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Lucas Van Leyden's Dance Around the Golden Calf: The Northern Triptych in the Age of the Reformation

Jennifer R. Pease
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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By Jennifer R. Pease
Department of Art
Faculty Mentor: Lynn F. Jacobs
Department of Art

Abstract:

This paper focuses on Lucas van Leyden’s 1530 triptych Dance Around the Golden Calf. It is shown through a stylistic and iconographic analysis of the painting that it is a piece reflective of the tensions and upheaval prevalent during the Reformation-era society in which it was produced. This was a time when Northern European artists such as Lucas began an increase in secularism in their work, demonstrating the dawn of a new era in the church. Lucas effectively uses visual contradiction and psychological implication to respond artistically to the tumultuous age of the Reformation.
**Introduction:**

Lucas van Leyden’s *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (Figures 1 & 2) is a sixteenth century triptych which reflects the tension of the transitional era of the Reformation in its style and iconography. Lucas was creating this painting during the tumultuous time sparked much debate about the role of the church in daily life, and people began discussing revolutionary religious ideas. One of the primary sources of debate centered on the importance of the taking of Sacraments, or communion, in the church. Lucas remarks through *Dance*’s contradictions and topics prevalent during this time. This paper seeks to demonstrate how Lucas’s painting embodies a multifaceted synthesis of Italian Renaissance and Dutch Netherlands influence to create a simultaneously cohesive and contradictory work of art which reflects the temperament of the Reformation Age. It will be shown that *Dance Around the Golden Calf* is a “composite, highly mannered art, as realistic in details as unrealistic in general effect; an art that reflected the spiritual ferment of the age, its skeptical detachment, its nervous tension, and its intellectualistic bias” (Leymarie 51).

**Style:**

Lucas’s treatment of style in *Dance* reflects the tensions and dualities of the Reformation. The color in Lucas’s *Dance* shows the influence of Northern masters before him, and also exhibits a personal mastery of the element of balance in his work. Essentially, Lucas blends Northern elements with new Italianate ones. The use of bright reds is characteristic of the North. The concept of complete color balance and harmony reflects the ideals of the Italian Renaissance. The color red is repeated rhythmically throughout the composition of *Dance*, drawing the eye in cyclical patterns throughout the work. It is notable that these undulating patterns are also repeated in buttocks, jugs, baskets, and clouds, as well as the dwellings of the Israelites in the background of the piece. Their significance will be discussed later in the paper. Visually, the red color of *Dance* acts to unify these repeating circular patterns, creating harmony and movement. A similar use of red as a device for movement may be seen in many earlier Northern works, an example of which is Jan Van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece*. Lucas also used a simpler method of red as a device for circular movement in his 1515 piece, the *Card Players* (Figure 3). The color scheme Lucas chose for *Dance* is largely subdued other than the rhythmic red. The palate of earth tones, including a range of cool browns, yellows, greens and blues serve as a balancing mechanism to the warm, attention grabbing red. Lucas juxtaposes these warm and cool hues to achieve a complex tonal balance within the work (Smith, New Appraisal, 39). Compositonally, the depth of hue in the foreground contrasted with the lighter handling of color in the middle ground is complimentary to Lucas’s innovative inverted format, discussed later in further detail.

We once again see the Italian Renaissance influence in Lucas’s treatment of the human figure and enveloping drapery in *Dance*. The skill and neatness with which the drapery is rendered evidences Lucas’s background as an engraver (Stechow 35). One example of Lucas’s ability to render drapery realistically may be found in his *Temptation of St. Anthony* (Figure 4). The drapery folds in *Dance* have the same realistic modeling over thick, sturdy forms that are apparent in the St. Anthony engraving. Italianate influence is manifest through Lucas’s sculptural treatment of the form, reminiscent of Donatello’s bulky, monumental body types. The corporealism found in Lucas’s treatment of the figure in *Dance* reinforces the piece as a genre subject dealing with morality issues. The Israelites are engaged in self-gratification, and the voluptuous forms with clinging drapery reinforce the sensual nature of their actions (to be discussed further in the second section of this paper). Furthermore, throughout *Dance* there are many figures which embody Italian prototypes of the figure, for example the back view of the female in the centralized portion of the left panel. This figure in particular may also show Albrecht Durer’s influence on Lucas’s style, for it is quite similar to Durer’s *Nude From Behind* (Snyder 322), a piece which was ultimately influence by the Italian
Figure 4. Lucas van Leyden. The Temptation of St. Anthony, 1509 (engraving).

Figure 5. (Above) Raphael. Madonna and Child and Young St. John (The Alba Madonna). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (©Alinari / Art Resource, New York)

Figure 3. (Left) Lucas van Leyden. The Card Players. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 6. Lucas van Leyden. David Playing the Harp Before Saul, c. 1508 (engraving).
Renaissance. The female figure in the center panel of Dance has another Italian prototype, Raphael’s Alba Madonna (Figure 5). Furthermore, the Italian influence on body types and posturing is apparent in the female figure in the centralized portion of the right panel. This female form is reminiscent of the one observed in Botticelli’s Birth of Venus. Lucas’s voluptuous form stands in a graceful sway, the contrapposto stance highlighted by the treatment of drapery, noted especially on the right leg. The prototypes Lucas uses throughout Dance reinforces the artist’s references to the Italianate tradition.

Lucas’s treatment of faces in Dance is another stylistic element which reinforces the contradictory and transitional nature of the piece. In Dutch and Flemish Painters, C.V. Mander observed that Lucas possessed great skill in depicting emotions, as seen in Lucas’s earlier work King Saul and David (56), (Figure 6). This scholar’s observation made me realize that the opposite phenomenon is at work in Lucas’s Dance. All of the faces in Dance are depicted in a neutral fashion. Some stare straight out at the viewer, but the look in their eyes is expressionless. No mouths smile, no faces grimace in this piece. Some faces, such as the centralized female in the right panel are entirely homogenous, the features completely undefined. This tactic was used by Lucas to spark a dialogue between the painting and the viewer, provoking the viewer to draw their own moralistic conclusions about the piece. Another observation concerning the facial qualities in Dance is in reference to a woman’s face which appears in the lower right foreground of the center panel. The wide face, shifty eyes, and flat headpiece recall in my mind a face in the right panel of Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights. This similarity shows possibility that Lucas was influenced by his contemporary, and may also act as a sly allusion to Hell when connecting the face in Dance with the earlier Bosch work.

It is commonly accepted by scholars that Lucas’s Dance was executed in 1530, which was late in his career. Lucas was a fabled child prodigy who had a natural proficiency for engraving, creating accomplished work as early as age nine (Mander 48). Certain visual elements in Lucas’s early work, such as hands gripping sticks and staffs, are found in the artist’s early works such as Susana and the Elders and the Milkmaid (Figure 7). These visual elements resurface in Lucas’s Dance in a more sophisticated manner, the significance of which will be discussed in respects to iconography. The shape of the Dance triptych is also an indication that Lucas executed this piece later in his career. The bell shaped format began appearing in much sixteenth century art, and its break from the traditional rectangular format was a necessary innovation of artists striving to capture the public’s attention in a shifting market. Lucas experimented with a similar shape in his 1526 Last Judgment triptych prior to his use of this shape in Dance. This is a shape that is not manifest in Lucas’s earlier work, the majority of which are engravings.

There is a conflict between Lucas’s treatment of the exterior of Dance versus the interior which reiterates the tension prominent in the piece. In assessing the exterior to the piece, greater explanation may be found as to the intent for the location of the work. The outside of the triptych is rendered simply in green and
red imitation marble, devoid of subject matter (Smith 107). Lucas's failure to make the exterior more engaging is probably reflective of the notion that Dance was a secular piece, intended for personal home display rather than church altar function. The shift in Lucas's focus from the primary biblical story to the revelry of the Israelites may have also influenced his decision to not include the major figures from the story on the outside of the piece, as was the trend with previous Northern work. This subversion of the biblical story in preference of the emphasis on the Israelites' revelry is what makes this piece describable as an 'inverted composition'.

By using an inverted composition in Dance, Lucas creates a scenario in which the biblical is subverted by the secular. This brings the licentious behavior of the Israelites rather than the role of Moses to the forefront. This makes the piece focused on rebellion, rather than obedience, to God. This introduces an element of tension into the work which solidifies it as a commentary on the conflicted age in which it was produced. The viewer is not meant to simply view an illustrative tale of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Rather, the viewer is accosted with the drunken revelry of the Israelites, their sensuous bodies filling the three triptych panels in the fore and middle grounds. We must strain to observe the biblical focus of the story, Moses, in the background. This inversion by Lucas shows how Northern Europe was shifting out of the middle ages towards the modern era. People were considering the role of the religious image in a new way. Rather than absorb a story illustrated straight from biblical text, they were thinking about the implications and deeper meanings behind the text, forming new opinions and ideas concerning religion.

The insignificance of the exterior of Dance is juxtaposed against the active, highly symbolic interior, and serves to heighten the sense of displacement and detachment that Lucas creates with his lack of facial expression. This is to say that Lucas creates a sense of incongruity in Dance by creating an energetic, complex composition which is full of active and emotive themes yet generalizes rather than humanizes his subjects. One would expect a lively, full composition to portray emotive participants, but rather they appear detached from their activities.

Lucas introduces further visual tension in Dance through his use of the three paneled triptych format. The artist uses this format to both unify and separate the visual presence of Dance. Division is apparent in that figures are cut off at the edges of the panels, for instance a face may be seen in the left portion of the right wing, but their body does not continue on into the next panel. However, the movement and momentum of the figures carries the eye fluidly throughout the piece. The continuous plane of the ground as well as the treatment of the skyline solidify the piece as simultaneously unified and divided. On the interior of Dance, visual unity is created between the three panels by the rhythmic red and repetition of cyclical patterning throughout. I believe this cyclical patterning throughout the composition became a strong influence in much later work, an example of which is Matisse's Dance II.

One manner in which Lucas prevents the incongruities of Dance from creating an illogically conflicted piece is through repetition of motif. There is a repetition of trios in Dance, which unifies the piece visually and logically, and fits into the use of a triptych format. The female that creates the central axis of each panel occurs three times. Moses appears in the painting three times, the most difficult of which to recognize is the tiny Moses on the cliff of Mt. Sinai in the background of the center panel. In the right panel, the careful observer will note that besides the figure recognized as Moses, there are two other bearded men in close proximity. These Moses look alike form a triangle in the right panel's middle ground. The pronounced spatial quality dividing the painting into definite foreground, middle ground, and background furthers the repetition of trios found in Dance. The possible meaning behind the unifying device of trios in Dance will be explored in the iconography portion of this endeavor. Further visual unity among the three panels of Dance is created by the expansive sky which flows through the piece. At first glance, the landscape seemed to reflect the same continuity, but upon further inspection, it seems the landscape contains both disparate and harmonious elements. This reiterates the earlier notion that Dance is simultaneously divided by the triptych format and incongruous faces, yet unified by the color and composition. On one hand, the flowing, painterly manner of the landscape is fluid from panel to panel. However, Lucas's decision to cut off trees, Mt. Sinai, and some of the camp of the Israelites introduces an element of tension into the piece. For example, the tree in the right portion of the center panel is severed abruptly, for it if continued it would actually be in front of the building directly adjacent to it in the right panel. Because the tree is cut off, a visual border is created at the right edge of the center panel which serves to contain the expansive space. The disparity caused by Lucas's decision to sever things at the panel parameters does not end with the landscape. The largest element of visual separation in Lucas's Dance is manifest by his repeated cutting off of the human forms from panel to panel. This is a unique decision by the artist. For in his earlier work Last Judgment the forms continue fluidly from panel to panel, an example of which may be found in the kneeling figure who carries over between the borders of the center and right panels. Why would Lucas disrupt the harmony created by color and form by repeatedly chopping off bodies at the panel edges? It is possible the artist was making a statement on the growing schism in the church. He may also have been alluding to the biblical wrath of God in Exodus 32:30, in which God tells Moses he will 'blot out' those who have sinned against him. Ultimately, Lucas's combination of harmonious and disparate visual elements in Dance results in an overall contradictory piece, the nature of which may have influenced the later Baroque style.
Iconography:

Iconographically, Lucas’s *Moses and the Worship of the Golden Calf* contains a complex layering of erotic, theological, and philosophical implications that show the piece to be a harbinger of a transient age. The dawn of the Reformation was a tumultuous time of collision and upheaval. Lucas was a member of the nobility of Leyden, married to a woman whose family was active in ‘The Forty,’ which was the governing council at the time (Silver 406). This close contact with the ruling class kept the artist centered in the public eye, thus creating an importance for him to not be perceived as a heretic. Thus, Lucas was a Catholic who was compelled to incorporate Protestant ideas into his work (Silver 409). By using this combination of elements in *Dance*, Lucas creates a piece intended to act as a commentary of the times, as well as a catalyst towards independent thought. The centralized females in each panel, the repetition of stick and staff forms, and the image of wine and vessels are some of the primary images in *Dance* which contain deeper meaning. The following seeks to unravel some of the complex iconography of Lucas’s *Dance*.

The erotic implications of *Dance* take a front seat to the biblical story for which the piece is titled. As discussed previously, the facial expressions, or lack thereof, in *Dance* are indicative of a desire to provoke moral pondering in the viewer. We witness illicit acts, yet are not informed as to how the participants feel about them. Thus, it is left to the viewer to make a judgment as to how they feel about the action of the piece. It is notable that the lust exhibited among the Israelites in *Dance* holds connotations with ‘luxuria’ or libido, which was considered one of the seven deadly sins by the church. However, in Renaissance times, many people began to regard ‘volumptas’, or sexual gratification, with the quality of lust (Hall 196). It is interesting that many Renaissance thinkers were actually coming to regard ‘volumptas’ as a virtuous and worthy pursuit. This is in line with Renaissance concepts of the glorification of the human, and the elevation of the physicality of man to a state of grandeur. This moral conflict between old church doctrine and modern Protestant thought was something Lucas could not ignore, and his decision to put the concept of the libido in the forefront to the biblical text indicates sympathy for modernized conceptions. Furthermore, the ‘play’ of the Israelites mentioned in Exodus 32:6 may refer to a sexual orgy of the Canaanites, who worshipped bull-calves as symbols of strength and fertility (Smith 296 Women). The stocky, bared body parts, especially knees, calves, and feet, found throughout *Dance* may be read as a visual reinforcement of this notion of strength. The pronounced breasts and belly of the female in the central panel further illustrates the notion of fertility. This depiction of the female was used to emphasize women’s role as the mother of all humanity. Also notable is the repeated use of feathered caps in *Dance*. This fancy, decorative element may indicate frivolousness and absence of chastity (Smith 65 New Appraisal).

The aforementioned female figure in the central panel of *Dance* bears a striking resemblance to typical Madonna images of the time. Also, the figure is handing a piece of fruit to the male who is seated on the ground slightly below her, paralleling her form with the role of Eve in the fall of man. This depiction of woman as both ‘Iamna diabol i’ (the Devil’s door) and ‘mater et nutrix omnium’ (spiritual mother and nurturer) is apparent in the centralized female form of Lucas’s *Dance* (Smith 296 Women). This idea of woman as the simultaneous embodiment of creator and destroyer is a visual play on the Ave/Eva dichotomy which manifests itself throughout art history. Lucas was in tune with the popular conception of the sixteenth century woman as morally degenerate, yet physically miraculous. A woman was, on one hand, socially bound to uphold virginal ideals of purity, chastity, and virtue. However, the glorification of the female nude, as in Botticelli’s *Venus*, highlighted the sheer erotic appeal of the disrobed female form. By depicting the centralized female figure as the embodiment of Ave/Eva, Lucas heightens the impact of his inverted composition and adds fuel to the fire of conversation his painting is intended to ignite.

The female in the centralized portion of the right panel of *Dance* holds further iconographical implications, largely due to the child beside her. With its references to Botticelli’s *Venus*, the figure takes on connotations of eroticism and desirability. The child beside her attempts to hold onto a bird, which is about to escape in flight. The Christ child is sometimes shown holding a bird. (Hall 48), and it is possible Lucas is repeating the Virgin and Child implication of the center panel. Another possible interpretation of the bird about to fly away is the symbolic loss of the soul, which may result from the Israelite’s revelry. It is notable that the child also wears a gold hoop earring, possibly indicative that he has remained pure by not participating in the construction of the golden calf. More likely, Lucas included this detail to give the boy a gypsy connotation. The combined imagery of the earring and the bird in relation to the boy could signify the child is tainted and wayward, in danger of losing his soul. Gypsy references are repeated in some of the headpieces and garments throughout *Dance*, creating an emphasis on the negative implications of gypsies as symbols of deceit and avarice, as depicted in Bosch’s *Heswain*. Furthermore, the word “gypsy” originates from Egypt, and the inclusion of such symbols in *Dance* may also allude to the Israelites’ biblical escape from Egypt (Smith 308 Women).

The repetition of the form of a stick, sword, or staff provides additional erotic as well as alchemical references within the triptych. In the center panel, the child on the Ave/Eva figure’s lap holds a stick, and his gaze lines up with the feather-capped gentleman in the right of the center panel. This man is gesturing back towards the center and holds what appears to be an empty sheath for a short sword, which holds obvious sexual connotation. The object may also be an empty tankard, which is a vessel also associated with female genitalia (Smith 300 WWW).
religious topics revolved around the spiritual value and effectiveness of the Sacraments (Silver 408). Lucas's inclusion of wine and wine vessels could well relate to the debate about the sacrament of communion occurring in the Church at this time. Communion was recognized at this time by Protestants and Catholics alike, but the debate over how it should be understood was a key point throughout the transition period of the Reformation.

Moreover, alchemically, wine was suggested by Aristotle to be symbolic of the union of male and female (Abraham 89). The view of wine as the vehicle to lust and fornication correlates with the interpretation of Dance as promoting eroticism. The appearance of the jug, wine drum, and act of pouring wine into a vessel by the male figure in the center panel create a repetition of motif. The shape of the vessels and drums in the middle ground area by the calf repeat the shape of the pedestal the calf rests upon, possibly correlating the wine as another form of idolatry. Importantly, the figure in the right portion of the center panel behind the Bosch inspired face holds a jug directly to his lips. Another figure in the left panel holds a cup right up to his mouth. One of the ideas that Martin Luther considered important was that the sacrament of communion should be considered more commemorative than miraculous, and for this reason, it was important for the wine cup to come into direct contact with the lips (Harbison 153). Lucas may have intended the motif of the wine vessel touching the lips to act as a visual commentary on the changes brought about by the Reformation in reference to the communion sacrament. Furthermore, the male figure in the center panel who pours out the sacrament into a cup could be interpreted as Aaron, the priest who constructed the idol for the Israelites. This may be a commentary on priests being vehicles to sin. A possible explanation of the male figure's action in the center panel may be explained by Exodus 32:20: "And he took the calf which they had made, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it". As seen by the biblical text, the Israelites actually consumed their idol after it was destroyed. Perhaps the figure pouring wine acts as a metaphorical foreshadowing of the consequence the Israelites will face when their idol is destroyed. The dark storm clouds which occupy the top quarter of Dance could also be indicative of the ensuing wrath of God.

Thus Lucas van Leyden's Dance Around the Golden Calf captures the tension and contradiction of the age in which it was produced. The use of inverted composition in Dance automatically subverses the biblical text in favor of more secular interests. One of the results of the tension of the Reformation age was to push more secular approaches to art. The color scheme of Dance juxtaposes vibrant hues of red against an otherwise earthy palate, setting up a subtle visual tension. The voluptuous, sensual forms observed show Italianate influence and add to the psychological implications of the piece. The expressionless faces reinforce Lucas's attempt with Dance to spark dialogue.
about morality, as well as add to its intrinsic contradictions. Compositional decisions such as cutting off the bodies, but continuing the landscape reinforce this unification and division. The juxtaposition of the Ave/Eva as creator/destroyer observed in Dance creates an interesting dialogue about the conflicted view of women during this time. The erotic connotations observed throughout the iconography continue the secular vein of the work, showing the revolutionary philosophies which rose from the Reformation. Finally, the depiction of wine and wine vessels in relation to the Sacraments solidify this piece as a complex, multi-faceted dialogue on the changes in the church during the Age of Reformation.

**Bibliography:**


**Mentor comments:**

Ms. Pease’s mentor, Lynn Jacobs, points out the particular characteristics of the paper that make it an important piece of scholarship. She says,

Jennifer R. Pease’s paper, “Lucas van Leyden’s Dance Around the Golden Calf: The Northern Triptych in the Age of the Reformation”, is a significant contribution to the study of artworks in their historical context. In this paper, Ms. Pease argues that the stylistic and iconographic features of this triptych reflect the tensions of the age of the Reformation—that central moment during which Northern Europe shifted out of the middle ages into the early modern era. This was the time when Northern European artists first truly assimilated the artistic values of the Italian Renaissance, and the time when the values of Catholicism, and the universalistic Catholic church, came under serious attack. The stylistic and iconographic analysis in Ms. Pease’s paper demonstrate how this triptych forms a site in which the various tensions and dualities of the Reformation era are negotiated.

Among the key points raised in this paper are the way in which the iconography functions as moral commentary through its association of the sins of the ancient Israelites with licentious behavior. The paper, however, is also sensitive to the multivalent character of the imagery and also considers how the painting uses the scene of the Golden Calf as an allusion to the Reformation debate both over the sacrament of communion and over the role of images in the church. Ms. Pease’s paper also demonstrates cutting edge art historical methodology in its attention to the role of the triptych format itself as a vehicle of meaning and in its treatment of the triptych as a unified entity.