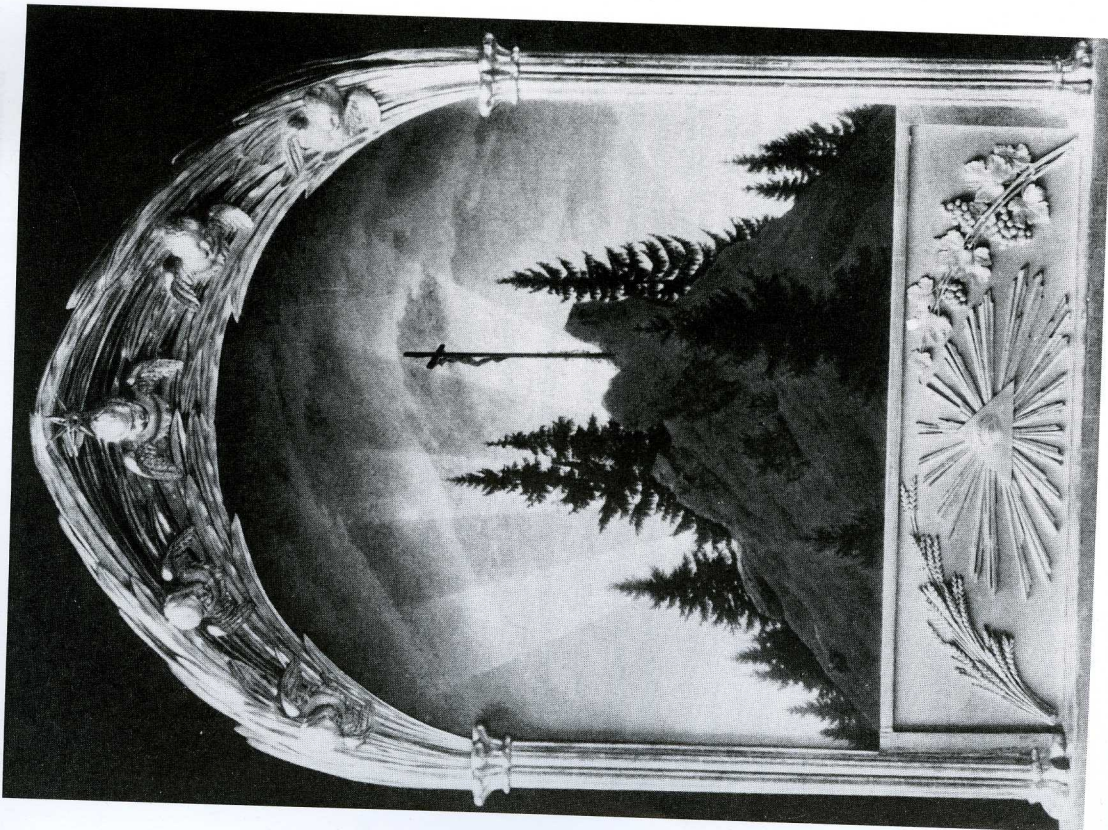


## Preface

This book was sparked by two coincidences, one planned, the other accidental. The planned one I produced using my profession's coincidence machine: dual slide projectors. On the left, at first on its own, was Caspar David Friedrich's *Cross in the Mountains*. I was hoping to communicate to an undergraduate audience this work's famous ambiguity: centred on a cross, and with its rounded top and allegorical frame, the work passes for an altarpiece, but the painting that the frame encloses is in fact an ordinary landscape view: the dramatic vista of a carved, gilt summit crucifix (illus. 1). I reported that the painter, a fervent Lutheran, agreed to sell the work thinking it would stand behind a Christian altar, but his noble client secretly hung it in her bedroom instead. I observed that the equivocation we were observing had perplexed Friedrich's first public who, in a flood of published criticism, debated the picture's hybrid status as sacred icon and secular work of art. And I suggested that this uncertainty reflected a distinctly modern condition: in the wake of the Reformation and Enlightenment, according to my lesson, the private experience of art and of nature replaces organized religion as site of spiritual transcendence. Friedrich's work hung properly in a bedroom since the artist had himself turned the ritual encounter with Christ at the altar into a subjective encounter with an image in the landscape. In the moment of lived experience that he painted, a twilight mountain prospect, together with that vernacular crucifix erected for wanderers to behold, revealed a glimmering divinity.

Having reached this 'end of religion', I switched on the right projector to introduce a comparative: again a crucifix, this one painted in an altarpiece in Wittenberg, in the church of Martin Luther's own ministry (illus. 128). By way of this mid-sixteenth-century painting by Lucas Cranach, I wished to show that already for early Protestants – who proclaimed a new subjective form of faith – Christ was a 'hidden' God. Cranach, I announced, had deliberately detached his crucifix from the scene of preaching in which it rises. This was neither the historical, flesh-and-blood Crucifixion nor a miraculous vision



1. Caspar David Friedrich, *The Cross in the Mountains*, 1807–8, oil on canvas. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden (Gemäldegalerie).



nor a crafted effigy of Christ on the cross. Markedly removed from the physical world, yet still also visibly *there*, this quintessential Lutheran image marked a first step toward the pure facticity of Friedrich's landscape view: where the Reformation located the sacred in a separate realm of inner faith, Romanticism made do with the residual void. The modern age dawned within the Protestant altarpiece at the place where, in Luther's own church, painting endeavoured to show divinity's detachment from the world.

This was at least the intended point of my comparison. But when I strode forward from my podium, stage right, to jab with my finger toward where Cranach indicated the crucifix's epochal remove, the second, accidental coincidence occurred. My students noticed it first and pointed to the spot. As I gestured towards the cross, my hand cast a shadow on the projection precisely where Luther, also speaking from the right, stretches his fingers towards Christ. Suddenly everything appeared alike. Preacher and teacher, pulpit and podium, sermon and lecture, parishioners and undergraduates, windowless choir and darkened auditorium: all seemed part of the same mechanism. And at the centre of both, as the intended target of everyone's attention still, stood something that – on the screen behind me and in Cranach's and Friedrich's paintings themselves – looked eerily projected rather than immediately at hand: the image in question, the icon of God.

This coincidence had a dual structure. It consisted of an *apparatus* and an *image*. The *apparatus* was the machinery of actors, actions and instruments using the image, and all these contained inside invisible surrounding walls. In the coincidence, that machinery had doubled, like a box inside a box. At first overlooked by us both in the artwork and in our world, and brought to light by the collapse of its pointing gestures, the apparatus united the scene of 'church' with the present-day routines of the school. The *image* within the apparatus, by contrast, did not double but remained resolutely singular. Luther and his flock, and now I and my students, all stood posed before this one stubborn portrait of the crucified Christ. True, the image's reference had changed. For Luther it stood for faith and religion, while for me it represented information and art. Yet the image itself, together with the apparatus of its use, remained eerily the same. It was to these likenesses that my finger unwittingly pointed.

This book attempts to account for this coincidence by attending to both its parts, the elusive image as well as the ineluctable apparatus. At first I studied the crucifix in isolation. After my 1990 monograph on Friedrich – focused largely on the *Cross in the Mountains* – I returned to my interrupted slide comparison.<sup>1</sup> Friedrich and Cranach, it seemed, addressed the same question: How visually to represent a hidden God? And both were shaped by attempts made just prior to them to do away with visual representation altogether. Friedrich's canvas responded locally to Napoleon's assault on

religion and sacred art and globally to the Enlightenment, in which, as Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote in 1799, 'everything mysterious and marvelous is proscribed and the imagination is not to be filled with empty images.'<sup>2</sup> The Wittenberg Altarpiece responded to Protestant image-breaking, which had its historical beginning in 1522 in the very church where Cranach's panel still stands. Both were post-iconoclastic icons. Both utilized the crucifix simultaneously to arrest and to repeat the hammer-blow that gave them space: Cranach's, by purifying the sacred of a world of facts; Friedrich's, by discerning vestiges of the sacred within that impoverished world.

Theirs were settlements that remain operative still today. Iconoclasm has become an expected cultural routine. Everything must be submitted to an ever more radical critique, including the critique itself in infinite regression. Yet although preceded and succeeded by iconoclasm, we generally feel ourselves not actively engaged in a scandalized, scandalous blow but stalled in image-breaking's interminable aftermath. Within this limbo nothing seems to change. This is not the same thing as lamenting that new idols inevitably replace the old. From the long history of iconoclasm, we learn that there never were, nor will there ever be, idols, since these are artefacts of the iconoclast's conviction, the imaginary Other of all critical campaigns. It is iconoclasm itself that never goes away, but haunts us as if forever newly with its fictive foe.

At first glance, the crucifixes of Cranach and Friedrich seem to be paradigmatic instruments of a disenchantment of the world – that 'great historical process' described by Max Weber, through which magic was eliminated from salvation.<sup>3</sup> Apparently disconnected from its depicted setting, Cranach's cross repudiates claims that a sacred personage is present in his effigy. His portrait of the iconoclastically cleansed church interior surrounding the cross divides the world neatly between beholding subjects and beheld objects. Even the tableau of a world-renouncing faith displays religion as it *in fact* is: a communicative action performed by a given social whole. Friedrich finalizes this argument. He turns the religious icon itself into a contingent social fact, whether as the vernacular summit cross he portrays or as Romantic work of art he himself creates. Yet each of these disenchantments also resurrects the image it disputes. Cranach's painting replaces both the Catholic retable that originally decorated the altar and the iconoclastic blank that gave the new painting space. And Friedrich quixotically turns the secular genre of landscape back into the sacred form of an altarpiece.

The Lutheran crucifix is both an icon and an iconoclasm. It does not simply restore, reactively, sacred pictures to a cleansed church. It maintains itself in a state of remove, asserting by visual means that what it shows is elsewhere and invisible. Yet at the same time as it dialectically cancels its



appearance, it also stubbornly stands *there*. I have learned to call this mix of having images and having done with images 'iconoclasm'.<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour coined this word for an experimental show we co-curated at the Centre for Art and Media at Karlsruhe. *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* attempted an archaeology of fanaticism, of a hatred based on the absolute distinction between truth and falsehood. Neither iconophile nor iconophobe, the exhibition sought at once to arouse and to suspend the passions underlying the image wars in the wild hope of thinking beyond them. My contribution consisted of three 'cells' which, woven into installations of contemporary art and science, recollected the pivotal modern moments of religious iconoclasm. In visualizing a 'Reformation of the image', I attempted to revise the view of image-breakers as heroic, if overzealous enemies of a genuinely superstitious, image-based religion promulgated by the Church. In most exhibitions devoted to iconoclasm, the pious use of pictures seems to hold as little mystery for the curators as it did for the iconoclasts: everyone seems to know idolatry when they see it. To give the so-called 'idol' a second chance and allow it to appear untainted by its later repudiation, I tried to reverse direction of the usual flow of exhibitions about Protestant image-breaking, not from superstition to disenchantment but from wherever we think ourselves to be back to the unseen, because always already repudiated, icon. For it was my contention that the Christian image was iconoclastic from the start. Pictures of a God who suffered and died, of the deity transformed into a monster through his abject, fleshly wounds: these were meant to train our eyes to see beyond the image, to cross it out without having to do something so undialectic as actually destroying it. Observed in this context, Cranach's crucifix was the Gothic Christ by other means. In it the latent iconoclasm in the icon was revealed.

The present book rests on the dual premise that images never go away and that they persist and function by being perpetually destroyed. A good example of this comes to us from the Baga people. The Baga, an ethnic group living on the coast of Guinea, were makers of elaborate forms of headdress, including the famous *nimba* that fascinated Picasso. The biggest of these was *kakilambe*, a five-foot long object used at rare initiation ceremonies. In 1956 the Baga youth, led by a Muslim preacher, Sheick Sayon, turned against their religious culture, destroying images, cutting down sacred groves, and beating specialists in ritual. By the 1960s the Baga were one of the most austere peoples in West Africa. But as recent fieldwork by Roman Sarró has demonstrated, *kakilambe* remains a powerful if invisible force in this culture.<sup>5</sup> When encouraged to dig beneath official discourse, Baga elders reported that the iconoclasts did no harm since the things they destroyed or removed were of course not the spiritual agencies behind them. 'Sayon could not do anything to us', they explained; 'he took away our objects but he could

not open up our bellies'. The belly is the locus of power in cultures where 'secrets' – and probably also the masks and headdresses themselves – are eaten. The elders claim not merely a comforting rationalization. By way of the sort of subtle parsing that allows a culture to survive through violent ruptures – here through a Manichean safety net built into the original myth – the Baga elders reiterate their founding story. *Kakilambe's* power was accessed by way of a secret, initiating ingestion. Whether the giant headdress was physically consumed, perhaps as ashes after being burnt, or whether ingestion was of another kind, the real *kakilambe* was always already not its visible form. *Kakilambe*, the real *kakilambe*, remains hidden, back in the days when it was still a ritual object, as now when, physically removed, it is still appealed to, verbally, in everyday decision-making in Baga villages. When shown a photograph of the cultic headdress now somewhere in a European collection (where it was taken by a French art collector who chanced to travel with Sheick Sayon during his image war), an elder provided the weary gloss: 'Oh yes, this is what you white people think is the *kakilambe*.'<sup>6</sup>

Cranach's images, and with them the iconoclasm that gave them space, and that traced the austerity of their outlines, represent a re-formation of the sacred images they replaced. Specifically, they renew an image that, from the start, displayed its object by negating it. Christ's incarnation was iconoclastic: the pagan idols crumbled before the infant Jesus; Christ's humble birth and humiliating death overturned the equation, made concrete in classical art, of the beautiful with the true and the good; his disciples martyred themselves rather than honour the emperor's portrait; his suffering mortified vision itself. To do as Protestants did and aim the hammer at the crucifix is to reiterate the gestures that made it.

I shall suggest that this image moreover persists even when its apparent centre, Christ, has vanished. Already in Cranach's scene of preaching, and again in my classroom, a new true image, one constituted as the old image's structural surround, comes into view. *Society*, visibly beholding the icon sacred to it, is revealed to be religion's end, its authentic 'function' as unmasked through the initiation rite of reason. This portrait of a mundane social world persists long after its ritual objects have been destroyed because we, the devotees of that framing image, have not yet recognized it as image but feel ourselves properly to *live* it.

In short, Lutheran art renewed rather than removed church pictures. Yet it is also true that, from the perspective of art history, works like Cranach's evidence a decline in the craft of painting. One of the ways in which the Wittenberg Altarpiece signals Christ's remove is by displaying an aesthetically unengaging portrait of him. Artistry had long been an ambivalent value in Christian art. To celebrate through superior craftsmanship that a sacred likeness was humanly made was to advertise its kinship



with the idol. 'Their land is filled with idols', laments Isaiah, 'They bow down to the works of their hands, to what their fingers have made' (Isaiah 2:8). Madeness was particularly embarrassing in images of Christ, since, divinely procreated, he produced his perfect likeness 'without hands' – in Greek *acheiropoietos*.<sup>7</sup> Yet at the eve of the Reformation, in the period leading up to the Protestant image wars, superior craftsmanship in art acquired a new cultural value. In *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, I argued that painters like Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer, Hans Baldung Grien and the youthful Cranach designed their productions as legible indices of their superior and inimitable skill. Dürer, in his *Self-portrait* of 1500, fashioned his own likeness after the miraculous *acheiropoietos* of Christ in order to announce that art is the perfect image of its maker (illus. 2).<sup>8</sup> This marketing strategy coincided with new practices of art appreciation and collecting. What counted now was not an image's subject but its author.

In the Friedrich monograph, I traced this idea forward to the nineteenth century, when the work of art was figured not merely as a display of the maker's personal skill or virtue but as the expression of an inner experience otherwise unavailable. The present book thus intervenes between my two earlier studies of German art. Dealing with works from the later sixteenth century, it picks up a story begun in a chapter on Cranach, in which, under the pressures of iconoclasm, painters sought to soft-pedal artistry and reduce semantic depth.<sup>9</sup> This also links up with the Friedrich monograph by discerning the religious roots of the *Cross in the Mountains* and, more generally, of the Romantic idea of art. The authentic inner experience passed from artist to viewer turns out to be a descendent of evangelical faith. The imperative, haunting church and catechism, that one should personally understand and believe, is answered by the school-based understanding of art, where individuals demonstrate their subjectivity through their always unique, because never definitive, response.

This book is also different from its two predecessors. At its centre lies a work remarkable not for its interpretative complexity but for its engineered simplicity. Manifesting all we need to know about it, the Wittenberg Altarpiece seems to do our exegetical work for us. And having done with us, it resists re-entry by other means. I will confess that no image has given me as much trouble as Cranach's. In an opening chapter on images of the Reformation image I have attempted to represent this recalcitrance in miniature. And by the end, in an account of Heinrich Göding the Elder's Mühlberg Altarpiece, I show us still marooned in a bizarre hall of mirrors that the artist has cleverly constructed. Over the years I have been helped by what the coincidence I described above revealed: the *apparatus* of teaching that still obtains. Shaped less as a picture to be interpreted than as the interpretation of a picture, the Reformation image mirrors the interpretative enterprise in which it here stands.



2. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-portrait*, 1500, oil on panel. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

'An angry Martin Luther nailed 95 theocrats to a church door.'<sup>10</sup> Let this assertion, taken from a comic pastiche of actual freshman history papers, stand for the problem of understanding in the context of the school. My own turn from images that invite interpretation (Dürer, Baldung, Friedrich) to ones that avoid it reflects my experience of teaching art history. Explaining pictures, and getting back those explanations as memorized replies, I have observed how thoughts become opaque. Luther, theocrats, anger, church doors and the number 95 do belong to a notebook page headed 'Reformation.' It is only their syntax here that's strange, suggesting that had this student recollect full sentences, and not their abbreviations, he or she would have been deemed to have understood. School measures its efficacy by the precision with which statements are duplicated, even as it also proposes that those statements represent not words but thoughts. Yet teaching has taught me that even before the work of art, where individual understanding is authenticated, minds don't communicate. Communication alone communicates.<sup>11</sup> This makes the Wittenberg Altarpiece relevant and – dare I say – understandable to me.



I therefore first of all thank my students, whose first instinct was to disagree. I would also like to thank the Department of the History of Art at University College London for inviting me to deliver the 1995 Tomas Harris lectures. They proved to be such an engaged audience that, when I relocated to Europe, I thrust myself into their department. In particular, I would like to thank David Bindman, who offered useful perspectives on my project as a whole. I am also indebted to Bruce Boucher, Briony Fer, Alexander Potts, Geraldine Johnson, Sigrid Rausing and Jon Elsner for their conversation and advice.

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Joseph Singer, my godfather, taught me how and what to read. The late Richard Wells taught me how to write. I dedicate this book to them.

## INTRODUCTION