

# 13 The impact of the Reformation on art

Although art continued to use religious topics after the Reformation, it became more didactic and narrative, pointing viewers to the Bible.



*The Pilgrimage to the Beautiful Virgin at Regensburg, by Michael Ostendorfer. Woodcut c.1519-23. London, British Museum.*

Art in Northern Europe prior to the Reformation was primarily religious, whether altarpieces, private devotional images, statues, woodcarvings and cheap prints. Such images were usually intended to provoke awe and worship in the viewer. They were often associated with miracles, indulgences and set prayers that channelled divine power to heal, protect and ward off evil, such as the Beautiful Virgin at Regensburg.

Reformation theology emphasised knowing God through the Bible, so the religious art of the Reformation became more didactic and narrative in its function, pointing viewers back to Bible texts. Erasmus famously said the gospel “makes Jesus so fully present that you would see less if you were to gaze upon him with your very eyes”.

Lucas Cranach the Elder was a close friend of Martin Luther in Wittenberg in the early years of the Reformation. Subjects such as Adam and Eve were favoured. This decorative painting, filled with the animals of a Saxon forest, points to Christ's death on the cross through the grapevine growing up the tree at the centre of the painting.



*The Temptation of Adam and Eve, by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Oil on wood panel, 1526. London, Courtauld Institute of Art.*



*Martin Luther as an Augustinian Friar, copy after Lucas Cranach; title page of Luther Acta et res gestae, Strasbourg: Johann Schott, 1521. London, British Museum.*

Portraiture played an important role in promoting the Reformation. Portraits of famous Reformers circulated widely either as oil paintings, or in cheaper printed versions. This woodcut of Luther as an Augustinian friar seeks to capture the moment of his conversion as, through the Holy Spirit (symbolised by the light and dove), he came to understand salvation by ‘grace alone’ in the New Testament book of Romans. Cranach also painted portraits of Luther's patron, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, which were widely copied.

Portraiture helped the Reformation gain traction, making it not simply about theology, but about real people. In Elizabethan England, John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* became a bestseller. The woodcut images were a key to its success because they visualised the life stories of brave



*Portrait of Frederick III, Elector of Saxony. Bodycolour on panel with two verses of letterpress on paper; 1532. London, British Museum.*



*William Tyndale tied to the stake. Illustration to John Foxe, Acts and Monuments, woodcut, 16th century. London, British Museum.*

reformers and created a new kind of hero. This image of the death of William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English, shows him before being burned at the stake, with a speech bubble saying “O Lord ope[n] the King of England's eies.”

The Reformation also prompted iconoclasm, when people smashed religious images that they believed were leading people to commit the sin of idolatry. A major wave of iconoclasm took place in the Netherlands in 1566, which was when this carved relief in Utrecht Cathedral was defaced.



*St Anna enthroned with her family. Stone carving with polychrome, c.1500; defaced in the iconoclasm of 1566. Dombkerk, Utrecht.*