

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*.



The Calling of Matthew (Jan Van Hemessen, ca. 1524)

This painting illustrates the moment Matthew turned from being the tax collector of Capernaum to follower of Jesus Christ as an apostle, eventually becoming author of the first gospel. In the upper right of the composition, Christ is shown beckoning to Matthew to repent of his sins and believe His forgiveness is real and complete. Represented at the left in the immediate foreground is Matthew, whose arms and head are dramatically shortened as he turns toward Christ, responding to his call. Two of Matthew's colleagues continue with their work, engrossed in the tasks of counting money and recording payments, oblivious to the momentous occurrence that is happening. Perhaps this image continues to have application to our lives, 500 years later, as we are focused on the material things in life rather than our spiritual growth.

Jan van Hemessen, who is from the Netherlands and painted during the heart of the Reformation era, was among the earliest to exploit the genre character of biblical subjects—often for their instruction on morality and ethics. The subject of the *Calling of Matthew*, for example, was used to explore the vice of greed and money's power to distract us from righteousness and service to God. A reminder of the wealth extracted from Germany through the payment of indulgences to the Pope and Church in Rome. The figure of Matthew in this painting is also a concealed portrait of the face of Emperor Charles V, who ruled the Holy Roman Empire during the time of Martin Luther. The painting was made during the time of the Peasants Revolt in Germany, which resulted in more than 100,000 deaths. (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/71.155>)

"As Jesus went on from there (Capernaum), he saw a man named Matthews sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him." (Matthew 9:9)