

Maria Dieters. *Kunst um 1400 im Erzstift Magdeburg: Studien zur Rekonstruktion eines verlorenen Zentrums.*

Neue Forschungen zur deutschen Kunst 7. Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2006. 190 pp. index. illus. map. bibl. €76. ISBN: 3-87-157-208-X.

This beautifully produced volume reconciles the old and new in German scholarship in order to reconstruct the style and influence of the archdiocese of Magdeburg during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Magdeburg, capital of the modern state of Sachsen-Anhalt, had been from 708 the favorite residence of Otto the Great, who envisioned it as “the Constantinople of the North,” and was raised to an archbishopric in 968. Losing its imperial cachet with the passing of the Ottonian dynasty, and suffering repeatedly from plague after 1350, it nevertheless is known to have had one of the earliest painters’ guilds (1197), with guild representation on the city council, and remained an important center of trade between Flanders, Bohemia, and the Baltic, and at a population of 25,000 was one of the largest cities in Europe in its day. A great deal was destroyed in the tragic fire of 1449 in the cathedral library and in the city hall in 1631, and in 1524 when the monasteries were laicized and the city became a Protestant stronghold. The invasion by the imperial army under Tilly in 1635 caused severe damage, as did the 1945 bombing of the medieval center of the city by the RAF and the subsequent Soviet occupation. While very few medieval works of art remain in the city, and only seven of its medieval churches and chapels still stand, the author convincingly reclaims for Magdeburg a number of surviving works that had been previously classified simply as “lower Saxon” or even “Bohemian,” that give a surprisingly good understanding of both the roots and the spread of Magdeburg style. These works generally were commissioned by nobility for the church of St. John in Barby, in Flötz, near Magdeburg, in Querfurt, in Wittenberg, and Prague. The capstone, however, is the enormous altarpiece of the Passion made for the bourgeois church of St. Nikolai in Jüterbog, made in Magdeburg after 1430 with archiepiscopal input in response to the Hussite heresy — the subject of the author’s diploma thesis for the Humboldt University in Berlin (1991).

The author proves her case by tempering close stylistic analysis with a thorough grounding in the theological and political affiliations of individual bishops and archbishops as revealed in the latest and best of modern German scholarship on medieval issues. In case after case, the wide-ranging and long-lived influence of the court style of Peter Parler and the court painters who served kaiser Karl IV in Prague and at Karlstein is revealed, from the life-size sandstone donor figures at Barby to the altarpiece from Klötz, so similar to the style of the votive panel of Jan Ocko of Vlasim and the Madonna from Raudnitz that it was classified as “Bohemian, ca. 1390” when acquired for the Deutsches Museum in Berlin in the 1920s. Dietrich here draws on the previous work of Ingrid Schulze, who had called attention to Karl IV’s particular devotion the Three Holy Kings, and on the important study by Robert Suckale on the Glatz Madonna commissioned by

Prague's first archbishop, Ernst von Pardubitz. The iconography of the Virgin as Empress, and of Joseph as patriarch are additional ties to the imperial court at Prague, while the style of the Madonna of Jan Ocko, as well as of some of the Karlstein frescoes, is seen in the funerary chapel of Johann von Redekin (d. 1403) in the cloister at Magdeburg. The commingled style of the Magdeburg-Prague cultural axis extends outward into the cathedral glass of Halberstadt (ca. 1400) and Stendal (ca. 1420), while the style of the Bohemian Fair Virgins is recast in the numerous Pietas that were made to grace Corpus Christi altars in Breslau, Vienna, and Wilsnack as expressions of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The retable made for the hall church of St. Nikolai in Jüterbog — a formerly Slavic village appended to the Magdeburg archdiocese in the twelfth century — is the most massive altarpiece (seven meters wide) since Meister Bertram's for the Church of St. Peter in Hamburg, and shares with that more famous work a set of eight Old Testament subjects displayed in biblical order, from the creation of Eve through the Fall and Expulsion, to Noah's ark the Sacrifice of Abraham, and Samson versus the Philistines. Dietrich makes a convincing case for several aspects of the iconography of this altarpiece as designed to counteract the attack of the Hussites against papal orthodoxy. The feast day aspect features a central series of Passion scenes, flanked by an unusual set of four panels devoted to the life and baptism of St. Mauritius (Moritz) the Moor — one of the saints most revered by the Teutonic Knights in converting the Slavs by fire and sword in an earlier day, and now the patron saint of Jüterbog itself, as well as a saint of great promise for the possible reconversion of the Hussites. The style of the Passion paintings, datable by dendrochronology to ca. 1433, strongly recalls that of Konrad von Soest, while the iconography of the St. Mauritius cycle seems to have precedent only in a work made for the Marktkirche in Hanover.

This book demonstrates an important fact: that the regional approach to the study of late medieval German painting, so dishonored as the favored method of the Volkish movement and the cataloguers of the Third Reich as the supposed result of a mystical attachment to one's place of birth, can produce valuable results when trade routes, episcopal policies, and political ties are taken into account. The river Elbe and its tributary the Moldau form the missing link connecting Prague not only with Magdeburg but also with Hamburg and the Hanseatic cities to the west.

It is valuable not only for the art works discussed, which fill in a section of Germany that was difficult of access to Western scholars during the Cold War, but for its excellent notes and indices that keep at hand the essential scholarship of Suckale and others shedding new light on specific topics too numerous to mention here.

JANE CAMPBELL HUTCHISON
University of Wisconsin