

# Forever Unfinished.

by Christian Höfgen © 2012

Venice was one of the centers of the new movement of beauty and sensuality south of the Alps. Florence was just too far away for the purse of Master Dürer, but perhaps, because of his meager funds, he had achieved a better destination for his quest.

The city was to be admired like a most perfect flower. Venice was still at the peak of its power and thus a rich patron of the arts.

Dürer was a German painter, on a quest to better his techniques, to learn from the mastery of Italian painting in Renaissance style. This art movement revived the old, ancient painting techniques of perspective and had developed them further.

Since the beginning of the Gothic period, there had been no other so major a revolution in the field of art.

In particular, portraits of people became most realistic and adept in a style found almost only in Italy. The painters seemed even to be able to capture the whole aura of a person. At least the aura that they subjectively perceived of a person.

After Dürer learned from an Italian colleague all the knowledge he could obtain, he thirsted for practicing the acquired skills himself and so he went for walks through the lagoon city laced by artificial canals, in search of an interesting scenery. He envisioned sketching some interesting parts of the famous metropolis, to be painted later in the studio, as a recording of Venice's charms for his fellow Germans in the cold north. In a way, he planned to anticipate Canaletto in a Renaissance style, but fate would soon change his plans.

Late one afternoon, while on one of his walks, he noticed a very nobly dressed lady who was certainly of highest rank, her stunning beauty underlined by her long, wavy auburn hair, of which he took notice first.

The painter was immediately taken with her slender figure as he spied after her from afar.

His eyes remained magnetically attached to her, and he followed her through the streets of the city. He had found his motif. For a whole hour he followed her and, although he never quite managed to see her face clearly, he was convinced he was following one of the most beautiful women in all of Italy. Only when they arrived before her Palazzo, did she look fleetingly around, taking more time for this, so Dürer managed to admire her face, and it took his breath away. What he saw were the most beautiful, brown, almond-shaped, eyes, he had ever seen, and as a painter he had seen many beautiful eyes. But they were also the saddest he had ever seen, and he wondered how such a beautiful and wealthy lady, could ever have a gloomy life.

Although still quite alien to the city, he memorized the address. He decided to return the next day to linger around the entrance of her Palazzo.

He had no idea how he should approach the unknown lady.

She was certainly of highest nobility, and he had no access to the places of her world, where he could have been formally introduced to her.

A hint of bitterness rose up in him.

The next day, as planned, he lounged near her Palazzo for so long that he earned himself some curious looks from the Venetians passing by, but he did not care, because he longed to see these so-magical eyes again. He had to paint them. An obsession took possession of him.

By late morning things finally became exciting for him, as the delicate beauty left her house.

Passionately the painter followed her like a distant shadow.

He saw only her. Forgotten was the beautiful city, when an even more beautiful city was moving in her midst whose magic was far more powerful. Perhaps our artist had also fallen in love with the lady without admitting the fact to himself.

He was a northern European with a Mediterranean heart that could catch fire quickly. Those who see his paintings in museums today can still feel his passion for portraying life, even centuries later. And when the lady he was following with his eyes and heart attempted to board one of the famous gondolas, probably in order to go to an outlying island off Venice, our carefully observing pursuer noticed that she began to slip with the danger of falling into the water. Yet before she herself became aware of this, Dürer rushed forward, responding as quick as a flash, ran to the edge of the canal, and jumped into the water, as if this was an everyday routine for him. He placed himself before the lady so that he could prevent her falling into the canal at the very last moment, so that her lady companion could successfully manage to pull her back into safety.

While the two ladies were still recovering from the shock they had endured, our painter and guardian angel of the unknown beauty climbed out of the canal. Well, now fate had forced his introduction to her.

"Be thanked many times, my unknown savior. Who are you?" she asked him after feeling easier.

Her sensual lips formed a practiced smile, but it didn't escape the sharp eyes of the artist that her eyes were still radiating the already familiar sadness, disregarding the beauty of these gems.

"My name is Dürer. I'm a painter from Germany, Madam. Always at your service," he replied with a slight bow, while at the same time unconsciously putting his hand over his heart.

"You have truly earned yourself a favor for your outstanding service. How could I reward you, worthy champion?", she said with a melodic, almost siren-like voice.

Everything about her was simply captivating.

"Allow me the great favor of sketching you. Your beauty must be preserved for eternity," he answered very boldly.

"Surely the answer of a true gentleman who is, above all, an artist. It proves more profoundly your

honesty towards me, even while your name is unknown to me, and I actually know all renowned painters," she replied softly.

"Certainly not all painters north of the Alps," replied Dürer.

"Certainly not," replied the still unknown lady.

"I'm Giulia Farnese, Master Dürer, and it will be an honor for me to fulfill your wish."

Giulia's eyes flickered when she said this. Dürer, however thought nothing of it, because he was only too happy to be able to paint this charming lady soon. A sketch was only the prologue, the notes for the later painting, which would certainly be his greatest work ever. He was sure of this.

"I suppose you have boldly followed me, and that you therefore already know my address. Visit me at eight this evening, with your drawing utensils at hand, to collect the reward for your help," said Giulia, accompanied by a very self-satisfied smile.

"My humblest thanks to you, Madam," he thanked her.

"I shall see you soon then, Master Dürer," she said upon leaving him.

A joyful artist, and perhaps also a happy lover, remained. As fast as his feet could carry him, he ran back to his small apartment to prepare his tools.

He wanted only the best paper and pens for this undertaking. The sketch alone would become his best ever, and his memory would memorize faithfully all the colors and highlights of his model at that very moment, later to be recalled when he actually did the painting. Thus to record the true magic of the moment for posterity.

He had no time to inquire more about the lady. He had already heard the name Farnese often and knew that it was a very noble family, but never caught up with all gossip due to his still poor Italian. At eight o'clock he was right on time at the door to Giulia's Palazzo, and a servant led him to her private chambers.

As soon as he saw her he felt as though struck by lightning, as she was welcoming him wearing only a dressing gown adorned with delicate lace.

Yes, Italians were more fun-loving than the always far too serious Germans. "I wish I could stay forever in Venice," he sighed inwardly.

Well, at least he could preserve and take with him the aura of this jewel, which he was facing now.

"You expected a less lewd setting?" she asked, smiling slightly, because his face betrayed total astonishment.

It was of such dimensions that he had completely forgotten to bow, and his eyes almost fell out of his head.

This genuine and pure admiration touched Giulia, who knew only the other, in which she was perceived merely as the pure object of desire, and the possession of her mighty lover.

She felt that this painter truly saw her soul, and did not know the libel and slander against her by all

evil and dirty tongues across the whole of Italy.

"No, I did not, Madam," replied Dürer honestly.

"Do you want to change the setting?" she asked.

"No. I want you to pose in the way that feels most comfortable for you. As you wish, Madam," he said and performed his previously forgotten bow.

"Then I shall sit down next to my dressing table and you shall draw me, as I wish." In saying this, the hint of a smile stole into her eyes for the first time.

She sat down, thereby exposing a breast, as if by accident. That she did not cover it again betrayed the first impression as lie. She was serious and seemed to look dreamily into a different, better world.

Dürer now electrified, quickly took up a pen and began his sketching work. He drew her full reclining figure. He planned to do the painting exactly like the sketch. The moment seemed so intimate, yet it was only the sketching that was very passionate for him. He saw her beauty only with the look of an artist.

The lover was banished to a distant corner of his thoughts. To him, a woman of her class was further away than the stars in the night sky.

He worked very precisely with a concentrated face and gave his best. After two hours he was done.

"Finished, Madam," he said finally.

"Why are you always looking so sad? Doesn't your beauty bring good fortune to you?" he asked with brazen curiosity.

"You really have heard nothing of me? Have you?" she remarked with amazement.

At that moment, her face could not hide the fact that she enjoyed this.

"They are mocking me all over the country as 'The Bride of Christ,' because I am the mistress of the pope," her voice spoke with doom.

"I was very young when he began stalking me. I never wanted or encouraged his attention. But can you reject one of the most powerful men in Europe, able to excommunicate under any pretext, anyone who tries to help you? ... There was no escape, so I had to become his mistress, concubine, prostitute, whatever you want to name my tragedy. My fate has many names, but none of them hint at the very fact that I am a victim. I am in Venice, on his orders, to conduct his diplomatic affairs, to negotiate political deals. He uses my appearance as a tool and is convinced that no one suspects a beautiful woman could actually be a successful diplomat. He is extremely clever."

Dürer was very moved and, at the same time embarrassed. If only he had imagined this. But now the sketch was done and pope or not, he would paint her, without ever giving her name officially away as the actual model. So her beauty had become a curse to her.

"It would ease my departure considerably if I only knew I could leave you in a happy state,

Madam.”

When he got up, she went to him with a request: "Give me a pledge of your friendship. Let me have the body of your sketch and take only my head with you. Divide your sketch now, and if you ever visit Italy again, seek me out and return to me my head of the painted portrait. Then, you shall obtain what the pursuit of art denied you this evening, dear Master."

A protest was impossible and he did not pause for a single moment to deny her wish. So Dürer divided the sketch and said goodbye.

At home, in Germany, he later painted only her head and upper body showing Giulia wearing the very same dress on the day they once met. He returned once more to Venice, but went not farther to visit Giulia.

He became a very famous artist. The painting today is regarded as his all time best, the high point of his career. He painted it, with interruptions, throughout the remainder of his life, since he always felt that the story behind the picture was incomplete. And so, the painting became a perfect masterpiece, and yet at the same time unfinished, but it is this unfinished style that gives it a unique grace today. Dürer preserved the beauty of a tragic fate. At closer look, one can still see and feel Giulia's lost gaze, one seemingly seeking a better world.

The sketches are lost, and only vague rumors hint at the possibility that Giulia was the model.

But those who look closely see the truth even after all these centuries. That she was very lovely, and her painter, perhaps, the only man who ever truly loved her.