

From the church to the home

In the early 16th century, the Holy Roman Empire was ruled by two emperors : Maximilian I, followed by Charles V from 1519. The two sovereigns were constantly working to organise their empire whilst expanding its territories. The feudal system that had prevailed in the Middle Ages was no more. The power of feudal lords and the clergy was countered by the rise of the bourgeoisie who ran the cities and the bankers who monopolised the money supply. The world was changing and mentalities with it. The Ninety-Five Theses written by Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) in 1517 denounced the shortcomings of the Catholic Church and called for a return to faith through a strict application of the Gospels. His writings divided the German people and unleashed a wave of iconoclastic* destruction. Artists took sides and continued to travel where their commissions led them, although these no longer came solely from religious sources, and commissions to decorate a private chapel or a church were less common than in the previous century.

In the Empire's territories that had remained Catholic, the walls of churches were still adorned with mural paintings, the stained glass windows contained images of the Holy Virgin, and altarpieces illustrated the Childhood of Christ, the Life of the Virgin and the lives of the saints, whilst the figure of Christ appeared at the heart of the altarpieces and in the cemeteries. The artists chose to humanise these divine figures and saints, and their expressions of joy, happiness, pain and sadness helped the faithful to identify with them as models or intercessors. The desire for naturalism was not limited to human expression, and artists reproduced interiors and landscapes with great care. The sculptor responsible for the *Martyrdom of St Catherine* contrasts the

serenity of the young saint, whose face is still childlike, with the grimace of her executioner, concentrating on his task as he raises his sword to decapitate her.



Attributed to the circle of Master H. L., *Martyrdom of St Catherine*, c. 1520 – 1530, polychrome wood (lime)

In contrast, the *Visitation* in the altarpiece sculpted by the Master HSR seems to reproduce a scene from everyday life : a meeting between two smiling, affable women. The suffering Christ's pain, with his taut muscles and protruding veins, echoed the human dramas that would inevitably be suffered by the same churchgoers who would be moved by the benevolent image of St Anne watching over her daughter Mary and her grandson Jesus.

These images of devotion can be seen alongside paintings, sculptures or stained glass windows that by then were taking their themes from Antiquity, everyday life or Humanism. Portraits had been invented before the 16th century, but from more or less naturalistic images, they developed into psychological portrayals.



Hans Holbein the Elder, *Portrait of a Woman*, c. 1515, oil on wood panel

The Young Woman painted by Holbein the Elder conveys her sadness through her distraught gaze, whilst her gaunt face and the whiteness of her skin, emphasised by the green background and her black headdress, probably indicate an illness.



Southern Germany,
*Portrait of a Man. Pyramus
and Thisbe*, c. 1515, oil on
wood panel

The Portrait of a Man shows a personable member of the bourgeoisie with a handsome physique, in what is perhaps a portrait intended for his beloved. The theory is an attractive one, especially since the subject on the reverse side is the story of two lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, who went to their deaths rather than renounce their love. The stained glass window from a house in Riquewihr goes further, because it combines the family's coat of arms with the image of a naked woman, setting up an even stronger contrast with the panel on the subject of *Melancholy* painted in 1532 by Lucas Cranach, court painter to the princes of Wittenberg, who were protectors of Luther and active defenders of the Protestant faith.



Lucas Cranach the Elder,
Melancholy, 1532, oil on
wood panel

Cranach draws upon one of Dürer's most famous prints, *Melencolia I*, to turn it into an illustration of one of Luther's sermons.

Here, the allegory of Melancholy as a source of creativity becomes a rejection of a psychological state to be guarded against, at the risk of attracting satanic ideas, as illustrated by the procession of men and women mounted on goats and pigs. To combat melancholy, Luther advocated earthly nourishment, symbolised here by the *hanap** and the dish of fruit.

Hanap: tall goblet, sumptuously decorated and used for domestic wine consumption

Iconoclasm: movement advocating the destruction of religious objects or buildings