

The Apocalypse and Religious Propaganda: Illustrations by Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach The Elder

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Apocalypse imagery was highly sought after in Germany during the 14th and 15th centuries, attributable to the millenialist belief that the world was coming to an end in the year 1500. This Christian conviction was supported by the reality that Germany experienced social unrest, such as peasant revolts, famine and church criticism towards the end of the 15th century. These events were interpreted as signs that the Apocalypse was imminent. Consequently, apocalyptic imagery prepared its viewers for the end of the world.¹

With the rise of book printing and distribution, Albrecht Dürer had become one of the most celebrated artists in Europe by the end of the 15th century. The printing process enabled the rapid dissemination of his work throughout Europe. Dürer's art thus became more accessible to those willing and able to pay a fair amount of money for his woodcuts.² In 1498, he published a large woodcut series of the *Apocalypse*. Fifteen illustrations inspired by the *Revelation of St. John* accompanied the text in both the German and Latin edition. In this endeavor Dürer was a pioneer; he acted as both printer and publisher while exercising full control over the form and content of this work.³ Dürer's *Apocalypse* was an enormous success and it influenced many future artists.

During the early 1520s when the Reformation became widespread, the *Apocalypse* as imagined by Dürer was reworked by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Cranach was responsible for illustrating the newly translated Luther bible.⁴ Martin Luther rejected the authority of the clergy as being the sole conduit to the word of God and criticised the practices of the Roman Catholic Church such as the selling of indulgences. More specifically, his teachings emphasised that only Faith, rather than good deeds, could lead to Salvation.⁵ Luther's seminal translation of the Bible into the German allowed a wider audience of all classes

¹ Albrecht Dürer, ed. Ludwig Grote, *Albrecht Dürer: Die Apokalypse, Faksimile der Deutschen Urausgabe von 1498. Die Heimlich Offenbarung Johannis=Albrecht Dürer: The Apocalypse, Facsimile of the German First Edition from 1498. The Revelation of St. John.* (New York: Prestel, 1999), pp. 24, 27. Edition consulted at the Special Collections Library, University of South Florida.

² Joseph Koerner, 'Albrecht Dürer: A Sixteenth-Century Influenza', *Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 18-19.

³ Grote, pp. 12, 19.

⁴ Christopher De Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2001), p. 216.

⁵ De Hamel, p. 216.

to engage directly with the religious text. At the same time, the use of the printing press to distribute Luther's Bible made it more affordable. These two developments facilitated the spread of literacy and Lutheran ideas.⁶

The Reformation and the words of Martin Luther influenced the production of Cranach's *Apocalypse*. Indeed, the artist maintained a close relationship to the reformer.⁷ While some scholars such as Max Dvorak believe Dürer's earlier *Apocalypse* embodies some of the religious and political inclinations of the artist, others, for instance Wilhelm Waetzoldt, reject such interpretations.⁸ In support of more apolitical interpretations, one needs to both consider the cultural context of its production and analyze images found both in Dürer and Cranach. Instead of acting as a source for early, pre-Reformation ideas, as some have argued,⁹ Dürer's *Apocalypse* acted as an artistic model for Cranach's later version. Consequently, Cranach used Dürer's imagery as a prototype but he modified the apocalyptic iconography according to its Lutheran context.

A closer investigation of Dürer's *Apocalypse* reveals that his illustrations are not layered with direct criticism of the Catholic Church. First, this paper will address the images within the work itself. The cultural context and the artist's professional agenda will be addressed. Because of a myriad of theologians within his circle of friends, Dürer was aware that an illustrated *Apocalypse* accompanied by a German text would provide a service to those that were not members of the clergy.¹⁰ The artist's piety might explain why he would want to use his art to deliver the divine word of God to a broader audience. However one can not underestimate Dürer's strong business sense and desire for prestige; it is likely, that he recognised the creation of a more accessible *Apocalypse* as a financial opportunity to satisfy a social demand. Dürer was the first artist to act as printer and publisher and handled the sales of his own prints by hiring traveling salesmen.¹¹ Hence, Dürer controlled the form and content of his monumental and instantly popular woodcut series.

Dvorak argues that Dürer elected to portray particular narrative scenes from the *Apocalypse* to best exhibit his artistic skill.¹² This *Apocalypse* was inno-

⁶ De Hamel, p. 216.

⁷ Jane Campbell Hutchison, *Albrecht Dürer, a Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁸ Jan Bialostocki, *Dürer and His Critics 1500-1971. Chapters in the History of Ideas, Inclusive a Collection of Texts* (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 1986), pp. 277-278.

⁹ Max Dvorak, *The History of Art as the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 59.

¹⁰ Hutchison, p. 61.

¹¹ Grote, pp. 12, 19-21, 28.

¹² Dvorak, pp. 55-56.

vative in a number of ways; the most immediately striking of which is the large format. His work consisted of full page illustrations on the recto and biblical text on the verso of each folio. His woodcuts demonstrated a new sense of vivacity which complemented the mystical text of the Revelation of St. John.¹³ The large format of the book coupled with the full page images increased the work's visual desirability as well as its market value.

Dürer's *Apocalypse* does contain elements of church criticism. Scholars have already called attention to the historical context of the book's creation amidst the contemporary persecution of the Jews in Bavaria.¹⁴ He created his *Apocalypse* against a backdrop of imminent political change. Peasants were revolting over higher taxes and the crime rate rose considerably.¹⁵ Widespread frustration with church practices was also present, though not to the extent found shortly before the Reformation.¹⁶ Considering these developments, it would be false to instantly conclude that Dürer inserted his personal opinion on contemporary issues in his work. Nevertheless, the cultural milieu of Nuremberg in 1498 was wrought with social and religious turmoil. As Dvorak has argued, Dürer's *Apocalypse* does not purely represent the artist's interest in artistic innovation but also his criticism towards the Roman Catholic Church. Since Germany was in its beginning stages of promoting the accessibility of church doctrine, Dvorak believes Dürer was interested in capturing the religious concerns of the German people. The emphasis on his innovation of artistic techniques is considered second to this aforementioned social concern. He describes the *Apocalypse* as a work representing Dürer's inner struggle with religious practices of the time.¹⁷

In contrast to Dvorak's theory, Wilhelm Waetzoldt believed that no anti-papal features can be found in Dürer's *Apocalypse* of 1498.¹⁸ He references the commonplace and pejorative depiction of bishops, cardinals and other members of the clergy on commonly found images in contemporary prints satirizing these figures.

Such figures are entirely neutral in Dürer's *Apocalypse*. During the late 15th century it was typical to find scrutiny of the Catholic Church in works of art; however, these images did not exhibit the extreme criticism later found during the Reformation. At the time it was believed that everyone including the

¹³ Hutchison, p. 62.

¹⁴ Dvorak, p. 55.

¹⁵ Grote, p. 27.

¹⁶ Thomas Döring, *Dürer's Apokalypse Und Ihre Wirkung: Herzog-Anton-Ullrich-Museum Braunschweig Kupferstichkabinett 22.9.-11. 1994* (Braunschweig: Das Museum, 1994), p. 1.

¹⁷ Dvorak, pp. 59-60.

¹⁸ Bialostocki, pp. 277-278.

clergy was considered a sinner should the end of the world occur;¹⁹ hence Dürer's depiction of beasts devouring cardinals should not be seen as radical church criticism, designed to excite the masses. Instead, such images represent the contemporary notion that everyone, from peasant to clergyman, will eventually suffer for their sins. Consequently, Waetzoldt's argument that Dürer's apocalyptic images during this time do not represent pre-Reformation ideas but capitalise on new artistic inventions, is valid in light of contemporary artistic conventions.²⁰

Using *The Whore of Babylon* (Figure 1) and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Figure 3) as examples, this essay will address how the apocalyptic imagery represents Dürer's intentions. Dvorak states that *The Whore of Babylon* (Figure 1) possesses anti-papal sentiments because of the appearance of the harlot's dress.²¹ The young, luxuriously dressed woman seen wearing a crown and holding a goblet, is seated on a seven-headed beast. She is saluting the crowd in front of her as she raises the goblet towards them. While the seven heads of the beast signify the seven deadly sins, the significance of the harlot's iconographic attributes is a cause for debate. Some scholars have interpreted the woman as representing the Roman Catholic Church due to her luxurious dress and tiara: her headdress is perceived as a symbol for the papal tiara and her decadent clothing thereby implies the lavish spending of the Pope.²² Thus, the Catholic Church is portrayed as the antichrist in the form of the harlot who leads people into sinful behavior.²³

Dvorak's interpretation becomes problematic in light of the fact that the figure of the harlot was most likely inspired by a Venetian woman encountered during Dürer's trip to Italy.²⁴ Dürer made many sketches of Venetian costumes (Figure 2), including those of wealthy women, on his trip from 1494 and 1495.²⁵ It seems likely that Dürer used his Venetian sketches to depict *The Whore of Babylon* (Figure 1); in so doing, he called attention to his Italian influence and newfound skill. Because Dürer had visited Venice and likely used his on site sketches to influence his figural representation in his *Apocalypse*, it becomes problematic to interpret the harlot's role as a politically charged embodiment of

¹⁹ Bialostocki, pp. 277-278.

²⁰ Bialostocki, pp. 277-278.

²¹ Bialostocki, p. 273.

²² Grote, pp. 74-76.

²³ Grote, pp. 74-77.

²⁴ Grote, pp. 74-77.

²⁵ Giulia Bartrum, British Museum, Gunter Grass, Joseph Leo Koerner and Ute Kuhlemann, *Albrecht Dürer and His Legacy: The Graphic Work of a Renaissance Artist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 105.



Figure 1: Albrecht Dürer, *The Whore of Babylon*, 1498. Woodcut in Albrecht Dürer, ed. Ludwig Grote, *Albrecht Dürer: Die Apokalypse, Faksimile der Deutschen Urausgabe von 1498. Die Heimlich Offenbarung Johannis=Albrecht Dürer: The Apocalypse, Facsimile of the German First Edition from 1498. The Revelation of St. John*. (New York: Prestel, 1999), © Prestel.

church criticism. Rather, Dürer's illustration of the harlot represents his artistic ability to render a foreign and complex female figure.

Similarly, the image of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Figure 3) has attracted opposing interpretations regarding Dürer's inclusion of anti-papal sentiments. In representing this scene, Dürer did not strictly follow the Biblical text. In *Revelation*, John described how the riders appear one after the other, bringing the plagues to humanity. Dürer depicts the horsemen as riding in together simultaneously as a group of four.



Figure 2: Albrecht Dürer, *Sketch of a Venetian Woman*, 1495. Inv. 3064r. Reproduced by kind permission of the Albertina Museum, Vienna, © Albertina, Wien, <http://www.albertina.at>.

The first rider mentioned in the text is the figure depicted as the farthest away.²⁶ Dürer incorporates the new Renaissance idea of depicting the mobility of figures and animals.²⁷ Confined by the thin frame of the rectangular page, Dürer condenses the narrative into a singular composition. It seems like each horseman is riding at a different speed; people seen are fleeing from their horses' angry hooves.²⁸ Hell opens up beneath the fourth rider, who represents

²⁶ Grote, p. 46.

²⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*. [2. rev.] ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), p. 57

²⁸ Panofsky, p. 57.



Figure 3: Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 1498. Woodcut in Albrecht Dürer, ed. by Ludwig Grote, *Albrecht Dürer: Die Apokalypse, Faksimile der Deutschen Urausgabe von 1498. Die Heimlich Offenbarung Johannis=Albrecht Dürer: The Apocalypse, Facsimile of the German First Edition from 1498. The Revelation of St. John*. (New York: Prestel, 1999), © Prestel.

death, while the figure of the emperor is about to be swallowed by the monster from hell.²⁹ This depiction of the emperor as one of the first victims to be swallowed up by hell may give the impression that Dürer was criticizing the Roman Catholic Church, perhaps prophesying the demise of the Holy Roman Emperor at the end of day. However, the problem with this interpretation lies in the narrowness of its interpretation; Dürer depicted other victims, not just clergymen.

²⁹ Grote, p. 48.

Moreover, by placing an emperor in the mouth of hell, he has followed the tradition of late medieval iconographic arrangement of the *Apocalypse*.³⁰ Dürer thus maintained an earlier pictorial tradition but deviated from the text in order to give his images a unique style.³¹

Dürer's 1498 *Apocalypse* does not contain an explicit counter-papal agenda. Therefore, it is necessary to use a different approach in explaining Cranach's use of Dürer's imagery in his illustration of *Apocalypse* in 1541, created after the Reformation. Cranach lived in Wittenberg, which had become the political center of the Reformation in the late 1530s. He was a wealthy citizen even enjoying the position of city councilor from 1519 to 1545;³² his high standing in society was partly the result of successful real estate and business ventures. Cranach also benefitted from the constant patronage of German princes. Eventually, he became a close friend of Luther and agreed to devise the illustrations for the great reformer's newly translated German Bible.³³ Luther believed religious images were required to follow the biblical text without changing the meaning of God's word. His viewpoint on the use of images in a religious context became increasingly moderate during the course of the Reformation; he eventually deemed them appropriate when used accordingly.³⁴ Therefore, biblical images always had to be secondary to the word. Art, for Luther, should clarify meaning to benefit the illiterate.³⁵

Although Cranach and Luther had a strong friendship, Cranach continued to accept commissions from Catholic patrons such as Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg.³⁶ Cranach, like Dürer, was a businessman. His workshop in Wittenberg was of tremendous economic importance to the region due to its thriving production. Cranach was able to choose his patrons freely thanks to his prominent position. Thus, supporting the Lutheran cause did not establish an absolute

³⁰ David Price, 'Albrecht Dürer's Representations of Faith: The Church, Lay Devotion and Veneration in the *Apocalypse* (1498).' *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 57, no. 4 (1994) 691.

³¹ Panofsky, p. 53.

³² Peter Moser, *Lucas Cranach: Sein Leben, Seine Welt und Seine Bilder* (Bamberg: Babenberg, 2004), p. 98-99.

³³ Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 76-77.

³⁴ Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 72.

³⁵ Frances Carey, Frances, *The Apocalypse: And the Shape of Things to Come* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 102.

³⁶ Dagmar Eichberger, Dagmar, Charles Zika, Larry Silver, Wim Husken, Bob Scribner et al., *Dürer and His Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. xviii, 2.

business relationship between the artist and the reformer, but it explains the Reformation ideas found in his illustration of the *Apocalypse*.³⁷

Nevertheless, Cranach's apocalyptic imagery functioned, in part, as a tool for spreading Lutheran thought.³⁸ Because of its creation on the printing press, this richly illustrated Bible was quickly and widely distributed throughout Germany. In the eyes of the reformer, the *Apocalypse* was the ideal framework for representing the harmful effects of Catholic Church practices.³⁹

Lucas Cranach's workshop illustrated the *Apocalypse* with either 21 or 26 woodcuts, most of which demonstrate Dürer's influence. While the earlier editions contained full-page images, those after 1534 often had additional scenes in a smaller, landscape format allowing them to be incorporated into the text.⁴⁰ By including eleven additional woodcuts, Cranach avoided condensing and fragmenting Biblical narrative. In so doing, he upheld Lutheran ideas. He separated scenes that Dürer had grouped together into one image. Cranach also added some Dürer had decided to omit. By increasing the number of images, Cranach's changes made the *Apocalypse* more comprehensible and textually explicative.⁴¹

In Cranach's *Apocalypse*, an anti-papal sentiment is expressed in visual content. In *The Whore of Babylon*, Cranach's harlot is similar to Dürer's in that she is luxuriously dressed and riding a beast with multiple heads.⁴² She holds the goblet which signifies that she is the mother of all shame on earth. However, Cranach's figure is wearing a papal tiara. Whereas in Dürer's portrayal the woman was wearing a small crown, Cranach made a conscious choice to depict her as wearing this explicit symbol of papal authority. Consequently, the harlot becomes an embodiment of sinful church practices. Moreover, unlike Dürer's image, those who have been seduced by her are kneeling, not standing, in front of the woman, symbolizing their submission.⁴³ This crowd includes noble figures, which suggests that even the nobility is guilty of falling victim to the Catholic Church's seductive power.

When analyzing *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* within the same edition of the *Zerbster Prunkbibel*, similar pro-Lutheran ideas become apparent. Due

³⁷ Eberhard Ruhmer, *Cranach* (London: Phaidon, 1963), p. 25.

³⁸ De Hamel, p. 237.

³⁹ Bodo Brinkmann, Royal Academy of Arts, and Städtische Galerie im Stadelschen Kunstinstitut Frankfurt am Main, *Cranach* (New York: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007), p. 200.

⁴⁰ Johannes Jahn and Hans Lufft, *Zerbster Prunkbibel "Cranachbibel"*, *Die Apokalypse* (Witten Berlin: Von Cansteinsche Bibelanstalt, 1973), I, II, IV.

⁴¹ Carey, pp. 102, 105, 106

⁴² Jahn, XVI.

⁴³ Jahn, XVI.

to Cranach's horizontal format, the four riders could not be depicted as riding side by side in a vertical composition. The image lacks the energy and swift movement of Dürer's illustration and there are slight differences in the representation of the riders. The rider formerly representing a king is now a Turk wearing a turban. The Turk of Cranach maintains the same gesture of Dürer's king: he is preparing to shoot an arrow. However, Cranach's transformation of the figure might function as a symbol for Islam and its opposition to Christianity. Similarly, the third rider has become a Jew wearing a fur hat, a trope that represents Luther's idea that Jews were responsible for price increases.⁴⁴ Finally, in Cranach's portrayal of the hell mouth, a Roman Catholic priest is devoured. Whereas in Dürer's depiction, a generic clergyman is depicted, Cranach's redaction of this figure's significations is emblematic of the place of his book in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church.

This essay has evaluated both Dürer and Cranach's portrayals of the *Whore of Babylon* and *Four Riders* images in their respective *Apocalypses* (1498 and 1541) in terms of their cultural contexts. While Dürer did not use his work as a means to criticise the church, Cranach embraced Dürer's apocalyptic images and moulded them to support the Lutheran cause. It is important to recognise that Dürer's *Apocalypse* did not fuel reformation ideas. When he first published his work in 1498, it was not a time of open, harsh criticism towards the church with the goal of exciting the masses. By selling his woodcuts throughout Europe with the help of tradesmen, Dürer's prints became widely accredited. Dürer's images were so well received that they became the model for *Apocalypse* illustrations. When Cranach was assigned the task of illustrating the *Apocalypse* in the newly translated Luther Bible, he used Dürer's *Apocalypse* as a model. However, he modified the type of imagery employed by Dürer to support Reformist ideas brought forth by Martin Luther. The combination of familiar images with the vernacular text enabled Lutheran reformers and their supporters to spread their ideas.

Cranach changed the relationship between text and image in his *Apocalypse* just as he reformed Dürer's apocalyptic iconography. His transformations with regard to the visual vocabulary reveal the artist's awareness of the cultural changes; by the mid-sixteenth century Germany's stability suffered from the religious turmoil. Cranach's moulding of religious imagery is a sign of the social changes taking place due to the Reformation. His *Apocalypse* represents the new ideas of the end of time and acts as a mirror of contemporary German culture.

⁴⁴ Jahn, VIII.