

The Protestant Reformation Revolutionized Art

Martin Luther's Reformation ended a period of dominance and unity in Europe under the Roman Catholic Church. This unity lasted for more than 1,000 years. The Protestant reformers influenced artists who became inspired by the new ideas of faith, forgiveness, a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and the powerful stories in the *Holy Bible*.



Crucifixion, (Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1538)

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, people mourning Jesus' death, and soldiers and non-uniformed men on horseback appearing satisfied with the justice of executing Jesus Christ on the cross.

At the foot of the cross we see 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 the Son of God.

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. The faces of the people express deep emotions, such as grief, fear, and doubt. His portrayal of the crucifixion is similar to those seen in 14th century German churches.

The artist was originally called Lucas Müller but changed his name to Cranach after his hometown in Germany, which is now spelled, *Kronach*. He studied in Vienna, where he learned the humanist style and became an important contributor to the Danube school. There he received his appointment as court painter from Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony. Frederick was one of Martin Luther's biggest supporters, and Cranach became friends with Luther while they both lived in Wittenberg. Cranach received commissions from important electors and caused aspiring artists to come live there, turning the town into a center for art. It was here also that Luther posted his 95 Theses and thus started the Protestant Reformation in 1517.

Cranach played a major role in spreading 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. (<http://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/26747> <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Renaissance/Crucifixion>)