

## Xavier John Seubert

### Francis of Assisi in the World of Cranach

In the sixteenth century the image of St. Francis of Assisi underwent a transformation, which was exemplified in the work of Lucas Cranach the Elder. Cranach was aware of the Observant Movement of the Franciscans, which had developed an evangelical way of life and was devoted to the preaching of the Gospel, especially to the poor. In these ways the Observant Movement would have resonated with some of the precepts of the early Reformation. Cranach captures this in his 1502 painting of St. Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata, in which Francis is depicted both as an Observant and in a peasant body-type. The peasants were considered by both the Observants and the early Reformation to be the natural beneficiaries of the preaching of the Gospel and this attitude is celebrated in the Cranach painting.

A certain reversal occurs in this painting. The image of Francis is quite sympathetic and is accessible to the viewer. He stands in contrast to the Crucified, enveloped by black, ruffled, seraph wings, which create a terrifying and uninviting aspect. The Christ is unapproachable and his presence can only be entered and endured through the experience and person of Francis. Francis was considered to be a true image of Christ. But here the prototype is inaccessible and the image performs what the source was originally intended to be – an entry into the presence of the Holy. It is this juxtaposition of source and image, which merited the attacks of Luther and other Reformers. However, it is precisely this reversal which is eventually apparent in images of Luther in relation to Christ.

After the defeat of the Schmalkaldic League in 1547, the Emperor Charles V attempted to restore Catholic practices which had been abolished in Protestant lands during the early Reformation. Although there had already been many reforms in the Catholic Church by this time, a woodcut caricature of Roman Catholic practices, influenced by the work of Cranach and featuring St. Francis, was produced c. 1550. The left side of the woodcut depicts Christ as the only mediator and the centrality of preaching done by Luther. Baptism and the eucharist are performed and all other rituals and practices have been excluded. The Father is seen in the upper left corner receiving the sacrifice of Christ. The Holy Spirit hovers above Luther in the pulpit as he preaches from the scriptures and points to the victorious Lamb and to Christ; Luther is John the Baptist *redivivus*.

On the right side of the woodcut the ritual abominations of Roman Catholicism are depicted. A friar preaches from a pulpit where no bible is present and a demon inflates his ear. Everything from masses to indulgences to blessings to spiritual privileges are being sold. A procession in the background fills out the scene; pilgrimages also were lucrative for the churches and monasteries in question. In the upper right corner of the scene, God the Father looks down in horror and rains fire and brimstone upon the gatherings. Next to him kneels St. Francis who shows his wounds to the Father, but the Father takes no heed of him. Christ is nowhere present and Francis' gesture is ineffectual. This is not the true order of salvation; this is playacting and human works, which are worth nothing.

A curious anomaly is that Francis' pleading is not effective, but he is, all the same, in heaven. Luther felt that the stigmata was self-induced, if it did indeed exist. At the same time he believed that saints, like Francis, were convinced of their unworthiness and were utterly dependant on their connection to Christ for salvation. It is this faith which saves them, and not any penances or actions they may have thought necessary for acceptance by God. It is this Lutheran understanding which explains the ambiguous image of Francis in an otherwise unambiguous scene.

Other images of Luther by the two Cranachs continue to emphasize him as a John the Baptist *redivivus*. This is certainly true of the predella of the Wittenberg altarpiece. But in a later woodcut done by Cranach the Younger. Luther stands in a pulpit in the center. He points approvingly to Christ crucified on his right and condemningly to a parade of Roman clergy being devoured by the mouth of hell. This is a Last

Judgment scene and Luther, not Christ, is the judge. We are back again to the early Cranach Francis, where prototype and image are reversed.