

# Leonardo – Dürer

RENAISSANCE MASTER DRAWINGS  
ON COLORED GROUND



## Exhibition Facts

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Duration          | 7 March – 9 June 2025   |
| Opening           | 6 March 2025   6.30 pm  |
| Venue             | Propter Homines Hall   The ALBERTINA Museum   |
| Curators          | Achim Gnann and Christof Metzger  |
| Assistant Curator | Margherita Clavarino Allerberger  |
| Works             | 146   |
| Catalogue         | Available for EUR 39,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via <a href="https://shop.albertina.at/en/">https://shop.albertina.at/en/</a>   |
| Contact           | Albertinaplatz 1   1010 Vienna<br>T +43 (0)1 534 83 0   <a href="mailto:presse@albertina.at">presse@albertina.at</a><br><a href="http://www.albertina.at">www.albertina.at</a>  |
| Opening Hours     | Daily 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.<br>Except Wednesday and Friday 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.  |
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## Leonardo – Dürer

### Renaissance Master Drawings on Colored Ground

The ALBERTINA Museum is dedicating its spring 2025 exhibition to the most important masters of the art of drawing. *Leonardo - Dürer. Renaissance Master Drawings on Colored Ground* is the major inaugural exhibition of Director General Ralph Gleis and at the same time the world's first detailed museum show in this field: and the most comprehensive presentation of Leonardo in the German-speaking world to date. From an art-historical perspective, the exhibition is also a premiere: the subject is considered in a pioneering way across regions between Italy and the North.

“With this exhibition, we are drawing attention to the ALBERTINA Museum's magnificent collection of graphic art and its tradition, so it has a programmatic character. The Renaissance was a time of new beginnings—also in the art of drawing. The exhibition sheds light on the development of the technique of chiaroscuro drawing on colored paper—an art that reached its peak with Leonardo in the south and which Dürer brought to the greatest possible perfection north of the Alps with iconic works such as the *Praying Hands*. During the Renaissance, artists came up with the idea of priming paper or using paper that had already been dyed in order to work with virtuosity in both dark and light areas. This opened up completely new sculptural possibilities and aesthetic experiences for the artists and their audience, as we show in this remarkable compilation of almost 150 works,” says ALBERTINA Director General Ralph Gleis.

The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to discover this virtuoso technique with top-class works from the museum's own collection as well as important international loans from the Royal Collection Trust Windsor Castle, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum New York, the Uffizi in Florence, the Kupferstichkabinett Berlin, the British Museum and numerous other international collections.

## **Art historical insights: developments in Italy and the North**

For the first time, developments in Italy and the north are seen in a reciprocal context: While drawings on colored paper in Italy played their role more as sketches and studies in the artistic work process, north of the Alps they were valued as independent works of art *in miniature*. In German-speaking countries in particular, drawings on colored paper were used for detailed depictions of religious or mythological themes.

“In Italy, the chiaroscuro technique has been used since the early 14th century: artists primarily used color-primed drawings for figure studies and used them to prepare their paintings. The exhibition presents the development of the color ground drawing chronologically, examines the use of color-grounded drawings by individual artists and also works out references to the printmaking of the time,” says curator Achim Gnann.

While the chiaroscuro drawing had a firm place in the work process in Italy, it was preferred in the German-speaking world from the mid-15th century for delicate scenic depictions: “In contrast to Italy, before Dürer these were never design drawings, but precious showpieces and collector's items. Outstanding examples of this are Albrecht Altdorfer's furious depictions of Christian and pagan thought or the famous *Witch Sheets* by Hans Baldung Grien. The many subjects from history, mythology, religion and popular beliefs alone demonstrate that the artists were targeting the desires of a new, educated clientele,” says curator Christof Metzger.

## **Starting point: Graphic Collection**

For the first time, 26 drawings by Albrecht Dürer meet as many works by Leonardo da Vinci in this exhibition. In addition to works by Leonardo and Dürer, the exhibition presents top-class works by Raphael, Titian, Albrecht Altdorfer, Hans Baldung Grien, Hans Holbein the Elder and other outstanding Renaissance masters. The starting point for the extensive show is the museum's own collection: around two thirds of the masterpieces on display come from the ALBERTINA Museum.

Master drawings such as Leonardo's *Apostles* or Dürer's *Praying Hands* paved the way for the recognition of the art of drawing as an artistic genre on a par with painting and are still among the most famous works of the Renaissance and the centerpieces of the ALBERTINA Museum's graphic art collection.

## **The Albertina Museum's first vernissage for children**

As part of the exhibition, the ALBERTINA Museum is hosting a vernissage especially for children for the first time: "In keeping with our motto of 'Albertina for all', we would like to address our youngest visitors in particular. The children's vernissage is deliberately scheduled before the opening to the public and follows our guiding principle 'Kids first!'. In doing so, we want to emphasize how important the youngest visitors are to us, whom we want to inspire for the museum and art with this special event. The welcome takes place directly in the exhibition and the subsequent guided tours are interactive and tailored to the children," says ALBERTINA Director General Ralph Gleis.

Through digital formats, exciting content and interaction with the public, a visit to the museum should be more than just frontal instruction on walls. In addition to the children's vernissage, the ALBERTINA Museum offers a varied educational program for the exhibition with public and barrier-free guided tours, junior tours, children's workshops and nude drawing workshops.

# Exhibition Texts

## Introduction

### Renaissance Master Drawings on Colored Ground

At the center of this exhibition are master drawings by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Renaissance painting's two ingenious innovators south and north of the Alps. Leonardo frequently used paper prepared with colored grounds for his studies, and Dürer was similarly fond of drawing his motifs upon a blue or blue-green ground. In such cases, the ground color serves as a central tone from which one can work toward light and dark, enabling the realization of rich tonal gradients with highlights and shading through the use of a metal point, quill pen, brush, or chalks. The technique of preparing paper and parchment with a thin paste of powdered bone, glue, or gum water with powdered pigments mixed in was being employed in Italy by the early 1300s, with initial indications of its use in northern regions appearing by around 1380. And indeed, silverpoint and drawing with other metal points required such preparation of the medium with a ground, since strokes thus made would not have been visible on a bare paper surface. Alongside papers prepared with variously colored grounds, artists also used papers toned as part their manufacture—among which blue paper, *carta azzurra*, were the first to appear.

In the Italian terminology of that era, drawings on a colored ground were referred to as *chiaroscuro*. This term also, however, encompasses monochrome depictions realized purely in lighter and darker gradients, for which reason the present exhibition also includes a number of the gray-toned drapery studies attributed to Leonardo. Likewise referred to as *chiaroscuro* were woodcuts printed using one or several complementary tone blocks, the original intent of which was to imitate the appearance of drawings on colored grounds.

This exhibition, which presents some of the most beautiful drawings on colored grounds by Leonardo, Dürer, and numerous other artists, offers an opportunity to experience the development of this fascinating technique up to the conclusion of the High Renaissance.

## Drawing with Light and Shadow

Drawing on a colored ground was first described by Cennino Cennini (ca. 1370–before 1427) in his *Libro dell'arte*, a treatise on artistic practice. There, he characterizes this technique as the “gateway” (porta) to painting. Drawing in high contrast on colored grounds, he holds, is particularly well suited to studying the impression of three-dimensionality (rilievo) and the effects of light and shadow (chiaroscuro). He also asserts that drawing in a chiaroscuro technique schools budding artists in the use of colors precisely because of its limited color palette. It requires the painter to reduce all that can be portrayed to contrasts in lighting that involve very few tonal gradients—from the middle tone of the paper toward darker and lighter tones—in order to achieve the desired three-dimensional effect. It is thus that, in Italy, chiaroscuro works on paper were used almost exclusively in preparation for paintings. North of the Alps, however, chiaroscuro technique seems to have been employed rather rarely as a mere means to an end in the creation of a painted image. Instead, the preference was for visually complete works created as paintings *en miniature* for a nascent collectors’ market.

## Chiaroscuro Drapery Studies

These drawings belong to a group of drapery studies done in an unusual technique with brush and tempera on canvas prepared in gray. The fabric’s folds are shaped using subtly modulated gray tones heightened with white to produce contrasting light and dark shades that emphasize the artful way in which it is draped. The architect, painter, and artist biographer Giorgio Vasari wrote in his biography of Leonardo that the artist often made “models of figures in clay, which he covered with soft, worn linen dipped in clay, and then set himself to draw them with great patience, on a particular kind of very fine Rheims cloth, or prepared linen; and he executed them in black and white with the point of a brush, to a marvel, as some of them which I have in our book of drawings still bear witness.” The studies attributed to Leonardo that are shown here exhibit stylistic inconsistencies, however, and works such as Domenico Ghirlandaio’s preparatory drawing for his ceiling fresco of Matthew the Evangelist at the Santa Fina Chapel in San Gimignano demonstrate how other artists of this period likewise executed light-and-dark studies on canvas.



## Leonardo's Drawings on Colored Grounds in Florence and Milan

In the 1470s, during his initial Florentine period, Leonardo chose conspicuously varied grounds in luminous red, orange, light purple, pink, and cream hues for his works on paper. On all of them, he employed a metal point whose lines he sometimes redrew with pen and ink in order to lend his motifs more detail and precision. Following his move to Milan around 1482, he developed a previously unseen fondness for using paper prepared in blue—as seen in his horse studies for the neverrealized bronze equestrian monument that Milan's regent Ludovico Sforza had commissioned in honor of his father Francesco. In these studies, Leonardo succeeded wonderfully in capturing anatomical details with a metal point and using the blue ground to help render visible the intended bronze material's dark tone and hardness as well as his equine figures' integration into a space saturated with air and atmosphere. The study for an apostle in his famous Last Supper is one of Leonardo's final works on paper prepared in blue and also one of the last that he executed in a metalpoint technique.

## Lavishly Staged – Chiaroscuro North of the Alps

Nearly all artists in the German-speaking region as well as in the Netherlands employed the chiaroscuro technique not to study details but mainly for drawings featuring complete pictorial compositions. Due to its high aesthetic quality, this process is particularly well suited to lending works on paper this special status. There is much to indicate that they actually did reach audiences outside of artists' workshops, which is to say that chiaroscuro drawings came to serve late-Medieval audiences' growing demand for exquisite artworks. One way of achieving this was via the mass production of printed graphics. And for more demanding clients, individual drawings also came on the market. These were mostly delicate, small-format, pictorially complete scenic depictions like Dürer's *Green Passion*. Carefully placed monograms, conspicuously inserted dates, dedicatory inscriptions, drawn framing lines, and the copying of compositions or even their reproduction in strictly limited editions were all aspects that, beginning in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, served to distinguish precious display items from the mass of rather hastily produced workshop material.

## Florentine Model and Head Studies on Toned Paper

From the second half of the 15th century, various head studies done by Florentine artists in metalpoint on paper prepared with colored grounds have been preserved. While Filippino Lippi chose a gray-blue ground for this depiction of a boy that was presumably done in preparation for a painting, Raffaellino del Garbo and Lorenzo di Credi chose grounds in yellow and pale pink hues, respectively, for their drawings here. In these delicately modeled portraits, heightening plays a special role in how the various shapes are worked out. It also makes surfaces seem to gleam, lending radiance to the faces.

Especially widespread were model studies in which artists drew clothed or nude figures in standing, sitting, or kneeling postures either singly or grouped alongside each other. The groups sometimes consist of identical figures engaged in varied motions, though the figures just as often appear unrelated. Though such drawings were usually done using live models, Domenico Ghirlandaio used a mannequin in his study for the draped robes of the Mother of God—as was also frequently the case in the oeuvre of Fra Bartolomeo.

## The Lagoon's Deep Blue – Dürer and Venice

It was in 1506, during his stay in Venice, that Dürer became acquainted with the Italian practice of working on papers that had been toned as part of their production. Particularly popular, though by no means of high quality, was the deep-blue *carta azzurra*. Dürer also attained familiarity with drawings used by artists such as Giovanni Bellini and Vittore Carpaccio to work out pictorial details during the painting process. It was probably his friendly interactions while in Venice, in particular with Bellini, that inspired him to expand his own use of chiaroscuro technique to include such areas of application. Dürer's work on his Venetian paintings was thenceforth accompanied by drawings on *carta azzurra*. They gave the artist a chance to test out various solutions in terms of their painterly effects and their characterization of surfaces, shapes, and structures of all kinds. As immediate preliminary studies for work on paintings, these drawings will have been of virtually no use—not least due to their extreme detail. But as part of his workshop archive, they did provide Dürer with readily available showpieces of analytic observation and supremely precise reproduction that testified to his art.

## “With Half-Colors” – Dürer and Chiaroscuro

From Albrecht Dürer himself, we learn that he produced preliminary drawings “with half-colors” during his stay in the Netherlands in 1520–21. By this, we can assume that he meant drawings in chiaroscuro. This technique accompanied him through most of his artistic life. Moreover, his multiple encounters with Italian art moved him to take the Italian practice of producing elaborate individual studies back with him over the Alps. For the Heller Altarpiece, completed in 1509, nearly 20 such detailed drawings of draped fabrics, hands, and heads are extant. In terms of technique and style, these take after the studies on blue paper produced by the artist in Venice—with the difference that Dürer now prepared his paper very carefully with his own blue or green grounds. The very fine surfaces that resulted allowed him to work with extreme delicacy and far more subtly than on the rough Venetian *carta azzurra*. Dispensing with a preliminary drawing, the artist would sketch his outer contours in extremely fine brushstrokes. He then accentuated the shaded areas with the thinnest washes of diluted ink before using the finest brushstrokes in darker gray and white to work out each detail, no matter how tiny.

## Extremes in Light and Dark – Hans Baldung Grien’s Witches’ Kitchen

During early modernity, the conviction was widespread that both women and men, inspired to violence by the Devil, worked evil as part of secret societies. Hans Baldung Grien’s pictures of witches and similarly themed portrayals show them in the midst of their dastardly deeds. To ground his paper, the artist often chose a red-brown hue that contrasted strongly with his black-and-white drawings and helped take the furor, violence, and energy of his scenes to the extreme. All light is visualized with hatching in exquisitely fine wisps whose nervous vibrations spread across illuminated surfaces. It is only in the combination of dark and light that details, structure, space, and plasticity emerge. Even during the drawing process, the artist had to proceed in a calculated manner and with a precise notion of his finished product. He dissected his intended image into light and dark ahead of time in his imagination—for simply adding white to a drawing begun in black fails to produce a satisfactory result and separates the masters of this discipline from those of little skill.

## Leonardo and the New Body Ideal of the High Renaissance

Leonardo's return to Florence around 1500 ushered in a new phase of High Renaissance art whose roots lay in the master's earlier works and whose development also involved artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael. From this point onward, Leonardo's human figures took on a monumental character that is plain to see both in their plasticity as well as in the power and confidence of their poses. It is particularly nude drawings that reveal this new heroic figural ideal, at which Leonardo arrived not least by way of intensive anatomical study. Shortly prior to his death, the artist stated that he had dissected thirty human corpses. He planned to author a treatise on anatomy, his interest being in the human body's form and structure, formation, development, and proportions as well as in the functions of its organs. Tied to this scientific interest was an artistic one, for Leonardo sought to use his anatomical studies in order to perfect the depiction of the body and its movements as well as human motivations and emotions in painting.

## In Red Chalk on a Red Ground

Leonardo, owed to the multifaceted nature of his intertwined artistic and scientific interests, represents a consummation of the Renaissance ideal of the universal genius. His scientific explorations led him to pioneering discoveries, and we also have him to thank for numerous innovations in the realm of painting and drawing. Leonardo was likely the first person to draw in red chalk on paper prepared with a red ground. The resulting lines hence join harmoniously with the reddish tone rather than contrasting with the underlying white. In nude studies, this red ground more or less formed the material substance from which Leonardo then separated the bodies step by step, and it also helped him to depict flesh tones. In other works on paper, he used red chalk in combination with black chalk, pen and ink, white heightening, and washes for impressive painterly effects. The red-on-red technique not only had a lasting influence on artists of Leonardo's circle such as Cesare da Sesto but also inspired other painters like Francesco Primaticcio and Giovanni Ambrogio Figino.

## Chiaroscuro Drawings in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, drawings in chiaroscuro occupied a position between that of Italian and German output. While such drawings did serve to prepare and present works in progress, pictorially complete drawn works featuring attractive subjects were also created to serve a flourishing collectors' market that began to develop during the early 1500s, above all in the commercial and artistic hub of Antwerp. Hugo van der Goes, probably inspired by Italian examples, was one of the first Netherlandish masters to discover new expressive possibilities in the chiaroscuro technique. Alongside enabling artists to model pictorial subjects in a highly sculptural manner, it also conveyed more precise information on effects involving light and shadow. This latter aspect explains why Netherlandish chiaroscuro drawings were produced with particular frequency as cartoons for stained glass windows. Under the impression of works by German artists and particularly in Antwerp, chiaroscuro technique enjoyed a rich heyday between 1520 and 1535.

## Augsburg Up Close and Personal – Portraits on Colored Grounds

A large number of portrait drawings realized in silverpoint and other techniques on a softly toned ground by Hans Holbein the Elder are extant. Some of their subjects reappear in paintings as secondary figures, while others served as preliminary studies for painted portraits. For the two works shown here, however, no further use is known. Holbein created portraits of people from sacred and secular life across nearly all social strata—from simple craftsmen to guild masters and artist colleagues and on to his home city's internationally networked political elite. And Augsburg, at the time, was a center of portraiture to begin with. Drawings, paintings, and medals are the media that acquaint us with that era's world. Of particular note were printed portraits, which—in Augsburg—were a specialty of Hans Burgkmair the Elder. Technical realization of such works as woodcuts was seen to by the Netherlandish artist Jost de Negker, who was regarded as highly talented in the production of wooden blocks for printing. With this multicolor printed portrait of the patrician Hans Paumgartner, done in chiaroscuro, the artist duo touched the boundaries of both drawing on a colored ground and painting.

## Albrecht Altdorfer and the Calligraphy of the White Line

Among the great virtuosos of chiaroscuro technique was Albrecht Altdorfer. He favored grounds in warm colors, though he also occasionally chose a cooler blue. Altdorfer's primary aesthetic concern was the artfully calligraphic realization of those white lines that often dominate his images so brilliantly that the darkly drawn elements and grounds completely recede. In a way much akin to writing, Altdorfer guided his drawing hand as if to demonstrate his mastery of the most complex gestures and lines as would a master scribe his skillful use of various scripts. He thereby rendered visible drawing as a process. Artists such as Dürer and Baldung aimed for highly disciplined textures of lines with the precision of copperplate engravings and used white to shape bodies, dramatize lighting, and clarify spatial aspects. Altdorfer's calligraphy, on the other hand, produces chaos, blurriness, and spontaneous motion, revealing him as a true acrobat of the quill pen and the brush. In his works, the white line defines shapes but also emancipates itself from light—often seeming to hover above the colored ground and black drawing like a curtain, remaining transparent and virtually immaterial.

## Masters of the High Renaissance in Rome, Florence, and Venice

The important High Renaissance masters in Florence alongside Leonardo and Michelangelo also included Fra Bartolomeo, who used paper prepared with red chalk in his preliminary drawing for the Belt Donation of the Madonna much like Pisanello and Lorenzo Monaco had in earlier works shown at the start of this exhibition. Raphael, for his model study for the figures grouped around Pythagoras in *The School of Athens*, chose a paper prepared in gray just as he generally preferred paper prepared in matte gray, gray-green, pink, and cream hues for metalpoint drawings during his Roman phase. His workshop employed papers prepared in all manner of colors—as seen in Giulio Romano's chiaroscuro drawing on a brown ground after a preliminary drawing by Raphael for the *Transfiguration*. Tommaso Vincidor, in a drawing for his series of tapestries with frolicking putti, used untreated paper toned in brown as part of its production. And the wonderful works here by Giovanni da Udine, Sebastiano del Piombo, and Titian, all of them native to the Republic of Venice, employ the paper produced in blue, the *carta azzurra*, that was particularly popular in the city on the lagoon.

## Titian – Raphael – Parmigianino and the Invention of Chiaroscuro in Italy

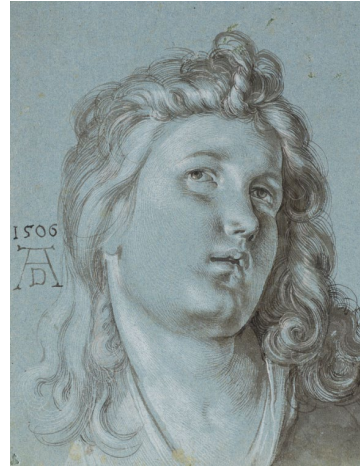
In 1516, the painter and woodcutter Ugo da Carpi petitioned the Venetian Senate for a privilege—a copyright of sorts—claiming to have invented a new process of printing in light and dark. Though Ugo was the first block-cutter to produce chiaroscuro woodcuts in Italy, the technique had, in fact, already been developed by Hans Burgkmair and Jost de Negker in Augsburg as well as by Lukas Cranach in Wittenberg. This type of printing is done using a line block together with at least one complementary tone block. In Ugo's first chiaroscuro, depicting St. Jerome, the lines recall pen-and-ink drawings by Titian, who provided the drawing for this print. The chiaroscuro after drawings by Raphael that Ugo produced later on in Rome used three or more tone blocks, gradually rendering the line block superfluous. These later depictions seem as if shaped by color and light alone. Contributing to the development of this more painterly style was the fact that Ugo no longer received pure pen-and-ink drawings as models but rather pen-and-ink drawings that had been washed and white-heightened. Ugo's masterpiece is his depiction of Diogenes after a drawing by Parmigianino, with whom he worked beginning in 1524.

## Press Images

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Leonardo da Vinci  
Half-Figure of an Apostle, ca. 1494–1496  
Metalpoint, pen and brown ink on blue primed paper  
14,6 × 11,3 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Albrecht Dürer  
Head of an Angel, 1506  
Brush and black and gray ink and white bodycolor, on blue paper (*carta azzurra*)  
27 × 20,8 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Hans Baldung Grien (Schwäbisch Gmünd 1484/85–  
1545 Strasbourg)  
The Witches' Sabbath, 1514  
Pen and brush and black ink, white body-color, on red-  
brown prepared paper  
28,8 × 20,5 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Upper Rhenish master  
Model Sheet with the Symbols of the Four  
Evangelists, Animals, and a Wild Man, ca. 1430–1440  
Brush and white bodycolor, on black prepared paper  
20,9 × 14,3 cm  
Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Inv. 638 Z  
© Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main



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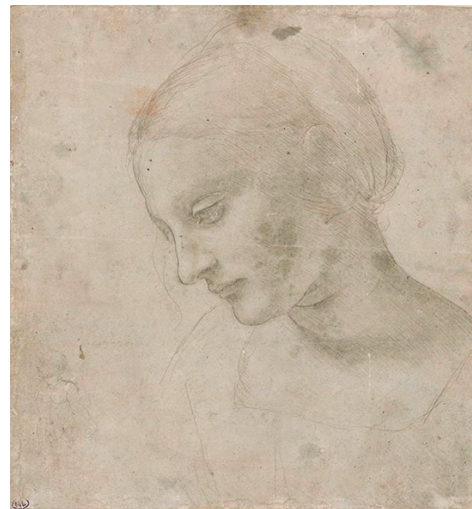
Leonardo da Vinci  
Standing Male Nude, ca. 1503–1506  
Red chalk and pen and brown ink on red prepared paper  
23,4 × 14,6 cm  
The Royal Collection / HM King Charles III, Windsor Castle  
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Leonardo da Vinci  
Bust Portrait of an Elderly Man, ca. 1508–1510  
Red and black chalks on orange-red prepared paper  
22,2 × 15,9 cm  
The Royal Collection / HM King Charles III, Windsor Castle  
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Raphael  
Study for the Bridgewater Madonna (recto), ca. 1506–1507  
Metalpoint and pen on brown primed paper  
26,2 × 19,3 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Leonardo da Vinci  
Woman's Head Almost in Profile, ca. 1478–1481  
Metalpoint with white heightening on gray prepared paper  
17,9 × 16,8 cm  
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts graphiques, Inv. 2376  
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Antonio Pisano, called Pisanello  
Allegory of the Luxuria (verso), ca. 1425-1430  
Pen and brown ink, traces of metalpoint on paper rubbed  
with red chalk  
12,9 × 15,2 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna



Albrecht Dürer  
Praying Hands, 1508  
Brush in black and gray ink and white  
bodycolor, on blue prepared paper  
29,1 × 19,7 cm  
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna  
© Photo: The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna