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Sixteenth Century Northern Art: A Conflict of Styles

During the fifteenth century, most of the artists north of the Alps remained indifferent to the advances made by the Italian Renaissance. Since the time of Jan van Eyck, they had looked to Flanders and not to Italy for leadership. However, this changed at the start of the next century. Artists began to make independent journeys to Italy and other countries and became aware of what was happening there. Eventually, the lure of Italian art became so strong that a trip to Italy to study the great Renaissance masters was seen as essential for artists in training.

The Spread of the Renaissance Style

The spread of the Renaissance style across western Europe was further aided by powerful monarchs with a thirst for art. These monarchs were eager to attract well-known artists to their courts to work for them. Some Italian artists were invited to visit other countries. They helped to spread the Italian influence wherever they went. Artists from other countries were also asked to visit Italy. When they left Italy to return home or to go to other lands, these artists carried with them what they had learned of Italian Renaissance ideas. In response to such an invitation, Leonardo da Vinci left Italy and journeyed to France. Albrecht Durer, the famous German artist, visited Italy. Hans Holbein, another German artist who visited Italy, also visited and then settled in England. However, not all northern artists were willing to accept the new Italian Renaissance style. Early in the sixteenth century, a conflict of styles developed between those remaining faithful to the style of the Late Gothic period and those in favor of adopting Italian Renaissance ideas as quickly as possible. This conflict continued until the Renaissance point of view triumphed later in the century.

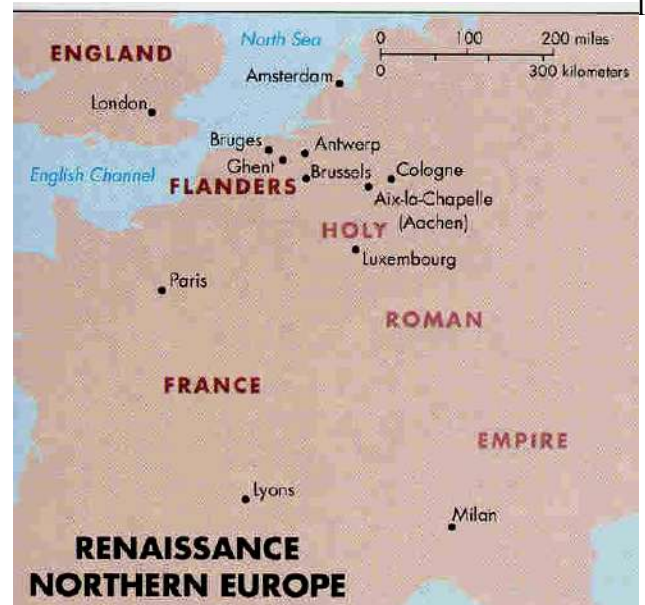


Figure 18.13 Matthias Grunewald. *The Small Crucifixion*. c. 1511-20. Oil on wood. 24 1/4 x 18 1/8". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection.

Matthias Grunewald

By comparing the work of two great northern painters of that time, Matthias Grunewald (*muh-tee-uhs groon-eh-vahlit*) and Albrecht Durer (*ahl-brekt dur-er*), this conflict of styles can be brought more clearly into focus. Both these German artists felt the influence of the Italian Renaissance. They understood the rules of perspective and could paint figures that looked solid and real. One, however, continued to show a preference for the dreams and visions favored by Gothic art. He used Renaissance ideas only to make his pictures of these dreams and visions appear more vivid and powerful to the viewer. This artist was Matthias Grunewald.

The Small Crucifixion

In his small painting of *The Small Crucifixion* (Figure 18.13), Grunewald used an active imagination to create a powerful version of the familiar Christian subject. His aim was the same as that of generations of earlier Medieval artists, that is, to provide a visual sermon.

How differently a Renaissance artist like Raphael would have painted this same scene. Raphael would have used a balanced composition. His story would have been told with a calm dignity rather than with frenzied action. He would have tried to present the event as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice. However, it would have been a gentle reminder, told in a whisper. Grunewald's message, on the other hand, is neither calm nor gentle. It is a

booming sermon forcefully describing Christ's agony and death. It spares none of the brutal details that Italian artists preferred to avoid. The pale yellow of Christ's body is the color of a corpse. The vivid red in the garments is the color of blood. The cold, black sky behind the figures is a dark curtain against which the tragic scene is played, emphasizing the people in the foreground by its contrasting value and hue.

Much of the impact of Grunewald's painting comes from the way in which it was painted. Look at the figure of Christ. The ragged edge of his cloth garment repeats and emphasizes the savage marks of the wounds covering his body. Now, focus your attention on the hands. Notice how the fingers twist and turn in the final agony of death. Like everything else in the work—color, design, brushwork—this contributes to an expression of intense pain and sorrow. The calm balance of the Renaissance has been ignored. Instead you see a forceful representation of the Crucifixion that seeks to seize and hold your emotions.

Albrecht Durer

Almost every German artist at this time followed the same course as Grunewald. Only Albrecht Durer turned away from the Gothic style to embrace the Renaissance. Durer was born in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1471, the second son in a family of eighteen children. Since he was the son of a goldsmith, it was assumed that he would follow in his father's profession. However, Durer showed such skill in drawing that he was apprenticed to a local painter at the age of fifteen.

A trip to Italy when he was in his early twenties introduced Durer to Renaissance painting and the Renaissance ideal of the artist as an intellectual. He returned to Nuremberg with a fresh view of the world and the artist's place in it. Durer made up his mind to make the new Renaissance style his own and set about educating himself in all fields of learning that went with this new approach to art. He studied perspective and the theory of proportions in order to capture the beauty and balance found in Italian painting. Then he applied the techniques he had learned to his own art.

Knight, Death, and the Devil

This does not mean, though, that Durer did nothing more than imitate the Italian Renaissance style. His studies enabled him to pick out the most interesting and impressive features of that style and combine them with his own ideas. For example, in his engraving entitled *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (Figure 18.14), the horse and rider exhibit the calmness and the solid, round form of Italian painting. The figures representing death and the devil, however, are reminders of the strange creatures found in northern Gothic paintings. The brave Christian soldier is shown riding along the road of faith toward the heavenly Jerusalem seen at the top of the work. The knight's dog, the symbol of loyalty, gallantly follows its master. This is no easy journey—the knight is plagued by a hideous horseman representing death, who threatens to cut him off before his journey is complete. Behind lurks the devil, hoping the knight will lose his courage and decide to turn back. However the knight knows full well where he wants to go and what he must do to get there. His journey through life on the road to heaven may be lined with danger, but he rides bravely forward, never turning from the Christian path, no matter how frightening the dangers along the way.

At this time, Durer found himself in the center of the conflict between Martin Luther and the Roman Church. He accepted Luther's principles and became a strong supporter of the Reformation. He took his place, so he said, alongside those who were looked down upon as heretics. His engraving of *Knight, Death, and the Devil* may have been his way of showing the tremendous tensions he and everybody else were experiencing during that turbulent period of history.



Figure 18.14 Albrecht Durer. *Knight, Death, and the Devil*. 1513. Engraving. 9 5/8 x 7 1/2". Museum of fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts. Gift of Mrs. Horatio Greenough Curtis in memory of her husband, Horatio Greenough Curtis. Point to features in this work that show Durer was influenced by the Italian Renaissance. What trait did Durer have in common with Leonardo da Vinci? In what ways does this picture reveal some of the conflicts experienced by the artist who created it? Do you think that this work can be considered important in the historical development of art? Why or why not?



Figure 18.15 Hieronymus Bosch. *Death and the Miser*. c. 1485-90. Oil on oak. 36 5/8 x 12 3/16". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection.

A Curiosity Like Leonardo's

Throughout his life, Durer exhibited a curiosity much like that of Leonardo. This curiosity led him to collect and study all kinds of strange and rare objects. Hearing of a whale stranded on a beach in the northwest part of the Netherlands, he set off to see it for himself. He died on the return journey. As for the whale, Durer never saw it. It decomposed before he got there.

Hieronymus Bosch

One of the most interesting artists of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch (*heer-ahn-nih-mus bosh*). He picked up and carried on the emotional quality noted in the works of Rogier van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes. Bosch's paintings, like those of the Italian Mannerists, mirrored the growing fears and tensions of the people during that uneasy period. Many people felt that the increasing religious conflicts were a sign that the evil in the world had reached new heights. It was only a matter of time, they felt, before an angry God would punish them all. This religious and moral climate gave artists subject matter for their works of art.

Bosch's pictures were meant to be viewed in two ways—as stories and as symbolic messages. His stories clearly focused on the subject of good and evil. His symbolic messages are more difficult to understand, however, because the meanings for, many of his symbols have been forgotten over the years. Many of these symbols probably came from magical beliefs, astrology, and the different religious cults that were popular in his day. Even though his paintings are often frightening or difficult to understand, they are not without traces of humor. Bosch often pictured the devil as a fool or a clown rather than as the sinister Prince of Darkness.

Death and the Miser

Bosch's skills as a storyteller as well as his sense of humor are evident in his painting of *Death and the Miser* (Figure 18.15). He uses the picture to tell you that no matter how evil a man has been during his lifetime, he can still be saved if he asks for forgiveness before dying. An old miser is shown on his sickbed as a figure representing death enters the room and prepares to strike. Even at this final moment, the miser is torn between good and evil. An angel points to a crucifix in the window and urges the miser to place his trust in the Lord. At the same time, a devil tempts him with a bag of money. Who will the miser listen to? It is difficult to say; he seems about to look up at the crucifix, although his hand reaches out for the money at the same time. He cannot make up his mind. At the bottom of the picture is a scene from an earlier period in the miser's life. Here too Bosch shows that the miser cannot make a decision between good and evil. The man fingers a rosary in one hand, but adds to his hoard of money with the other.

Pieter Bruegel

Bosch's unique art style did not pass away with his death in 1516. Forty years later, another Flemish artist turned away from the landscapes he had been painting to create pictures that owe a great deal to Bosch's influence. The artist's name was Pieter Bruegel (*pee-ter broi-gul*).

The Parable of the Blind

Bruegel's pictures are often based on the unsettled conditions in the Netherlands during the sixteenth century, but what could he have had in mind when he painted *The Parable of the Blind* (Figure 18.16)? Five blind beggars are seen walking in a line; the sixth—their leader—has stumbled and is falling over the bank of a ditch, and the others are destined to share his misfortune. Like Bosch's work, Bruegel's painting can be seen as a parable, a story that contains a symbolic message. It illustrates the proverb that reads "And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into a ditch."

The picture could be interpreted as a warning to those who blindly follow the lead of others. Such people should be prepared to suffer the same fate. Bruegel's beggars follow a road leading to eternal suffering rather than the one leading to salvation. In their blindness they stumble past the distant church cleverly framed by trees and the outstretched staff of one of the beggars. The ditch they are about to tumble into could represent hell. It would represent the only possible end for those who allow themselves to be led down the path of wickedness. Bruegel warns that anyone can be misled; even the blind man wearing a showy cross as proof of his piety is being led astray.



Figure 18.16 Pieter Bruegel, *The Parable of the Blind*. 1568. Tempera on canvas. 34 x 60". Museo Nazionale, Naples, Italy. This painting stands as a warning to those who blindly follow the lead of others.

Bruegel demonstrates a keen sense for detail—no less than five different eye diseases were once identified by a French physician after studying the faces in this picture. Also, observe the variety of expressions the figures show. They range from the confusion of the man at the far left to the fear of the figures at the right. This concern for detail ties Bruegel more firmly to Jan van Eyck and other Flemish painters than to any Italian Renaissance artist. At a time when many Flemish artists were freely adopting the Renaissance style, Bruegel followed his own path. The Renaissance Italians ignored what they thought to be excessive details. Bruegel, by contrast, emphasized them. The Italians also placed little importance on symbolism. Bruegel, on the other hand, used it in much the same way as the medieval artist did in illustrating stories from the Bible. His blind men are symbols painted with accurate details to give them a more lifelike appearance.

Hans Holbein

Several years after the death of Grunewald and Durer, another German artist named Hans Holbein (*hans hole-bine*) left his native country to settle in England. Carrying a letter of recommendation from the great scholar Erasmus, Holbein hoped to escape from the strife of the Reformation. Known for his lifelike portraits, he became the court painter for King Henry VIII. He was the king's favorite painter and eventually painted portraits of Henry and three of his wives. The king was so impressed by Holbein's talent that he once remarked that he could make seven lords from seven peasants, but he could not make a single Holbein, not even from seven lords.

Edward VI as a Child

As a New Year's gift in 1539, Holbein presented Henry with a portrait of his fourteen-month-old son, Edward (Figure 18.18). The birth of this son had been widely acclaimed in England, because it meant that the king finally had a male heir to the throne. It was partly due to Henry's desire for a son to succeed him as king that he had divorced his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. This act had thrown the whole country into confusion. The pope condemned the action and Henry broke with the Church, taking his country with him. Unfortunately, Henry did not father a son while married to his second wife either. The future King Edward was born while he was married to his third wife, Jane Seymour.

Holbein painted the young Edward in royal garments and placed a gold rattle in his hand. Even though the face and hands are childlike, Edward hardly looks like a child not yet two years of age. The artist probably wanted to impress Henry by showing the child's royal dignity rather than his infant charms.

The Latin verse below Edward's portrait asks him to follow the path of virtue and to be a good ruler. Unhappily, the young king had little opportunity to do either. He was never strong and died of tuberculosis at the age of sixteen.

Anne of Cleves

The year after completing his painting of young Edward VI, Holbein was asked by Henry VIII to complete another portrait—a most unusual portrait. At that time, Henry was looking for a new bride, having divorced Catherine of Aragon, beheaded Anne Boleyn, and seen Jane Seymour die in childbirth. Hearing that Anne, the young daughter of the Duke of Cleves in Germany, was available, he decided to send a delegation to look her over. Included



Figure 18.19 Hans Holbein. *Anne of Cleves*. 1539. Tempera and oil on parchment. 25 5/8 x 18 7/8". The Louvre, Paris, France.

in this delegation was Holbein, who was sent along to paint a portrait of Anne. Taking the artist aside, Henry confided, "I put more trust in your brush than in all the reports of my advisors."

Hearing this, Sir Thomas Cromwell, one of the king's most powerful ministers, summoned Holbein. Cromwell was anxious to see a marriage between Anne and Henry since it would certainly make Anne's father an ally against England's enemies on the Continent. Meeting with Holbein, Cromwell told the artist that he must, without fail, bring back a most beautiful portrait of Lady Anne.

Holbein met Anne in her castle in Germany on a hot August afternoon—and found her to be no vision of loveliness. She was good-natured, patient, and honest but, unfortunately she was also dull, lifeless, and plain.

This presented a problem for the artist. If he painted Anne to look beautiful, he would please Cromwell but risk the anger of the king. On the other hand, if he painted her plain, he would offend both Cromwell and the woman who might become queen.

Apparently Holbein decided to let his brush make the decision for him and completed the portrait in less than one week. Returning to England he

showed the painting (Figure 18.19) to Henry, who took one look at it and signed the marriage contract. Arrangements were soon under way for a marriage ceremony that would dazzle all of Europe.



PARVULI PATRIS, PATRIA, VIRTUTIS ET HARELS
ESTO, NIHIL MAIUS MAXIMVS ORBIS HABET.
CONATVM VIX FOSSINT COELVM ET NATVRA DEDISSE,
HIVS QVEM PATRIS VICTVS HONORET HONOS.
ALQVATO TANTVM TANTI TV FACTA PARENTIS,
VOTA HOMINVM VIX QVO PROGREDIANTVR, HABENT
VINCITO, VIGESTI QVOT REGES PRISCVS ADORAT
ORAS, NEC TE QVI VINCERE POSSIT, ERIT.

Henry burst in on Anne and froze. He was so stunned by her appearance that he forgot to give the girl the presents he had brought for her. He returned to Greenwich in a rage but was forced to go ahead with the wedding because he was afraid that if he did not, the girl's father would join his enemies.

The marriage took place on January 6, 1540, and, on July 7, it was legally dissolved. The king gave Anne two residences, a generous yearly income, and the most unusual title of "Adopted Sister." Anne was apparently overjoyed and was seen wearing a new dress every day—along with a wide smile.

Thomas Cromwell was not as fortunate. He was arrested for treason and executed in the Tower of London.

Surprisingly, Holbein suffered no ill effects for his part in the affair, although Henry chose his next two wives after close personal inspection. Only one of them was to be beheaded. Holbein remained in Henry's good graces and was painting a portrait of the king when he fell victim to the plague. He died in London in the fall of 1543.



Although Holbein is now best-known as a portraitist, he was famous in his own time for woodcuts, such as *The Alphabet of Death* and *The Dance of Death*. The second of these is a series of forty-one woodcuts that were popular among Holbein's contemporaries, because, like Durer's *Apocalypse* series, they reflected the preoccupation with death that characterized this time period. Each of the scenes Holbein created portrays a skeletal figure triumphing over a human one, suggesting that every person, regardless of status, wealth, or faith, must face death. The first in the series *Expulsion from Paradise* (right) portrays man's first encounter with death outside the Garden of Eden.

