

## A MASTERPIECE BY DÜRER AND AN INTRIGUING PORTUGUESE FACE

ALBRECHT DÜRER

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**TWO YEARS BEFORE** the portrait of Jakob Muffel was painted, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in a letter to the German poet and humanist Pirckheimer that Dürer was an artist who would never die. In 1781, Goethe remarked to his friend F. Müller that if Raphael and Dürer could achieve perfection, the true student should seek to avoid choosing between the two. Two and a half centuries separate these two statements expounding the immortality and perfection of the art of Albrecht Dürer, two concepts that, naturally, must be handled with caution. But it is very clear that both ideas, of perfection and of immortality, followed Dürer throughout his life and work. Few artists had such comprehensive training. The son of a goldsmith of the same name, and godson of the printer Anton Koberger, Dürer learned to paint under the most renowned master in Nuremberg, Michael Wolgemut, and soon started engraving, as well as embarking on journeys around Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands. Extremely gifted at drawing, he grew up surrounded by printers and developed close friendships with the most prominent writers and humanists of his day, becoming the first of a new lineage of artists among the painters of the north, cultured, literate and aware of the importance of the arts as a cultural phenomenon. His successive self-portraits reflect the intellectual and noble models he adopted for himself and demonstrate, like his writing, a perfect self-awareness of his genius and his approach to art. The Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga holds one of his masterpieces, the *St. Jerome* given to Rui Fernandes de Almada, secretary of the Portuguese factory in Flanders and his close friend. We can now add another two paintings that help increase our knowledge of the painter.

The portrait of Jakob Muffel is a late work, dating from the final years of Dürer's career. It is also a late portrait of Muffel, who died later that year. The two men were almost exactly the same age, both born in Nuremberg, in 1471, and while Muffel died in 1526, Dürer followed just two years later. There is reasonable evidence



Albrecht Dürer  
(1471-1528)

### **Portrait of Jakob Muffel**

1526

Oil on wood panel  
transferred to canvas

49,7 × 37,2 cm

Berlin, Gemäldegalerie,  
inv. 557 D



Albrecht Dürer (?)  
or based on Dürer

### **Portrait of a man (João Brandão)**

c. 1525

Oil on oak wood  
(unfinished)

43,4 × 33,5 cm

United Kingdom,  
private collection

of the relationship between the two men. Muffel was one of the witnesses in the legal proceedings that followed the purchase of Dürer's house, they had several friends in common and it is highly likely that they were friendly themselves. In the travel diary he wrote in 1520-1521,

on a trip to the Netherlands, Dürer recorded the purchase of a scarlet scarf, one vara [1.1 m] long, to send as a gift to Jakob Muffel. The portrait was not, however, an homage to their friendship. It was more than likely an official commission. Muffel was a councillor and burgomaster of Nuremberg and, the same year, Dürer also painted the portrait of the senator Hieronymus Holzschuher, with the same dimensions, presumably both as a single commission for the city chambers where, it is worth remembering, the important decision had been made the previous year to accept the Protestant Reformation. Panofsky noted a difference in the postures of the two men, with Holzschuher almost cheerful in contrast to the certain rigidity of Muffel's pose, seeing in it a touch of irony from the painter, but Muffel's posture could not help but have been affected by the fact that he was certainly already ill and very close to the end of his life. Nevertheless, his portrait presents an institutional pose and a sense of sober responsibility, as befitted an image of a man who had devoted his life to public service. In a model for a bust portrait, a composition favoured by Dürer, the figure occupies almost the whole painting, cut out against the blue background. The face is carefully modelled in all its structure and detail, with an emphasis on the lines that gives the pronounced features a certain hardness, but which is an excellent example of Dürer's portrait art and his analytical abilities in capturing the human figure.

The other portrait shown here raises a series of questions that make it a particularly interesting case study, first and foremost because it is unfinished, which reveals a lot about the artist's creative process, allowing us to see the preparatory drawing and the different phases of colour application. Displayed for the first time at the great exhibition in Aachen, in 2021, and attributed to an "unknown master", the portrait derives directly from a drawing by Dürer from the Albertina Museum in Vienna (inv. 3166). Although undated, everything indicates that the drawing was made in 1521, during Dürer's visit to the Netherlands, when he made acquaintance with various members of the Portuguese factory.

We know of three other painted portraits based on this drawing: one a small-scale artwork, its whereabouts unknown; another in the British royal collections; and a third in the Phoebus Foundation, in Antwerp. The latter two were clearly of Flemish production, while the origin of the unfinished piece is rather less certain. The image became popular all around Europe, from an engraving published by Philips Galle, in 1587, in which the figure is identified as Damião de Góis. In 1572, Galle had published in Antwerp an album with 44 engravings of famous scholars, accompanied by short poems written by Arias Montano. In the preface, he asked readers to send him other portraits for a new edition, which would be published in 1587, with poems by François Raphelengien the younger, grandson of the famous printer Plantin Moretus, and 50 new portraits. It was in this edition that the figure drawn by Dürer was identified as Damião de Góis, in an engraving probably produced from a painted copy. In addition to Galle's book, the print circulated as a loose sheet, and the plate (shown in this exhibition) was later, probably in the late-18th century, counterfeited with a false monogram of Albrecht Dürer. Despite it circulating as a genuine portrait of Damião de Góis, the historiography calls this identification into question from the outset, as the Portuguese humanist and the German painter are unlikely to have ever met. Góis only arrived in the Netherlands in 1523, two years after Dürer's trip, and made his first visit to Germany in 1529, after the painter's death. Galle was, probably, led along the wrong path by someone who sent him the portrait, now after the death of Damião de Góis, and when the humanist was already quite well-known in Europe thanks to his publications. Dürer's original drawing is thought to depict João Brandão, the only Portuguese Dürer claimed to have painted who can be associated with this portrait, although there is still some doubt. The German painter's travel diary, however, reveals his close friendship with Brandão, and we also know of the beautiful portrait he made of his black maid, Catarina.

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