

Art in the Upper Rhine between 1510 and 1520

At the time when the *Isenheim Altarpiece** was made for the Antonite order by Grünewald and Nikolaus Hagenauer, what were the characteristics of artistic activity in the Upper Rhine, and more specifically in Strasbourg, where the artists responsible for the altarpiece seem to have worked, and in Colmar, which is so close to Isenheim?

Nikolaus Hagenauer (attested from 1485 to 1522), the artist responsible for the sculpted portion of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, was a dominant figure in Strasbourg. In his workshop in the Rue du Maroquin, the master and his associates produced hundreds of sculpted figures, but his style also persisted through works bearing the influence of the art of his entourage.



Attributed to the workshop of Nikolaus Hagenauer, *St Anthony* and *St Peter*, c. 1512 – 1520, polychrome wood (lime)

This connection to Nikolaus Hagenauer can be seen in the figures of *St Anthony* and *St Peter* on display in the nave of the former chapel, for instance. Works influenced by the Strasbourg master are typified by the sense of the body's posture and its marked presence beneath the drapery, with its deep, broken folds, as well as their heavily individualised and expressive faces. Technically, the treatment of the backs of the two sculptures differs because of their different functions: the figure of *St Peter* is not sculpted at the back as it was placed against the corpus of an altarpiece; the figure of *St Anthony* could be seen from behind and is worked on the back, showing that it probably

adorned the structure crowning an altarpiece.



Attributed to the workshop of Veit Wagner, *Bergheim Altarpiece*, 1515 – 1517, wood

The other major figure in sculpture in Strasbourg was Veit Wagner (attested between 1492 and 1512), who created the *Bergheim Altarpiece* with his entourage. Like Nikolaus Hagenauer, he emphasised the expressivity of his faces and the movements of the body, but they are set apart by the fact that Veit Wagner used engravings as a source of inspiration. So the *Bergheim Altarpiece*, the *Annunciation* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* draw upon compositions from Albrecht Dürer's series of woodcuts of the *Life of the Virgin* published in 1511, and on the left-hand wing when facing the work, the figure *St George* draws upon Dürer's engraving of the same name dating from 1508.



Stetter Wilhelm, *Saint John the Baptist Blessing the Cup of Poison*, 1519, oil on wood panel

The opposite wing, with its image of a *Hermit Saint (Onuphrius?) at Prayer in front of a Church*, could perhaps also have been inspired by a print, but one that so far remains unidentified. There are few examples of contemporary painting from Strasbourg at the Musée Unterlinden, although we can mention the panel

of *Saint John the Evangelist Blessing the Poisoned Cup Intended to Poison Him*, painted by Wilhelm Stetter, a member of the Order of St John, whose style reveals some clumsiness in the proportions and the handling of perspective.

In Colmar, painters were still under the influence of Martin Schongauer, and the workshops active around 1500 were still in operation. On the reverse side of the wings of the *Altarpiece of St Eligius* illustrating the saint's legend, we find figures of saints who are worthy heirs to the female figures created by Schongauer. Two sculptures that are still held in Ammerschwihr, a figure of *St Eligius* and one of *St Roch*, must have stood at the heart of the altarpiece. These works originating from Colmar are representative of one of the numerous sculptors' workshops active in the city in the early 16th century.



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Lamentation of Christ*, c. 1510 – 1520, sculpture (high relief) in polychrome limewood



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1510 – 1520, polychrome wood (lime)

One of them was responsible for the *Lamentation of Christ* from Rouffach and a series of sculptures, such as the *Virgin of Marbach*, which all share the same characteristics: elongated silhouettes, gestures that are often static and awkward, and above all, narrow, regular

and parallel folds that break into sharp edges. A second workshop in Colmar stands out for its works in which the static effect of the images is at odds with the narrative aspect of the scenes.



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Baptism of Christ and Visit of St Anthony*, c. 1510, polychrome wood (lime)

Engravings were a significant source of influence within the workshop, as is demonstrated by the two reliefs of the *Baptism of Christ* modelled on Schongauer's engraving, and the *Visit of St Anthony to St Paul the Hermit* after a work by Dürer. A final workshop represented at the Musée Unterlinden was operated by Hans Bongart, who is attested in Colmar between 1511 and 1549.

The sculptor produced the *Kaysersberg Altarpiece of the Passion*.

Comparison with the figures of this monumental polyptych made it possible to attribute the figures of *St James* and *St Peter* on display here to the same workshop.



Circle of Hans Bongart, *St James and St Peter*, c. 1515 – 1520, polychrome wood (lime)

Altarpiece: refers to a painted and/or sculpted work standing above the altar of a church or chapel. The altarpiece consists of a corpus (the main body), wings, a predella (the base) and a decorative sculpted section above the corpus.