





A KEY PIECE OF THE PUZZLE: THE DISCOVERY OF A MISSING PANEL OF THE FLORIAN ALTAR RETABLE IN GRAZ

ABSTRACT

At the Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław (Breslau before 1945), a missing element from the wing of the fifteenth century *Florian Altar Retable* was identified. Attributed to an anonymous Styrian master, the now deconstructed and disseminated altarpiece would once have consisted of a centerpiece with folding two-sided panels on a left and right wing, which formed the Sunday and workday sides of the altar. The panels showed scenes from Christ's childhood on the front and the martyrdom cycle of St. Florian on the reverse, although many of the panels have now been split into individual scenes. Five paintings from the altar are held in the Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz, Austria. Since 2019, a sixth painting has been held in an unknown private collection in France. Correspondingly, the two-sided panel in Wrocław—the only one that remains intact—depicts the circumcision of Jesus on the front and the drowning of St. Florian in the Enns River on the back.

The discovery reveals important information about the content of the altar: The complete, unsplit panel in Wrocław confirms the iconography of the wings, as well as providing important clues as to the sequence of the scenes. That the *Drowning of St. Florian in the Enns* is second in this sequence of four scenes from the legend of St. Florian, before the *Guarding of the Body*, means that the circumcision scene must have come before the *Adoration of the Magi*. The most probable sequence for the scenes on the wings, both open and closed, can therefore be reconstructed horizontally from left to right. The research presented here also finds that the splitting up of the wings most likely took place in Styria circa 1800, and that, some time before 1866, the complete panel discussed here was moved to St. Lazarus Church in Wrocław.

KEYWORDS

Florian Retable; Altarpiece; Styrian Painter; Late Fifteenth Century; Graz; Breslau; Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław

The subject of this article is a surprising find at the Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław (Breslau before 1945). While compiling a scientific catalog of the museum's medieval artworks, a missing element from the wing of the late fifteenth century *Florian Altar Retable* was identified (Figs. 1, 2). The complete retable, likely once housed in a church in modern-day southern Austria (Styria or Carinthia), consisted of a central painting and two wings. The central image and the paintings on the front of the wings—with scenes from the childhood of Jesus—would have been visible when the altarpiece was unfolded on Sundays and festive periods, and the more muted scenes on the reverse of the wings—



Fig. 1: The Circumcision of Jesus, front of the altarpiece, ca. 1490, tempera on fir boards, 86 × 89 cm (without frame). Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).



Fig. 2: Drowning of St. Florian in the Enns, rear of the altarpiece, ca. 1490, tempera on fir boards, 86×89 cm (without frame). Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).

concerning the martyrdom of St. Florian—were visible on workdays when the altarpiece was folded. The left and right wings were both made up of two panels each, painted on the front and reverse, meaning there would have been eight scenes in total. Whilst the two-sided Wrocław panel was discovered intact, the other three had been split, with their front and reverse scenes separated and the constituent paintings spread across Europe, sold, and often damaged. Five paintings from the altar are held in the Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz. Unlike in older investigations, analyses from the last thirty years have excluded the panels in Graz from the oeuvre of the master of the *Krainburg Altar* and

attributed them instead to an anonymous Styrian master.³ Since 2019, a sixth painting has been held in an unknown private collection in France (Fig. 3).⁴ Thus, six paintings of the original wings were known, while the last panel and its two paintings remained a mystery.

Identified in Wrocław, the final altarpiece panel depicts *The Circumcision of Jesus* on the front and the scene *Drowning of St. Florian in the Enns* on the reverse. Formal and stylistic analysis has proven with certainty that the panel belongs to the oeuvre of the anonymous painter of the panels in Graz. This is especially apparent in the highly individualized, characteristic physiognomy of the subjects and their hands, as well as in the color



Fig. 3: The Massacre of the Innocents, front of the altarpiece, ca. 1490, tempera (?) on panel, 83.2×84.3 cm. Private collection, France (Photo: Sotheby's, London).

combinations and decorative techniques used in the robes (Figs. 4, 5, 6). The iconography also corresponds perfectly with the painting cycle from Graz, as do the dimensions after accounting for the different frames and treatment of the panels.





Fig. 4a: The Circumcision of Jesus (detail), front of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).

Fig. 4b: Adoration of the Magi (detail), back of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie Schloss Eggenberg, Graz, inv. no. 340 (Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz).





Fig. 5a: The Circumcision of Jesus (detail), front of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).

Fig. 5b: Adoration of the Magi (detail), back of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie Schloss Eggenberg, Graz, inv. no. 340 (Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz).





Fig. 6a: Drowning of St. Florian in the Enns (detail), back of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).

Fig. 6b: Eagle Watching the Body of St. Florian (detail), back of the altarpiece, ca. 1490. Universal-museum Joanneum, Alte Galerie Schloss Eggenberg, Graz, inv. no. 338 (Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz).

The dimensions of the Wrocław panel are 86 by 89 centimeters, or 91.5 by 94.5 centimeters when including the secondary 5.5-centimeter-wide nineteenth-century frame. The minor difference compared to the single-sided panels in Graz (which measure 84 by 86.5 centimeters)⁵ and the painting from the front cycle purchased in London in 2019 (83.2 by 84.3 centimeters) may be due to splitting process, in which the edges will have needed to be evened out, whilst the Wrocław panel received no such treatment. A preliminary investigation of the Wrocław panel paintings was conducted by conservators. According to their report, the ground is stuck together with four vertical fir boards (apies) arranged along the grain of the wood. The front side may have been painted in tempera on white gesso, with gilding added to the background and haloes. Three paint layer samples were taken from the front. In a sample taken from the robes of the priest performing the circumcision, leadtin yellow was identified. The stratigraphic examination of the sample from the green robe of the woman standing on the right shows a layer of white ground, a yellow-green layer of underpainting directly on top, and a thick layer of green; a further two layers of paint were added over this, but the analyses found these to not be original. Natural azurite was identified in a sample taken from the blue robe of the priest holding Jesus, which features painted imitations of fabric ornamentation and brocade.

The painting is severely damaged. The front has numerous small defects in the gesso layer and the original paint layers. There are visible signs of retouching on the gilded

background and the paint layer, signified by dark dots in the UV fluorescence photographs, and the remains of gilded secondary varnish are present on the surface. On the reverse, a thick secondary layer of wax covers the surface above the ungrounded paint layer. This is down to poor conservation and an attempt to protect the flaking paint layers. An anonymous conservator who occasionally cooperated with the museum covered most of the rear surface with a wax layer (possibly in the 1960s), applying it to a dirty layer of paint, which unfortunately made the scene on the reverse almost illegible.

On the rear top edge of the picture frame, there are two paper labels with the following information inscribed in ink in German: The first label reads "Circumcision of Christ / From the Lazarus Hospital / Handwritten catalog no. 1173"; and the second, "1173." At the bottom of the frame is a label in Polish, possibly also dating from the 1960s, bearing the following text: "147. Muzeum Archidiec. Obrzezanie Chrystusa, malow. na drzewie, pocz. XVI w., 90 × 95." The number at the start is the new Polish inventory number for the work.

But how did the panel from St. Lazarus Church reach the Museum of the Archdiocese in Wrocław, and what is its history at this institution? The museum was founded in 1898 with the main aim of collecting unused objets d'art from the churches of the expansive diocese and thus present the history of Christianity and the Church in Silesia. The building was opened for its first exhibition in 1903. No published catalog of the collections existed prior to 1945, although the director at the time, Alfons Nowack, published a guide to the museum's exhibitions in 1932. 10 The painting in question is not mentioned in this guide, indicating that it had not been exhibited. After damage to the building from World War II was repaired, the museum reopened in 1948 as an institution of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. A Polish guide, which was quite close to Nowack's museum guide, was then published in 1952, 11 again, without mention of the panel. The first comment on the panel's location in the exhibition dates from December 1966, from a handwritten inventory book. 12 The first, and currently only published work to mention the panel's existence in the museum is a collection catalog by the historian and long-term director of the Museum and the Archive of the Archdiocese in Wrocław, Bishop Wincenty Urban (died 1983). The panel was given the inventory number 147 and a laconic description, the content of which is similar to the label on the frame: "Circumcision: Painting on wood, on the rear damaged painting residue, early sixteenth century, dimensions 90 × 95 cm. – Kn 1173."¹³

The number at the end of this entry—"Kn 1173"—refers to an entry in the "Katalog niemiecki" [German catalog], a handwritten copy of the German inventory book. Fortunately, manuscripts of the museum's acquisitions book, which was kept continuously from the period before 1945, have been preserved. In the first acquisitions book, the following

entry is listed under Number 1173: "From the Lazarus Hospital 30.05.04 / Medieval panel painting circumcissio." This entry corresponds partially with the content of the label in German on the top rear of the picture frame.

The recurring accession number, the information concerning providence from "St. Lazarus Hospital," and the iconography of the scene on the front side clearly links this entry with the panel. The brief accession entry also contains important information about the date of the work's arrival at the museum: May 30, 1904. Thus, the painting reached the museum via conventional channels at the beginning of the museum's history, by which point it must have fallen out of use, no longer needed in a church setting, and would likely also have been in bad condition.

The Lazarus Hospital was a nursing home in Breslau with a history dating back to the medieval period. ¹⁴ From the second half of the fourteenth century, a small Gothic church of the same name existed in an eastern suburb of the city (Przedmieście Oławskie). In the Middle Ages, a leper house was situated next to it, which gradually changed its function and became a hospital and nursing home. Although the acquisition information indicates that the panel was transferred from the St. Lazarus Hospital, this may be incorrect, since this name referred to the complex as a whole, together with its small church, which was also referred to as a chapel. Indeed, other medieval memorials of local Silesian provenance also found their way from St. Lazarus Church to the Museum of the Archdiocese. ¹⁵ The presence of the panel painting in St. Lazarus Church before 1866 is evidenced by a note in a publication from the same year: "In the Chapel of St. Lazarus, altar painting – [...] 2. The Circumcision of Christ – circa 1520." ¹⁶

It can thus be surmised that the panel most probably arrived in the St. Lazarus Church in the first half of the nineteenth century, although it is uncertain who donated the picture and why. Further clues as to the date of its appearance in Silesia can be gleaned from the history of the earliest mentioned part of this retable in Graz. The picture, containing the scene in which an eagle guards Florian's body, ¹⁷ was bequeathed to the picture gallery associated with the Drawing Academy in Graz by Josef August Stark together with other paintings. Stark, a painter and collector as well as being the director of the academy from 1820 until his death in 1838, had acquired the workday side of the original two-sided panel at an unknown time. ¹⁸ As three of the four currently known panels from the retable were split on the territory of Austria, that the only unsplit panel ¹⁹ traveled to Wrocław could indicate an earlier departure of the work from Styria or Austria, most likely prior to 1838.

No references to direct contacts between Wrocław and Graz have been found to date. However, an indirect route through Vienna via contacts between members of the

circle of the Royal Art and Applied Arts School in Breslau and the Vienna Academy at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is possible. For example, the first director of the Royal Art and Applied Arts School, the painter Carl Daniel Bach (1756–1829), traveled to Vienna between 1788 and 1791 to familiarize himself with the Academy and its organizational structure. Bach's student in Wrocław and later teacher at the local art school, Josef Raab (Raabe) (1780–1849), completed his training just before 1807 in Vienna under Giovanni Battista Lampi, who had also been a teacher of Josef A. Stark starting from 1806. It should be added that both Silesian painters and draftsmen, Bach and Raab, are known for their interest in the Middle Ages. However, if this Austrian painting was acquired in this way, how did it reach the St. Lazarus Hospital and Chapel?

The discovery of the missing part of the Florian Altar Retable reveals important information about the content of the complete altar. Firstly, the fact that this two-sided panel was not split into front and reverse proves that the disparate paintings from the same retable had originally formed an altarpiece with two-sided wings. Secondly, it provides confirmation about the iconographic content and important information on the sequence of scenes. ²³ Otto Benesch reconstructed this order according to earlier suggestions made by Suidas as follows: The top of the left wing of the festive side shows the Adoration of the Child by Mary (Birth); the bottom, the Adoration of the Magi; the top of the right wing, The Massacre of the Innocents. Benesch speculated that the missing panel depicted the Flight into Egypt. The workday sides were thought to show the cycle of St. Florian in the following order: At the top of the left wing: Martyrdom (Bludgeoning) of St. Florian on the orders of the prefect, and at the bottom, an eagle who guards a corpse retrieved from the river. At the top of the right wing, he placed the transfer of the body, and at the bottom, he proposed the scene of the saint's burial.²⁴ This must now be corrected, as the panel found in Wrocław does not contain the scenes that Benesch had anticipated. 25 The Drowning of St. Florian in the Enns is the second image in this sequence of four scenes from the legend of St. Florian, now placed before the eagle who is guarding the body. The circumcision is therefore placed between the Birth of the Child and the Adoration of the Magi. On this basis, two hypothetical orders can be reconstructed for the scenes on the wings: In the first, the reading sequence on the open festive side and on the closed workday side runs horizontally from left to right (Figs. 7, 8, 9); in the second (less probable), it runs vertically.

In summary, both sides of the retable had painted wings; on the workday sides, they depicted at least four scenes from the legend of St. Florian, while the festive side featured scenes from the infancy of Jesus. At an unknown point, perhaps in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the work was parceled out in the process of secularization under



Fig. 7: Reconstruction of the sequence of scenes on the fronts of the wings—festive side of the retable (Photos: top right, Małgorzata Kujda; top and bottom left, Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie Schloss Eggenberg, Graz; bottom right, Sotheby's, London).

Emperor Joseph II. The content of the central altar shrine is still unknown, but the wings were evidently split into individual quarters, potentially to maximize value for collectors. While all three of the previously known panels were split up further to produce double the number of individual images, this was not the case with the panel in Wrocław. It may therefore have changed hands at an earlier point, before the owner of the three other panels made the decision to split them. The separation of the wings and their splitting into individual images is thought to have occurred before 1820. Either the panel in Wrocław



Fig. 8: Reconstruction of the sequence of scenes on the reverse of the wings—workday side of the retable (Photos: top right, Małgorzata Kujda; top and bottom left and bottom right, Universalmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie Schloss Eggenberg, Graz).

left Austria at an earlier date, or it ended up in the hands of someone who did not treat it so commercially. In that case, it would only have left Styria a little later, as it was in Wrocław by 1866 at the latest, and nothing was known about its origin at this time. It may have come to Silesia as a collector's piece rather than as an addition to the furnishings of a church or chapel. However, the question of why the painting was taken to St. Lazarus must remain unanswered.

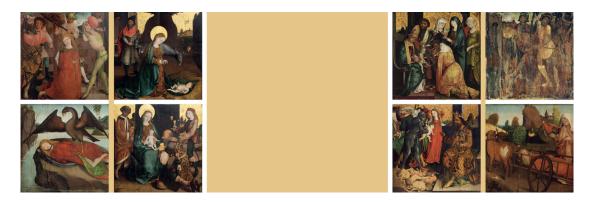


Fig. 9: Reconstruction of the retable with the sequence of scenes from the front and reverse.

NOTES

- 1 Project financed as part of the National Development Program for Humanities No. 11H 18 0024 87, led by Romuald Kaczmarek, with the cooperation of Agnieszka Patała, Jacek Witkowski, and Agata Stasińska.
- 2 Adoration of the Child by Mary (Birth), inv. no. 337; Adoration of the Magi, inv. no. 340; Martyrdom (Bludgeoning) of St. Florian, inv. no. 339; Eagle Watching the Body of St. Florian, inv. no. 338; Transfer of the Body of St. Florian, inv. no. 1156, Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz.
- 3 The Krainburg Altar is a retable (ca. 1500) that was once the main altar of the church of St. Kantian in Kranj/Krainburg (Slovenia), of which two panels have survived (today housed in the Belvedere, Vienna). From them, the substitute name of the painter to whom the group of works was assigned was created. See, among others, Gottfried Biedermann, Katalog der mittelalterlichen Kunst: Alte Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum. Tafelwerke Schreinaltäre Skulpturen (Graz: Alte Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, 1982), 143–145; Tomislav Vignjević, Der Meister des Krainburger Altars (Ljubljana: Narodna Galerija, 1996), 96–97; and Helga Hensle-Wlasak, "Meister des Krainburger Altars," in Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon, vol. 88 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 232. Concerning the acquisition of the fifth panel in 2004, containing the scene of the transfer of the body, see Helga Hensle-Wlasak, "Styrian painter (?), ca. 1490 (cat. no. 10)," in Alte Galerie Meisterwerke: Ein Führer durch die Alte Galerie, ed. Ulrich Becker, exh. cat., Landesmuseum Joanneum, Alte Galerie at the Universalmuseum Joanneum, for the information and photographs.
- 4 Auctioned in December 2019 at Sotheby's in London from a private collection in England, see https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/old-masters-day-sale/master-of-the-krainburg-altarpiece-the-massacre-of. Many thanks to Mathilde Wood of Sotheby's in London for the information and photograph.
- 5 These dimensions are given according to Biedermann 1982, 143 (see note 3). See also Otto Benesch, "Der Meister des Krainburger Altars," *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 7 (1930): 135, 138, where the dimensions of the four panels in Graz are given as 83.3–83.6 centimeters (height) and 85.5–86 centimeters (width).
- 6 Benesch 1930, 135 (see note 5); and Biedermann 1982, 143 (see note 3) identify the material as fir. Like pine, it is also a member of the Pinaceae family. The structure of wood is very similar and difficult to differentiate without microscopic investigation.
- 7 "thin tempera with resin component." See Biedermann 1982, 143 (see note 3).
- 8 The investigation was conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Works of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw: the conservators Prof. Krzysztof Chmielewski and Dr. Jan Andrzejewski; the stratigraphic analysis and the identification of the wood types was performed by Dr. Ing. Elżbieta Jeżewska.
- 9 English: "Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław. *Circumcision of Christ*, painted on wood, early sixteenth century, 90 × 95." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations by Jessica West.
- 10 Alfons Nowack, Führer durch das Erzbischöfl. Diözesanmuseum in Breslau (Wrocław: Otto Borgmeyer, 1932).

- 11 Zygmunt Wrześniowski, *Przewodnik po Muzeum Archidiecezjalnym we Wrocławiu* (Wrocław: Wydany przez Kurię Arcybiskupią Wrocławską, 1952).
- 12 "Księga inwentarzowa," part 1, no. 147 (manuscript, Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, no inventory number).
- 13 Wincenty Urban, "Muzeum Archidiecezjalne we Wrocławiu oraz katalog jego zbiorów," *Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne* 28 (1974): 82.
- 14 Die Kunstdenkmäler der Provinz Niederschlesien, vol. I, Die Stadt Breslau, part 3, Die kirchlichen Denkmäler der Altstadt (Fortsetzung) und des erweiterten Stadtgebietes: Friedhöfe, eds. Ludwig Burgemeister and Günther Grundmann (Breslau: Wilhelm Gottlieb Korn Verlag, 1934), 143–144; Marek Słoń, Szpitale średniowiecznego Wrocławia (Warsaw: Neriton; Instytut Historii PAN, 2000), 207–213.
- 15 Painted triptych, ca. 1420–1430, inv. no. 3462, Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław; attendant figures Mary and St. John the Baptist, ca. 1500, inv. nos. 3544, 3545, Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław.
- 16 Alwin Schultz, *Urkundliche Geschichte der Breslauer Malerinnung in den Jahren 1345 bis 1523* (Breslau: Kern, 1866), 137.
- 17 Eagle Watching the Body of St. Florian, inv. no. 338, Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz.
- 18 Karin Leitner-Ruhe and Christine Rabensteiner, "Von der steiermärkischen 'Landes-Bildergallerie' zur Alten Galerie im Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz," *Historisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Graz* 45/46 (2016): 46, 56, note 48.
- 19 This is clearly visible due to the difference in thickness. According to Biedermann 1982, 143 (see note 3), the panel itself is "greatly reduced to a thickness of approx. 0.5 cm." In the case of the Wrocław panel, it is 1.3 centimeters.
- 20 See Petra Hölscher, *Die Akademie für Kunst und Kunstgewerbe zu Breslau: Wege einer Kunstschule 1791–1932* (Kiel: Verlag Ludwig, 2003), 26.
- 21 Kurt Bimler, "Raabe, Josef," in *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. 27, ed. Hans Vollmer (Leipzig: Seemann, 1933), 533; Hölscher 2003, 494 (see note 20).
- 22 Margit Fritz-Schafschetzy, "Stark Josef August," in Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950, vol. 13 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 107, https://www.biographien.ac.at/oebl?frames=yes.
- 23 It is assumed that there were a total of eight pictures from the front and rear sides and no more.
- 24 Benesch 1982, 138 (see note 3).
- 25 The last suggested sequence of scenes is also not possible: *Adoration of the Magi* (front, left wing, bottom) and the *Eagle Watching the Body of St. Florian* (reverse, right wing, top), see Hensle-Wlasak 2005, 34–35 (see note 3).

Romuald Kaczmarek is an expert in medieval art history, in particular the art of Silesia. His publications include: Rzeźba architektoniczna XIV wieku we Wrocławiu [Architectural Sculpture of the Fourteenth Century in Wrocław] (1999) and Italianizmy: studia nad recepcją gotyckiej sztuki włoskiej w rzeźbie środkowo-wschodniej Europy [Italianisms: Studies on the Reception of Italian Gothic Art in the Sculpture of Central and Eastern Europe] (2008). In the summer semester of 2019, he was a visiting professor at the Institute of Art History at the University of Vienna, and from 2012 to 2024, he was the director of the Institute of Art History at the University of Wrocław.

COLOPHON

CITATION: Romuald Kaczmarek, "A Key Piece of the Puzzle: The Discovery of a Missing Panel of the Florian Altar Retable in Graz," Belvedere Research Journal 2 (2024), https://doi.org/10.48636/brj.2024.1.108167.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.48636/brj.2024.1.108167

AUTHOR: Romuald Kaczmarek

TITLE: A Key Piece of the Puzzle: The Discovery of a Missing Panel of the Florian Altar Retable in Graz

Publication Date: 2024

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IMAGE EDITING: Pixelstorm, Vienna

TRANSLATION (GERMAN-ENGLISH): Jessica West

COPYEDITING AND PROOFREADING (ENGLISH): Hannah Sarid de Mowbray

Österreichische Galerie Belvedere Wissenschaftliche Anstalt öffentlichen Rechts Prinz Eugen-Straße 27, 1030 Vienna Austria

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Published by

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The electronic open access version of this text is permanently available at https://www.arthistoricum.net DOI (Issue): https://doi.org/10.48636/brj.2024.1



Issue 2 cover illustration: Circumcision of Christ (detail), front side of the altar panel of the Florian Altarpiece in Graz, ca. 1490. Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław, inv. no. 147 (Photo: Małgorzata Kujda).