The European Reformations gave way to a new sect of Christianity: Protestantism, which, in many countries, eclipsed Catholicism. Following Martin Luther’s posting of his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, which criticized the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, radical reformers following Luther’s theology engaged in acts of rebellion against the papacy. Among these events of insurgency were sporadic iconoclasms, in which reformers destroyed religious images in sacred spaces that were now seen as idolatry. In the cases of Protestant England, Wittenberg, and Strasbourg, iconoclasm gave way to a new aesthetic in religious art. Notably, the destruction of images did not signify a universal rejection of religious art, but assisted in fashioning a new theological perception of what art should mean in the ecclesiastical sphere. The purging of images associated with Catholicism led to a new Protestant aesthetic that minimized anxieties surrounding idolatry by incorporating text alongside religious iconography. Protestant art thereby denounced the ostentations of Catholic decoration in sacred spaces by restricting the creation of devotional imagery to representations of Holy Scripture and by superimposing text on icons. From the earliest iconoclasms in Protestant Wittenberg and Strasbourg, devotional art was transformed by the inclusion of text alongside images and within religious spaces. Protestant England followed suit in an attempt to re-contextualize religious art and impose human agency over devotional icons. In essence, scriptural and admonitory texts were used to manage anxieties surrounding idolatry in the creation, function, and reception of religious iconography.

In order to examine the iconoclasms of the sixteenth century, one must first understand the pre-Reformation Catholic culture of religious art. As Phillip Lindley notes, “images were to
instruct; to aid memory; and to inspire devotion”.¹ Yet the early sixteenth century experienced criticism of the opulence with which images were created, “frequently clothed in precious materials and adorned with rings, jewels and girdles”.² In his Colloquies of 1518, Desiderius Erasmus’s “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake” posits a critique of the luxurious decoration of sacred spaces. Erasmus begs the question, “to what purpose are so many golden fonts, so many candlesticks and so many images…when in the meantime our brothers and sisters, Christ’s living temples, are about to perish for hunger and thirst?”³ The fact that Erasmus was a pious Catholic criticizing this seeming obsession with opulent materials indicates a substantial universal concern with the culture of images and relics of the Catholic Church. In this way, and similarly to Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, concerns relating to the economic functions of the papacy were growing. One can certainly argue that the amount of money spent on the gaudy embellishments of images, relics, and spaces, combined with the colossal income from pilgrimages to these sacred temples that the Catholic Church benefited from, was a primary concern that helped shape the simplicity of Protestant art.

These economic criticisms ran parallel with concerns relating to idolatry, as “many people worshipped the image and not what it represented”.⁴ The Protestant aesthetic that would be constructed in the early sixteenth century was greatly concerned with the perception of images as idols. These concerns are well demonstrated by the intensely naturalistic statue Virgin and Child.⁵ English statesman Sir Thomas More commented “that he observed some women adoring

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² Ibid., 23.
⁵ See Appendix A.
an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, imagining that it smiled at them”. Indeed, “this kind of confusion must have been greatly facilitated by the astounding lifelikeness of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century imagery”. With huge strides being made in the visual arts at this time, a new level of naturalism had been reached in perspective, both in painting and sculpture, which allowed for the accurate depiction of detail. Effectively, *Virgin and Child* blurs the line between inanimate and human, which would have fostered anxieties relating to idolatry, as suggested by Sir Thomas More. In these ways, the very purpose of Catholic religious art as a visual means to stimulate meditation, prayer, and devotion resulted in their criticism. Art objects of the period thus quickly fell to condemnation for two reasons: the economic aspects of the Catholic Church’s expenditures relating to sacred decoration, and the fear that obsessions with icons would nurture idolatry. It is from these concerns that Protestant theology developed a foundation for what would become its own visual aesthetic.

Following these concerns, the first acts of iconoclasm were guided by reformist ideology, inspired and led by Protestant preachers and by civic authorities. Major reformer and theological figure, Martin Luther, preached against images in a 1522 sermon, “Whoever places an image in a church…imagines he has performed a service to God, and done a good work, which is downright idolatry”. Moreover, a close supporter of Luther, Andreas Karldstadt, published a pamphlet in Wittenberg on 27 January 1522 in which he “raged against an idolatrous Church, summoning all Christians to read God’s lips: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image’”. These two Reformation leaders inspired iconoclasm in Wittenberg and, arguably, across the European

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7 Ibid.
continent, as their preaching against paintings, images, and icons inspired the reformers to take action. In January of 1522, the town council of Wittenberg decreed, “the images and altars in the church should be removed, in order to prevent idolatry, for three altars without images are enough”. The civic authorities in Wittenberg thus ordered iconoclasm. Inspired by the theological leaders of the Reformation, who preached against idolatry, reformers engaged in the destruction of altarpieces, paintings, and icons that were now perceived as idols and, notably, as tokens of the Catholic Church. Iconoclasm, then, was inherently a revolt against the papacy as the supporter of opulent imagery that now poisoned the sacred spaces reserved for divine holiness rather than materialistic falsities. Moreover, it is directly from this purging of Catholic images that Protestant art was produced in a new simplicity: the word of God was held above all, effectively cleansing and creating space exclusively for the verbal and written Holy Scripture.

Iconoclasm in Strasbourg provides an account for a new aesthetic that is illustrated by the word, not the image. Strasbourg iconoclasts often “marked their [wreckage] indelibly and legibly”. One contemporary report in 1529, explains that “the parishioners of Old St. Peter’s, together with their pastor, ‘white-washed’ the church…” instead of saints… the walls were written all over”. Joseph Koerner notes that this “gesture of over-painting pictures with texts, widespread in the sixteenth century, visualized the attack against the visual”. This early iconoclastic attack that used text to crudely redecorate the sacred space set the stage for centuries to come. Indeed, “Evangelical church space was visibly saturated with words”, as in 1606 when a local pastor in the village church of Türkheim “ordered 195 Bible quotations painted on the

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11 Koerner, Reformation of the Image, 42.
13 Koerner, Reformation of the Image, 42.
walls”.¹⁴ In these ways, the word took the place of the illustrated, as “texts transmitted and visualized a word-based faith. Their appearance in places formerly reserved for sacred icons announced reform”.¹⁵ Indeed, this is highly significant to understanding the new Protestant aesthetic in the decoration of holy spaces. With imagery destroyed, the written word would now reconcile the differences between the Catholic and Protestant faiths. In their ultimate belief in the word of God found in Holy Scripture, Protestants could focus their meditation and prayer on text, effectively preventing the possibility of idol worship.

A pair of engravings effectively illustrates the stark contrast in ornamentation between Protestant and Catholic spaces, in which text flanks the former and images flank the latter. Completed by an anonymous German artist around 1600, the first engraving, *True Image of the Ancient, Apostolic Evangelical Church*, represents the Reformation church, while the second, *True Image of the Papist Church*, represents the Catholic.¹⁶ It is clear from the titles that the artist favours Protestantism over Catholicism. The representation of the Reformed Church illustrates “apostolic purity…by two lonely adornments at the church’s rear: a pair of round-topped tablets and an open codex”.¹⁷ These “materializations of Scripture” symbolize “the law and the Gospel,” which illustrates a “collective attention to the word”.¹⁸ The absence of altarpieces, paintings, and statues direct attention entirely to the collectivity of the congregation in prayer, engaging in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, overlooked and facilitated by the word of God. In contrast, the engraving portraying the Catholic Church is exclusively ornamented with images. These sharp differences illustrate that the Catholic space as one

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¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid., 43.
¹⁶ See Appendix B.
¹⁸ Ibid.
obsessed with lavish iconography that circumscribe their devotion, while, for Protestants, “tablets, book, preaching and sacraments visualize what fills and makes the true church: God’s words”.\(^{19}\) In these ways, the triumph of the word over the image demonstrates a new Protestant aesthetic.

Often deemed a Reformation artist, Lucas Cranach the Elder further develops the Protestant aesthetic as one characterized by text. In his painting, *Law and Gospel (Fall and Redemption)*,\(^ {20}\) Cranach explores the themes of God as ruler, Adam and Eve and their fall from grace, and Moses with the Tablets of Law. The work includes biblical text along the bottom. As John Dillenberger notes, “while texts were sometimes used in conjunction with works of art before the Reformation, the extensive use of texts is a Reformation phenomenon”.\(^ {21}\) Indeed, the incorporation of text directly from Scripture supports Luther’s teachings that “above all, the foremost reading for everybody…should be Holy Scripture”.\(^ {22}\) Reformation art thus manages Protestant anxieties surrounding idolatry by limiting its themes to biblical stories and by including text therein, taken directly from the word of God. This accompaniment of text effectively shaped viewer response to visual imagery. Moreover, the art resists idolatry by prohibiting the illustrations of individual saints, which had been a major iconographical representation of Catholicism. In the Catholic Church, cults of saints had become a major phenomenon, with preachers teaching that “God wrought miracles through the intercession of saints” and the “most popular means of accessing saints’ intercession was through their relics or, more commonly, by devoutly praying before their images”.\(^ {23}\) These practices of devotion were

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.*, 46.
\(^{20}\) See Appendix C.
denounced by Protestant teachings and “Lutheran church pictures were designed to visualize nothing but the Bible’s content”. Thus the new Protestant aesthetic was borne directly from its theology, and, one could argue, from Sola Scriptura (“Only Scripture”), which maintains that Christian scripture is the only true rule of faith and practice. Subjects were thus restricted to biblical themes accompanied by text to sustain and bolster the Protestant doctrine of the word of God above all.

In Protestant England, images were re-appropriated and permitted in certain contexts, justifying those comprised of script. Head of Christ, created by an anonymous artist in late sixteenth century England, is a prime example that seems to contradict Protestant ideology toward images but is simultaneously permitted. Indeed, the second Elizabethan Book of Homilies, originally published in 1571 to be read aloud in the Churches of England, warned against everything this portrait seems to encapsulate. In the “Homily against Peril of Idolatry, and Superfluous Decking of Churches,” images “decked with gold and silver, painted with colours, set…with stone and pearl” run the risk of occasioning the devout to “commit most horrible idolatry.” These official decrees beg the question: How could Head of Christ not only have survived English iconoclasm, but also been displayed publicly at Hampton Court Palace in the early seventeenth century? The Book of Homilies, although outlining Protestant ideology toward images, attempted to deal with the interiors of sacred spaces. The public display of Head of Christ at Hampton Court Palace in the early seventeenth century conveys that the image was not only kept intact from its inception in the previous century, but was also displayed publicly in a significant space. Notably, this space is more domestic than it is ecclesiastical. In Jean

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25 See Appendix D.
Baudrillard analysis, an object “can have one of two functions”: it is either “utilized” or “possessed”.27 By “placing it in a collection” alongside other secular portraiture at Hampton Court Palace, it is deprived of “it of its former function”.28 In this case, the art object is re-appropriated: *Head of Christ* loses its religious function in a church setting, in which the possibility for idolatry is great, and is admired simply for its inherent beauty in a domestic space.

The portrait’s inclusion of vernacular text, along with the secular context in which it is displayed, allows for the image to remain well received by Protestant onlookers. Like their German counterparts in Wittenberg and Strasbourg, Protestants were able to reconcile inconsistencies between concerns for idolatry and the creation of images by the incorporation of text in the painting. The “inclusion of a textual inscription” allowed Protestants to “circumscribe and shape viewer response to…religious imagery”, which minimized “the risk of idolatry.”29 Comparably to the ways in which Cranach the Elder had included text in the German vernacular in his *Law and Gospel*, the inclusion of a large text block that almost overpowers the portrait in *Head of Christ* “reminds the viewer of the worldly circumstances surrounding the production…of the object, thereby imposing human control and agency over the object and diluting its spiritual power”.30 Although text in the aforementioned German examples was biblical in nature, script here still manages anxieties surrounding idolatry by providing an historical caption. In this way, the reception of the image is transformed from one of resentment to appreciation in Reformation England.

Iconoclasm in Reformation Europe transformed both the perceptions and inceptions of religious art. Denouncing the ostentations of Catholic churches and the imagery therein, Protestant reformers attempted to revolutionize the sacred space. Both iconoclasm itself and the creation of Protestant art were facilitated by religious ideology put forth by major Reformation figures, such as Martin Luther and Andreas Karlstadt. Iconoclastic events in Wittenberg and Strasbourg nurtured a new aesthetic that was circumscribed by the holy word of God in Scripture. The inclusion of text in religious art, both old and new, managed anxieties surrounding idolatry. Themes and subject matter were limited in newly created images, such as the examples from Germany, while Protestant England successfully re-appropriated images with text by re-contextualizing them in domestic, rather than ecclesiastical, spaces. In essence, text became the foundation of a new Protestant aesthetic, as it mediated and reconciled concerns and contrasts surrounding image worship.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


Appendix A: *Virgin and Child*\(^{31}\)

1.7: Virgin and Child statue from Winchester Cathedral. Photograph: John Crook.

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Appendix B: *True Image of the Ancient, Apostolic Evangelical Church and True Image of the Papist Church*\(^\text{32}\)

Appendix C: Law and Gospel (Fall and Redemption)\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{33} Lucas Cranach the Elder, Law and Gospel (Fall and Redemption), 1539, Castle Museum, Weimar, in Dillenberger, Images and Relics, 99.
Appendix D: *Head of Christ*\(^{34}\)

Plate 3: Anon., *Head of Christ*, oil on panel, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, English (London art market).

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\(^{34}\) Anonymous, *Head of Christ*, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, English (London art market), in Hamling and Williams, *Art Re-Formed*, Plate 3.