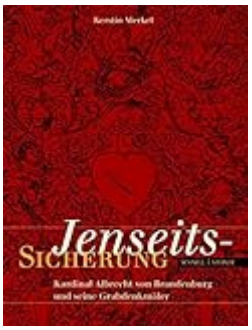
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kerstin Merkel. *Jenseits-Sicherung: Kardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg und seine GrabdenkmÃ¤ler.* Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2004. 215 pp. EUR 59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-7954-1662-1.

Reviewed by Pia Cuneo (School of Art/Division of Art History, University of Arizona)

Published on H-German (February, 2007)

Knock, Knock, Knocking on Heaven's Door

There is much to appreciate in and learn from Kerstin Merkel's study of the funerary monuments commissioned by Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490-1545). The tale of Albrecht's attempts to mark his grave and commemorate his life makes for a rather complicated story and, much to her credit, Merkel preserves this complexity while also telling the story clearly. Between 1520 and 1540, Albrecht repeatedly changed his mind about where his final resting place should be located and how it should be decorated. In 1520, Albrecht began to plan for his burial in Magdeburg; shortly thereafter he decided on Halle and then finally in 1540, after Halle became Protestant, on Mainz. During the course of these years, Albrecht commissioned a number of monuments. In 1523 he ordered a bronze tomb slab from the Vischer workshop, which is signed and dated 1525. But in 1527, Albrecht commissioned a stone tomb slab from Loy Herring to be placed horizontally on the ground over his tomb in Halle; a year later, the Vischer workshop began work on a tablet displaying an extensive inscription that was subsequently positioned over the bottom part of the original 1523-25 bronze tomb monument, which, at this point, was clearly meant to be placed on a wall. In 1529-30, a second bronze relief slab was ordered from the Vischer workshop, this time decorated with an image of the Madonna of the Immaculate Conception, also meant to be mounted on a wall. In 1536, Albrecht commissioned the Vischer workshop a third time, this time for the preparation of a bronze baldachin meant to stand above his tomb. In 1540, after Albrecht left Halle and set up residence in Mainz, he commissioned a marble tomb relief from Dietrich Schro for his tomb in the cathedral. Complex, too, is the relationship between some of these monuments, as well as between the monuments and other projects sponsored by Albrecht, including his relic collection, in terms of how they were meant to interact with one another in their intended and changing commemorative and liturgical settings.

Merkel uses the cardinal's commissions as a way to gain access to information about the man. This strategy is the result of Merkel's main assumption, which provides both the foundation for her study as well as the contribution she hopes it will make; namely, that her analysis of art will shed light on what is missing in documentation related to Albrecht–his personality. While this assump-

tion should be critically debated and while some scholars may regard the role of art in the construction of identity as more theoretically tenable than its role as a mirror of personality, Merkel nonetheless is consistent in her argument, making insightful observations and raising important issues along the way.

These issues, for example, include those inherent in the three conclusions that logically follow from Merkel's assumption. Each should provide an impetus for vigorous historical and art historical debate. The first consequence of Merkel's assumption is that works of art enjoy a special ontological status as evidence. Unlike other kinds of documentation, art allows the scholar, who understands how to make the works "speak," unique access to a personal realm, indeed to a kind of personal truth. Merkel in fact says as much (p. 9). Many art historians, the present reviewer included, do embrace art's evidentiary nature, tempered with the understanding that a visual image cannot be treated as an equivalent to a written document. But not all would follow the essentially Romantic claim that art thus provides a higher level of truth. Indeed, the highly tendentious nature of commemorative funerary monuments and the high stakes involved in getting that commemoration right would seem logically to lead to an understanding of the work of art more as a carefully selective presentation of information than as a naked view of the truth.

The second consequence of Merkel's assumption is that, armed with this special knowledge imparted by the works of art, we can now see Albrecht in a different, more positive light, essentially as someone who was genuinely pious and even self-effacing. Merkel is certainly correct in identifying an overtly negative bias in scholarship on this man. Having manifested a lifestyle that in several fundamental ways made a mockery of Christian and clerical ideals, Albrecht is, after all, rather too easy to hold in complete contempt. Sometimes, however, in her effort to present a more balanced view of Albrecht, Merkel over-interprets some facts while pressing others into a service far weightier than their slim insights can actually uphold. An example of this is her interpretation of part of the inscription added to Albrecht's bronze tomb relief. She reads the descriptive phrase "ein Diener Gottes und die ZÃ¼gel von beiderlei Herrschaften vereinend" as an indication that Albrecht wanted to signal that he understood rulership as a weighty burden that he nonetheless bore with a deep sense of responsibility (p. 69). While such an interpretation is certainly possible, nothing in the text itself specifically prompts such an emphatically favorable and rather nuanced reading. But such moments are infrequent in Merkel's analyses.

The third consequence of Merkel's assumption is that her focus falls upon the patron, Albrecht, and not on the artists who produced the works in question. While Merkel is completely upfront about an emphasis that is, for the most part, justified in terms of her book's main argument, the lack of information about the artists strikes one sometimes as a deficit, especially for a book written by such a clearly competent art historian. For example, her book includes several illustrations of paintings by Simon Franck, an artist who obviously enjoyed Albrecht's patronage on a number of different occasions and who produced works featuring likenesses of Albrecht included in scenes of religious subject matter. Franck's paintings are almost dead ringers for works by Lucas Cranach the Elder: court artist of Frederick the Wise of Saxony, Albrecht's electoral colleague, fellow relic collector, and of course, Martin Luther's patron and staunch ally. We are given no information whatsoever about Simon Franck, nor is his absolutely startling stylistic affinity with Cranach mentioned, much less commented upon. Yet the fact that Albrecht would employ an artist who produced paintings that look almost identical to those produced by Frederick's court artist must surely be significant, signaling a keen sense of cultural, and perhaps also political, competition between these two powerful princes.

In analyzing the various monuments commissioned by Albrecht for his ever-changing final resting place, Merkel laudably brings to our attention works of art that have not received sustained scholarly attention. This is also true of many of the comparative works she marshals to elucidate the funerary monuments, drawn from a wide array of media including episcopal seals, reliquaries, manuscript illumination, illustrated pamphlets and related works of funerary sculpture. In discussing the main works involved, Merkel's visual analyses are models of sensitivity and clarity that provide careful consideration of iconography, insightful technical observation and exacting description.

Also to be appreciated in Merkel's project is her willingness both to interpret and to contextualize, intellectual strategies that still cannot be taken for granted in some disciplinary circles. Rather than merely repeating the facts of the commissions and providing stylistic analysis, Merkel interprets the changes in Albrecht's plans according to changes in his spiritual outlook. In order to accomplish this, she also necessarily contextualizes the commissions in terms of events in Albrecht's life and in

church history. The earlier commissions, Merkel argues convincingly, were informed by Albrecht's profound fear of divine judgment, an emotion widely shared by people living in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period, including Martin Luther. Albrecht's monuments were intended to remind the living to pray for the release of his soul from purgatory. The more extravagant and visible the monuments, the more prayers they would serve to elicit. But then something changed. Sometime after his move to Mainz and his commissioning of Schro, both in 1540, Merkel argues that Albrecht lost interest in the existing bronze grave monuments that he brought back with him from Halle. Nor did Albrecht display much interest in commissioning something new and spectacular; his instructions for a monument marking his grave as written in his last will and testament calls for something that Merkel describes as basically generic and "pauschal" (p. 192). Merkel interprets this change as a result of Albrecht's acquaintance with the Jesuit Peter Faber, with whom Albrecht had significant contact in the early 1540s and especially 1542. According to Merkel, Faber convinced Albrecht that God is a loving and forgiving father and that Albrecht therefore no longer needed the prayers of the faithful, evoked and stimulated by a spectacular grave site, to assure his salvation. In Merkel's retelling, under Faber's influence and shortly before his own death, Albrecht lost his faith in the "magic of art" (p. 192) and thus also lost interest in funerary monuments.

While Merkel's interpretation is both plausible and interesting, it is also not the only explanation for Albrecht's scaling back on his funerary monuments. An alternative, or at least additional, explanation could be that he simply no longer had the resources to finance such an undertaking; indeed Merkel briefly mentions the desperate and humiliating financial straits Albrecht was in at the end of his life. Merkel's interpretation here is also typical for others in her book in that she draws material primarily from the nexus between personal and church history. Her predominant contextual focus on the personal and the spiritual/confessional neglects the political dimensions of Albrecht's life and times. Albrecht's roles as prince-elector and imperial arch-chancellor, for example, are no more than mentioned. Consideration of these themes suggests a missed opportunity for understanding yet another profoundly important facet of Albrecht's monuments and why he made some of the changes that he did. Yet even though church history plays such a fundamental role in her interpretations, Merkel's treatment of these extremely complex opening decades of the Reformation is rather flat. The reformers are conceptualized as an utterly homogenous and for the most part nameless group of people, while confessional identities are treated as firm and clear. Just because the same quotation from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is found both on Albrecht's bronze baldachin and on a painting by Lucas Cranach elucidating Luther's views on law and grace does not automatically mean that Albrecht was sympathetic and responsive to Reformation ideas. Even if Albrecht were partially open to these ideas, and Merkel's study raises this extremely interesting possibility, the reoccurrence of Paul's widely used quote lacks sufficient weight to be used to provide conclusive evidence.

Precisely because Merkel's study engages with such fundamental issues and because the work that she does is extremely thoughtful and richly insightful, the volume makes an important and welcome contribution to the history of early modern German art.