

BOOK REVIEW

Madar, Heather. *Albrecht Dürer and the Depiction of Cultural Differences in Renaissance Europe*

New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 186.

Jonathan Trayner 

Southampton Solent University, UK
Email: jon.trayner@solent.ac.uk

The first half of this study focuses on Dürer's depictions of Ottoman and Mamluk figures (Madar's suggested terms) and their attributes—notably their turbans. It begins with a discussion of contemporary northern European knowledge and prejudices about Islam and Ottoman society, which are examined alongside Dürer's exposure to and involvement in these prior to his independent career. The use of visual symbols such as the turban to denote Otherness is outlined, and the depiction of Islamic figures by Martin Schongauer as a major influence on Dürer is described. The turban becomes a shorthand for exoticism or non-Christian identity in Biblical scenes but is used more accurately with other Islamic apparel in Schongauer's historic works following his trip to Spain. Similarly, in chapter 2, Madar describes Dürer's trip to Venice and his relationship with Gentile Bellini as being similarly significant in lending depth to his works depicting non-European subjects, noting the way that he integrates different types of Ottoman and Mamluk dress accurately. This is contrasted to his continuing use of the tropes deployed by Schongauer and other northern graphic artists elsewhere in his oeuvre, especially the blending of Ottoman and Western regalia in *Oriental Ruler Enthroned* (1495). Madar suggests that this was done pragmatically to allow a smooth reading of kingship by Dürer's audience.

The third chapter starts with a discussion of Dürer's *Portrait of Sultan Süleyman I* (1526), where Madar suggests that its careful observation and synthesis from a variety of sources is a demonstration of the interest in humanism in Dürer's later life, as Süleyman is presented as a real figure, closely observed. The unasked question here is whether it is the sultan's rank that enables Dürer to see him as a proper subject. This is followed by a discussion of two enigmatic genre pieces, *Six Warriors* (1495) and *Landscape with a Cannon* (1518), which leads into a discussion of the ambivalence of Dürer's images and his popularization of archetypes in the depiction of figures from the Islamic world. Madar argues throughout that this is achieved through a combination of close attention to authenticity and accuracy combined with an understanding of the popular apprehension of these images.

In the second half of the book, Madar focuses on Dürer's depictions of Black African subjects building on Joseph Koerner's discussion of hermeneutic Blackness ("The Epiphany of the Black Magus," 2010) and the ideology underpinning Dürer's adoration scenes, which present all the world being drawn toward the worship of Christ. In similar arguments to her first section, Madar suggests that these demonstrate his internalization of existing northern European prejudices and assumptions of Black inferiority rather than a knowledge of the social context of Black Africans in Ottoman society—or direct knowledge of non-enslaved Black individuals.

The discussion of *Katharina* (1521) in chapter 5 focuses almost entirely on the social context and conditions of Katharina's enslavement/servitude and the respective positions of her and Dürer in relation to her master: Madar considers it therefore to be a technical exercise on the artist's part rather than an attempt at humanization or humanism. This contradicts the interpretations of the image presented by Ulinka Rublack (*Dressing Up* [Oxford, 2010]) and Diane Wolfthal (*Household Servants and Slaves* [New Haven, 2022]), Rublack suggesting that the averted gaze of the subject demonstrates Dürer's sympathy, while Madar suggests it is indicative of Katharina's discomfort. A lack of primary

information prevents Madar from engaging in the same level of discussion around *Portrait of a Young Man* (1508)—except in the form of a hypothetical link to Cristophle le More—an image that she sees as similarly anthropological in intent, though she considers him a more willing sitter. As Madar notes, the lack of other Black sitters within Dürer's portraiture makes it difficult to assess his intentions. However, the questions of class, in terms of contradiction to the portrait of Sülyman, and gender—did Dürer favor the male sitter, consciously or unconsciously?—could have been highlighted here.

In her conclusion, Madar turns to Dürer's posthumous text the "Aesthetic Excursus" (1528) to underline her points. In this work, his ideas of race and beauty appear to her to present him as a forerunner of later ideologies of white aesthetic superiority. This works toward her conclusion that while "he may see certain individuals as exceptional, this does not cause him to reassess his thinking" (141). Madar does note a contradiction in Dürer's thought, and it would have been useful to have this expanded further, as it is possible to find other points in Dürer's private writing that seemingly contradict his public text. Here, Madar's interpretations differ from Koerner's regarding the meanings of both Dürer's text and related images; but, as with her difference from more conventional interpretations of the portrait of Katherina, her point is well argued—though, owing to its comparative brevity, those who are convinced of the universality of Dürer's humanism are not likely to be swayed.

This, therefore, is a highly focused and well-directed study that provides an important set of plausible perspectives of Dürer's conceptions of race and religious identity. It is a relatively slim volume, and there are many points that could perhaps have been expanded upon fruitfully—and therefore been more likely to convince a sceptical reader. Madar's discussion is highly readable and intellectually stimulating; a longer book would not have felt like a burden.