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VERLAG HANS CARL, NÜRNBERG

Neue Funde

Grünewald's Rosebush in the Isenheim Altar – Another Medicinal Presence

In memory of Hubertus Falkner von Sonnenburg († July 16th 2004)

Emphasis has long and rightly been placed upon the multiple curative references within The Isenheim Altar, (Colmar, Musée Unterlinden) painted by Mathis Gothart Nithart, long mistakenly known as Mathias Grünewald. Commissioned for the high altar of the hospital church of an Anthonite monastery, the altar is named for that institution's site at Isenheim. The hospital was devoted to the healing of Erysipelas or Ergotism (Saint Anthony's Fire). Much of the magnificent polyptych's imagery reflects to that ailment and to its various treatments; a whole monograph has been devoted to this theme by Andree Hayum: *The Isenheim Altarpiece, God's Medecine and the Painter's Vision*, Princeton 1989.

Every religious image, whatever the size, has, in the most basic sense, an overtly curative function, designed toward that ultimate

healing – salvation. This is twice true for all hospital altars, be they of *The Last Judgement*, such as the one by Roger van der Weyden, painted for the hospital at Beaune or *The Portinari Altar*, painted by Hugo van der Goes, commissioned by a leading Florentine banking family that was the founder and long the major patron of the great Hospital Church of S. Maria Nuova in Florence. It was there that the altar was set up, in the chapel of S. Egidio, the great painting now in the Uffizi. These vast polyptychs possess a doubly curative dimension by dint of their location and through their subjects' special meaning in that particular context.

Among the many beautiful and brilliant features of the second opening of *The Isenheim Altar* (pl. 1) is the unusually prominent rosebush, striking for its glowing crimson blossoms, painted just to the right of the



Abb. 1 Matthias Gothart Nithart, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, second opening: Virgin Mary and the Child. Colmar, Musée Unterlinden (Bruckmann)

Virgin and Child. (pl. 2). There, as Andree Hayum (p. 179, note 53) has observed, the configuration of the flowering shrub echoes Mary's »over-all shape«. This parallelism, if such there be, might refer to her Immaculate Conception, in which the Virgin is often referred to as a rose without thorns.

Mary and Jesus face the Mystical Tabernacle of the Incarnation with its music-making angels (to the left). The *Resurrection* is shown in the adjacent panel to the right of the Mother and Infant. Roses, along with lilies,

strawberry plants and daisies are among the many flowers and fruits most commonly associated with Mary. For that reason, the prominence of the bush bearing those first flowers in *The Isenheim Altarpiece* has elicited understandably scant scholarly attention, roses practically a symbolic cliché for the Virgin. Yet within the context of a monastic hospital church, specifically to an institution devoted to the cure of Saint Anthony's Fire, the striking presence of the rose takes on a supplementary value, one not narrowly Marian in character.

The flower's scholarly neglect is nonetheless somewhat surprising since the *Altarpiece* has of course received endless art historical attention for its botanical symbolism, such endeavor taking place in the centers most concerned with iconographic studies – America, France and Germany. Teutonic scholars in particular, have explored 15th and 16th century herbals – Hieronymus Bock (1498-1554), *Kräuterbuch* (Strasbourg n. d.), Otto Brunfels, *Herbarum Vivae Eicones* (ibid. 1530) –, all of these combed in conjunction with the Isenheim Altarpiece (see references from Hayum, p. 156, note 27).

Otto Kuhn observed that no less than fourteen of the twenty identifiable plants in the polyptych were placed on the panels due to their common use as a cure for Saint Anthony's Fire. These include Verbena, Sage, Plantain and Poppy, all believed to diminish the searing heat contributing to Erysipelas' agony (Hayum, p. 156, notes 25-27).

Looking far further back in time, a once-popular medieval lapidary by Marbod of Rennes (+ 1123), the Bishop and Chancellor of the Diocese of Angers (see the Introduction by John Riddle, *Marbod of Rennes, De Lapidibus*, Wiesbaden 1977; Robert Halleux, »Damigeron, Evax, et Marbode. L'heritage alexandrin dans les lapidaires médiévaux«, *Studi medievali* ser. 3, 15, 1977, pp. 327-47), was accompanied by »The Book of Herbs« (PL 171.1566, cols. 1687-8), also known as

the *Macer Floridus De Virtutibus Herbarum* (*Macer Floridus - A Middle English Translation on Macer Floridus De Viribus Herbarum*, ed. by Gosta Frisk, Uppsala and Cambridge/Mass. 1949). It is usually dated to the mid-11th century and includes seventy-seven plants.

The herbal is sometimes given to the authorship of Odo de Meung (Odo Magdunensis, *PL* 171, cols. 1451-1780) although the text could also be by Marbod himself (or Marbod's scientific works see L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, New York 1923, I, 612-613). Gerald A. Bond does not believe in the latter eventuality but wrote that Marbod »certainly conceived of the herbal and lapidary as companion paradigms, since he mentions them together« (*The Loving Subject. Desire, Eloquence and Power in Romanesque France*, Philadelphia 1995, p. 80 and note 31, p. 236). Recently it has been suggested that the herbal was written in an earlier version, in 10th century Germany and then gradually expanded to include recent material coming from Arabic sources that had been translated into Latin at Salerno from the XIth century on. According to Bruce P. Flood Jr., the text was possibly prepared by a French author, writing between 1070 and 1112 (*Macer Floridus. A medieval herbalism*, Univ. of Colorado, Boulder 1969, p. 63).

Following traditionally Aristotelian lines, the *Herbal* was oriented toward the four states – hot, cold, wet, dry – associated with the classical concept of the Humors. Its author observed:

*Dici flos florum nobis rosa iure videtur
Quod specie cunctos praecedat odoreque flores.*

Non tamen haec specie tantum nec odore iuvare

*Nos valet, at variis nos adiuvat illa medelis.
Eius sicca gradu vis et frigido primo:*

Compscit sacrum si trita apponitur ignem.

Sic quoque, si stomachus calet aut praecordia, sedat

...



Abb. 2 Mathis Gothart Nithart, *The Isenheim Altar*, second opening, detail (Marburg 85893)

Macer's text (cf. the translation by Bond, p. 80, taken from *Macer Floridus, De Virtutibus Herbarum*, ed. Ludwig Choulant, *Handbuch der Bücherkunde für die ältere Medizin*, Leipzig 1848, pp. 5-14, 60) was widely translated and incorporated in the herbals of many other authors. It is composed of passages from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, Dioscorides' *De materia medica*, and the *Medicina* by the Roman 2nd century historian and medical writer Gargilius Martialis. His words appeared in German, French, Danish, Italian, Catalan, Middle Dutch and Middle English, as noted by Flood, who concluded that though »the bulk of the material presented in the herbal is borrowed from earlier sources and rendered in a tedious style, the evidence ... makes it clear that the *Macer Floridus* was one of the most important

avenues of transmission for ancient medical lore and was one of the most influential works on botanical pharmacy and therapeutics from the eleventh century to the Renaissance and thereafter.«

The *Macer Floridus* was well known in Germany in the later Middle Ages, its author bracketed with such basic texts as those of Galen, Avicenna and Bartolomeus Anglicus. An associate of the latter's, the Franciscan Berthold von Regensburg (1210-72), referring to the *Macer Floridus*, preached in Colmar in 1255. Those words were recorded in print form (Franz Pfeiffer, ed. *Berthold von Regensburg: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Predigten mit Anmerkungen*, Berlin 1965, I, p. 517; see also *Lexikon des Mittelalters* I, col. 2035).

That the text would have been known to the artist of the Isenheim Altar or to whoever devised the polyptych's program is certain since it was so long popular in Germany. The

rose is mentioned in one of the first herbals published in Germany, in 1484. The text was mentioned by Paracelsus (1493-1554), Jerome Bock of Strassbourg (1498-1554) and Jacob Theodore of Bergzabern (1529-90; see Flood, note 19).

So, in conclusion, the prominent rosebush is just what it ought to be, far more than conventionally Marian, this now joins the many other plants within Isenheim's glorious altarpiece, their presence tributes to the healing, salvific powers – divine and terrestrial – to which Grünewald's masterpiece is dedicated.

Colin Eisler

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Frauenkloster-Projekte 2005

Das Jahr 2005 stand nicht zuletzt im Zeichen der Frauenklöster. Robert Suckale (ehem. TU Berlin) und Jeffrey Hamburger (Harvard University Cambridge) haben ihr langjährig geplantes Projekt verwirklicht, Kunst und literarische Kultur aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern in einer großen Ausstellung erstmals einem breiten Publikum zugänglich zu machen. Unter der Mitarbeit von Lothar Altringer, Jan Gerchow, Carola Jäggi, Susan Marti, Petra Marx, Hedwig Röckelein und Katrinette Bodarwé wurden sie vom 19. März bis 3. Juli an zwei Orten unter dem Titel *Krone und Schleier, Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern* gezeigt: im Ruhrlandmuseum Essen die *Zeit der frühen Klöster und Stifte 500 – 1200* und in der Bonner Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland die *Zeit der Orden 1200 – 1500*. Die teils

bislang kaum bekannten Schätze aus Klöstern und Stiften und das umfangreiche Rahmenprogramm fanden großes Interesse. Das Fachpublikum konnte sich zudem während des internationalen Colloquiums *Frauen – Kloster – Kunst. Neue Forschungen zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters* austauschen, das vom 13. bis 16. Mai in der Katholischen Akademie des Bistums Essen in Mühlheim an der Ruhr stattfand.

Die Ausstellung zeigte nicht zuletzt, daß die Geschichte und das kulturelle Umfeld der süddeutschen Frauenklöster bislang kaum bekannt ist. So veranstalteten Eva Schlottheuber (LMU München) und Helmut Flachenecker (Universität Würzburg) vom 21. bis 23. September in Kloster Frauenchiemsee eine Tagung mit dem Titel *Nonnen, Kanonissen, Beginen und Mystikerinnen. Frauengemein-*