**Introduction**

During the last thirty years the new interest in and the re-discovery of the figure of the “witch” by historical, gender, religious, economic, legal and media studies, art history and studies in popular culture has also led to a re-discovery of a flood of pictorial images. Witches and witchcraft had become a prominent theme not only in theological, humanistic, juridical and medical treatises, historical chronicles as well as in moralizing literature of the time but also in pictorial representations – being produced and circulated often as part of the print publications or distributed independently. What can be called in retrospect the “imaginary of witchcraft” produced a dangerous reality for those being accused of it. One of the questions rising within the research on these representations is whether or not, (and how) they have been involved in and contributed to the discourses and the circulation of concepts of demonic magic and the witches as a sect, which finally supplied the arguments for legal and institutionalised prosecutions of “witches” and the execution of about 50,000 persons – not all but the majority of them being women.¹ Among these representations we find miniatures in manuscripts, drawings, woodcuts and etchings, news sheets and last but not least paintings. Some of the representations are anonymous some of them can be attributed to masters and artists or their workshops, some of them have been received as major contributions of those artists whose works are considered to be paradigmatic for the history of art between 1500 and 1600.²

Remarkable is the historical coincidence of the media revolution of print-making, the first historical “mass-medium” enabling reproductions in a quality, speed and geographical reach unexperienced before with the rise of the modern concept of the (male) “artist” as a “godlike” creator and inventor at the end of the Middle Ages. The transformation of the social status of artists distinguished them from former craftsmanship, a concept linked to notions of authorship, authenticity and “free” individual imagination, still dominant ideas in traditional art history up to today.³ Yet – transdisciplinary analyses of the images in central Europe show that the imaginations depicted represent less individual but rather popular beliefs and that “inventions” of the artists were embedded in theological and humanist discourses spreading around in diverse sources and practices.⁴ The set of qualifications making a witch ‘a witch’ had been synthesised and standardised by demonologists from the beginning
of the fifteenth century onwards. Research on the variety and mix of tropes and elements of witchcraft concepts in different images considers the choices of sources, relates them to specific interests and situates them within local and historical cultural frames. Important questions are to whom the images had been addressed, who the patrons might have been and in which social groups the images circulated.

While many of the representations reflect demonic magic the witches were supposed to be able to practice with the help of the devil (malefic sorcery) – for the demonologists the main evidence for their sinfulness – the concepts of the witch and witchcraft deeply rooted in (Christian) phantasies on “female” seductiveness began at the time to become overtly eroticised not only by the narratives but also by the formal organisation and painterly techniques of the art works. Sexuality practiced outside of marriage was considered a sin from the Christian theological perspective, and lust one of the seven sins. The representations of women as witches allude to diverse imaginations about perverse sexual practices with demons or the devil, and about the powers or qualities reflected in behavior and gesture as well as in the depiction of erotic naked bodies, allowing for a new kind of voyeurism and adding to the attractiveness of the pictorial image. The so called female nude became a genre in itself as one of the central painterly “quotations” from Antiquity in the Renaissance period. The artists of early modern Europe inscribed the familiar set of motives into the theme of the erotic witch, they thus contributed to the iconology of the erotic female nude which became a dominant element in European art history and visual culture up to today. Though the motive of seduction and the endangering of male reason which had already been a part of the witches’ myths, artworks of the Renaissance shifted the concept of witchcraft clearly from combined sinfulness and demonic magic (the so called malefic sorcery, the Maleficium) to the visual attractiveness of the female nude as the body of a witch – a bewitching body – reflected in drawings, woodcuts and paintings.

The fascination of these images for viewers even nowadays has to do with a historical continuation of phantasies of “female” sexuality which is a gender-specific attribution of seductive powers to women – by no means an exclusive qualification of the figure of the witch – and with the continuity of voyeuristic structures within painting and other visual media. The frame for the reception of their erotic content has become different now when sexualised images are omnipresent even in public spaces and social media and “free” sexuality is celebrated as one of the markers with which western societies are identified. So it is of no surprise that publications on the topic of witches usually are heavily illustrated; even more so if they appeal to a broader public. Recycling and circulation of the images add to the attractiveness also of coffee table books, exhibition catalogues and of the position of the historical expert him or herself – an effect which should be reflected also by the researcher. The use of the pictorial images within diverse strategies of showing can be observed within the historical sources themselves as well as in the perspectives of research and of publishing the material. The term “illustration” hints at one of the problems of their use in historical compendia: very often they are neither analysed in detail nor related to historical sources but are considered to illustrate the sources or, even worse, to “document reality”.

The following article focusses on examples of witchcraft and early modern art from 1450 to 1550 in the heartland of the persecutions. It will acknowledge that artworks
don’t speak for “themselves”. The perspective of the analysis is always dependent on
the concepts with which one proceeds and this perspective is even responsible for the
choice of objects included in or excluded from the corpus of analysis. Historians for
example have tended to concentrate on representations accompanying theological,
philosophical and humanist treatises, while traditional art history focussed on the art-
works of acknowledged artists as being related exclusively to other artworks. In order
to close the gap and take into account that the subject is embedded in a wider field
of cultural practices the researcher is drawn to the transdisciplinary approaches of
studies in visual culture while observing interrelations between the cultural artefacts
and sources. This includes approaches provided by social art history, i.e. concepts
focussing on the function of convention within the processes of transfer, transla-
tion and reading of images through histories and societies. To this complex belong
iconological, iconographical as well as semiological approaches, and the concept of
a repertoire of images that processes a “cultural memory”. The circulation of images
and the building of a repertoire of images are powerful processes in which the (art)
historian always participates.

Imagination and construction of witches as a
heretical sect and the Sabbath

Probably one of the earliest depictions of women as witches riding and/or flying on
a besom in the fifteenth century is the illumination at the margin of a folio in Martin
le Franc’s manuscript “Le champion des dames” from 1451 composed at around
1440–1441. (Figure 26.1). Martin le Franc, living some time in Arras in the north
of France around 1435, then secretary of the duke of Savoy, Amadeus (the anti-
pope Felix V), and provost of the chapter of Lausanne and participant at the reform
Council of Basle 1431–1449, provides one of the first literary descriptions of the
witches’ Sabbath as a manifestation of a sect-like counter-church perverting Christ-
ian rites in the tradition of heretics. At the same time duke Amadeus encouraged
his advocates to cooperate with Franciscan and Dominican inquisitors in establish-
ing proceedings against heretics, Jews, sorcerers, witches and magicians. The pros-
ecution and executions of persons as witches spread then from Savoy to western
Switzerland.

Witches’ persecutions in the Wallis between 1420 and 1430 were already reported
as early as 1430 for example by the Lucerne chronicler Hans Fründ, and one of
the first compilations of experiences from witch trials and witches’ persecutions in
the cantons of Bern, Wallis and Vaud was published by the Basle council theologian
Johannes Nider in his treatise “Formicarius” 1437, repeatedly quoted in the most
influential book written against witches, the “Malleus Maleficarum” of Heinrich
Kramer, (Institutoris) first published in 1486. Martin Le Franc is one of the first who
attributes the “Sabbath” or “Synagogue” especially to women, both terms referring
to Jewish religious rituals – in a description of heresy of course no accident. In his
allegorical poem narrating stories of courageous women like Jeanne d’Arc, Martin
le Franc transforms an assumed sect of heretics (the Vaudois, Waldensians), into an
assumed sect of witches. In the illumination the women are depicted as “normal”
women in usual traditional rural garbs comparable to illustrations of the time, rid-
ing on brooms being the only “unusual” element. The flying witch riding on sticks,
brooms or animals became an integral element of representations of the Sabbath – an assembly of devil worshipping and practising perverse sexuality as in the miniatures illuminating the three French manuscripts of the influential Cologne theologian Johannes Tinctoris’ “Traité du crime de vauderie” published around 1460, when the trials against Waldensian heretics in Arras were still ongoing pursued by the Inquisitor of Arras, Pierre Broussart. All three illuminations show “Waldensians worshipping the devil and kissing the anus of the devil as gout”. The depiction by the French illuminator Philippe de Mazerolles living and working at the time...
in Bruges shows one female and eleven male Waldensian in a group around the goat holding lighted candles, some of them praying, one of the men kneeling and approaching the anus with his head. The scene is situated in a nocturnal landscape outside the city-walls seen in the background. Five more men and women are shown still flying to the assembly through the sky, two women on brooms, one on an animal, one man and one woman with courtly headdress being carried through the air by demons or devils. Beside the fact that the “obscene kiss” is depicted the illumination is not an erotic image. It shows the women and men in their normal urban or – in one case courtly – garbs. Beside the flying heretics in the sky and the demons there is no sign that the scene should not be “real”, it does not differ from other illuminations in chronicles from the same illuminator in the Parisian manuscript style of the time. The illuminations seem to underline the aim of the treatise which was to convince its readers of the reality of the events described as Waldensian heresy.

The theme of the witches’ Sabbath – at least in the combination of all elements – disappears then for the next hundred years from witchcraft imagery. The cultural historian Charles Zika proposes the interpretation that this might be a possible effect of the victory of the appellants in the Arras trials in 1491, declaring the descriptions of the Sabbath as illusionary. Yet more detailed research on this phenomenon is necessary, since the topic did not disappear from the demonologists’ propaganda and publications. Illuminated manuscripts, even if circulated in several copies, did not have the same width of audience as printed publications and woodcuts which became successful in distributing codes of witchcraft in the second half of the fifteenth and in the sixteenth century in different contexts and geographical areas. We are left with some interesting questions: why, when and how the Sabbath – with its ensemble of motives – became (again) an interesting subject for chroniclers and painters from the end of the sixteenth century onwards, dominantly in the northern parts of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation, in Flanders and the Netherlands?

Evil practices of witches: malefic sorcery

At the end of the fifteenth century the most influential theological treatise against witches, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the witches) of the Dominican inquisitor Heinrich Kramer (Institoris) was published and reprinted between in 1485 until 1669 in thirty editions. A manual of demonological popular witch beliefs and descriptions of witchcraft quoted from theological and other sources, it concentrated on the sins and the malefic sorcery of the dominantly female witches – the pact with the devil being the precondition. The treatise shows that witches and their crimes existed and challenges the civil authorities and civil lawyers to prosecute the witches as criminals. The publication *De laniis et phitonicis mulieribus* (*On Female Witches and Seers*) of the Constance doctor of laws Ulrich Molitor, one of the first reactions to “The Hammer of the witches”, reflects this strategy and opposes it within a conversation between three participants on the possible reality of the crimes of witches. It discusses the questions whether the witches are able to cook up hailstorms, to lame men with arrows (or to make men impotent), to transform themselves and others into animal shapes, to ride on anointed forks or animals through
the sky, whether they practice intercourse with the devil and – last not least – whether they would be able to recognise each other as witches. The last question suggests that the sect of the witches uses secret signs and languages, assuming that in everyday life they usually would not look different from other people. This is a question which in fact illustrators and painters had to ask themselves too when representing witches: how can they be made recognisable to the viewer? Which signs does the viewer need to understand the images?

Whereas Molitor’s treatise admits the reality of the devil as source for all evil it negates the effectivity of evil practices of witches. Yet, the illustrations added to the chapters of the treatise show malefic sorcery as being practiced by the witches themselves, not by the devil. The series of six woodcuts appeared in variations and copies in more than twenty illustrated editions of the bestseller between 1490 and 1510 in more than nine German cities. The single crimes as depicted in the illustration were by then common belief, their mode of representation had become common knowledge. Among the motives quoted most frequently are the ride of the witches on sticks or animals and the group of witches cooking hailstorms by throwing snakes and cocks into the boiling cauldron above a fire (Figure 26.2).

The Swabian artists Hans Schäuffelein, an apprentice to Albrecht Dürer’s workshop in Nuremberg between 1503 and 1507, clearly addresses viewers familiar with the single elements of the composite woodcut he produced for a treatise on civil law “Der neü Layenspiegel” (“The Laymen’s Guide”) written by the city secretary Ulrich Tengler and published as a revised version by Tengler’s son Christoph, a professor of canon law, in 1511 (Figure 26.3). Surrounding a central circle within a landscape on which a magician invokes demons the witches’ crimes are depicted: on the left side a witch cooking a hailstorm; a witch sending an arrow to the crippled man in the right corner below (alluding to the witches’ crime of laming a man); on the right side a witch stealing milk from a tree trunk. Above her we see a witch embracing the devil and on the left of that scene a man dealing with a Chandler while being indoctrinated by a devil on his shoulders. Two witches with forked sticks ride on goats through the sky. Below the magician’s circle on the left side we see two lawyers, perhaps Ulrich Tengler and his son, discussing and watching the legal punishment of the witches and sorcerers: their execution by fire. Though this woodcut shows the scenes simultaneously and compiles them like a dictionary it organises them at the same time within an illusionary, almost unified pictorial space which is interrupted only by the circle of the magician. The landscape is supposed to portray a “real” space, the women and men do not show specific bodily qualifications or garbs, they are recognisable as witches and sorcerers only by what they do as something happening in “reality”. The woodcut illustrates an added chapter in the revised version of the treatise, definitely integrating witchcraft and sorcery into a manual about the punishment of civil crimes. Legal punishment of crimes can be demanded only if these are considered to be effective and real – not imaginary.

Schäuffelein’s woodcut among others is proof that Renaissance artists were familiar with recent publications on witchcraft and theological, humanistic and juridical debates on black, demonic and white, spiritual magic, that they were often familiar with the authors and that they cooperated with editors and printers, that they
Figure 26.2  Two witches cooking up a hailstorm, illustration of malefic sorcery in Ulrich Molitor, “Von den bosen weibern, die man nennet die hexen” (De laniis et phitonicis mulieribus), Ulm, Johann Zainer 1490/91. INTERFOTO / Alamy Stock Photo.
delivered the illustrations which made the books attractive and marketable. For the pictorial language of his woodcut, Hans Schäuffelein did not refer to the woodcuts as those in the diverse editions of Molitor’s treatise alone but recycled representation of witches he knew from his master Albrecht Dürer and his colleague Hans Baldung Grien, working at Dürer’s workshop at the same time. These two German artists were the main agents contributing to the transformation of the figure of the witch in the sixteenth century.

*Figure 26.3* Hans Schäuffelein, Crimes of malefic sorcery, woodcut, in Ulrich Tengler “Der neü Layenspiegel”, ed. b. Christoph Tengler, Augsburg 1511. Wikimedia: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sorcery_and_witch_craze.jpg
Albrecht Dürer takes part in the transformation of the social status of artists at around 1500 and in the transformations of social and theological perspectives.\textsuperscript{21} An apprentice to Michael Wolgemut (beginning 1486) he might have participated in producing some of the illustrations for the “Nuremberg Chronicle” published in 1493 by his godfather Anton Koberger, the most successful publisher in Germany of his time. Dürer established his own workshop in Nuremberg 1497 after having traveled to the Netherlands and Italy and before traveling there again. He became familiar with protagonists of the Italian Renaissance. Jacopo de’ Barbari triggered Dürer’s interest in the rediscovery of antique techniques in perspective, proportion and anatomy leading him to take on his own research. Dürer corresponded with humanists and reformers such as Willibald Pirckheimer, Philipp Melanchthon, Agrippa of Nettesheim and Erasmus of Rotterdam on humanist and reformers’ concepts; he sympathised with the reformation. He was not only interested in fusing figures of classical mythology (Medea, Circe, Aphrodite and others) with associations of the Northern European figures of the witch and the vices but also in the form of the classical nude which he used 1497 for the engraving known as the “The four witches”, four female nudes in classical positions building a group within a central perspective interior watched by a devilish monster.\textsuperscript{22} The influential engraving “Witch riding backwards on a Capricorn/goat” 1501 (Figure 26.4) has been interpreted as picture puzzle synthesising humanist astrological concepts with the witches’ ride familiar to him, the Furious Horde (a ride of restless dead and demons) and representations of the vice of lust and sexual disorder.\textsuperscript{23}

The witch riding backwards on a Capricorn with the tail of a fish or serpent, together with the winged putti, build a sort of circle inscribed into the space of the engraving which is split up into a sky and earth spheres separated through a small line of the sea as horizon. The circle signifies the cycle of the periods of a year represented in the Zodiac. Belief in astrology – at the center of humanist philosophy of Ficino and others considered as “spiritual” magic – sees the celestial bodies dominating and influencing micro- and macrocosms for a specific period of the year; a heritage of classical antiquity. Witches are the planet Satan’s “children”, as well as criminals, Jews, the poor, miners and others. The pictorial image can be read as allegory of “the world turned upside down” at the time of the winter solstice. For this interpretation it provides a number of signs: the backward ride, the somersaults of the putti, the hair of the witch flying in contrary direction against the possible wind and Dürer’s monogram turned around. The witch’s body shows formal elements of classical nudes and the signs of representations of the vice of lust. She holds one corn of the goat/Capricorn with one hand, with the other she keeps a distaff between her legs – allusion to sexual autonomy – her hair is flying wildly and she obviously has something to do with the hailstorm in the left upper corner. The depiction of such a witch in the context of an astrological concept stages the power of the witch as an inversion of the “normal” social order similar to carnival rituals. This inversion underlines the order which is considered to be “normal”, it does not last – the end of the reign of women is foreseeable. Humanist defenders of spiritual magic claimed that astrological magic contrasted to sinful
Figure 26.4  Witch riding backwards on a goat, c.1505 (Burin engraving), Dürer or Duerer, Albrecht (1471–1528)/Private Collection/Photo © Luisa Ricciarini/Bridgeman Images
demonic magic which had to be accepted by Christian theology since the planets and their movements were created by God, therefore also their influence on life on earth. With the permission of God, the humanist magician practices white magic in order to react to the imagined influences of the planets.

Dürer’s allegory of the world “turned upside down” was addressed to circles of humanists and friends who were familiar with the astrological allusions. In combination with the more popular figure of the riding witch, the engraving seems to suggest that even witches’ crimes and power have a place in God’s universe; the Lutheran version being that God allows the devil do his work to a specific point for enabling the distinction between sinners from not sinners. It does not seem likely that Dürer doubts the reality of the devil and the witches – neither did the humanists nor the reformers. They all were involved in a complex discussion on magic, declaring that one of the witches to be demonical for distinguishing their own beliefs and practices as part of the theological order.

**The eroticisation of the witches in the imagery of Hans Baldung Grien**

The Swabian artist Hans Baldung stemming from a family of scholars, younger than Dürer – his nickname Green (greenhorn) deriving from the times he worked at the latter’s workshop – focussed on representations showing groups of mostly attractive naked young women contrasted often with an old hag as witches sitting around a cauldron. He deliberately exploited the voyeuristic aspects of such images and alludes to diverse erotic imaginations accompanying the witches’ mythology. Group scenes of witches promise indirect access to the initiated who can be watched from “outside” without danger. Those scenes of female nudes became extremely fashionable at the beginning of the sixteenth century starting with Dürer’s “Four witches”. Baldung Grien after having been an apprentice in Strasbourg went to Dürer’s workshop in 1503 which he directed while Dürer was traveling. In 1510, the year Baldung got married and founded his own workshop in Strasbourg, a city known for its tolerance at the beginning of the Reformation, he produced the most influential woodcut of his series of witch scenes (Figure 26.5), most of them drawings produced between 1514 and 1515 while he was working on the altar piece for the Freiburg cathedral, and one an oil painting in 1523. During his lifetime he became one of the most successful artists and an acknowledged citizen of Strasbourg. Baldung was familiar with publications such as the “Hammer of the witches”, recent discussions on witchcraft and of course with the tradition of its depiction. At the time he installed himself in Strasbourg, Johann Geiler of Kaysersberg, a popular preacher, had held sermons 1509 in the cathedral discussing the different aspects of witchcraft. The sermons were published under the title “Die Emeis” (“The Ants”) by the Franciscan author Johann Pauli. The printed edition was enriched with illustrations, some – or at least one of them – coming from Baldung’s workshop, an illustration linking the scene of witches to the topos of the “reign of women over men” (Weibermacht).

The woodcut “Witches preparing for the Sabbath” of 1510 shows a group of three witches in a forest surrounding, sitting and kneeling around a boiling cauldron, the
Figure 26.5 Hans Baldung Grien, Group of witches preparing for the ride to the Sabbath, chiaroscuro woodcut 1510 (Schade, Schadenzauber, Abb. 18, S. 54) INTERFOTO / Alamy Stock Photo
latter and one of the witches situated within a magical triangle of cooking forks. The witch riding backwards on a goat above the scene in the nocturnal sky is the youngest and about to join the fogs and clouds streaming from the cauldron; she is a quotation of Dürer’s “Witch riding backwards”. Almost hidden by the main group of witches and the vapours from the cauldron, parts of another goat and another witch become visible. The most agitated old witch in the middle of the group raises her arms holding a cloth and a platter with animal parts. The diverse objects lying around the witches hint at sacrificial practices, the cooking of hailstorms without natural means (no fire) and of flying ointment used for rubbing forks or themselves before flying. The cat sitting back to back to the witch on the right side seems to be a transformed witch herself. The cauldron seems to be linked to the myth of Pandora’s Box, since the evil evaporates while the same witch opens the cover only slightly.26 The sausages collected on the fork on the left side refer to the popular wording of the time meaning male genitals, signifying to those familiar with the moralising literature and demonology the crime of “impotentia ex *maleficium*” (impotence by sorcery). The image has been exercised within a refined new technique, a chiaroscuro woodcut for which several woodblocks are necessary, a technique which had been invented by the Augsburg artist Hans Burgkmair the Elder. It allows for dramatic effects of light and dark zones, for the plasticity of the female bodies adding to them a painterly dimension and creating the illusion of natural bodies in a real environment.

Whereas this image is more than filled with attributes recognisable from the iconography of the witch, Baldung’s most astonishing chiaroscuro drawing of “Three witches” of 1514 lacks them with almost only one exception completely (Figure 26.6). It is a pen drawing on a tinted paper heightened with white. The eroticisation of the theme is evident: the viewer is confronted with a group of two young witches and one old, presenting their bodies and their genitals without shame, one shows her backside spreading her legs, the other one covers her genitals with her right hand (which can be interpreted also more actively). It should be noted here that art historical description as the one just given often fails to name the agency correctly: it is not the witches but indeed Baldung who presents the bodies. Beside the steaming pot held up high by one of the witches – a reference to Venus also – and the flying hair there is no other sign identifying the women as witches. To those familiar with the tradition of their depiction in fact more signs are no longer necessary. The bodies build a kind of dynamic pyramid over the wooden plate with the artists’ monogram helping each other to scrub them with flying ointment. The witch stepping on top of the back of the one crouched on hands and legs seems just about to leave through the sky. The gaze upside down through her legs to the viewer makes the women crouching on her legs the most provocative since she addresses the viewer directly. Baldung confronts the viewer with his desire to see while seducing him and letting him know that he is observed at the same time. But who is the viewer? The drawing shows also an inscription “DER COR CAPEN EIN GUT JAR”. If it translates how it was first proposed, that it can be read as a new years’ wish dedicated to a cleric (*Chorkappe* in German), the drawing then ironically alludes to the debates around the problem of the concubines of the clerics (*Mönchshuren* in German) who at the time did not obey to the order of celibacy, giving reason to polemics between the reformers and the traditional church, and
Figure 26.6  Hans Baldung Grien, Three witches (New years’ greetings), pen drawing on tinted paper, heightened with white, 1514, Wien Albertina, (Schade, Schadenzäuber, Abb. 51, S. 112) Art Heritage / Alamy Stock Photo
leading to Luther’s proposal that clerics should also be married to one woman alone.\textsuperscript{27} The image addresses voyeuristic impulses, plays with the desires expected from a male viewer and was shown in private circles as well as the later oil painting “Two weather witches” of 1523. Baldung’s representations of witches had been widely copied by his contemporaries and his naturalising and illusionist depiction of women’s bodies have been quoted throughout the further tradition of witchcraft imagery.

**Illusion or reality: the furious horde and witches in Lucas Cranach’s allegories of Melancholy**

The “wild hunt” or “furious horde” (or the wild cavalcade, das Wütische Heer in German) had been a folkloristic element which was quoted in most of the treatises dealing with witchcraft, so in the “Hammer of the witches” or in Geiler of Kaysersberg’s sermons. The latter describes the furious horde as revenants having been killed through executions condemned to restless strife through the night. Paracelus links the furious horde to the witches. For him it is an assembly of witches and demons altogether.\textsuperscript{28}

While the furious horde had already been integrated in representations of witches as early as in Albrecht Altdorfer’s drawing “Departure to the Sabbath” in 1506 the motive was taken up, shifted and framed within the representation of Melancholy in four paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder between 1528 and 1533. I will concentrate on the one version now in the Museum Unterlinden in Colmar of 1532 (Figure 26.7). Cranach, court painter to the Electors of Saxony in Wittenberg from 1505 and embracing the Protestant Reformation becoming a close friend of Martin Luther, referred in his allegories of melancholy to Dürer’s engraving “Melencolia I” of 1514, an image having caused abundant scholarly interpretation in art history, mostly analysed as an optimistic humanist re-interpretation of the temperament as a precondition even for genial creativity.\textsuperscript{29} In Cranach’s versions the main figure, the winged personification of melancholy and the putti refer to Dürer’s engraving, also the sphere, the sleeping dog, chisel and compass depicted in three of them. Yet, in Cranach’s paintings the personification of melancholy – a temperament attributed to the “children” of Saturn and part of the astrological concept of the influences of the celestial bodies on the humours – is situated in an interior with a large wall opening towards a landscape outside with a city and castle in the background leads the view to a large dark cloud in which the furious horde is depicted. In the painting of 1532 the participants of the furious ride are four naked women, clearly associated with the figure of the witch, three old and one young, riding on a boar, a horned cow and a dragon. The only man in the clothes of a German nobleman of the time rides on a Capricorn and seems to participate not on free will but pushed by the old women with a fork and pulled forward by the woman on the dragon. One of the most interesting elements in this painting is the putto swinging between the two levels of “reality” within an anyway illusionary frame. It links the personification of melancholy to the devilish fantasies ascribed to the temperament not only by astrological concepts but also by the Lutheran theology. The devil’s insinuations were considered to be real and melancholy a sinful vice one has to fight.
Figure 26.7  Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Melancholy*, oil on panel 1532, Museum Unterlinden, Colmar Peter Horree / Alamy Stock Photo
The appearances of the witch and of witchcraft – a proof of the artist’s virtuosity

Throughout the theological, demonological and humanist treatises one of the main questions addressed is, what exactly can be taken as “real” and what exactly as fantasy, whether the agency of the devil or the agency of the witches, the crimes of the witches, their ability of flying to Sabbath assemblies and/or perverse sexual practices and rituals being performed at those occasions. The different answers lead to different consequences. The power ascribed to women as witches mirror the power of the inquisitor, the exorcist or the legal persecutor ascribes to himself. All the descriptions of sinful excesses show that they empower themselves by narrating or depicting the forbidden scenes.

The artist at the time of early modern art is a new agent on the scene. The examples of Dürer, Baldung, Cranach and others show that the topic of the witch was discovered as means of establishing a new kind of identity and demonstrating virtuosity in a field, where competitiveness leads to a new understanding of their task: who will be the best magician? Isn’t it the artist who is the master of delusion and illusion? While contributing to the discourses around the powers of witchcraft the artist not only adds to their attractiveness but also vice versa exploits the lustful projections of the debated crimes and seducing powers for his own purpose, claiming the power of these for his own profession and status, one of the heritages of early modern art.

Notes

1 Johannes Dillinger, Hexen und Magie (Frankfurt: Campus Verlang, 2018), 87–90.


10 Renilde Vervoort, “Les representations artistiques du sabbat (XVe-XVIIe siècles).” In: Ostorero, 79–89, here 81 ff, ill. 19, the other two illuminations see 2 and 80.

11 For further historical details see Charles Zika, The Appearance, 61–63.

12 Ibid., 63.

13 Ibid., 67.


15 German title: “Tractatus von den bosen Weibern, die man nennet die hexen”.

16 Ulrich Moltor himself, archduke Sigismund of Austria and the major of Constance, Konrad Schatz, see Sigrid Schade, Schadenzauber, 25–32.


18 Ibid., 17.

19 Schade, Schadenzauber, 31–34; Zika, The Appearance, 36.

20 Schade, Schadenzauber, 32.


24 For the following paragraph see Schade, Schadenzauber, 42–62, 80–118; Hults, The Witch, 75–103; Zika, The Appearance, 11–17, 82–87.


26 Schade etc.

27 Schade, Schadenzauber, 112–118.


30 Hults, The Witch.

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