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# Iconography



## Battle for the true God

This epitaph was painted in memory of deceased Leipzig merchant Balthasar Hoffmann and depicts a scene from the Old Testament. To make the priests of Baal realize the error of their ways, the prophet Elijah challenged them to a display of divine power. The two groups each built an altar with animal sacrifices that could only be

ignited by prayers to the God it had been built for. Although Elijah repeatedly ordered water to be poured over his altar, his prayer was answered and his offering burst into flames, while all the prayers, dances and self-castigation performed by the priests of Baal proved in vain. Their altar and offerings remained unburnt.





# Iconography



## The background story

In the far background, Cranach continues the Biblical tale depicted in the central scene in two further vignettes. Both feature the Prophet Elijah in a brown sheepskin, but they couldn't be more different in character.

To punish them for their idolatrous beliefs, Elijah brutally slaughtered the followers of Baal. Then he falls to his knees and prayed for rain to fall on the parched and famished land. Soon, his servant spotted a single cloud coming from the sea, which developed into a storm of heavy rain.





# Iconography



## Elijah – John – Luther

The Old Testament prophesized the return of Elijah, a role the New Testament promptly accorded to John the Baptist. This continuity is illustrated in form of the red cloak that Elijah wears over his sheepskin; John the Baptist was shown wearing the very same garment in a different painting.

Cranach's contemporaries continued the line of prophets. As early as 1518, Martin Luther was hailed as the "third Elijah" by his followers, who saw his crusade against the papacy and its representatives as a modern-day version of Elijah's battle against the false priests.

Detail from "Law and Grace" (1529),  
National Gallery, Prague





# The underdrawing



## Hidden drawing

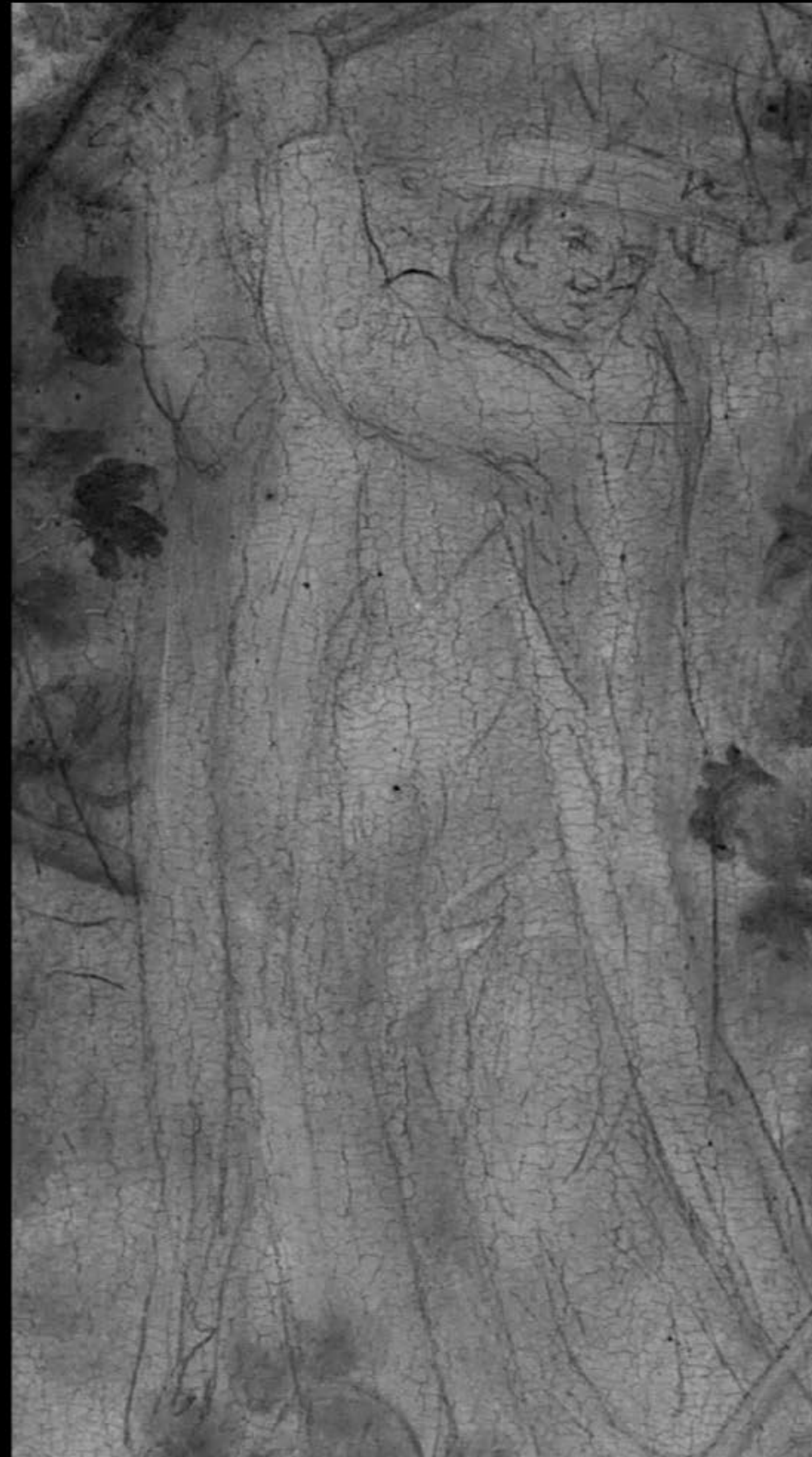
Before applying any paint, Cranach sketched the outlines of the composition on the white-primed wooden panel. All the figures were outlined with black chalk. This “underdrawing” served as a guideline for the painting process.

Modern technology (infrared reflectography) enables us to see these lines that are invisible to the naked eye, giving us valuable insight into the way the master worked and how the painting evolved.





# The underdrawing



## Cranach's style of drawing

Cranach's stroke indicates a fast, sure touch, the product of many years of practice. Black or red chalk was his material of choice for the underdrawing, in which he sketched out the basic motifs in short and supple strokes, which he sometimes retraced several times until he found the form that he was looking for. These sketches, which resemble scribbles in part, show a distinct style of underdrawing, which Cranach the Younger developed after taking over his family workshop. This sketch of a holy man on the "Vineyard Altar" (1582) in Salzwedel is a particularly good illustration of this style.





# The underdrawing



## Grids as an aid to drawing

Cranach usually made preliminary sketches on paper, which he then transferred to the wooden panels. No such preliminary sketch has been preserved of this epitaph. However, we can see that a grid of vertical and horizontal lines was drawn onto the priming layer, a system often used to facilitate transferring the design in the correct proportions from a small piece of paper to a large wooden panel.

The infrared reflectogram shows only marginal differences between the underdrawing and the painting itself. Some of these variations are now visible to the naked eye, such as the row of trees in the background.





## Artist materials



### Merchants' wares

In the 16th century, paints were either made of minerals and earth pigments, or were synthetically produced.

Cranach the Younger did not make his own paints. Like his father, he probably bought them in Leipzig. Balthasar Hoffmann, the man depicted on the epitaph, was a Leipzig merchant. Merchants traded spices, iron and brass items, as well as dyes and pigments. Cranach might well have been one of Hoffmann's customers.

Cod. Guelf. 18.4 Aug. 4°, f.145r, (1511) Herzog August Library, Wolfenbüttel







## Artist materials



### Lead white, cinnabar and verdigris

Modern methods of physical analysis allow us to identify the materials used to make the paints. For the Hoffmann epitaph, Cranach's palette was composed of the following materials: lead white for white, lead-tin yellow and yellow ochre for yellow, cinnabar and colored lacquer for red, verdigris for green, and a variety of earth pigments for different shades of brown. To widen his range of colors, Cranach experimented with all sorts of combinations, using a mix of lead-white, cinnabar and ochre to paint skin, for example.

Color analysis produced by the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences using X-ray fluorescence analysis and electron microscopy





## Artist materials



Blue smalt cloaks have turned gray with time.



Digital reconstruction of the original blue

### Where's the blue?

You might have noticed that the color blue is missing from the painter's palette. This is not down to artistic intention nor to a lack of blue pigment in the Cranach workshop. The reason is that Cranach used the pigment smalt for blue. Made of ground cobalt-tinted glass, smalt was a popular choice of pigment in the second half of the 16th century. In combination with an oil-based binding agent, however, its color soon fades, which is why everything that was once painted blue is now gray. This can be observed particularly well in the sky.





# The working process



## Preparing the panels

The first stage of the panel-making process fell to a carpenter, who glued twelve boards together. A ground consisting of several layers of glue and chalk was applied to the panel; then it was scrubbed and planed until the surface was smooth enough to paint on. This was usually the job of a workshop assistant. Finally, the panel was primed with a thin layer of lead-white pigment and oil, creating a brilliant white surface, just rough enough for the master to sketch out the contours of the composition in chalk.

Backside detail of the Hoffmann epitaph





## The working process



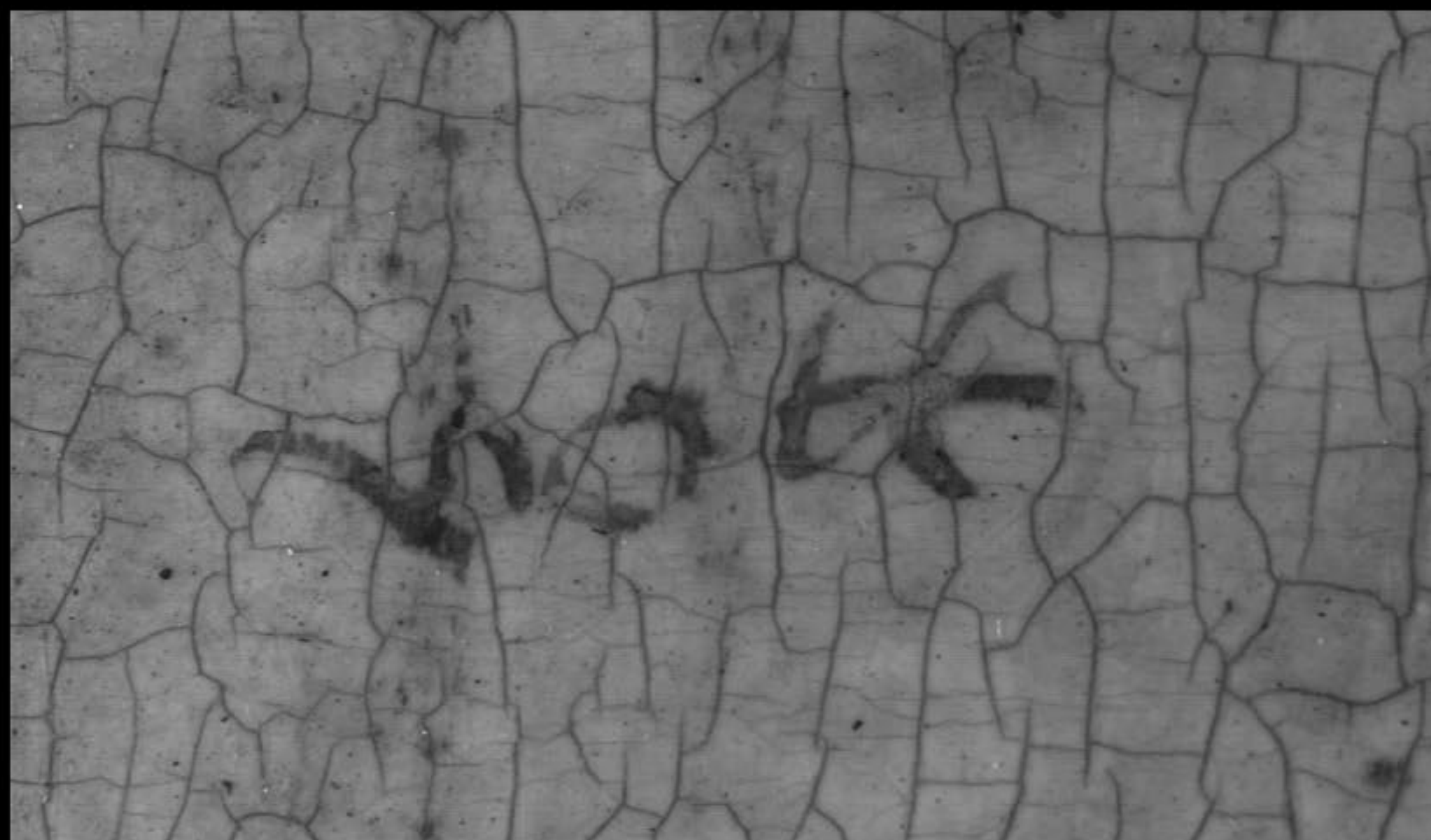
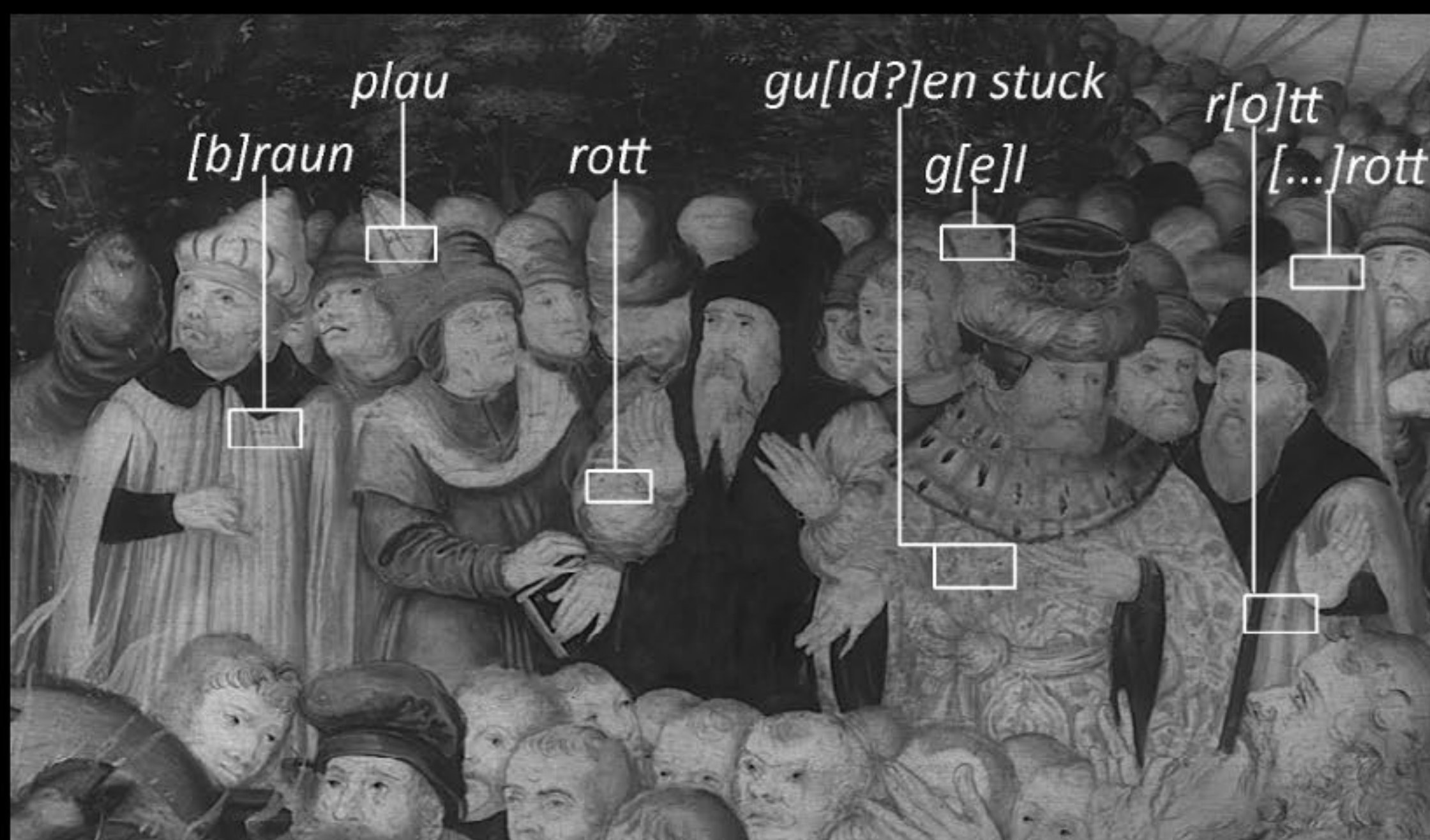
### Scribbled notes underneath

The remarkable thing about this painting is that the underdrawing not only sketches out the basic theme; notes on the colors to be used in that part of the painting are also scribbled in ink into the outlined figures. So far, these kinds of notes have only been found on paintings from Cranach the Younger's workshop; his father's paintings rarely feature such instructions. While the underdrawing is clearly the work of the master himself, the scribbled notes on color bear no resemblance to his handwriting.





# The working process



## Painting by numbers?

As far as we can see, these color guidelines were largely – if not fully – implemented in the final version of the painting. Color directions concerning the cloaks (red) were mostly observed, with the exception of the male figure in the left-hand corner: originally it had been determined that his cloak should be brown.

We will probably never know who made these notes, or for whom they were intended. Did the notes help the artist gain an overview of the distribution of color in the composition as a whole, especially in view of the many figures it involved? Did Cranach dictate these notes to an assistant? Or did an assistant make these notes himself?





# Corrections



## A family dispute

The epitaph of Balthasar Hoffmann is neither signed nor dated. It must, however, have been painted between Hoffmann's last documented act (June 1552) and the epitaph's mention in Leipzig City Church (January 1557). At that time, the epitaph only featured Hoffmann's second wife Magdalena Wiedemann and their offspring

Elisabeth, Heinrich and Magdalena. Noticing their absence from the epitaph, Hoffmann's children from his first marriage took the case to court in January 1557, which decided in their favor.





# Corrections



## The Hoffmann women

The court ruled that the children from Hoffmann's first marriage and their deceased mother would have to be added to the epitaph. Hoffmann's first wife, Katharina Becker, depicted wearing a white bonnet, was added, standing next to Magdalena. As a sign of mourning, both wives have a white ribbon before their mouths.



The two grown-up daughters Katharina and Barbara were also added, kneeling behind the girls from Hoffmann's second marriage (Elisabeth and Magdalena). The infrared reflectogram (IRR) shows that the older girls' faces were painted over the top of the rocks.





## Corrections



### Hoffmann's male descendants

Heinrich – Hoffmann's son from his second marriage – was originally shown kneeling directly behind his father. Heinrich was painted over and his place taken by Hoffmann's two sons from his first marriage (Balthasar and Michael), who are accompanied by two small children in white – obviously the first Hoffmann couple lost two children at a very young age. The overpainted Heinrich was given a new place on the left-hand side of the painting – again, an amendment that is clearly visible against the translucent background in the IRR.







## Portraits of the painters



### Two familiar faces?

“The Sacrifice of Elias” shows the family who commissioned the painting kneeling in the foreground, a part of the Old Testament scene and an illustration of their piety and faith. A closer look reveals that they are not the only contemporaries Cranach added to the Biblical scene. On the left hand side of the painting we can recognize two other familiar 16th-century faces.





## Portraits of the painters



### Putting his father in the picture?

The old man carrying the jugs of water is none other than Cranach the Elder. This picture of him is almost an exact copy of a portrait Cranach the Younger painted of his father aged 77 in 1550. By involving him in the scene as one of the defenders of the true God, Cranach the Younger testifies to his father's faith.





## Portraits of the painters



### A self-portrait?

There is another face in the crowd that deserves particular attention. Like Cranach the Elder, he is wearing clothes that clearly label him as a man of the 16th century. He is not actively involved in the scene, but like the commissioning family, has merely folded his hands in prayer. Some experts suggest this is a self-portrait of Cranach the Younger, positioned behind his father and thus defining him as his successor. This interpretation is supported by the fact that his gaze is directed beyond the picture's frame – a feature typical of artist portraits – and by a certain resemblance to the cupbearer in the “Altarpiece of the Reformers” (Dessau, 1565) and its copy in Köthen.





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## Imprint

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Corrections

about  
by  
touching a button.