



REFLECTING CHANGE: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL UPHEAVAL ON ART IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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Abstract

The population decrease in Europe due to plague in the fourteenth century, as well as the rise of humanism and calls for religious reform, caused the fracturing of the perception of a monolithic Christian belief. The fractures within Western European Christianity in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods set the scene for the social and political revolutions within those periods and later. This paper will focus primarily on the manner in which the art of Europe reflected and influenced the shifts in the theological and political ideals of the sixteenth through early nineteenth centuries.

Keywords

Social Upheaval, Art, Early Modern Europe, Renaissance

In 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed, allegedly, his 95 *Theses* to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, which was in the territory of the Elector of Saxony, Frederick I. This is seen by many historians as the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation, which divided the monolithic notion of Christendom in Europe, a notion that had been in place throughout the entire Medieval period. Eventually, the Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent, held between 1545 and 1563. Luther's call for reform of the Catholic Church was not the first call for religious reform in Europe, but was the most successful, at least in the long term. All of the calls for reform after the outbreak of the plague, especially those of William Wycliffe and Jan Hus, were clearly supported by the rise of Humanism in the fourteenth century. The Reformations, both the Protestant and Catholic versions, can be seen as the first major social revolutions of the modern period, and were supported by artists aligned with the varying interpretations of Christianity.

Given the upheaval of the Plague, and the number of people who died between 1347 and 1351 due to the Black Death, many teachings of the Catholic Church were called into question. Christian teachings through the Medieval period, stated that diseases and plagues were punishment by God for sins.¹ Priests, monks, and Church leaders had been seen as less susceptible to sin within the teachings of the Church, which is one of the reasons they were able to absolve sin within Church sacraments. The fact that the Plague also killed priests, bishops, and other church officials weakened the credibility of the Church. Also, many priests charged for masses and prayers for Plague-afflicted people and many who died left land and wealth to the Church as penance for sins, causing the church to become wealthy.² All of this amplified the calls for reform that had existed previously and caused people to lose faith in the Church and its teachings.

The Plague led to shifts in the amount of social mobility that would have been available to people in Europe. With the loss of so many people of various classes, there were opportunities to shift social class and career. While there were clear push backs, such as the Labor Laws passed in England in the late 14th century, laborers had distinct advantages in their calls for increased wages and other concessions.³ Artists would have been a part of this new mobility, changing locations, especially given the devastation of the Plague in many cities in Europe. There was also an increased demand for art that reflected the apocalyptic belief that was the response of many to the impact of the Plague. Orcagna's fresco *The Triumph of Death*, painted in 1344 in the Florentine Church of Santa Croce, as well as Buonamico Buffalmacco *Triumph of Death*, painted between 1336 and 1341 on the walls of the Camposanto of the cathedral complex in Pisa, reflect the use of art in this period to deal with the upheavals of the period, as well as the psychological impact of the Black Death.

The Protestant Reformation

Humanist scholars had been looking back to texts from antiquity and the early Christian period since at least the Early Renaissance period. Humanism in the Renaissance preached the centrality of man in God's creation. It can be argued that this philosophical ideal does not come into play until the period after the Black Death, replacing Scholasticism, and the stress on Aristotle, with Neo-Platonism, here given a Christian gloss.⁴ A connection can be made between the stress in Protestant sects on the importance of a personal connection with God and the Humanist notion that man is at the center of God's creation. This can be connected back to the societal upheaval of the Plague through the decline of belief in the infallibility of the church, and the increasing importance of the individual. It certainly can be argued that the stress of individual relationships with God in many Protestant sects and specifically in Luther's teachings is part of this Humanist ideal of man as the center of creation.

Scholars also, by the early 1400s, began, through the process of going back to the texts, often with the cry of *ad fontes*, to see errors in the various copies of the texts, as well as mis-translations from Greek and Hebrew sources. This connected with ideas of the fallibility of man, and the need to retranslate the Bible from the Hebrew, for the Old Testament, and Greek, for the New Testament, something that was taken up by Desiderius Erasmus among others in the early 1500s. Luther also spent time reading and retranslating Biblical texts, here into German as well, coming up with the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Epistles* of Saint Paul as the texts he saw as the most correct. For Luther, Saint Paul was the one who laid out the central tenets of the Christian Church.⁵

These calls for reform within the church can be seen in the rise of both Jan Hus (active 1401-1415) in Bavaria and William Wycliffe (active 1377-1384) in England. Both Hus and Wycliffe can be seen as precursors to Luther, and were celebrated by Protestants once the Reformation began. In the 1390s, Wycliffe translated the Latin Vulgate Bible into English, something tied to the Lollards, as Wycliffe's followers were called. In the late fourteenth century, this would lead to its own uprising, something suppressed by the English government of the period.⁶ In many ways, this can be connected to Hus and the Hussites in Bohemia in the early fifteenth century. One of the connectors was Peter Payne, who simplified Wycliffe's works in the University of Prague.⁷ When Hus was condemned to death as a heretic at the Council of Constance on July 6, 1415, he was condemned as a follower of Wycliffe.⁸ Hus had also been a part of a group that circulated the Vulgate Bible in Bohemian, arguing for the importance of a personal connection to God. This is a definite precursor to Lutheran ideas as well. Martin Luther certainly admired Hus, and had read and written about his letters.⁹ Certainly, if Luther knew about Hus, and Hus was influenced by Wycliffe, connections can be drawn between all of the important figures of the Reformation, beginning in the late fourteenth century.

A number of people associated with the Church began to call for reform, especially after the invention of movable type in the West by Johannes Gutenberg in Strasbourg, Germany in 1440. Desiderius Erasmus is the most-often cited name associated with these calls for reform. *Julius Exclusus*, traditionally attributed to Erasmus, was published anonymously in the sixteenth century. Erasmus was a Catholic priest and an advocate for reform, who, although Luther tried to persuade him, did not join the Protestant movement. He is an example of someone who was working within the Catholic Church to bring about reform. *Julius Exclusus* is a powerful tract in which Saint Peter debates with Pope Julius II at the Gates of Rome, ultimately denying the pope entry to Heaven, with Peter telling him, "O wretched man! O miserable Church! . . . I am not surprised that so few now apply here for admission, when the Church has such rulers. Yet there must be good in the world, too, when such a sink of iniquity can be honored merely because he bears the name of Pope."¹⁰ The text makes clear the need to reform and the corruption at the highest levels of the Church in Rome.

Artists also took up the call for reform and the interests of the Reformation. Hieronymous Bosch's *Haywain*, with its clear ecclesiastical iconography and inclusion of priests, bishops, and nuns, is one of many works of the early fifteenth century in Northern Europe that can be read as critiques of Church corruption. Lucas Cranach the Elder, court painter to Frederick I of Saxony, was also called the Painter of the Reformation due to his close ties to Luther. Cranach's *Allegory of Law and Gospel*, from 1529, brings Luther's ideas of salvation through faith alone. Cranach also consulted with Luther on the work, making sure it highlighted his teachings and ideas in the new Lutheran faith.

Gutenberg's printing press, and its invention in Germany, meant that, although printing spread throughout Europe quickly in the later 15th century, the German states saw the largest output of printed materials through the first half of the 16th century. It was used most widely to publish images, pamphlets, and broadsheets in Germany. Prints and pamphlets produced by Protestant factions had a decidedly anti-papist sentiment, often connecting the pope in Rome to the Antipope of the *Book of Revelations*. Protestant artists linked the pope to corruption, making him the face of their anti-Catholic sentiment. In many ways, these artists and printers were more effective in their propaganda campaign than the Catholic artists and printers who also produced pamphlets, although in lesser numbers.¹¹

Luther's posting of the 95 *Theses* in Wittenberg, regardless of the manner in which he did this, touched off a seismic shift in the religious landscape of Europe in the early sixteenth century. While his original idea was to implement Church reform and outlaw the sale of Indulgences, Luther touched a nerve through his protests, hence

the term Protestants. Within a few years, Luther had left the Augustinian order, married a former nun, and was the head of the Lutheran church. A number of other thinkers and former priests followed Luther, creating different sects of Protestantism that spread like wildfire throughout Europe. Many of these sects were based in the idea of a personal connection with God, not mediated through a priest, and, like many Humanist scholars before them, many advocated for a return to the basic Christian texts and the importance of faith alone, the notion of *sola fides*. Albrecht Dürer connects to this in his last painting of the period, *Four Evangelists*, with its text, connects to ideas of Lutheranism, even if Dürer's own ideas on religion are not fully known. He puts Luke and Paul in the foreground on either panel, aligning with Luther's foregrounding of those saints within Biblical interpretation, with Luke clearly teaching Peter from his Gospel book. Here, Dürer is also connecting to notions of the return to the texts and the personal nature of faith, inherent in both Humanist thought and Luther's teachings.

Many of these burgeoning Protestant sects were iconoclastic, meaning that they rejected religious art as idolatrous, often destroying existing art, including sculptures, textiles, books, and stained-glass windows, within churches. This allowed for the expansion of pre-existing traditions of genre scenes and art with a more moralizing message, such as Hieronymous Bosch's *The Cure for Folly*, which can be read simultaneously as a call for church reform, given the priest and nun as witnesses to the quack's operation, and a commentary on Late Medieval and Early Renaissance German society. Although Bosch was a committed Catholic, and a member of religious societies in 's-Hertogenbosch, a town in the southern Netherlands, his work can be seen as a direct precursor to later artists such as Pieter Breugel the Elder, also a Netherlandish artist. Many of Breugel's works, which certainly reflect his own ambiguity to religion, also can be read through both a Humanist and a Protestant lens. Works such as *The Blind Leading the Blind*, a theme that comes up more than once in his work, can be seen as commentaries on people following the Pope in Roman Catholicism. This can also be seen in a central vignette in his *Netherlandish Proverbs*, where a man dressed as a monk appears to be venerating a man dressed as Jesus. Humanism can be tied in here given Breugel's clear connections to the Protestant critique of Catholicism in the sixteenth century.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation

The Catholic Counter Reformation began in 1543 with the calling of the Council of Trent, which met intermittently until 1563. The stated aim of this council was to create a response to the Protestant Reformation. There were a series of doctrinal declarations that came out of the Council, including the need to improve the education of priests and reassert papal authority beyond Italy; the establishment of an Inquisition in Rome, granted the power to censor works of art; and the Council restated that art should be didactic, ethically correct, decent and accurate. Parallels between Old and New Testament events, called typology, were to be emphasized in art, which should appeal to emotion rather than reason.¹² Art became a central part of the Catholic response, something that could be seen as a repudiation of the iconoclasm of many Protestant sects.

Art had long had a central role in Catholic ritual and the Catholic church. From the earliest periods of Christianity, art had been a locus of devotion, and a means for believers to demonstrate their piety. Given that the Council of Trent focused on the correct way for subject matter to be laid out, the role of art in the Counter-Reformation was to create a vehicle to uphold Catholic doctrine. Artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio started to use the Baroque taste for increased drama within their works as a means to highlight the mysticism and possibilities of Catholic teachings. Paintings such as *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* were meant to both highlight the spectacle of the Resurrection, but also allow the viewer to put themselves in the place of the saint, questioning their own faith as Saint Thomas is questioning Jesus's resurrection. This connects to the Catholic emphasis on art as something didactic, yet also appeals to emotion.

The Catholic Church in this period wanted to portray itself as triumphant, framing the Protestants as heretics. This can be seen in the ceiling frescoes of Il Gesù and the Palazzo Barberini. Giovanni Battista Gaulli's *Triumph in the Name of Jesus* in Il Gesù put the heretics in darkness, emphatically falling into Hell. This fresco worked in tandem with Pierre Legros the Younger's sculpture *Religion Overthrowing Heresy and Hatred* in the Chapel of Saint Ignatius Loyola in Il Gesù which makes a similar rhetorical point. Pietro da Cortona's *Allegory of Divine Providence* in the Sala Grande of the Palazzo Barberini makes the same point, placing the credit for the triumph of the Catholic Church in Rome squarely at the feet of Pope Urban VIII, born Maffeo Barberini. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptures throughout Rome in this same period, especially his *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria, can also be connected to this larger connection of the Catholic Church triumphant, given its use of the Counter-Reformation Saint Teresa of Ávila, someone who reaffirmed the long tradition of mysticism in the Catholic Church.

Religion, colonization, and politics

The notion of triumph of a certain version of Christianity sometimes played out as a numbers game given the conquest of the most populous parts of the Americas by Spain and the forced conversion of the indigenous

populations of those regions to Catholicism. The Inquisition also played a part here, persecuting non-Catholics, including Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Indigenous Americans, for any real or perceived failure to fully convert.

It is also important to remember that Protestant colonizing nations, such as England, also saw as part of their mission forced conversion. Elizabeth I read a tract in which Richard Hakluyt, “the influential cleric and writer...argued that Christian rulers had a sacred duty to save the souls of ‘those wretched people’--that is, Indians.”¹³ By the period of the English Civil War, there was a notion of creating a Protestant Empire in the English North American colonies, a notion cemented in the idea of a “British Empire” by the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ This would continue through the colonial period, and would be supported artistically, such as with Benjamin West’s *William Penn’s Treaty with the Indians*, from c. 1771, helped to imply that Protestant colonization and conversion was more peaceful than Catholic. Colonialism, therefore, was as much a means of competing for converts as much as territory, with Spain, the Netherlands, England, and France competing for “the souls of those wretched people” as well as land. Indigenous converts also created art under the watchful eyes of missionaries, such as the *Mass of Saint Gregory*, a featherwork image produced by an unknown indigenous artist at the School of San Jose de los Naturales in 1550 with a dedication to Pope Paul III.

Burgeoning ideas of religious freedom were another byproduct of the Reformation, often leading to violent conflicts like the 30 Years War, or the founding of additional English colonies in North America, such as New England by the Puritans and Maryland by the Catholics. Other political conflicts, such as the English Civil War, can also be traced to the Reformations, especially considering the antipathy towards Charles I’s perceived Catholicism and the rise of the Puritans and other Reformist sects in England. The connection between this conflict and art can be seen in the architecture of Inigo Jones, with his Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace, a Baroque invocation of royal power and authority, and Sir Thomas Wren, with his rebuilding of Saint Paul’s Basilica after the Great Fire of London in 1666, a still grand, but far more spare example of Baroque architecture. Civil war portraits of Royalists versus those of Parliamentarians provides another comparative example. Richard Walker reused and remixed the compositions of Anthony van Dyck to create images of Cromwell’s soldiers in armor, usually in a half or three-quarter length pose, “creating the imagery of a club, with a membership which was easily recognisable on account of the repeated imagery of men...”¹⁵ Richard Dobson became King Charles I’s court painter after the court moved to Oxford, and was instrumental in creating the propaganda of the Royalist cause.¹⁶ After the execution of the king in 1649, propaganda was produced by both sides to shore up their own positions, although the Parliamentary leaders were generally successful in preventing Royalist polemics in England.¹⁷ There is also a Dutch engraving from 1649 showing the crowd at the execution itself. It must also be noted that not all in the crowd were for the execution, given the long tradition of English monarchs as anointed by God, a tradition that continues into the twenty-first century with the coronation of Charles III in 2023. The image of the severed head of Charles I was used for years as a “political instrument in an attempt to intimidate, or at least give pause to, the opposition.”¹⁸ Images of this moment remained important as Romantic images related to the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars in Europe, such as Paul Delaroche’s *Cromwell Looking at the Coffin of Charles I* from 1831. The manner in which Delaroche paints Cromwell could be read as regretful, given his facial expression. This can be directly compared to Jacques-Louis David’s sketch of Marie Antoinette on her way to the guillotine, a fate to which he had voted to send her. This seems to be almost a triumphant caricature of the queen, stripped of all of her finery with her Hapsburg chin emphasized. It is vastly different from the image in Delaroche’s painting, where Charles I is identifiable, but there is a solemn deference to both figures in the room.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who were both political philosophers and social ones of this period, engaged in commentaries on the upheavals of this period that will ultimately influence the political revolutions of the eighteenth century. Both Hobbes and Locke also used to great effect the printing presses, connecting to the importance of propaganda in framing opinions on both sides of the Civil War, similar to the Reformations. They can be connected to the philosophes of the eighteenth century, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. All of these also directly influenced the great political revolutions at the end of this century. David’s art can be seen as propaganda for the Revolution itself, from the *Oath of the Horatii* of 1784 to the *Oath of the Tennis Courts* of 1791. Given that David was, in the early years of the Revolution, allied with the Jacobins, serving even on the Committee of Twelve, it is not surprising that he also used his canvases to reinforce the ideas and policies of the revolution. Jean-Antoine Houdon’s sculpted portraits of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington highlight the subjects’ commitments to connections to the verism of Late Roman Republican art, a means by which the nascent American Republic is connected to the ideals of both the Roman Republic and fifth century BCE Athenian democracy. The layout and Neoclassical architecture of Washington, D. C., a city founded specifically to be the capital of this new republic also functioned as means to confirm this connection, something used as well by the Jacobins in France with the completion of the rebuilding of the Pantheon, or the Church of Sainte-Genviève, in Paris.

A contrast to this may be seen in the art of the loyalists to England during the American Revolution. Artists such as John Singleton Copley and Benjamin West created works that celebrated the government in London. A reading of Copley’s *Watson and the Shark*, painted in 1778, correlates the work to the American Revolution, giving the connection between Brook Watson and the black man holding the rope connected to Watson, and

Watson's own role in the slave and sugar trades as a Tory politician in England.¹⁹ Benjamin West who, like Copley, settled in London after the outbreak of the American Revolution, was also the second president of the

Royal Academy of Arts. His *Death of General Wolfe*, commemorating an event of the Seven Years' War paints the English military leader as a martyr to the cause, a cause which is often seen as the powder keg used to light the fire of revolution in the American colonies. Both of these paintings contain implicit critiques of the American revolutionaries, and their ideology of Revolution contained within their writings, especially the Declaration of Independence and the pamphlets circulated within Revolutionary Boston.

The leaders of the American and French Revolutions also responded to shifting notions of religion in the eighteenth century, including deism and rejection of religion. In many ways, this is connected to the ideals of Enlightenment philosophes and their advocacy for Deism, the notion of God as a clockmaker who set the world in motion and allowed for freedom of choice, and their critiques of religion.²⁰ Denis Diderot's publication of the *Encyclopédie*, which discussed everything from how to smelt metal to the nature of God connects to the importance of education as well as the loosening of the restrictions on knowledge. In many ways, this book was the extension of the scientific classification system, but now expanded across various different genres of making and knowing.²¹ The articles in the *Encyclopédie* also included illustrations that further explained the learning contained within the article itself. For example, the article on iron smelting was accompanied by illustrations of the materials needed, as well as a smelting furnace. The illustrations, then, served to further the larger discussion and transmittal of knowledge contained within the article. They were didactic art, here serving as a vessel of esoteric knowledge instead of the vessel of Catholic theology within the Counter-Reformation.

Conclusion

It is certainly possible to connect the responses of artists and societies in the wake of the Black Death to responses of artists and societies in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Art is a means by which traumatic events can be understood and processed within communities. The David J. Sencer CDC Museum, Office of Communications and the CDC COVID-19 response put together an exhibition in 2024 called *Stand & Witness: Art in the Time of COVID-19*. This brought together a number of artists to process the realities of the impact of COVID.²² In the end, this is a direct connection to the paintings of the *Triumph of Death* throughout Late Medieval churches in Europe. Art is often used to process political and social upheavals, as in the case of art by artists from Ai WeiWei to the first-generation Chicano movement artists.

In many ways, the Reformations, both Protestant and Catholic, are responsible for the shift in the importance of knowledge away from the sacred towards the esoteric. They came out of the upheaval in Europe caused by the first wave of Black Death, and its successive waves through the late seventeenth century. These were, as argued here, the first major social revolutions of the modern period, and were supported by artists aligned with the varying interpretations of Christianity. But they also ultimately led to the major political upheavals through the early nineteenth century, and the subsequent decentralization of religion in the minds and lives of many in the West. Artists throughout the period of the late thirteenth through the early nineteenth centuries charted the course of these changes.

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