

Albrecht Dürer

IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

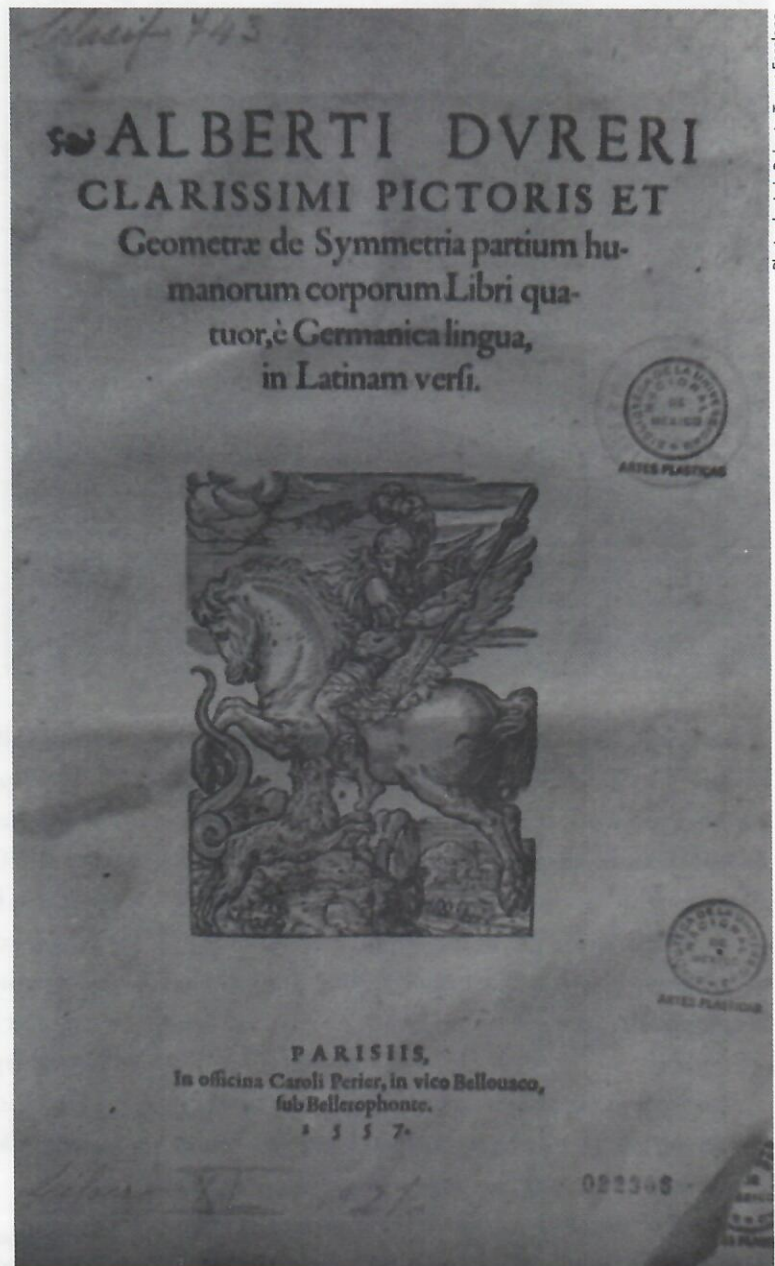
Luis Roberto Torres Escalona*

Two works of the celebrated painter Albrecht Dürer have been stored in the reserved stacks of Mexico's National Library since 1971. The works, *Institutionum Geometricarum Libris, Lineas, Superficies et Solida Corpora Tractault* (Institutions of Geometry) and *De Symetria Partium Humanorum Corporum Libri Quatuor* (The Four Books of Symmetry of the Parts of the Human Body), once belonged to the Old Academy of San Carlos. The former was printed in Paris in 1535, under the direction of Christian Wechel, and the latter in 1557, under the direction of Charles Perier.

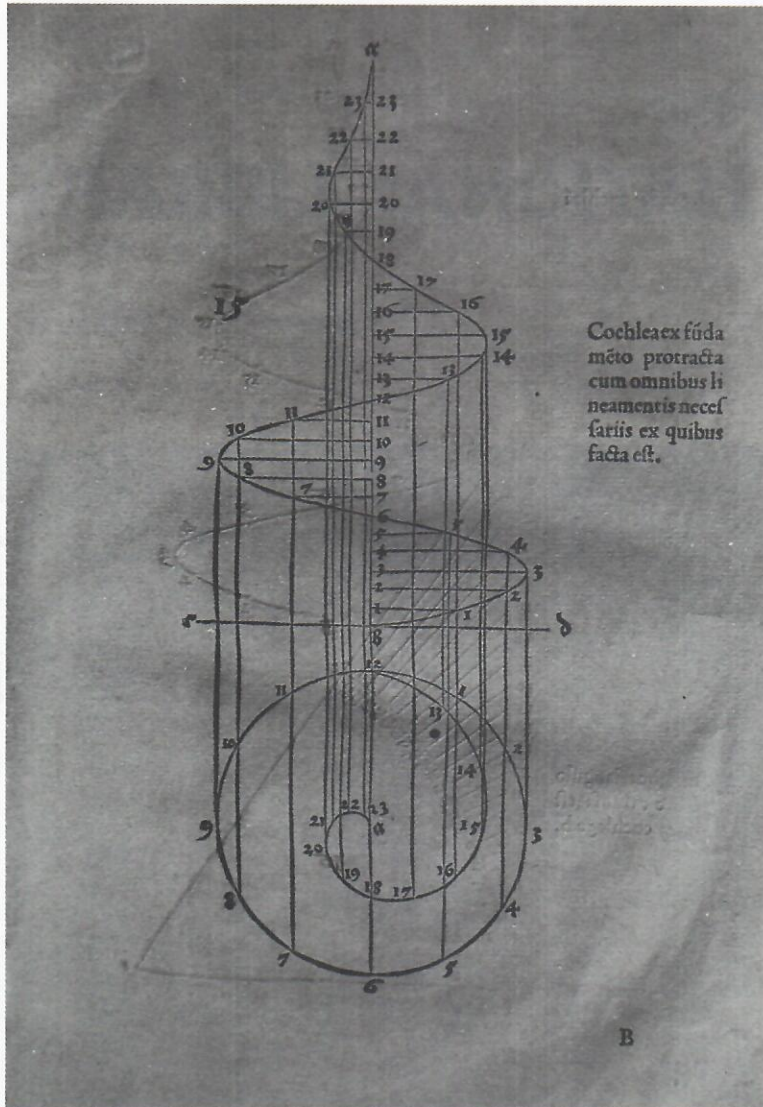
Institutions of Geometry is Wechel's translation of the German publication edited by Dürer himself in Nuremberg in 1525. It is divided into four books: the first deals with lines, their dimensions and types; the second goes into surfaces and explains the way in which different geometric figures should be drawn; the third and fourth deal with solid bodies and how to create them.

Dürer dedicated this treatise, also called *Study of Measurement with Compass and Triangle*, to his dear friend Willibald Pirckheimer, a great humanist and man

* Researcher at the UNAM's Department of Artistic and Cultural Assets.



Photos by Luis Roberto Torres Escalona



of the world, considered one of the illustrious spirits of his time. In his dedication, Dürer says that his aim was that the work be useful to painters, goldsmiths, sculptors, stone masons, carpenters and “in a word, all those who use the compass, ruler and measuring stick.” Dürer made use of the opportunity to defend his religious beliefs against the budding ideas of the Protestant Reform:

And while in our time we hear some amongst us damn painting because they say it nourishes idolatry, the Christian man is swept away by paintings or images to idolatry no more than the good man, girded with a sword, is led to thievery. It would certainly be dull for a man who

wished to adore paintings, wood panels or stones; and for this reason, painting edifies and aids, more than hinders, the Christian religion, as long as it is done honestly, artistically and well.

The work contains a judgement, in the form of a dialogue, about Albrecht Dürer by Erasmus of Rotterdam, another noted humanist and creator of the works *Adagios*, *Coloquia* and *Eulogy to Madness*.¹ In this particular work, entitled *On the Correct Pronunciation of the Greek and Latin Languages*, Erasmus conducts an intelligent discourse through a bear and a lion on the art of lines and monochromatic forms explained by Dürer. Erasmus says Dürer imitated the old heroes, “specifically Pamphilius of Macedonia, an expert both in letters and in geometry and arithmetic,” and points to him as the modern Apelles.

After Erasmus’ text is the dedication by the printer Christian Wechel, who salutes Almirico Bouchard, prince of Saintes and secretary to François de Valois, the king of France, to whom he dedicates his translation because he is “a man blessed with the culture of the fine

arts and all manner of virtues.”

The Four Books of Symmetry of the Parts of the Human Body was published by Perier and translated from the German to Latin by Joaquim Camerarius the Elder, historian, philologist, mathematician, theologian, poet and author of numerous translations of classic writers, wise founder of Greek and Latin studies at the University of Tübingen and deputy for Nuremberg at the Diet of Augsburg.

The Latin work is preceded by two prologues by Joaquim Camerarius, one to “equanimous” readers, “lovers

¹ All subsequent titles are translated to English from the Spanish version given by the author. [Translator’s Note.]

“We admire quite rightly Albrecht [Dürer] as the right custodian of honesty and modesty.”

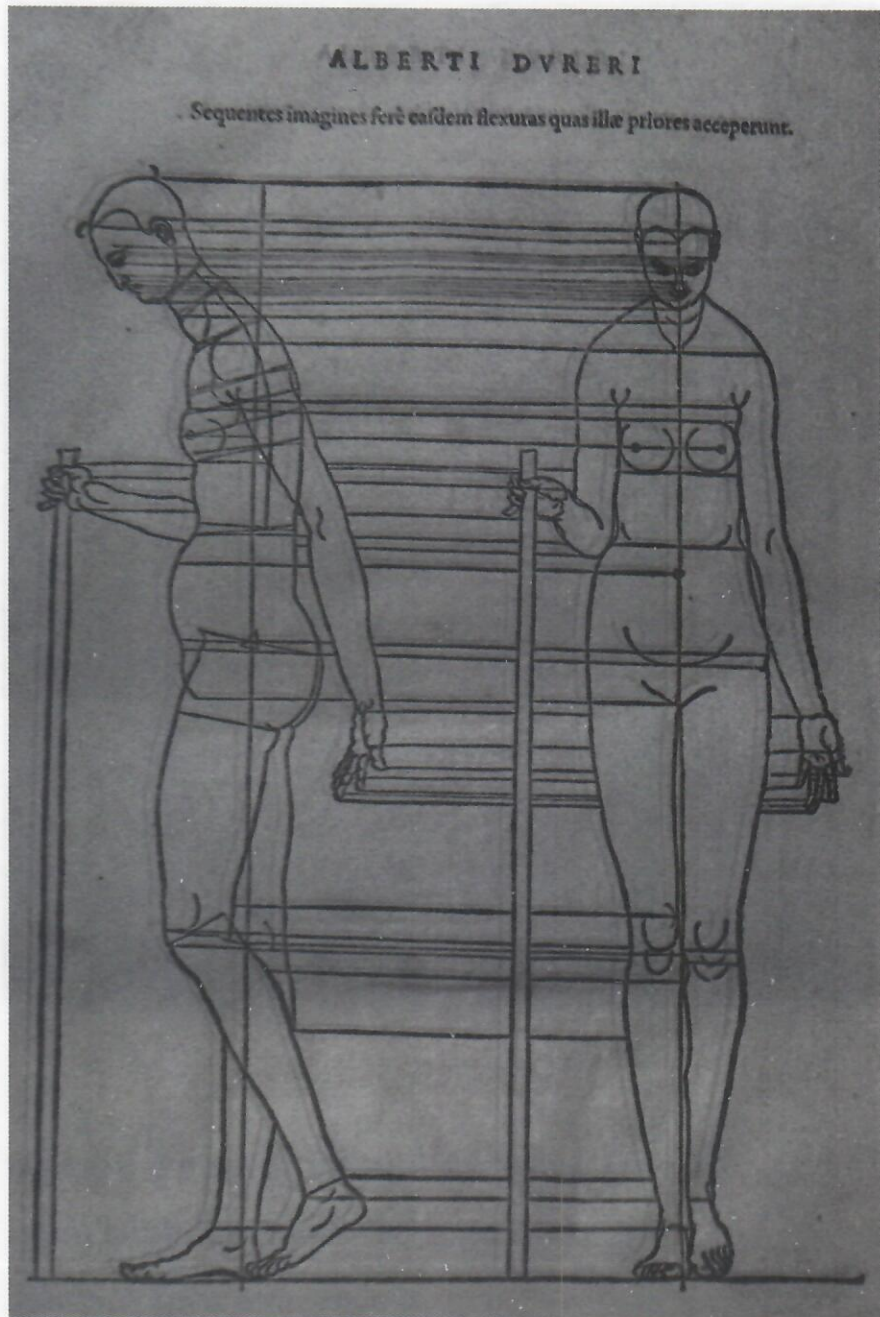
Joaquin Camerarius

of the fine arts,” and another to Christopher Colerus, “conspicuous gentleman,” who urged Camerarius to do the translation. In the first prologue, Camerarius writes of Dürer: “We admire quite rightly Albrecht as the right custodian of honesty and modesty, and proclaim ourselves aware of his virtues, to the degree that even of his lesser works, nothing is to be disdained.”

There are two laudatory essays and four epitaphs by Eobonius Hessus, 10 obituaries and three epitaphs by Willibald Pirckheimer, all in memory of Albrecht Dürer.

This work was the result of measurements taken of eight men, 10 women and a child. It is divided into four books: *First Technique of Measurement of the Human Figure*, *Second Technique of Measurement of the Human Figure*, *On the Variation of Figures*, and *On the Flexing and Gesture of the Figures Described*. The first book explains the way to measure the human body with vertical lines and figures from the front, the back and in profile. In the second book, Dürer uses a ruler one-third as long as the figure he is going to measure; this technique is done with the images placed in the same fashion as in the previous book. The third book

proposes a theory of movement based on variations of the human figure: large and small; long and short; heavyset and thin. The fourth and last book studies the movements of the head, using masculine figures with both front and profile views, with indications for each of its parts; in other cases, he puts the figures in cubes. Dürer said



that the inspiration for his work came from the studies on proportion by Vitruvio and Leon Battista Alberti.

Albrecht Dürer was born May 21, 1471 in Nuremberg. Extant writings from his father tell us that his godfather was Antonius Köberger, the famous printer of Hartmann Schödel's *Liber Choronicarum*.

In 1485, Dürer began his training as a goldsmith in his father's workshop and the following year had his first artistic contact: he was admitted to the work-


shop of the painter Michael Wolgemut who made, together with Wilhelm Pleydewürff, the 2,000 xylographs (wood carvings) which illustrate the aforementioned incunabula.

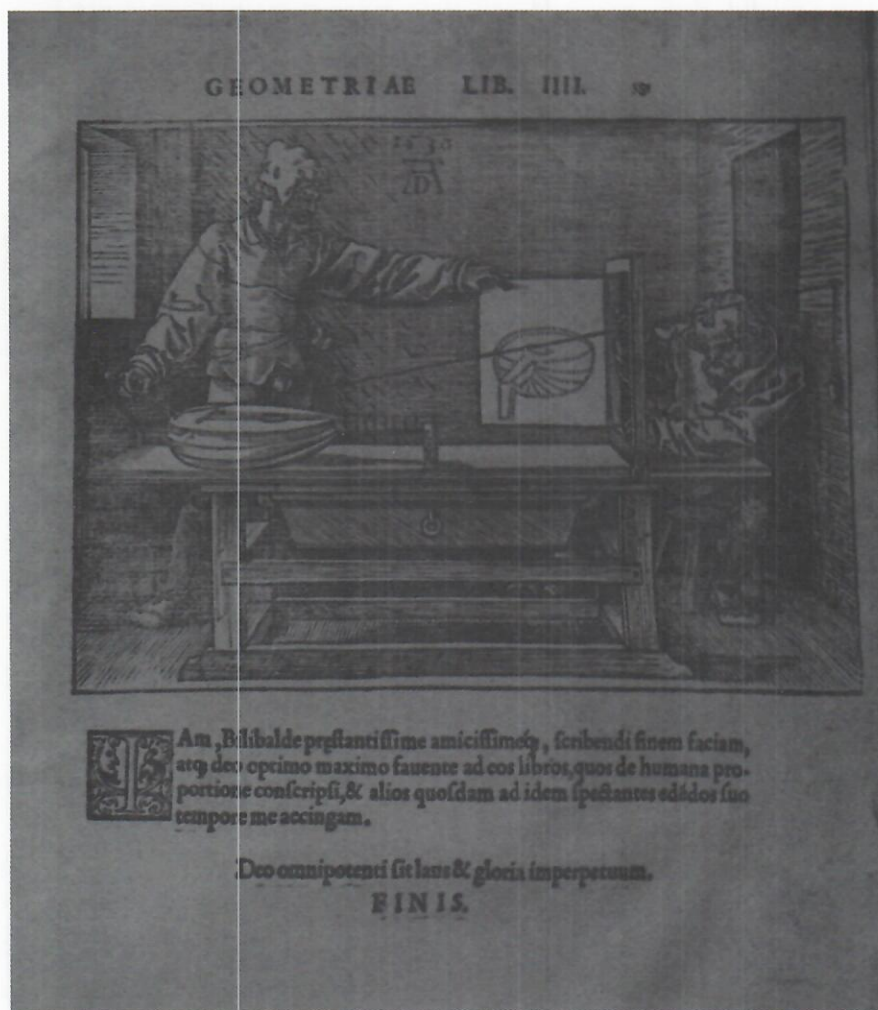
Between 1490 and 1494, Dürer traveled to Colmar, Basel and Strasbourg in order to broaden his knowledge of his craft. Once back in his native land, he married Agnes Frey and began a trip through Venice. This trip was definitive in his life because it was his

first contact with classic art and the Italian Renaissance, which left their mark on the development of his vast subsequent work.

Later, in Saxony, he worked under the protection of Frederick the Wise until, in 1512 and after a new stay in Venice and other Italian cities, he was called on by Emperor Maximilian I to design the stamps of his prayer-book and the gigantic xylograph of the Arch of Triumph.

When Maximilian I died, the pension that the monarch had bestowed on Dürer was canceled, so in 1520 he traveled to Antwerp to seek the favor of Charles V. However, grave illness prompted him to return to his homeland, where he died either April 6 or April 8, 1528 at the age of 57.

Among his engravings considered masterpieces are *The Knight, Death and the Devil*; *Saint Jerome in His Study* and *Melancholia*. Outstanding among his paintings are *The Festival of the Rosary*, *The Four Apostles*, *Adam and Eve* and his self-portraits. 



Dürer's work on human proportions was based on measurements of eight men, ten women and a child.