

Meet Maximilian

- *Portrait of Emperor Maximilian I, 1519*
- *The Triumphal Arch of Emperor Maximilian I, 1515-1517*



Portrait of Emperor Maximilian I
c. 1519
Albrecht Dürer
German, 1471-1528
and
Unidentified colorist
Woodcut with transparent washes
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

Five hundred years ago, Maximilian reigned as emperor of Germany and the surrounding lands of the Holy Roman Empire. He was a man of enormous ego and ambition who wanted more than anything else to be remembered as the equal of the great emperors of ancient Rome.

If Maximilian I were alive today, he would be delighted to know that people all over the world could view his portrait on the Internet. Like many powerful rulers, Maximilian thrived on being in the public view.

When Maximilian held power, celebrity and fame were not easy to arrange. There was no television to bring a ruler's image into people's homes. There was no radio to transmit his speeches. There was, however, a new invention called the *printing press*, which was capable of producing many thousands of inexpensive pictures printed from woodblocks on cheap paper.

Maximilian loved inventions, and realized the enormous potential of the printing press to publicize his success as a ruler. Just as today's leaders make arrangements with photographers to create a complimentary and flattering *photo-op*, Maximilian invited distinguished artists to produce prints that celebrated his achievements. Such prints were distributed far and wide throughout his realm.

In 1518, Maximilian invited the distinguished German artist Albrecht Dürer to sketch an informal portrait, "high up in his little room in the castle." When Maximilian died the following year at age sixty, Dürer cut a woodblock based on the sketch he had made. The inscription, in Latin, is a final memorial tribute to Maximilian:

Imperator Caesar Diuus Maximilianus Pius Felix Augustus

*(Maximilian, risen to heaven, supreme commander and emperor,
godly, successful, and majestic.)*

Maximilian's memorial print was reproduced in huge numbers and distributed far and wide throughout the Empire. Many of the prints were painted in bright colors by print colorists. The colored versions often fetched higher prices than the original black-and-white prints.

Looking at Maximilian

Two different colorists painted the two portraits of Maximilian below. The two prints are virtually identical underneath the paint.

The print with the green background was painted shortly after Maximilian's death.

The print with the blue background was painted about 200 years later.

Compare the two portraits.

What differences do you find in the colors of Maximilian's hat?

What colors are his jacket and neck scarf?

What color is Maximilian's hair?

What color is Maximilian's skin?

How old does Maximilian appear to be?

Does Maximilian look like an *ambitious, powerful* ruler or a *weak* ruler?



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Portrait of Emperor Maximilian I, c. 1519
Albrecht Dürer
German, 1471-1528
and
Unidentified colorist
Woodcut with later coloring
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

Discussion

- If Maximilian were a 21st century ruler, he would undoubtedly be fascinated by the staggering innovations and possibilities of the electronic media. Imagine that Maximilian decided to create his own web site to publicize himself and his programs to the entire world. Which portrait would he use?

What does Maximilian's portrait tell you about Europe in the 15th-16th centuries?

Even though Maximilian wears a simple beret instead of a crown, his portrait contains several signs of his position and power.

- **The Latin inscription**
Latin had been the language of the ancient Roman Empire. Since the Holy Roman Empire claimed to be a continuation of the ancient Roman Empire, it was natural that Latin was used for the inscription on Maximilian's portrait. Maximilian liked to believe that his ancestors included Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and even the mythical Hercules
- **The Holy Roman Empire** was a very loosely organized empire, consisting of hundreds of small-disconnected regions governed by local princes and dukes. The territory of the empire included what are now the countries of Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, eastern France, the Low Countries, and parts of northern and central Italy. The Holy Roman Empire lasted for about 850 years, beginning in the year 962 and ending in 1806. Maximilian I was Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1493 until 1519.
- **The Chain of the Golden Fleece**
Maximilian wears a jeweled chain around his shoulders. Hanging from the chain is the limp wooly fleece of a golden ram, called the *golden fleece*. Maximilian was one of fifty-one Catholic nobles who called themselves *The Order of the Golden Fleece*. Together they formed a knighthood whose purpose was to preserve and defend Catholicism and the codes of chivalry. Each of the Knights of the Golden Fleece wore a similar collar-like chain to identify himself as a member. The *Golden Fleece* that hangs from the chain probably derives from the ancient myth of Jason who set sail on the ship Argo to capture the fleece of a divine ram.
- **The Religious Medallion**
A medallion of the Madonna and Child is attached to the front of Maximilian's beret. Like all Holy Roman Emperors, Maximilian was a Catholic, allied with the Pope in Rome. During Maximilian's reign, religious turmoil between defenders of the Catholic Church and those who worked for its reform grew ever more intense. The conflict ultimately resulted in the *Reformation* and the establishment of the Protestant church.

Learning about Maximilian

The world has known a great many emperors and kings. Some led drab, isolated, forgettable lives. Maximilian, however, relished his power and prestige. He was a colorful, larger-than-life ruler, driven by an enormous ego, ambition, and zest for living.

Maximilian had a *huge desire for fame*. He would have liked to make himself Pope as well as Emperor. He considered himself the equal of Roman emperors and tried to imitate them in everything he did.

Maximilian *loved learning* and *always wanted to excel*. He was a serious student of history and mathematics. He spoke seven languages: German, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, Walloon, Flemish, and English. He found the whole world exciting, and took an active interest in classical archeology, art criticism, music, poetry, veterinary surgery, mining, carpentry, artillery, cooking, law, education, and fashion design. He sought out the best artists, poets, musicians, architects, and historians to help him bring glory to himself and his empire.

Maximilian was *reckless and bold*. He was *adventurous*, but *lacked good judgment*. As a young man, Maximilian scaled the 350-foot tower of Ulm Cathedral, the tallest spire in Europe. As emperor, he dreamed of restoring grandeur of the Holy Roman Empire by recapturing its former possessions in Italy. But he was not a good general. He didn't think things through, and his attempted invasions were ill conceived and futile.

In his early years, Maximilian was a popular emperor. His cheerful disposition, skill in jousting and hunting, and his love of tournaments and pageants brought him close to the people. By the end of his reign, however, he was worn out, disillusioned, and arrogant.

Maximilian was restless. He *traveled constantly* around the empire, never really settling down. By doing so, he held his loosely connected empire together and gained support for himself as ruler.

Maximilian was always *short of money*. He had extraordinary plans to improve the empire, but didn't always have the means to carry them out. Even though he was emperor, he sometimes lacked funds to pay for his dinner.

Maximilian's Triumphal Arch

Maximilian I was driven by an enormous ego. As Holy Roman Emperor, he considered himself the descendant and equal of ancient Roman emperors who lived and ruled more than 1,000 years earlier. Taking Caesar, Titus, and Constantine as his models, Maximilian conceived the notion of building a triumphal arch to celebrate his ancestry and achievements in the same way that the massive ancient triumphal arches commemorated the victories of earlier Roman emperors.

However, erecting and carving a huge triumphal arch out of stone was expensive, and Maximilian did not have the funds to carry out the project. So he resorted to a backup plan, which was to create a huge triumphal arch almost 12 feet tall, out of paper.

The printing press, invented in 1450, made Maximilian's plan feasible. His enormous arch could be assembled out of a great many individually printed small pieces of paper, and attached flat to a wall. What's more, multiple copies of his arch could be produced on the printing press and distributed to royalty and aristocrats throughout Europe throughout the empire to spread the Emperor's fame. In all about 500 sets were printed.

Maximilian's Triumphal Arch is made of **192 separate woodcuts** of varying sizes. When properly assembled, the Arch is nearly **12 feet tall by 10 feet wide**.

The arch is laden with images of battles, emperors, kings, and royal relatives surrounding the enthroned Maximilian. All leftover space is filled with delightful ornament, griffins, playful dogs, monkeys, trumpeters, goats, and mermaids.

Such an enormous project required the work of many. Albrecht Dürer, Nuremberg's finest artist was the master designer, but he had considerable help from an architect a scholar, and a number of woodblock cutters.

Two hundred copies of the Triumphal Arch were printed during Maximilian's lifetime. Many were distributed among the members of the aristocracy who were pictured on the monument. Some of the prints were hand-colored using stencils. Three hundred more copies were printed and distributed about nine years later, after Maximilian had died.

For photographs of the individual sheets being assembled into the arch, see *The Triumphal Arch and the Large Triumphal Carriage of Maximilian I*, Part II, figures 11-15, by Linda S. Silber, Elmer Eusman, and Sylvia Albro available on line at <http://aic.stanford.edu/conspec/bpg/annual/v14/bp14-07.html>



Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I

1515-1517

Albrecht Dürer - German, 1471-1528

and

Unidentified colorist

Woodcuts and letterpress with transparent washes and body colors, applied through stencils, highlighted with gold
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett

What is a Triumphal Arch?

In ancient Roman times, triumphant military generals led their victorious armies through arched city gates that had been decorated with trophies.

As time went on, Romans builders erected free-standing arches *inside the city* so that a victorious general and his army could emerge through the arch as they entered the forum. These monumental triumphal arches stretched from one side of the main street to the other. When the arch was a grand **three-part arch** the center arch was tall and wide enough to admit carriages, while the two side arches were narrower, allowing people on foot to walk safely through.

You can find photographs of a triumphal arch at many sites online. Here are two:

http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/Arch_of_Severus.html

http://romanhistorybooksandmore.freesevers.com/images_j/DSCF0004_2.jpg

Maximilian yearned for a triumphal arch to celebrate his ancestry and achievements in the same way that the earlier Roman emperors had their triumphal arches to honor and celebrate their victories. The inscription at the top of Maximilian's central arch states:

- *The Arch of Honor of the most Serene and Mighty emperor and King Maximilian is constructed after the model of the ancient triumphal arches of the Roman Emperors in the City of Rome.*

Discussion

Compare the stone Arch of Constantine to the paper Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I.

- How do the two monuments compare in overall shape?
- Could carriages pass through Maximilian's central arch if it were made of stone?
- Would Maximilian's arch stand up if it were built of stone?
- How do the two arches compare in number of figures and carvings?