Context

Altars and Altarpieces

The altar in a Christian church is deeply symbolic, representing both the table of Jesus’ Last Supper and the tombs of Christ and the saints. Its top is called the mensa (from the Latin for “table”), and its side supports are called stipes (from the Latin for “post”). The front, often decorated, is called the antependium.

An altarpiece is a painted and/or carved construction placed behind the altar so as to appear visually joined to it. Originally a single panel, the altarpiece had evolved by the fifteenth century into an elaborate architectural construction. Before the Renaissance, altarpieces were generally fixed in place (and were often painted in fresco). Painting on panel freed artists to create these more elaborate constructions. The altarpiece’s base, or predella, is usually decorated with images. Above this might appear a diptych or triptych, two- or three-paneled, hinged paintings, designed to fold around and seemingly embrace the altar. The triptych soon evolved into a winged triptych, in which two panels, often painted on both sides, fold over the central section, and then into a polyptych, a multipaneled construction also painted on both sides, which could be opened and closed to form different arrangements according to the specific liturgical needs of the church year.

A diptych has 2 and a triptych has 3 panels. An altarpiece rests on the altar mensa, or top. The lowest section of the altarpiece is the predella, under the stationary center section. Two movable wings extend outward.

Hieronymus Bosch in ’s-Hertogenbosch

Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516), was born, lived, and worked in the town of ’s-Hertogenbosch (now in southern Holland). The town owed its prosperity to wool and cloth. Bosch was a contemporary of the painters in Southern Europe who worked in the so-called High Renaissance. Such a distinction seems inappropriate in the North, where there was greater continuity between fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art. (Only Albrecht Dürer, a German, discussed later in the chapter, fits comfortably into the High Renaissance cult of the individual creative genius.) Bosch’s paintings are at once minutely detailed and brutally imaginative, casting a dark, satiric shadow over the materialistic concerns of his Northern predecessors. In Carrying of the Cross, Bosch presents Christ in the middle of the painting, the crown of thorns on his head, bent under the weight of the cross, his eyes closed, and several days’ growth of beard on his face (Fig. 16.10). It is difficult to say whether he closes his eyes from exhaustion or from sorrow and pity for the grotesque menagerie of humanity that surrounds him. From their faces, these participants in Christ’s pain and humiliation seem morally bankrupt, hideously evil, almost sublimely stupid, if not criminally insane.

Christ carries the Cross on his shoulder, looking downwards. He is surrounded by people who sneer, laugh, and frown.

Fig. 16.10 Hieronymus Bosch. Carrying of the Cross, ca. 1490.

Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent. It seems likely that Bosch knew of Leonardo da Vinci’s studies in the 1490s of grotesque human visages, studies that Leonardo believed revealed the character and personalities of those depicted.

Such pessimism derives at least partly from a sense of doom that was characteristic of the North. It continues from the medieval sermon tradition stressing the wretchedness and worthlessness of human existence, exemplified by Pope Innocent III’s On the Misery of the Human Condition (see Reading 10.5) through the devastation of the bubonic plague. From the 1340s well into the sixteenth century, the plague periodically ravaged Northern cities due to the colder climate and harsher conditions that defined day-today life in the North.

Northern pessimism manifests itself most dramatically in Bosch’s most ambitious painting, a triptych with closing doors known as the Garden of Earthly Delights, painted around 1505 to 1510 (see Closer Look, pages 574–75). Although the painting takes the form of a winged triptych altarpiece, it was never intended for a religious setting. The Garden of Earthly Delights hung in a palace in Brussels, where invading Spanish troops seized it in 1568 and took it to Madrid, where it remains.

The painting is really a conversation piece, a work designed to invite discussion of its meaning. Bosch has given us an enigmatic essay on what the world might be like if the fall of Adam and Eve had never happened. It presents, in other words, a world technically without sin, yet rampant with behavior that its viewers, the fallen sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, could only identify as sinful. Other parts of the painting, the right panel in particular, seem to suggest life after the fall, life in which Adam and Eve’s sin has made humankind aware of good and evil. The paint-ing’s paradoxes are its source of endless fascination. Equally intriguing is its meticulous detail, which gives the most grotesquely imaginative landscapes a sense of reality, and contemporary artist Raqib Shaw has seized on Bosch’s sense of the grotesque in creating his own Garden of Earthly Delights (see The Continuing Presence of the Past, page 576).

Literature, Tapestry, Dance, and Music in Northern Europe

What tensions existed between the financial wealth of the North and its ethical and moral climate?

The pessimism and moral ambiguity of Bosch’s paintings ran through the Northern intellectual climate as a whole: The human body was widely regarded as the vehicle and instrument of sin, in stark contrast to the Southern human-ist approach to the body as an object of beauty reflecting the beauty of God. (See, for example, Donatello’s David, Fig. 14.14.) And, rather than offering hope, the Church seemed to many to be morally bankrupt and intent on bankrupting the faithful as it rebuilt Rome. In the late fifteenth century, the French poet Jean Meschinot (1420–91) summed up the sense of physical and spiritual melancholy that pervaded the North with these words: “O miserable and very sad life! … We suffer from warfare, death and famine; Cold and heat, day and night, sap our strength; Fleas, scabmites and so much other vermine make war upon us. In short, have mercy, Lord, upon our wicked persons, whose life is very short.” As Johan Huizinga noted in the passage from his Autumn of the Middle Ages quoted on page 561, in the North: “Sickness contrasted more strongly with health. The cutting cold and the dreaded darkness of winter were more concrete evils. Honor and wealth were enjoyed more fervently and greedily because they contrasted still more than now with lamentable poverty.” Thus, in a painting like Van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait, Giovanni’s wife’s robe, in all its bright color and fur-lined warmth, would also have evoked in the Northern imagination its opposite— dismal darkness, poverty, and cold.

The Literature of Ambiguity

By the first half of the sixteenth century, pessimism and doubt still pervaded Northern thought. Skepticism, about the Church in particular, reached even the highest ranks of the Northern European aristocracy. They regarded it with ambiguous feelings worthy of Bosch. This skepticism was poignantly expressed in the writings of Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549), sister of the French king Francis I (1494– 1547). She governed France herself when her brother was imprisoned in 1524 by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. She invested large sums of money and energy in order to reform monasteries and convents and establish hospitals across France. As a writer, Marguerite expressed the nuances of human relationships with a subtlety rare in her own day. Clearly a person of high moral and ethical character, she could nevertheless sympathize with sensibilities far less refined than her own, as the 72 stories that make up the Heptameron indicate time and again.

Modeled on Boccaccio’s Decameron (see Chapter 13), the stories are told by ten persons of aristocratic birth, who through a variety of misadventures find themselves thrown together at the abbey of Our Lady of Sarrance in the Pyrenees Mountains. Informed that the French royal family wishes a French equivalent of the Decameron, they undertake the task, each telling a tale a day, although they complete only the first seven days. (Marguerite’s own death may have terminated the cycle.) Story 55 (see Reading 16.1, pages 584–85) is short, but shows Marguerite’s skill to the fullest. It is about a Spanish widow’s strategy to circumvent her dying husband’s wish to sell his valuable horse in order to purchase an indulgence for himself. Her scheme is clever, but the real interest of the work lies elsewhere. Marguerite’s tales are, like Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, conversation pieces, designed to provoke dialogue and debate among their listeners. In this case, the conversation turns to the subject of Franciscan friars, who stand for the greed of the Church and, as other tales in the Heptameron make clear, the hostility toward women of the entire monastic system. In this tale, the wife’s clever scheme to avoid paying alms to the Church, while technically immoral and sacrilegious, is honored by at least some of the group as wise and even noble.

Marguerite’s tale is characteristically Northern in its emphasis on money. The social fabric of the North was deeply divided between those with wealth and those without it. In the calendar pages of the Limbourg brothers’ 1416 Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, for example, the daily lives of nobility and peasants are contrasted (see Figs. 12.22 and 12.23). The very large peasant class regarded the aristocracy, the Church, and the mercantile middle class with equal suspicion. In fact, in France, the peasants rebelled in 1358 against the heavy tax burden imposed upon them by the Hundred Years’ War. They revolted also in England, in 1381, and in Germany, culminating in the so-called Peasant War (see Chapter 17) of 1524 to 1526. As a result, the aristocracy, the clergy, and the middle class viewed peasants with deep suspicion too. In fact, since before the fall of Rome in the fifth century ce, the Latin word for “peasant,” paganus, had been synonymous with “pagan.” Peasants were assumed to be ungodly.

Tapestry

In this atmosphere, the great fairs of both Bruges and Antwerp continued to overflow with luxury goods. Goldsmiths and jewelers rented stalls, featuring elaborately decorated ornaments, wine canisters, goblets, punch bowls, and drinking cups. Picture frames were a specialty, and the joiners (specialized carpenters) who crafted these also offered pulpits, church benches, altars, organ cases, and furniture for sale. The textile merchants conducted a brisk trade in very costly luxury broadcloth, usually woven from British wool. The most luxurious of these rivaled Italian silks in their fine, soft, and close weaves. The stalls of the tapestry merchants were among the busiest. These luxury goods supplemented the fine art market, and along with the popular art forms in dance and music, constituted a rich cultural heritage.

Materials & Techniques

Tapestry

Tapestries are heavy textiles handwoven on looms. The looms range in size from small, handheld models to large, freestanding structures. They serve as frames, holding in tension supporting threads, called the warp, so that striking threads, called the weft, can be interwoven between them. Warp threads are made of strong fibers, usually wool or linen, while weft threads are brightly colored strands of silk, wool, or spun gold or spun silver threads. Once the warp threads are stretched on the loom, the weaver places a cartoon, or full-scale drawing, below or behind the loom. The weaver then works on the back side of the tapestry, pushing the weft threads under and over the warp threads, knotting alternating colors together in a single strand, to match the cartoon’s design so that the front side of the tapestry reproduces the design in reverse. The design can approach painting in its compositional complexity, refinement, and the three-dimensional rendering of forms.

In weaving, the tensioned, vertical strings are the wrap and the horizontal string that is woven is the weft.

The vertical warp threads of a tapestry are interwoven with horizontal weft threads

Closer Look

Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights

Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights is full of strange hybrid organisms, part animal or bird, part human, part plant, sometimes part mechanical contraption. In the left panel of the triptych, we see the Garden of Eden, populated with such strange creatures as albino giraffes and elephants, unicorns, and flying fish. In the right panel, we see Bosch’s deeply disturbing vision of Hell, in which fire spits from the skyline and tortured souls are impaled on musical instruments or eaten alive by monsters. The central panel presents an image of life on Earth, with hundreds of naked young men and women frolicking in a garden full of giant berries and other fruits. Lovers are variously contained in transparent columns or globes of glass—a reference to the proverb “Happiness and glass, how soon they pass.” This landscape is like a parody of the central meadow in Van Eyck’s depiction of the Adoration of the Lamb in the Ghent Altarpiece (see Fig. 16.6). The world here has gone awry. Illicit lust replaces love of God, wanton seduction replaces beauty, and Bosch’s own wild imagination replaces reason.

The panels depict a sphere with an earthly landscape. A figure floats above the orb, in the upper left corner. Words are inscribed across the top of the 2 panels, which are outlined in black and gold.

Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights, closed, ca. 1505–10.

Museo del Prado, Madrid. When closed, the triptych reveals the world at the moment of Creation. At the top left-hand corner, God floats on a cloud and looks down at the earthly orb. The landscape has no people. Inscribed across the top are these words from Psalms 33:9: “Ipse dixit et facta su[nt]. Ipse ma[n]davit et creata su[n]t”—“He himself spoke, and they were made; he himself commanded, and they were created.” The irony of what is hidden inside these exterior panels could not be greater.

Bosch’s, Garden of Earthly Delights.

Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights, open, ca. 1505–10.

The Continuing Presence of the PAST

Raqib Shaw’s Garden of Earthly Delights X

Raqib Shaw was born in Calcutta, India, and raised in Kashmir, the great valley of northwestern India. Kashmir was called “Heaven on Earth” by the Mogul emperor Jahangir who said, “If there is heaven on earth, it is here, it is here.” Shaw’s art reflects his Kashmiri-Indian heritage, his work bringing to mind the rich textures and patterned surfaces of Mogul miniature paintings such as the border of Jahangir Seated on an Allegorical Throne (see right and Fig. 18.21), or finely woven silk carpets and embroidered textiles. In contrast to Indian miniatures, Shaw’s Garden of Earthly Delights is enormous at 8 by 15 feet, and is just one of 15 similarly titled works painted between 2002 and 2006.

Working at this size, Shaw is able to outline each element of his work in a gold-flecked viscous paint of the kind used to repair stained glass. These lines are raised enough that he can then fill each compartment with glossy enamel paints into which he swirls the fine tip of a porcupine quill to create subtle patterns and details. Finally, he adds glitter and semiprecious stones to the ensemble, adding to the luster and glow of the whole.

But as much as it draws on the rich heritage of his Kashmiri background, Shaw’s painting is also a modern-day homage to Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights (see Closer Look, pages 574–75). If Bosch imagines a world as it might have been had Adam and Eve never fallen (yet rampant with behavior that its viewers could only understand as sinful), Shaw presents us with a world in which, for instance, a lobster has intercourse with a bird-headed man. “The work is made from a place of no inhibitions,” Shaw has explained. “There are no moral policemen. It is what it is, and it is happy to be what it is.” Shaw’s Garden of Earthly Delights represents what might be called a post-moral world.

A watercolor painting of flowers and other plants.

Bichitr, Jahangir Seated on an Allegorical Throne, from the Leningrad Album of Bichitr (detail), ca. 1625.

The stone walls of the palaces and private residences of French and Burgundian royalty were covered with tapestries from Arras, Brussels, and Tournai (see Materials & Techniques, page 573). These heavy, handwoven textiles with decorative designs usually depicting historical or current scenes hung from metal hooks on the wall and were used to help warm the rooms in the cold winter months. They were highly transportable and moved with their itinerant courts. It is possible that the transportability of tapestries may have inspired painters to create their own imagery on highly transportable panels.

Few tapestries from the period survive, but they could be over 30 feet wide and nearly as tall. The figures in them were often at least life-size—sometimes larger—so they were legible even in the largest room or church. Most tapestries were woven with dyed wool and silk, and their original coloration was often brilliant, even intense, and that color could be further enhanced with silver- and gold-wrapped threads. This ultimately led to their destruction, especially during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, when they were burned to retrieve the precious metals.

Tapestries in churches often served the same icono-graphic and liturgical functions as frescoes in Southern Europe. A fifteenth-century tapestry showing the Adoration of the Magi (Fig. 16.11), commissioned by a French cardinal, the Archbishop of Lyon, in 1476, is a rare surviving example. It was designed to hang across the front of the altar of the earliest of the great French Gothic cathedrals, Saint-Étienne in Sens, halfway between Paris and Lyon. The cardinal’s own coat of arms, with the motto, N’espoir ne peur (“No hope, no fear”), lines the border top and bottom, and his red cardinal’s hat decorates each corner. It would have been just one of many such tapestries decorating the interior of the cathedral. Another companion tapestry, an Assumption of the Virgin, served as the cathedral’s altarpiece. From the landscape in the background of the Adoration of the Magi to the realistic faces of the figures and the luminous surfaces of lighted objects (an effect achieved here by means of silver and gold threads instead of oil paint), the influence of Flemish painting on this design is clear.

The Virgin sits upon a throne and holds her infant son. They are surrounded by the Magi, who stand or kneel, praising the child.

Fig. 16.11 Anonymous Brussels weaver (perhaps after a design by the Master of the View of St. Gudule), Adoration of the Magi, ca. 1476–88.

Wool, silk, silver, and gilt-metal-wrapped thread,

Dance and Music

Elaborate decorative programs were not limited to palaces and churches. Many town halls across Northern Europe were richly decorated as well, and the great halls in these buildings often played host to important civic social gatherings, including dances. In 1477, the Munich town council commissioned for the city’s new feast room sculptures of 16 Morris dancers by Erasmus Grasser (ca. 1445/50–1518) (Fig. 16.12). Over 2 feet tall, each of the sculptures depicts a dancer leaping or twisting around to what, in real life, would be flute and drum music. Morris dancing is thought to have originated in Moorish Spain, Morris being a corruption of Moorish. The dances were popular not only among the common people—Morris dance troupes often wandered from town to town performing at carnivals and festivals—but as interludes at more formal dance occasions. The garments of most of the Morris dancers were adorned with bells, which made an agreeable tinkle as the dancers moved. The dances were often frankly slapstick, a source of great amusement to their audience.

A sculpture of a male dancer. He crosses his left leg over his right, bending downwards. With one hand he holds a cape, the other flared behind him.

Fig. 16.12 Erasmus Grasser, Morris Dancer (Bridegroom), 1480.

Limewood with modern polychrome, height

Women and Witchcraft

Grünewald’s altarpiece captures the miracle of the Christian story as powerfully as any work of its age. Yet since the Middle Ages, other apparent miracles had occurred more routinely in secular society, and the Church could not tolerate them. Local legends had it that practicing miracle workers caused impotence, droughts, multiple births, and miraculous recovery from disease—anything that seemed unnatural. From 1400 to 1700, across Europe and especially in Germany, the threat of witchcraft seemed very real. In this time period, somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 people were sentenced to death for the practice of “harmful magic,” and 80 percent of the witchcraft trials over the three centuries were conducted against women. In village culture, people with apparently special gifts—the “cunning folk”—had traditionally been called upon during times of crisis: plague, drought, or personal problems, such as disability and the inability to conceive. These “cunning folk” were often single women and widows who also functioned as midwives and were almost totally estranged from the community financially. Through the practice of their putative magical powers, they achieved, on the other hand, a certain real status in the community.

Although the Church also believed its clergy to possess magical powers—the exorcism of demons, for instance—it attacked the practice of magic by laypeople based on what it considered to be a legitimate fear of the devil. One of the most influential documents of the age was a guide on how to bring these laypeople to justice. The Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches), was written chiefly by Heinrich Krämer, a German theologian driven to the task apparently by his extreme misogyny. In its own time, the Malleus Maleficarum was little respected. Nevertheless, the Malleus remained one of the few documents of its kind in print, and as witch trials erupted across Europe in the sixteenth century, it provided an important reference point for the civil courts charged with conducting the trials.

Hans Baldung Grien’s woodblock print Witches’ Sabbath (Fig. 16.15) of 1510 captures the essence of what the Church most feared. Here, beneath a dead tree hung with moss, the witches perform a black mass. One witch raises a lizard above her head in a mockery of the consecration of the Host, the moment in the celebration of the Catholic Mass when bread and wine are reputedly changed into the body and blood of Christ. Another witch rides backward on a goat (symbol of the devil) across the top of the print. The nudity of the figures suggests the sexual perversion of their activities. The print confirms the misogynistic thinking of Krämer’s Malleus, where he answers the question, “Why is Superstition chiefly found in Women?” (see Reading 16.2):

Nude women sit in the woods and brew spells. A gush of steam rises from a pot.

Fig. 16.15 Hans Baldung Grien, Witches’ Sabbath, 1510.

Chiaroscuro woodblock with orange tone block,

**587 Through 591**

17 The Reformation

A New Church and the Arts

Learning Objectives

 17.1 Describe both Erasmus’s and Luther’s calls for reform of the Roman Catholic Church.

 17.2 Discuss the spread of the Reformation and its different manifestations in Zurich and Geneva.

 17.3 Assess the impact of the printing press on both the Reformation and the art and literature of the era.

 17.4 Recognize how the Reformation transformed art throughout Northern Europe.

In 1528, the painter Albrecht Altdorfer (ca. 1480–1538), a native of Regensburg, a relatively small German town located at the northernmost bend of the Danube River in Bavaria, was commissioned by Wilhelm IV, Duke of Bavaria, to paint one of a series of images that the duke envisioned for his palace in Munich. The series would depict eight historical battle scenes, and Altdorfer’s subject was the victory, in 333 bce, of Alexander the Great over Darius III of Persia on the plain of Issus, a small port city in Asia Minor near what is now the border between Turkey and Syria (Fig. 17.1). It was a subject of some contemporary moment, since, even as Altdorfer took up his brush, Ottoman Turks, led by Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), had gained control of Hungary and were preparing to set siege to the Austrian capital of Vienna, only 200 miles downriver from Regensburg. Altdorfer was, in fact, in charge of preparing Regensburg’s defenses against the imminent Turkish threat.

A battle scene with hundreds of figures. In the distance are mountains and a city.

Fig. 17.1 Albrecht Altdorfer, The Battle of Issus, 1529.

Oil on panel,

Alte Pinakothek, Munich. The banner at the top of the painting, evidently added at a later date, reads in Latin: “The defeat of Darius by Alexander the Great, following the deaths of 100,000 Persian foot-soldiers and more than 10,000 Persian horsemen. King Darius’s mother, wife, and children were taken prisoner, together with about 1,000 fleeing horse-soldiers.”

The painting depicts the Battle of Issus in the most minute detail across its bottom third. His lance extended before him, Alexander, dressed in medieval armor, can be seen charging Darius in the very middle of the painting, above the two red-striped umbrellas that point toward him. Darius retreats in a chariot drawn by three white horses. The middle third of the painting is a representation of the eastern Mediterranean. The island in the middle of the sea is Crete. Just above the pinnacle of the mainland mountain is the Red Sea, and to the right of it, the delta of the Nile. The tumultuous sky mirrors the battle below, but with a sense of apocalyptic doom, for even as the sun sets in the west, the crescent moon of Islam rises in the east. Darkness is about to settle upon the world.

No painting more accurately reflects the psychological tone of the era than Altdorfer’s. If Alexander succeeded in defeating the Persians, the painting seems to suggest, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, might not be so lucky with Suleiman the Magnificent. But in fact, in 1529, soon after Altdorfer completed this work, Suleiman’s army withdrew from its siege of Vienna, unable to subdue the city after repeated attacks, and demoralized by rain and snow. The painting’s apocalyptic vision was in tune with more than just the Turkish threat. To the embarrassment of Charles V, Rome had been sacked in 1527 by his own troops, angry that the emperor was not able to pay them. They jailed Pope Clement VII (Giulio de’ Medici) and forced him to pay a large ransom for his release. And if the Christian world had been torn asunder by those events, it was even more threatened by the challenge of Martin Luther (1483–1546), a rogue priest from Wittenberg, Germany, far to the north on the Elbe River (Map 17.1), who on October 31, 1517, had posted Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the town’s All Saints Church. The door served as a sort of kiosk for university-related announcements, and since Luther was a professor of theology at the university, it seemed the proper forum to announce the terms of his protest against the practices of the Catholic Church. His aim was to reform the Church, and by 1529, his movement had become known as the Protestant Reformation. As Altdorfer worked on his painting, the Church seemed to be threatened from both within and without. From Luther’s point of view, the Sack of Rome signaled the bankruptcy of the Church and God’s displeasure with it. From the Catholic point of view, Luther’s challenge to papal authority signaled the disintegration of belief that presaged the Second Coming and the Day of Judgment (when, they were sure, the likes of Luther would be sent directly to hell). But equally, for both, the Apocalypse seemed at hand.

A map of Germany circa 1517. Major cities include Hamburg in the north, Berlin and Brandenburg between the Elbe and Oder rivers, Cologne, Worms and Frankfurt am Main near Rhine, and Munich and Salzburg in the south near the Danube.

Map 17.1 Germany during the Reformation, ca. 1517.

Apocalyptic fervor had swept Europe since the late fifteenth century. Seizing on this widespread fear, in 1498, Albrecht Dürer executed a series of prints illustrating the Apocalypse and, in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, its chief signs—pestilence, war, famine, and death (Fig. 17.2). The prints were reproduced by the thousands and distributed across Germany and the rest of Europe, effectively securing Dürer’s income for life. By the mid-1520s, as the Turks pressed on Vienna, even Martin Luther saw their invasion as a sign that the Apocalypse was at hand. In a treatise entitled On the War Against the Turks, he wrote that they were “the rod of God’s wrath” by which “God is punishing the world.” Their war, he said, “is nothing but murder and bloodshed … a tool of the devil himself.” From his point of view, the only thing a Christian could do was repent and prepare for the end.

Four men ride on horseback, weapons drawn, as people flee on foot. An angel flies above.

Fig. 17.2 Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, 1498.

Woodcut,

Yale University Art Gallery. Library Transfer, Gift of Paul Mellon, B.A. 1929, L.H.D.H. 1967. 1956.16.3e. Dürer represents eight verses of Saint John’s vision in the Book of Revelation (6:1–8). The rider with a bow represents pestilence. Next to him, raising his sword, is war. The third rider, with the empty scales, is famine. In the foreground rides Death, sweeping a king and his people backward into the jaws of Hades (at the bottom left).

This chapter outlines the causes of Luther’s Reformation and its impact on political, social, and cultural life in sixteenth-century Germany and France. As if Luther’s theses were a giant stone of questioning dropped into the pool of European faith, his message quickly spread in waves from its center in Wittenberg to other countries across Northern Europe. Luther’s message had broad appeal, largely because he understood the need to address ordinary people. By successfully communicating with this wider audience, he could be said to have changed the humanist enterprise forever. Although late medieval writers like Boccaccio, Dante, and Chaucer had created a vernacular literature (see Chapter 13), Luther permanently transformed the nature of learning by translating the Latin Bible into vernacular German and writing hymns that could be sung by the entire congregation. He also arranged for his community to provide for those in need. These accomplishments undermined the traditional authority of the Church, just as they undermined the authority of the Catholic nobility. Other Church leaders soon took up the reformist cause, often resulting in strife.

What probably contributed most to the spread of Luther’s ideas was the printing press. Far faster and cheaper than hand-lettering, printing books could put written ideas into the hands of many more people. Ordinary citizens now could own their own Bibles, which previously had been available only in churches and monasteries, and they could interpret scripture for themselves. New humanist writers, often sympathetic to reformist goals, could publish and rapidly distribute their own ideas. Printmaking also made imagery, another transmitter of reformist ideals, widely available. And artists, responding to the distaste of many Protestant reformers for religious imagery, increasingly turned their attention to nonreligious subject matter.

Erasmus, Luther, and the Reformation

How did Erasmus and Luther seek to reform the Roman Catholic Church?

Luther’s own antipapal feelings were inspired, at least in part, by his reading of the Dutch humanist and scholar Desiderius Erasmus, whose 1516 translation of the Greek New Testament into Latin especially impressed the young Augustinian monk (see Continuity & Change, page 583). Luther’s early teachers, like those of Erasmus, were all Augustinians, so he was predisposed to be impressed by Erasmus’s attack on the corruption of the clergy.

The Satires of Erasmus

Erasmus’s chief tool was satire. Satire is a literary genre designed to convey the contradictions between real and ideal situations. It had lain dormant in Western culture since Greek and Roman times when such writers as Aristophanes, in his comedies, and Horace and Juvenal, in their poems and essays, used it to critique the cultures of their own day. Humanist scholars like Erasmus and Thomas More, thoroughly acquainted with these Classical sources, reinvigorated the genre.

Luther was also impressed by Erasmus’s anonymously published attack on Pope Julius II in Julius Excluded from Heaven (1513). In this satiric dialogue, Saint Peter and the pope encounter each other at the doors to paradise (Reading 17.1):

Reading 17.1 from Desiderius Erasmus, Julius Excluded from Heaven (1513)

PETER: Immortal God, what a sewer I smell here! Who are

you?

JULIUS: … so you’ll know what sort of prince you insult,

listen up. … Even though I supported such a great

army, celebrated so many splendid triumphs, erected

buildings in so many places, still, when I died I left five

million ducats. …

PETER: Madman! … all I hear about is a leader not of the

church but of this world. …

JULIUS: Perhaps you are still dreaming of that old

church. … What if you could see today so many

sacred buildings erected by kingly wealth, so

many thousands of priests everywhere (many

of them very rich), so many bishops equal to the

greatest kings in military power and in wealth, so

many splendid palaces belonging to priests. …

What would you say?

PETER: That I was looking at a tyrant worse than

worldly, an enemy of Christ, the bane of the church.

Julius believes that his “good works”—his military victories, his public projects, even the wealth he has brought to the Church—are going to get him admitted to paradise. Saint Peter—and, of course, Erasmus and Luther—believed otherwise. (Although extremely critical of the Church, Erasmus would remain a Catholic to the end of his life.)

Erasmus wrote his most famous satire, In Praise of Folly, while living in the home of his friend the English humanist, philosopher, and statesman Thomas More (1478–1535) in London (the work’s Latin title, Encomium Moriae, is a pun that can also be translated “In Praise of More”). Like the later tract, Julius Excluded from Heaven, the work, an attack upon the vices and follies of contemporary society, went through more than two dozen editions in Erasmus’s lifetime.

In Praise of Folly helped to secure Erasmus’s reputation as the preeminent humanist in Europe and was his most influential work. It is written in the voice, or persona, of an allegorical figure named Folly (Moria). Folly is a fool, and plays the fool. Thus, in the work’s opening pages, she addresses her readers as follows, pleading for her reputation by noting how pervasive in human behavior is her rule (Reading 17.2a):

Reading 17.2a from Desiderius Erasmus, In Praise of Folly (1509)

[T]ell me whether fools … are not infinitely more free and happy than yourselves? Add to this, that fools do not barely laugh, and sing, and play the good-fellow alone to themselves: but … impart their mirth to others, by making sport for the whole company they are at any time engaged in, as if providence purposely designed them for an antidote to melancholy: whereby they make all persons so fond of their society, that they are welcomed to all places, hugged, caressed, and defended, a liberty given them of saying or doing anything; so well beloved, that none dares to offer them the least injury; nay, the most ravenous beasts of prey will pass them by untouched, as if by instinct they were warned that such innocence ought to receive no hurt.

Through the device of Folly, therefore, Erasmus himself is free to say anything he pleases, and, as Folly reminds us, “It is one further very commendable property of fools, that they always speak the truth.” Erasmus spares virtually no one among Folly’s “regiment of fools,” least of all theologians and Church officials. He attacks, especially, those who “maintain the cheat of pardons and indulgences”— a sentiment that would deeply influence Martin Luther (Reading 17.2b):

Reading 17.2b from Desiderius Erasmus, In Praise of Folly (1509)

By this easy way of purchasing pardons, any notorious highwayman, any plundering soldier, or any bribe-taking judge, shall disburse some part of their unjust gains, and so think all their grossest impieties sufficiently atoned for; so many perjuries, lusts, drunkenness, quarrels, blood-sheds, cheats, treacheries, and all sorts of debaucheries, shall all be, as it were, struck a bargain for, and such a contract made, as if they had paid off all arrears, and might now begin upon a new score.

The rhetorical power of such verbal abuse accounts for much of the appeal of Erasmus’s prose. So too does his sense of irony, his ability to say one thing explicitly but implicitly mean another—to speak with “tongue in cheek.” Irony is, in fact, one of the chief tools of satire, and is embodied in the very title of Erasmus’s work. In Praise of Folly is, of course, a condemnation of human folly.

Martin Luther’s Reformation

The satire of Erasmus was rather too lighthearted for Luther himself. If he and Erasmus recognized the same problems with the Church, they were too serious, from Luther’s point of view, to be dismissed as mere “folly.” Even a cursory comparison of Luther’s demeanor in Lucas Cranach’s portrait of the Wittenberg professor (Fig. 17.3) and the expression of Erasmus in Dürer’s portrait of the Dutch humanist (see Fig. 16.19), executed at approximately the same time, reveals their difference in temperament.

Martin Luther is a man with curly hair, almond eyes, and a strong nose. He wears a conservative robe and hat.

Fig. 17.3 Lucas Cranach, Martin Luther, ca. 1526.

Oil on panel,

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. A remarkable aspect of this painting is Luther’s sideways glance, which suggests a personality capable of concentrating on more than one thing at once.

Luther’s own early years in the Church underscore how seriously he took his calling. He had entered the Order of the Hermits of Saint Augustine in Erfurt in 1505, at the age of 22. This decision was apparently motivated by an oath he had taken when, in a severe lightning storm, he had promised to become a monk if he survived the storm. By 1511, he had moved to the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, earning a doctorate in theology in 1512. In the winter semester of 1513 to 1514, he began lecturing at the university there. His primary subject was the Bible.

In the preface to the complete edition of his writings, published just a year before his death, Luther recalled the crisis in belief that preoccupied him between 1513 and 1517 (Reading 17.3):

Reading 17.3 from Martin Luther, Preface to Works (1545)

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. … I was angry with God, and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity … without having God by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. …

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’” [Romans 1:17]. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous [person] lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. … Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

Luther’s thinking amounts to an almost total rejection of traditional Church doctrine. He argued that the moral virtue that God commands of humanity does not exhibit itself in good deeds or works—in commissioning an altar-piece, for instance—for if this were true, people could never know if they had done enough good works to merit salvation. This was the source of Luther’s frustration, even anger. God, Luther was certain, accepts all believers in spite of, not because of, what they do. The Bible, he argued, rejects “the wicked idea of the entire kingdom of the pope, the teaching that a Christian man must be uncertain of the grace of God toward him. If this opinion stands, then Christ is completely useless. … Therefore the papacy is a veritable torture chamber of consciences and the very kingdom of the devil.” From Luther’s point of view, Christ had already atoned for humankind’s sins—what was the point of his sacrifice?— and he provided the faithful with the certainty of their salvation. So Luther began to preach the doctrine of salvation by faith rather than by works.

Like both Dante and Chaucer before him, Luther was particularly bothered by the concept of indulgences, remissions of penalties to be suffered in purgatory. Theoretically, indulgences pave the way to heaven for any sinner, and given the apocalyptic fervor of the day, they were especially popular. Luther’s specific target was Johannes Tetzel, a Dominican monk notorious as a traveling seller of indulgences (Fig. 17.4). Tetzel had been jointly hired by Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz and Pope Leo X to raise money to cover the arch-bishop’s debts and to fund Leo’s rebuilding of St. Peter’s in Rome. The sale of indulgences supported these projects.

Two men rush to place a coin into a box. A man riding on a dog-like creature holds a piece of paper out.

Fig. 17.4 Anonymous, Johannes Tetzel, Dominican Monk, ca. 1517.

The last lines of the poem at the top of this contemporary caricature read: “As soon as the coin in the basin rings, Hurray the soul into heaven springs.”

In general terms, Luther detested both the secular or materialist spirit evident in Church patronage of lavish decorative programs and the moral laxity of its cardinals in Rome. He longed for the Church to return to the spiritual ways of the early Church and to back away from the power and wealth that were corrupting it. In particular, Luther found the practice of selling indulgences to be contradictory to scripture. In the Ninety-Five Theses, which he nailed to the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, he wrote: “Those who believe that, through letters of pardon, they are made sure of their own salvation will be eternally damned along with their teachers” (thirty-second thesis). More to the point, he wrote in the eighty-sixth thesis: “Why does not the Pope, whose riches are at this day more ample than those of the wealthiest of the wealthy, build the single Basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather that with that of poor believers?” (See Reading 17.4, page 611, for more selections from the Ninety-Five Theses.)

At the heart of his opposition, in fact, was class division. Only the rich could afford to pay for the remission of their sins and those of their families. If the poor did buy them, they did so at great sacrifice to the well-being of their families. Then they had to watch the proceeds from the practice build the most extravagant, even profligate of projects in Rome. Such injustice and inequity fueled Luther’s rage.