dürer's future delight in the unexpected qualities he would bestow on cloth.

According to Joseph Koerner, this sheet of sketches suggests that the young artist viewed the depiction of arranged fabric as an opportunity to practice his own creative process.<sup>6</sup> Assuming, as he does, that Dürer worked from his self-portrait to his hand to the pillow first, and then drew the pillow series from top left to bottom right, the sheet shows Dürer's characteristic desire to not only comprehend the form itself but control the way it functions.<sup>7</sup> In drawing these forms, Dürer was working without any known precedent of an earlier artist, as he had likely been doing in the aforementioned Erlangen sketch (fig. 3). He is engrossed entirely by the challenge of setting out to draw a pillow punched into a variety of shapes—

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<sup>5</sup> Italian painter and theorist Gian Paolo Lomazzo (1538-1600), living slightly later than Dürer, implies that one of the most desired traits for a successful, well-educated Renaissance artist was the ability to create innovative works, in Gian Paolo Lamazzo, *Idea del tempio della pittura* (1590, in *Gian Paolo Lomazzo: Scritti sulle arti*, ed. Roberto Paolo Ciardi [Florence: Marchi and Bertolli, 1973-74], I:272) cited by Evonne Levy, "Ideal and the Reality of the Learned Artist: The Schooling of Italian and Netherlandish Artists," in *Children of Mercury: The Education of Artists in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Providence?: Brown University?, 1984, 20-27), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Koerner, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Koerner fittingly calls them sculptures.<sup>8</sup> True to the keen mind of a developing master, he also takes liberties: certain whorls of fabric could not have existed in reality, like the nubs of curled cloth at the on the left side of the center left pillow or at the top of the bottom right one.<sup>9</sup> He literally stretches and twists the object to investigate what kinds of surprising visual effects he is able to achieve.

The result is a series of shapes simultaneously so simple and complex that the viewer becomes lost in his or her own study of their intricate surfaces, the volumes within, and the resulting droops and curls of this object of common use. Repeated on the page, the pillow becomes something of a character itself—both an object study and a character study, as if Dürer were portraying the same person six times. The pillows seem to be posed like models, lounging along the page (at center right) and sticking out protruding bellies with a cock of its head (at lower right).

Thus it is clear that even early in his career Dürer was drawn to arranging cloth in ways that give them interesting visual characteristics. His obsession with drapery, first seen in early, unfinished sketches, would continue throughout his life. As he repeatedly works with forms of cloth over and over again, he challenges himself to create the illusion of three dimensionality on a two dimensional surface (the drawing or print). But he also is captivated by the nature of the cloth itself: a form that is inherently two dimensional until it falls or is arranged into forms that occupy shape, which he explores in a variety of different contexts.

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<sup>8</sup> Some scholars (including Koerner, 12-13) have seen faces within the folds; see Walter L. Strauss, *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer* (New York: Abaris Books, 1975), I:148. Anamorphic forms may exist elsewhere in Dürer's work; see footnote 27 for further discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Koerner, 12.

## 1. Cradled in Cloth

Dürer returns to the subject of the seated Madonna and Child multiple times in his career.<sup>10</sup> Alongside setting, figure type, symbol, and engraving technique, Dürer employs drapery to create a series of prints that vary greatly in mood and intention. Like the concept of the *Six Pillows* sketch, the subject specifically allows Dürer to experiment endlessly with variations of complex, hanging fabric. Inherently more elaborate than drapery falling from a single point of support (e.g., the shoulders of a standing figure), fabric suspended from two supports introduces more considerations for the artist: it stretches between two points; arcs fall from that stretch; cloth drops directly from the knees; and excess fabric collects in piles at the feet of the figure.<sup>11</sup> One wonders if it what drew Dürer so repeatedly to the subject of the Madonna and Child was largely his fascination with the potential of this complicated arrangement of material.

By studying the drapery of these figures, it becomes evident that Dürer's treatment of the standard type of the seated Madonna and Child as a whole develops and changes throughout his career, but always seems a vehicle for artistic experimentation, even as he addresses the devotional purpose of the prints. The series can be divided into three separate groupings. In the earliest set of prints,

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<sup>10</sup> Dürer depicts the theme ten times in engravings, and this chapter will focus on four of these prints. He also paints the subject at least six times; notably, the painted works almost always show the Madonna at bust-height or even closer, whereas the prints always depict her entire figure.

<sup>11</sup> Rhead, 32, gives an excellent technical description of drapery suspended between two points that informed the above explanation.

encompassing the period 1495 and 1503,<sup>12</sup> Dürer hones his skills as a printmaker and tries out different compositional arrangements. These experimentations adjust the level of intimacy between the displayed figures and, in turn, the work's overall effect.

In *The Madonna with the Monkey* (c. 1498, fig. 8), the Virgin is seated on a wooden bench, looking somberly at the Christ Child, who is teasing a bird with a bundle of cloth. The figures appear in a fenced enclosure against a sprawling landscape behind them, situated in a fenced enclosure, a monkey seated at the Madonna's feet. In contrast to the earlier, more Schongauer-like angular drapery seen in the Erlangen sketch (fig. 3) or in the earlier *Holy Family with the Dragonfly* (c. 1495, fig. 9) engraving, Dürer's own characteristic style has begun to appear in the complicated, delicate curls of cloth that are suspended over the Madonna's lap. The effect of highlighting along hemlines and curved crosshatching over shadows are further examples of Dürer's understanding of the forms he depicts.

Drapery serves a distinct role in the print's composition, leading the viewer along "U"-shaped guidelines that seem to cradle the figures in the center of the work. We follow the Virgin's downward gaze to the Christ Child, along the deep shadow of her mantle and across her knees to the Bible on which her hand rests; from there to the curve of her skirts to the Monkey and back up to her face. This visual motion gently encompasses the two figures in a compact shape that establishes the main focus of the composition. Instead of the more traditional axial composition seen in the *Dragonfly* engraving, the "U"-composition still leads the

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<sup>12</sup> This grouping includes *The Holy Family with the Dragonfly* (c. 1495), *The Madonna with the Monkey* (c. 1498), and *Madonna on a Grassy Bench* (1503).

direction of viewing, but in a much subtler way. A somewhat less conventional design would surely have encouraged the devout viewer to look longer and to think more deeply about the relationship between the figures. As Christ toys with the bird,<sup>13</sup> Mary looks on solemnly, perhaps aware of her son's fate.

Some five years later, *Madonna on a Grassy Bench* (1503, fig. 10), illustrates a different approach to presenting these two figures, whose undulating drapery frames them in a decidedly more geometric way. The fabric here is quite different from that of the Madonna in *Monkey* even though they are both in a seated pose, gazing at the child in their lap. The stiffer fabric does not droop between the knees of this older Madonna; instead, her lap is a nearly flat plane, but for the shadow of an overhanging conical fold falling along the center axis, which directs the eye to the nursing infant. The softness of the rolls of cloth suggests a dress worn many times. Well-worn layers create recesses of shadow and suggest vacuous pockets of fabric that rest at the slope of the enclosure. The pileup of such a pattern, at the left in her mantle, illustrates the arbitrary, almost abstract nature into which Dürer sometimes allows these forms to grow.

These trapezoidal quality of the folds create a compositional frame very different than the "U"-curves in the *Madonna with the Monkey*. Here, the Virgin's bent head and her veil create a triangle above the Christ Child; her apron serves as another below him, and the huge expanse of drapery around them creates yet one larger triangle that grounds the grouping. This diamond centers the nursing of the Christ Child, perhaps the most intimate exchange between mother and son. By

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<sup>13</sup> The bird is a symbol of the human soul, and foreshadows Christ's future role as redeemer of mankind.

compacting the figures in this mandorla-like shape, Dürer intensifies the effect for a viewer, who, using the small print for devotion, would surely be struck by the sweetness of their intimacy.

Seven years later, at the beginning of the most mature period of his art (including Madonnas from the years 1503-14), Dürer wrote, “As the [ancient Greeks and Romans] used Venus to express the most sublime beauty, so we should depict the same elegant and refined figure of the purest Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.”<sup>14</sup> This belief certainly describes Dürer’s attitude towards presenting the Virgin in the middle of his career, at the time when his most ambitious and celebrated works were made, one of which being his *Madonna by the Wall* (1514, fig. 1).<sup>15</sup>

This Madonna is monumental: the very definition of refinement and elegance, her calm features and repose encompass the print. Dürer now turns the “U” composition into an egg-like frame that, over and over, returns the viewer to the faces of the Madonna and her son. The skirts trailing on the ground, the dramatic sweep of her huge mantle, her bent elbow, and her rippling veil all lead directly back to the Christ Child, the sole focus of her attention. The drapery is further complicated by the fact that, unlike the *Madonna with the Monkey* or the *Madonna on a Grassy Bench*, the entire figure is turned in three-quarter view. Like the trails of the landscape behind her, the edges of the mantle lying across her lap and the leftmost peaks of cloth at her feet zigzag over each other, making arrowheads that dart along the surfaces, enlivening shiny satin and deepening the shadows of heavy

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<sup>14</sup> David Hotchkiss Price, *Albrecht Dürer’s Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 66.

<sup>15</sup> *Madonna with a Pear* (1511) and *Madonna by the Tree* (1513) are two earlier examples that fall into the more mature period of Dürer’s Madonna prints.

cotton skirts. It is so detailed that one can discern the puffed-out pockets of air beneath the tube-like forms that fall from her knees, sometimes collapsed with tiny indentations. Each tube, every indent, all the twists convey Dürer's pure delight at drafting drapery so deliberately arranged that its intricacy often draws the viewer's mind away from the narrative of the print and into the abstraction of its folds.

This older Madonna is more aware than the solemn young lady with a monkey; she is not blissfully lost in nursing her child, as is the woman sitting on a grassy bench. Dürer complicates the relationship between the two: against deteriorating stone steps, entirely covered by elaborately arranged clothing, this Madonna seems more aware of her son's future. Though the drapery tells us of her pose, the only uncovered part of her body is her face. The rest is understood only through the mountainous shapes of her veil, mantle, and skirts. They create a constricting frame around the two figures, centering them and binding them together—even though symbols like the apple and crumbling steps hint at what is to come.

In the late 1510s, following the interests of his good friend Willibald Pirckheimer's circle, Dürer read Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, and refers to them in letters; further, one of the artist's manuscripts in the British Museum lists sixteen of the theologian's works, probably an inventory or reading list.<sup>16</sup> For a time Dürer continued to produce prints and paintings with Marian themes, but by 1521 Luther had begun to lecture on her role in the religion, implying that the intense worship of the Virgin that had become common was in fact dangerously close to

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Campbell Hutchinson, *Albrecht Dürer: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 124.

worshipping a false idol.<sup>17</sup> From that point forward, no more prints of the Madonna and Child appear. In fact, in 1523, on a woodcut by Michael Ostendorfer showing pilgrims worshipping a large statue of the Madonna, Dürer wrote: “This spectre [i.e. the statue] has risen at Regensberg against Holy Scripture... God help us that we not dishonor his mother in this fashion, but honor Jesus Christ. Amen.”<sup>18</sup>

As Luther and his ideas rose to prominence, Dürer’s Madonna prints (executed in the years 1518-1520) changed dramatically. The latest in the series—*Madonna with the Swaddled Infant* (1520, fig. 11)<sup>19</sup>—forms a striking conclusion to this series of explorations, for it appears to speak to the changing political and religious attitude of the time. A strict triangle that reaches to the edges of the print, the Madonna’s monumental and arbitrarily proportioned body appears weighty and solid, almost cumbersome. The stiff skirts do not stretch so much as cover the Madonna’s knees, forming diagonal pleats and crisp edges. The pleats create a starburst in and of themselves, conversing with the vibrating lines of the sky above; originating in the crevasse formed by her left knee and calf, this starburst reaching up to create the cone of her lower half. With the shadowing, her knees and lap give this starburst the illusion of mass, resembling a prism. In contrast, the fussy ruffles of her deflated, rubbery sleeves give little warmth to the act of cradling.

Utter frontality and axial bisymmetry add to the almost confrontational quality of this print. Intimacy is present, but not the focus: instead, as we have seen in the example of her clothing, strong contrasts deepen its devotional intent. The

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 180-81.

<sup>19</sup> Other prints in this later period are *The Virgin Crowned by Two Angels* (1518), *The Madonna Nursing* (1519), and *The Madonna Crowned by an Angel* (1520).

Madonna's form is made up of planes (of fabric) creating volumetric forms; the infant is swaddled into a tight and rounded cylindrical shape. Her expression, firm and resigned with an underlying tender sadness, contrasts with the innocent peace of the sleeping infant. The mass of the stiff, geometrical drapery imparts a sense of strength to the Madonna, whose hands both support and protect her sleeping son.

Dürer offers yet another schema for a devotional print featuring the Madonna and Child. Though there are no apples or birds in this work to foreshadow the infant's role, a viewer contemplating this print would understand the complex expression of the Virgin and the layers of contrasts in this print. Responding to the changing times of the burgeoning Protestant Reformation, Dürer strips the scene of symbols, structures, and mantles to show the relationship between the Mother of God and her son as purely as possible—although he cannot resist a few rouge, rubbery ruffles or the overlapping edges of a fur-lined skirt.

With every work, Dürer redefines the limits of his experiments, employing drapery, the material that so fascinated him, to depict not an object or a natural occurrence, but a concept: the intimate relationship between a mother and son. As he creates arrangements of cloth that alternately nestles or engulfs the holy figures, Dürer makes drapery a vehicle for his own love of experimenting with its variable forms.

## **2. Unveiling Experimentations**

The sudarium, or Veronica's veil, is a unique example among the types of fabric Dürer depicts. Although the story itself is not part of any gospel, surfacing instead

the middle ages, it became an extremely popular image for artists to depict in the fifteenth century. According to the legend,<sup>20</sup> Veronica was a pagan woman who took pity on the suffering Christ along the road to Calvary. She wiped his brow of blood and sweat with a cloth that, according to Koerner, she had planned to sell at the market, and was rewarded when the perfect, exact image of Christ appeared on the fabric. Because the image on that sweat cloth (literally “sudarium” in Latin) was said to have been made by the hand of Christ himself, it is also called the vero icon. In art it is a cult object meant to be displayed to a worshipper.

It is not surprising that such a complex, layered subject is one that Dürer was compelled to depict. A print itself is, after all, a kind of vero icon: an image imprinted on a flat page or sheet, created by a master artist. Further interesting is that Veronica, according to some versions of the story, had intended to sell the sweat cloth: a print, able to be reproduced over and over again, was of course also meant to be sold.<sup>21</sup> Dürer shows the sudarium in differing circumstances three times in his print work, each instance in a different medium and varying in mood and intention, but again, always with a keen sense of experimentation, both in the service of his audience’s devotional needs., and for his own pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The following is adapted from *The Oxford Companion to Art*, ed. Harold Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 1185 and Koerner, 81. For an exhaustive study of the vero icon and its many variations, see Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a “True” Image* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Koerner, 81.

<sup>22</sup> In addition to the prints discussed in this paper, as Koerner, 91-92, relates, Dürer made one drawing of the veil for the *Prayer Book of Maximilian* (1515) and painted at least three panels that either featured or incorporated the sudarium, one of which was part of the *Heller Altarpiece*.

In the earliest, a woodcut of 1510 in the *Small Passion* series (fig. 12), Dürer shows a traditional scene in which St. Veronica displays the sudarium, flanked by Sts. Peter and Paul. The figures are located in an enclosed, box-like interior that flaunts Dürer's understanding of perspective (his tilted monogram is a clever touch). The diagonals of the robes of Paul and Peter, as well as the perspective, lead directly to the image of Christ at the center of the print.

The image of Christ is not worked up to the same degree of shading as the other figures, but nevertheless comes forth three-dimensionally into the space of the saints. While one would expect the image of Christ to be flat on the plane of the veil, because of its separation from the horizontal lines of shading on the cloth, it instead emerges mystically from its surface. The fewer, bolder lines required by the woodcut technique emphasize Christ's expression, his cloudy eyes pained and entreating. The starkness of the medium, combined with Christ's gaze boring directly into that of the viewer, puts his suffering at the foreground of the work.

Of the three sudarium prints, this is the only one in which when Veronica herself is shown. Delicately displaying the veil in front of her, she gazes down at the face of Christ, head reverently tilted. There is little interaction, however, between her and Christ. The scene is simple and direct, focusing on the relationship between Christ and the viewer, as every line of the composition pulls the eye back to the center, unable to look away from the tiny but intense image of Christ.

Three years later, Dürer uses the familiar medium of engraving to depict a very different representation of the veil. In *The Sudarium Displayed by Two Angels* (1513, fig. 13), Veronica is absent and in the place of the Sts. Peter and Paul, two

angels flank the veil. The angels, much less static than Paul and Peter, kneel in midair, their unfurling drapery and feathery wings framing the sudarium between them. In its presence, one turns away, overcome with emotion, while the other is unable to tear his eyes away from its imprinted image.

This image is particularly striking. As in the woodcut, Dürer's Christ looks straight into the eyes of the viewer, but this time he seems resigned, past pain. The details of his suffering are engraved into his features: a drop of blood falls onto his forehead, a drop of sweat onto his left cheek. The shading technique does not differ from that of the angels'; if anything, Christ is more detailed, every lock of hair on his beard, every thorn on the crown visible to the naked eye. This Christ also emerges from the sudarium, but here does so in an eerily realistic way, as if the bodiless head had been affixed to the veil. Because there is no differentiation in shading that would push the head back or bring the sides of the cloth more forward, the viewer understands that these parts of the sudarium are on the same plane as each other, closest to the foreground.

Somehow, the miraculous object displays this twice-larger-than-life head despite its obvious mass. The folds of the sudarium cup the massive head between them. The sudarium itself, then, becomes a curtain—the ultimate mode of display—not just presenting but showcasing the image it that appears upon it. Because the viewer knows it should be flat on the surface of the cloth, its dimensionality becoming almost like a modern-day hologram, emerging despite what the viewer thinks should be true. The unfurling robes of the angels beside the veil further perpetuate the idea of a curtain as they unfurl to the edges of the print. The small

size of this work allows for the viewer to become immersed in a scene that seems unveiled just for him or her.

Three more years later, Dürer returned to the idea of a devotional print in *The Sudarium Stretched out by an Angel* (1516, fig. 14). The easy, fluid lines of the engraving process create a world of swirling fabrics and clouds inhabited by reverent angels. That Dürer allows his hand to move more freely across the plate is clear in the background of horizontal lines, more loosely drawn bodies of the angels, and the echoing sketchy outlines of their forms that bleed into the background. This uncharacteristic imprecision—due in part to the medium of engraving—emphasizes the religious fervor of the artist's work. With little white space to frame its contents, filled with frothy clouds and floating cherubs, there is little to distract the viewer from the drama of the scene. At a certain point, illusion is lost as these prevalent lines remind the viewer of the work's existence as a print.

Instead of proudly displaying the sudarium as those before did, this angel lifts the veil upwards, so that it is blown out by a gust of wind or the force of the motion. The viewer can only just make out the image of Christ, now actually, as in the legend, imprinted on the sudarium, instead of emerging forth. This face is not at all three-dimensional; completely in shadow on the panel of cloth, it is fully a printed image. Except for the fantastical circumstances around it—flying angels, registers of clouds—Dürer shows the cloth to be exactly what it is. Moreover, he makes use of its properties: the cloth of the veil (as well as that of the robe of the largest angel) reacts to the forces of nature around it, emphasizing the turbid quality by showing the gusts of wind spiraling around the scene. Christ no longer meets the

viewer's gaze; instead, because of the veil's placement at the topmost corner of the work, the image is overturned; the only one who can clearly see Christ's image is the angel. The viewer cannot make out the face of Christ without turning the print upside down, and when this is done, Christ's eyes still evade the viewer's, sliding to the right and meeting only those of the angel.

Martin Luther's ideas shifted the conception of all types of devotional images, not just those of the Virgin Mary. His belief in a faith-based Christianity sparked controversies over the place of devotional imagery in art, lest these images—objects—take precedence over the role of Christ himself. Though this etching was made in 1516 and Luther's theses not publicly available until early 1518, it is known that in late 1516 Dürer attended the lectures of Luther's mentor, Johann von Staupitz, whose own beliefs foreshadowed Luther's.<sup>23</sup> Since the opinions of Luther and his circle were certainly circulating before the Theses were published, and since Dürer's friendship with Pirckheimer afforded him easy access to such new ideas, it is likely that Dürer would begin to be affected and realize the need to respond to growing notions of the legitimacy of devotional images, as he does in this print.

This change in representation of the image on the sudarium does not undermine the devotional qualities of the print but rather accentuates them. While Luther would probably not have approved of any sort of devotional image, let alone one whose subject was a cult object technically without basis in Christian text, it is clear that Dürer is beginning to tackle how best to adapt his trade to the new ideas

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<sup>23</sup> Hutchinson, 123. The list on the British Museum manuscript, which includes early works of Luther from 1516 (see Hutchinson, 124), could imply—though does not definitively show—that Dürer might have been aware of or possessed works of Luther's in as early as that year.

of what would later be considered the Protestant Revolution. The approach he takes is entirely different from those before. The smaller angels in the lowest register serve as surrogate viewers; kneeling as if in a heavenly orchestra, they display the poses and states of traditional prayer. Through them, the viewer moves through the print, and watches as the larger angel raises the face of Christ to the highest corner of the print. The intensity of the interaction between the two is the focus of the print. Koerner suggests that the raising of Christ on a curved surface, viewed from below, is similar to decorations on Romanesque church domes;<sup>24</sup> if his interpretation is correct, then the importance of Christ is far from relegated to the upper edges of the print, but instead is even more heightened.

In this way, Dürer shows the relationship between a viewer and an object of contemplation. The sudarium is no longer an object with a mystical, three-dimensional apparition protruding from its surface; instead it is fully a printed image itself. Moreover, although the angel is able to look directly at the image of Christ, the human viewer cannot—it is always out of his or her reach. With that in mind, the image becomes more acceptable by the changing standards of the day; this sudarium is not a cult object, but an object to deepen religious thought. Because its style takes into consideration the changing theological climate, Dürer's print continues to be relevant to his audience and gives him a chance to experiment with new modes of showing religious objects.

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<sup>24</sup> Koerner, 97-98.

### 3. Motifs of Action and Inaction

For Dürer, drapery is nothing less than essential as he innovatively uses it to enhance the meaning of a print. Motion is another important area that Dürer explores through drapery, creating unexpected juxtapositions that once more demonstrate his love of drapery for its own sake.

In *Nemesis* (1501, fig. 15), Dürer depicts a monumental, perfectly proportioned figural allegory of the uncertainty of fortune, as derived from a poem by Politian.<sup>25</sup> A long, thin mantle trails over her shoulder; wings stretch from her back; she holds the goblet of favor and the bridle of admonishment in her hands.<sup>26</sup> She stands against a blank sky, on a stage of clouds that rolls out over a minutely detailed landscape of a small town and its environs. An erratic wind whips about the scene, further emphasizing her power and capriciousness. Her mantle is cloth in its most basic form: a simple, long, scarf-like panel, draped over her left shoulder.

Dürer's mastery over the depiction of this mantle is crucial to the narrative of the print, for, in conjunction with the clouds, it is the only object that can depict the enlivening motion of gusting wind. The wind is inconsistent: it calmly rolls out the soft clouds and gently sways the trees below, yet above her mantle snaps in a strong gust and her wings extend fully to adjust to it. This irregularity allows Dürer to change the levels of action within the scene. Because of it, there is an interesting juxtaposition between the horizontal gusts of wind, in the fantastical realm of the intimidating goddess above, and the forwards-backwards direction of the unfurling

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<sup>25</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 81.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

clouds over the peaceful, oblivious landscape. The inaction of her stoic, monumental body and the peaceful town below, nearly devoid of human figures, contrast strongly with the evidence of motion all around them. These contrasts speak towards the narrative of a goddess so powerful that controls the natural forces surrounding her presence; meanwhile, the town is utterly unaware of the power this colossal goddess has over humankind.

The abundance of textures alleviates the harshness of these contrasts and invites the viewer further into the details of the print. The goddess' flesh is supple and abundant; from her shoulders, wings sprout with plumes ranging from downy to feathery. The glossy surface of her golden goblet catches an unseen light source; from her hand a leather bridle intermingles with the crisp, wind-whipped folds of her mantle. Below her, velvety clouds uncover a detailed landscape, as if a roll of cloth has just tumbled onto the ground and begun to unravel. Stage-like, these clouds softly form the base of Nemesis' column-like figure. Their edges have the same soft, fuzzy quality as do the fur-lined skirts of Dürer's Madonnas.

As the clouds intermingle with the bottom edge of the mantle, they seem to become drapery themselves, and even the leather strap of the bridle loops itself among the curving shapes. Following the arc of the clouds arc exactly, the twisted cloth unfurls, and both billow into pockets of sky and pillows of cloudbanks, until, at the left-center of the print, the hem of the mantle becomes indistinguishable from the clouds themselves. Together the clouds and cloth create a swirled, abstract oval. Dürer delights in this subtle visual trick in the same way he did playing with the forms of pillows. This melding of the two materials ties the unfathomable celestial

world of the goddess above, with the stage-like clouds and mortal world below. Without these substances, the narrative of the work would have less of the rich detail afforded by the array of motion in the print; instead, the very addition of a long mantle and unfurling, velvety clouds amplifies the power of her figure over aspects of both nature and man.

In contrast, the figure in *Melencolia I* (1514, fig. 16) is clothed in drapery that emphasizes the inaction of the print. The monumental seated woman, staring off into the distance, is another allegory, this time of the medieval humor known to plague artistic genius. The weariness of Melencolia's incessant intellectual pursuit is symbolized by her canine companion; the lack of interest in the results of her hard work is represented by the purse (wealth) and keys (power) hidden within her skirts.<sup>27</sup> It seems as if the very thoughts of the figure herself twist and turn like the wrinkles in her skirts, then burst into clarity only to dissipate instantly, like the vibrating lines of the twilight sky. Her drapery is strikingly different from any discussed before. Her skirts are an accordion of folds, a maze made up of countless rivulets of shadow and light. Silvery gray shadows overlap each other on a surface that is anything but smooth.

This now-iconic image, so complex in iconography and interpretations, could be a study in its own right; but drapery is one aspect of it that has not been considered in earlier scholarly discourse. This drapery speaks to the frustrating inaction of the melancholic humor and artistic creativity. Traveling through the paths created by the shadows and highlights of the skirts, the wrinkles and patchy

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<sup>27</sup> Dorothy M. Limouze, *The Felix M. Warburg Print Collection: A Legacy of Discernment* (Lunenburg, Vermont: The Stinehour Press, 1995), 83.

shadows become abstract. Most striking, perhaps, is the gray area between her knees, which contains shadows of varying values of silver. These triangles and crescents are just improbable enough that the plane of fabric suddenly contains a strange, blurry apparition—perhaps a face, one that is certainly less clear than that shown in the 1516 *The Sudarium Stretched out by an Angel* (fig 14). The viewer wonders whether it is present for a reason, or if its rumples simply show the disarray of the mind of an artistic genius, as Panofsky suggests. The vague suggestion of this arbitrary image on the cloth's surface, once glimpsed, is difficult to ignore, and most frustrating is the viewer's inability to define what the out of focus shapes might be.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the two symbols embedded in the fabrics can speak to the meaning of this strange image. The intricate folds hide the rewards of artistic labor within them—the keys and the purse, power and wealth. Dürer seems to suggest that a master artist's fame and power becomes hidden, is perhaps even overcome, by the pursuit of a blurred image that might represent an idea or concept he knows he will never be able to fully grasp—but nevertheless feels compelled to try to do so. This suggestion, literally embedded in her drapery, underlines Melencolia's inability to produce: she, too, stares into the distance, surrounded by the tools of her trade, but cannot draw or write a thing. In the presence of the gravity of what Panofsky calls a

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<sup>28</sup> In this very work, there is another odd shape that could also be a face: the lighter silvery patch on the polyhedron. Seeing possible faces are not a new occurrence in scholarship on Dürer. Koerner, 28, sees faces in the pillows sketch, and cites Dürer's c. 1495 watercolor *The View of Arco* as another instance of anamorphs in the work of Dürer; he cites Hermann Leber, *Albrecht Dürers Landschaftsaquarelle. Topographic und Genese, Studien zur Knsteschichte*, 50 (Hildesheim, 1988).

“spiritual self portrait,”<sup>29</sup> the playfulness Dürer has in arranging his fabric here seems muted. But the experimentation is still present, as he brings imbues the melancholic humor with the sometimes defeating aspects of the creative genius—which it seems that, from experience, he truly understood.

Drapery once more acts as an experimental device that is arranged and drawn so as to take full advantage of its material qualities. As it reacts to changing winds, it becomes an essential part of the story of the goddess of retribution; as it curls in on itself in unclear, untamable folds, it speaks to the paralyzing inaction of artistic genius.

## Conclusion

The role of drapery in the graphic work of Dürer seems to come full circle when one reconsiders two prints discussed earlier in the paper, both from the climax of his career, 1514. *Melencolia I* (fig. 16) and *Madonna of the Wall* (fig. 1)<sup>30</sup> were not intended to be companion pieces and are, in fact, very different in size and subject. The similarity between the two seated women, however, speaks to the remarkably varied effects Dürer achieved in depicting drapery at the height of his career.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Panofsky, 171.

<sup>30</sup> In his catalogue of Dürer’s intaglio works, Strauss places this Madonna print directly before *Melencolia I*,<sup>30</sup> and Panofsky implies the same timeline, but which was completed first will probably never be known.

<sup>31</sup> Intriguing parallels exist between the two prints that do not fit into the scope of this paper. The meaning of the purse and the key present in each—which Panofsky, 162, suggests are merely means to show the messy disarray in *Melencolia I*—merits deeper research, as does the resemblance of the Christ Child to the putto in *Melencolia I*.

Examining the drapery of each figure reveals the fundamental difference in the characters of these two women, by interacting compositionally with their poses and the objects they hold. The Madonna's drapery is the very definition of clarity: while intricate, we can trace and understand every form it creates. It falls in neat, rational diagonals, emphasizing the print's perfect perspective, and nestles the figures in a series of curves that frames mother and son together in a soft oval. Meanwhile, Melencolia's drapery is nearly impossible to read: like mobius strips, the accordion folds of cloth twist in and out of each other, and confounding images seem to materialize in shadows. Just as Melencolia has thought and re-thought concepts of artistic creativity, ultimately arriving at a point of frustration so debilitating that she can do nothing but gaze into space, so too have the folds wriggled and coiled among themselves, finally reaching planes of shadows or even the stopping point of the hem of the skirts. The draperies depicted in two prints that are, compositionally, quite similar—each showing a monumental seated woman in three-quarters view—achieve very different results: the definition of intimacy and elegance in the holy pair of Virgin and Christ, and the swirling but unfulfilled mind of an artistic genius.

In these two prints, Dürer uses drapery to magnify the strength of the narratives he creates, just as he did throughout his career. In the series of Madonna and Child prints, Dürer works with the same subject a multitude of times, expanding and transforming its meaning with the help of compositions indebted to drapery. In his prints of the sudarium, a religious object becomes a mechanism to explore vehicles of individual devotion when he plays with notions of the traditional. He

experiments with the traits of fabric itself by exploring its uses in active and inactive scenes, and juxtaposes two women by bestowing character to the very clothes they wear.

But throughout all of these very different works, Dürer's obsession with depicting the endless variations of overlapping folds is always present. Though he is not always lighthearted with his experimentations in cloth—the skirts in *Melencolia I*, after all, take on quite a different tone than the manipulations of the surfaces of pillows in the *Pillows Sketch*—the delight and satisfaction Dürer derives from every fold he draws is clear. Dürer wrote, in 1513, “We like to look at beautiful things because they give us pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> Yet an artist such as Dürer likes not only to look at beautiful things, but to challenge himself to create them. He experiments with visual arrangements and constructs unexpected juxtapositions of shadow and shape to produce forms that are masterworks of both draftsmanship and inventiveness in their own right. Even as tastes and political climates shifted, his love of the challenge of depicting complex folds and the compositions they could inform never diminished. After all, as Dürer himself wrote, and practiced: beauty “depends on many things. And if we want to introduce [it] into our work, it is no easy task, and we must search it out far and wide.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Walter L. Strauss, Introduction to *The Painter's Manual* (New York: Abaris, 1977), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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