



Understanding Northern Renaissance Art

Aneta Georgievska-Shine

Friday, October 24, 2025 - 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET

Northern Renaissance artists were famous for imbuing their paintings with religious and philosophical symbolism. Grounded in the medieval belief in the world as the book of God, this approach remained central to the visual culture of the Lowlands throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, especially in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.

Art historian **Aneta Georgievska-Shine** highlights these “painted treatises,” and explores their deeper symbolic content in a range of genres, from beautifully appointed domestic interiors to market scenes and images of children’s games.

10:00 to 11:15 a.m. The art of description as a spiritual meditation (Van Eyck to Van der Goes)

11:30 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. Religious images in the wake of the Reformation (Dürer to Holbein)

12:45-1:15 Break

1:15 to 2:30 p.m. The play of genres in 16th-century painting (Bosch to Aertsen)

2:45 to 4 p.m. Accepting paradox as a way of life (Bruegel and his legacy)

ANETA GEORGIEVSKA-SHINE teaches in the Department of Art History, at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research interests include the reception of classical art and literature in the early modern period, inter-pictorial, and inter-cultural exchanges. She has published extensively in her area of specialization, including books on Rubens and Velazquez. Her most recent one book, *Vermeer and the Art of Love*, was a recipient of a Choice Award for Outstanding Academic Titles for 2023. Her interests in other art historical periods are exemplified by her curatorial work and publications on modern and contemporary art. Beyond the academic environment, she is a frequent lecturer for museums and other institutions, including the Smithsonian Associates and 92 Y in New York.

1. The art of description as a spiritual meditation (Van Eyck to Van der Goes)

Hans Holbein the Younger, J. de Denteville and G. de Selve (*The Ambassadors*), 1533, London

Anon., Illuminated manuscript showing a scribe, Netherlands 1479

Anon., The Luttrell Psalter, England, Calendrical cycle, early 14th century

Anon., The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, Angel leading Souls from the Mouth of Hell, c. 1450

Anon., Mary of Burgundy's Book of Hours, Crucifixion, 1467-80

Manner of Jean de Colombe, Book of hours with calendar, Tours, c. 1480

Simon Bening, Da Costa Hours, Bruges, The Month of January, c. 1515.

Simon Bening, 1483-1561, Self-portrait, Dated 1558

Jan Van Eyck, Arnolfini Wedding, 1434, London

Jan Van Eyck, Self-Portrait, 1432, London

Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece, 1432

Petrus Christus, St Eligius in His Workshop, 1449, New York

Petrus Christus, Potrait of a Carthusian, 1446, New York

Hans Memling, Diptych of Maarten Nieuwenhove, 1487, Bruges.

Rogier van der Weyden, Annunciation Triptych c. 1440, Turin.

Rogier van der Weyden, Bladelin Triptych 1445-50, Berlin.

Jan van Eyck, Madonna with Canon van der Paele, c. 1437, Bruges.

Hugo van der Goes, The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1476-79, Florence.

Hans Memling, Flower Still-life, c. 1490, Madrid.

Albrecht Dürer, Iris, c. 1503.

Martin Schongauer, Study of Peonies, c. 1472, Private collection.

Hugo van der Goes, The Fall, 1467-68, Vienna.

2: Religious images in the wake of the Reformation

Cathedral of St. Martin, Utrecht, Sculpture at the portal, destroyed during the Reformation

Lucas Cranach the Elder, Portrait of Martin Luther, 1529, Kassel

Lucas Cranach the Elder, Passion of Christ and The Antichrist, 1521

Albrecht Altdorfer, The Virgin of Regensburg, 1519-20

Michael Ostendorfer, Pilgrimage to the Church of the Beautiful Virgin in Regensburg, 1520

Frans Hogenberg, Destruction of Images in Antwerp, c. 1570

Dirck van Delen, Beeldenstorm, 1630, Haags Historisch Museum

Frans Floris, The Fall of the Rebellious Angels 1554, Antwerp

Albrecht Dürer, Self-Portrait in a Fur-Collared Robe 1500 panel, Munich

Albrecht Dürer, Lamentation for Christ 1500-03 Oil on panel, Munich

Albrecht Dürer, Madonna of the Pear 1512 Oil on wood, Vienna

Albrecht Dürer, Christ Among the Doctors 1506 Oil on panel, Madrid

Albrecht Dürer, The Four Holy Men 1526 lindenwood, Munich

Albrecht Dürer, Self-Portrait as the Man of Sorrows 1522 pencil, Bremen

Albrecht Dürer, Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1526, Engraving

Lucas Cranach the Elder Head of Christ Crowned with Thorns c. 1510, private collection

Lucas Cranach the Elder, Virgin and Child 1525-30, canvas 87 x 59 cm, St. Petersburg

Lucas Cranach the Elder An Allegory of Melancholy 1528 Panel, Edinburgh

Hans Holbein the Younger The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, 1521, Basel.

Hans Holbein the Younger Self-Portrait 1542-43, 23 x 18 cm, Florence

Hans Holbein the Younger The Plowman from the Dance of Death, 1524-26, Woodcut.

Hans Holbein the Younger The Noble Lady from the Dance of Death, 1524-26, Woodcut.

Hans Holbein the Younger Erasmus 1523, Paris

Hans Holbein the Younger, Illustrations for Erasmus, Praise of Folly, 1515

Hans Holbein the Younger Sir Thomas More 1527 panel, 74,2 x 59 cm Frick Collection

Anon. Fool's Cap map, c. 1585, Antwerp.

Anon. Roman copy of a Greek original, Socrates/Silenus

3. The play of genres in 16th century painting

Hieronymus Bosch, Self-Portrait, pencil and sanguine, Bibliotheque Municipale d'Arras, Arras

Hieronymus Bosch, Studies of Monsters, pen and bistre, Oxford.

Hieronymus Bosch, The Cure of Folly, 1475-80, Madrid

Hieronymus Bosch, The Seven Deadly Sins, c. 1480, Madrid

Hieronymus Bosch, Garden of Earthly Delights c. 1500, Madrid

Hieronymus Bosch, Allegory of Gluttony and Lust, c. 1500?, Yale University Art Gallery

The Housebook Master Aristotle and Phyllis, c. 1485 Dry point, 155 mm Rijksmuseum.

Hans Baldung Grien, Aristotle and Phyllis 1513, German. National M., Nuremberg

Joachim Patenier, Triptych c. 1520, New York.

Lucas van Leyden, Worship of the Golden Calf, 1525, Amsterdam

Pieter Aertsen, Still-life, 1552, Vienna

Joachim Beuckelaer, Christ in the House of Martha and Mary 1565, Brussels

Pieter Aertsen, Butcher's Stall, 1551, Uppsala

Joachim Beuckelaer, Slaughtered Pig 1563, Cologne

Andreas Alciatus, *Emblems*, No. 152, On human life: Democritus and Heraclitus

Weep for the troubles of human life now more than usual, Heraclitus:
it overflows with many calamities. You, on the other hand, Democritus, laugh even more,
if ever you laughed: life has become more ridiculous. Meanwhile, seeing these things,
I wonder: how far in the end, Heraclitus, I may weep with you,
or how, Democritus, I may joke merrily with you.

4. Accepting paradox as a way of life

Peter Brueghel (Elder), The Painter and the Buyer, c. 1565 Graphische Sammlung Albertina

Andreas Alciatus, *Emblems* No. 189, "Mind, not outward form, prevails."

Peter Brueghel (Elder), The Fall of the Rebel Angels 1562, Brussels

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Christ Carrying the Cross, 1564 panel, Vienna

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Landscape with the Fall of Icarus c. 1558, Brussels

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Big Fishes Eat Little Fishes 1556 Pen drawing, Albertina, Vienna

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Seven Deadly Sins (Superbia, Gulla, Desidia) ca. 1560

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Peasant Wedding c. 1568, Vienna

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Netherlandish Proverbs, 1559

Peter Brueghel (Elder), Children's Games, 1559-60

Peter Brueghel (Elder), The Tower of Babel 1563, Vienna

Peter Brueghel (Younger), The Kermesse of St George 1628

Van der Heyden, after Cock, Merrymakers in a Mussel Shell, ca. 1560

Adriaen Brouwer, Smoking Men, c. 1637

Adriaen Brouwer, The Bitter Draught, c. 1635

Frans Snyder, Still-life, 1614

Frans Hals, Peeckelhaering, 1628-30

Peter Paul Rubens, Silenus or Faun, 1636-38

Jan Miense Molenaer, Painter in His Studio, 1631

Jan Steen, Self-Portrait as a Lutenist, 1660-63

Jan Steen, In Luxury, Look Out, 1663

Jan Steen, The Artist's Family c. 1663

Hendrick van Vliet, The Old Church at Delft with the Tomb of Admiral Tromp, 1658

Roemer Visscher, "Nihil est in rebus inane" (There is nothing senseless in things) 1614.

A fox entered a theatre director's store-room, and found a human head skillfully finished, so elegantly made that the only thing wanting was breathing; in other ways it was like a living creature. Taking it up in her paws, she said: "Oh, what a head is this! - But it has no brain!"

The 95 Theses

In 1517, the priest and scholar Martin Luther approaches the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed a piece of paper to it containing the 95 revolutionary opinions that would begin the Protestant Reformation. In his theses, Luther condemned the excesses and corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, especially the papal practice of asking payment—called "indulgences"—for the forgiveness of sins. At the time, a Dominican priest named Johann Tetzel, commissioned by the Archbishop of Mainz and Pope Leo X, was in the midst of a major fundraising campaign in Germany to finance the renovation of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther's frustration with this practice led him to write the 95 Theses, which were quickly snapped up, translated from Latin into German and distributed widely. A copy made its way to Rome, and efforts began to convince Luther to change his tune. He refused to keep silent, however, and in 1521 Pope Leo X formally excommunicated Luther from the Catholic Church. That same year, Luther again refused to recant his writings before the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Germany, who issued the famous Edict of Worms declaring Luther an outlaw and a heretic and giving permission for anyone to kill him without consequence. Protected by Prince Frederick, Luther began working on a German translation of the Bible, a task that took 10 years to complete.

The term "Protestant" first appeared in 1529, when Charles V revoked a provision that allowed the ruler of each German state to choose whether they would enforce the Edict of Worms. A number of princes and other supporters of Luther issued a protest, declaring that their allegiance to God trumped their allegiance to the emperor. They became known to their opponents as Protestants; gradually this name came to apply to all who believed the Church should be reformed, even those outside Germany. By the time Luther died, of natural causes, in 1546, his revolutionary beliefs had formed the basis for the Protestant Reformation, which would over the next three centuries revolutionize Western civilization.

Examples:

1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ``Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
2. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.
3. Yet it does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortification of the flesh.
4. The penalty of sin remains as long as the hatred of self (that is, true inner repentance), namely till our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.
5. The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons.
6. It is vain to trust in salvation by indulgence letters, even though the indulgence commissary, or even the pope, were to offer his soul as security.
7. To say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers is equal in worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy.