

HIST 96.10 Seminar: Topics in Medieval History.
The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages Reconsidered: Art, Artists, and Cultural Change
in the Northern Renaissance, 1350–1575

Course Description:

This seminar re-examines a famous period in European history through the lense of its art. The “Late Medieval Crisis” is often thought as a period of decline and decadence, ultimately discarded and replaced by the Renaissance. Looking at cultural and intellectual change in the visual arts prompts a more nuanced approach, revealing the extraordinary fertility of thought and action in this time of transition.

The seminar concentrates on four remarkable painters: Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Informed by ideas and models that were rooted in the medieval tradition but influenced by new cultural trends, they and their contemporaries transformed the art of painting and brought it to new heights. As all art, theirs reflected discussions of faith, the rise of humanism, growing interest in individual thought, the beginnings of modern science, the expansion of the European world and commercial capitalism, social inequality, renewed debate about gender, and the effects of the Reformation on political life. Great artists, however, do more than simply reflect social and intellectual movements: they also offer a critique, asking questions and proposing answers that exist above and apart from trends and “-isms.” As such, they are excellent guides for the historian who wants to understand how a society renews itself and mentally or conceptually adapts to change.

The seminar will provide an opportunity to hone your skills as a historian by working closely with primary sources, both textual and visual. Texts to be read include work by Erasmus, Sebastian Brandt, Luther, Thomas More, and Montaigne.

Instructor: Walter Simons.

Distributive and/or World Culture:

Dist: SOC; WCult:W

Offered:

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Department-Specific Course Categories

Major Dist: EUR.