

Lutheran Tradition in the Visual Arts

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INTRODUCTION

We think in images. Our brains are primarily organized to comprehend, retain and recall those things we can envision. Even our language is highly visual, so that many words are pictures for our minds to embrace. The very word “idea” comes from a Greek word meaning “to see.” Early church fathers used the word *eikon* not only to speak of images, but also of concepts and thoughts. Our Lord frequently utilized imagery in His preaching and instruction to His church. Scripture is rich with word-pictures and parables, all designed by God for us to grasp, retain and recall His truth by the work of His Holy Spirit (eg. Vine & Branches, The Body of Christ, Fishers of Men, etc.). Even His sacred means of grace are a visual presentation of the Gospel, engaging all of our senses.

Just as music is a natural by-product and expression of the faith, likewise it is natural for the Church to produce imagery and symbols to convey and teach God’s truth. Christian art in the church should therefore be designed to serve the Biblical principles of worship. There are some great differences between what God designed for Old Testament worship compared to that in the New Testament, yet there are some essential elements in both which are constant:

- 1) Recognition of the devastating consequences of the Fall on mankind.
- 2) The gracious act of God through His Christ to redeem fallen man, justifying us.
- 3) The need for faith in the heart to possess the benefits of Christ.
- 4) The delivery system God alone establishes to bring these benefits to fallen man.
- 5) The believer’s response to God’s gracious salvation.

As important as our service is to God (the work of Martha), His service to us through Word and Sacrament remains the one thing needful (the better part chosen by Mary). In our theology and art primary attention must always be on God’s side of things – what He has done and continues to do for us through the Messiah and His chosen means of reaching us. The Lutheran tradition of the arts has always emphasized this imbalance placing a greater stress on what is Sacramental (God to us) over that which is Sacrificial (us to God).

ARTs in service of the divine

“Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this Tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.” - Exodus 25:8-9

God called upon artisans and craftsmen to make His Tabernacle/Temple distinguishable from all other buildings (Exodus 37, 38 & 39). Jewish children could easily see and hear the difference when they came to a house of worship. The edifice was holy, set apart and consecrated to something wonderful, of divine origin – truly a sanctuary. This was not work. This was not play. This was not theatre. This was not entertainment. This was a house of God. This was a house of worship. The architecture and art said boldly: “What is done here is special, unique, exclusive, distinct, and uncommon from any other part of life.” Skilled laborers used their talents to fashion such a worship environment. Foreign military commanders often made a point of visiting the Temple, having heard of its unique splendor. By the time

of Christ, the Jewish Talmud refers to Herod's Temple as "the most beautiful building in the world." The breastplate of the High Priest visually depicted his role of mediator for the 12 tribes, a foreshadowing of Christ. During the Passover, the Kedron river often ran pink with the blood of so many sacrificial lambs. The worship images designed by God were Messiah-centered, and highlighted His delivery system. Concepts which would have to be rediscovered someday in the Reformation era.

In the time of Israel's captivity, as synagogue worship developed, many sanctuaries were constructed with an elaborate pulpit and a special "ark," for storing the sacred scrolls. They were built facing the Temple, as if to be a "home away from home" for those so far from Jerusalem. The rabbi's head was covered while reading the Scriptures. Visual rubrics and images were employed by the faithful to convey Biblical teachings. This same sense of reverence and sacredness for worship would carry on into the early Christian community. James, the first bishop of the Christian church in Jerusalem, is said to have worn highly decorated clerical garb. Early Baptismal fonts were adorned with colorful mosaics. When it was feasible, Christians sought decorative ways of adorning their worship life.

During the era of persecution, little art was commissioned or created while the Church went into hiding. Imagery for worship was often minimalistic, less concerned with adornment, and more concerned with expressing the believer's hope through symbolism. Many symbols now standard in the church developed during its first 300 years, while living under oppression. Yet, in these formative years some familiar themes already began to emerge in church art. Near the end of the second century, Tertullian (160-220AD) mentions the common usage of the Good Shepherd image for Christ relating to His sheep, and Christian coffins are often decorated with the story of Jonah.

Upon his conversion to Christianity, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313AD, bringing an end to the Diocletian persecution. All confiscated Christian structures would now be returned. The following decades witness a tremendous outburst of music, liturgy and artwork commissioned for the Church. Constantine ordered the elaborate production of numerous Bibles with beautiful, illustrative calligraphy. With Constantinople as the new capitol of the empire it also became the center for the arts, and in particular, ecclesiastical art.

Primarily in the east there developed a particular style or form of painting Christian images, now called *icons*, credited to St. Luke by Church tradition. For centuries up to the early renaissance, the production of icons had rather tight rules. Realism was not the goal, but rather a picture of the spiritual, soul-quality of the image, reflecting the divine. The iconographer was not thought of as an artist or painter, but as a technician who made a "window into heaven" through which the believer could have contact with the Divine. The icon therefore was not seen as a painting or work of art, but rather like a written image to aid the believer (who was often illiterate) in his/her devotional life. Craftsmen followed a strict, stylized pattern, showing little - if any - artistic expression. Many of these highly stylized forms remained unchanged for centuries, making eastern art very distinct from that in the western Church, where Lutheranism would have its birth.

Images of the early Byzantine era (@ 350-1200AD) tended to depict Christ in His godly, "other-worldly" glory and power. This emphasis on His conquering, divine nature may have developed as a response to the Christological controversies in the early church, which often diminished our Lord's divinity. In Byzantium He was represented as transcendent, eternal, all-powerful, and above the dealings of earthly life. For this reason it was not unusual for the common Christian to think of Jesus as a stern judge. Eastern theology

focused on the triumphant, risen Christ, rather than the suffering Servant on the cross. Unlike the theology which would someday flower in Rome, Greek churches emphasized Easter as more important than Good Friday. Even the crosses from this era in the east tend to be highly ornate to show the conquering, glorious nature of the faith.

By the late middle-ages Western art began to emphasize the humanity and suffering of our Lord. By the time of the early renaissance these themes, along with images of the saints, typically replaced images of the triumphant Christ. Attention was now drawn to the passion and pain of Christ as He was martyred for a great moral cause. Much of the art in western sanctuaries was used to inspire and motivate the faithful to greatness, and a life of self-sacrifice as found in Christ and His early followers. Crusades to the Holy Land brought back to Europe the tradition of visiting the stations of the cross (Via Dolorosa), which Francis of Assisi developed as a way of suffering along with Jesus, the Man of Sorrows. The saints (especially Mary) were depicted as being worthy of veneration due to their moral virtue. By the time of the renaissance it was rare to find a Christian sanctuary in the west without a prominent image from the passion of Christ, as well as depictions of His followers.

THE REFORMATION ERA

By the 13th century, it was more and more apparent that the Church was in need of reform. Numerous attempts were made in the 300 years prior to the arrival of Dr. Martin Luther. Many of these movements, however, were directed at abuses in the Church, and in particular against the immorality among the clergy and in Rome itself. New monastic orders sprang up with the hope of purifying the Church. Secular authors even warned youth not to enter the ministry due to its corrupting influences. The young Luther was also well-aware of the deplorable conditions in Rome's hierarchy. He would later write of many fellow monks who openly criticized the Pope and others in leadership, but recalled that the average person felt powerless since the Church was supreme above all, and She was all they had.

Yet, by God's grace Luther was lead to see that the primary issue was restoration of the central doctrine of the Church: justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. Once this vital truth was placed back in its proper location theologically, it would begin a reforming movement all its own. In this essential way Luther's reformation was unique and finally cleansing of the Church. His work has often been called a conservative reformation. One can see this in his handling of the music and liturgy of the Church, and also in his approach to the visual arts in his mature years.

In the art community, the name Martin Luther is typically despised. He is portrayed as one who disrupted the patron-artist relationship, and watered the arts down to a role of instruction, rather than standing as beautiful objects on their own. Luther took the spotlight off of the art itself - as well as the artist - and put it on Christ. Some of this criticism from the art community holds true. However, to be fair to the great reformer, we might divide his view on ecclesiastical art into the following periods, all of which overlap somewhat:

- 1) A general disdain for church art as part of the Roman system of indulgences
- 2) Preservation, and a fear of going too far in purging church art as others were doing
- 3) Refocusing the art already existing in the Church
- 4) Establishing a Lutheran identity of church art

No Time for Rome's Decorations

In the early stages of the reformation, Luther criticized the exorbitant amounts of money spent on the visual arts. He condemned the potential for statues and paintings to become idolatrous, not only as objects of veneration, but also in the promotion of works-righteousness by patrons giving gifts of artwork to the Church. Art had become one of the exaggerated abuses of the indulgence system. In addition, much of it had taken attention off of Christ, and placed it onto His followers. Luther initially sought to work through church and civil channels to remove idolatrous art from the evangelical churches, but never advocated violent vandalism.

In this stage he reasoned that in order for the art to become didactic (teaching) it had to become less visually seductive, and less intended to produce an emotional response, since its goal should be to convey the Gospel, rather than decorate the church. In a sermon he stated, "(Images are) unnecessary, and we are free to have them or not, although it would be much better if we did not have them at all." (LW 51, p. 81) Such an approach did little to endear him to art connoisseurs. For example, contemporary art historian Hubert Schade writes with derision, "Is there such a thing as Reformation art? Not upon its own basis. Either it is a polemical weapon or it produces school lessons." Even some Lutheran historians felt that despite his restoration of proper religion, the reformer had damaged German culture. From this point forward the world of art grew further away from the church, and increasingly Luther is portrayed in a negative light for his early tendencies and the iconoclasm which took his ideas to an extreme.

A NEW FRONT IN THE WAR

Ironically, the iconoclasts would be the very ones to cause Luther to change his stance on the subject. While he hid out in the Wartburg Castle for nearly a year as Junker George, his colleague Andreas Karlstadt stirred Wittenberg residents into a riotous mob "cleansing" the Church - vandalizing and destroying all that appeared to be a part of Rome's domain, including ecclesiastical art. Paintings and statues were defaced or destroyed. A few went so far as to defecate and urinate on artwork. Animosity against years of papal oppression was vented toward the church - feelings they believed were in line with Luther's reform movement. As they soon discovered, however, nothing was further from the truth. Luther now found himself pitted against two extremes: Romanists who encouraged idolatrous worship through art on the one hand, and on the other iconoclasts who sought to virtually destroy the church, throwing the baby out with the bath water.

This second, radical wave of reformation swept past Luther, and would cause him to divide his energy in this theological war along a second front, in addition to the first front with Rome. His comments in 1522 show that he had not warmed up to religious art, but hated the iconoclasts even more than papal abuses. By the mid-1520's fallout from the peasant uprising had changed his mind so that he saw the need to be protective of the arts, so long as they served the Gospel. In many places, images represented orderliness and respect toward the church. Luther's writings in this period are primarily aimed at those who sought to radically cleanse the church. Consistent with his theological approach in other areas, the reformer sought to separate himself from those who wanted nothing to do with the established church. He was seeking reform, not revolution. If there was ever a time in the history of Lutheranism to abandon the liturgy, rites and imagery of the established church it was in the Reformation era. Yet, Luther so carefully retained and preserved what was good in the church. Church historian Charles P. Krauth would later comment,

"The Reformation, as Christian, accepted the old foundation; as reformatory, it removed the wood, hay, and stubble; as conservative, it carefully separated, guarded, and retained the gold, silver, and

precious stones, the additions of pious human hands, befitting the foundation and the temple which was to be reared upon it.”

In some German cities, the issue was not only theological, but a matter of not destroying cultural landmarks in the community. In Nuremburg a Lutheran congregation, converted from Romanism, chose to place a bag over a statue which was too Catholic. It would be removed only when Catholic dignitaries visited the city. Other “Lutheran-ized” cities would carefully take images from the sanctuaries and place them in museums or sell them. By the mid-1530’s, especially under the cleansing work of young John Calvin, art collectors had a field day, purchasing ecclesiastical art at basement prices. Calvin’s attitude was, “Leave nothing in the church that will leave any memory of what it once was.” Sadly, his theological views emigrated to American shores sooner than did Dr. Luther’s, and clearly reflected a different spirit. They caused the building of stark, austere US sanctuaries, often devoid of any artwork.

Retain, Reclaim & Purify

“Those (images) that are of no hindrance in the churches, let them stand.” So wrote the local pastor in Wittenberg, Johann Bugenhagen, in a 1524 church ordinance, demonstrating that Luther’s approach was becoming a standard among evangelical churches. In those early years, the question often asked was: “How much should we keep?” When it came to liturgy, music, architecture and art, young Martin was very conservative to stay connected to the traditions and history of the church. He held that old art can remain and be used, as long as it is purged of anything that militates against the Gospel, such as the veneration of saints.

Papal critics lumped Lutherans together with the radical reformers, like Calvin. Dr. Luther fervently objected. He wished to be consistent in his conservative Reformation. His goal was never to break from the church, but rather to conduct a moderate cleansing of it from the inside, restoring the doctrine of justification front and center. Joseph L. Koerner writes, “An empty, white-washed church (favored by Calvinists) proclaimed a wholly spiritualized cult, at odds with Luther’s doctrine of Christ’s Real Presence in the Sacraments. Some of the period’s strongest opposition to image-breaking came not from Catholics but from Lutherans.” (p.58) Anything the church possessed which could be used to support the central truth of justification and the means of grace would be kept.

Luther saw his new evangelical cause as reclaiming what belonged to the ancient church, tied to the apostolic era. By readjusting and cleansing the images which had been part of Her existence, the Reformers could claim to be part of the legitimate remnant of Christendom. Retaining imagery which the faithful had grown accustomed to seeing in their churches, also held potential for evangelism opportunities. Five years before his death he wrote,

“Praise God that our churches, in regard to neutral things, are so arranged that an Italian or a Spaniard (Roman Catholic) who can’t understand our sermon would say, when he sees our mass, choir, bells, vestments, etc., that this is a proper papal church, and there’s no difference or little in comparison to variations among Catholic churches themselves.” (Koerner, p. 68)

For this reason Lutherans would often preserve the image of a saint, but would reinterpret it with words imposed over the top to redirect the theology. Churches would either remove a corrupted text that promised an indulgence, or would add a text that refocused the purpose of the image back to Christ rather than upon the saint. Koerner writes, “Where pre-reformation altar pieces featured saints as mediators of salvation, Lutheran epitaphs memorialized deceased persons as models of faith in Christ alone.” (p. 67)

One congregation added this admonition on the altar painting of the Virgin Mary, “Mary is to be honored, but not adored.” A pre-reformation woodcut of the Annunciation by Lucas Cranach, which at one time promised 80,000 years off purgatorial punishment, was stripped of its text, and edited with an ornamental framing instead. On other pieces a new gloss in the form of a Scripture passage often re-presented the old image in a new way.

a new focus

Following the question, “What should we keep?” came the question, “What should we make?” To Luther the Sacraments themselves were already visual pictures of God’s grace, and how He has chosen to make Himself known among us. For this reason, many of the early Lutheran altar paintings depicted the use of the means of grace, images of God’s visible ways of conveying the Gospel (an image of an image). Newly commissioned Lutheran altar paintings were typically Christ-centered, and contained references to where we go to find Christ. These are the outward, visible marks of God’s church in the world. Highlighting Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the Word was also a bold statement against the fanatics, like Karlstadt, who believed God comes to us without any external means. Such paintings spoke more against the radical reformers than against Rome.

Once in control of things in many parts of Germany, the young Lutherans considered themselves to be like young stewards, now living in a beautiful home which they had inherited and had been asked to manage. They developed and encouraged a high respect for the music, liturgy, art and architecture of the church they received. A mature Luther came to see the visual arts, just like music, as an important function for serving the Gospel. He learned to appreciate, tolerate and even encourage church art as long as it served to instruct. He recommended that art be simple, not overpowering what it is conveying, and therefore instructive for the common man.

“Luther and his coworkers were too busy with the elements of Christianity, with the restoration of the Church to its primitive purity, to take an active part in the fostering of the fine arts. But this does not mean that he was in any sense opposed to the arts or decried their influence. His classical saying is to place all arts in the service of Him who created them, and the fact that he advocated their adoption in the curriculum of schools, effectually disproves all other charges.”

-Paul Kretzmann

Lucas Cranach

More than any other artist in his day, Luther’s friend, Lucas Cranach would come to embody these artistic ideals of the newly formed church, despite being 14 years his senior. The Wittenberg altarpiece in the city church is a perfect example of this Lutheran focus for the arts. Already by 1518 Lucas Cranach was turning away from Romish imagery, and giving expression to the concept of salvation by faith alone. We know he met Luther as early as 1520. The two men and their wives became very close friends, with the artist serving as Baptismal sponsor to the oldest of the Luther children. Early in the reformation era, Cranach also produced many “antithetical prints” which were both political and polemical to highlight the abuses of Rome, depicting the unchristian nature of the papacy. His dedication to the Gospel is unquestioned, having voluntarily gone into captivity with his elector one year after Luther’s death.

Albrecht Durer

Though he never technically left the mother church, the famous artist Albrecht Durer was also drawn to the evangelical teachings of Luther, and counted himself as a devout follower as early as 1520. Rome

must have somehow pressured him for his beliefs since he writes of feeling persecuted for his faith. Having studied under his father, he developed European fame as an artist already in his early twenties while Luther was still a monk. Dr. Luther's influence on his theology was well-documented, and caused Durer to be uneasy with the images of saints in church art. He once wrote, "I intend to make a portrait of (Luther) with great care and engrave him on a copper plate to create a lasting memorial of the Christian man who helped me overcome so many difficulties." In his final years he began to question the role his art had played in the spiritual lives of people. He feared that his artwork may have aided some in their idolatry, "God help us that we do not thus dishonor Christ's mother." Luther lavished great praise on Durer upon hearing of his death, referring to him as the best of men who believed in Christ.

PRINCIPLES OF LUTHERAN ART

Luther understood the work of God's kingdom primarily coming through the ears rather than the eyes. Art must therefore serve the text of the written Word, which is where God comes to us. Early Lutheran art often combined text and image so the two were seen and read as one. Even major altarpieces frequently contained lengthy quotations and annotations on top of the image. The editor of Luther's German Bible claimed the reformer insisted on simple illustrations that would serve the text, and not overpower it. He made similar requests regarding publication of the catechism for children. Luther also advocated the building of medium-sized churches with lower ceilings (rather than the high, Gothic style) for the purpose of hearing good preaching, since the primary purpose of worship is the proclamation of the Word. These ideas separated new Lutheran sanctuaries from the elongated gothic style of the Roman Catholics, and from the stark, sterile environment worship halls of the Calvinists and other iconoclasts.

Dr. Paul Kretzmann follows this same vein of Luther's thinking, regarding the contrast between Lutheran and non-Lutheran reformed sanctuaries in the 20th century:

"When one sees the large platform with its elevated portion for the singers ... searching in vain for altar and pulpit, until one discovers an insignificant lectern and a still less significant table, one is tempted to indulge in criticizing levity and to inquire when the performance is scheduled to be and to wonder whether programs are furnished with box seats only. The Lutheran Church has retained the division of its church edifices into nave and apse, not in order to make a distinction between clergy and laity, as in the Roman Catholic Church, but in order to give expression to the division of the liturgy in the sacrificial and sacramental parts of the service. Everything that pertains to the office of redemption, the reading of the Scripture lessons, the pronouncing of the benediction, the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the Sacraments, takes place in the apse; all acts of a sacrificial nature, prayer and singing of the congregation and choir, confession of sins and of the Creed, are performed by and with the assembled congregation in the nave." (p. 140)

LUTHERAN ART ON OUR SHORES

19th century European Lutherans who desired to be faithful to their heritage, brought with them a high view of the arts and church architecture, though it was often difficult to afford. Most had come from a state church system where the support of church work was a civic matter. Suddenly having to take on that financial burden through their personal offerings was a bit challenging at first. Simple churches were soon constructed, but it was often the second edifice, built decades later, that received the most artistic and architectural attention.

Many of the Germanic and Scandinavian sanctuaries stood out in an American spiritual landscape primarily inspired by Puritanical, Congregational, Methodist, Baptist and Calvinist theologies. The

influence of Dr. Luther can be seen in many of the Lutheran churches built before the 1900's. Altars are typically highly decorative, Christ-centered, and more in line with Rome's sanctuaries than with those of Geneva. Our present-day fear of appearing too "Roman Catholic" did not bother Luther, who was known to say, "I would rather drink the blood of Christ with the Pope, than grape juice with Zwingli." Even though the reformed claimed to teach salvation by grace, they lacked the proper delivery system where Christ reaches us. Martin felt a greater affinity with the Roman Catholic Church which retained a clearer, though at times imperfect, understanding of the means of grace. Today Luther might be somewhat shocked at our greater coziness with the reformed churches. Our European brethren have retained elements in their worship and sanctuaries which reflect Luther's bias better than Americanized Lutherans.

Around 1920 something happened to American Lutherans. There was a clear shift toward appearing more like the reformed. Some believe it was caused by a large flux of Roman Catholic immigrants arriving in the US from Ireland, Italy, Poland and other Catholic countries, whom many Americans did not welcome warmly in spiritual matters. Did this heightened national aversion to Catholicism cause our Lutheran ancestors to strip away images and customs associating them more closely with these unwelcomed guests? Suddenly pastors abandoned the wearing of clerical collars. Children were no longer taught to make the sign of the cross. Images of the crucified Christ were replaced with an empty, clean cross. Depictions of the means of grace were downplayed or eliminated in sanctuaries. Rarely were altar paintings commissioned. Decorative craftsmanship on the altar itself was diminished. Even in seminaries this minor purging of Romish tendencies was raised to a level of confession. From this time forward American Lutheran churches were typically designed to look more like Baptist sanctuaries.

Liturgical Lutheran Art Today

Architecture, art and furniture define what is done in a space, and how it is to be considered. A gymnasium, or a stage gives a particular impression of what is conducted in this place. Liturgical art does not attempt to shock the viewer, or to be too modern and trendy, which would cause it to be easily dated and rendered meaningless for future generations. It points beyond itself to what God has done for us. Its goal is devotional and/or catechetical. In his book "*Gathered Guests*," Timothy H. Maschke submits essential parameters from our Lutheran heritage for defining proper church art and architecture. I list them here with some alterations:

- 1) It draws attention to God in His grace.
- 2) It defines an environment specifically designed for worship, unique from any other.
- 3) It is sensitive to the liturgical space and function of worship, as both sacramental and sacrificial
- 4) It is not attempting to be its own "statement" or "agenda" about anything, and is not presented for attention to itself.
- 5) It evokes a sense of timelessness and connection to something well-grounded.
- 6) It will always be Gospel-centered and justification-focused.
- 7) Natural materials are to be preferred, as a closer connection to the Creator.
- 8) Artists will strive to use the best and highest forms to show the special, reverent character of the Divine Service, just as our Lord did in the prayer He taught us to pray.

S O L I D E O G L O R I A

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