The Development and Dissemination of Witchcraft through Art

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Assignment Description: Choose a topic related to the subject of witches and Europe between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, and then research the chosen topic through primary and secondary sources. The assignment for Dr. Lindsay Starkey’s Special Topics in Europe since 1500.

Art and religion have an affinity that cannot really be explained. One can exist without the other, but they both would be a little less interesting without each other. If asked to make a general association of the two, the first response of most people is the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo. Philosophical history tells us that religion was the first cradle of art. Much thought is given to how art helped develop certain religious beliefs and reinforce others. In Medieval Europe, the notions of religious heresy and its connection to witchcraft were, without a doubt, helped along by the miniature pictures that were drawn by hand in the margins of handwritten religious manuscripts by men called Illuminators. At the time religious writings were handwritten manuscripts. These manuscripts were very large, bulky, and not available to the generally illiterate population. When the printing press became widely used, the print shops of the Holy Roman Empire, in what is now southern Germany, became the place where people congregated. These people were theologians, magistrates, artists, the artists’ patrons, and generally those who were educated. This is where the iconography of witchcraft was developed. The broomstick for flying, the cauldron for brewing potions, and kissing toads to cast spells were images that were created and spread throughout Europe, and are still in the minds of many today when asked to describe the activities of a witch.

The images that accompanied manuscripts before the fourteenth century were devoid of witchcraft. The critical shift in thinking, amongst scholars and theologians that demonized magic and sorcery, also increased the emphasis put on demonic presence and agency. A human being needed a pact with the devil to make his or her evil wishes become reality, just as the devil needed humans for his evil purposes. The demonic black arts were combined with village sorcery to bind together the crimes of heresy and witchcraft.

The religious movement of the Waldesians was characterized by lay preaching, renouncing the wealth of the Catholic Church as they vowed poverty, and advocating strict adherence to what was written in the scripture. Waldesians were first declared heretics by Pope Lucius III in 1184 and again by Pope Innocent III in 1215. When heresy was tied to witchcraft, it was not a stretch for the Catholic Church to say that all Waldesians were also witches. They appear as witches in illustrations that


3 Zika, Charles, The Appearance of Witchcraft. 15
accompanied the manuscript called *Le Championne de Damnes* by Marin Le Franc, who had composed the work much earlier. It was a luxury manuscript and it was considered a contribution to the medieval debate on the nature of women. The images it contains were the first known of women flying on sticks or brooms.  

Print was firmly established as a new medium for cultural communication in the 1470’s. The number of images that came with the printed word was on the rise. In the next two decades, printers were experimenting with illustrations and were trying to create an alliance between images and the printed word. Print shops became a place for intellectuals and the educated to interact and, over the next century, this was the place where the visual image of the witch was developed. The number of images printed was also in direct correlation to the number of witch trials that were happening in the Holy Roman Empire and area directly surrounding.

The majority of the images were produced in the print shops of the German speaking area of the Holy Roman Empire. We know the area today as southern Germany and Switzerland. Many were also produced in the Alsace region in the French town of Strasbourg, and the upper Rhine region of Germany. The printed images of witchcraft and sorcery first appeared in large numbers in the late fifteenth century, and by the first two decades of the sixteenth century the artists who were already established in the print shops of Germany would create much of the iconography and visual language that was new and distinctive. Some would last into modern times.

Between 1500 and 1510, a group of artists based in southern Germany transformed the visual language of magic and sorcery into the visual language of witchcraft. The most creative of this group was Hans Baldung Grien. He drew on the work of his elder colleagues, Albrecht Dürer and Albrecht Altendorf. Grien would establish the visual codes and cues through which the imagery of witchcraft would be read for much of the following century. These codes and cues would include such things as groups of women around a cauldron, and women riding goats or sticks and brooms. These images were printed as illustrations that accompanied pamphlets and broadsheets.

There were unknown artists and some of these images went on to become the most reprinted of the time. They also influenced other artists. The images that supplement Ulrich Molitor’s treatise *On Female Witches and Seers* were reprinted up to twenty times in twenty years. They were a series of six images created on woodblocks that were recycled and reused. Ulrich Molitor’s writings were very popular and they enjoyed an extremely wide distribution. It would be problematic to overestimate the impact that these images made on contemporary perceptions of witchcraft. Every new edition needed new images, so the images underwent slight stylistic changes and were reused. They would definitely influence Albrecht Dürer.

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6 Zika, Charles, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*. 64
7 Ibid., 13
8 Ibid., 15
9 Ibid., 18
10 Ibid., 11
11 Ibid., 11-12
12 Ibid., 18
13 Ibid., 17
Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of the *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* is notable for its overwhelming feel of wild energy and the illusion of sexual disorder. The Capricorn goat, with its fish or serpent tail, alludes to the Roman God Saturn. Saturn achieved his power by castrating his father and eating his children. He was also considered the patron of agricultural laborers and the poor, aged, crippled, Jews, cannibals, magicians, and of course witches. Dürer’s riding witch becomes a ‘child’ of Saturn, who unman through sexual violence. Being on top of the goat and holding its horn alludes to the woman being in control and signifies a man who has lost his virility because he allowed another man access to his woman. This entire engraving is filled with images people would have associated with sexual disorder, right down to the artist signing with his initials in a way that was reversed from his normal signature.

As an apprentice of Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien was influenced by his work, but he played a much more significant role in the development of the visual language of witchcraft. Grien left Dürer’s workshop in Nuremberg in 1507 to start his own print shop in his home town of Strasbourg. Upon his return he got married, took out his citizenship, and became a master in the guild of goldsmiths, painters, printers, and glaziers. He then opened his own shop and introduced the letter ‘G’ into the signature of his work as a sign of his new independence. His new signature can be seen in his works produced between 1510 and 1515. Witch imagery was attracting attention from the readers in urban populations and Baldung Grien would give this interest his own particular visual form and contribute more to the creation of the new visual subject that any other artist.

The dominant images of many of Baldung Grien’s works are of naked women grouped around a cauldron, symbolically united by a triangle of forked sticks. These women are shown engaging in a ritual activity that involves food, drink, and sacrifice. The women are focused on the cauldron with its pseudo Hebraic script, the cauldron sits between the legs of one woman and the thick bellowing smoke coming from it contains toads. On the ground they are sitting on a triangle of forked sticks, which symbolically unites them. They are not pickforks, but crude cooking tools that were common at that time. The gestures of these women and the wildly flying hair that has sexual and magical associations, along with the eerie forest setting, and the uncontrollable forces that escape the cauldron like Pandora’s Box, all provide a sense of magic and mystery. These symbols would appear over and over, and when people saw them in any new form, they would automatically associate them with witchcraft.

Goats were well established visual symbols of lust in the iconography of the late middle ages and Baldung Grien underscored this with having a torch lit from the heat of the goat’s genitals. This symbolism would later be used to show the sexual heat of witches; additionally, the cauldron is heated between a witch’s spread legs. These things, as well as sausages roasting somewhere in the picture, the wind-blown hair, and the symbols of female vanity, the brush and convex mirror, all allude to the sexuality that resonates through

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14 Ibid., 29
15 Hultz, Linda C., *The Witch as Muse*, 74
16 Ibid., 96
17 Zika, Charles, *The Appearance of Witchcraft*. 15
the entire scene. Contemporary thought was that there could only be one male with the sexual prowess to keep these women happy. They had to be women who made a pact with the devil, and that was a crime to be punished.\textsuperscript{18}

In the cases of crimes involving witchcraft or sorcery, executions in the Empire most frequently took the form of burning or drowning. Burning was meant to both cleanse societies of evil and to annihilate the instrument by which the evil was perpetrated, by having the witch burned and her ashes strewn in the river or buried under the gallows. The executioner played a vital role. In executions, he was more than the man who killed the condemned. In the art, he also is shown in this vital role, meaning he is a prominent part of the depiction. He is shown tending the fire, so there would be no missteps and the crowd would stay controlled.\textsuperscript{19} When the depiction shows no witches, it usually meant that the guilty party was shown leniency and dispatched quickly. If brushwood is depicted in art from this time, it could mean that leniency was shown to the condemned; it could indicate the intense political nature of the event. Brushwood is the thick undergrowth (or small twigs and branches) that will generally burn hotter than larger pieces of wood. Some witches are depicted with heads shaved and completely naked. This signifies that they were searched for the ‘devil’s mark’ and as a way to humiliate and degrade the condemned.\textsuperscript{20}

Throughout Germany and Switzerland, drowning was probably the most used form of capital punishment in the sixteenth century. Primarily it was used on women, especially those who violated religious or moral norms. It was also considered to be a more merciful form of punishment than burning. In the image shown of the condemned woman’s death, she is to be drowned because she begged for mercy and to be spared the fire. The accused had a reputation of promiscuity and it was rumored that she made her husband impotent. When she was taken into custody, she readily confessed to all of her evil deeds under threat of torture. She was shown mercy-- possibly because she was from a well-connected family in the Zurich region and powerful people had asked she be shown mercy. The image shows her tied up in the executioner’s arms, waiting for death to come quickly.\textsuperscript{21}

The images that we, in the twenty-first century, associate with witches without a doubt come from this time. We do not read every single aspect of each image the way someone in the sixteenth century would have, but that can be credited to modern people growing up in a world where reading and science was taught in public schools. We live in a society where it is important that religion is kept separate from state. Maybe as children we believed if we could put a piece of paper with a name scrawled on it inside of a dead bird’s mouth, misfortune would find them. As educated people we know better, but our world is more colorful with this imagery from long ago.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 12-15
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 196
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 198
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 200
Bibliography

Hults, Linda C. *The Witch as Muse.*


Zika, Charles. *Exorcising Our Demons.*