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Michael Pacher and the fate of the altarpiece in Renaissance Germany

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In 1709 the Franciscan friars of Salzburg, after more than a century as custodians of the city’s parish church, commissioned a new and modern high altarpiece.1 The old retablo was older than anyone remembered; it was condemned as “pervetustum et ruinosum”—ancient and decrepit—and dismantled. The cathedral chapter agreed that its replacement had become an “absolute necessity,” and promised 300 gulden toward the project. The Stadtrat or city council donated 500 gulden. And even the doomed altarpiece itself was able to contribute: although its painted panels were treated rather roughly—handed over to the cabinetmaker as scrap, or at best farmed out to needy provincial chapels2—it and silver trimmings and furnishings were painstakingly stripped and converted into cash. Only the central sculpted figure, an enthroned Madonna and Child, found a niche in the new regime. Laden with a crown and scepter, her carved drapery mutilated to accommodate a cone-shaped cloth mantle, the altar’s patroness endured, squarely in the center of the modern tabernacle. She was spared, according to documents, in deference to miraculous powers credited to her.3

The architect of her new surroundings was Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, who had already designed four entire churches in Salzburg.4 Fischer enveloped the Madonna in billowing stucco clouds and a retinue of gilded angels. More angels lofted a garland above her head. Golden rays linked her to the figure of God the Father in the tabernacle’s crown. This new machine renounced as cumbersome and unnecessary the elaborate framework that the old retablo had provided: an apparatus of figure and color, narrative and expression, the rhythm of opening and closing painted shutters. Nothing of this superannuated commentary upon the Virgin’s presence was retained except, presumably, the characters of the guardian saints Florian and George, who traditionally flanked the central shrine of winged altarpieces.

The reconstructed eighteenth-century Virgin exercised an altogether new kind of power: the power to generate an artistic style. Precisely in her strangeness, in her still unfathomed provenance, she promised a startlingly immediate access to spirit. Fischer’s stylistic rapprochement with the Gothic, with its energy and even its “bisarreties,” was inspired by this image. In the thoroughness and sincerity of Fischer’s gesture the old sculpture, the spolia, was absorbed into the totality of the new: the assimilation was reciprocal and absolute. The carved Madonna vanished as a fragment of history into a work of sacred art, into a construct that could claim in a sense to stand outside history. Thus the very source of her newfound power—the historicity of her style—was rendered perfectly transparent.

Not until 1864 was the old Madonna dredged out of her cultic anonymity and reconstructed yet again, but then only as a new species of cult object, the historical monument.5 The municipal authorities had disclosed the original master of the high altar, Fischer von Erlach’s predecessor: the great Tyrolean sculptor and painter of the late fifteenth century, Michael Pacher. The Virgin was measured and photographed, her abused drapery restored. Nothing that had ever been done to this Madonna so altered her as this historical and authorial label. It redoubled her “stylistic” power: the historical resuscitation prompted, at the very end of the last century, a proposal to scrap Fischer’s Baroque


2. Leopold Spatzenegger, “Beiträge zur Geschichte der Pfarrkirche Franziskanerkirche in Salzburg,” MGSL 9 (1869), p. 14, records a local legend that the panels were reconstituted in the Salzinerkapelle am neuen Sudhause in Hallein.


6. Eberhard Hempel, Michael Pacher (Vienna: Schroll, 1931), pp. 72 ff. on the restoration of 1864/65, with Leopold Spatzenegger’s 1864 photograph of the mutilated Madonna and Child (fig. 81, p. 70); the photograph was first published by G. Dahlke, “Michael Pacher,” Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft 8 (1885), p. 300.
confection and replace it with a neo-Gothic tabernacle. The proposal founndered and Pacher’s Madonna remained safely in her second home (fig. 1). 7

The recontextualization of Pacher’s fragment has continued in our own century on another plane. In 1918 two fragments of an altar wing, truncated representations of the Flagellation of Christ and the Marriage of the Virgin, surfaced in the Viennese art market (figs. 2, 3). 8 They were at once ascribed to

8. Vienna, Österreichische Galerie, Museum Mittelalterlicher Österreichischer Kunst, Inv. 4845 and 4846; Elfriede Baum, Katalog des Museums Mittelalterlicher Österreichischer Kunst (Vienna: Schroll, 1971), nos. 44 and 46. Originally published by F. M. Haberditzl in Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Staatsgalerie 2/3 (1918), and in Die Bildenden Künste 2 (1919), pp. 30–32.

Pacher and some years later associated with the lost Salzburg retable. In 1951 a third fragment was liberated from two and a half centuries of service as the lid of a cabinet in the upper sacristy of the Franciscan church in Salzburg (fig. 4). 9 The lid was still legible as one-half of a representation of Joseph being thrown into the well by his brothers. Suddenly the enthroned Madonna is surrounded, in our minds, by color, detail, narrative, movement, even argument: theological, typological. Our attention inevitably drifts outward from her to these imaginary surroundings, to the challenge or provocation that they seem to pose to her stasis and her cult.

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The career of the German carved retable or “Schnitzaltar” was brilliant and relatively brief. 10 Several dozen of the largest altarpieces built in southern Germany—Alsace, Swabia, Franconia, Bavaria, Salzburg, the Tyrol—during the second half of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century are still with us, having survived iconoclasm, modernizing crusades, several wars, and state secularization of the monasteries. The most ambitious among them exceeded in sheer bulk and mechanical complexity any altarpieces that had ever been built before.

Their essential structure was already established in the High Middle Ages: a central cabinetlike shrine (the “Scheren” or “Corpus”), usually containing freestanding figures of Saints or of the Virgin; shutters or wings adorned with painted scenes; and a row of carved pinnacles (the “Gesprenge”) along the top. Variations and elaborations on this schema followed close on one another in the fifteenth century. In the central shrine, dramatic scenes often replaced standing rows of saints. Narrative relief carvings supplemented the painted

10. Two general and reliable studies of the German carved retable are Walter Paatz, Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre der Spätgotik (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1963), and Herbert Schindler, Der Schnitzaltar (Regensburg: Postel, 1978). More ambitious is Michael Baxandall, The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), the only work of any note on the subject in English. All three studies unfortunately neglect the painted components of the altarpieces.
scenes on the wings. The crowning pinnacles soared ever higher, twisting and ramifying toward the vaulting of the ceiling. And the entire structure was lifted onto a pedestallike predella, apparently conceived as a container for relics; the predella was soon fitted with its own painted wings and sculpted figures. But most dramatic of all was the addition of a second set of wings. The retable was thus transformed from a static backdrop to the sacramental spectacle carried out on the altar, into a kind of mechanical theater. For the wings were never opened and shut arbitrarily, but rather according to the rhythms of the church calendar. On ordinary or “work” days both sets of wings were closed. Only the outermost face—the “Werktagsseite”—was visible: normally painted panels illustrating the life of the altar’s patron saint. On Sundays the first pair of wings was opened: the “Sonntagsseite.” Here might be shown scenes from the Passion of Christ, or from the Life of the Virgin. But the heart of the structure was the sculpted shrine, and the churchgoer waited for the highest holy days—perhaps three or four times a year—to see it: only on “Festtage” was the second set of wings opened (see diagrams I, II, and III below).

Such structures were no longer merely church furniture: they were practically architecture in their own right. A commission for a large winged retable involved carpenters, cabinetmakers, joiners, blacksmiths, locksmiths, goldsmiths, and an entire workshop of painters and carvers. Construction might occupy the better part of a decade.

In the fifteenth century the sculpture on these altarpieces was typically more distinguished than the painting. Michael Pacher was one of the few great masters who practiced both arts. But in the early sixteenth century the balance began to tilt toward the two-dimensional medium. The altarpiece commissioned by the Antonites of Isenheim in Alsace, for instance, is remarkable not primarily for its shrine sculpture by Nikolaus Hagenower but for the wings painted by Matthias Grünewald. Painting and the graphic arts were embraced (albeit rather awkwardly) by German
humanists, and by the princely courts that they served, as progressive media, as paradigmatic manifestations of a regeneration of the arts. Painting, as its ambitions mounted, participated perhaps less effectively in the coordinated theatricality of the winged retable, in the sacramental spectacle. In many accounts, the decline of the Schnitzaltar is thus symptomatic of a general impoverishment of the cult object in favor of a more familiar kind of art. Pacher’s Salzburg retable, now reduced to fragments, stood to all appearances at the apex of the entire tradition of the winged altarpiece. It makes for an unusually promising case study.

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The group of documents attesting to Michael Pacher’s authorship of the high altarpiece of the parish church of Salzburg comprises seven letters from the correspondence of the city council, dated from 1484 to 1486; records of expenditures relating to the retable from the parochial account books, under fourteen different dates between 1495 and 1498; and a final receipt for the altar from Pacher’s son-in-law from 1502. The Bürgermeister and his council initially wrote to another celebrated painter, Rueland Frueauf of Passau, ostensibly for advice in the matters of format, materials, or theme. They offered him an expense-paid visit to Salzburg, which may have augured an eventual offer of the commission as well. But in the meantime the city established contact with Pacher. His talent was vouched for by one Virgil Hofer, an immensely wealthy Tyrolean mining entrepreneur who had retained his citizenship in Salzburg. Hofer not only brought Pacher’s accomplishments to the attention of the city council but also put up a thousand guldens of his own money.


toward the commission. The councilmen were easily persuaded; indeed any of them might have been already familiar with Pacher’s masterpiece, the retable at St. Wolfgang only thirty miles from Salzburg. By late summer of 1484 they had closed a contract with Pacher; this document, regretfully, has not been preserved.

The decision of the Stadtrat to commission an altarpiece from a major master aligns itself readily within a long-standing rivalry between the city and the archbishop of Salzburg. Tensions between Rathaus and cathedral in other German metropolitan cities—Cologne, Mainz, Trier—had long since driven the archbishops out of residence. The archbishops of Salzburg, by contrast, not only presided physically over the city, in the lowering fortress of the Hohensalzburg, and had not only walled off their cathedral and court into a separate “Fürstenstadt” within the city, but indeed held considerable sway over local affairs, particularly in the matter of taxation. For decades the urban patriciate and the archbishop had been sparring over political and economic privileges. Since 1477 Emperor Frederick III had taken the part of the burglers; he resented the strength of the archbishop of Salzburg nearly as much as the citizens did.

In the fifteenth century, buildings and patronage became a currency of social and political competition between the urban patriciate and the archbishop. The building boom had begun in 1408 when the city commissioned the Bavarian architect Hans Stethaimer to build a new choir for their parish church, the soaring space that would eventually house Pacher’s retable. Now, between 1486 and 1498, the citizens were

14. Curiously, as Otto Fischer observed, there is little trace of Tyrolean style in Salzburg before the actual arrival of Pacher and his shop: “Marx Reichlich und die tirolische Malerei in Salzburg,” MGSL 47 (1907), p. 119.
15. On the relations between the city and the archbishop in the fifteenth century, see the relevant sections in the monumental Geschichte Salzburgs, Stadt und Land, 1, Vorgeschichte, Altertum, Mittelalter (1 vol. in 3), ed. Heinz Dopsch (Salzburg: Anton Pustet, 1981–1984).

Figure 4. Michael Pacher, Joseph Thrown into the Well by His Brothers. Vienna, Museum Mittelalterlicher Österreichischer Kunst.
building a tower for their church. Following a design from Nuremberg, they raised it higher than any other tower in the city, higher even than the cathedral. In 1487 the citizens erected a fortification of sorts, comprising brick towers and a wooden palisade, on the Mönchsberg, the hill west of the city and adjacent to the archbishop’s Hohensalzburg. It purported to defend against attacks from the west, but may have carried symbolic significance as well; it was known as the “Bürgerwehr.” Such statements were not lost on the archbishops of Salzburg. Between the 1460s and the 1490s they built up their hilltop residence from a simple walled keep, no more impressive than many provincial castles, into a splendid fortress, an impregnable princely palace. But archbishops also commissioned chapels and altarpieces for the cathedral. The size and splendor of these various projects attested to the mental and spiritual resources of their sponsors: money, initiative, organization, piety or prudence, probably knowledge or judgment as well.

Certainly any attempt at a political exegesis of Salzburg patronage would have to proceed with extreme circumspection. By no means were architecture or art patronage established or conventional vehicles for social or political statement. There were not necessarily any concrete expectations that money be spent on art; there were few ground rules for spending money in this way. One circumstance seems clear: although the bulk of the demand in the city was apparently satisfied by several local workshops, all the key patrons were eager to attract outside talent. And it was by no means easy to draw artists from elsewhere; as we have seen, a successful contract was contingent upon accident, connections, hearsay. There were no well-worn channels of patronage.

Most of the documents unearthed in the 1860s report on the financial and logistical arrangements worked out between Pacher and the city council. We learn, for example, that the council had trouble liquidating the enormous sum they had promised Pacher: 3300 rheinische gulden, the highest recorded fee paid for any altarpiece of the epoch. The documents record that Pacher established a workshop in Salzburg no later than 1495; it is nevertheless likely that Pacher executed the major sculptural work at home in Bruneck in the south Tyrol, as he did for the St. Wolfgang altar, and only later moved to Salzburg to paint the wings. Pacher died in Salzburg in the summer of 1498; apparently all but the predella was complete.

The proportions and program of this immense retable must be extrapolated from the three extant fragments.

21. The extant documents on Salzburg workshops were published by Otto Fischer, *Die altdeutsche Malerei in Salzburg*, pp. 207–225, and by Volker Liedke, “Salzburger Maler und Bildschnitzer sowie Bau- und Kunsthändler der Spätgotik und Renaissance,” *Ars Bavarica*, Archäologisches Jahrbuch für Baukunde und Kunstgeschichte in Bayern 3 (1975), pp. 49 ff. None of these workshops attained any distinction after the 1460s, perhaps in part because guild regulations dating from 1494 but probably rehearsing much older traditions) prohibited any master from employing more than two workshop assistants (Fischer, *Die altdeutsche Malerei in Salzburg*, p. 208).

22. For his altarpieces at Gries and St. Wolfgang, by comparison, Pacher was paid, respectively, 950 and 1200 gulden. Rasmu, *Michel Pacher*, p. 244 (December 8, 1488) and p. 242 (December 13, 1471).

23. Two notices from 1495 and 1496, for example, attest that the silk-embroiderer Gabriel was paid for housing Pacher and, presumably, providing space for his temporary workshop. But Pacher’s most outstanding pupil, the Tyrolean Marx Reichlich, appears in the Salzburg *Bürgerbuch* already in 1494. On Reichlich
The Flagellation and Marriage panels each measure 113 × 139.5 cm. They represent, to all appearances, somewhat less than half of the original compositions. This was confirmed by the discovery of the panel with Joseph and the Well, which measures 261 × 85 cm, that is, 35 cm more than twice the height of the other panels. The panels have also been cropped at the sides. We can thus presume original dimensions of approximately 261 × 170 cm for each panel.

On the reverse of the Joseph panel, the upper face of the sacristy cabinet lid discovered in 1951, nothing remains but a chalk ground and two oblong patches of gold ground pressed with an ornamental pomegranate motif. The gold strips are pointed and may have represented windows. Otto Demus concluded that the surface was the support for a relief, on the grounds that it lacks the strips of linen used on the painted side to mask cracks and seams in the wood.

Thus we have four surfaces that seem to belong to four different sequences or sets of scenes: a Passion scene, a scene from the Life of the Virgin, an Old Testament scene, and a relief. There can hardly have been less than four scenes in either the Passion or the Life of the Virgin sequence. We must imagine a double-winged rebate with two tiers of scenes on each opening: four scenes visible with both wings closed, eight scenes visible with one set of wings open, and four scenes flanking the central carved shrine with both wings open. The height of the wings reached at least 520 cm. The enthroned Madonna and Child, only 146 cm high, was probably surrounded by flanking standing saints and floating angels. She was surely mounted, like the central figures of Pacher’s St. Wolfgang altarpiece, on a kind of pedestal that also served as a reliquary, with perhaps the entire upper third of the shrine occupied by a tracery screen. The net height of the rebate, including the crown, is usually calculated by analogy with St. Wolfgang, where a shrine of 390 cm height forms the basis of a rebate of 11.10 m. The same proportions in Salzburg would result in a structure 14.8 m high: the largest rebate known as well as the most expensive.

The group of reliefs would by strict convention have occupied the interior surfaces of the inner pair of wings, flanking the shrine. Because the altar (like the church) was dedicated to the Virgin, they would have illustrated scenes from the Life of the Virgin. And if the painted Mariological sequence, including the Marriage of the Virgin, accounted for the early life, then the reliefs must have represented later episodes, perhaps beginning with the Annunciation.

The relief on the inside puts the Joseph scene necessarily among the central four panels of the middle opening (diagram II). The Marriage scene on the outside puts the Flagellation necessarily among the outer four panels of the middle opening. This middle opening— a vast, virtually unbroken wall of images, eight scenes

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24. Dagobert Frey, “Michael Pacher-Studien,” Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte 15 (1953), p. 65, raises and ultimately rejects the possibility that the Flagellation and Marriage panels did not in fact occupy opposite sides of the same wing. Both panels (as well as the Joseph fragment) are made of “Zirbel” or pine (rather than “Fichte” or spruce as noted in early Kunsthistorisches Museum catalogues). Moreover, examination of the knotholes in the two panels indicated beyond reasonable doubt that they belong together. It is not clear whether they were sawed apart before or shortly after they were acquired by the Staatsgalerie in 1919.

25. Long before the discovery of the Joseph fragment, Eberhard Hempel had estimated the original height of the truncated wing at 175 cm (Michael Pacher, p. 74). E. Strohner, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum catalogue of 1938, estimated 205 cm. Frey mistakenly figured the height of the recently discovered (but not yet formally published) Joseph fragment at 240 cm; his reconstruction of the incomplete panels reflects the error (Michael Pacher-Studien, “p. 63).

26. The Flagellation calls for an extension of perhaps 20–25 cm on the left (enough to complete the window) and perhaps 10 cm on the right.


28. The tallest extant late Gothic rebate is the high altar of the Alte Pfarrkirche zu Maria Himmelfahrt in Niederland in the South Tyrol, commissioned from Hans Schnatterpeck of Meran in 1503. The fee, according to the contract, was 1100 guldin. See Josef Weingartner, Die Kunstdenkmäler Südtirols, II (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1951), pp. 137–138; Schindler, Der Schnatterpeck (see note 10 above), pp. 66, 125–126, 131–133, fig. 77. Rasmo estimates the height of the Salzburg rebate at 17 m (Rasmo, Michele Pacher, p. 184). It is worth noting that while Pacher’s St. Wolfgang rebate nearly fills its chapel, the Salzburg work was built for a choir of 26 m.

Only a pair of further fragments have emerged as serious candidates for inclusion in the Salzburg rebate. A fragment in a private collection measuring 51 × 37 cm apparently represents St. Anne at the Birth of the Virgin (Vienna). Dr. F. Kieslinger; see Karl Oettlinger, Alte deutsche Malerei des Ostreich (Vienna: Schroll, 1942, p. 28, fig. 48; Rasmo, Michele Pacher, p. 226, fig. 119). That episode frequently preceded the Marriage of the Virgin in the Life of the Virgin sequences. A fragment of a Flight from Egypt in Basel (51.6 × 45.6 cm), however, probably did not belong to the predella as has been suggested, for it is made of oak and not pine like the other fragments (Basel, Öffentliche Kunstmuseum); see Wilhelm Siuda, “Aus dem Kreise des Michael Pacher,” Belvedere 13 (1922), pp. 37–38, pl. XV; Hempel, Michael Pacher, p. 58, pl. III; Rasmo, Michele Pacher, p. 226, fig. 120).
extending over something like thirty-four square meters—poses the real riddle of the altarpiece. For there are no precedents for this direct pairing of a series of episodes from the Passion with single Old Testament types.

Typology was an exegetical strategy familiar to wide audiences by this time. Christian typological interpretation was classically expounded by the early Church fathers; it sought in Old Testament events and characters (“types”) hints or foreshadowings of the events and characters of the New Testament (“antitypes”). In the High Middle Ages typology was adopted as an iconographical program in ecclesiastical art, most notably in Abbot Suger’s cross and window for St. Denis (mid-twelfth century) and Nicholas of Verdun’s Klosterneuburg altar (1181). In the mid-thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries the first illuminated typological manuscripts began to circulate; the most famous, the *Biblia pauperum* and the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, originated in the Bavarian-Austrian region.29 These codifications or anthologies of types and antitypes were originally intended as reference material for the designers and painters of monumental fresco cycles; later, with more complex visual layouts, they served as theological textbooks for clerics. But as their accompanying narrative texts expanded, so too did their audience. With their fluid divergences from orthodox iconography, the illustrated manuscripts catered ever more effectively to mystical and devotional religiosity among clergy and laity. From the fourteenth century, typology figured more and more frequently in sermons. Throughout the fifteenth century it flourished in frescoes, glass painting, block books, and eventually printed books, as well as in a handful of painted altarpieces.30 These altarpieces had added Old Testament types as marginal glosses upon the primary subject in the shrine or middle panel. There are several well-known fifteenth-century Flemish and German examples.31 In none of them does typological thinking.

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**Diagram 1. Werktagsseite (both pairs of wings closed)**

Series of painted panels illustrating the early life of the Virgin.

A: Birth of the Virgin. B: Presentation in the Temple (?).
C: Marriage of the Virgin. D: Visitation (?).

Painted predella panels. E and F: Four Church Fathers (?).
interfere with the primordial sacramental function of the altarpiece. Instead typology is permitted only to comment perpendicularly on the exchange between altar and worshiper. In Pacher's Salzburg altarpiece, by contrast, the two testaments share a single broad field that has in a sense lost its focus. The shrine and essence of the altarpiece is hidden from view.

There are a number of possible solutions to the
reconstruction problem, and none is altogether satisfying. It suffices for our present purposes to agree that the two testaments were organized either in rows, with four Old Testament scenes above four corresponding scenes from the Passion of Christ, or in horizontal pairs (see diagram II for a possible reconstruction). This visual interweaving of episodic narrative and achronic exegesis is in any event an intellectual structure of unprecedented complexity. The typological commentary even threatens to interfere with the narrative.

What could have inspired such iconographic audacity? None of these earlier adaptations of typological thinking to visual media helps us account for Pacher’s Salzburg altar. For it must be borne in mind that the problem of what to paint on the “middle opening” of a retable—the surface created when one set of wings of a double-winged altarpiece was opened and the other shut—was rather new. The double-winged retable was a monster born of the inflationary

Witz [Geneva: Droz, 1972]). The other celebrated fifteenth-century examples are mariological, including Jan van Eyck’s altarpiece for St. Martin of Ypres and a lost triptych by the Master of Flémalle (Friedländer, Early Netherlandish Painting I, pp. 64–65, pl. 58–59; II, p. 75, no. 75, pl. 102).

32. Otto Demus is the only scholar to have worked out the reconstruction in detail (“Die Salzburger Altar Michael Pachers”). For the middle opening Demus settles on a configuration of two horizontal rows of four scenes. Although it seems rather unlikely that the Old Testament would have been placed in the upper row, the reverse is impossible for still better reasons. Nevertheless the best solution may well be Demus’s third proposal: horizontal pairs of Old Testament and New Testament scenes (see diagram III). This has the distinction of being the only solution in which the perspective lines of all three extent fragments are oriented toward the center of the retable. There is even a neighboring precedent for this schema. The middle opening of Pacher’s St. Wolfgang altarpiece, which he completed in 1481, represents eight scenes from the ministry of Christ. They are grouped in pairs, on the basis of analogies, “rhythms,” or direct opposition of meaning. Christ’s Baptism by John is contrasted, in his subsequent confrontation with Satan. The miracle of the Wedding at Cana is paired with the Feeding of the Five Thousand; the attempted stoning of Christ with the Driving of the Moneylenders from the Temple; and the parable of the Adulteress with the Raising of Lazarus.

The next step is to complete the missing scenes in the typological schema. The most frequent types for the Flagellation of Christ were Achor bound to a tree, Lamech beaten by his wives, and Job beaten by his wife and the Devil; the most likely was probably Job scene. The episode of Joseph being thrown into a well by his brothers, meanwhile, was one of several types associated with the Entombment of Christ. It was never a type for any other New Testament scene. The leading candidates for the remaining two Passion scenes are the Agony in the Garden, the Bearing of the Cross, impulse toward ever greater size, complexity, and expenditure. Not only might an altarpiece compete with the architecture that surrounded it, straining upwards toward even higher choir vaults, forming in effect a church within a church; it also competed with celebrated antecedents. Just as a city or cathedral chapter was always aware of the precise height of the neighboring city’s church or bell tower, so did the height and bulk of winged retables become a point of pride and competition. The immediate spur for the Salzburg project was surely in part Pacher’s own St. Wolfgang retable, but even more especially—because it was a bourgeois commission—Veit Stoss’s altar of the Virgin in Cracow.34 Closest to home, of course, were the archepiscopal commissions in the Salzburg cathedral, including perhaps a very great altarpiece by Rueland Frueauf.35

The “middle opening” of such a giant retable, because it concealed the shrine from view, was emancipated from any sacramental or reliquary urgency. And yet, unlike the closed face, the outermost surface, it made an explicit bid for attention simply by being open and vast and conspicuous. Moreover, it could not quite resort to straightforward sequential narrative in the manner of a narrative fresco cycle: it still loomed above the high altar of a church, a steadier, more self-insistent focus of attention. It

the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. All had their own conventional Old Testament counterparts in the typological manuscripts. The reconstruction proposed here demands one scene before the Flagellation and another before the Entombment. The best alternatives are thus the Agony in the Garden (associated in the Biblia pauperum with Hezekiah praying to the Lord and with Susanna and the Elders), and the Bearing of the Cross (associated most frequently with Isaac carrying the bundle of wood to his sacrifice). We can then suppose that the four Passion scenes were supplemented by a carved Crucifix in the crown (as at St. Wolfgang). The salient disadvantage of this reconstruction is that it situates the Entombment of Christ in the unusual final position in the Passion sequence.

33. Retables reaching almost to the height of the ceiling (for example, Schnatterpeck’s high altar at Niederlands; see note 28 above) might even enter into a sort of exchange or play with the lines and arcs of the vaulting. See Schindler, Der Schnitzaltar, p. 131. Cf. also Adam Kraft’s famous sacrament-house in St. Lawrence of Nuremberg, a stone tower of 19 m that bends at the tip to accommodate the curve of a rib vault.

34. Stoss began work in 1477 and had completed his retable, with a height of 13.95 m and for a fee of 2808 florins, by 1489. See, for example, Baxandall, The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany (see note 10 above), pp. 268–269. The altar was commissioned by the German community in Cracow.

35. See note 20 above.
demanded a tight internal structure, a coherence among its various components, something more rigorous than simple left-to-right flow. The unprecedented expanse of panel surface presented by Pacher’s readable only exacerbated the situation. The only solution was internal organization, among the panels, along nonnarrative or even antinarrative vectors. Typology here, then, serves primarily “compositional” ends: it resolves a problem of planar structure.

But our ultimate appreciation of this solution will have to wait, at least until we have reemerged from the analysis of another problem of planar structure: the construction of the individual scenes in the Salzburg altar. For the inflation of the readable as a whole, needless to say, brought with it an enlargement of the individual panels. The Salzburg panels dwarfed anything else Pacher had done.36 Solutions appropriate to one scale cannot simply be expanded to fit another. Again, the novel assignment resulted in novel solutions that are indeed legible even from fragments.

Pacher in Salzburg was evidently no longer satisfied with his earlier trick (derived from northern Italian painting, and especially Andrea Mantegna) of the low horizon, a device that automatically endowed foreground figures with stature. Instead Pacher developed a conception of stature generated from within his figures, a statuesque self-sufficiency. His figures are themselves capable of staking out and controlling large tracts of panel. Pacher generates two-dimensional pattern out of the figures themselves, out of the vectors created by their movements and their sheer corporality. His protagonists are simplified and substantiated; they occupy a planar layer of their own, a slice of space between the background and the imagined picture plane. They detach themselves from architecture and onlookers in the picture and thus do not quite belong to a “unified” space. Yet they avoid—by virtue of their corporality but above all by incursions of chronological specificity, expression, superfluous detail—assimilation to the picture plane. Discursive detail and architectural settings in Pacher do not participate directly in the planar pattern, but only obliquely, never conspicuously. Architecture can even enter into a certain tension with the front plane, a tension that preserves the illusion that we are beholding a random view of an event that really happened, without impairing or undermining the sense of cohesion or stability.

We might start by looking closely at the Flagellation scene. The original panel was more than twice its present height. Christ is perched on the base of the column. In the lower left corner appears the cap of a figure who probably kneels in the act of binding reeds into a scourge. The hat and part of the face of another figure are visible at the extreme right. A fundamental two-dimensional geometry controls at least this upper portion of the image. Two diagonals and a heavy vertical intersect at Christ’s waist. The gazes or lines of sight of the figures recapitulate the visible structure. These accumulated vectors grasp the picture surface like a net; they train our attention centripetally. Pacher built his diagonals with his main figures, but equally with excerpts from the architectural setting, with background figures, with the paths of gazes within the picture. The lines that hold the picture surface together may leap instantaneously from one spatial plane to another; they do not, in other words, represent “real” lines in three-dimensional space. Sometimes, if they are lines of sight, they are invisible. Pacher leaves it to the cognizant beholder to piece it all together.

Pacher’s two-dimensional pattern, which provides stability and gravity, at the same time interlocks with the dramatic and psychological structure of the represented episode. It colludes, paradoxically, with an architectural setting that in its deliberate incompleteness and asymmetry threatens to cancel any two-dimensional organization. For here architectural setting, by itself, provides no particular order at all. The Flagellation column is not in the center. The ceiling vaults, the architectural juncture of the column and the rear wall, are beyond our view and comprehension. Even a considerable extension at the top would not adequately describe the rib vaults emerging from the column. This is a setting that has to be deciphered. No longer are we treated, as so often in Pacher’s St. Wolfgang panels, to neatly framed and comprehensible architectural interiors. No longer does the scene open at strategic junctures to reveal deep perspectival avenues. Instead we see—or would see if we had the whole panel—an apparently random view upon an a priori setting. We are all the less inclined to notice that the view has been selected and arranged for us.

The setting of the Flagellation insists upon its status as a historical setting. This is Pilate’s palace, the Praetorium; the signal of a secular building is the

36. The panels of the St. Lawrence altar measured approximately 100 × 97 cm, the panels of the Gries altar 172 × 138 cm, the panels of St. Wolfgang 173 × 140 cm, the panels of the Church Fathers altar 212 × 100 cm.
beamed ceiling at the rear and the window with the single round column. The mere elaboration of detail—the marbles of the column and the railing, the lattice-work beneath the railing, the costumes—contributes to our sensation of being privy to historical information.

Analysis of Pacher’s Marriage of the Virgin scene, because the fragment shows us more of it, should prove still more fruitful. It is necessary to imagine the three protagonists standing at full length. Each figure is associated with a massive column, an image of literal support with its own stabilizing visual inertia. The figures absorb the mass of the columns into their own constitutions. These figures are built like trees; their limbs are functional but remain in essence appendages of the trunk. The figures turn on clearly felt central axes or cores, spinal columns. Here, again, the narrative protagonists claim their own layer of space detached equally from the picture plane and from the architectural and figural background. Again the background provides purely supplementary information, a “setting” in the familiar modern sense, and not, for example, additional narrative data that simply would not fit elsewhere. Yet both the isosceles trialect of onlookers (disappointed suitors and attendants of the Virgin) and the ponderous symmetry of the primary trio are crucially modified by our knowledge, on the basis of information furnished in the picture, of asymmetry and imbalance in the third dimension. The isosceles triangle formed in plan by the protagonists is weighted or directed heavily toward the right: by the invisible gazes fixed upon the Virgin by Joseph and the priest, but also by the joining of their hands, by the sacred iunctio dextrarum. For the gesture of the handcasp itself seems to sweep from left to right, and not quite parallel to the picture plane, but rather obliquely, converging upon her from a third angle. Even the great polygonal pierl behind the three figures lumber forward and from left to right. The movement of the oblong architectural space, the crowd, the attention of the male protagonists, all stream together from the left rear toward the right foreground, a current of overwhelming force that the Virgin can only deflect and resolve with her lowered gaze and left hand. Thus the crowd and the architecture conspire to stabilize the composition in two dimensions, and simultaneously generate a movement, a directedness in three dimensions that interlocks with the dramatic and psychological—and theological—logic of the episode.

37. It is unlikely that any additional figure occupied the space before them, for example, one of the disappointed suitors breaking his rod (as suggested by Rasmo, Michele Pacher, p. 186).

And yet there is more: for the complexity of this interior, precisely its imbalance and difficulty, assures us even after we have grasped its logic that it belongs to an a priori, unconstructed world. We assume neither that this wedding was staged in this church for a beholder, nor that this picture of the event was framed and prepared for a beholder. The space is inordinately confusing, particularly in view of the extraordinary means for constructing and elucidating that we know the painter to have had at his disposal. We are shown a mere excerpt from a perplexing interior. An extension of the panel upward would have even less hope of explaining the vaulting than it would in the previous case of the Flagellation. What is more, the event of the Marriage itself has not been staged in any straightforward geometrical relationship to this curious oblong space, neither parallel to it, nor perpendicular. Instead we deduce that the main characters have aligned themselves at a bizarre diagonal to the nave, somewhere in the middle of the church, neither at the altar nor at the doorway. Again we are privy to a moment fragmentarily presented and almost randomly chosen, a moment unfolding on its own terms. The sacred event, like the fragment of architectural space, is revealed only in the form of an excerpt from a larger intellectual structure.

Pacher’s narrative painting purported to show not only that an event had occurred, but also what the event looked like when it occurred. To this end Pacher developed a repertoire of narrative devices, pictorial tricks designed to convince a beholder that he was witnessing a historical episode. Many of these new categories of opticality had already been gestating in the St. Wolfgang panels and in the Church Fathers altarpiece: for example, specificity and superfluity of detail, costume, and furnishings, or the selection of apparently random and fragmentary points of view. A third strategy was the impression of instantaneity: the illusion that the picture represents a particular moment in time, and that the scene did not look quite like this an instant earlier, and would not look quite the same an instant later. This impression is achieved with hand motions: the left hand of the priest in the Marriage, for example, is not fixed in a timeless gesture but rather is about to descend upon the clasped hands of the couple and complete the blessing. In the Flagellation scene, Pilate gestures toward Christ in the act of speaking, and in the same instant he is beseeched by his interlocutor’s insistent right hand. Gazes or lines of sight, as we

38. Cf. the hands of both Christ and God the Father in Pacher’s Coronation of the Virgin altar at Gries.
have seen, are never empty or meaningless in these pictures. But in real life, of course, lines of sight shift instantaneously and unexpectedly: to build a composition on lines of sight is to leave that composition exceptionally vulnerable, on the verge of collapse with every passing moment. Sometimes the physical action itself threatens to proceed forward in time and disturb the pictorial order. The raised flag in the Flagellation will fall; the soldier tightening Christ’s bonds will finish that task and turn to another; Christ may shift his own awkward position.

A similar impression of instantaneity obtains in the Joseph scene, where the stature of the main figures is enhanced by their station on a raised platform. More than the other fragments, this scene relies on a conventional four-sided internal frame for its structure. The picture is built on concentric bands of architectural elements and figures, dissolving only in the center in the helpless figure of Joseph, on the verge of plunging out of sight altogether. Likewise, the figure slaying the lamb in the foreground will finish his job and stand up, and the spindle-legged brother at the right will swing out of his gymnastic twist.

Overlapping and inconvenient concealment have the same authenticating effect in these pictures. Many of the faces of the onlookers in the Marriage are awkwardly cropped and distorted by the intervening figures. Three faces have lost an eye; to the immediate right of the priest appears a spectator represented solely by an eye. Another face, at the extreme left, is bisected by a green pointed hat. A face below this one has lost both eyes; perhaps the green hat has slipped forward over his nose. In the Flagellation, Pilate’s foot extends inadvertently over the edge of the landing. The very act of tightening Christ’s bonds, which appears virtually at the center of the panel and to which our attention is drawn by the intense (one-eyed) gaze of the soldier in yellow, is hidden from view. The device of overlapping contributes to the impression of instantaneity by implying that the alignment of figures and sight lines will shift momentarily.\(^{39}\)

Here the example of Pacher’s immediate followers, even of his epigones, is instructive. For their interpretation of his work, however insensitive or maladroit, represents for us a kind of contemporary commentary on Pacher, the nearest we have to an appreciation. Those aspects of his art which they endeavored to reproduce or elaborate on are the aspects which they thought most eloquent or important. They are by no means necessarily the same aspects we consider important. Thus Pacher’s impact on, say, his gifted pupil Marx Reichlich or upon Friedrich Pacher is informative not only about Reichlich or Friedrich Pacher but also about Michael Pacher. The history of reception is proposed here not as an object of inquiry in its own right but as an interpretative tool.

Indeed it was precisely these qualities of opticalism—random perspectives, fragmentary presentation, instantaneity, impertinent detail, restlessness of figures in space—that his followers exaggerated and often caricatured. This partial shift in focus away from the primary event and onto the accompanying circumstances, the ambient of the figures, the transitions, the immaterial, was diagnosed by Otto Pächt as that “painterly vision” characteristic of the late phases of stylistic developments.\(^{40}\) And yet this vision was Pacher’s real legacy, the facet of his achievement that unfolded within two decades into a multidimensional style so powerful that art history would have to invent for it a label of its own. The lineage extends from Salzburg, for example, to the Flagellation scene of Marx Reichlich’s 1506 altar for Neustift, to Albrecht Altdorfer’s St. Florian Flagellation of 1517–1518, to Wolf Huber’s St. Florian Flagellation of 1525. This movement toward the full-fledged pictorialism of the so-called Danube School was at the same time symptomatic of a broader Renaissance endorsement of painting over sculpture: a revolution whose consequences we still live with.

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The carved and gilded Madonna who still presides over the Franciscan church in Salzburg, we have discovered, was originally engulfed by a welter of pictorial and intellectual activity. Did the elaborate narrative and typological argument or the discursive opticalism of the painted wings pose any challenge to her status? The Madonna, after all, was the beneficiary of what Bernhard Decker has called a new “covenant” between the sculpted image and the relic. She enjoyed an exemption from the ordinary activities engaged in by painted images, a certain detachment from the exigencies of argument or the compilation of detail. Sculpted images had become objects of veneration in their own right, even the sources of miraculous energy.

\(^{39}\) Neither the trick nor its narrative application, needless to say, was Pacher’s invention; for the most familiar among many previous examples, cf. the crowd in Giotto’s Kiss of Judas in the Arena Chapel in Padua.

Their capacity to re-present, to "make present," the relic supplemented and replenished the relic's invisible power, and disseminated that power more efficiently to far-flung audiences. This legitimizing kinship to relics even became a theme within the German winged retable: sculpted figures might on occasion refer to the relics, the authentic sacred "substance," still housed within the central shrine.41

Certainly the pictures painted on the wings of such a retable were designed not to undermine, but on the contrary to corroborate and explain the authority of both relic and sculpted image. Both typology and pictorial illusionism were devised precisely to bridge the cultural disjunction inherent in a religion that offered in its ritual practice—in the Eucharist as well as in the relic cult—an unmediated, ahistorical access to the spiritual, and yet whose authority was founded on a historical, scriptural narrative. Typology and optical narrative painting "compensated" for historical and cultural remoteness. The unfamiliar was exorcised by explaining it in the terms of familiar sensation, by promoting it to the realm of represented experience; and at the same time the shock of this promotion preserved a certain quality of unfamiliarity: a kind of catharsis through wonder.

Indeed this representation of experience, in typology as well as narrative, had become in large measure exclusively visual. Pictorial images presented visible "rhymes" or parallels as metaphors for invisible symbolic or theological relationships. They did this by establishing "horizontal" references between images, by rhyming with other images on the basis of consistency in framing, in point of view, in the relationship of figure to ground. The properties of images, their didactic or exegetical capacities, had the repercussive effect of modifying the conventions of typological argument itself. The exigencies of illustration came to govern both the selection of episodes and their presentation, in manuscripts as well as in stained glass or fresco or retabiles. The phenomenon of mass audiences for the typological manuscripts of the fourteenth century, for example, fostered an emphasis on pairs of types and antitypes linked by an often superficial visual rhyme, often at the expense of typological pairs with deeper symbolic or doctrinal kinships.42 Images shifted, and in some respects augmented, the range of argument available to typology.

Ultimately, and paradoxically, this contradicted essential principles of typology. The original object of typological exegesis was, precisely, to demonstrate that events were not to be construed literally, that appearances were deceptive. But typology would ever reach a broad public only through the medium of visual images: the typological manuscripts and their painted and glazed derivatives aimed not only to explain but also to demonstrate, to show. The success of these images as exegetical aids, in turn, was increasingly contingent on the beholder's faith in the veracity, the "reality," of visual impressions.

Such unintended consequences of opticalism raised a comparable and historically momentous challenge to the authority of the cult image, eventually even to the institution of the cult image. For individual scenes, especially narrative episodes, began to assume too much initiative. We have already seen from Pacher's fragments just how replete with information, how self-contained, a representation could become. The pictorial imagination was operating ever more vigorously on the possibilities of drama, expression, psychological motivation, inner causalties. Pictorial space was increasingly appreciated for its rhetorical capabilities, its powers of enriching and clarifying narrative or drama. As a result painters honed their devices for representing space. The necessity of controlling and stabilizing larger areas of panel had a similar effect. Individual scenes came to be constructed on principles of internal self-sufficiency; they offered more powerful claims to focused attention than ever, and fewer "horizontal" or extra-pictorial references. Such claims, although different in kind from those of the icon or the Andachtsbild, were no less antagonistic to sequential narrative or to typology, to horizontal structures of meaning. The new image was no longer expected to be "read" but rather to be "experienced." This alone threatened to destabilize the Bilderwand or wall of images. The juxtaposition of several purportedly equally "real" scenes inevitably unmasked or at least debilitated the illusion at work in each individual


42. Gerhard Schmidt calls these superficial matches "Situationsreime" and distinguishes them from more meaningful "Bedeutungsschweine" and "Symbolreime" or "Erüllungsparallelen," Die Anmembein, pp. 105 ff. See also Peter Bloch, "Typologische Kunst," in Miscellanea mediaevalia 6, Lex et sacramentum im Mittelalter, ed. Paul Wilpert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), p. 142.
image, and impaired the unity of the structure as a whole. These scenes were not yet insulated by frames. Frames as we know them since the Renaissance serve the purpose of protecting pictures from each other. They ensure that the reproductions of experience offered in two unrelated but adjacentely hung pictures will not contradict one another. Frames have made it possible to compare images on the basis of their ability to construct alternative "worlds," without fear of those worlds engaging, so to speak, in any mutual ontological interference. The carved skeleton of the winged retable, by contrast, still functioned essentially as physical support for the painted panels.

At this point we should be on our guard against several uncomfortably familiar explanations or arguments. Above all, there is no reason to attribute the development of optical narrative painting, along with the resultant general proliferation of interest in problems of picture making, to a loss of confidence or interest in the object of representation, namely sacred truth and history. Likewise we must disagree with Pächt's thesis that "behind the effort to 'make present' hides the acknowledgment that the capacity to represent the essential content of a theme has been lost." The corollary argument that the traditional cult object was replaced or superseded by the modern "work of art" is no less tenuous. For the emotional and mental habit of cultic devotion did not vanish overnight; it merely changed in nature, and demanded a new kind of object. Pictorial qualities—colors, lines, proportion, geometrical or perspectival proficiency, verisimilitude of surfaces and textures—in fact became themselves agents of sacrality; as Michael Baxandall has demonstrated, it is unsafe to assume that such qualities were "theologically neutral." The makers and sponsors of images came to expect from purely pictorial elements the ability to generate doctrinal or spiritual meaning—or at the very least the power to incite in a beholder appropriate responses. Virtuosity or craft as a source of wonder, and by association a source of sacrality, was to be sure nothing new. But now the criteria of virtuosity began to cluster around the specific problem of optical mimesis. Ultimately, and

undeniably, these criteria and their endless complication and elaboration became a source of interest in their own right. This is what we mean by the concept of "art," of "style," of style as a kind of meaning. Nevertheless it would be injudicious to speak of an attrition or undermining of the "cultic" attitude. Devotion, among those who thought about or collected images, was merely shifted to a higher intellectual plane. Eventually, in some quarters, the power of a given image might even be seen to reside in intellectual properties: disegno, invention, composition, maniera.

These developments—still embryonic in Pacher—were in a way quite consistent with the long tradition of Christian image theology, indeed may have constituted simply the latest campaign to perpetuate this theology. The Western church had always tolerated images on the condition that they in effect "vanish" after fulfilling their function as vehicles of meaning. But then the invention of the idea of "art" itself involved a kind of dematerialization of the image. The modern image had very rapidly come to rely on its pictorial properties—on the success of its representational devices and strategies—to produce the impression that the object or idea it represented was actually present. Already we saw how the pictorial structure of Pacher's narrative images was linked to, even subjugated to, the imagination of their beholder: once the element of time is introduced to the painted scene, the beholder makes a direct analogy with his own time; if a scene represents interrupted motion, as do the three fragments of the Salzburg altar, the impending forward progress of the beholder's "real" time threatens to throw the given pictorial order into disarray. The presence of the represented figures and objects is thus intimately dependent on the mind of the beholder. In earlier images, just this presence had always been guaranteed by quite different properties of the image, properties that might be characterized as "objective" or not contingent on a beholder's impression. The efficacy of an icon might derive from various legends about its provenance, miraculous powers attributed to it, its location, its physical dimensions, its sheer material value, and so forth. Of course in practice the new works of art also relied on "external" or objective qualities as guarantors of sacrality or value: size and preciousness still mattered, as did circumstances of genesis or preservation. The crucial distinction is nevertheless illustrated by the simple fact that the beholder of a modern work of art ordinarily will not mistake the represented object for reality; the

"realization" of the idea behind the work takes place in the beholder’s mind. The normality of this situation is most clearly indicated by the very exceptional status of the genre of trompe l’oeil in Western painting since the Renaissance, and by the perpetually recycled myths about the successful deceptions of beholders carried off by very exceptional painterly illusionists. The beholder of the medieval image, by contrast, was altogether likely to take (not “mistake”) that image for reality. The image might well be treated as if it were the very thing (often a holy personage) that it represented. Orthodox theology of images, and the intermittent iconoclasm that it sparked, disapproved of precisely this experience.

The long debate on the proper use of images came to a virtual halt just as the image seemed to grow into its full potential, into autonomy. This ought not to mislead us into interpreting the invention of the modern work of art as victory for the iconophiles. Much later, Alois Riegl would characterize the fully-fledged “optical” engagement with art as the supreme instance of elision, as the ultimate disappearance of the work of art as object. Here the picture is overwhelmed and absorbed not by its own content—as orthodox Christian doctrine had demanded—but by the subjectivity of the beholder. The immemorial Judeo-Christian antagonism to the icon was appealed, in a sense, by seventeenth-century Dutch painting.

Late medieval devotion had always thrived on a tension between seeing (revelation) and not-seeing (mystery). The worshiper or beholder was swept into a rhythm of anticipation and fulfillment. This was the basis of the cult of relics, and equally of the winged relatable with its regular schedule of openings and closings. Walter Benjamin remarked that it is more important that cult objects exist than that they be seen. Pacher’s pictures, by contrast, demanded to be seen. And what is more, we realize now, they had the power to destabilize the entire relatable, the visual textbook itself; they disrupted the collective of images by interfering with the orthogonal grid.

The unintended consequence of opticalism, as of iconoclasm, was the irrevocable dismantling of many of the traditional frameworks for meaning. The wall of pictures, the Bilderdienst, does not reappear in the West until the walls of the Baroque Kunstkammern, the eighteenth-century salons, and the nineteenth-century museums are hung. Here framed images most decisively do not form a collective whole; rather, they compete against one another.

POSTSCRIPT

The central sculpted scenes of Michael Pacher’s altarpieces occupy an ambivalent station between nature and history. The Coronation of the Virgin in the retables at St. Wolfgang and at Gries bei Bozen hover between stasis and action; they present an incomplete moment within a sequence, and yet not with so much instability or external reference (spatial or chronological) that their claim to iconic status is impaired. The “nature” of the holy event is rendered “history” by virtue of the chronological indications; yet this new history is preserved or protected as nature by its secure station within the shrine, and by the substance of the three-dimensional pinewood itself.

This ambivalence was inherent in sculpture by virtue of its materiality, its iconic reference to the physical body. Painting was different; painting had to be pressed into new tasks and capabilities. Ultimately, painting was capable of a more comprehensive spirituality than sculpture. Its spirituality consists in what Hegel called its “incompleteness”: its two-dimensionality entails a diminishment of phenomenal appearance and thus a “withdrawal” of the external world into itself. The spiritual or inner life thus becomes the very content of art. Whereas sculpture always enjoys a certain self-sufficiency, painting depends on a cognizant beholder. It awaits its own completion through the subjective imagination.

Nevertheless the expansion of painting’s range and power, at least in the case we have been studying, was contingent on an artist’s or a patron’s deliberate decision to introduce typology into the iconographical program of a large-scale winged altarpiece. It was equally dependent on the sudden expansion of surface area upon the relatable. The circumstances that occasioned that decision and that expansion were manifold. Salzburg begot the largest of all late Gothic retables out of an atmosphere of highly charged and focused political and social rivalry. Even then, the decision to hire one painter over another, and so to set one kind of an example rather than another, followed its own inscrutable byways. The ascendancy of painting over sculpture promulgated in the great winged retables of the High Renaissance, the works of Altdorfer and Grünewald, was never a foregone conclusion.

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45. Alois Riegl, Das holländische Gruppenportrait (1902; Vienna: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, 1931), Textband, p. 5.