

Luther and the art of the Reformation

Atlanta, New York and Minneapolis

by ARMIN KUNZ

THIS YEAR MARKS the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. On 31st October 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther attached his ninety-five theses to the doors of the Schlosskirche in Wittenberg. In these he analysed and queried, in moderate terms, the principle and practice of the sale of indulgences by the Roman church with the promise of remission of sins. Luther intended to start a scholarly debate on the fact that such indulgences were nowhere sanctioned in the Bible. However, none of the theologians to whom he sent copies of his theses seemed much interested. It was only after a German-language summary was published in March 1518 that Luther's views were brought to the attention of the very people who actually bought indulgences, and the explosive implications of the theses became evident. The public debate that Luther originally had in mind never took place. Instead, his new theology ultimately led to a fundamental and irreversible split within the Church itself.

The build-up for this major anniversary was already inaugurated in Germany in 2008 by the so-called 'Luther decade' (which makes one wonder how all the anniversaries of events following the year 1517 will be marketed). The intention was to encourage tourism to locations associated with Luther, an aim also reflected in the catalogues for the shows under review, both of which include extensive sections on the history of the lending institutions and serve as pocket guides for trips to the Reformation's homeland. An ambitious promotional project for the region was spearheaded by the State Office for Heritage Management and Archaeology Saxony-Anhalt in Halle; this was a series of exhibitions encompassing art, history and culture under the umbrella title *Here I stand: Luther exhibitions USA 2016* and comprising three separate shows in Minneapolis, New York and Atlanta. A 504-page publication served as catalogue for all three venues, supplemented by an equally hefty volume of essays.¹

The exhibition *Law and Grace: Martin Luther, Lucas Cranach, and the Promise of Salvation* at the **Pitts Theology Library at Emory University, Atlanta** (closed 16th January), was the smallest but also the most focused of the three. Its theme was the new iconography of Law and Grace developed during the Reformation, the formula that gave visual form to the essence of Luther's theology: the idea that belief in the grace of God alone can lead to redemption. While this imagery probably originated in progressive but non-Reformational circles outside German lands, it was the collaboration between Luther and the highly productive workshop of the Saxon court artist Lucas Cranach the Elder that led to its wide-

spread dissemination and to its entry even into the decorative schemes of domestic interiors of the period. This was illustrated in the exhibition by objects as quotidian as the green-glazed tiles from a stove and a wall fountain, the latter coming from Luther's house in Wittenberg's Collegienstrasse (cat. nos.188 and 236). The Pitts Library's rich Kessler Reformation collection, one of the most comprehensive holdings of Reformation imprints and manuscripts in the world, provided the perfect context for the loans from Germany, the centrepiece of which was a later version of a Law and Grace painting executed by the younger Cranach around 1550 (no.186).

Wider-ranging was the exhibition *Word and Image: Martin Luther's Reformation* at the **Morgan Library & Museum, New York** (closed 22nd January). Although confined to one of the large exhibition rooms in the Morgan's old annex building, it nevertheless included more than ninety objects, nearly forty of them paintings, arranged in seven sections. The well-displayed art works, books and documents illustrated many of the essential aspects of Reformation history. The dispute over indulgences that sparked the movement was represented by one of the six existing printed copies of the ninety-five theses (no.145), while Luther's conflict with Church and state was illustrated by his autograph for the beginning of a speech to be held at the second hearing before the Diet of Worms on the 17th or 18th of April 1521 as well as by his letter to the Emperor Charles V, written ten days later but never sent, in which he states that he 'can in no way recant without being better instructed' (nos.170 and 174). Luther's translation of the Bible into German was displayed in a variety of editions, and one of the manuscript drafts for his translation of the Old Testament gave a fascinating insight into his writing practice (no.211). The most dazzling among the many spectacular loans were Conrad Meit's ravishing boxwood sculptures of *Adam and Eve* (nos.75 and 76; Fig.82), displayed in their own octagonal cabinet in front of Cranach's painting of *Adam and Eve in Paradise* from Magdeburg (1532; no.74).

The central and most comprehensive part of this tripartite exhibition was *Martin Luther: Art and the Reformation*, shown at **Minneapolis Institute of Art** (closed 15th January). It featured an exhilarating mix of objects from the most mundane to the most precious, from a small brass strap buckle dating from Luther's time and found in his house (no.268) to the six-metre-high pulpit from which Luther gave his last sermon on 15th February 1546 (no.371; Fig.81). Among the extraordinary archaeological finds on view here were the remains of an alchemist's workshop found in Wittenberg in 2012 (nos.139–41) and objects from the 'Luther pit' – the garbage pit of Luther's parents' house in Mansfeld, excavated in 2003 (no.2 is the first of many). Another intriguing discovery was the large number of sixteenth-century lead printing types unearthed from two Wittenberg sites, one group in a former latrine in the town centre (nos.292 and 365) and the other (which even included type for

musical notation) from the former Franciscan convent there (no.302; exh. New York). The sheer quantity of archaeological finds in the exhibition explained why one of its chief organisers was the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle rather than one of the area's art museums. There was, nevertheless, no shortage of 'high art' on show. The traditional piety and devotional routines that Luther challenged were represented by, among other works, the central shrine of the Kämmeritz altar from Halle (no.80) and a reliquary for an arm from the cathedral of Halberstadt (no.87). The pilgrim's robe of the Emperor Maximilian (no.104) and the boot that the Elector John Frederick, one of the leaders of the Schmalkaldic League, lost when the Protestant princes were defeated by the Emperor Charles V's imperial troops at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547 (no.359), might both be described as 'secular reliquaries', employed to bring history alive.

The highpoint of the Minneapolis show, however, was the monumental Gotha altar, created by Heinrich Füllmaurer and his workshop in southern Germany in 1539–41 (no.217). This polyptych is the most extensive surviving image cycle of the period. It consists of a fixed central panel and fourteen hinged wings that allow for five different openings. The 157 individual panels give a highly detailed narrative of the life of Christ, who is the central focus of every scene. Each scene is surmounted by a framed cartouche with related



81. Pulpit in which Luther gave his last sermon. Central German workshop. 1518 (with later additions). Oak, limewood and pine, paper, iron, tempera or casein paint, partly gilded, height c.6 m. (Evangelische Kirchengemeinde St Andreas-Petri-Nicolai, Lutherstadt Eisleben; exh. Minneapolis Institute of Art).

passages from the New Testament in German. The imposing altarpiece therefore combines in an exemplary manner all aspects of Reformation art – Christcentric iconography, fidelity to the biblical text and accessibility to a lay constituency that did not necessarily read Latin. At the same time, the exquisite artistry of this work belies commonly held prejudices about the antipathy of the Reformation towards the visual arts.

That this period was by no means artistically barren is also the core thesis of *Renaissance and Reformation: German Art in the Age of Dürer and Cranach* at the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art** (to 26th March). The availability of so many exceptional and sometimes fragile works of art from Germany was evidence of the fact that both projects were initiated by the lenders. The driving forces behind the Los Angeles show were three of Germany's most prestigious art collections in Berlin, Dresden and Munich. Yet while the archaeologists in Halle succeeded in forming a partnership with the Minneapolis Institute of Art, an institution that embraced their ambitious concept and made a success of it (the galleries were nearly always crowded and the audience was in no way limited to Lutheran Minnesotans), the far more complex exhibition proposal of the three German heavyweights behind the Los Angeles exhibition did not, for whatever reason, ultimately find the prestigious venues they might have been hoping for, perhaps in Boston, New York or Washington DC. When it finally arrived in Los Angeles, the project seems to have been slimmed down to a show of objects that, despite the admirable efforts of the museum's curators, appeared somewhat overwhelmed in the Resnick Exhibition Pavilion, LACMA's most recent architectural addition, designed by Renzo Piano and opened in



82. *Adam and Eve* by Conrad Meit. c.1510. Boxwood, height 36 cm. (*Adam*) and 33.7 cm (*Eve*). (Schlossmuseum Friedenstein, Gotha; exh. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York).



83. Detail from *The siege of the city of Alesia*, by Melchior Feselen. 1533. Canvas laid on panel, 162 by 121 cm. (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich; exh. Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

2010. While flexible in its layout, its interior feels heavy handed and overbearing. Given the tactile sensitivity that Piano has repeatedly displayed elsewhere, this is surprising. The loans, however, are generous. Berlin sent drawings by Matthias Grünewald from the Plock Bible (cat. no.9), Dürer's wonderfully free pen-and-ink drawing of the *Arrest of Christ* (no.6), his quasi-photorealist portrait of the Nuremberg patrician Albrecht Muffel (no.99), two fine limewood sculptures by Tilman Riemenschneider (nos.7 and 10) and the highly experimental bronze *Virgin and Child* by Hans Leinberger (no.12). Dresden allowed Hans Holbein the Younger's *Double portrait of Thomas Godsalve and his son Sir John* (no.105) and Dürer's *Portrait of Bernhard von Reesen* (no.98), both of them on panel, to travel together with Cranach's fabulous watercolour of *Four dead partridges* (no.90), and Munich sent Dürer's panel painting of *The Virgin as mother of sorrow* (no.5). Inevitably, loans from the Dresden armory seemed to hold their own in the Pavilion's thick-walled interior, including a richly wrought gilt burgonet helmet with matching curass saddle, daggers, swords and pistols (nos.49–59). They were effectively set before the pair of portraits of the Elector Moritz of Saxony and Duke John Frederick the Magnanimous, both fine examples of the kind of quality Cranach the Younger's workshop was able to produce as late as 1578

(nos.48–49). Melchior Feselen's unbelievably detailed *Siege of the city of Alesia* (no.81; Fig.83), part of the cycle of history paintings commissioned by Duke William IV of Bavaria in 1533 that form the nucleus of Munich's painting collection, was well-suited to this military context. The reduced and oversimplified conceptual framework of the show was, however, ultimately disappointing. This is also reflected in the slim catalogue that features, in addition to a good introductory survey on 'German Art in the Sixteenth Century' by Jeffrey Chipps Smith, only the briefest of entries on the individual works.² One suspects that the organisers in Los Angeles underestimated the cultural interest of their audience and opted for a stripped-bare presentation that feels a bit like the preview for one of those now fashionable curated sale exhibitions at an art fair, gallery or auction house.

¹ Catalogue: *Martin Luther: Treasures of the Reformation*. 504 pp. incl. 488 col. ills. (Sandstein Verlag, Dresden, 2016), \$39. ISBN 978-3-95498-224-0. The accompanying volume of essays in English is produced under the same title by the same publisher, 1000 pp. incl. 759 b. & w. ills. €68, ISBN 978-3-95498-223-3. Although none of the shows had a German venue, catalogue and essay volumes are available in German editions.

² Catalogue: *Renaissance and Reformation: German Art in the Age of Dürer and Cranach*. 240 pp. incl. 190 col. ills. (Prestel Verlag, Munich, London and New York, 2016), \$49.95. ISBN 978-3-7913-5539-9.