



Julian Chapuis, ed. *Tilman Riemenschneider, c. 1460-1531*. Studies in the History of Art. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. 264 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10134-8.



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The Swan Song of Gothic Art in Germany

Tilman Riemenschneider was only about ten years older than his more famous compatriot, Albrecht Dürer, yet between Riemenschneider's carved altarpieces and Dürer's prints and paintings a change of generation took place. While Dürer, like Riemenschneider, was steeped in the visual traditions of the Netherlands and his native Germany, his theoretical writings, his sense of self-perception, and some, at least, of his images were inspired by the example of Renaissance Italy. In Riemenschneider's art, by contrast, we see the flourishing of the German Gothic. While he on occasion chose, or was instructed by his patrons, to utilize the vocabulary of the Italian Renaissance (for example, in his funerary monument for Lorenz von Bibra, prince-bishop of Würzburg, completed in 1522), his sculpture essentially represented the culmination of the northern tradition developed by artists such as the Netherlander Nicolaus Gerhaert von Leiden. In the expressiveness of his limewood and stone sculptures, the immediacy of his figures, the subtlety and refinement of carved details such as cloth and hair, and his brilliant use of space he showed

himself to be a master of this tradition.

Riemenschneider has long captured the imagination of both scholars and novelists, not only because of his exquisite sculpture but also because of the circumstances of his life. Having settled in Würzburg in 1483, he obtained citizenship in 1485 and established a flourishing workshop. During the first decade of the sixteenth century, he became increasingly involved in municipal politics: he was elected to the Würzburg city council in 1504, then in 1509 to the Upper Council. From 1520-21 he served as mayor, and from 1521-22 as mayor emeritus and again as a member of the Upper Council. When the prince-bishop's fortress was assaulted by peasant armies in 1525, Riemenschneider was implicated; when the siege collapsed the ringleaders were killed and a number of the city's magistrates, Riemenschneider amongst them, were arrested and tortured. Although, as Thomas Brady points out in the opening essay to this volume, we know nothing about Riemenschneider's own attitude towards the peasant rebels and their cause or towards the evangelical Reformation, his involvement has led to him being

regarded as a hero of the common man.

This collection of essays provides a useful and stimulating addition to Riemenschneider scholarship. Most were originally delivered as papers at a symposium held at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts that accompanied the first part of the 1999 exhibition devoted to Riemenschneider in Washington DC (and later at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York). As such, they need to be read in conjunction with the catalogue of that exhibition: Julien Chapuis, ed., *Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages* (1999). Both volumes are beautifully illustrated and produced, as we would expect from Yale University Press. The catalogue itself contains a number of useful essays on Riemenschneider's life and oeuvre, on his style and sources, on his career and critical fortune, and is most suitable as an introduction to the artist. The current volume, by contrast, contains a number of detailed and thought-provoking pieces, and will be of more use to those looking for a more in-depth analysis.

It opens with a typically masterful exposition by Thomas Brady of the evolution and nature of that most peculiar imperial institution, the prince-bishopric. Brady discusses the mixing of spiritual and imperial powers that characterized it, the criticism that it attracted, and the ultimate survival and flourishing of those, such as Würzburg, that survived the Reformation intact. He also provides a useful discussion of Würzburg during the Peasants' War, and succinctly dispels many of the myths surrounding Riemenschneider's experiences. Brady's scene-setting is followed by three essays that examine individual works by Riemenschneider in detail. The first, by Hartmut Krohm, follows from Brady's particularly well, as it examines the monument to Prince-Bishop Rudolf von Schenernberg commissioned from Riemenschneider by his successor, Lorenz von Bibra, in 1496. Krohm details the ways in which this magnificent red marble monument celebrates Rudolf both as a secular lord and a spiritual leader: in his left hand he grasps his crozier, in his right a sword. While the inscriptions relate his political actions, the effigy depicts him as an ascetic, a new St. Kilian, apostle to the Franconians. Iris Kalden-Rosenfeld discusses the original location and significance of Riemenschneider's tomb for Emperor Heinrich II and Empress Kunigunde, patron saints of Bamberg. Claudia Lichte locates a previously unknown statue of the Virgin and Child in Riemenschneider's oeuvre.

The following section, "Give and Take," contains three essays that examine Riemenschneider's place in the

artistic currents of the time. Timothy Husband considers his alabaster carvings and the visual language that he inherited from the Netherlands and Rhineland. In an essay that will be of interest to admirers of Michael Baxandall's seminal *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), Till-Holger Borchert considers the dissemination of the Renaissance style in Germany, the motivations of those who commissioned works in it, and its resonances for contemporary viewers. Fritz Koreny examines the importance of the graphic arts for sculpture.

For modern viewers, one of the most striking things about Riemenschneider's sculpture is the fact that much of it is monochrome rather than gilded and brightly painted. The *Holzichtigkeit*, the finish that allows the wood to be seen, appeals, as Eike Oellermann points out in his essay, to the Romantic notion of sculpture as a form inherent in raw material. This is a difficult area: as many of the essays in this volume point out, it is very difficult to reconstruct the original intentions of both artist and patron with regard to final appearance. As the fourth section of the volume demonstrates, technical scientific examination is therefore of particular value with regard to Riemenschneider's works. These five essays by conservators take no prisoners in their very technical discussions of surface finishes and so on, but the evidence they assemble is fascinating. Oellermann suggests, for example, that the fact that many of Riemenschneider's limewood sculptures have both a monochrome finish and a contemporary polychrome overpainting indicates that the artist supplied them to his patrons with the finish, then left it up to them to decide whether or not to add color. We know, for example, that Veit Stoß was commissioned to add color to Riemenschneider's Münnstadt altarpiece only twelve years after its completion (which he did, despite specifying that his own altarpiece for the Nuremberg Carmelites was never to have color added!).

The final three essays of the volume examine Riemenschneider's afterlife and reputation. Jeffrey Chipps Smith considers Riemenschneider's surprisingly limited artistic legacy, which was due largely, he argues, to the unpropitious climate for commissions after 1525 as well as to the stylistic shifts (epitomized by Dürer's art) that made Riemenschneider's work look old-fashioned. Artists who trained with him, such as Peter Dell, Smith demonstrates, had to forge careers for themselves through producing new types of image: private devotional reliefs, portraits, and so on. Complementing Till-Holger Borchert's consideration of Riemenschneider's critical fortune in the 1999 exhibition catalogue, Keith Moxey considers Riemenschneider's reception by both art historians and

novelists in Germany during the period of National Socialism. His relativist approach fits rather oddly with the very technical section 4 of this collection, but his discussion of the ways in which political conviction shaped writing on Riemenschneider, and his more general consideration of the art historical endeavor, is fascinating. The final essay in the volume, by Corine Schleif, considers the supposed self-portraits of Riemenschneider on his Creglingen altar and his Maidbronn Lamentation, explor-

ing in particular the range of meanings that have been projected onto them by art historians and novelists.

Readers who pick up this volume expecting a general introduction to Riemenschneider will be disappointed: it really needs to be read in conjunction with the 1999 exhibition catalogue. But the two volumes together provide an informative, enjoyable, and stimulating guide to one of the greatest German artists of all time.

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