

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

A WALK THROUGH THE HISTORY OF ART

Luther and the Reformation.

*A walk through the works
of the Thyssen-Bornemisza
Collection*

25

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Luther and the Reformation.

Key events in Luther's life

- 1483 Martin Luther was born on 10th November in Eisleben, Germany.
- 1505 He joins the order of St. Augustine.
- 1512 He is offered the Professorship of Bible Interpretation at the University of Wittenberg, Germany.
- 1517 He presents his 95 Theses against the selling of indulgences and other practices carried out by the Catholic Church.
- 1520 He is excommunicated for burning the papal bull requiring him to recant his Theses.
- 1521 Diet of Worms: Luther does not retract his Theses and is forced into hiding.
- 1522 Luther puts an end to the revolts against the factions of the old faith in Wittenberg and finishes his translation of the New Testament into German.
- 1525 Having left his religious order, he marries the former nun Katharina von Bora.
- 1530 The Augustan Confession: the first document in which the official Lutheran faith was set out, is presented to Charles V.
- 1534 He finishes his translation of the Old Testament. From this point onwards, a simplified version of the Bible, easy to understand for the broader public, is made available. This also standardised the German language.
- 1546 Martin Luther dies on 18th February in Eisleben, Germany, at the age of 62.

Key social and political events of the time

- 1450 Gutenberg invents the printing press, thanks to which Luther's ideas spread rapidly.
- 1506 The construction of St Peter's Basilica in Rome begins, partly financed by the selling of indulgences.
- 1519 Maximilian I dies. Charles I of Spain is named Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.
- 1526 Diet of Speyer: the emperor accepts an interim agreement on religious freedom. The princes continue to use disputes over true religion to strengthen their own political positions jeopardising the unity of the empire.
- 1529 Luther is banished again. The Lutheran princes leave the Diet and send a document of protest, which is where the name Protestants comes from. Catholics and Protestants join forces to defend against the Ottoman Siege of Vienna.
- 1531 The Protestant princes join to form the Schmalkaldic League.
- 1534 John Calvin converts to Protestantism and starts his own religious movement.
- 1547 Charles V defeats the Schmalkaldic League at the Battle of Mühlberg.
- 1555 Peace of Augsburg: Lutheranism is officially recognised, but conflicts continue. Charles V divides his empire between his brother Ferdinand and his son Philip.
- 1563 The Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church begins with the conclusion of the Council of Trent.





The thematic route *Luther and the Reformation*, created to celebrate the movement's 500th anniversary, is made up of a selection of works from the permanent collection that best illustrate the most important milestones of Luther's Reformation.

The creation of this route has been made possible thanks to the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Spain and the Goethe Foundation, who with their invaluable support are helping to promote one of the most important German art collections outside Germany. Another highlight of the close cooperation between the Embassy and the museum was the restoration of the painting *Hercules at the Court of Omphale* in 2013/14 by Hans Cranach, who worked in the workshop critical to the spread of the Protestant religion.

Hans Cranach *Hercules at the Court of Omphale*, 1537. Oil on panel. 57.5 × 85.3 cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid





“Why doesn’t the Pope, who is even richer than Croesus, at least fund the building of St. Peter’s Basilica with his own money, instead of that of poor believers?” Luther’s Thesis n° 86.

One of the most popular motifs in Luther’s Germany was the image of Saint Anne accompanied by her daughter, the Virgin Mary, and the Child Jesus. In this depiction the abbot who commissioned a triptych for the Monastery of Obermarchtal is also represented as a tiny figure.

Saint Anne was a key figure for Luther since 1505, when he promised that he would become a friar if he survived a storm. Two weeks later he entered a monastery in Erfurt, studied Theology, and a few years later began to ask the first questions that would culminate in the writing of his Theses against the purchase of forgiveness through the indulgences whose sale in part financed the construction of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

Anonymous German painter active in Swabia *Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child and a Donor*, ca. 1515. Oil on panel. 159 × 65 cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid





“Oh my God! If Luther is dead, who will explain the Holy Gospels to us so clearly from now on?” So said Dürer before the temporary disappearance of Luther after the Diet of Worms.

Albrecht Dürer was the greatest Renaissance painter in northern Europe and one of the first champions of the Reformation. However, the painter from Nuremberg began his own artistic reformation long before Luther began to protest against the policies of the Holy See. Dürer's obsession was to depart from the pictorial conventions that had prevailed since the Middle Ages.

This picture shows his extraordinary talent for developing new forms of representation; nobody had painted the episode in the temple in which the doctors of the law harassed the young Jesus. Interestingly, the painting is signed and dated with Dürer's initials on the slip of paper protruding from the book in the foreground.





“I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen!” Luther to the Emperor at the Diet of Worms (1521).

Luther saw Charles I of Spain, Charles V of Germany in person for the first time at the Diet of Worms. Here the emperor urged the champion of the Reformation to recant his Theses against various practices of the Catholic Church. Luther emphasised that he would only obey the Scriptures, but this did not convince the powerful ruler, who, despite his many differences with the Pope, defended Catholicism and in turn the unity of his empire.

This portrait was created by the greatest promoter of the Reformation, Lucas Cranach the Elder. Like other German artists, Cranach wanted his portraits to reflect spirituality and individuality, so he emphasised the emperor’s fallen lower lip and prominent chin.





“If the art of painting and sculpturing are gifts from God, I demand that they should be used in a pure and reasonable way.”
John Calvin, founder of Calvinism, a branch of Protestantism.

With the Reformation there was a strong move away from the depiction of religious images in northern European art. This was brought about by the increased interest and development of genres that until then were considered minor, such as landscapes, portraits and, above all, still lifes.

The still life was used as a tool to highlight the colonial power of these countries. Most of the objects in the painting are free from religious references, instead highlighting the important trade with the East. In the painting you can see a Ming bowl, a wine glass similar to the Venetian style, a Persian carpet from Afghanistan and a nautilus cup, alluding to increased naval expansion.

Willem Kalf *Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, a Nautilus Cup and other Objects*, 1662. Oil on canvas. 79.4 × 67.3 cm. Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid





“The greatest gift of God a man can have is a pious, amiable, God-fearing, home-loving wife, with whom he can live in peace.” Martin Luther.

Unlike Catholics, who viewed the Virgin as an icon of motherhood, Protestant artists chose the home to represent the ideal role of a woman within the family. In southern Europe it is often commented that there is a noticeable absence of curtains in these depictions. The most obvious explanation for this is the lower intensity of the sun in northern Europe, but also the Reformation’s emphasis on transparency: if the home is a moral one, there is nothing to hide.

Martin Luther was a friar, a doctor of theology and the father of six children by a young woman named Katharina von Bora, who came to him after escaping from a convent in 1523. Like him, many priests and friars sympathised with the Reformation, leaving their religious order and married, convinced that celibacy did not contradict what was stated in the Bible.

Nicolaes Maes *The Naughty Drummer*, ca. 1655. Oil on canvas. 62 × 66.4 cm.
Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid





“...you will always obey the Holy apostolic See, and protect and abide in everything that is fitting for a good king and a Christian prince.”
Charles V's will and testament to his heir Philipp (1548).

Despite the emperor's support, the Catholic Church was not able to avoid a schism. In response to the establishment of a new religion, the Holy See began a Counter-Reformation at the end of the Council of Trent (1545-1563, with interruptions). The Council underlined its differences with Protestantism and corrected the most obvious absurdities of the Catholic Church. At this time artistic images were used to evangelize, and artists who were believers were encouraged to update their repertoire.

By the time Zurbarán began painting, new works were still needed in Spain and America. His *Saint Casilda* is a piece of sacred art with a twist; the portrait is of a real woman, depicted with holy attributes, a style known as a “retrato a lo divino” (a portrait to the divine).

Francisco de Zurbarán *Saint Casilda*, ca. 1635. Oil on canvas. 171 × 107 cm.
Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid