

The austere and the sensual

By [Martin E. Marty](#)

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Oh, to be in Rome or Paris this season, where one could attend blockbuster showings of the art of Lucas Cranach. Jackie Wallschlager [says](#)

the painter "is becoming the Old Master for the early 21st century."

The exhibits display what one critic has called "Lutheran austerity": Luthers, epic crucifixions and the like.

Simultaneously, the events include paintings by the same artist of what Wallschlager calls "slinking nudes," often Venuses (once banned on posters in London's underground) and Three Graces "seen from the front, back, and in profile." "Wily, worldly, witty" Cranach favored "small, high breasts, nipped waists, rounded stomachs, and elongated [erotic] forms" that were sometimes sarcastically provoking. This "chief artist of the Reformation knew how to deliver a frisson of sensual delight wrapped in a parable," as with a woman painted as "an emblem of lasciviousness."

The Reformers knew what was going on. Cranach stood up for Luther and wife at their betrothal; he was godfather to a Luther child and vice versa. Ex-nun and wife-to-be Katharina was a maid at Cranach's home when Luther came calling for a bride. Cranach painted the Luthers' parents and children.

How did Luther justify his support of this supplier of virtual centerfold images for Wittenberg? If anyone can find a signal that Luther was disturbed or put off by the interplay of images from the brush of one man, they will do better than I.

Some explain all this by showing that Cranach was patriarchal and parabolic in his treatment of women figures, but still, he must have gotten pleasure out of his attention to the detail of these very slightly limbed women. Lutherans like the Latin word *simul*, speaking of how the human is *simul* justified and a sinner. Maybe Cranach, in a similarly *simul* spirit, was juxtaposing and correlating "austere Lutheranism" with sensual and sexy portrayals of women.

We can't settle that here. For now, it is amusing to ponder this strange *simul* representation and then hail Cranach, who knew a thing or two about dimensions of life that the austere *and* the sensualists often suggest cannot appear in the same artist, subject or Reformation.

Those who want a visual hint of what I am talking about might pursue [this link](#).