

Introduction

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THE Reformation was about ideas and power—those two invisible, intangible, omnipresent forces in human society. Yet it also expressed itself through physical objects: physical things served as the means to embody, to communicate, to remember, and as vehicles for beliefs and ideas. There is a something of a fashion for writing about “materiality” in history at the moment. At times, it seems as though physical matter may be viewed as somehow more “real” than the intangible business of ideas and beliefs. On the other side, centuries of theological history have tended to prioritize beliefs and abstractions over the material. In this collection, we observe the intimate entanglement of beliefs with the material and the aesthetic, and vice versa. The Reformation offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the relationship between ideas and matter. These six essays do this in various interconnecting and mutually illuminating ways.

I. BOOK DESIGN AND CONFSSIONAL IDENTITY

One place (not the only one, but perhaps the most obvious) where ideas and the material collide is in the book, especially the printed book. A book has design, size, mass, and weight. Its design—its physical appearance, its bodily presence so to speak—sends an important first message regarding what it is about. The first two essays of this collection approach the relationship between the message and the aesthetics of publishing in different ways. Andrew Pettegree begins by exploring how Wittenberg religious printing gradually acquired a distinct “look” through the collaboration of Martin Luther and Lucas Cranach the Elder. Over the course of the early 1520s, there emerged a distinctive design common to Wittenberg religious pamphlets. Neoclassical borders printed from a woodcut block surround a clearly presented title, with (usually) the author and imprint clearly stated. This, Pettegree points out, was “brand Luther”: a highly visible and instantly recognizable physical vehicle for the reformer’s message. David Price, in the second essay, shows that the idea of turning publishing into a visually recognizable “brand” was not absolutely unique to Luther. Johannes Froben, in Basel, had done

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something similar with his humanist publications, especially, but not exclusively, the works of his close friend and colleague Erasmus.

While in the relatively chaotic and uncontrolled atmosphere of early 1520s Germany there may have been an advantage to making the works of Luther recognizable even before one read their titles, the same thing could not be said of all times and periods where Reformation pamphlets were printed. As Pettegree goes on to explain, most of the movements for further reformation in France and the Low Countries were, at least in their early stages and often for much longer, illegal according to the rules of the monarchs in those countries. That uncertain and risky legal situation posed a problem for publishers. Anonymous or pseudonymous attributions and bogus imprints, of course, proliferated. But, as Pettegree explains, even some of these more furtive printers, the publishers at Emden printing for the reformed Low Countries or those at Caen printing for the Calvinist congregations in France, for example, cultivated a visual style to their imprints which one could recognize given a brief acquaintance with their works. At the same time, by concealing the authorship or imprint, one avoided thrusting the heretical nature of such books in the faces of the censors. Here we see a peculiar and very important social and political role for the aesthetics of printing. The appearance of a published book could constitute a semi-transparent, semi-coded set of identifiers for those who needed them. That code might be explicit—to ensure authenticity—or it might be partially concealed, in order to appeal to one clientele and allow the rest to ignore it.

Pettegree introduces us to another point that religious historians often overlook, one where we can assuredly learn from book historians and bibliographers. Once the reformed churches were established in something approaching security, a large and growing market opened up for works of conventional piety: catechisms, prayers, and summaries of religious instruction of various kinds. Unlike the high-profile tracts of leading reformers, works of controversy or of systematics, these books were unlikely to find their way into scholarly libraries. In their natural milieu, the home of the ordinary and not particularly prosperous believer, they could be read until they fell to pieces. When they disintegrated, the owner, or the owner's heir, would buy a new edition rather than repair the old one. Consequently, collateral sources such as inventories and catalogues will often reveal the existence of multiple editions of relatively low-status religious (and other) publications which have been entirely lost. Such losses seem less likely at a higher level of culture; however, I worked many years ago with a historically important neo-Latin oration by a Scottish scholar of the sixteenth century, published by a credible Parisian press, which survives in one solitary copy. Bibliographers will rightly be concerned about the mounting evidence of "lost" editions of early modern books, and argue over the

variable reliability of the sources that attest to these lost books. For historians, however, the lesson of this potential loss of early modern editions is that books were material objects like any other—some had high value and were prized and collected, while others were everyday items of modest, dwindling, or negligible worth. They were not all specially privileged items whose survival can be taken for granted in all circumstances.

There is a further perceptual point. Historians, like other authors, increasingly work largely or entirely in digital form. It is not unusual for a whole book, never mind a scholarly article, to have no existence outside a computer until the proofs arrive, and sometimes not even then. Our generation runs a risk which our predecessors did not encounter: we may forget that, to our early modern counterparts, books were intensely material things. They had an evocative look, feel, even a smell, derived from the plant and animal materials from which they were made. No wonder that a culture built up around them.

II. BOOK DESIGN AND ILLUSTRATION BETWEEN RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

With David Price's article on Holbein and the Bible, we move to an area where religious book production and the arts intersect, even more than they did with Cranach and Luther. Holbein was a well-travelled and well-connected artist in many media, perhaps most celebrated now for his portraits in informal drawings and finished oil paintings. Price's essay draws attention to another of Holbein's activities: his work as a designer and illustrator for Bibles and other forms of biblical publications.

Price's article draws attention to an important difference between Holbein and, say, Lucas Cranach. Holbein's own religious affiliations were (perhaps intentionally) unclear, as Cranach's were not. Holbein worked with Protestant Bibles in reformed Basel, but his own allegiances were not explicit. In some instances, he apparently softened the ideological stance of the Cranach models that he used. For example, he muted the resemblances to contemporary religious and political figures in his version of the woodcuts for Revelation in the Basel adaptation of the Luther New Testament. Holbein also subtly altered the iconography of the title page of the Coverdale English Bible, so as to leave the theological program of the latter less clear than it had been in the Lutheran imagery that he adapted. That similar ornamental and pictorial strategies could work for different theological postures reminds us of something else that is easily overlooked. Many biblical stories could be told in more or less the same way to different church communities. The pictorial Bibles, often based on Old Testament narratives, could

certainly be interpreted in different allegorical or prophetic-spiritual modes in different traditions, but the actual stories could be told in much the same way by anyone.

Secondly, Holbein worked, as all sixteenth-century artists did, with a Renaissance aesthetic which was more than just a set of decorative conventions. Holbein expended considerable care and energy over the decoration of the 1522 Erasmus New Testament, published by Froben in one of the defining collaborations of author and printer of the age. Holbein added to the Erasmus Bible an elaborate and programmatic border design based on the pseudo-Platonic dialogue of the *Painting of Cebes*. This theme introduced a principle very precious to Erasmus himself: the belief that Christian ethics and classical philosophy not only could be reconciled, but were in fact deeply complementary to each other. Elsewhere in this special issue, one will observe the relationship between reforming ideas—of various confessional types—and neoclassical humanist ornamentation reflected in a range of media. Whether the works were of Lutheran, Swiss reformed, or indeed reformed Roman Catholic orientation, their architecture, the design of printed books, or the decoration of domestic and church interiors reflected the classicizing aesthetic of the late Renaissance and early Mannerism. As Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen remarks in connection with Danish church ornament, even modestly cultured people could hardly fail to notice that a completely different decorative language was being employed in Northern Europe by circa 1570 than had been the case fifty years earlier. Historians ignore this “shock of the new” at their peril.

III. LUTHERAN THEOLOGY AND THE ARTIST

Christopher Boyd Brown takes us deeper into the relationship between (especially) Lutheran theology and the arts in an essay dedicated to Johannes Mathesius’s wedding sermon for an artist. Before approaching the sermon itself, we observe how Lutheran approaches to the arts produced an environment for worship combining different genres and styles. On the one hand, many works of devotional art from the later Middle Ages would be allowed to remain, so long as they did not convey an overtly objectionable message; on the other, even modest communities such as Joachimsthal (now Jáchymov) in Bohemia would acquire a significant number of new works of Lutheran-inspired art. To borrow Jürgensen’s phrases, the “shock of the new” was mitigated or complicated by the “comfort of the old.” More than that, Brown points out how Lutheran preachers could reinterpret medieval images in their sermons so as to make them conform to the then-received doctrine. Brown argues that this reinterpretation did not constitute an act of

unscrupulous, falsifying appropriation of art from another era. The preachers who so interpreted the surviving works of art may truly have believed that medieval art, properly understood, testified to a better faith than the Church had taught until recently.

Mathesius's sermon expounded Exodus 31(1–11), where God directs Moses to assign the work of decorating the tabernacle to the artist Bezaleel and his assistant Aholiab. The message of the scripture, emphasized in the sermon, was that the artist could be, and in this case was, inspired and gifted by God in the arts and crafts required to adorn worship. That meant that there were in fact two quite different modes in which the Spirit of God could be said to “inspire” a person. There was the inspiration leading to justification and redemption, which could only be spoken of (so it was believed) in respect of God's elect, justified through faith in Jesus Christ. However, there was another more generally accessible form of inspiration to be seen at work in the creative artist. Creativity was the first and most widely distributed gift of the Spirit. It could be seen at work in Roman Catholic musicians, or in pagan artists and sculptors. Good quality art meant only that a high level of inspiration was present, it did not necessarily turn such works into idols.

Another important dynamic associated, albeit not exclusively, with the Reformation was the shift of religious materials and images from primarily ecclesiastical settings to domestic ones. One should not make this change too absolute: in the Middle Ages pilgrim badges and woodblock devotional prints, to say nothing of Books of Hours, were found in a range of household settings. However, a quantitative shift of religious art to the domestic setting occurred, especially in association with the Lutheran Reformation. Religious art was designed for the domestic environment, and religious emblems—as we read in the last chapter of this issue—were incorporated into domestic objects. While one would still encounter artistic representation of the sacred in a Lutheran church, one could just as easily, and perhaps more often, see representations of Christ crucified or resurrected in a household context, even molded into the ceramic of utilitarian objects.

IV. RELIGIOUS OBJECTS IN HOUSEHOLD SETTINGS: A QUESTION OF THE SACRED

In quite another sense, as Alexandra Walsham explains, sacred objects migrated into the domestic sphere in post-Reformation England. In the campaign of expropriation, first of monastic lands, buildings, and objects, and then of material associated with chantries carried out under Henry VIII and his son Edward VI, many religious objects were seized by the government, taken into “protective custody” by sympathetic conservatives, or adapted to secular

use by zealous Protestants attesting to the absence of holiness in old cultic objects. The spiritual was incorporated into the domestic, or in some cases vice versa: many former monastic estates were turned into residences for the gentry and aristocracy. Walsham's article provides us with a subtle and sophisticated theoretical analysis to use in approaching the reuse or "recycling" of sacred objects in the English Reformation.

One point deserves attention, given that cultural and social history (though not any of the essays in this issue) sometimes plays down the significance of belief. The religious response to material objects, as several contributors illuminate, was shot through with theology, deeply held and widely understood. For example, several contributors observe that the reformers were quite comfortable with the *commemoration* of the departed through their images and representations. Funerary monuments in Reformation England (and occasionally in Scotland), or the innumerable portraits of reforming leaders, appreciated without qualms by Bullinger and gathered by Theodore Beza in the *Icones*, served to preserve the image of the remembered dead. It was, however, important not to pray *for* them, or *to* them. Neither could the donors of religious objects who included their names (say as donors of a communion cup) think that they in any sense placed God under an obligation to "reward" their "merit." The distinction between commemoration and intercession was critical to the role of art in the Reformation, and awareness of that distinction appears in all kinds of places.

Both Walsham and Jürgensen draw attention to the chronological phases in the relationship between the Protestant churches and their artistic legacy. In the cases of both England and Denmark, there was an early phase of theologically driven austerity. In reformed England, that could mean actual iconoclasm or the removal or symbolic defacement of medieval religious art; in Denmark, which saw little image-breaking, it could mean the adoption of a more austere decorative style. In Walsham's portrayal of England, the swing of the pendulum away from austerity, as well as from Calvinism, had an explicitly political and ideological character. Some of the same theologians who objected to the Calvinistic fixation on the niceties of predestination also took exception to the "sacrilege" which they detected in the resolve of early English Protestants to rip away church fittings and fixtures and reuse them for secular purposes. The restoration of the beauty of holiness entailed a criticism of the aggressive desacralization of earlier generations, a conflict over a divisive memory. In Denmark, the corresponding swing of fashion inaugurated the decorative style of Lutheran Baroque.

The English conflict over holiness and sacrality raises a point which is implicit throughout this special issue, but which may deserve a brief discussion here. In the medieval and early modern Catholic way of thinking, religious objects were not simply assigned to a special spiritual purpose.

They were “consecrated,” that is, set apart from ordinary use; they were also, it was implied and sometimes explicitly stated, imbued with a specific and palpable holiness. Ordinarily, such holiness meant that to use them for anything other than their intended spiritual purpose, maybe even just to take them into profane hands or into a profane place, incurred the sin of sacrilege. In normal circumstances, consecration was permanent and unalterable. More than that, certain kinds of holy objects acquired special potencies, as holy water had the property to wash away venial sins when sprinkled on the face. All the Lutherans discussed here, and most if not all of the Anglicans, turned against this view of consecrated, holy “stuff.” As in so much else, Martin Luther had led the way. In his polemical tract *On Councils and the Churches*, published in 1539, Luther reasoned that:

The church has other externals that do not sanctify it either in body or soul, nor were they instituted or commanded by God; but, as we said at length above, they are outwardly necessary or useful, proper and good—for instance, certain holidays and certain hours, forenoon or afternoon, set aside for preaching or praying, or the use of a church building or house, altar, pulpit, baptismal font, candlesticks, candles, bells, priestly vestments, and the like. These things have no more than their natural effects, just as food and drink accomplish no more by virtue of the grace the children say at the table.¹

As Walsham observes: “Redeploying religious structures and artifacts for secular purposes, and thereby denuding them of reverence, was itself a strategy of sterilization and desacralization that must be situated on a continuum with iconoclasm.” One may add that it was entirely consistent with the Protestant view that the materials used in religious worship were things of convenience: they did not encapsulate the holiness or the power of God on earth, nor did they undergo intrinsic change.

V. CHANGING CHURCH INTERIORS IN CONSERVATIVE LUTHERANISM

One may, therefore, speculate that for those people exposed to decades of Lutheran preaching, even where the changes to their physical environment were slight, a gradual shift in attitudes would have taken place, attested by subtle shifts in religious art and decoration. Martin Wangsgaard Jürgensen’s article on churches in Lutheran Denmark is particularly helpful here. He leads us in considering a country which adopted Lutheranism fairly early

¹*Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, Christopher Boyd Brown, and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, 67+ vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–), 41:172–173.

(and definitively in 1536) and thereafter had few or no iconoclastic episodes, and espoused a ceremonially rich form of Lutheranism. Many of the changes charted in this article were pragmatic responses to the new focus of worship. Churches which had not possessed fixed pews in the Middle Ages acquired them, so that people could sit and worship in orderly rows. Pulpits became more prominent fixtures in all churches. Particularly interesting here are the “gallery pulpits” where the preacher stood literally in a dramatic frame surrounding the view of the altar. The fashion for these pulpits lasted a short time (possibly because of the athleticism required of the pastor to climb into them), but some survive.

Other aspects to the changes to Danish churches reflect the same combination of the theological and the aesthetic that has been remarked upon already. Altar retables remained in Lutheranism as they had been before the Reformation, the focus of the eyes of most of the congregation. Changes made to these were accordingly highly significant. While stone altars might themselves receive an adornment of text, some of the so-called “catechism retables” imposed a considerable body of scripture and/or creeds, in the vernacular, on the sight line of worshippers. Here Danish Lutheranism and the Church of England coincided somewhat, given the fashion for tables of catechetical text behind the communion table in Elizabethan churches.

VI. THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LUTHER’S WORLD

This issue concludes with an insight into the fascinating and relatively new discipline of Reformation era archaeology. The need to carry out major civil engineering works in the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik afforded unexpected opportunities to dig down into the history of the Luther households in Mansfeld, Eisleben, and Wittenberg. These excavations led to the discovery of unexpected troves of physical remains, both from Luther’s childhood home in Mansfeld and from the excavations in and around the former Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg. This introduction will not spoil these discoveries for the reader; however, the historical lessons may be briefly summarized. First, the household where Luther grew up was far from poor. Luther’s father, Hans Luder,² made himself a significant fortune from

²The form “Luder” is and was used for Luther’s parents and family relations. See Michael Fessner, “Die Familie Luder in Möhra und Mansfeld: Archivalische Überlieferungen zum Elternhaus von Martin Luther,” in *Fundsache Luther: Archäologen auf den Spuren des Reformators; Begleitband zur Landesausstellung “Fundsache Luther – Archäologen auf den Spuren des Reformators” im Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte Halle (Saale) vom 31. Oktober 2008 bis 26. April 2009*, ed. Harald Meller (Stuttgart: Theiss; Halle [Saale]: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt, Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte, 2008), 78–84.

the leasing of mines, and his new, if precarious, wealth is reflected in the evidence of luxuries in the Mansfeld complex of buildings. As Lyndal Roper has pointed out in her recent biography, the father's wealth did not last: the caprices of business left him working for a salary rather than as an independent agent later in life.³

Martin Luther's own household was certainly not destitute of luxuries. Luther ended his life in the unusual situation of being an international celebrity with a large household (and not insignificant land and houses) and at the same time a pastor and professor with a modest income and almost no cash savings. The chief pictorial luxury in German homes of the time comprised decorated, molded, often polychrome tiles used in large stoves and other decorated ceramic objects. Tomoko Emmerling and Louis Nebelsick's article demonstrates the extremely close relationships between this domestic decoration and works that might be considered "high art." Recognized artists such as Erhard Schön and Lucas Cranach saw their patterns and designs, including portraits of religious figures and members of the aristocracy, adapted for domestic utility objects. Moreover, some of these utility objects also embodied the religious message of the Lutheran Reformation. Here above all, one observes the importing of religious themes into the domestic setting. One sees the themes of the new confession expressed in the most practical of everyday objects.

Historians of the Reformation have long debated over the relationship between ideas, beliefs, politics, economics, and social mores in the complex of movements and changes that convulsed Western Christianity in the sixteenth century. To those factors, we should now add the complex pattern of changes and continuities in the physical environment of secular and religious life. The focus on the material is not intended to displace ideas, or politics, or anything else in the story. None of the contributors who have graciously contributed their work to this issue have adopted such an exclusive approach. Rather, the material dimension joins all the other long-recognized factors in helping us to build up a multidimensional image of the Reformation. The people of the sixteenth century integrated their beliefs and their religious passions visibly and palpably into the material objects which surrounded them and furnished their homes and their churches. We must honor that integration.

³Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), chap.1.