

Divine Diagrams: The Manuscripts and Drawings of Paul Lautensack (1477/78–1558). Berthold Kress.

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Berthold Kress's monumental study explores the visionary works of a Bamberg painter, Paul Lautensack, who, in middle age, moved to Nuremberg and for the ensuing thirty years created a quantity of complex diagrammatic images that testify to the artist's radical reevaluation of his role as a painter. From a conventional practitioner Lautensack transformed himself into a self-appointed prophet and creator of revelatory images that were intended to lay bare God's plan in an unprecedented fullness. It is this body of dense and often-intractable material that is the focus of Kress's impressively detailed and patient work of textual and visual exegesis.

The volume is divided into six chapters. The first two cover the artist's biography and position his radical views on the status of the image against the background of the image controversies of the 1520s in Lutheran Nuremberg. The next three lengthy chapters provide detailed examinations of the diagrams themselves: their structural components and constituent parts, their combinatory logic, and their chronological evolution; a final chapter examines their subsequent influence. An exhaustive catalogue of the drawings, manuscripts, and later printed materials includes extensive details of provenance, condition, and bibliography. The volume is generously illustrated with 105 photographs.

From Luther's and Melancthon's mild rebuttals of his work in 1533 onward, Lautensack seems to have been regarded more as a well-intentioned eccentric than dangerous heretic. Even the few patrons he managed to attract eventually gave up on him in baffled incomprehension in the face of his impenetrable images. These dense grids of biblical texts, names, alphabets, religious images, and symbols of natural signs (planets, celestial apparitions) were the artist's painstaking attempts to develop what Kress aptly calls a "theology of the image." Lautensack justified his calling on the dual grounds that he was unlearned and thus a mere cipher through which God might speak unfiltered, and that as a painter he could represent God's Word plainly, without human commentary. This second claim flew in the face of the Reform movement's insistence on the primacy of the word. Paradoxically, Lautensack's own biblical fundamentalism derived from Luther's dictum of *sola scriptura*; yet, as Kress convincingly shows, it was Luther's self-confessed inability to understand the imagery of the book of Revelation that allowed the artist to claim that God's revelations worked partly through images and that it was therefore the painter, not the theologian, who should interpret them.

As such Lautensack's diagrams were conceived not as illustrations or compilations of biblical knowledge but as interpretive structures, which, by their complex juxtaposition of different elements, sought to rearrange the revelations of the Bible so as to reveal their true meanings. Lautensack called this process an "unlocking" of the Bible, and in similarly

mystical language described his diagrams as “nailing” or “burying” key texts so as to “resurrect them in glory,” or, elsewhere, as subjecting biblical passages to “crucifixion” by embedding them within cruciform diagrams (129–34).

Kress emphasizes the uniqueness of the artist’s claim to the superiority of the image over the word to reveal God’s truth. Herein lies Lautensack’s main historical significance: for though other Reform-minded artists recorded their religious beliefs or, like Dürer, defended their art on creative and professional grounds, no other artist of Protestant convictions espoused his own craft as an instrument of revelation or insisted that images were sites in which a direct contact with God was possible. Kress’s final chapter follows the afterlife of Lautensack’s diagrams as they appeared in later accounts, printed copies, and other borrowings, prompting interesting questions about the circulation of manuscripts in the period. Largely ignored during his lifetime, Lautensack’s manuscripts had a wide audience in seventeenth-century Germany, finding their most engaged audience among mystics, alchemists, Rosicrucians, and other nonconformists, who, ironically, valued his diagrams for their very obscurity. It was a legacy, as Kress points out, that Lautensack would hardly have welcomed.

This immensely impressive work of painstaking scholarship will be of interest to all scholars interested in the art, theology, and religious practice of the German Reformation and in the broader trajectories of arcane knowledge in the early modern period.

Andrew Morrall, *Bard Graduate Center*