IN AUGUST 1867, AN AGITATED museumgoer in Basel climbed onto a chair to have a closer look at a painting. His wife, already alarmed by the effect the work was exerting on her susceptible husband, worried about a possible fine. She disengaged him from the picture and soothed his nerves in a neighboring room. The painting, Hans Holbein the Younger’s The Dead Christ in the Tomb, 1521, is a life-sized depiction of a supine, nearly naked corpse in a long, narrow box. The right eye slips up behind the eyelid; the mouth gapes. The right hand is elegantly flexed but pierced and discolorated. The Russian visitor of 1867, a novelist, did not soon forget his ordeal. He later transferred his horror to the character of Ippolit Terentyev in The Idiot; after seeing a picture very like the Dead Christ, Terentyev wonders whether any faith can defy the implacable laws of nature—nature, which has wrung the life out of the holy man’s body. Could the apostles who saw this body, the novel asks, have believed that it would rise again? Face-to-face with Holbein’s painting, Dostoevsky doubted the reality of the Resurrection.

In 2006 the bipolar career of Holbein (1497–1543) will unfold across a pair of linked exhibitions in the two cities in which he spent much of his life, Basel and London. The Dead Christ will be the cynosure of this spring’s show at the Kunstmuseum Basel, which addresses Holbein’s complex response to Protestantism, the theological revolution whose hostility to cult images threatened the livelihood of every religious painter. Holbein painted his forensic report on the corpse of Christ in the very first years of Martin Luther’s Reformation. It soon became clear that there was little future for an artist in radically iconophobic Basel. Holbein, the well-connected son of a famous painter, set off on his travels armed with a letter of recommendation from the titanic scholar Erasmus, seeking employment in France and the Low Countries before finding work in London painting portraits of royal courtiers.

In 1532, Holbein, at that point the most gifted painter ever to have set foot on British soil, settled more or less permanently in England. By 1539 he had won a salaried position at the English court. Henry VIII, an aggressive Protestant, was no less hostile to traditional religious art than the Swiss preachers had been, but he also loved fine things and required propaganda. The artist’s London period is the subject of the year’s second major exhibition, "Holbein in England," at Tate Britain.

The Basel show reveals a brilliant painter, draughtsman, and printmaker with pan-European ambitions. Until the Reformation shut him down, Holbein had been poised to bring German art into a new era. He was young, a whole generation younger than Albrecht Dürer, a near-contemporary of the Mannerists Pontormo and Parmigianino. Until the Reformation struck, he had no reason to believe, any more than did Michelangelo, that the highest ambitions of art were incompatible with the true religion. During his travels in the 1520s he made tangential contact with the works of the Italians—for example, the drawings and paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, who had died in France in 1519. His alluring painting Laís of Corinth, 1526, depicting the courtesan and lover of the ancient Greek painter Apelles, expresses all the ambivalence of an artist newly released into a free market of art. Laís is the successful court painter’s prize, but at the same time she is a constant reminder that beauty, once the image of the divine itself, is now a mere commodity. The London years were dominated by portraits of real people—preening German merchants, swell amidst the tokens of their prosperity; courtiers, cunning and close; the monarch himself, corpulent, unfathomable; his luckless wives—a long series of jobs that seemingly afforded little room for artistic maneuvering. Holbein also designed allegorical mural paintings and decorated Henry’s palaces, but little of this work survives. The exhibition at Tate Britain next fall will be very much about these portraits. It is tempting (unless you are English) to see Holbein’s Tudor servitude as the tragic curtailment of a powerful talent. But to see it that way—to read this year’s sequence of exhibitions as a story of loss—would be to misunderstand the artist. For wasn’t portraiture, after all, Holbein’s essential project? Isn’t that what Dostoevsky grasped—the critical force of neutral description?

When the human face is fixed, immobilized, in paint, when it is disengaged from time by a frame, it takes on an infinite, inscrutable density. The Dutch painter Jan van Eyck, a century before Holbein, learned this from the Byzantine icon. He then transferred the rhetoric of the sacred portrait to his portraits of mortals. The painted face hypnotizes. In re-creating his human subjects as sacred icons, Holbein was only repeating van Eyck’s experiment. He found a way to extend the project of sacred painting under the radar of Protestant iconophobia. He set “trap[s] for the gaze,” as Jacques Lacan put it in his famous discussion (in "The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis") of Holbein’s Ambassadors, 1533, the double portrait mystically marred by an anamorphically distorted skull.

Holbein’s painting equalized the human and the divine. His courtier is permanently present, his Christ is subject to the laws of physics. The two meet chiasmatically in his art. When Dostoevsky encountered Holbein, he was seized by what we would call gnostic doubt: The painting, for a moment, disclosed the Resurrection as a mere hallucination and Christ as a man who really died, who once lay putrefying in a sarcophagus. But at the same time—and this was almost harder to accept—the painting offered Christ as a man who really lives, in the prothetic imagination of painting. Historical art was not providing what the provincial Dostoevsky had unthinkingly come to expect from it—namely, the beautiful image of Christ as the symbol of his divinity. Not Christ, but the ancient panel painting itself had risen from the dead and rattled his faith. "From the vault," indeed!
Los Angeles

Courbet and the Modern Landscape
J. Paul Getty Museum
February 21–May 14
Curated by Charlotte Eyerman and Mary Morton

Major museum exhibitions of Courbet are rare in the US (the last one was at the Brooklyn Museum almost twenty years ago). And when they do occur, they tend to be large and unwieldy, as if to make up for their infrequency. We should therefore applaud the Getty for its less-is-more approach: About forty landscapes centered around the crucial decade of the 1860s—many rarely seen together and a handful never before exhibited in the US—should focus attention on Courbet’s disturbing and at times erotic brand of naturalism, the kind of work that so impressed later generations of modernist painters. One regrets that LACMA’s Cézanne and Pissarro show shows closes before Courbet comes to town. Travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 18–Sept. 10; Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Oct. 15, 2006–Jan. 7, 2007.

Paul Galvez

London

Tropicália: A Revolution in Brazilian Culture
Barbican Art Gallery
February 15–May 21
Curated by Carlos Basualdo

“Tropicália,” the poet Torquato Neto wrote, “is whatever is necessary.” We should get a sense of just how exhilarating “whatever” can be in this exhibition, which presents some 350 works produced during the influential Brazilian cultural movement of the late ’60s. These are shown alongside contemporary responses by Marepe, Karin Schneider, and nine others. Highlights include Hélio Oiticica’s seminal environment Eden, 1969, and television footage from 1968 of Os Mutantes singing in plastic suits. Accompanied by a catalogue containing an anthology of period texts, the show, co-organized by the MCA Chicago and the Bronx Museum, argues that being slippery can also be extremely smart. Travels to Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, July–Sept.; Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, Oct. 14, 2006–Jan. 28, 2007; and other venues. —Irene Small

Martin Kippenberger
Tate Modern
February 8–May 7
Curated by Doris Krystof and Jessica Morgan

Martin’s back! The massive Tate Modern is making room for the colossal Martin Kippenberger in a retrospective of more than two hundred works. Touchingly, The Happy End of Franz Kafka’s “Amerika,” 1994, provides the show’s center of gravity; Kafka’s epic, like Kippenberger’s retrospective, appeared posthumously. Although getting a grip on the artist’s dizzying productivity can be like trying to grasp escaping butane, retrospectives decelerate the blur of life, making an oeuvre more legible. You even feel Kippenberger’s breath in the catalogue essay his sister Susanne has written on, among other things, the playhouse the young artist called Martinsklaue. Now, Tate Modern is Martinsklaue II. Travels to K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, June 10–Sept. 26. —Ronald Jones

Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination
Tate Britain
February 15–May 1
Curated by Martin Myrone

This show promises to be an educational Halloween party. With 160 works, it explores the demons, witches, and elves imagined by two dozen high-minded British visionaries and considers such popular entertainments as the “Phantasmasiæ,” which offered nineteenth-century Londoners a preview of the modern horror film, complete with grisly slide shows and creepy sounds. This rich territory was a core ingredient in the Romantic imagination, which, from the 1760s on, expanded into an ever-more irrational world. Here, the focus is on the odd couple of Swiss-born Henry Fuseli, with his crowd-pleasing Nightmares, 1781, and William Blake, whose depictions of monsters and phantoms were inspired by the loftiest pages of the Bible and Dante.

—Robert Rosenblum