

Reformation

The Renaissance with its ideals of individuality changed the way Italian artists portrayed their world, but the “new” wave of ideas, focusing on the individual and adding the ideas of Aristotle to those of Plato didn’t just stay in Italy. It affected different areas of Europe, reacting quite differently with different systems of government, economics, and national attitude.

In the North of Europe, the Renaissance became the reformation, a new religious point of view that changed the way governments and individuals viewed religion. Before you can understand the Reformation, however, you need to know what started it.



To understand the Reformation, you have to return to Rome. From the birth of Christianity until the 1500s, Christianity was a catholic religion (little c = universal) There was only one kind of Christianity and everybody followed it. That form of Christianity had been going for about 1500 years. It had survived the persecution of Rome, the collapse of Rome, the chaos of the Medieval period and the structure of Feudalism. To survive all of that, the religion had to be flexible; it was, but it had also picked up a LOT of baggage along the way.

The church had gathered traditions as it progressed and made rules to help its attendees “stick with the program.” A lot of those rules and traditions had been created or enforced by the Bishop of Rome – the pope – under the authority of apostolic succession.

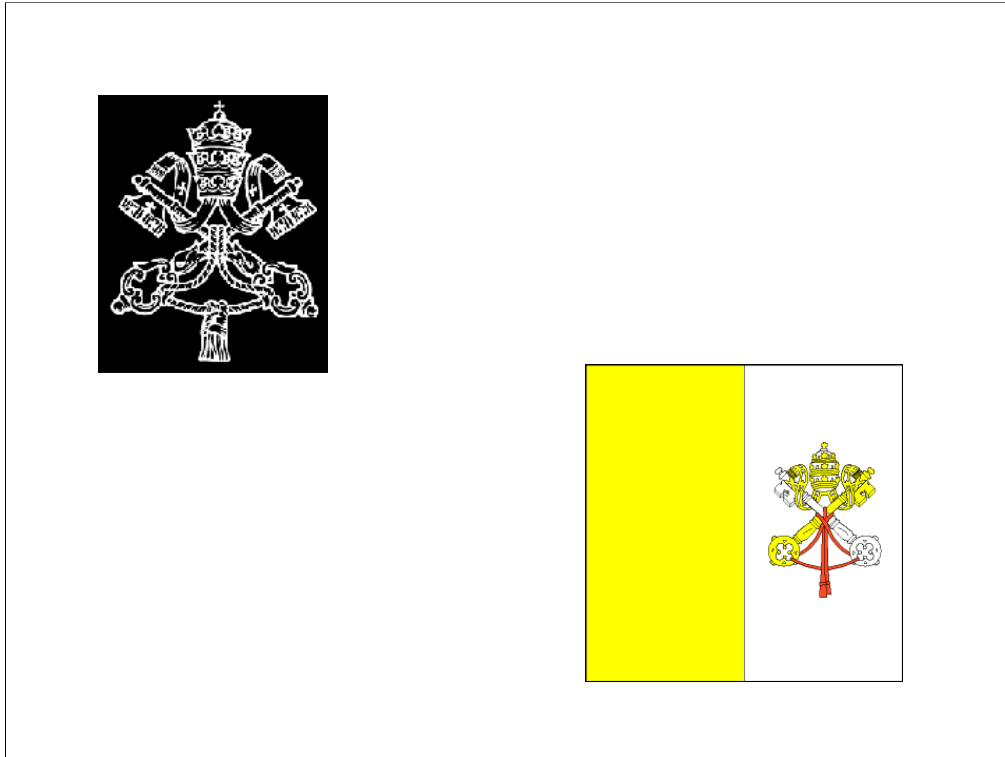
Over time, the church had gathered a massive amount of money and power – land left to them, the papal states, donation of Constantine. The position of Pope became a desirable one for temporal as well as spiritual reasons, and the papacy and the positions of cardinals and bishops were frequently held by corrupt men. Christianity and faith in God were alive and well, but a lot of the church officials were not the ones keeping them going.



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To enhance the temporal power of the pope even further, Julius II had cut a deal with the Swiss to provide special troops to defend the papacy. So the pope had lands under his control, a private mercenary army, and a steady income of tithes and taxes...not a bad job at all.

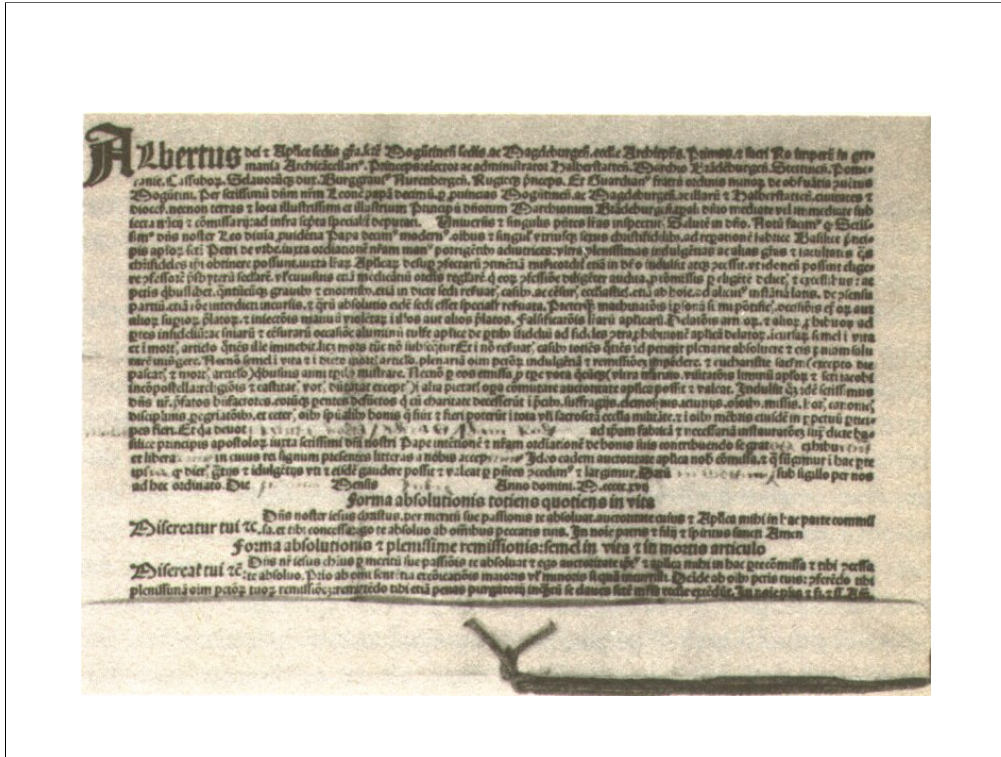
And, of course, the church had the power of excommunication – the right to exclude anyone from church and from the sacraments and fellowship of the Catholic Church. During the renaissance when salvation could depend upon adherence to the church's traditions, excommunication was a serious matter.



During the Renaissance, the Catholic church dropped to its scummiest point. The Popes of this time period did not keep any kind of celibacy vow, relied on other people to advise them in what the Bible and tradition said, and were as concerned with keeping the taxes flowing in as they were in keeping prayers flowing upward.

A few practices in particular are worth noting.

- Purchased offices – lucrative church positions were open for sale to make \$\$ for the church
- Sexual promiscuity – most religious officials lived with a woman, women, or men/boys. It basically operated on a don't ask/ don't tell policy



- Absolution for sale – the prayers of priests and clergy were supposed to help absolve sins – before or after death. When the church needed money, it seemed it was possible to buy your way into heaven.

- Indulgences – building on the idea of absolution for sale. Catholic tradition held that saints and holy individuals had more “heavenly brownie points” than they needed to get into heaven. These extra bonuses were stored in the treasury of heavenly merit in heaven. The pope had the keys to that treasury and could write bulls of indulgence, or get out of hell free cards, for those who could buy them.

Overall, the common churchgoers, genuinely wanting to serve God and caught in a web of traditions and strict rules of church rituals and penance often felt as though they had little in common with the “big wigs” of the church who behaved as they wished.



Martin Luther

Into this world came a frightened young man by the name of Martin Luther. Luther was a young man in Germany who was notoriously intelligent, stubborn, and terrified of his own shadow. Ferociously superstitious and sure that everything was going to eat him, the story is told that Luther was on his way home late one night. A violent thunderstorm broke out and a tree near him was struck by lightning. Terrified, Luther supposedly cried out that if God spared his life, he would become a monk.

Luther was not a good monk. He asked too many questions and preferred studying to hard work. He had a lousy temper, and his father kept showing up and trying to talk him into quitting the whole monk thing. However, Luther was no dummy. He kept reading the Bible and books of theology and wondering about the big gaps between the way the books said things should be and the way they were. In his studies, he ran into

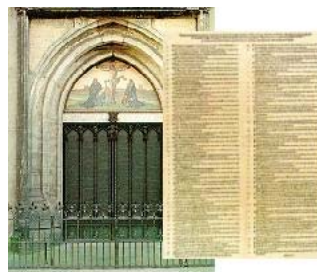
Ephesians 2:8-9

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Luther was shocked – the Bible said that people were saved from sin by faith...they didn't get in by doing what the church said and earning heavenly brownie points?!? Then what the heck was the church doing?



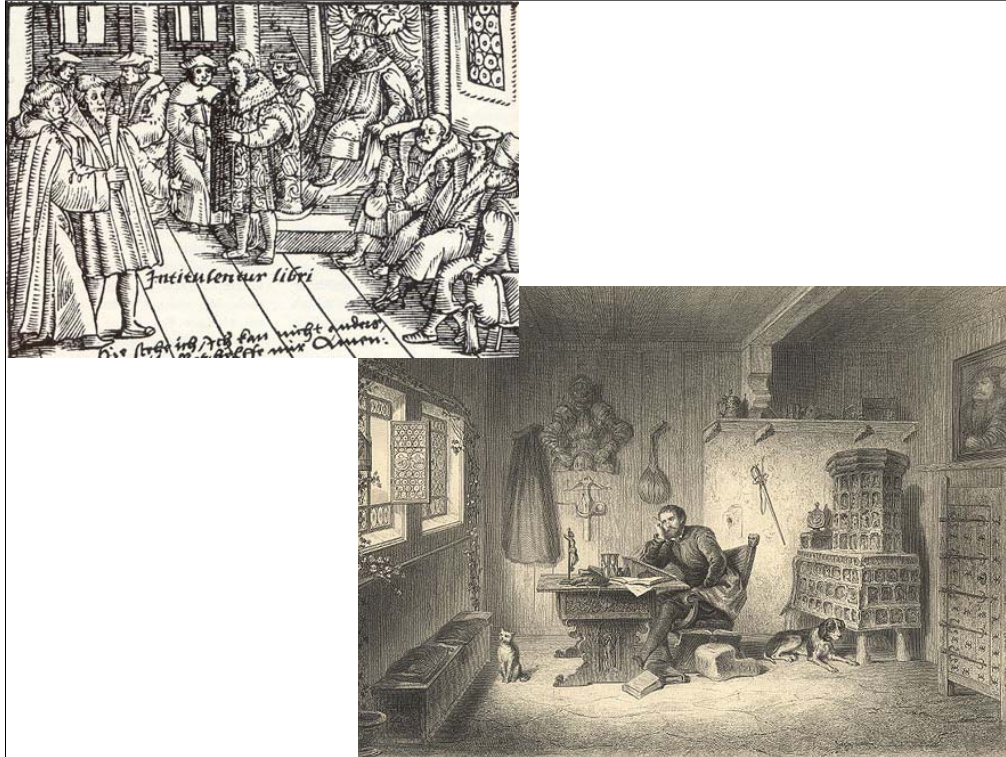
95 Theses



Luther began a movement to reform the church. He followed in the footsteps of great writers and thinkers, trying to inspire people to change their ways. Finally, one day, Luther was out on the streets of Wittenberg and he saw a man selling indulgences.

The next morning, Luther nailed a list of objections to Indulgences – talking points – to the door of Wittenberg cathedral. Those points have gone down in history as the 95 theses. Luther challenged the church to answer his objections.

And he challenged them again...and again. Finally, Luther was getting quite a following, and the church realized that they had to do something about him. They called him to an official church meeting in the City of Worms...the meeting was called a diet, so the meeting was known as the Diet of Worms.



At the diet, Luther was asked to disavow or take back all of the things he had written about the church, its members, and its doctrines. Luther said that unless they could prove that what he had written violated the Bible, he would not take it back. They excommunicated him and gave him 3 weeks before the free-for-all that promised anyone could kill him without legal repercussions went into effect. Luther was taken into hiding by a German noble who was a friend of his and spent much of the rest of his career dodging hit men.

Ironically, Luther didn't disagree THAT much with the Catholic church. He simply wanted to get rid of the corruption, let people read the Bible in their own language, get rid of the church's stranglehold on salvation, and reform the clergy. He simply protested the corruption of the church and the equation of church tradition as equally important with the Bible – thus those who followed him became known as the Protestants.


**Earthy sermons, expunged

**marriage & quote

**Bibles at all pubs

Luther started something. Something big. Other northern European clergy, inspired by the success Luther had found, began to emphasize the importance of Sola Scriptura – only the Bible as a basis for religion. Two reformers in particular gathered large followings.




 The Spread of Lutheranism from Germany to Scandinavia, Central Europe, and England. Protestant ideas took hold almost exclusively in northern Europe.

Catholic

- Bible & tradition given equal authority
- Individuals must complete the sacraments/rules of the church
- Only priests can perform certain functions
- Tradition, established, traces authority back to Jesus

Protestant

- **Sola Scriptura** – Bible only authority
- Individuals must make their own peace with God
- Proof of faith is in action – good deeds are the result of salvation not a requirement for it
- New, liberating, claims to return to original faith.

Catholic

- Kings & Nobility interested in stability
- Merchants who benefit from church business
- Intellectuals who value tradition and humanism

Protestant

- Kings & nobility interested in nationalism & fiscal independence
- Merchants & guilds interested in independence and commerce
- Educated individuals


Catholic

- Stability and internationalism
- Acknowledgement of God's power
- Assurance of God's blessing in physical terms
- Familiar feudal power structure

Protestant

- Nationalism
- Freedom from church tithe
- Sense of direct relation with God
- A sense that God can impact the lives of common people



 The Religious Divisions of Europe, ca. 1555. Prior to 1520, all of Europe was Roman Catholic.



With the rise in printing and the spread of books, pamphlets, and printed advertisements and propaganda across Europe, art extended into new directions. Publishers and writers needed illustrations for printed material – art that could, like books on a printing press, be replicated hundreds of times. To serve this purpose, 3 types of art became more popular and more prevalent: woodcuts, etchings, and engravings.

Woodcuts were stamps made of wood. Essentially the wood was carved so that a picture was created in outline, much like a stamp. Ink was rolled across the surface and then the image was stamped out. As the woodcut became perfected, the ink adhered to the “upper” or raised surface of the woodcut. Earlier woodcuts using inferior ink were occasionally produced in negative.

Woodcuts only stood up to a limited number of stampings before losing quality due to saturation of the wood with ink and the dulling of the edges of the woodcut due to the pressure of the stamping.



Etching

Etching used a metal sheet instead of a wooden block to create reproducible images.

The sheet was coated with a grainy wax that was chemically base. The artist then used a sharp stylus to incise lines into the wax coating, scraping away the wax to reveal lines of metal. Then, the entire metal plate was dipped into acid. The base wax repelled the acid, but where the wax had been scraped away, the acid ate into or etched the metal, making lines.

The plate was then scraped clean of the wax, rolled with ink, wiped with a cloth, and pressed onto paper. The etched lines retained the ink, creating an image.

If the engraver wanted lines of differing depth or decided that he wanted to change the picture, he could re-coat the metal with wax, add more lines, and re-dunk the plate in acid. The first lines (if exposed again) would be etched more deeply (and hold more ink), and later lines would be lighter.

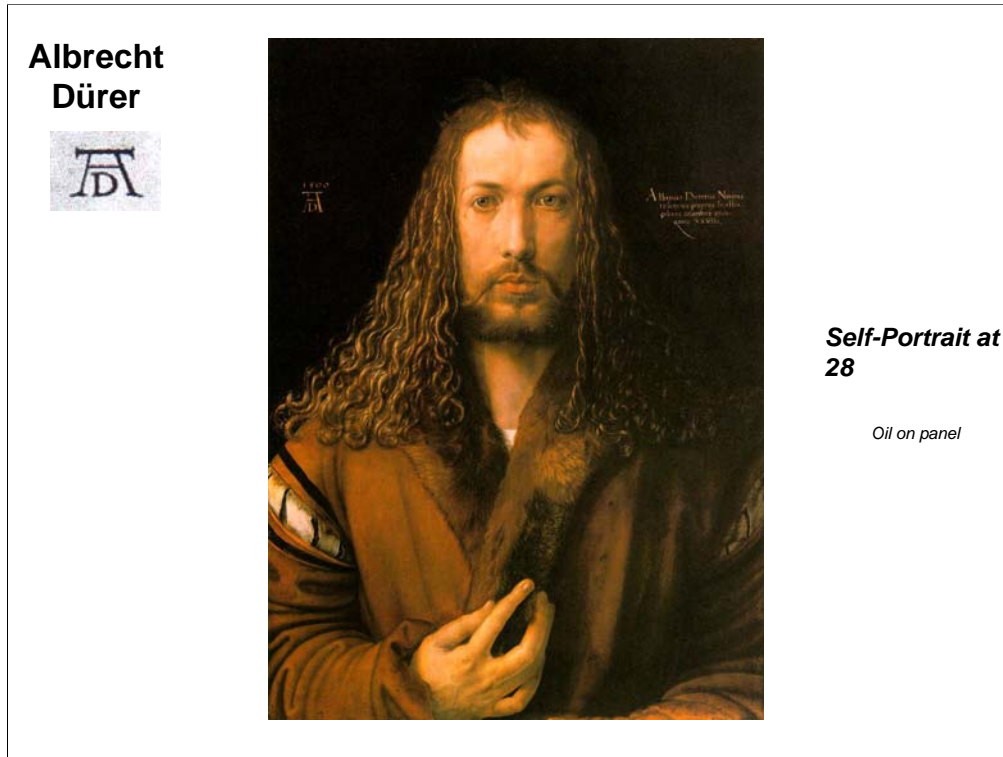
This option of double-dunking allowed different versions of an etching to be made with slightly different images.



Engraving

Engraving, like etching, used a metal plate to create images. Instead of using acid, however, it simply used sharp instruments which artists used to scratch or engrave lines into the surface of the metal plate. The artist could control the depth of the lines and their frequency, allowing a variety of textures and details to be created.

The image was then rolled with ink, wiped with a cloth and pressed. The lines in the metal retained the ink and created the image.



Albrecht Durer was one of the greatest artists of the Northern Renaissance during the time of the reformation. His father was a goldsmith, and Durer trained under him. But never really got interested in 3 dimensional art. He preferred working in every form of 2-D art. He was interested in art theory and studied abroad, traveling to Italy to study the works of the great Renaissance artists. Coming home, however, he painted a vast array of works of art ranging from maps, to woodcuts and engravings, to wildlife paintings, to self-portraits. His early training did pay off, however, in his facility with engraving tools.

**\$ via prints

Durer's work reflects the Northern way of doing things in so many ways.

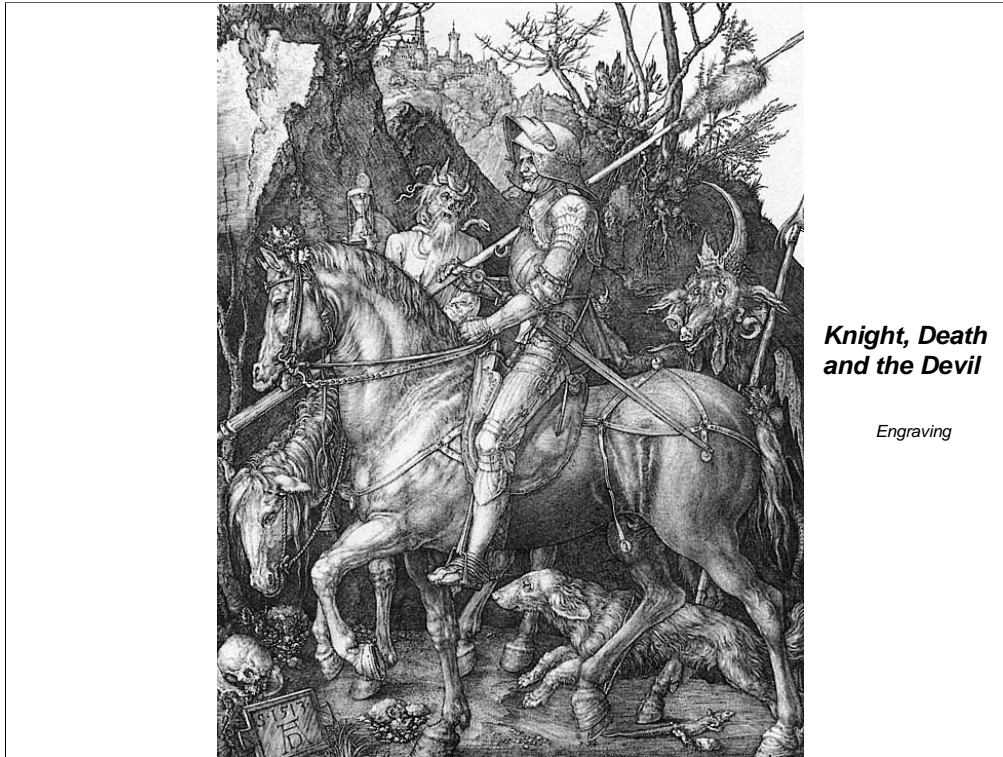
- Precise naturalism – the Northern focus on practicality and Aristotelian science allowed Durer to study the natural world freely and to be free from the requirements to include religious elements in every work
- Individuality – Durer's creation of a series of self-portraits emphasizes the newfound sense of self-importance. Furthermore, Durer makes an unabashed analogy between himself and Christ in his portrait, suggesting that he too is a divine creator of sorts.

(348, 349)



**Four Horsemen
of the
Apocalypse**

Woodcut



Durer produced hundreds of woodcuts, engravings and etchings throughout his life, but his image of the **Knight, Death, and the Devil** expresses some of his most brilliant technical work and reveals some of his religious ideas and theories. The entire engraving is an elaborate allegory.

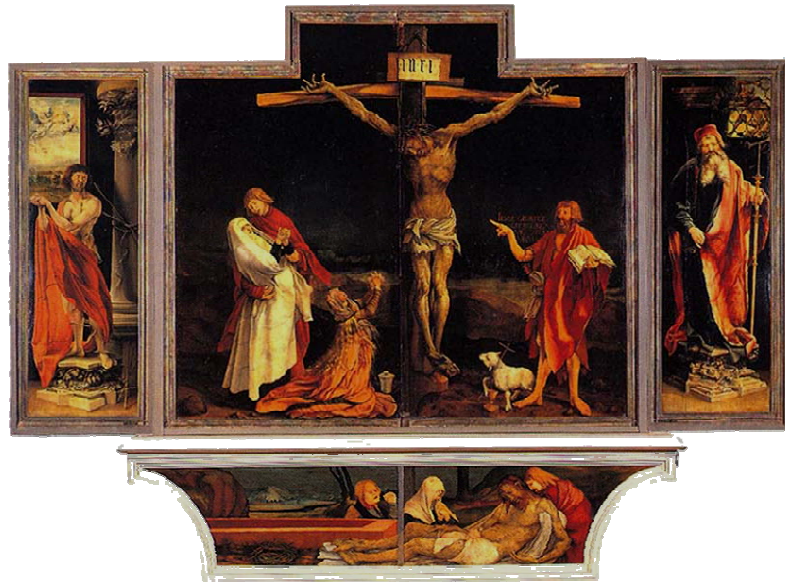
- Mounted knight = Christian soul on its way to the citadel of Virtue
- Retriever – reason in faithful pursuit of truth
- Death – symbolized by the hideous corpse – memento mori (hourglass, skull before the horse)
- The Devil – carries an axe/scythe, hideous medieval-referenced grotesque

The knight does not look to the side, but stays fixed on his quest. The devil smiles ingratiatingly as if sure he can trap him sooner or later.

The entire engraving is incredibly detailed, creating carefully crafted areas of light and dark. Durer also manages to capture a sense of movement, life, and motion, while presenting Northern complexity of detail and a 3-dimensional construction reminiscent of DaVinci.

(350)

GRUNEWALD



Matthias Grunewald was a rather quirky artist who, while not having the training of Durer or some of his Northern contemporaries had an excellent grasp of color and emotion. Grunewald worked for the Catholic church in his younger days, not only as an artist, but also as an architect, engineer, and supervisor of works. Later, he was involved in a peasant revolt and had to flee to Northern Germany where he continued his work as an artist.

Grunewald was an individualistic and talented painter obsessed with color. He is best known for his altarpiece placed in the monastic hospital order of St. Anthony of Isenheim.

An altarpiece, of course, goes over the altar of the church. Usually, it sits directly above the cabinet in which the eucharist is placed. The altarpiece is frequently in triptych (3-part) form and the central panel swings open to reveal an inner area or cabinet.

Grunewald's Isenheim altarpiece starts, on its exterior, with a dramatic portrayal of Christ's crucifixion, flanked by 2 saints:

St. Sebastian on Right - ward off disease

St. Anthony, patron saint of the order, associated with miraculous cure

Isenheim Altarpiece



The altarpiece's central panel shows the crucifixion --

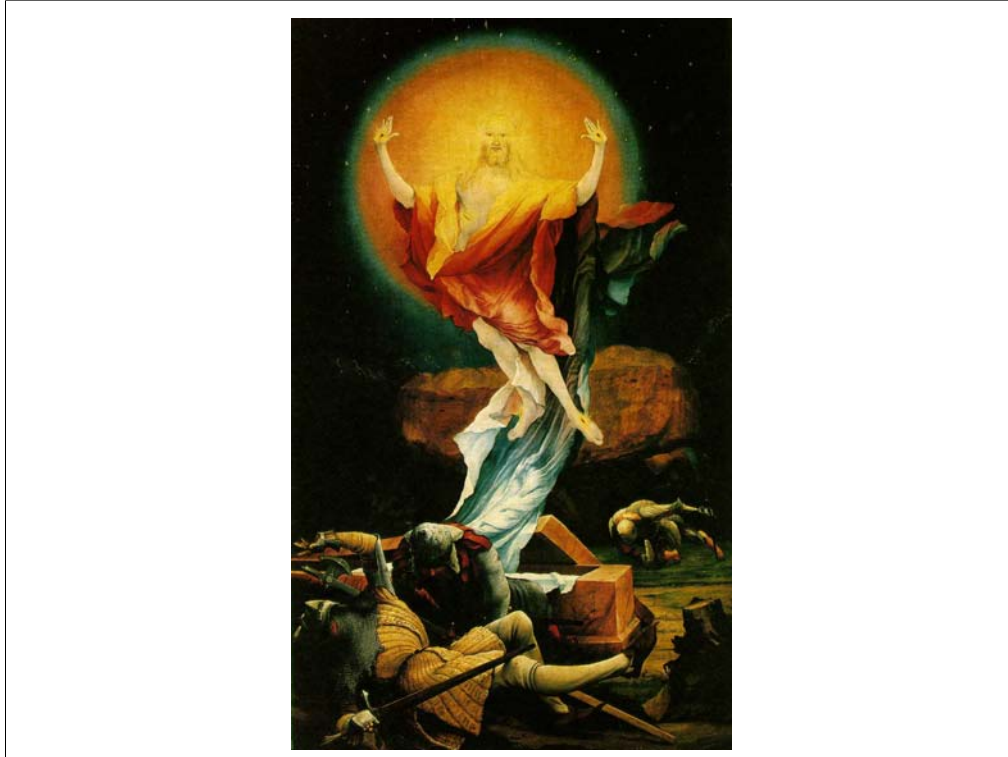
On the left a swooning Mary and St. John echo the angle of Jesus' arm

Mary Magdalene weeps at the foot of the cross, her arms and pose exaggerated to show emotion.

At the right John the Baptist is pointing at the cross (line from finger to head echoes the arm of Christ) with the symbolic sacrificial lamb at his feet.

The river Jordan behind John represents baptism and current recommendation of water cures for disease and the maroon sky suggests blood of eucharist

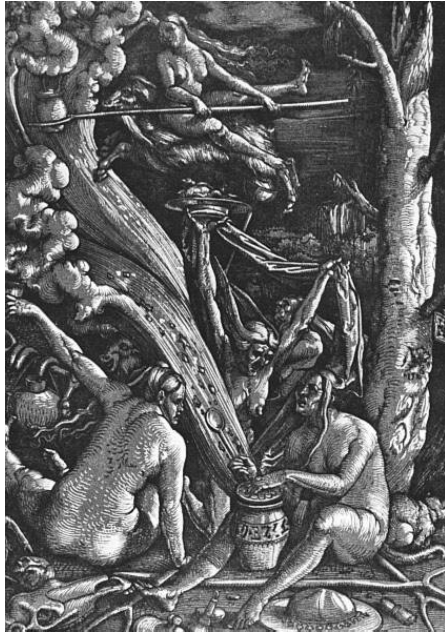
One of the main diseases treated by the hospital was Ergotism, caused by a fungus called Ergot which grows on Rye. The disease caused convulsions and gangrene, and the gangrene frequently required amputation. The portrayal of the crucifixion is all about emotion –presenting pain. The painting is laid out in such a way that when opened Jesus' arm or legs are severed. The skin of the Christ is covered in fungal disease, to allow the afflicted to feel Jesus' knew their suffering and remind them of His great sacrifice. The painting is all about pain and contortion, something the hospital staff and patients would understand.



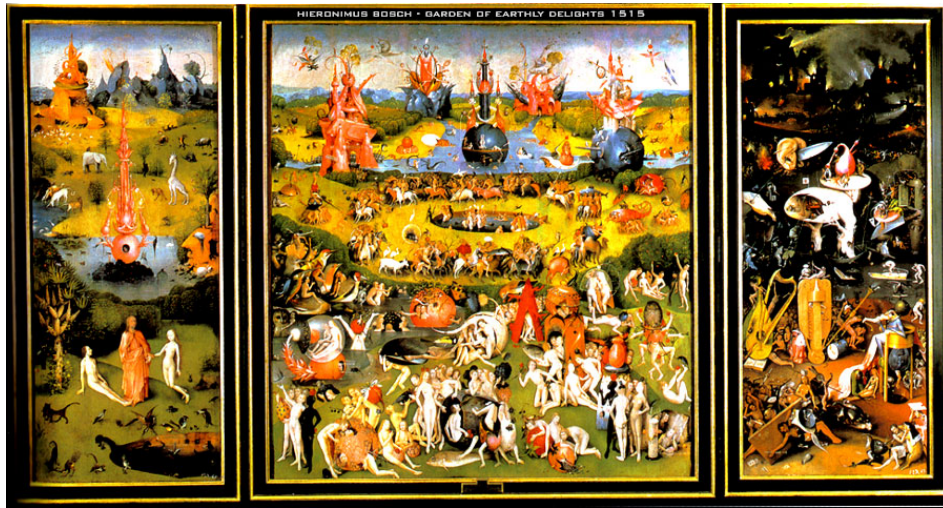
The interior of the altarpiece is a totally different story. Again there are 3 panels, one showing the annunciation, one showing Mary caring for Jesus in the way a nurse cared for patients, and the final panel shows the resurrection. From the tortured crucifixion filled with reds, blacks, and greens, the resurrection is filled with blues and golds.

Unlike southern renaissance portrayals of the resurrection, Jesus is not a massive, stately greek statue beside a sarcophagus. Instead he is caught in a moment of violent action and is surrounded and filled by light so bright that it merges the shape of his body with the light behind it.

History tells us almost nothing about Grunewald, but his sense of context and of drama set him apart and make him one of the great figures of the northern renaissance & reformation.



BOSCH



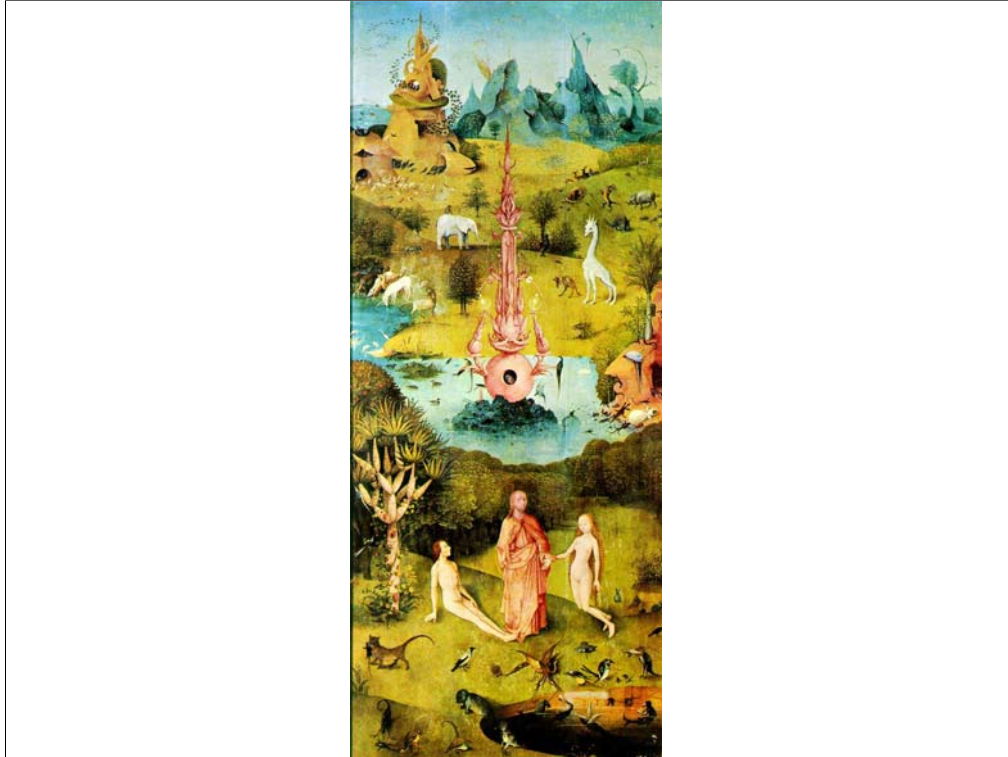
GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

And then there's Hieronymus Bosch. Um...yeah. Bosch was from the Netherlands and spent his life at home in a small, unremarkable town. History records very little about him – we don't know who trained him or anything about his family history. We do know that he worked for the church and that the body of his work seems to center upon the darker side of human nature, examining temptation, sin, and damnation. We also know that he was a rapid, spontaneous painter who seemed to use little preparatory work or sketching before setting out to paint.

And we know that he had a very, very, very active imagination.

The best known of Bosch's work is The Garden of Earthly Delights, a triptych displaying man's gradual descent from paradise to hell.

The painting has had many interpretations. It certainly doesn't look like anything else painted in Bosch's time...or, indeed, until the modern era. We can gather general interpretations, but opinions are many. A few things we do know, however. Bosch was born in the year the great European witch hunts began and he uses symbols of witchcraft and corruption throughout. There are symbols of alchemy as well. And, of course, sex and music are evil in Bosch's world.



The work starts on the lefthand panel with the Creation of Eve. This narrow panel is the simplest, clearest image of the three. In it, God, clothed and peaceful, stands between the seated, surprised-looking Adam and the newly-created sensual Eve.

The three stand in front of the phallic fountain of life, also shaped like an alchemical beaker.

- Ravens – non-believers and magicians
- Owl
- Garden is non-biblical – death and corruption already present
- Implication – original sin is sexual sin – blamed on woman

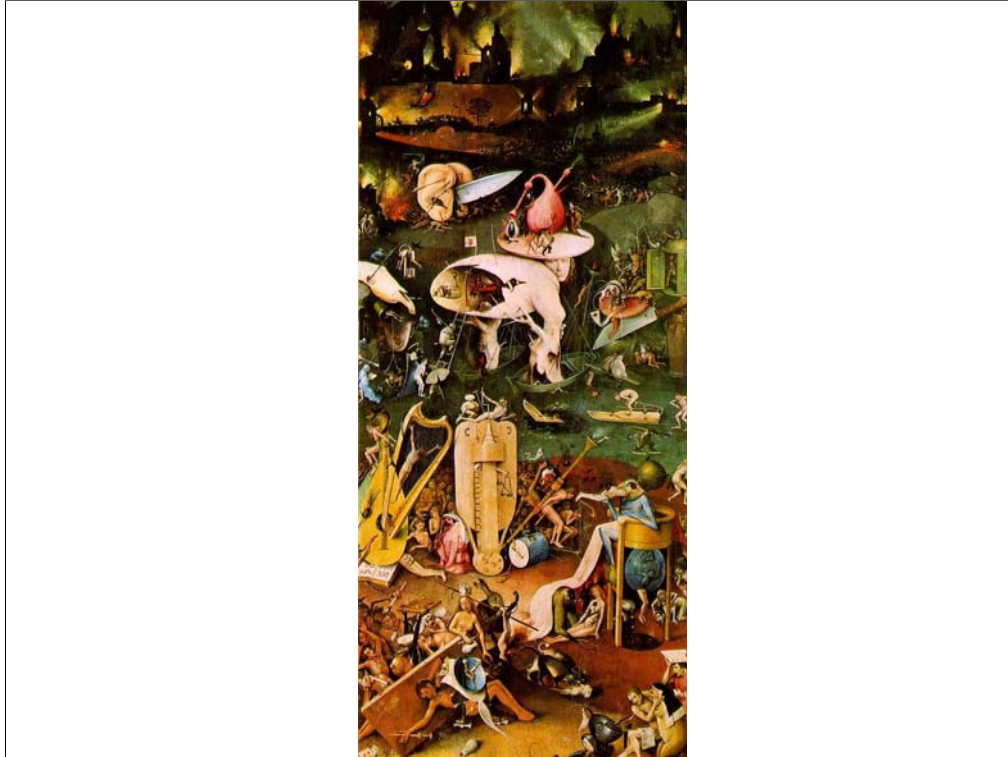


The central panel, the piece actually titled the Garden of Earthly delights shows a world of sin and corruption. The shape of the Fountain of Life still appears in the background, but it is overwhelmed by an array of human figures acting out every imaginable perversion.

Again, the interpretations are all over the place, but essentially, scholars agree – In this panel, Bosch is focusing on the ultimate evil of mankind – sex – and the relation of that evil to the wickedness of witchcraft and alchemy.

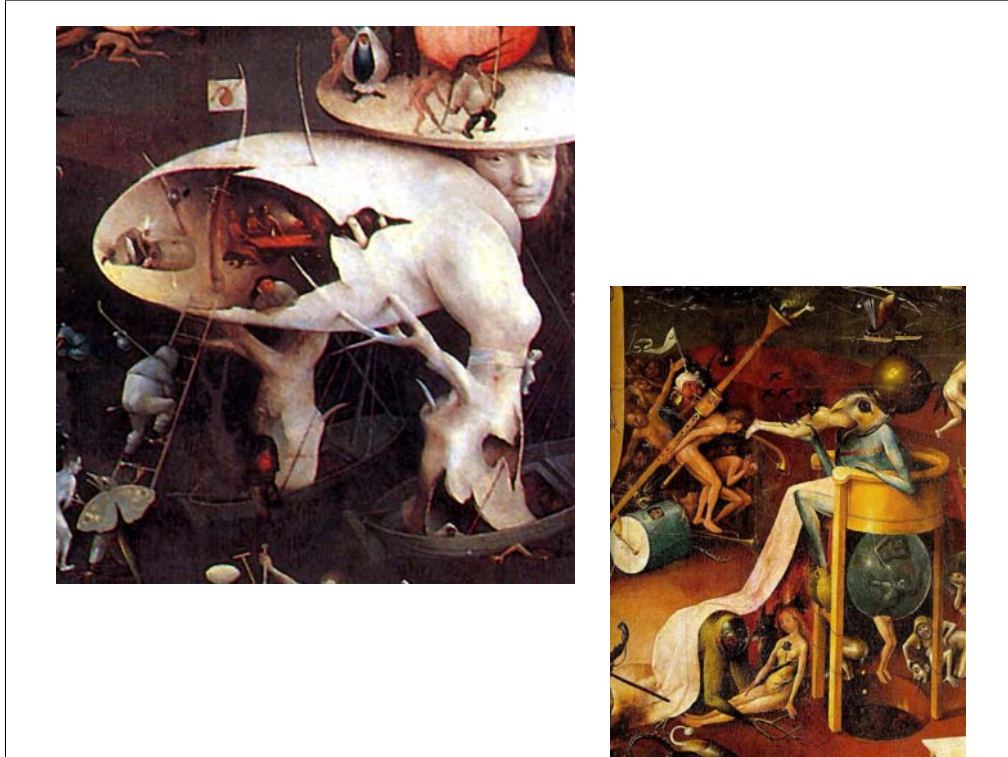


Again, the panel is filled with sexual perversions as well as bizarre symbols of witchcraft. Owls appear in numerous places throughout the painting. Rounded and pointed shapes which may be interpreted as alchemical mixing equipment (as well as sexual symbols) are also visible everywhere in the painting.



The third panel of the Triptych, Hell, shows the results of the central panel.

The painting shows a bizarre and disturbing variety of punishments awaiting those who fall into sin. Illustrating the belief that secular music could be intended to lead people into sexual sin, Bosch uses the ears to make his point and utilizes musical instruments as torture devices.



Again Bosch uses the shapes of alchemy tools and turns the sexual pleasures of his earlier panel into sexual horrors.

Regardless of the detailed interpretation of Bosch's work, the message comes through loud and clear – man's great sin is sexuality and sensory pleasure. Indulge in those things and you are damned. The message is not uncommon, but the way Bosch presents it is. Not until the surrealist movement of the Twentieth century did anyone else mix such a variety of nightmare images, rendered with great detail into a dreamlike array of horrors and perversions.



Peter Bruegel came from a family of painters. His sons carried on his tradition, resulting in Peter changing his “public” name to Peter Bruegel the Elder. Bruegel was a Belgian artist who told stories through his paintings. Like Bosch, Bruegel made very detailed paintings filled with individual actions and vignettes.

One of his two best known pieces is known as “The Triumph of Death.” The canvas, shifting from dark to light as the viewer’s eyes “read” from left to right, portrays the assault of the forces of death, taking all humanity. In the painting, all people are treated equally from kings to peasants.



Bruegel's painting is organized in a series of vignettes or "mini-stories" that all share similar moral lessons. Expressing the truth that all men die, Bruegel has stepped one notch up into the horror movie tradition, and actually brought the dead back to actively recruit for their forces.

Ironically, as in most zombie movies, most of the people under assault are too busy hiding or stealing to band together and help one another. Death and its forces appear to be triumphant...and the fault lies at least in part with the selfishness and sinfulness of man.



Bruegel also did some less violent works, most notably the Peasant Wedding Feast.

Portraying a simple event in Belgian peasant life, the wedding feast exemplifies the differences between Northern and Southern European art. The Peasant Wedding Feast is a scene without strong religious impact or recognizable religious figures. The people are simple and “unimportant,” yet they are each given an individual personality and sense of emotion.

Bruegel’s rendering of the importance of every day life and the simple purity of peasant life gives a glimpse into the values that made the reformation work. People had begun to stop simply envying the people at the top of the heap and had decided to glorify the simple things and do their best to live their own lives.



Brueghel rejected the influences of Italian Renaissance art and its classical foundations.

Rather than depicting mythological subjects and idealized scenes, Brueghel's art portrays natural figures acting out realistic situations in contemporary settings.

Born Pieter Brueghel in the town of *Breda*, located in northern *Brabant* in present-day *Holland*, he later dropped the "h" from his name. He had two sons, Pieter the Younger and Jan, both of whom became well-known painters and retained the "h" in their names.

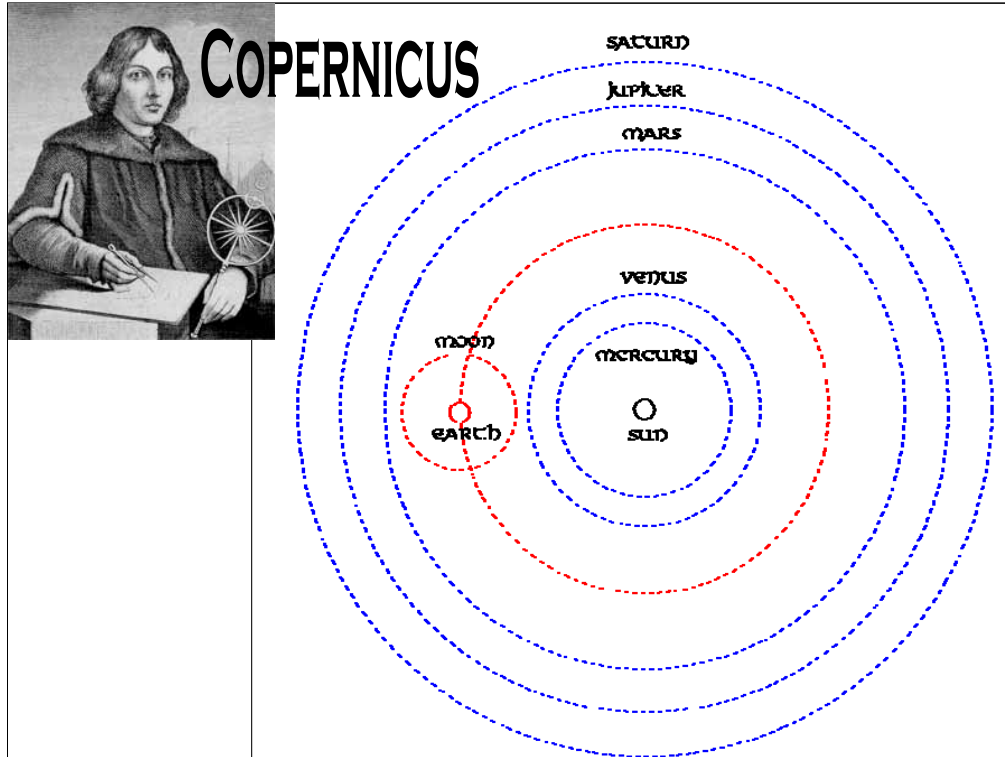


MONTAIGNE

Not only did the renaissance and reformation change art, it also impacted literature and science.

From this time period, we get the bane of the student's existence – the essay. In Northern France, Montaigne, a scholar, began to write short works in an attempt to study mankind – to 'assay' his nature and habits in an attempt to reflect on and understand the nature of man.

Montaigne's short, well-organized reflections on individual incidents and aspects of human nature evolved into the essay form. Like modern essays, his works were all founded around a theme or proposition, and then clearly proven, discussed, or explained.

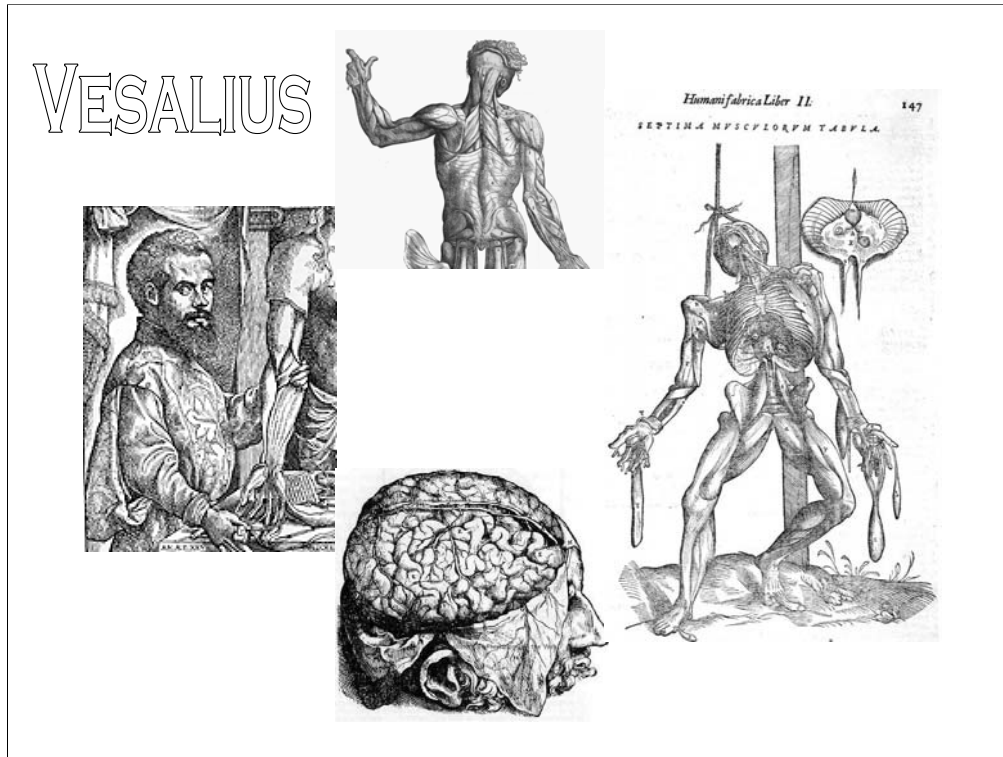


The new spirit of the Reformation, with its focus on individualism and its refusal to accept the Church as the only one who could explain God's will opened the door to an amazing revolution. For the first time, science was not limited by the permissions of the church.

Nicholas Copernicus of Poland was a prime example of that idea. Studying astronomy from a tower in his uncle's home and observing the skies – without the aid of any mechanical equipment – Copernicus came up with a new theory. In his work *De Revolutionibus*, Copernicus asserted that the earth rotated on its axis once daily and traveled around the sun once yearly.

There is no way to explain to the modern mind what an utter shakeup this was. For thousands of years, the western world had believed that the Earth was static at the center of the universe. Medieval and Renaissance Christianity supported this idea. Man was the pinnacle, the ultimate top of God's creation. He **had** to be at the center of the universe.

Copernicus proposed a new view – one that took the earth around the sun and the moon around the earth. He presented a heliocentric view.



Andreas Vesalius of Belgium came from a family of physicians, and he carried on the family legacy with a vengeance! During the medieval period and much of the renaissance, physicians believed that the body was controlled by 4 substances or “humors” which were tied to emotion and to the elements (this had lots to do with astrology, but we won’t go there because of time). It was because of this that physicians did things like bleed people, put leeches on ‘em and dump them in icy cold water.

Because of the teachings of the Catholic church, physicians were not allowed to do autopsies on people. Instead they used apes from northern Africa and Asia.

Vesalius introduced a wacky idea – that anatomy should be studied by doctors before performing surgery. To that end, Vesalius wrote a number of pamphlets demonstrating his ideas and showing a real knowledge of things like blood flow that most other doctors up to this time had not even considered.

Vesalius managed to get the permission of a judge to dissect the bodies of executed criminals, and the first anatomist was born. Vesalius was the first man to publish an anatomy textbook complete with detailed woodcuts illustrating the internal structure of the body.

- Different than apes
- Understood circulation, skeletal function & musculature



FRANCIS BACON

Francis Bacon was a British philosopher, spy, statesman, and writer. Born to an official of the queen's court, Bacon spent his life in and out of debt and trouble. He was an incredibly intelligent man who was also an excellent politician. His greatest contribution to history was his philosophy which laid the grounds for the modern scientific method and began the dissolution of an inclusive system of knowledge.

Bacon wrote several books of essays expounding his beliefs and theories. In them, he stresses that the philosopher is a scientist. He is dealing with a quest for Truth based upon rationality.

- Get rid of "Idols" or preconceptions – race, individual, language, authority
- Be able to prove logical connections or steps
- Did not believe that religion and philosophy or science could co-exist because one was based on revelation and the other strictly on logic. Refuted that all things fit together under one grand scheme.
- Laid the basis for the scientific method (repeatable or not provable) – "by successive steps not interrupted or broken "



HENRY VIII

Now, we've landed in England, which requires a short detour to explain. England isn't connected with the rest of Europe geographically, and it's very different in other ways as well.

Henry VIII, who most people either know from an odd 70s song or because he had so many wives, actually presented a huge turning point in British history.

Henry VIII wasn't too wild about being king when he first came to the throne, but he gradually warmed to the position and began to take it seriously. Doing his duty to provide an heir to the throne (primogeniture), he married Catherine of Aragon, princess of Spain. And then they had a little problem. Catherine provided him with a daughter, Mary...and nothing else. Henry was not a happy camper. He needed a boy to carry on the royal line, and Catherine was not putting out. So Henry wanted a divorce. He requested one from the Pope, BUT Catherine's daddy was the king of Spain, a good buddy of the Pope's. No divorce for Henry. Henry huffed and he puffed...and he seceded from the Catholic church, making the Bishop of Canterbury head churchman in England and making himself head of the church. And he annulled the marriage to Catherine and sent her packing.

After Catherine, there were 5 more wives, and another daughter, until, finally, Henry got a boy, Edward, to carry on the throne. Henry died...and then Edward came down with Tuberculosis, and promptly died. Leaving a mess in the succession department.



MARY TUDOR

After Edward's death, Mary, the daughter of Henry's first wife came back to the throne. Now, Mary had been raised in the Catholic tradition, and, well, according to the Catholic church, she was the only legitimate child anyway (since the pope never had approved the divorce).

She returned to England, the England her father had broken away from the Catholic church and made (pseudo) Protestant. And she decided to make them Catholic again. This did NOT go over well. Many of the English protested, resisted, and kept being protestant. Mary had over 350 of these folks executed publicly in an attempt to get these folks back in line. And she had her little sister Elizabeth put in jail to try to prevent anyone from attempting to make her queen. For her actions, Mary went down in history as Bloody Mary, the evil oppressive queen.

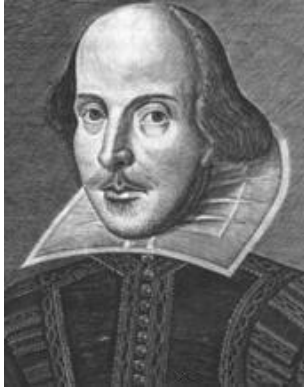
Mary died fairly young, modern scholars believe of an ovarian or cervical tumor. And with her death, her younger sister, now out of prison, stepped up to be queen.



ELIZABETH I

Elizabeth, the legitimate heir according to the Church of England turned out to be an incredibly capable ruler. She never married – if she had, she would have had to relinquish a good bit of power – but she managed to play suitors off one another for more than 40 years.

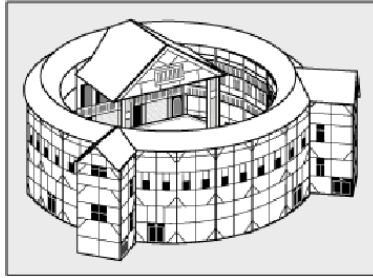
Elizabeth's reign became known as Elizabethan England, and under the power of "The Virgin Queen" England expanded its overseas empire, became an international power, and spawned one of the most famous writers in history.



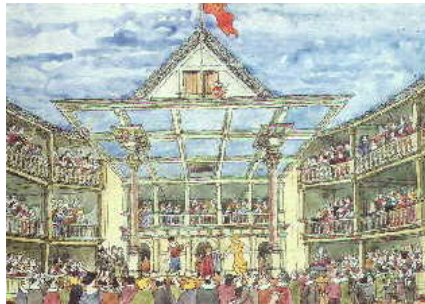
SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was the son of a glove maker in a small town, yet history credits him with authoring 37 of the most famous plays in English.

We know little about Shakespeare's life – he married a woman older than he only a few months before their first child was born. He didn't stay around her long, but headed off to London. While there, he ran a theatre and worked as an actor. He was credited with some of the greatest plays written and performed, and earned the favor of the queen herself.



GLOBE



Shakespeare's theatre was known as the Globe. A round building more reminiscent of the Coliseum than a modern theatre, the Globe required a lot more of a playwright than a modern theatre. Raised seating on the sides of the building was reserved for those with a bit more money to pay for seats. The main, circular floor, onto which the stage projected, was only a penny for entrance. The people who stood there, called "groundlings" were able to see the shows cheaply, but they couldn't sit down. The plays presented had to have pretty poetry and plot for the folks paying for the good seats, but they also had to have dirty jokes and good comedy for the folks on the ground.

Shakespeare's plays have remained popular partially because he mastered both sides of the equation. Shakespeare's plays remain important because they are beautiful, sad, and funny. They talk about what it means to be human, to fall in love, to lose someone you care about, and to make an ass of yourself.