



Stag Beetle, Albrecht Dürer

Stag Beetle

Albrecht Dürer

German, 1505

Watercolor and body color; upper left corner added, with tip of left antenna painted in by a later hand

5 9/16 x 4 1/2 in.

83.GC.214

Questions for Teaching

Insects are made up of three parts, a head, thorax and abdomen. Identify the three parts in this drawing.

How did the artist make the beetle look real? What details do you notice? What techniques do you think he used?

This drawing was made over 500 years ago, in 1505, before microscopes were invented in the 1590s. (The date is visible on the image.) How do you think the artist drew the beetle without the use of a microscope?

This was made at a time when insects were considered disgusting creatures that carried diseases. Do you think that the artist felt that way about this beetle? Why or why not? What do you see that makes you say that?

Background Information

"It is indeed true," wrote Albrecht Dürer, "that art is omnipresent in nature, and the true artist is he who can bring it out." *The Stag Beetle* is one of Dürer's most influential and most copied nature studies. Singling out a beetle as the focal point of a work of art was unprecedented in 1505, when most of Dürer's contemporaries believed that insects were the lowest of creatures. Dürer's keen interest in nature, however, was a typical manifestation of the Renaissance. This beetle, rendered with such care and respect, seems almost heroic as he looms above the page.

Dürer probably made this drawing in the studio, based on quick sketches from nature and memory. The level of finish shows that he considered it an independent work of art, not a preparatory study. He used body color to show volume, as in the hard, convex outer wings. Transparent washes represent light effects, such as the shadow cast by the body, which the legs raise off the ground. Seen up close, the creature's legs and spiky mandibles suggest its



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kinship to imaginary beasts in late Gothic depictions of Hell or the temptation of Saint Anthony Abbott.

About the Artist

Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528)

"In Venice, I am treated as a nobleman. . . . Here I really am somebody, whereas at home I am just a hack." —Albrecht Dürer

Though Dürer lamented Germany's medieval conception of artists, Italian Renaissance ideas first came north in a powerful way through him. Dürer initially trained in Nuremberg as a goldsmith, painter, and woodcutter. After visiting Venice in 1495, he studied mathematics, geometry, Latin, and humanist literature intensely. He expressed himself primarily through prints; painting was less profitable, and Lutheran church reformers disdained most religious artworks. Dürer's paintings are few and more traditional than his engravings and woodcuts. In 1498 he published the first book entirely produced by an artist, *The Apocalypse*, which included woodcuts illustrating the *Book of Revelation*. Its vivid imagery, masterly draftsmanship, and complex **iconography** established his reputation. After visiting Italy again from 1505 to 1507, Dürer's art assimilated Renaissance principles. Unlike his earlier, more Gothic woodcuts, Dürer's engravings of 1513 and 1514 suggest the influence of Italian **chiaroscuro** and were conceived in painterly terms, using a range of velvety tones rather than lines. His drawings include studies of hands, draperies, and costume, portraits, Madonnas, and intimate and detailed watercolor studies of nature. Despite the impressive scope of his workshop, Dürer left no direct successors, though his easily transportable prints were influential throughout Europe.