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SEEING IS BELIEVING

Valten Voith’s *Ein schön Lieblich Spiel von dem herlichen vsprung* (1538), Protestant “Law and Gospel” Panels, and German Reformation Dramaturgy

I. Introduction

Since the appearance of Robert Scribner’s *For the Sake of Simple Folk* in 1981, a growing body of research has demonstrated that German Protestants were not the iconophobes they were long believed to be. Indeed, reformers were keenly aware of both the propagandistic and didactic value of images and often actively collaborated with artisans in the creation of a new Protestant iconography to help spread the fledgling faith. Martin Luther, inspired by the Apocalypse woodcuts of Lucas Cranach the Elder for the September Testament of 1522, worked closely with Cranach and other artists in designing subsequent biblical illustrations and anti-papal images. In Zurich as well, Huldrych Zwingli and other

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theologians of the “Prophezey” collaborated with the printer Christoph Froschauer in creating the Zurich Bible of 1531, perhaps the most richly illustrated Bible of its time.⁴ Even Andreas Karlstadt, author of the Reformation’s first iconoclastic pamphlet, Von der Abtuhung der Bylder (1522), was image maker as well, joining with Cranach in 1519 to create the Fuhrwagen, the Reformation’s first broadsheet to unite word and woodcut in polemicizing against the papacy.⁵ For the Reformation’s arch-iconoclast himself, not all images were created equal.

As has become increasingly apparent, the Reformation distinction between acceptable and unacceptable images lay not in their content, but in their manner of representing that content for the viewer. Werner Hofmann was one of the first to note that images primarily troubled reformers because of their inherent ambiguity, rendering them unreliable as representations of divine truth.⁶ To counter this, Protestant art followed theology in returning to the Bible; the word of scripture not only determined a picture’s content, but also appeared directly in many works to ensure their interpretation in accordance with Protestant exegesis. Joseph Leo Koerner has recently examined how Reformation artists restricted the interpretive freedom of the Renaissance viewer not only through the coupling of image with text, but also by abandoning illusionistic portrayals in favor of “Merkbilder”, readily identifiable, schematic visual representations.⁷ Similarly, Kristin Zapalac has focused on Protestants’ eschewal of illusionistic images as transcendent conduits to a divine reality, tracing, for example, how Protestant painters distanced themselves from the technique of perspective and

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⁵ Peter-Klaus Schuster: ‘Fuhrwagen’ des Andreas Karlstadt. In: Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst, pp. 191-192, Nr. 65.
⁶ Werner Hofmann: Die Geburt der Moderne aus dem Geist der Religion. In: Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst, pp. 23-71, here pp. 31-35.