

# 15th- and Early 16th-Century Germany

The changes experienced in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were nowhere more strongly felt than in German-speaking lands. There the revolutions of printing and the Protestant Reformation were first unleashed. And it was a German artist, Albrecht Dürer, who introduced the art of Renaissance Italy to northern Europe. As France, England, and Spain coalesced around strong dynasties into powerful nations, Germany remained a political mosaic of small, independent states under the aegis of the Holy Roman Emperor. Yet it sustained a strong sense of national identity, and this was reflected in the distinctive character of German art.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, German artists, like those all across Europe, created delicate courtly art in what is now known as the International Style. This was marked by long graceful figures, richly patterned surfaces, gold decoration, and a preference for abstract ornamentation over realism. By about 1450, influenced by painting in the Netherlands, German artists adopted a more naturalistic style. In general, however, their work remained more expressive than their neighbor's. German painters tended to emphasize line and pattern over three-dimensional form. They juxtaposed strong contrasts of color and continued to use gold backgrounds long after they became old fashioned elsewhere. German altarpieces often included painted and gilded sculpture, increasing the theatricality of the sacred scenes. All these qualities pitched art to a high emotional key, one well suited to the German religious experience, which had been heavily influenced by the mysticism of such preachers as Meister Eckehart beginning in the 1300s.

## *The Reformation and the Graphic Arts*

In 1517 Martin Luther launched the Protestant revolt when he posted his Ninety-five Theses complaining of greed and corruption in the church. Long before, German mysticism and other changes in late medieval piety had begun to "democratize" religion. An emphasis on direct, emotional experience of God shifted spiritual focus—and authority—to private devotion. In addition, political realignments had increased the power of secular rulers at the expense of the church, and growing nationalism made prosperous northern cities increasingly reluctant to share their wealth with Rome.

The Reformation swept through Germany and into the Low Countries in the 1520s. Its success was aided by religious propaganda broadcast through the new media of printed books and graphic arts. Perhaps because so many German artists had emphasized line over form, they were particularly attracted to woodblocks and engraving. The wide availability of prints, especially those by Albrecht Dürer, also helped to spread the style and theory of Italian Renaissance art, leading northern painters to model their figures with greater three-dimensionality. In areas affected by the Reformation, artists turned more frequently to secular subjects, especially portraiture, and in religious works they focused on the life of Christ, paying less attention to the saints whose role as intermediaries for mankind was denied by Protestant theologians.

*The Guide in Gallery 38 describes many of the saints encountered here and in other rooms nearby.*



***The Death of Saint Clare,***  
about 1400/1410

Saint Clare was a disciple of Saint Francis and founder of the order of Franciscan nuns called the Poor Clares. This jewellike painting illustrates a vision that appeared to her followers as they stood vigil around her deathbed in 1253. The Virgin cradles the dying nun's head as a group of female saints, Clare's sister Agnes, and members her order stand by. Above the gold field that separates earth from heaven, Jesus holds a representation of Clare's soul as a white-clad child. (The gold leaf, often beaten from coins, was applied in extremely thin square sheets whose overlapping outlines are visible here.)

This panel was perhaps made for a convent of the Poor Clares in eastern Europe. We do not know the name or even the nationality of the artist, but his style is unmistakable, distinguished by large heads, long spidery fingers, saturated colors, and richly patterned surfaces. The long, elegantly silhouetted figures, delicate designs punched into the gilt, and flattened space are all typical of the International Style, a court style that united the arts from Paris to Prague at the end of the Middle Ages. Its surprising uniformity resulted from dynastic marriages and from the strong competition between royal patrons to hire the best artists. Speculation about this artist—he has been called French, German, Austrian, and Bohemian—indicates the style's pervasiveness.

Oil on panel, .675 x .553 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.83

**The Master of Heiligenkreuz**  
(HY lee genn kroitiz)  
Active about 1400



***The Crucifixion,*** about 1400/1410

With Mary and John the Evangelist at the Crucifixion are a Roman centurion and a Carthusian monk. Although not a portrait, this figure is probably meant to represent the monk who used the panel for private devotion in his own cell. The Carthusians emphasized solitary contemplation, and this scene makes concrete the type of vision such contemplation hoped to achieve: transporting the worshiper to the site of the Crucifixion to witness firsthand the human suffering of Christ's sacrifice. Angels, who collect Jesus' blood in chalices, offer hope of man's salvation through the mass and eucharist.

The gentle lyricism and decorative elegance of this work are in keeping with the International Style. The delicate coloring—notice the shot pinks, vermilion, and mauve in Saint John's robe—was produced with tempera, a medium soon to be replaced by oil paints. The artist remains anonymous even though he directed an important workshop in the rich and active commercial center of Cologne. The stillness and intensity of his images exerted a great influence on other German painters.

Tempera on panel, .462 x .311 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.29



***The Dead Christ Supported by an Angel***  
***(The Trinity),*** about 1440

The lifeless and gaunt body of Christ slumps in the arms of an angel, whose face is marked by quiet grief. In the corner the hand of God, emerging from a swirl of stylized clouds, points with a gesture of benediction to the dove of the Holy Spirit as it descends to the head of Jesus. Such images inspired the viewer to contemplate and identify with the suffering of Christ. Dramatic depictions of great pathos and immediacy, called *Andachtsbilder* (devotion-images), had been especially popular in German-speaking lands since the early thirteenth century for their ability to elicit a personal and emotional religious response.

This small alabaster relief, probably made by a Rhenish or southern Netherlandish artist, still retains much of its original paint. It may have been part of a larger set of carvings installed in a church or convent chapel or it may have been used for private devotion in a home. As the numbers of wealthy merchants in the cities increased during the fifteenth century, there was a growing market for such private devotional works. Some were specifically commissioned, but others were also produced in large numbers for export and to be sold at the annual fairs that enlivened market towns.

Alabaster, painted and gilded, height .311 m.  
Gift of Mrs. Ralph Harman Booth 1942.11.3

**Rhenish or Southern Netherlandish Artist**  
1400–1500



**Johann Koerbecke**  
(CUR beck eh)  
German, about  
1420–1491

***The Ascension*, 1456/1457**

After his sixth and final appearance on earth, the resurrected Christ ascended to heaven, leaving behind his mother, his fervent but shaken apostles, and the indelible print of his feet on the Mount of Olives. In this painting he is flanked in heaven by John the Baptist and several Old Testament figures, probably those he rescued from limbo. We can identify, for example, Aaron with the flowering branch, Moses with the Tablets of the Law, and King David with his harp.

This panel decorated the altar of an abbey church near Münster, where Koerbecke had a large studio. It and seven other scenes from the life of the Virgin formed the inner doors of an altarpiece more than twenty feet high. It must have been a dazzling sight when the doors were opened on Sundays and feast days to reveal a gilded and painted statue of the Virgin and Child in the center and reliquaries for Saint Ursula and twenty-four of her virgin companions, the latter probably in the form of heads lined up in rows.

In Germany the International Style had been gradually transformed by the middle of the 1400s, influenced by naturalism from the Low Countries. Though Koerbecke continued to place his figures against a gilded background, they have greater solidity and individuality than those in the earlier works in this gallery. They are marked by vigorous movements and vivid expressions. The wide spread of angular folds in the Virgin's robe seems particularly to suggest the style of Robert Campin and his followers (seen in a nearby gallery).

Tempera on panel, .927 x .648 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1959.9.5



**The Master of the  
Saint Bartholomew Altar**

German, active about 1475–1510

***The Baptism of Christ*, about  
1485/1500**

Jesus and John the Baptist are surrounded by a crowded arc of seven male and seven female saints. The choice of the saints is unusual and may have been specifically requested when the panel was commissioned. Its large size and horizontal shape suggest it was originally part of an altarpiece.

The Master of the Saint Bartholomew Altar is sometimes referred to as the last Gothic painter of Cologne because he combined the naturalism of artists in the Netherlands with the abstract, otherworldly qualities of earlier German painting. Yet these figures have robust presence and, like his more “modern” contemporaries in the Netherlands, he re-created surface textures with meticulous realism. Notice, for example, how different are the murky water surrounding Christ's legs, the angel's richly embroidered vestments, and the hard gleam of Saint George's armor. At the same time, he retained the flat, two-dimensional space and gold background seen in paintings made a hundred years earlier. Here much of the original gilt is lost and has been retouched with yellow paint, but the vaporous effect of these swirling clouds remains much the same, removing this scene from the ordinary world to place it and the viewer in another realm. German mysticism may have conditioned artists and their clients to favor “old-fashioned” gold because its aura evoked not the physical world but a spiritual presence instead.

Oil on panel, 1.057 x 1.704 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.78



**Hans Baldung Grien**

(GREEN)  
German, 1484/1485–1545

***Saint Anne with the Christ Child, the  
Virgin, and Saint John the Baptist*,  
about 1511**

Unlike most artists of the time, who followed their fathers' trades, Baldung came from a distinguished professional family. While in the workshop of Albrecht Dürer he acquired the nickname Grien (green), possibly for his acid-green pigments or preference in clothes. He and Dürer were close friends, and Baldung's own style was influenced by his teacher's encounter with Renaissance and classical art in Italy. Here the scene is placed, not against a gold background, but in a realistically portrayed room that opens on a landscape in the distance. The robust figures, shaped by bright light, are active and vital. Their sculptural presence is similar to that in Dürer's *Madonna and Child* nearby.

Saint Anne embraces her daughter Mary and holds Jesus as John the Baptist, by his gesture, repeats the Gospel exhortation “Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1.29). Saint Anne's popularity was stimulated by interest in Christ's human life and by growing acceptance of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which freed her from original sin—notice the apple she holds jointly with her son. After Baldung's Strassburg home became a center of the Reformation, commissions for religious altars became scarce and he turned to secular subjects and to printmaking.

Oil on panel, .890 x .776 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.62



**Bernhard Strigel**  
(STRE gle)  
German,  
1460/1461–1528

***Saint Mary Salome and Her Family*,  
about 1520/1528**

This work and its companion, which hangs opposite, portray Jesus' extended family. According to the medieval *Golden Legend*, the Virgin's mother was married three times and bore two other daughters named Mary. These panels show the younger Marys with their own children, Jesus' cousins. Here Mary Salome is surrounded by her father, whose unusual hat identified Jews in medieval Europe; her husband; and her children saints James and John the Evangelist, the latter occupied with a book to remind viewers of his role as Gospel writer and the author of Revelations. The eagle was his traditional symbol.

This domestic and tranquil subject appealed to popular sentiment and to worshipers' personal identification with Christ and the saints. The panels probably flanked a sculpted centerpiece of painted and gilded figures, creating a crowded tableau that would have resembled real-life scenes from medieval passion plays, in which townspeople acted out events from the life of Christ.

In these paintings, with their tooled gold backgrounds and shallow space, Strigel returned to a Gothic sentiment that had largely been abandoned after the Reformation swept through Germany in the 1520s. More typical of this period are his portraits of Hans Roth and his wife, also in this room. This couple represents a new clientele: prosperous merchants and burghers. Her family, and perhaps his as well, had far-flung ventures in the New World and the spice trade.

Oil on panel, 1.20 x .657 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.89



**Lucas Cranach the Elder**

(CRAH nach)  
German, 1472–1553

***Portrait of a Woman*, 1522**

Cranach painted this woman and her husband in the year Luther's German translation of the New Testament was first printed. Cranach was closely associated with the Reformation. Luther himself was the godfather of one of Cranach's children, and the artist painted Luther several times.

This couple's identities remain unknown. The lack of distracting details such as jewelry or elaborate embroidery and the featureless green backgrounds focus attention on their faces, which are naturalistic likenesses.

What is striking though not unusual about their portrayal is the way the man's portrait is dominant. He is much larger, and his shoulders extend beyond the frame of the painting, while hers is a smaller, less imposing figure. Her pale face seems drawn in comparison to his ruddy complexion. The opposing turn of their heads indicates that he occupied the place of honor on the left side. It is likely that the portraits were intended to flank a window: notice how the shadows are cast in opposite directions and how the reflections of window panes can be seen in their eyes. (In Strigel's portraits of Hans Roth and his wife, also in this room, the couple's equal size and her placement on the left may indicate that they were commissioned by her family or when she received unusual honor on her birthday.)

Oil on panel, .587 x .405 m.  
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1959.9.2