

Late Gothic German Winged Altarpieces

l. sweet / Materiality and the Religious Impulse / fall 2008

Structuring Concepts

- Consider the density, complexity of symbolism and juxtaposition of narratives in altarpieces
- Consider the role/knowledge of the artist(s) who build these structures in terms of theological concepts
- Be aware of the liturgical or Eucharistic themes and narratives addressed through altarpiece imagery.

Terms

predella

polychrome

sacristy

Corpus Christi

Winged altarpieces

Visuality: revelation and concealment

Because parts of the altarpiece could be opened and closed, they visually *reveal* and *conceal* narratives, forms and images.

The visual impact of this shifting form presented two dimensional painted images.....

St. Wolfgang altarpiece, 1481, Austria closed/detail

Scenes from the legend of St. Wolfgang

Four Church fathers

St. Wolfgang altarpiece, 1481, Austria open

....and alternatively when the wings were opened, they revealed glowing gilt and polychrome three-dimensional forms.

The contrast between painted exterior and highly gilded interior heightened the visual impact on the infrequent feast days when the wings were opened.

Opened/Closed based on Liturgical calendar

The different visual programs or themes they displayed depended on the liturgical calendar.

The feast days when the wings might be opened included:

- major celebrations of Christ and the Virgin, (such as Corpus Christi or Feast of the Assumption)
- the anniversary of the church's consecration, and
- feast day of the altar's patron s.

The opening and closing function meant that several themes or narratives could be included in a single altarpiece; pictorial themes were often linked or juxtaposed through opening/closing wings.

Another aspect of the opening/closing was the performative aspect of revealing scriptural truth – suggesting the beauty and inscrutability of the scriptures and the sacred.

Gothic church floor plan

The main altarpiece was located within the choir; others were located in side chapels.

Many churches had multiple altarpieces along walls of the church or against piers supporting the church.

For instance Ulm Cathedral had about 50 such altarpieces by the 16th c.

Iconoclasm significantly diminished the number of such altarpieces, as did the WWII.

Production and proliferation

Dornstadt altarpiece, Master Hartmann, Ulm, 1417

Production required “the collaboration of highly skilled designers, joiners, carvers and painters, also considerable theological sophistication in the formulation of their pictorial programs.”

artists selected not only for their artistic skills, but for their ability to translate theological ideas into images and forms.

This is significant, and one of the structuring concepts for this program involves tracking the role of artists.

Commission

Altarpieces were commissioned with the endowment of a particular mass (Duffy) including a stipend for the vicar offering the mass, the creation of vestments and silver utensils to celebrate the mass. Often these were memorial masses.

Commissions came from the (1) city council on behalf of the citizens, (2) from guilds, (3) merchants' associations, (4) fraternal organizations, (5) universities, or (6) families hoping for a kind of indulgence.

Often family or guild members chose to be buried near the altar.

Reading an Altarpiece

Altarpieces are generally read along axes, though exceptions exist

Vertical = from bottom to top

Horizontal = from outer-most images to central-most

Additionally certain figures' higher status was represented by placing these figures on the right-hand side of Mary or Jesus or God.

It is helpful to try to discern large themes in certain parts of the altarpiece structure and along the axes to "read" the altarpiece thoroughly.

Origin of Winged Altarpieces: A few theories

Practical: to protect the gilding and delicate paintings or sculptures by closing them. (unlikely)

Relic cabinet: to contain relics at the altar (more likely)

Evidence for this argument = the Cistercian order that used a cabinet to hold relics rather than reliquaries (The cabinet was simple and lacked the gilding and jewels associated with reliquaries.)

Two other antecedents = the *sacristy* or *tabernacle*. The *sacristy* was a cabinet that held vestments, chalices and other articles for celebration of the Eucharist. The *tabernacle* held the Eucharistic bread. Both structures were located near the altar.

Early relic-holding altarpieces

Dornstadt altarpiece, Master Hartmann, Ulm, 1417

The imagery is devoted to Mary Queen of Heaven

Left panel: Mary spinning – possibly with Joseph and the child Jesus

Right panel: The adoration of the Magi (keep your eye on this image – it shows up a lot!)

Center: Queen of Heaven, a kind of Theotokos pose, (Mary holds Jesus in *left* arm so she is positioned on *his* right – *he* is the point of reference and central)

flanked by two virgin saints:

- St. Barbara with chalice (symbol of her faith)
- St. Catherine of Alexandria with broken wheel (symbol of Catherine's tortures).

the niche below Mary likely held a head reliquary or relic of the Virgin.

Tirol Castle altarpiece, 1370 (closed view)

The architectural form common to German altarpieces referenced the heavenly fortress or a Gothic church form.

Narrative theme is the life of the Virgin

Wings:

- Annunciation
- Adoration of the Magi (again)
- Dormition
- Coronation

Central images:

- Visitation
- Nativity (note this depiction!)

Tirol Castle altarpiece, 1370 (open view)

Compartments for holding relics.

Deocarus altarpiece, St. Lawrence Church (Lorenzkirche), Nuremberg, 1436

In the *predella* (paintings or sculptures running along the frame at the bottom of an altarpiece):
a “life-sized” painting of the St. Deocarus

Originally there was a silver reliquary in the predella

Also four scenes from the life of St. Deocarus (left to right):

- confessing Charlemagne
- on his deathbed
- translation of his remains to Nuremberg
- relics venerated as holy by the laity

The interior wings:

On left wing:

- Transfiguration,
- Miraculous Draught of fishes,

On right wing:

- last supper
- the resurrection.

Central Niche: Split between subterranean, terrestrial and celestial elevations

Predella is the subterranean/grave

Middle (earth): St. Deocarus between six apostles. The apostles all hold attributes identifying them.

- Most carry the implements of their martyrdom.
- Peter with the keys to heaven,
- St. James holds the scallop shell referring to his miraculous translation to Santiago de Compostella,

Top: Christ in Majesty flanked by six apostles

Read on the horizontal axes:

Predella: the life of Deocarus

Middle: Earthly life of Christ (in wings)

Top: Christ in Glory/Divinity

Bad Doberan altarpiece, Cistercian Abbey, North Germany, 1300 in situ

Bad Doberan close-up

Wings:

Lowest level: Old Testament prophets

Middle level: Old testament figures/events that refer to New testament events

Top level from outer images to inner:

(left) (1) John the Baptist with Agnus Dei (2) Annunciation (3) Nativity (4) Presentation

(right) (1) resurrection (2) crucifixion (3) carrying the cross (4) Christ flogged

Reading images down ward for example, Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha (his self-sacrifice) is prefigured in the sacrifice of Isaac below it.

predella, central image: Coronation of Mary Queen of Heaven

The central niche held a sculpture of a standing Madonna in the center. It still exists, in another sculpture in the church.

Along with the Christ child on her arm, she held a pyx in her hand.

The altar niche was accessible by the door in the back, making it possible to retrieve the reserved Eucharist from the pyx.

Therefore, in the original version, the communion hosts were held by a sculpture of Mary within the altarpiece – a very concrete and visual representation of her role as theotokos – God bearer.

This was not just convenient or clever, it was deeply rooted in the theology of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and Mary's role in literally and figuratively "delivering" the Saviour to the world.

The central theme of this piece was the role of Mary in the economy of Salvation (Ehresmann)

High altarpiece, 1350, Cistercian Abbey, Marienstatt, Westerwald open view

Lowest level: skull relics behind the grilles

Next level: busts of saints with additional grille revealing/concealing relics inserted into the chests.

Next level: Quatrefoil relic cubbies

Top: Mary Queen of Heaven with Christ; possibly flanked by apostles

The Busts

These are representative of 12 of the 11,000 virgins who died with St. Ursula.

These are in the same tradition as the *shaped reliquaries* we viewed earlier – both depiction of saint and housing a relic of the saint.

The niche between the reliquary heads held was a kind of tabernacle to hold the Eucharist

The central theme in this image was the intercessory role of Mary and the Saints (through relics it appears) (Ehresmann)

Relics supplanted by relic-holding altarpieces and later by the visual appeal of images and sculptures

As imagery was on the ascendency, the role of relics in the church was on the descent.

“Nowhere else do we see so vividly how the veneration of painted or carved images of saints came to supplant that of relics, actual fragments of their bodies.” (Kahsnitz)

the beauty and complexity of these carved, painted programs compelled and rewarded visibility in a way that relics did not.

Relic-holding functions of altarpieces was gradually replaced exclusively by imagery as a kind of dogmatic or liturgical text.

Polychrome altarpieces (carved and painted sculpture): Two Case Studies

I High altarpiece in St. Sigmund church, 1430, South Tirol

High altarpiece in St. Sigmund church (closed)

Exterior – 2-D paintings, no gilding. This would have been seen on most days of the year.

Predella wings: unidentified narrative

Main altar wings:

- John the Baptist and St. James (the pilgrim)
- St. Christopher fording the river carrying Christ
- St. Barbara (with tower) and St. Catherine with wheel and sword
- St. Dorothy and possibly St. Martha taming the dragon

High altarpiece in St. Sigmund church (open)

Notice how the imagery has shifted from 2D to 3D – Three dimensions being more realistic, having more in common with our bodies.

Predella wings interior images:

- Martyrdom of children? Unidentified narrative
- Adoration of the Magi (the Magi are prototypes of the faithful who go to the Church, the true Bethlehem, and to the Eucharistic feast at the altar/the “true manger.”)
- Massacre (Martyrdom) of the Innocents

Carved central images:

- St. James
- Mary Queen of Heaven (theotokos) Mary again holds Jesus in her *left* arm.
- And...? St. Sigmund? Sigisimund?

The standing saints are 1.3 meters tall.

Interior wings:

- Annunciation/conception of Christ (note the pictorial strategy for depicting this mystery)
- Presentation of Christ at the Temple
- Dormition of the Virgin
- Christ teaching in the temple

These images may be read vertically on the left then on the right

- Mary’s entrance into and exit out of the economy of salvation
- Christ’s presence in the temple (or *church* through the Eucharist)

II High altar, 1466, Parish of St. Jakob (James), Rothenberg, Franconia

High altar, 1466, Parish of St. James, Rothenberg, Franconia (open view)

Major subject is crucifixion, Christ surrounded by lamenting angels

Exterior paintings, Closed view

Predella – half length figures of Christ and apostles with their attributes: From left to right: Matthew, Simon, Bartholomew, Philip, James the Elder, Peter, John, Andrew, Thomas, James the Younger, **Mark?** and Jude

the gathering of Christ and his disciples was a common visual strategy in which the Last Supper and inauguration of the Eucharist by Christ, with the Eucharist celebrated in the church.

Christ and the apostles seem to observe/witness the daily or weekly celebrations of the ‘memorial last supper’/Eucharist

Main exterior altar wings Scenes from the ‘life’ of St. James:

Top row:

- James preaching
- His arrest and beheading (with translation of the body into an unmanned boat washed ashore)
- Translation of body to Santiago de Compostella, Spain (the cart pulled by a wild bull)
- A group of German pilgrims on their way to Santiago to venerate the shrine of St. James has dinner together, during the meal, the innkeeper hides a silver beaker in a young man’s luggage.

the miracle of the gallows continues below:

- Horsemen come after the pilgrims, apprehend the young man and hang him for alleged theft. The remaining pilgrims continue to Santiago.
- On their return, the pilgrims pass the site of the hanging, noticing the young man is still hanging, but alive. They rescue him.
- Later the hung man’s father appeals to the local judge and together they confront the innkeeper. The innkeeper protests that the hung man is no more alive than the chickens being roasted by the fire. At that moment, the chickens fly away.
- The innkeeper is hung

In keeping with Geary’s article on the narratives that attend relics, this narrative is both miraculous (confirming the relics sanctity) and indicates how James relics got from the Middle East where he was killed to Spain –

The theme of the closed altarpiece (exterior wings) was the life of St. James, to whom the church was dedicated.

But the theme/narrative shifts when the altarpiece is opened on feast days....

(open view) High altar, 1466, Parish of St. James, Rothenberg, Franconia

- The predellas is again visible
- A central image of the crucifixion flanked by saints
- Christ the man of sorrows above

Detail Central Niche Sculptures

Mary and John at the foot of the cross, flanked by saints

Elizabeth of Hungary w/ loaf and pitcher to feed the hungry	St. James w/ scallop shell	Virgin Mary	John the beloved disciple	Leonard the patron saint of prisoners of war	Anthony, w’ attribute of a bell; patron of skin diseases
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Detail Central St. Elizabeth and St. James

Detail of Christ crucified

Some crucifixes could be removed from the altarpieces and used in processions during Holy Week (Lent) especially the Adoratio Crucis (adoration of the cross) on Good Friday (the solemn Friday -- before Easter -- when Christ was crucified).

Detail of feathered angel

Detail Man of Sorrows sculpture

Atop the whole structure is the Man of Sorrows displaying his side wound, covered with the wounds that emphasize his mortality and elicit our empathy.

Detail interior wings

The interior wings are devoted to a cycle of images honoring Mary.

Left Wing

- The annunciation
- Visitation (Elizabeth greeting Mary)
- Nativity
- Circumcision of Christ

- Adoration of the Magi
- Presentation of Mary at the temple (post partum)
- Dormition of the Virgin covers two panels.

The overall thematic program of this altarpiece (when open) = Christ's crucifixion in the context of the Eucharist:

View of entire altarpiece in situ

From bottom to top, the central axes emphasizes Christ as the central figure:

- Last supper to
- Crucifixion to
- Man of Sorrows (the figure of Christ is 'dying every day')

And the wings, ready on the horizontal axis, generally emphasize Mary's role in the Incarnation

Working together, both axes emphasize the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Unpainted carved altarpieces: A Case Study

Gradually aesthetic tastes shifted to a preference for the unpainted carved altarpiece.

I Corpus Christi altar, 1505-10 Church of Our Lord, Creglingen, Franconia

View of altarpiece in situ

Dedicated to the Feast of Corpus Christi which was established in the early 14th century, celebrates the Holy Sacrament (Eucharist)

Corpus Christi is one example of how devotion to the Eucharist grew from the 12th century, on.

While the Holy sacrament was the intention of the altar, *visually* this theme *appears* to be overtaken by a veneration and memorial to the Virgin.

Numerous parts are missing: vandalized broken stolen, in some cases figures may have been sold off. So this is not how it originally appeared.

Predella: Jesus' early life

Central niche: Assumption of the Virgin

Superstructure: Coronation of Mary Queen of Heaven (flanked by God the father on the left / Christ on the right)

Top: Man of Sorrows

Detail of predella

(1) Adoration of the Magi (baby Jesus has been missing since 1833).

In this context the Magi are prototypes of the faithful who go to the Church, the true Bethlehem, and to the Eucharistic feast at the altar/the "true manger."

(2) Angels holding ceremonial cloth (would have been a niche for monstrance holding the Host)

(3) Jesus at 12 teaching in the temple

The theme of these images is Jesus' early life

Detail of central niche

Assumption of Mary, surrounded by apostles – Mary is assumed not under her own volition, but by God's authority and power in this event are symbolized by the angels framing Mary.

Detail of disciples

Detail of disciple's faces

The individuality of these faces suggest the sculptor worked from models.

Detail of Coronation of Mary (lower part of superstructure)

- Mary is crowned Queen of Heaven.
- God is on her right, registering his superiority to Christ. (His hand has been broken off)
- The holy spirit in the form of a dove was also removed (it's wings remain)

Larger view of superstructure: Coronation and Man of Sorrows

The man of sorrows has topped most of the altarpieces we've seen so far – the mystical image of Christ who is always dying in the Eucharist / the sacrificial lamb

View of relief carvings of interior wings

The narrative – events in the life of Mary --begins at bottom left

- Annunciation
- Visitation
- Nativity
- Presentation of Christ at Temple

Detail of Annunciation relief

Notice how the word of God, delivered to Mary by Gabriel takes the form of a written and folded note (literacy appears here in both the note and the book)

The flowers in the vase were broken off

Slide of Creglingen Annunciation and Schongauer's Annunciation

Scholars believe that the sculptor may have based his carving on Schongauer's engraving of the Annunciation.

Another example of artists borrowing images that are effective.

View of whole altarpiece / Thematic program

“During the Eucharistic controversies of the early and high middle ages, proponents of the doctrine of the real presence tightened the connection with the Incarnation with the result that references to the conception and birth of Christ became formulas for expressing the official doctrine” (Ehresmann)

“*We receive the very body which was taken from the Virgin*” (Lafranc of Bec)

“*[the eucharist] is certainly no other flesh than that which was born of Mary*” (Paschasius Radbertus)

The action of the Holy Spirit at the conception of Christ by the Virgin Mary is presented as analogous to the action of the Holy Spirit in the transubstantiation.

Therefore, while the piece *seems* to focus strongly on Mary: (1) Mary's life in the wings (2) Assumption (3) Coronation

It actually addresses the theme of Corpus Christi – the Holy Sacrament-- by utilizing imagery about Mary.

If we move vertically from predella to top of the altar, we see in order:

- The Host in the Monstrance (the real presence)
- Mary
- Mary
- Christ the Man of Sorrows who is dying at every mass through the miracle of the transubstantiation.

Mary is presented in the role of the Theotokos – God Bearer and instrument of the Incarnation.

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Bad Doberan altarpiece, Cistercian Abbey, North Germany, 1300

High altarpiece, 1350, Cistercian Abbey, Marienstatt, Westerwald open view



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High altar, in situ (open view)

Exterior wing paintings, Closed view

Detail Central Niche Sculptures

Detail Central niche left: St. Elizabeth and St. James

Detail of Christ crucified

Detail of feathered angel

Detail Man of Sorrows sculpture

Detail interior wings

Unpainted carved altarpieces: A Case Study

I Corpus Christi altar, 1505-10 Church of Our Lord, Creglingen, Franconia

View of altarpiece in situ

Detail of predella

Detail of central niche -- Assumption

Detail of disciples

Detail of Man of Sorrows and Coronation of Mary

View of relief carvings of interior wings

Detail of Annunciation

Annunciation comparison: Corpus Christi relief and Schongauer's engraving

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