

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*.



Raising of the Cross (Rembrandt, 1633)

This painting is fairly unique in that it depicts specifically the raising of the cross rather than the typical crucifixion. Rembrandt painted in the realist style, and used intense contrast between light and darkness to create a somber and dramatic mood. A ray of light coming from the top of the image illuminates Jesus, whose face is contorted in suffering, displaying His Passion. The beam also makes visible a shovel, reminding the viewer of the grave that awaits Jesus when He dies. The same light also shines on the face of a man in a blue beret, a representation of Rembrandt himself, who lifts the cross with the Roman soldiers, who perhaps represent Rembrandt's assistants. His struggle to raise the cross symbolizes not only a personal struggle to depict this religious and momentous scene, but also his battle against sin as a human being. Rembrandt stands at the foot of the cross and seems to suggest that his sin, like the sin of mankind, put Jesus on the cross and He died to forgive him and grant

him salvation. Rembrandt also appears to be looking at the cross, but not at the face of Jesus. Perhaps he is avoiding facing (literally and figuratively) the anguish which Jesus experienced for the sake of all people. Maybe Rembrandt feels ashamed or unworthy of such sacrifice, conscious of his shortcomings as a sinner in the eyes of God.

The message that Jesus died to redeem every individual is a key tenet of Protestant, especially Lutheran, theology. The reformers emphasized the importance of a personal relationship with God, who by His grace grants salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the background stands another representation of Rembrandt in a turban. He seems to direct the Roman soldiers like a master instructor. He also appears to look out from the canvas at the viewer, pulling the outside world into this scene. As Rembrandt painted this, he would have been looking into his own eyes, which inspire deep self-reflection on the part of observers regarding their sinfulness, faith, and the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection to them.

It is not known whether, or if, Rembrandt aligned himself with any particular sect of Christianity. His father belonged to the Reformed Church, while his mother remained Roman Catholic, and perhaps Rembrandt preferred not to choose a side. However, he did have his children baptized as infants, which disproves a theory stating that the artist was an Anabaptist, a denomination that expressly denounced infant baptism.

Rembrandt was Dutch and lived in the Netherlands his entire life. During his lifetime, the region was divided into the Roman Catholic and Spanish-controlled Netherlands in the south and the Dutch provinces, which formed an independent Protestant federation. A war against Spanish rule lasted 80 years, and ended with the unification of the Netherlands. In addition, The Thirty Years' War, the chief war of the early half of the 17th century, was being fought during this period over religious, dynastic, territorial, and commercial issues. The Peace of Westphalia ended it in 1648, creating the beginnings of modern Europe.

Not one European country was spared religious upheaval at this time. The warring blocs of Catholicism and Protestantism—Reformation and Counter Reformation—kept battling for influence. Religious alignments decided political alliances and often caused distrust between countries vying for power and prestige throughout the continent and abroad.

Because of the laws stating that a ruler's religion became that of his subjects, many people were faced with the difficult choice between conversion and exile. Religious toleration was not looked on favorably in most places across Europe, because it lacked political security and the assurance of constancy. Many people sought refuge in different countries, including those of the New World.

<http://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/106072>, <http://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/109483>, <http://www.credomag.com/2011/09/24/raising-the-cross/>

http://www.everypainterpaintshimself.com/article/rembrandts_raising_of_the_cross/, <http://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/72150>

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