Witchcraft in Art of the Northern Renaissance

The mass hysteria caused by the concept and fear of witchcraft is most often instantly associated with the Salem Witch Trials of the late 1600s. The fears surrounding ideas of witchcraft however have been a concern that has plagued humanity for several centuries leading up to its final culmination in the 17th century. Witchcraft has been prevalent in antiquity, resurfacing and rearing its head in several great series. The association of women as witches has been a longstanding tradition, an assumption that has been accepted by society for hundreds of years. Yet this tradition had been established long after the first murmurs of witchcraft, developing throughout centuries until the perception that witches are women was ingrained into common knowledge. A further study into how witches were portrayed in art throughout this time period provides for a provoking discussion into the development of this customary idea of witch. Looking specifically at Northern Renaissance artists, who were situated in the heart of witchcraft hysteria during the 16th and 17th centuries, this paper will delve further into the question of why the artists portrayed witches in the ways that they did and how this portrayal may have affected the greater societal view of witches. The renowned late medieval artists that dealt heavily with the theme of witchcraft to be examined include Albrecht Dürer (c. 1471-1528), Hans Baldung Grien (c. 1484-1545), and Frans Francken II (1581-1642). Durer and Grien both hailed from Germany, while Francken was Flemish. Many pieces by these artists portraying witches and how these
types of individuals were perceived in the northern renaissance culture are well recognized even in present times. These artworks, particularly the ones discussed, provide a rich analysis of the early modern cultural view towards witchcraft and how the superstitions of these supposed witches were understood (and often feared) during this period.

Before considering the actual artwork, it is important to define what was considered to be witchcraft. Throughout medieval Europe there were two types of magical practice considered; the divine or demonic, and the natural or occult. Demonic magic was seen to be a perversion of religion, those that deal with the Devil. Occult magic was seen as a “branch of science,” a magic practiced organically through “hidden powers” in nature (Breuer 8). Richard Kieckhefer, one the foremost scholars regarding witchcraft explains that “intellectuals in Medieval Europe recognized two forms of magic: natural and demonic. Natural magic was not distinct from science…it dealt with ‘occult virtues’ within nature. Demonic magic was not distinct from religion, but rather a…religion that turned away from God and toward demons for their help in human affairs” (Kieckhefer 9). These terms of course are not as straightforwardly classifying as they seem, as the lines between the two can and were blurred in almost all instances. The concepts of white magic, deemed helpful, and black magic, deemed harmful, were most often defined only by the consequences of what the magic produced. Or, as Kieckhefer points out, “the difference between positive and negative magic lay not in their basic conception but in the purposes they served” (81). This misunderstanding or misconception of “powers” almost certainly led to the distrust that arose of individuals practicing magic and added to the increasing suspicion towards these individuals.
Throughout the works to be examined, figures using both black magic and white magic are portrayed and the differences between the two are very distinct.

Important also to consider is the atmosphere in which the artists being examined worked, and what cultural ideals may have affected how they portrayed witches. Although legends of witchcraft had been around for centuries, after catching the attention of the Catholic Church in the 15th century, the crime of witchcraft became policed both spiritually and secularly, in assurance that both church and “state” could proclaim themselves accountable for prosecuting it (Decker 45). This new exposure to witchcraft, which fell under the category of heresy, sparked an interest in religious individuals of the time and inspired an extremely significant literary piece to be developed in 15th century Germany. This work, called the *Malleus maleficarum*, was essentially a manual outlining what made an individual a witch, how to identify witchcraft, and contains methods regarding torture and management of a person found guilty of witchcraft. The book quickly became a tremendous influence on how witchcraft was perceived. Written and published by Dominican friars Heinrich Kramer (Institoris) and Jacobus (James) Sprenger in 1486, the guidebook was composed of three sections that discussed the concept of witchcraft, the practices and powers of witches, and the process of persecuting a witch. The manual illustrates the ways in which individuals become inclined to practice witchcraft while simultaneously arguing that it was women who were more disposed to demonic temptations through the inherent weaknesses of their gender. The manual was widely distributed and had enormous influence, noticeably among the examined artists of the period. The tensions against witchcraft grew rapidly in the 15th century following the publication of the *Malleus* and the attitudes
towards witchcraft shifted from a “routine, day-to-day (almost personal) technology” to a highly demonized practice (Ben-Yehuda 3).

Looking first at the German artist’s, the influence of the *Malleus maleficarum* is prevalent in both artist’s work. Both Dürer’s *The Witch* of 1500 (Figure 1) and Grien’s *Witches* of 1514 (Figure 2) portray an almost caricature like rendering of the women whom the artworks label as witch. Dürer’s engraving illustrates his witch as a frightening older woman, riding backwards on a goat holding a device that she uses to manipulate the weather above her in the top left corner of the image. This particular type of activity was specifically attributed to witches in the *Malleus*; it states “…that devils and their disciples can by witchcraft cause lightnings and hailstorms and tempests” (Institoris and Spenger 147). Her hair streaked with gray blows recklessly and loose behind her, while she seems to be yelling in a grimacing fashion, exposing her toothless expression. Her face is menacing, flecked with numerous wrinkles and facial hair. The remainder of her body is wrinkled as well, with her muscles distinct and apparent in a typically unfeminine way. The presentation of this musculature is unique also in the sense that it would be atypical for an old woman, who might generally be presented as frail and weak, to be portrayed in this way. Her breasts and stomach sag and shrivel while she stoops forward on the goat, most likely bent forward with age.

Dürer’s intensely detailed and finely etched witch is seemingly much more intimidating and terrifying than Grien’s softly shaded, more unobtrusive older woman. However Grien demonstrates further the other indictments of witchcraft. In his portrayal, Grien shows three women, all nude and performing what seems to be an overtly sexual ritual with one another. The women expose their genitalia to the viewer in
contorted positions, while one woman holds a flaming pot above her head, containing what is inferred to be some sort of potion created by the women. These attributes lend to the superstition surrounding ceremonies and concoctions witches were accused of participating in and creating as outlined in the *Malleus*, such as when witches “meet together in conclave on a set day, and the devil appears to them” (99). Grien’s elderly woman compares to Dürer’s with her long snaky hair, muscular build, sagging extremities and extensive wrinkling, but in this sketch, her face is somewhat less intimidating as she seems preoccupied in the activity she contributes to. Although just a sample of work and literature at the time that depicts witches, Dürer and Grien’s artwork provides historians with a further look into how the implications of witchcraft further influenced the mindsets towards women and witchcraft.

The portrayal of women characterized as witches by both Dürer and Grien allow historians to further analyze how these women were being depicted and what behaviors were identified with these female witches. In both images, the male artists have stripped their subjects bare, a parallel Lyndal Roper equates to what an executioner would have done in the search for a “witch’s mark” (Roper 166). The *Malleus* advises prosecutors to strip the accused bare to ensure the individual is not concealing devices associated in the act of witchcraft. As Sprenger and Kramer explain, “…the reason for this is that they should search for any instrument of witchcraft sewn into her clothes” (Institoris and Sprenger 225). This nudity is also a testament to the indecent nature by which witches were accused of living.

Roper furthermore discusses the relationship between infertility and witchcraft, a prevalent theme in not only the *Malleus*, but the views towards women held at this
time. As the role of women in this time was inherently related to the idea that a woman’s sole duty is to receive life from a man and harbor that essence until birth, fertility played a significant factor in the accusation of witchcraft. If a woman was not able to fulfill her part in producing a child after partaking in sexual activities, suspicion would surely be raised as to the state of her “generative force.” The *Malleus* makes mention of this generative force often throughout the manual, largely in regards to how witches supposedly impede potency (54, 117, 118). The generative force in this context refers to fertility and reproductive abilities, in which witches are accused to be able impede in both male and female victims. This issue, as Roper examines, plays an integral part in how witches are perceived in art, as they are most often shown as shrunken, aged women (Roper 164). Dürer and Grien both include older women in their portrayals of witchcraft, drawing attention to the loss of the women’s reproductive functions often implicit in post-menopausal, aging women. This connotation is important to keep in mind while regarding such images, as the undertone of infertility connects not only the conventions of witchcraft set forth in the *Malleus*, but the superstitions held with the early modern society about who a witch was and why she should be so intensely feared.

Frans Francken II, however, chose to depict witches in a different manner than Dürer and Grien. Although Francken lived and worked a generation after the two previously discussed artists, he was still in the center of Northern Europe’s ghoulish fascination with witchcraft. Francken’s portrayals of what he defines as a witch differ greatly from the sketches and drawings of his predecessors, giving way to further insight of how the idea of witchcraft was perceived in 15th century Netherlandish and
Germanic areas. In both his *Witches’ Sabbath*, 1606 (Figure 3) and *Witches’ Kitchen*, 1610 (Figure 4), Francken paints the primary figures in his painting as young, alluring women, one of whom bashfully looks away while the other makes direct, almost confronting eye contact with the viewer. These figures are painted not as the old crone typecast, but the illicit and conniving version of the witch stereotype. The *Malleus* rebukes the lustfulness of witches throughout the manual, making claims that the “lust of women leads into all sins,” that all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, and that when “lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin” and when it is finished, “bringeth forth death” (Institoris and Sprenger 43, 47, 52). Although his witches may seem aesthetically more pleasing, further inspection shows Franckens portrayal of witchcraft more urgently sinister than Dürer and Grien’s.

The figures in both paintings are painted brighter than the rest of the hectic scene to ensure the viewer’s immediate focus, and are in the midst of undressing, preparing to join the chaos that surrounds them. Among this chaos, Francken depicts several frightening elderly women within both scenes, performing invocations, reading from spellbooks, and creating elixirs. In *Witches’ Sabbath*, the floor is littered with skulls, a chilling reminder of the horrors in which witches practice. Both paintings show destruction in the backdrop, a town burning in *Witches’ Sabbath* and what seems to be an explosion in *Witches’ Kitchen*, demonstrating the level of ruin these women were supposedly capable of. Bizarre and whimsical beings, reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch’s otherworldly creatures, run rampant in both paintings. A batlike figure floats above an altar in the bottom left hand section of *Witches’ Kitchen*, most likely a personification of the devil, as several women bow down and pray to it. A troll like
creature in the pile of discarded animal corpses hands the seated woman a comb while a smokey, reptilian looking animal emerges from a giant cauldron. In *Witches’ Sabbath*, small monkey-like creatures adorned with colorful feathers and barbs along their spines ride a giant tortoise in the left section of the painting as an eerie, almost indescribable crab creature with butterfly wings in the bottom center reaches up towards one of the women who is undressing herself. All of these horrifying and bewildering components of each painting serve one purpose; to scare the viewer. These paintings were made to inform the viewers of the power of witches, to remind them how truly evil these individuals were. Such depictions undoubtedly emerged from the fearful sentiments towards witches and further perpetuated the idea that witches were a dangerous force that needed to be eradicated.

Although neither painting can be directly traced to a particular patron, the works were most likely commissioned for the private gallery of a wealthy member of the noble or bourgeois class (Hults 117). Meant to be a warning of the dangers of witchcraft and what could happen if it was not suppressed, the paintings and their exhibition would have defined both Francken and the owner of the painting as anti-witchcraft. This would be an important establishment to make, as the connection between witchcraft and heresy was implicit, and witchcraft would become increasingly threatening. Francken's surroundings would be a central authority in persecuting witches, mirroring the anxieties felt throughout the Counter-Reformation and chaotically political atmosphere of the Netherlands. Hults reports these areas in Europe that were most affected by the conflicts between Catholicism and Protestantism from approximately 1570 through 1640 saw witchcraft become a crime of the highest degree and was not only the highest
threat to God, but to the monarchy personifying that authority on earth as well (118). In a period where persecution of witchcraft was at its peak, the pressure to expel these individuals was seen as a necessary function to preserve social and political order.

Art would have been one of the most far reaching methods of representing and spreading ideals in this time period. Particularly relevant in Northern Europe where each of these artists worked, as it was an artistic center and international market, any statement made through such pieces would have been regarded earnestly (117). Being a fundamental method in which political, religious, and moral statements could be made, the subject matter within artwork such as those discussed would have been a necessary way for individuals to display their stance on critical issues. The importance of art as a means of expressing social values has been around for centuries, and its necessity in a culture obsessed with witchcraft is seen quite evidently throughout the Northern Renaissance period. Intellectually and visually stimulating, these pieces were inspired by and subsequently further generated concepts held about witchcraft during this era of art.
Bibliography


Figure 1.
Albrecht Dürer
*The Witch*
1500, 11.5 x 7.1 cm
Engraving on paper
Figure 2.
Hans Buldung Grien
Witches
1514, 309 x 209 mm
Pen and ink heightened with white on brown paper
Figure 3.
Frans Francken II
*Witches’ Sabbath*
1606, 63 x 50 cm
Oil on oak panel
Figure 4.
Frans Francken II
*Witches' Kitchen*
1610, 51.8 x 66cm
Oil paint on wood