Encyclopedia of German and Spanish Arts

Gian Mohr

Toby Wade

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Email: info@wtbooks.com

Table of Contents

Chapter-1

Introduction to German Art

Altar by Tilman Riemenschneider

German art has a long and distinguished tradition in the visual arts, from the earliest known work of figurative art to its current output of contemporary art.

Germany has only been united into a single state since the 19th century, and defining its borders has been a notoriously difficult and painful process. For earlier periods German art often effectively includes that produced in German-speaking regions including Austria, Alsace and much of Switzerland, as well as largely German-speaking cities or regions to the east of the modern German borders.

Prehistory to Late Antiquity

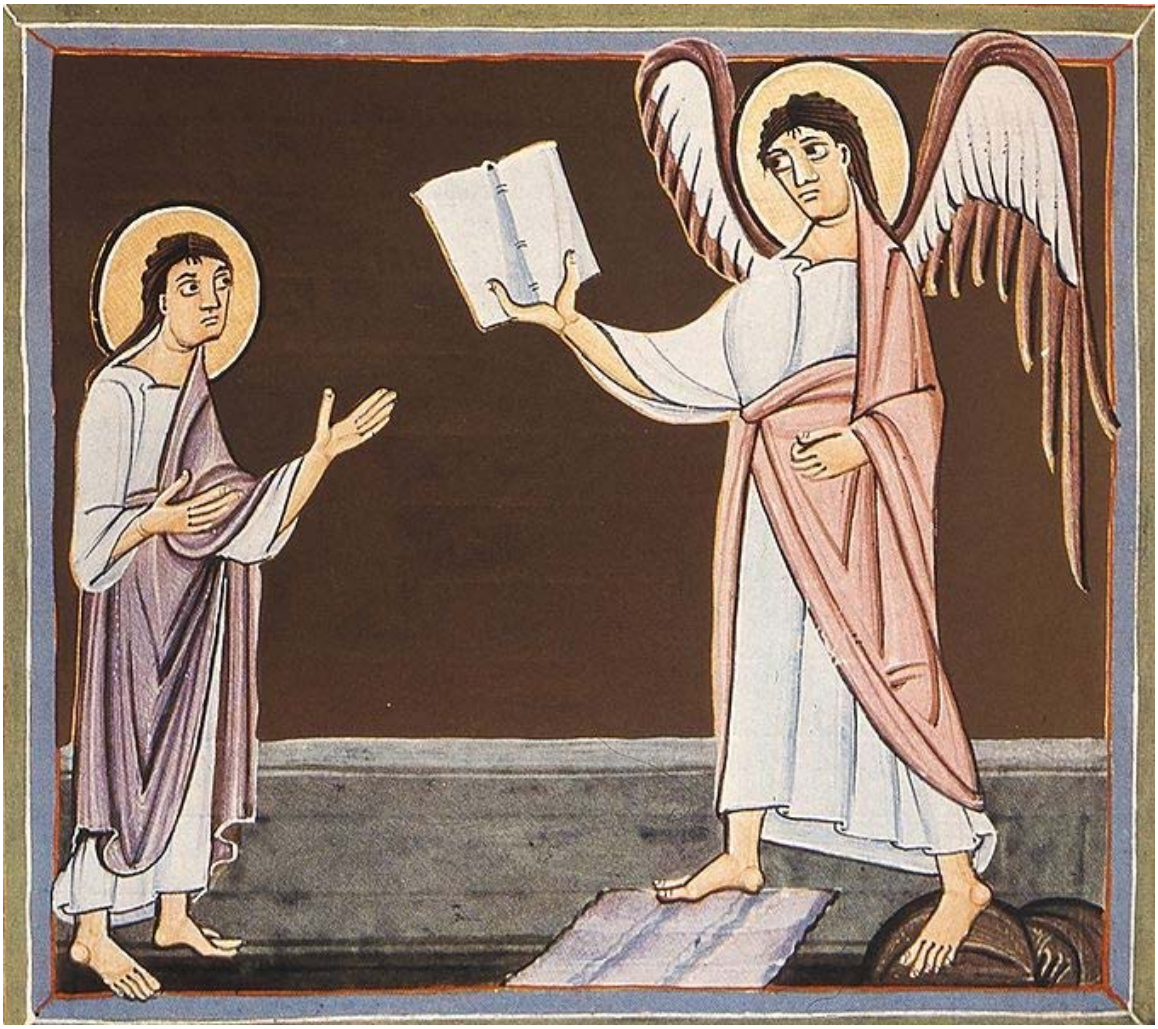
Venus of Hohle Fels, 35,000 to 40,000 BP, the oldest known figurative work of art (true height 6 cm (2.4 in)).

The area of modern Germany is rich in finds of prehistoric art, including the Venus of Hohle Fels. This appears to be the oldest undisputed example of Upper Paleolithic art and figurative sculpture of the human form in general, from over 35,000 years BP, which was only discovered in 2008; the better-known Venus of Willendorf (24–22,000 BP) comes from a little way over the Austrian border. The spectacular finds of Bronze Age golden hats are centred on Germany, as was the "central" form of Urnfield culture, and Hallstatt culture. In the Iron Age the "Celtic" La Tène culture centred on Western Germany and Eastern France, and Germany has produced many major finds of Celtic art like the elite burials at Reinheim and Hochdorf, and *oppida* towns like Glauberg, Manching and Heuneburg.

After lengthy wars, the Roman Empire settled its frontiers in Germania with the Limes Germanicus to include much of the south and west of modern Germany. The German provinces produced art in provincial versions of Roman styles, but centres there, as over the Rhine in France, were large-scale producers of fine Ancient Roman pottery, exported all over the Empire. Rheinzabern was one of the largest, which has been well-excavated and has a dedicated museum.

Non-Romanized areas of the later Roman period fall under Migration Period art, notable for metalwork, especially jewellery (the largest pieces apparently mainly worn by men).

Middle Ages



The Bamberg Apocalypse, from the Ottonian Reichenau School, achieves monumentality in a small scale. 1000–1020.

German medieval art really begins with the Frankish Empire of Charlemagne (d. 814), the first state to rule the great majority of the modern territory of Germany, as well as France and much of Italy. Carolingian art was restricted to a relatively small number of objects produced for a circle around the court and a number of Imperial abbeys they sponsored, but had a huge influence on later Medieval art across Europe. The most common type of object to survive is the illuminated manuscript; wall paintings were evidently common but, like the buildings that housed them, have nearly all vanished. The earlier centres of illumination were located in modern France, but later Metz in Lorraine and the Abbey of Saint Gall in modern Switzerland came to rival them. The Drogo Sacramentary and Folchard Psalter are among the manuscripts they produced.

No Carolingian monumental sculpture survives, although perhaps the most important patronage of Charlemagne was his commissioning of a life-size gold figure of Christ on a crucifix for his Palatine Chapel in Aachen; this is only known from literary references and was probably gold foil around a wooden base, probably modelled with a gesso layer, like the later and rather crumpled Golden Madonna of Essen. Early Christian art had not featured monumental sculptures of religious figures as opposed to rulers, as these were strongly associated by the Church Fathers with the cult idols of Ancient Roman religion. Byzantine art and modern Eastern Orthodox religious art have maintained the prohibition to the present day, but Western art was apparently decisively influenced by the example of Charlemagne to abandon it. Charlemagne's circle wished to revive the glories of classical style, which they mostly knew in its Late Antique form, and also to compete with Byzantine art, in which they appear to have been helped by refugee artists from the convulsions of the Byzantine iconoclasm. As Charlemagne himself does not appear to have been very interested in visual art, his political rivalry with the Byzantine Empire, supported by the Papacy, may have contributed to the strong pro-image position expressed in the Libri Carolini, which set out the position on images held with little variation by the Western Church for the rest of the Middle Ages, and beyond.

Under the next Ottonian dynasty, whose core territory approximated more closely to modern Germany, Austria, and German-speaking Switzerland, Ottonian art was mainly a product of the large monasteries, especially Reichenau which was the leading Western artistic centre in the second half of the 10th century. The Reichenau style uses simplified and patterned shapes to create strongly expressive images, far from the classical aspirations of Carolingian art, and looking forward to the Romanesque. The wooden Gero Cross of 965–970 in Cologne Cathedral is both the oldest and the finest early medieval near life-size crucifix figure; art historians had been reluctant to credit the records giving its date until they were confirmed by dendrochronology in 1976. As in the rest of Europe, metalwork was still the most prestigious form of art, in works like the jewelled Cross of Lothair, made about 1000, probably in Cologne.

Romanesque carving from Maria Laach Abbey

Romanesque art was the first artistic movement to encompass the whole of Western Europe, though with regional varieties. Germany was a central part of the movement, though German Romanesque architecture made rather less use of sculpture than that of France. With increasing prosperity massive churches were built in cities all over Germany, no longer just those patronized by the Imperial circle. The French invented the Gothic style, and Germany was slow to adopt it, but once it had done so Germans made it their own, and continued to use it long after the rest of Europe had abandoned it. According to Henri Focillon, Gothic allowed German art "to define for the first time certain aspects of its native genius-a vigorous and emphatic conception of life and form, in which theatrical ostentation mingled with vehement emotional frankness." The Bamberg Horseman of the 1330s, in Bamberg Cathedral, is the oldest large post-antique standing stone equestrian statue; more medieval princely tomb monuments have survived from Germany than France or England. Romanesque and Early Gothic churches had wall paintings in local versions of international styles, of which few artists' names are known.

Three Foolish Virgins, Magdeburg Cathedral, c. 1250.

The court of the Holy Roman Emperor, then based in Prague, played an important part in forming the International Gothic style in the late 14th century. The style was spread around the wealthy cities of Northern Germany by artists such Conrad von Soest in Westphalia and Meister Bertram in Hamburg, and later Stefan Lochner in Cologne. Hamburg was one of the cities in the Hanseatic League, then at the height of its prosperity, and Bertram was succeeded in the city by artists such as Master Francke, the Master of the Malchin Altar, Hans Bornemann, Hinrik Funhof and Wilm Dedeke who survived into the Renaissance period. Hanseatic artists painted commissions for Baltic cities in Scandinavia and the modern Baltic states to the east. In the south, the Master of the Bamberg Altar is the first significant painter based in Nuremberg, while the Master of Heiligenkreuz and then Michael Pacher worked in Austria.

Like that of Pacher, the workshop of Bernt Notke, a painter from the Hanseatic city of Lübeck, both painted altarpieces or carved them in the increasingly elaborate painted and gilded style used as frameworks or alternatives for painted panels. South German wood sculpture was important in developing new subjects that reflected the intensely emotional devotional life encouraged by movements in late medieval Catholicism such as German mysticism. These are often known in English as andachtsbilder (devotional images) and include the *Pietà*, *Pensive Christ*, *Man of Sorrows*, *Arma Christi*, *Veil of Veronica*, the severed head of John the Baptist, and the *Virgin of Sorrows*, many of which would spread across Europe and remain popular until the Baroque and, in popular religious imagery, beyond. Indeed "Late Gothic Baroque" is a term sometimes used to describe hyper-decorated and emotional 15th century art, above all in Germany.

Martin Schongauer, who worked in Alsace in the last part of the 15th century, was the culmination of late Gothic German painting, with a sophisticated and harmonious style, but he increasingly spent his time producing engravings, for which national and international channels of distribution had developed, so that his prints were known in Italy and other countries. His predecessors were the Master of the Playing Cards and Master E. S., both also from the Upper Rhine region. German conservatism is shown in the late use of gold backgrounds, still used by many artists well into the 15th century.

Renaissance painting and prints

The Heller altar by Albrecht Dürer

The concept of the Northern Renaissance or German Renaissance is somewhat confused by the continuation of the use of elaborate Gothic ornament until well into the 16th century, even in works that are undoubtedly Renaissance in their treatment of the human figure and other respects. Classical ornament had little historical resonance in much of Germany, but in other respects Germany was very quick to follow developments, especially in adopting printing with movable type, a German invention that remained almost a German monopoly for some decades, and was first brought to most of Europe, including France and Italy, by Germans.

Printmaking by woodcut and engraving (perhaps another German invention) was already more developed in Germany and the Low Countries than anywhere else, and the Germans took the lead in developing book illustrations, typically of a relatively low artistic standard, but seen all over Europe, with the woodblocks often being lent to printers of editions in other cities or languages. The greatest artist of the German Renaissance, Albrecht Dürer, began his career as an apprentice to a leading workshop in Nuremberg, that of Michael Wolgemut, who had largely abandoned his painting to exploit the new medium. Dürer worked on the most extravagantly illustrated book of the period, the Nuremberg Chronicle, published by his godfather Anton Koberger, Europe's largest printer-publisher at the time.

After completing his apprenticeship in 1490, Dürer travelled in Germany for four years, and Italy for a few months, before establishing his own workshop in Nuremberg. He rapidly became famous all over Europe for his energetic and balanced woodcuts and engravings, while also painting. Though retaining a distinctively German style, his work shows strong Italian influence, and is often taken to represent the start of the German Renaissance in visual art, which for the next forty years replaced the Netherlands and France as the area producing the greatest innovation in Northern European art. Dürer supported Martin Luther but continued to create Madonnas and other Catholic imagery, and paint portraits of leaders on both sides of the emerging split of the Protestant Reformation.