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The Impact of the Protestant Reformation on Renaissance Art

One aspect of popular culture that has remained the same since the Renaissance is the psychological accessibility of visual art to the masses. During the 16th century, people could look at a painting and grasp its basic message, just as people today can see a photo on the Internet and understand what is happening in it. The difference between the visual art experience of then and now lies less in innovations that have since developed and more so in the technological accessibility that has resulted from these advancements. Peoples' basic understanding and innate intellect has not shifted, but the world around them has. With the development of new technology came the ability to reach many more people in a much shorter amount of time. Given the same tools, Renaissance inhabitants would have shared their ideas just as—if not more—effectively as today's average citizens, whose uninterrupted connection through social media allows them constant access to each other.

Renaissance art was the news broadcast of its time; it played a major role in recounting events of all types (Biblical stories, mythological legends, historical incidents) and allowed people to express and share their sentiments in public venues. Artists were visual scribes of the era, documenting what mattered to society.

One of the most influential movements during the Renaissance was the Protestant Reformation, which found several devotees in Northern European artists. These artists were friends and followers of the reformers and eagerly used art to spread the reformers' ideologies. The effect of this new school of religious thought (which often addressed other areas of culture) can easily be seen in the art of Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach the Elder. By comparing their early works, as well as those of Roman Catholic artists, to their works after the start of the Reformation, one can understand the messages of the Protestant reformers.

As Germans, Dürer and Cranach found themselves at the epicenter of the Reformation which was ignited by Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses on Wittenberg's cathedral door in 1517. Dürer became an ardent follower of Luther in 1519 after meeting him the previous year in Augsburg, where Luther was called by Cardinal Cajetan to recant his statements against the Church. His refusal to do so forced him to flee the city. Also, Dürer's friendship with Luther's famous contemporary Desiderius Erasmus furthered the artist's social standing. Giorgio Vasari made frequent mention of the artist in *The Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors*, building his reputation to an international level. Despite his Lutheran faith, Dürer was praised by the Roman Catholic Church and became a favorite of Pope Rudolph II in the latter part of the 16th century.¹

Lucas Cranach served as court painter to Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, who was one of Martin Luther's biggest supporters and introduced the two men. The artist became a friend of Luther while they both lived in Wittenberg, the birthplace of the Reformation. Cranach

¹ "Albrecht Dürer," in *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. David Rundle (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 139-140.

played a major role in the dissemination of the ideas and images of the Protestant movement throughout Germany. He made innumerable copies of portraits he had done of the Protestant reformers and the princes who supported them, recreating them as paintings, engravings, and woodcuts. He also painted images and altarpieces for Lutheran churches.

Meanwhile, the Italian Renaissance, already a century old, continued to flourish in the hands of many great artists, Italian and otherwise. Artists blossomed there, improving their skills by learning from each other, and becoming inspired by the volume and magnificence that there was to behold. The ornate lavishness of Italy's art provided a drastic contrast to the simpler yet deeply humanistic works by artists in the North. The ways the artists depicted and honored their faiths were different, and only the artists know what they sought to express about their own convictions when they created these pieces.

Domenico di Tommaso Bigordi was a Florentine artist of the latter 15th century known for his religious fresco scenes. Despite being known for his Biblical works, Bigordi portrayed little passion or emotion, focusing on how religion fit into the local landscape rather than the gospel. His pieces were accurate and easily relatable for people of that time because he chose settings from everyday Italian life, but did not conjure doctrinal agreement, not religious zealotry, from his audience. Bigordi received his most important commission in 1481 from Pope Sixtus IV, for whom he painted *The Calling of St. Peter and St. Andrew* in the Sistine Chapel. He earned the name Ghirlandaio ("garland-maker") from admirers, and had Michelangelo for a student. He articulately documented Florentine life during the early Renaissance and is among the era's most prosperous painters.²

Titian, an Italian High Renaissance master, remains one of the history's greatest artists due to his skill, creativity, and productivity. Throughout his long life he served important Roman Catholic leaders including several popes, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Hapsburgs, the royal family in control of Spain, Austria, and the Netherlands. Titian's use of color and detail, as well as his keen ability to perceive and depict the true character of his subjects, leaves the viewer in awe of his ability. A prolific and well-respected artist from the advent of his career, even royalty demonstrated great respect for his inimitable abilities.³

These four men differed greatly in nearly everything from birthplace, to artistic style, to clientele, but what joins them is the incredible skill with which they conveyed the messages of their religious works. Each made an important and lasting contribution to the propagation of religious faith throughout Europe. Their art continues to rouse in its viewers a wide range of emotions and subjects to contemplate.

² "Domenico Ghirlandaio," in *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. David Rundle (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 186.

³ Marilyn Stokstad, "Renaissance in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Giorgione and Titian," in *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 704-707.

The deeper questions that surface after looking at each work are:

1. Is the piece a form of religious propaganda, or is it an expression of the artist's personal faith?
2. When does art stop being a collection of pictures to admire, and starts being the source of spiritual inspiration for others?
3. How can the image's impact be qualified like the life events and religious beliefs which inspired its creation?

Although the answers to these questions are neither concrete nor immediately clear through observation, the works serve as testaments to the power of art in popular culture.

Madonna and Child- Dürer vs. Dürer

Feast of the Rose Garlands, Albrecht Dürer, 1506



The content of *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* illustrates Dürer's spiritual evolution. Painted in 1503, 15 years before he met Luther, the piece has a distinctly Roman Catholic aesthetic. German merchants living in Venice's commercial center Fondaco dei Tedeschi commissioned Dürer to paint their funeral chapel in the city's church of San Bartolomeo. Dürer portrays an ideal congregation of the Brotherhood of the Rosary (located in Strasbourg, Germany), documenting the story of the Rosary prayer, which became popular in Germany in 1474. The background depicts a German landscape.

In the center sits Mary, who is being crowned by angels, holding Jesus, and to her right stands St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order. They are giving blessings to those surrounding them in the form of rose garlands. Christ crowns Pope Sixtus IV, who stands at the

head of the clergy represented at the left. St. Dominic puts a garland on a bishop's head. At the same time, Mary blesses secular leaders, one of whom is Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who stands in wait. Dürer painted himself in the background wearing a fur coat, standing next to a tree.

In the early church, the rose symbolized the blood of the martyrs, as well as peace and forgiveness. The painting contains 150 garlanded roses, which represent the 150 psalms of the Old Testament on which the Rosary prayer was based.

The veneration of Mary has always been an important aspect of the Catholic religion. She, not Jesus, is the focal point of this painting, and is being crowned by angels, giving her a divine standing among men. The painting also supports the religious and secular rulers of the day. It attracted the admiration of crowds from all over Europe.

The Feast of the Rose Garlands was an important work in the transition from the Gothic to Renaissance styles, and was painted just 11 years before the Reformation. Luther did not support the worship of Mary, instead encouraging his followers to pray directly to God in the name of Jesus Christ. He did, however, find truth in the first Hail Mary: "*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*" Dürer had not yet met Luther, but the change in his views becomes quite apparent in his works after 1519, when Dürer became a devoted follower of Luther, whose teachings aided him through the grief and struggles with faith caused by the death of his parents within the last two decades.

The Virgin and Child with St. Anne, Albrecht Dürer, 1519



With his conversion to Lutheranism in 1519, Dürer's works changed drastically. His shift in religious convictions became obvious in his pieces, especially *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. There are clearly no references to the pope or Rosary prayer, and no examples of good works, aspects which made *The Feast of the Rose Garlands* distinctly Roman Catholic.

For this painting, Dürer drew from the delicate, charming style of Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini, whose later works ushered in the High Renaissance. It was in Italy, especially Florence and Venice, that Dürer felt at home, welcome, and inspired. Like Bellini would have done, he chose to depict the Virgin tenderly gazing at her child. Standing behind Mary's shoulder is her mother St. Anne, to whom Luther prayed while he was caught in a violent storm. Legend has it that he vowed that he would become a monk if he was saved, and he honored that vow upon his survival.⁴

Despite the apparent maternal affection, the expressions of the women are also touched by sadness; they accept with a sort of melancholy resignation that this child will one day have to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. Anne solemnly lays a comforting hand upon the shoulder of her daughter, whose eyes are downcast, knowing that her maternal love cannot protect Him forever.

These sentiments make clear the message of God's love for humanity that He, like Mary, would give His Son to die for the sins of the world. This emphasizes the ability to have a close personal connection with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Luther taught that faith "is enough for a Christian, he does not need good Works: he is definitely freed from all commandments and all laws, and if he is freed from them, he is surely free. Such is Christian liberty, and faith alone causes it."⁵ He did not condone the veneration of saints (including Mary), and felt that good works or external actions of faith were not necessary for salvation, which he believed was achieved "by faith alone," which is granted by the grace of God.

The Last Supper - Ghirlandaio vs. Dürer

The Last Supper, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1480



⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 40.

⁵ Martin Luther quoted in Leonard W. Cowie, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 20.

Whereas Dürer encouraged his audience to consider the spiritual importance of the events his works depict, Ghirlandaio used his art as a medium for informing the public of these events' proceedings. Ghirlandaio's *The Last Supper*, painted almost 40 years before the Reformation, is an excellent example of an early Renaissance Roman Catholic interpretation. As was typical of the period's artists, he made the setting in a grand hall in a spacious Italian villa, complete with stone-carved details, frescoes on the walls, and a view of the landscape outside. The large arches draw the viewer's eye to the center of the piece, where Jesus sits just slightly to the left of center, crowned with a glowing halo. His favorite disciple⁶ John leans on him and sleeps. The reason for his doing so remains unclear; perhaps John is resigned to the fact that his teacher and friend will soon be betrayed and die a violent death. Sleep often represents a means of escape from, or denial of, the inevitable parts of life, such as grief and death. Opposite them sits Judas, extricated from the group by his position on the other side of the table, his traditional location in Roman Catholic art. Jesus and the other eleven are seated farthest from the viewer, separated from him by the table, as if to say that they are not part of the earthly, sinful world where Judas resides, but are prepared for the afterlife because of their faith in Christ.

On the windowsill on the right sits a peacock, which is attentively watching the group. Because a peacock's flesh does not decay after death and it molts each year and re-grows new, more beautiful feathers, the bird was often used by early Christians to represent Christ's resurrection and the eternal salvation granted by faith in Him. In addition, the feathers on a peacock's tail look like eyes, symbolizing the ever-watchful eyes of God.

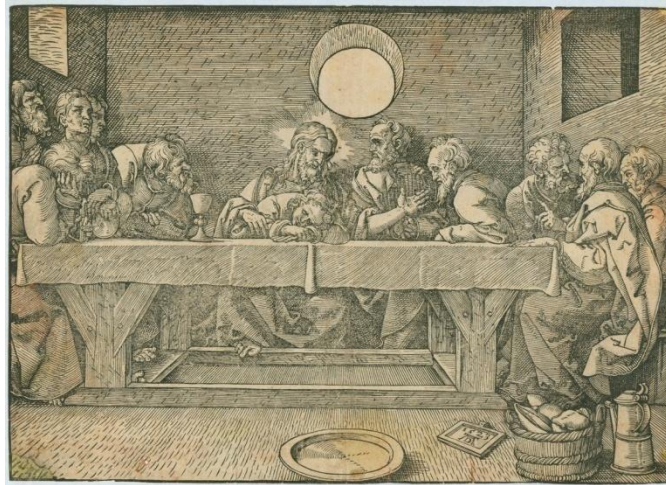
As in most Roman Catholic interpretations, this piece depicts the wine, bread, and paschal lamb, the key supporting factors in the Roman Catholic Eucharist. During the Reformation, the Eucharist was a major point of contention between Luther and the Church. Luther believed that everyone should partake of the bread and wine, symbolic of Christ's body and blood, both of which Jesus addressed at the Last Supper when He instructed His disciples to "take and eat." The Roman Catholic Church gave bread to every parishioner, but only the clergy partook of the wine, whereas Luther supported *utraqism*, the participation of the laity in all aspects of Holy Communion.⁷ Luther found issue with the fact that Roman Catholics re-crucified Jesus as they conducted each mass and Holy Communion. He taught that Christ died once and for everyone.

In addition, the Roman Catholic Church supported the doctrine of transubstantiation, which stated that the bread and wine were changed (in substance, not appearance) during Communion into the real body and blood of Christ, meaning the priest bore witness to God performing a miracle as he said the words of institution during each service. Luther, on the other hand, took "this is my body" to mean that the substance of the wine and bread do not change, but the Spirit of Christ is present in them. This denied that priests initiated any miracles during the service, therefore deeming them inessential and undermining a central Roman Catholic belief called sacerdotalism, which asserted that priests were necessary mediators between God and men.

⁶ *The New International Bible*, John 13.23

⁷ David Price, *Albrecht Durer's "Last Supper" and "Septembertestament"*, (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH Munchen, 1996), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1482893>.

The Last Supper, Albrecht Dürer, 1523



In contrast, Dürer's woodcut is very simple and presents a stark contrast between the ideologies of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Here, Dürer has also placed Christ slightly left of center with a halo around His head, holding the sleeping John. Renaissance architects believed that geometry in design was the embodiment of perfection, and the circles, squares, rectangles, triangles, and trapezoids in the windows, furniture, and tableware in the woodcut emphasize the perfection of Jesus.

Dürer placed his subjects in groups of three or four, as da Vinci did in his *Last Supper*. The interplay of their expressive personalities adds depth to their characterizations and reactions to what Christ is saying. Dürer also made visible the toes of Jesus and several disciples because sandals were always removed in the traditional Jewish home. Also, the pan and pitcher of water remind the viewer that Jesus washed his disciples' feet. These details humanize the subjects and underscore the ability of everyday people to develop a personal relationship with God, which Luther encouraged his followers to seek.

Predominant objects are the wine and bread, and particularly the chalice, all of which are used for Holy Communion and address the Lutheran position on the Eucharist. Luther believed that the sacrament involved fellowship with Christ as well as all other people, so everyone should take part in all of its aspects. In addition, the empty platter sits directly in the center, calling attention to the absence of the sacrificial lamb. The lamb is used as a symbol for Christ throughout the Bible, but Dürer chose not to focus on the sacrifice and death of Jesus, as most Roman Catholic interpretations did, but rather on His glorious resurrection which left the tomb, like the platter, empty.

Roman Catholic artists often depicted the Last Supper with Judas, at the moment when the apostles learned that one of them would betray Christ. The tone of these works is accusatory and pessimistic. Dürer decided to depict the scene after Judas left when Jesus gave his followers a new commandment: "...love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one

another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples.”⁸ Dürer highlights not the instructions to perform the Eucharist, but rather this verse, to which Luther devoted much of his preface to his 1522 New Testament translation, and which emphasizes love and fellowship, key attributes of evangelism.

The Crucifixion- Titian vs. Cranach vs. Cranach

The Crucifixion, Titian, 1558



In a typical Roman Catholic arrangement, this work depicts Christ on the cross, surrounded by his mother Mary, his favorite apostle John, and St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order. Mary wears her traditional blue mantle and weeps with her eyes downcast. St. Dominic looks utterly hopeless as he clings on to the base of the cross, just as Christ clings on to the last moments of His life. John stands on the right, the only one looking up and at Jesus. With his arms flung out, he seems to be questioning if such sacrifice is necessary, why this is God’s plan. His posture and expression cause the viewer to ask the same question.

The figures are placed close to the observer, nearly on the same plane, forming a triangle. Christ appears slightly smaller, producing the effect of shrinking from the others, slowly withering as He breathes His last. The halo that encircles his head is a typically Roman Catholic symbol. The predominant colors of the work are dark blue, red, and black, creating a somber, tragic atmosphere. Small accents of white starkly contrast the prevailing darkness, adding drama and highlighting important details, such as the moonlight illuminating the ominous clouds, Jesus’ loincloth, which is stained with blood, and the INRI sign (which in Latin stood for, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” a title given by the Romans to mock Christ). Each person wears an expression of great pain.

⁸ *The New International Bible*, John 13.34

Titian painted this during the period when he studied human emotion, particularly suffering. The intense sadness on the subjects' faces produced feelings of empathy and deep faith. This piece, like many of Titian's religious works, was an important contribution to the Counter-Reformation movement, which attempted to renew Roman Catholics' faith and glorify the Roman Catholic religion while weakening the Protestant opposition.

The emphasis on the Passion, the suffering of Christ on the cross, is an important theme in the Roman Catholic faith. Many Protestants disliked the negativity of this gory scene, and instead chose to glorify Christ's resurrection, which left the tomb empty and rolled away the stone from the cave's entrance, and His joyous ascension to heaven to join His Father.

The Crucifixion, Lucas Cranach, 1503



This piece differs from most depictions of Christ's crucifixion in several ways. Firstly, the crosses of Jesus and the two criminals are in a U-shape instead of a line, which encircles Mary and John the Evangelist, making them the focus of the painting. There is relatively little emotion in the subjects' faces, especially Jesus' face, which looks like he is already resigned to death. The fabric of his loincloth appears to move, maybe due to a gust of wind, which along with the ominous clouds in the top right, suggests an imminent storm. Perhaps a more optimistic view is that the storm is leaving; the fight against sin, death, and the devil is over and Jesus has won. The tomb near the bottom right lies in wait of His body, while dogs at the very bottom edge of the canvas gnaw at the bones of the already deceased.

The hopelessness in the eyes of the subjects, as well as Cranach's morbid details, adds to the melancholic mood of the piece. He painted this about 15 years before he met Luther, after which his approach would change considerably.

The Crucifixion, Lucas Cranach, 1538



Twenty-one years after the start of the Reformation, the movement had gained momentum and many devoted followers by 1538. During its early years, Luther translated the New Testament into the German vernacular, making the gospel available to the common man. In addition, Philipp Melancthon, a friend and active supporter of Luther, wrote several important pieces which outlined and solidified the Lutheran doctrines, including the *Loci communes* and the Augsburg Confession. Lutheranism was a major force by this point in Northern and central Europe, and Denmark and Norway adopted it as their official religion during the 1530s. The religion's proliferation made it easy for the masses to understand its artistic representations.

This painting is divided down the middle; on the right are "the Blessed" and on the left are "the Damned." The Damned are illustrated by the soldiers casting lots, determining who would get Jesus' clothes, and the bad thief who insults Jesus and refuses to repent. On the right are: the repentant thief looking at Jesus, Jesus' mother Mary, Jesus' disciple John, and people mourning Jesus' death.

Also at the foot of the cross are a father and son together, illustrating the Protestant belief that anyone, even children, can have a personal connection with God and understanding of religion. The Lutheran ideal of "By Faith Alone," which states that only faith is necessary for

salvation, is shown through the converted Roman commander pointing at Jesus and acknowledging Him as his savior.

Unlike his contemporaries in southern Europe, Cranach preferred the realistic style and rarely embellished. He liked to show detail in objects like armor and swords and gave his subjects' faces deep emotion, such as grief, fear, and doubt. His portrayal glorifies Jesus as the Redeemer, a statement about how he viewed Christ.

The variety of people and emotion demonstrates that Cranach understood every person has a personal relationship with God and responds differently regarding matters of faith. He also varied his color usage, which gives the work a somber aesthetic, yet it is not morbid; through the conversion of the soldier to faith and the belief in Christ of the father and son, there remains a glimmer of hope which will carry them through, and which will later become joy at the news of Jesus' resurrection. Their grief is only a necessary stepping stone to happiness.



The presence and influence of all four of the artists' personal beliefs make these works effective. Each piece conveys a different message about faith and a particular sect of Christianity. Regardless of which form of Christianity the artists followed, their works were more than just propaganda, but visual representations of their values. From the debate regarding the Eucharist, to the veneration of saints, to the glorification of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the artists depicted what they accepted as religious truth. Therein lies their power to affect people; because the artists drew from a deeper place than just their artistic judgment, communicating messages greater than displaying the extent of their talent, their works have lasted through the ages. It becomes increasingly difficult for the modern audience to connect with religion as a whole, both in art and in life, yet even if the contemporary viewer cannot understand the religious allusions in these works of art, the observer can see the artists' passion, and every person can appreciate that.

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