



Lynn F. Jacobs

The Painted Triptychs of Fifteenth-Century Germany

Case Studies of Blurred Boundaries

Amsterdam
University
Press

The Painted Triptychs of Fifteenth-Century Germany

Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700

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This book is dedicated with love to
my father, Stanley A. Jacobs ז"ל.

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Introduction

Abstract

This introduction examines the reasons why German fifteenth-century painting has been so little studied compared to German sixteenth-century painting. Some of the issues considered include scholarly privileging of the Reformation and of Netherlandish and Italian, rather than German fifteenth-century art. But in Germany another central impediment to study in this field up to around the year 2000 was that the main reference tool for the field, an eleven-volume series on fifteenth-century German painting, was produced by Alfred Stange, one of the leading art historians of the Third Reich, whose scholarship was tainted by Nazi ideology. After examining the impediments to scholarship in this field and how these were overcome, this introduction lays out the scope and theme of the book, its methodology of *Medialität*, the motivations behind its selection of case studies, and the main arguments of its four chapters.

Keywords: Alfred Stange, historiography, *Medialität*, Nazis

2017 was the 500th anniversary of the writing of Luther's 95 Theses, considered the beginning of the Reformation. The Lutherjahr 2017 was a major tourist event in Germany, accompanied by national exhibitions in Berlin, Wittenberg, and Eisenach, along with festivals held from 2016 to 2018, including one on 2 July 2016 in Mansfeld to celebrate Luther's first day at school and one on 31 October 2017 in Wittenberg to celebrate Reformation Day. The art historical and historical scholarly communities in the United States joined these German commemorations by sponsoring numerous publications on Luther and the Reformation,¹ as well as by staging Reformation-oriented exhibitions—including ones at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the Pitts Theology Library at Emory

1 Krey, Bellitto, and Radano, *Reformation Observances: 1517–2017*, forms one of the many works published in 2017 on the Reformation, and one that specifically situates itself within the context of the 500th anniversary.

University²—as well as conferences, most notably, two at the institutions for which this anniversary held special historical significance, Catholic University and Luther College. The hoopla surrounding the Lutherjahr made even more evident a long-standing scholarly privileging of artistic developments of German art in the age of the Reformation as opposed to art in the century that preceded it, that is, the art of the fifteenth century. This scholarly neglect of German fifteenth-century painting is easy to document. A quick search of Kubikat, the world's largest art historical database, developed by the four main German art historical research institutes, turns up more than 1500 books focused on Albrecht Dürer, the major German artist of the sixteenth century, but only around 25 books that treat Stefan Lochner, one of the best known German painters of the fifteenth century.³

Reasons for the disparate interest in the two centuries are easy to adduce. To start, the Reformation involves conflict, particularly conflict about the role of art, and conflict is inherently more interesting than lack of conflict, as any scholar of literature, theatre, or viewer of reality TV knows.⁴ In addition, the sixteenth century is associated with the influence of Italian Renaissance style and the turn to early modernity and theory.⁵ By contrast, fifteenth-century art represents the last phase of the Gothic style, and hence is linked to the Middle Ages, not early modernity. Scholars naturally gravitate toward studying the rise of new phenomena as opposed to the tail end of old ones. In addition, most German fifteenth-century artists cannot be identified by name, which makes them much less attractive objects of scholarly attention. Hence, the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece, an artist whose works are enormously engaging and of extremely high quality, has formed the subject of only eight books listed in the Kubikat database, and of those, one is the Cologne exhibition titled *Genie ohne Namen* (Genius without a Name) and another, *A Victim of Anonymity*—titles that identify the artist's scholarly public relations problem as clearly as can be.⁶

In the United States, within the field of scholarship on Northern Renaissance fifteenth-century art, Netherlandish painting has largely stolen the spotlight, especially in the 1960s and 70s, a time when, following the 1953 publication of Erwin

2 The exhibition at the Morgan was titled 'Word and Image: Martin Luther's Reformation'; the one in Minneapolis, 'Art and the Reformation'; and that at Emory University, 'Law and Grace: Martin Luther, Lucas Cranach and the Promise of Salvation'.

3 https://aleph.mpg.de/F?func=file&file_name=find-b&local_base=kubo1 (accessed 14/1/2022)

4 For one assessment of the role of conflict as a defining element in tragedy as discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics*, see Gellrich, 'Aristotle's *Poetics*'.

5 See Alpers, *Art of Describing*, pp. xix–xxiv, regarding how twentieth-century scholars made Italian Renaissance art central to the traditions of Western art and placed particular value on Albertian views of perspective and *istoria* that differ from Northern European traditions.

6 Budde and Krischel, *Genie ohne Namen*, and MacGregor, *Victim of Anonymity*.

Panofsky's seminal book, scholarship on Netherlandish fifteenth-century painting was particularly lively.⁷ American scholars in those decades saw Netherlandish artists (such as Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, and Rogier van der Weyden) as leading figures in terms of artistic innovation and quality, and viewed German fifteenth-century artists as inferior to and mostly imitative of Netherlandish art. As Charles Cuttler stated in his 1968 *Northern Painting*, the first major textbook on Northern Renaissance art, German painting of the first half of the fifteenth century 'rarely scaled the heights attempted in Italy and Flanders'.⁸ Cuttler characterized German painting of the second half of the fifteenth century largely in terms of 'the almost complete domination[...]of Rogier's outlook', and his chapter on German late fifteenth-century art considered only one artist, Michael Pacher, as free from dependence on Netherlandish style.⁹ This approach started to change with the 1985 appearance of James Snyder's new textbook, in which German painters of the first half of the fifteenth century were finally treated in their own right without negative comparisons to the Netherlandish counterparts.¹⁰ However, in the first edition of this book, the chapter on later fifteenth-century German art is titled, 'The Impact of Netherlandish Art on German Painting of the Later Fifteenth Century', hence signalling the bias that historically has hampered scholarly interest in fifteenth-century German painting among English-speaking scholars.¹¹ Within Germany itself, more complex factors impacted art historical investigation of these works.

Historiography

The history of scholarship on German fifteenth-century painting among English-speaking scholars is very short. The main body of English-language scholarship on this material is of fairly recent date and largely can be counted on one hand:

7 Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*. For a brief summary of scholarly responses to Panofsky, see Harbison, 'Iconography and Iconology', pp. 391–406.

8 Cuttler, *Northern Painting*, p. 261.

9 Cuttler, *Northern Painting*, p. 284. Pächt, 'Zur deutschen Bildauffassung', p. 108, however, took an opposing view, arguing that early Germany painting did not strictly follow the Netherlandish example, at least in terms of the relation of the object to the observer's point of view.

10 Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art*, p. 227, begins the chapter on German fifteenth-century art by stating, 'The developments of the arts in the German-speaking territories during the course of the fifteenth century have been described and analyzed for the most part in terms of the propensities of the German painters to absorb and assimilate the *ars nova* of the Netherlandish artists. No doubt Netherlandish influence is a foremost factor to be considered, but it is not the only, and the arts of the many regions along the Rhine and beyond have intrinsic values and qualities of their own'.

11 This problem is rectified in the 2005 second edition, by Larry Silver and Henry Luttikhuisen, in which this chapter is re-titled simply, 'German Art of the Later Fifteenth Century'.

technical work on Cologne underdrawings by Molly Faries (mainly in the 1980s and 90s); the monograph on Stefan Lochner by Julien Chapius (2004); and two books by Brigitte Corley, one of the few British scholars working in this field, one on Conrad von Soest and Westphalian art (1996) and one on Cologne painting (2000).¹² Otherwise, German scholars have largely monopolized the field. Not surprisingly, in Germany there has been a longer and more robust history of scholarship on German fifteenth-century painting. But within Germany, scholarship on this specific area of German painting, also not so surprisingly, has been impacted by quite different sorts of cultural baggage.

In Germany, the first major research on German fifteenth-century painting produced in the twentieth century appeared in the 1913–1919 publication, *Die deutsche Malerei vom ausgehenden Mittelalter bis zum Ende der Renaissance* by Fritz Burger, Hermann Schmitz, and Ignaz Beth. This three-volume series is organized by region and chronology: I) Bohemia, Austria, and Bavaria up to 1450; II part 1) Austria, Bavaria, Swabia, Upper Rhine, and Switzerland up to 1420, and II part 2) Lower Germany; and III) Upper Germany in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Despite the appearance of a clear organizing principle, the volumes nevertheless lack a systematic focus: they combine discussions of thematic issues—such as Italian or French influences, perspective, and naturalism—with attention to artistic developments in the various regions under consideration. The authors occasionally focus on the work of a specific artist, but the analysis is not exclusively organized around individuals; the volumes are not limited to panel painting, but consider a variety of two-dimensional media, including glass, fresco, manuscript illumination, tapestries, prints, and book illustration.

This study was superseded by the eleven-volume set compiled by Alfred Stange, *Deutsche Malerei der Gotik*. The first three volumes were published in 1934, 1936, and 1938; after the war, the series publication resumed in 1951 and was completed a decade later, in 1961.¹³ It was partially reprinted in 1969. The series focuses primarily on panel painting, but also includes wall painting and manuscript illumination, often in separate sections at the end of each chapter. The chronological range mostly covers the century between 1400 and 1500—although volumes one and two span the dates from 1250 to 1350 and from 1350 to 1400, respectively, divided by region. The entire series aims to develop a systematic understanding of stylistic distinctions between regions, to create groupings around individual masters and workshops, and to trace regional stylistic developments over time. Each volume includes numerous illustrations of artworks, many reproduced for the first time.

12 Faries, 'Technical Investigation'; Faries, 'Stefan Lochner's Darmstadt *Presentation*'; Faries, 'Underdrawings in Cologne Paintings'; Chapius, *Stefan Lochner*; Corley, *Conrad*; and Corley, *Painting and Patronage*.

13 Grötecke, 'Alfred Stange', considers the full history of this publication.

One drawback is that the illustrations are small and in mediocre black and white, but colour reproduction was rare at that time. Despite the relatively low quality of the photographs (at least by current photographic standards), the series is still unmatched in scope. Indeed, it is such a fundamental resource for research on this topic that there has been talk of updating and republishing the series in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

Stange's work and approach was extended through the 1990s by Paul Pieper, who studied with him in 1936 in Bonn and went on in the 1970s to serve as director of the Westfälisches Landesmuseums für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte in Münster (now called the LWL-Museum für Kunst und Kultur), and to publish widely on many topics but particularly on German fifteenth-century art in Westphalia and Cologne.¹⁵ But otherwise, Stange did not have a large cadre of students and followers in his wake to generate work on German fifteenth-century painting, as typically occurs within the German university system. Art historical scholarship under the Nazis was largely marked by a brain drain, when leading art historians fled Germany.¹⁶ In post-war Germany, Stange's influence on art historical circles was tainted by his Nazi affiliations: in 1933 he had joined the Nazi party (NSDAP) and he also joined the SA (Sturmabteilung).¹⁷ In 1945 after the war, Stange was removed from his professorship as part of the denazification process.¹⁸ He, however, was able to resume work on *Deutsche Malerei der Gotik* and received funding support for the project; his dismissal from his teaching post was even changed to an emeritus status in 1962.¹⁹ But he was one of only a few art historians not allowed to eventually return to their teaching posts after being fired and hence was never able to train more students in the post-war period.²⁰ Moreover, his Nazi past, though seemingly ignored by the scholarly community, cast a cloud over the corpus of fifteenth-century German painting that he had single-handedly created. This

14 Grötecke, 'Alfred Stange', p. 15.

15 On Pieper, see Caesar, 'Wanderkünstler', pp. 117–118; Pieper did contribute to the catalog of one of the few large exhibitions of early German painting prior to the rise in interest in the field in the years around 2000, the 1974 *Vor Stefan Lochner* exhibition at the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne, which was also accompanied by a conference, with essays published in 1977, including one by Pieper, 'Köln und Westfalen'.

16 See Petropoulos, *Faustian Bargain*, pp. 165–166, and Preiss, 'Wissenschaft', p. 50. Doll, 'Politisierung des Geistes', pp. 985–186, discusses how, after the Nazis came into power, art history was the discipline most affected by Nazi politics, and, as a result, one-quarter of the art historians in Germany had to leave the discipline and were largely replaced with Nazi members or sympathizers.

17 On the life of Stange, see Klee, *Personenlexikon*, p. 596. There is some question about whether Stange joined the SA in 1933 or 1934, as discussed by Doll, 'Politisierung des Geistes', esp. p. 986, note 28.

18 On Stange's dismissal from his position, see Klee, *Personenlexikon*, p. 596.

19 On his emeritus status, see Klee, *Personenlexikon*, p. 596.

20 Caesar, 'Wanderkünstler', p. 105, attributes this to his being, along with Pinder, one of the central Nazi art historians.

explains to a large degree why so few German scholars undertook research in this field throughout the second half of the twentieth century and why, up to around the year 2000, German scholarship on fifteenth-century German painting remained largely within the traditional areas of style, dating, assembling workshops, and regional localization, rather than moving into new methodological areas, such as technical studies, patronage, iconography, meaning, gender, and historical context, etc., as German scholarship on fifteenth-century Netherlandish and Italian art had already done.²¹

Only recently have scholars directly acknowledged that *Deutsche Malerei der Gotik*, though seemingly a neutral scholarly work, takes a political stance consistent with Nazi ideology. In a 2013 article, Iris Grötecke argued convincingly that Stange's volumes are ideological both in terms of presenting German Gothic painting within a regional realm that incorporated the expansionist goals of the Nazi regime, and in terms of presenting the history of style as representing a deterministic path tied to a region, that is, tied to the soil and its people, and free from outside influences.²² Although these unsavoury, somewhat hidden biases were clearly ignored as Stange continued his work with the support of the art historical community in post-war Germany, the examination of fifteenth-century German painting throughout the second half of the twentieth century was burdened with a double Nazi association: first, the general taint that under the Nazis, art historical scholarship had been used to glorify German culture and demonstrate German racial superiority;²³ and second, that the specific field of fifteenth-century German painting had been pioneered, and its main reference tool established, by an avowed Nazi.²⁴

Beginning in the 1990s, and especially after 2000, however, German scholars became increasingly interested in fifteenth-century German painting. They produced a much greater number of publications, exhibitions, technological studies, conservation work, and digital documentation dedicated to this material. It is outside the scope of this introduction to summarize the full extent of all these

21 Bickendorf, 'Deutsche Kunst', discusses the bias in German scholarship toward Italian and Netherlandish art, up to the eighteenth century, which may also play a lingering role here.

22 Grötecke, 'Alfred Stange', pp. 20–22. Caesar, 'Wanderkünstler', pp. 106–109, made similar points in 2012, but Grötecke's article presented the most sustained examination of Stange's ideology as it plays out in this publication.

23 On the tasks of art history under the Nazis, particularly its role in glorifying German artists and German racial superiority, see Preiss, 'Wissenschaft', esp. p. 50, and Petropoulos, *Faustian Bargain*, p. 168.

24 Not only did Stange join the party and the SA, but also he contributed to the 1939 *Festschrift Hitler* in which he espoused a view of art history fully in line with Nazi values. See Doll, 'Politisierung des Geistes', p. 987, which discusses Stange's essay in the *Festschrift* and how it stresses the originality of the accomplishments of German art as opposed to foreign art and influences from abroad, thereby espousing a Nazi ideology of German superiority and racial purity.

activities. But key publications appeared at this time, notably Robert Suckale's major two-volume *Die Erneuerung der Malkunst vor Dürer* (2009), which focused on painting in Franconia. Because Suckale was a scholar who strongly condemned the incorporation of nationalist and Nazi ideology within German art historical studies under the Third Reich, his engagement with early painting in Franconia had important implications for freeing the subject from the stigma of its scholarly past.²⁵ Moreover, his study brought special attention to fifteenth-century painting by casting light specifically on those painters in Franconia who had been overshadowed by the tremendous reputation of the region's sixteenth-century rock star, Albrecht Dürer.

Other publications calling attention to fifteenth-century German painting include a number of catalogues of early German paintings from key German museums, such as Frank Günter Zehnder's on early Cologne painting in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum (1990);²⁶ Bodo Brinkmann and Stephan Kemperdick's on German paintings from 1300 to 1500 in the Städelmuseum in Frankfurt (2002);²⁷ and Kemperdick's on German and Bohemian paintings in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (2010).²⁸ Major catalogues also highlighted painters of this period, for example, the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece exhibition in Cologne (2001), and the Hans Holbein the Elder exhibition in Stuttgart (2010–2011).²⁹ Both these large exhibition catalogues included a variety of essays demonstrating a range of methodological approaches and also incorporated many technological studies.

Other publications on fifteenth-century German painting have included volumes of collected essays centred on individual altarpieces, such as that on the *Peter and Paul* Altarpiece in Hildesheim (2000), and on the high altarpiece in Göttingen (2005), as well as more monographic studies, such as Helmut Möhring's study of Gabriel Angler (1997) or more thematic approaches like Felix Prinz's interrogation of how fifteenth-century painting references other media (2018).³⁰ Some major conservation projects have been the restorations of Conrad von Soest's altarpiece in Bad Wildungen (1993–1996) and of the retable of Altenberg in the Städel Museum (in conjunction with a focus exhibition and catalogue of 2016).³¹ This latter project tied

25 Hamburger, 'Robert Suckale', p. 367, discusses Suckale's critique of the history of German art history under the Nazis and how it is evidenced in Suckale, 'Wilhelm Pinder'.

26 Zehnder, *Altkölner Malerei*.

27 Brinkmann and Kemperdick, *Deutsche Gemälde im Städel 1300*.

28 Kemperdick, *Deutsche und böhmische Gemälde*.

29 Budde and Krischel, *Genie ohne Namen*, and Wiemann, *Holbein Graue Passion in ihrer Zeit*.

30 Schällick, *Drei Tafeln des Peter-und Paul-Altars*; Carqué and Röchelein, *Hochaltarretabel der St. Jacobi-Kirche*; Möhring, *Tegernseer Altarretabel*; Prinz, *Gemalte Skulpturenretabel*.

31 Sander, *Schaufenster des Himmels*.

into the 2011–2015 research project, *Mittelalterliche Retabel in Hessen*, conducted under the auspices of the Städel Museum and the Universities of Frankfurt, Marburg, and Osnabrück, which involved the study and digital documentation of the medieval and early modern altarpieces within that region.³²

In addition to these activities in Germany, another key activity in the field was the 2010–2011 exhibition in Bruges, *Van Eyck to Dürer: Early Netherlandish Painting and Central Europe 1430–1530*. Organized by Till-Holger Borchert, this exhibition catalogue represents a fully international effort with contributions from scholars from a wide variety of countries. The catalogue provides the most nuanced assessment to date of the relationships between the Netherlands and Germany: as the preface states, ‘The catalogue clearly shows that the relationship was by no means static or one-way; influences went back and forth, and the ways in which they were assimilated and visually expressed shifted constantly’.³³ In its totality, the exhibition and accompanying catalogue effectively overturned older traditions regarding the mere derivativeness of German fifteenth-century painting.

Methodology, Scope, and Theme of this Study

Nevertheless, more work needs to be done to bring the study of the field of German fifteenth-century painting up to speed in relation to Netherlandish and Italian fifteenth-century painting. This book attempts to move this project forward, not through a full-scale, systematic study of German fifteenth-century triptychs, but admittedly in a more limited way. The limits of this book were motivated first by my long-term scholarly interests in pursuing a specific methodological approach, which Germans refer to as *Medialität*.³⁴ This methodology studies the consequences arising out of a medium. In its simplest sense, a methodology focusing on *Medialität* probes the full range of consequences (visual, semantic, or any other relevant aspect) of an art work’s being produced in a medium, say, sculpture rather than painting. But the German sense of a medium extends well beyond the English term ‘medium’ to include things that English speakers would consider to be a ‘function’, such as an altarpiece, and what English speakers would consider to be a ‘format’, such as, a triptych.³⁵ Since there may or may not be an English translation of the

32 This resulted in the two-volume publication, Schütte et al., *Mittelalterliche Retabel in Hesse*.

33 Borchert, *Van Eyck to Dürer*, p. 9.

34 This approach has informed my work on Netherlandish carved altarpieces, which combine painting and sculpture, as well as my work on the Netherlandish triptych.

35 The expanded sense of medium within an understanding of *Medialität* is presented in Rimmele, ‘Transparenzen’, pp.15–19. My initial insights into this approach are much indebted to correspondence with Heike Schlie.

Medialität—‘mediality’ does not exist on dictionary.com and a Google search for ‘mediality’ turns up a variety of meanings, many of which differ from that of the German—I will use the German term throughout this book as defined here for purposes of clarity.

Medialität is a valuable methodology because it provides ways of understanding meaning within art that are bound up with the ‘medium’ rather than symbols.³⁶ This book applies this methodology specifically to an examination of the ‘medium’ of the triptych to position this study within the growing scholarship on the *Medialität* of German fifteenth-century triptychs and thereby complements the more extensive literature with this methodological focus directed at the Netherlandish triptych.³⁷ In considering the triptych format from the standpoint of *Medialität*, a central issue is the treatment of the boundaries between the triptych’s parts—both the separate panels that make up the whole, and the front and back sides that make up the different views of the open and closed work (since the panels are normally hinged to allow for opening and closing). For this reason, this book focuses on the theme of the boundary. The examples in this book are specifically selected to highlight instances in which boundaries are blurred. Many fifteenth-century triptychs did in fact respect the boundaries inherent in the format, but those examples in which boundaries are transgressed represent particularly strong examples of how artists leveraged the format to produce meaning.³⁸ In addition, those cases of blurred boundaries often represent previously unrecognized interconnections, which have important ramifications for our understanding of the artworks and, sometimes, our understanding of the relations between German and Netherlandish triptychs as well.

One of the key limits of this study is its focus on fully painted triptychs, rather than sculpted triptychs (or ones that combined sculpted centres with painted wings). Fifteenth-century German art is particularly well known for sculpted altarpieces produced by artists such as Michael Pacher, Michel Erhart, Bernt Notke, Tilman Riemenschneider, and Veit Stoss. Certainly, these sculpted works are highly appropriate objects of study for the methodological approach and thematic focus of this book. Questions of *Medialität* raised by these sculpted examples can be both similar to and

36 In this way the methodology is meant to go beyond the Panofskian idea of meaning as bound up with disguised symbols.

37 Rimmelé, ‘Transparanzen’, and Krischel, ‘Now you see me’, are some examples of the use of the methodology of *Medialität* for the study of German and Netherlandish triptychs. Schlie, ‘Martyrium’, and Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, focus on this methodology within the specific study of Netherlandish triptychs.

38 The probing of blurred boundaries in early German painting also helps counter the claims of Päch, ‘Zur deutschen Bildauffassung’, p. 113, that, in early German painting, the picture border functioned as a spatial border, creating closet-like and even prison-like spaces.



Fig. 0.1. Lucas Moser, *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece, exterior, 1432, St. Maria Magdalena Church, Tiefenbronn (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).

different from those raised within fully painted triptychs. For example, the painted exterior of Lucas Moser's *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece of 1432 (Fig. 0.1), which depicts legends from the Magdalene's life after Christ's Ascension, definitely shows an interest in blurred boundaries. Moser paints green frames around the exterior's three narrative

scenes but allows the architectural setting of the Magdalene's last communion at the right to continue across into the central scene of the Magdalene's arrival in Marseille (which itself spans the crack between the closed wings). The willingness of this Upper Rhenish artist to transgress both the boundaries of the physical panels and of the frame he himself painted to divide the scenes is similar to the treatment of the frames on the interior of Conrad von Soest's fully painted *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece (Fig. 1.1), which will be the focus of Chapter One. But the opened *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece (Fig. 0.2) displays a dynamic not found in the *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece nor in any of the fully painted triptychs. The interior of Moser's altarpiece presents a central sculpture—the current sculpture is not original and replaces an earlier sculpture of unknown subject matter³⁹—paired with painted wings depicting standing saints and a painted lunette at the top and painted predella at the bottom. The possibilities for connections between boundaries in the *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece are thus complicated by differences between media (painting and sculpture) not found in fully painted works and by a presumed need for collaboration between Moser, who is known only as a painter, and an unknown sculptor.⁴⁰

Other sculpted examples, such as the *Blaubeuren* Altarpiece (Fig. 4.5), raise issues of *Medialität* that differ both from the *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece and from those typically found in fully painted triptychs, such as the Master of the *St. Bartholomew* Altarpiece's *Holy Cross* Triptych (Fig. 4.6). These differences arise from the specific format and arrangement of media within the *Blaubeuren* Altarpiece, which is more typical of later fifteenth-century sculpted works—rather than Moser's unusually designed earlier fifteenth-century example.⁴¹ The *Blaubeuren* Altarpiece's interior combines three-dimensional standing figures in the central shrine with narrative relief sculpture in the wings, and, like many German sculpted altarpieces, it possesses a double set of wings. Thus, unlike the typical painted triptych, which has only two views, the *Blaubeuren* Altarpiece has three views, one displaying sculptures, attributed to Michel Erhart, and two comprised of paintings, attributed to several other hands.⁴² While explorations of these boundaries and interactions of media within this and other sculpted/painted triptychs represent very valuable scholarly

39 See Morris, 'Lucas Moser's', pp. 153–160.

40 Morris, 'Lucas Moser's', pp. 153–154, discusses the theory that Multscher made the original sculpture for the shrine, and why it was rejected.

41 On the unusual shape of this altarpiece, see Morris, 'Lucas Moser's', pp. 43–46.

42 Kahsnitz, *Carved Altarpieces*, pp. 185–186, argues that the claims for joint attribution to Gregor Erhart are problematic, although the carvings likely were divided up within the workshop of Michel Erhart. Kahsnitz, *Carved Altarpieces*, pp. 186–187, argues that the paintings were largely produced by Bartholomäus Zeitblom, along with Bernhard Strigel and another artist, possibly from the workshop of the Ulm painter Hans Schüchlin. His attributions revise those advanced by Stange, *Deutsche Malerei*, vol. VIII, pp. 26–28.



Fig. 0.2. *St. Magdalene* Altarpiece, open, paintings by Lucas Moser, 1432, and sixteenth-century sculpture replacing an original fifteenth-century sculpture, St. Maria Magdalena Church, Tiefenbronn (Photo: Ewald Freiburger, J.S. Klotz Verlagshaus Neulingen Germany).

projects—as is evidenced by Valerie Möhle’s essay on the high altarpiece in the St. Jacobi-Kirche in Göttingen, for example⁴³—this present book’s focus specifically on painted triptychs allows for a more sustained consideration of *Medialität* specific to the fully pictorial format. Moreover, this focus allows for a more sustained assessment of how German painted triptychs compare to their Netherlandish counterparts, thereby providing a stronger basis for demonstrating the vitality, rather than imitative nature, of German fifteenth-century art.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in this book, German sculpted triptychs will occasionally be included as comparisons to pictorial triptychs when relevant.

The Case Studies

The four main chapters of this book present case studies designed to present a sampling of ways in which meaning could be bound into the creation of a triptych’s blurred boundaries. The case studies are largely arranged chronologically, beginning with studies of the boundaries inhering in the triptych format itself—both within the interior itself and between the interior and exterior. The conception of the boundaries within the case studies then expands first to examine the regional boundary between the Netherlands and Germany, and then the extensive range of boundaries addressed in the triptychs of the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece, which include boundaries between artistic media (sculpture and painting) and metaphysical boundaries between earth and heaven. Because the case studies were selected to foreground especially striking examples of blurred boundaries—and ones that had particularly important consequences for the meanings of the triptychs—this book does not cover the full range of artistic traditions across the whole expanse of the German-speaking regions of the time. The examples included here focus primarily on Cologne, Westphalia, and, to a lesser degree, Southern Germany. But this does not imply that blurred boundaries cannot be found in triptychs from other Germanic regions not treated in this book.

The first case study, in Chapter One, centres on Conrad von Soest’s famous 1403 *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece (Fig. 1.1) and the boundaries created on its interior. This work, like many German painted triptychs in the first decades of the fifteenth century, especially within Westphalia, divides its interior into many individual

43 See Möhle, ‘Vielfalt’.

44 My previous studies of Netherlandish carved altarpieces and Netherlandish painted triptychs have shown distinct divergences between these two formats; see Jacobs, *Early Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces* and Jacobs, *Opening Doors*. The present book’s goal of mapping issues of *Medialität* across the German/Netherlandish regional divide thus provides another rationale for confining the study to the painted format.

scenes, each showing a different event in the life of Christ. The scenes are all multiply framed, both with painted forms and even a little-noticed pastiglia relief strip, made of white chalk and moulded into a thin, rope-like shape, which surrounds each scene. This compounding of frames within the open triptych gives the strong impression that each scene within the narrative cycles depicted here is sharply separated from one another. But, as this chapter argues, this impression is quite wrong. For within the *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece, Conrad von Soest—as he, his contemporaries, and followers did in other triptychs—made the transgression of boundaries into a leitmotif and a way to forge visual and iconographic connections between individual scenes within narrative cycles. This chapter examines the connections created across the divisions within the *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece's interior and within other early fifteenth-century Westphalian triptychs, and the ways in which these blurred boundaries contributed to the visual character and meaning of these works. This chapter provides the first sustained consideration of the presence and significance of the pastiglia frames within the *Niederwildungen* Altarpiece. Of special importance here is the examination of where the pastiglia frames were cut to eliminate the frame and thereby allow sections of the scene to extend past the strips that would have contained the images. Since the pastiglia was applied to the altarpiece prior to the painting of the scenes, the careful cuts of the pastiglia reveal that violation of the boundaries of the scenes was planned into the altarpiece from the very start and was intrinsic to its conception.

Chapter Two moves from a consideration of the interior boundaries of the triptych to an investigation of the boundaries between interior and exterior. This chapter probes the ramifications of the use of colour on the exterior of most German fifteenth-century triptychs. This practice stands in contrast to the traditions of Netherlandish fifteenth-century triptychs, which typically placed grisaille images of illusionistic sculptures on their exteriors.⁴⁵ Hence German artists, unlike their Netherlandish peers, did not structure the exterior and interior of the triptych as a seeming opposition between the media of sculpture and painting. In Netherlandish triptychs, this feigned opposition of media served in part to demonstrate the artistry of the pictorial medium by showcasing how painters could create an astonishingly deceptive illusion of sculpture. Instead, as this chapter argues, German triptychs displayed artistry on triptych exteriors in other ways, probing realism without creating one side effect of the use of illusionistic grisaille, namely, the effect of distancing.⁴⁶ The inclusion of pseudo-sculptures on the exteriors of Netherlandish

45 Although by the later fifteenth century, Netherlandish, grisaille became more pictorial, as noted in Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, pp. 224–225, the exteriors of many fifteenth-century triptychs still retained strong references to sculpture and illusionistic elements.

46 To be sure, certain German triptychs, especially those produced in Cologne, created distancing on their interiors through the inclusion of gold leaf, which heightens the interior's transcendent character.

triptychs makes viewers aware that what they are seeing in the triptych, despite its seeming realism, is all just representation, artifice, not reality. But because German triptychs stay within their pictorial character, they never consciously call attention to the nature of the medium's role as representation. This desire to maintain pictorial representational modes may explain more generally why German painters almost never adopted Netherlandish pseudo-sculptural forms of grisaille at all—except, for example, when depicting buildings with sculpture on them—but did develop alternative, vital, and inventive forms of pictorial monochrome, which are especially evident in the works of the Munich artist, Gabriel Angler. His monochromes represent a high point of painterly approaches to the medium: as far as is known, unlike Netherlandish grisailles, his monochromes appear on single panels or within triptych interiors (Figs. 2.9, 2.10, 2.11), but never on triptych exteriors. By including colour on their exteriors, German triptychs achieve much greater connections between their interiors and exteriors than is typically found in Netherlandish works, and hence create greater transparency between the closed and opened views. This blurring of the boundaries between exterior and interior plays a powerful role for generating meanings that resonate across the two views of the triptych, as exemplified in several works discussed in this chapter, notably the Master of St. Veronica's *Virgin with the Sweet Pea Blossom* (Figs. 2.31, 2.32), the *Peter and Paul* Altarpiece of Hildesheim (Figs. 1.26, 2.23), the *Crucifixion* Triptych by the Master of the Kirchsahr Altarpiece (Figs. 2.33, 2.34), and the Master of Schöppingen's Haldern Altarpiece (Figs. 1.20, 2.35).

Chapter Three moves the examination of the relations between German and Netherlandish art beyond the boundaries nested within the triptych format itself into the broader issue of regional boundaries activated through the movement of artists and art works across them. This chapter investigates the case study of the commissioning of the Columba Triptych (Fig. 3.1) by a Cologne patron from the leading Netherlandish artist of the mid-fifteenth century, Rogier van der Weyden. Chapter Three builds on Chapter Two's claims about the independence and vitality of German traditions of triptych design by arguing against the long-held notion that artistic influences between the Netherlands and Cologne went in one direction, that is, from the Netherlands to Cologne. It considers, more fully than previous scholarship to date, how Rogier van der Weyden was influenced by Stefan Lochner and by Cologne triptych traditions, and how Rogier very consciously developed his Columba Triptych in relation to, and in competition with, Lochner's *Dombild* (Fig. 2.22). But while Rogier incorporated specific Cologne features into his triptych, ones not previously seen in Netherlandish examples, he also showcased specific Netherlandish features that were largely unprecedented in Cologne works as a competitive challenge to Stefan Lochner. This chapter's study of triptychs produced by Cologne artists in the second half of the fifteenth century indicates that while

Cologne artists were influenced by Netherlandish style generally, they were quite reluctant to incorporate key aspects of the Netherlandish triptych that Rogier featured in his Columba Triptych. Indeed Cologne triptychs for a long time retained local traditions, such as gold leaf, which were included in Lochner's triptych, but not in Rogier's Columba Altarpiece.⁴⁷ Hence even in Cologne, the area considered the most susceptible to Netherlandish influence, local traditions of triptych design were able to withstand competition from one of the most famous Netherlandish paintings on display in one of the main churches in town. This chapter exposes the multi-directionality of the interrelations between the Netherlands and Germany as well as the ways in which the two regional traditions both competed with and accommodated one another.

Chapter Four focuses on one artist, the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece, who engaged with an especially wide variety of boundaries. One was regional, since this master straddles the boundaries between the Northern Netherlands and Cologne: although a large body of his works were produced for Cologne patrons, scholars have advanced diverging opinions about whether he was born, trained, and worked in Cologne or in various Netherlandish cities. Another boundary line negotiated in this artist's works is that between seriousness and humour, which creates odd shifts within the Bartholomew Master's triptychs between moments of religious intensity and moments when the seriousness seems to shift into deadpan irony. The Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece also engages with the boundaries between media by regularly evoking in his paintings the effects of sculpture. He does so not just on the exteriors of his triptychs, in unusual late fifteenth-century examples of pseudo-sculptural grisaille imagery, but also in polychrome interiors bearing standing saints who evoke the appearance of polychromed sculpted figures. This chapter argues, however, that the most central boundary within the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece's three major triptychs is spiritual, that is, the boundary between heaven and earth. By showing forms that project forward into the real space in front of the triptych and forms that are located in an infinite, heavenly space somewhere beyond it—and, sometimes depicting forms that are ambiguously placed between earth and heaven—the Master of the St. Bartholomew Altarpiece distinguishes the realm of the material from the immaterial, while also demonstrating ways one can make the passage between the two through acts of faith. This chapter examines how the Bartholomew Master exploits the built-in boundaries of the triptych medium to visualize the fundamental desire of the donors (and viewers) of his triptychs to transcend the boundaries of the physical to reach the eternal realm.

47 Rogier van der Weyden did, however, use gold leaf in some of his other works, for example, the Beaufort Altarpiece, the Prado *Deposition*, and the Medici *Madonna*.

The book concludes with a coda that examines the German triptych in the age of Dürer, with specific attention to the triptychs of Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien, and Lucas Cranach the Elder. Although the use of the triptych declined significantly in German-speaking regions due to the impact of the Reformation and the influence of the Italian Renaissance, this coda reveals that sixteenth-century German artists continued to recognize and exploit the triptych's *Medialität* not only in the early years of the century, but even, surprisingly, at and post mid-century when the triptych at times took on a new role, that of serving as a Reformation altarpiece.

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