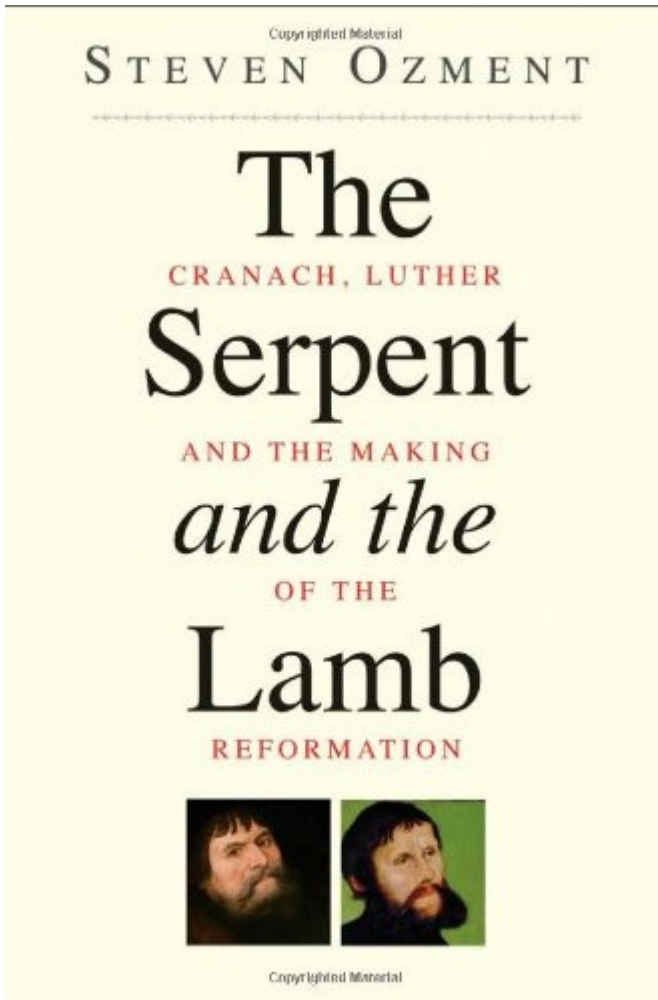


Lucas Cranach, partner in reform

By [Debra Bendis](#)

July 6, 2012

## In Review



## The Serpent and the Lamb

by Steven Ozment

Yale University Press

Last spring I visited the Paris exhibition *Cranach in His Time*, where I was introduced to a sampling of Lucas Cranach Sr.'s diverse and sometimes puzzling range of work.

Cranach (1472–1553) produced more than 1,500 paintings, not to mention engravings, decorative work and altarpieces.

I began my tour with his portrait of the powerful and shrewd Frederick the Wise, who was Saxon's ruling elector, Cranach's patron and Luther's protector. A little further on I studied a portrait of Luther, Cranach's friend and partner, painted as a nonthreatening monk—an effort to persuade his critics that he was not dangerous.

The exhibit also included *The Law and the Gospel*, which exemplifies Cranach's powerful work on Lutheran themes. *The Law* is divided into two parts: the left side depicts an Old Testament prophet with Adam and Eve in the background, and the right side shows an empty tomb and John the Baptist. Both holy men point behind them to the crucified Christ—unified in their conviction that salvation comes through Christ and only through Christ.

Then I turned a corner and—surprise!—came eye-to-eye with the *The Nymph of the Spring*, one of the first northern European paintings of reclining nudes. Cranach's nymph is wrapped in a transparent veil that only adds to her allure. Her eyes are slightly open, as if she's on the alert for a viewer's reaction. To warn against an inappropriate reaction, Cranach inscribed a moral reprimand on the painting: "Here I rest: Do not disturb my sleep"!

In his new book, *The Serpent and the Lamb*, Harvard professor Steven Ozment describes Cranach's many-faceted character. How do art critics evaluate Cranach's work, asks Ozment, and have they underappreciated this post-Renaissance man? Do we focus on Cranach the civic leader, who served over 30 years on Wittenberg's city council, established a pharmacy, a publishing house and the most magnificent house in town (84 rooms)? Or do we focus on Cranach the diplomat, who was able to paint nudes for the good burghers of Wittenburg, create architectural plans for Roman Catholic Cardinal Albrecht, and help Luther implement Protestant reforms? Finally, who was Cranach the Christian?

*The Serpent and the Lamb* explores all of this and more. (The book's title refers to the serpent on Cranach's coat of arms, given to him by his employer, Frederick the Wise; and to the lamb, a protective seal created by Luther for his published writing.) Ozment makes a compelling case for Cranach's importance as an artist and man of faith whose collaboration with the great Reformer was central to the spread of the Protestantism.

(See also [Matt Lundin's review](#).)