

**FROM MEMLING TO HEYDEN:
A DEVELOPMENT OF HELL
ICONOGRAPHY**

The vehement nature in which Hell is studied throughout Art History suggests a personal and/or contextual relation to the subject matter. This, in turn, allows for the study of Hell's iconography as being a reflection of the historical context of the time in which different depictions were made. When observing various examples of Hell, one can ascertain different aspects of the motif. However, as is the practice of the study of Art History, one cannot separate different depictions from their historical context. The purpose of this essay is to examine the content of hell imagery and iconography in the Northern Renaissance, and assess how these reflect their respective historical moments. This study will be carried out through the examination of three works: Hans Memling's *Triptych with the Last Judgment* (1467-71), Lucas Cranach the Younger's *Luther Preaching with the Pope in the Jaws of Hell* (1550), and Pieter van der Heyden's *The Descent of Christ into Limbo* (1561).

Before we commence the study of Memling's work, it would be appropriate to lay out its historical foundation. The year is roughly 1470. The Hundred Year's War, a bloody dispute between the kingdoms of France and England, had ended about twenty years back. The resulting social and financial troubles of this war led to the War of the Roses between the houses for the throne of England. By 1471, this battle had ended with Edward IV and Richard III being exiled to Bruges. These wars served to set the stage of a conflictive Northern Europe, where dynastic disputes left the area in a state of economic, social, and political turmoil. Bruges, where Memling's work is attributed to be from, had been named a participant of the Four Members, a medieval parliament

that controlled most of Flanders¹. Roughly between the 12th and the 15th centuries, Bruges has undergone a Golden age, which saw to a rise in trade, the arts, and architecture. Bruges was a strategic place for commerce, which resulted in goods coming in from several parts of Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the East. This led to an influx of artisanal goods, such as cloths, which in turn influenced the arts. The reign of Phillip the Good in Flanders, whose court was set up in Bruges, saw to a rise in the arts, as it attracted a number of bankers and artists, particularly because the New Flemish school had mastered oil paintings and techniques². However, by 1500 trade and commerce in Bruges began to decline, leading to the economic downfall of the area. The golden age of Bruges had ended.

Hans Memling, although German-born, reached his artistic climax in Bruges at the end of its Golden age. His paintings have often been acclaimed to epitomize Flemish expression. However, his work can be attributed to embody previous Netherlandish expression as well as serve as a precursor for a falling society that was no longer a result of the rich Burgundian courts. His paintings are “the first reflections of the period of détente and denouncement at the end of a remarkable golden age.”³ Memling’s style is very much Gothic- as seen by the architecture, the treatment of the figure, the gestures, the seemingly “flat” use of volume and perspective, and the symmetrical composition. He has often been compared to Rogier van der Weyden, however, his interpretation of various subjects matters remain very much his own. In

¹ Ward, Laura, and Steeds, Will. *Demonios: Visión del Diablo en el Arte*. Mexico City:

² Snyder, James. *Northern Renaissance Art*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1985.

³ Lane, Barbara G. "The Patron and the Pirate: The Mystery of Memling's Gdansk Last Judgment." *The Art Bulletin*. no. 4 (1991): 625.

his *Triptych with the Last Judgment* (**Fig. 1**), which was commissioned by Angelo Tani, an agent of the Medici at Bruges⁴, the Archangel Michael weighs human souls to determine Christ's judgment on whether the souls would be saved or damned. What makes this image so striking is the overwhelming number of souls that have been condemned to Hell. In the right panel, which depicts Hell, the souls twist and turn in agony as they are being guided and tortured by a number of demonic figures that, to a certain extent, are human-like, insofar as their anatomical composition. The demons, however, seem to share this same agony, as their expressions can be as horrific as the souls they torture (see **Figs. 2-4**). Demons are usually depicted as evil in nature, and they take pleasure in torturing condemned souls, yet here they are very much the subject of eternal damnation as well. This depiction is, in a sense, contradictory to Dante's *Inferno*, as in this epic poem, "The perceptions of the evil spirits, significantly, are skewed by their sinful outlooks on reality."⁵ At this moment, the scales favor the blessed. However, this does not add a hopeful sentiment to the work as "it is more traditional for good to outweigh evil in the psychostasis... the position of the scales in Memling's Last Judgment does not necessarily indicate a change..."⁶ More striking is the serenity and calmness of Christ's expression, as if he has no regard for these tortured souls. The whole of the Hell scene does give off a horrific sense to the piece, as it is evident that the condemned souls prevail the saved ones, and no matter how much they retract and try to escape, they will not be redeemed. Dante masterfully

⁴ Lane, Barbara G. "The Patron and the Pirate: The Mystery of Memling's Gdansk Last Judgment." *The Art Bulletin*. no. 4 (1991): 630.

⁵ Cole, William. "Expanding Hell." *Collage Literature*. no. 3 (1993): 152.

⁶ Lane, Barbara G. "The Patron and the Pirate: The Mystery of Memling's Gdansk Last Judgment." *The Art Bulletin*. no. 4 (1991): 629

conveys this sentiment: "But tell me who thou art, put in a place of such misery and under such a penalty that, if any is greater, none is so loathsome"⁷

By 1500, the use of printmaking had revolutionized the media as information was able to be distributed throughout Europe. This advantage naturally led to an increase of propaganda being spread throughout the continent. Roughly twenty years after Martin Luther published his translation of the Old Testament, the Reformation was well under way in Northern Europe. Prints enabled Luther's message to reach the masses, thus spreading Lutheranism throughout. One master printer that worked with Luther to carry out his propaganda was Lucas Cranach the Elder. Together they sought to portray the Pope as the Anti-Christ through themes such as social morality, Scriptural stories, and individual salvation.⁸ The concept of *verkehrte Welt*, a perverted world, was also associated with the popery.⁹ In this world, deceit overrules; fools dominate the wise and spiritual leader are nothing but malefactors. Cranach's son, Lucas Cranach the Younger, portrayed this concept masterfully in his *Luther Preaching with the Pope in the Jaws of Hell* (**Fig. 5**). In this work, Luther is juxtaposed with the Pope. He is seated in an elevated pulpit- a place usually reserved for the Pope or Christ as divine jurors. He is preaching from an open Bible, suggesting that he is speaking the true Word of God.¹⁰ To his left, a swarm of clerics, led by the Pope are depicted as condemned souls rotting in Hellmouth. This serves to strengthen the idea of the Pope as the antichrist, which only serves to strengthen Lutheran propaganda.

⁷ Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. (New York: Oxford, 1939), 89.

⁸ Kibish, Christine Ozarowska. "Lucas Cranach's Christ Blessing the Children: A Problem of Lutheran Iconography ." *The Art Bulletin*. no. 3 (1995): 198

⁹ idem.

¹⁰ Snyder, James. *Northern Renaissance Art*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1985.

Thus Hell imagery in this piece is mainly focused on *who* is being condemned, whereas Memling's piece focuses on the overwhelming number of doomed souls. To the right of Luther, a mass of people-presumably a mix of aristocrats and common plebs- are receiving the Eucharist. This inclusion was probably meant to appeal to all groups within the social hierarchy. "Luther... influenced his contemporaries and particularly those in the circle of his immediate followers, to which Cranach belonged."¹¹

The second half of the 16th century saw to the increasing revival of explorations and sciences. The reformation had most of Northern Europe converting or already converted to Protestantism. The Thirty Years War, chiefly between the Protestants and the Catholics, had ended by 1648.¹² The war swept through Europe leaving famine and disease in its trails, significantly decreasing the population of the German states and Bohemia. This disparity was well portrayed by artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, who both depicted the realm on Earth as an other-worldly environment, where fantasy meets reality. Bruegel has commonly been considered as a descendant to Bosch, and although there is evidence of a Bosch-ian influence, Bruegel was very much an innovator as well. His work was so influential that there was an emergence of artists that followed his style, namely emerging in a school that came after Bruegel¹³. One such artist that arose during this time was Pieter van der Heyden. His work can be attributed as having surreal aspects- figures (both

¹¹ Kibish, Christine Ozarowska. "Lucas Cranach's Christ Blessing the Children: A Problem of Lutheran Iconography ." *The Art Bulletin*. no. 3 (1995): 200

¹² Ward, Laura, and Steeds, Will. *Demonios: Visión del Diablo en el Arte*. Mexico City: Carlton Books Limited, 2007

¹³ Davis, Howard McParlin. "Fantasy and Irony in Peter Bruegel's Prints ." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series*. no. 10 (1943): 293

human and fantastical) morph into other-worldly creatures, made-up worlds in which few elements from the human world can be ascertained, and differing iconographical motifs which leave much room for interpretation. In his *Descent of Christ into Limbo* (**Fig. 6**), Christ has descended into what appears to be a very strange Limbo, he is depicted inside a hovering protective bubble, surrounded by angels. He is facing a sort of gaping Hellmouth out of which a mass of condemned sinners sprawls out in an attempt to reach Christ. Here, Heyden has created a fantastical world in which creatures that seem to be composed of differing exotic animals are laid out in a grotesque yet almost ethereal manner. Although the focal point here is Christ himself, there is a greater emphasis on what surrounds Hellmouth. This interest speaks to the growing secularization of the arts towards the end of the 16th century. It is not unlikely that the creatures displayed here were influenced by the increasing interest in exotic fauna that prevailed during this time. Furthermore, there is a mechanical aspect to the work, which is probable result of the emerging attention to technological advances that would become so prominent in the century to come. The condemned souls have once again lost their identity, as all are portrayed naked and thus there is no hierarchical difference amongst them. They reach out to Christ in a futile attempt to redeem their souls, and “repenting, in Dante’s mind, means choosing salvation over sin.”¹⁴ This gives the work a sense of hopelessness as their attempts to be saved are overshadowed by the world that surrounds them, making the viewer more interested in where they are than in the souls themselves.

¹⁴ Cole, William. "Expanding Hell." *Collage Literature*. no. 3 (1993): 148-156.

Throughout the Northern Renaissance, the depiction of Hell undergoes an array of changes. There are no doubt resulting sentiments left by their respective historical contexts. Towards the end of the 15th century, artists such as Memling were painting with styles that resulted from juxtaposing the dying Gothic art-historical period with the emerging Netherlandish tradition. The globalization that arose with the expansion of commerce heavily influenced different pictorial aspects of Northern art. The first half of the 16th century brought forth new ideals and oppositions to the Church. Prints were being replicated by the thousands and were carried out throughout Europe, facilitating the spread of propaganda. Martin Luther's ideals were thus able to reach vast areas, helping the arise of the Reformation. This, in turn, allowed images of Hell to serve as tools for their anti-papal ideals. By the end of the century, the arts were subject to a secularization never seen before. This was partly due to the increasing interest for natural sciences and explorations. Additionally, the Counter-Reformation had failed to stop the convergence to the Protestant tradition, so religious propaganda became less prominent. That is not to say that the motif of Hell died, as it would continue to appear in the arts for centuries to come.

REFERENCED IMAGES



(Fig. 1) Hans Memling. *Triptych with the Last Judgment*. c. 1467-71. Panel. Gdaiisk, Muzeum Narodow. (image source: [library.artstor.org.library.scad.edu](http://library.artstor.org/library.scad.edu))



(Figs. 2-4) Details of *Triptych with the Last Judgment*, Hans Memling



(Fig. 5) Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Luther Preaching with the Pope in the Jaws of Hell*. 1550. Engraving. Dresden. (image source: <http://www.wga.hu>)



(Fig. 6) Pieter van der Heyden (after Pieter Bruegel the Elder), *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*. 1561. Engraving. (image source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/>)

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