

# Tilman Riemenschneider *Master Sculptor of the Middle Ages*

BY SUSAN HAGEN

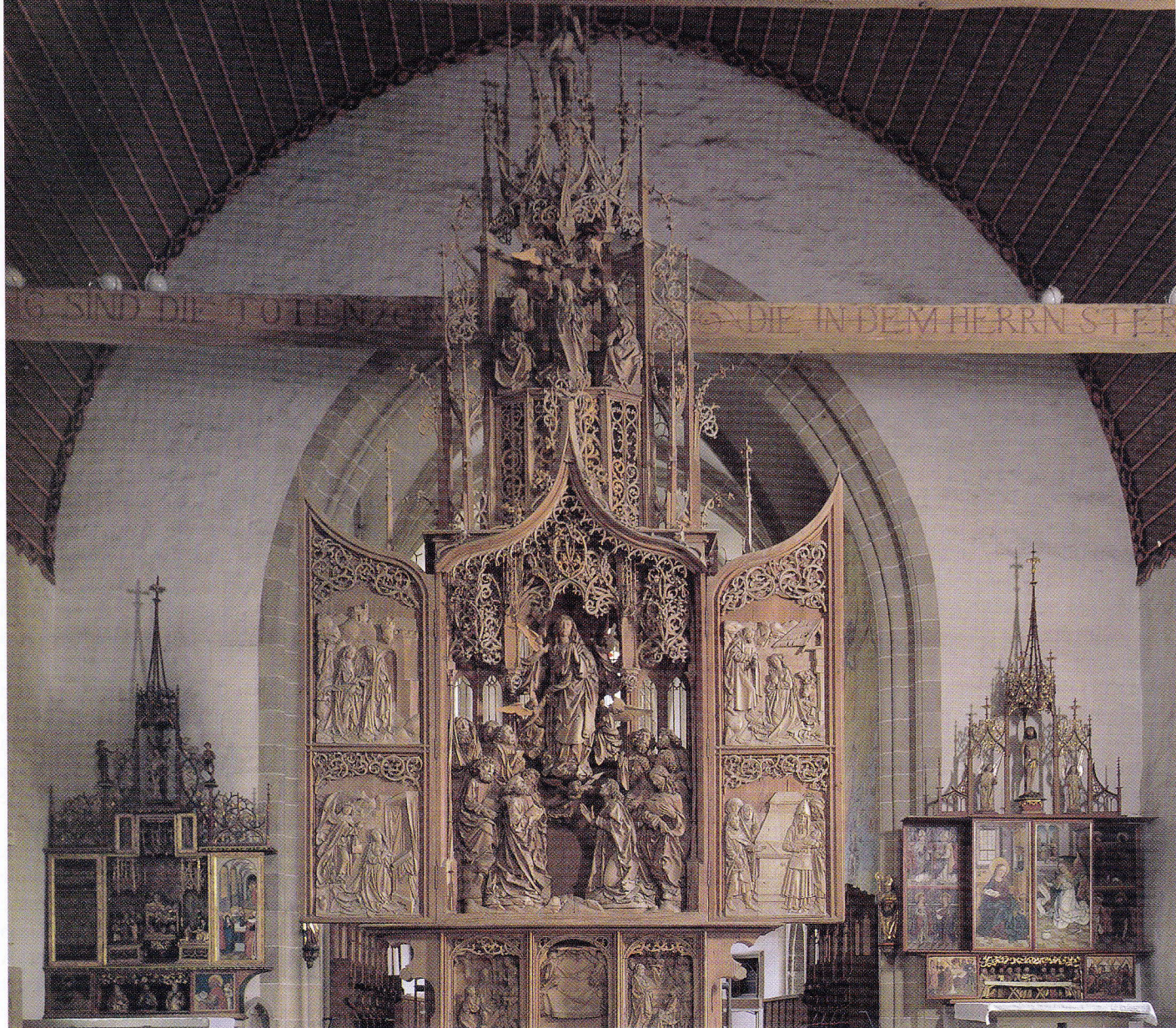


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About ten years ago, I made what could only be called a pilgrimage to Germany to experience firsthand the late medieval carved limewood sculpture I had discovered in books. As a woodcarver, I was drawn to this sculpture because of its expressiveness and technical accomplishment. I've tracked down a number of museums in the United States with German wood sculpture from this

period, but imagine my delight when I recently visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and saw an entire exhibition of one of the last great sculptors of the Middle Ages, Tilman Riemenschneider!

Riemenschneider was born circa 1460 in Heiligenstadt im Eichsfeld and grew up in an era of growth and prosperity in Osterode am Harz. There is evidence that

he worked as an apprentice or journeyman in Strasbourg and Ulm. It was crucial for an artist or craftsman to travel and work in different cities and workshops in order to complete his education—the goal of my visit to south Germany as well. This *Wanderjahre* that every journeyman undertook after his apprenticeship helped to create a flowering of culture in medieval Europe. In Germany, stylistic



and formal ideas were spread quickly through this system. The late 15th century saw many changes in the nature of sculpture and the profession, with sculptors starting independent workshops and joining guilds, and the work produced, rather than being an intrinsic part of the architecture, was considered a somewhat autonomous object. This also permitted sculptors to work in wood rather than stone with a greater frequency, and a school of limewood carving developed.

Two years after relocating to Würzburg, Riemenschneider joined the Saint Luke's Brotherhood, the local guild for painters, glaziers, and sculptors. He quickly became the most important sculptor working in the Würzburg area and became a well-respected citizen. He was elected to serve several terms on the municipal council and also served two terms as mayor. Tragically, his position during the Peasants' Revolt in 1525 abruptly changed his life. The city council had refused to allow the prince-bishop of Würzburg, Konrad von Thüngen, to station troops in the town. After the revolt was defeated and the prince-bishop gained control, Riemenschneider was imprisoned and tortured, thus ending his long career. He died in 1531. "Saint Matthias" bears a remarkable likeness to the portrait on Riemenschneider's tombstone—could it be in part a pensive mid-life self portrait of the artist?

The number and caliber of sculptors working in south Germany from about 1470 until 1530 is really quite remarkable. From the sculptures that survive, a picture of an intensely creative and productive period has emerged. The exhibition gave Riemenschneider's work a context by including the work of three other artists of his milieu—Niclaus Gerhaert von Leiden, Michel Erhart, and Veit Stoss—and showed stylistic differences within the framework of the period. Erhart and Gerhaert are both represented in the exhibition because of their almost certain role as mentors or masters.

Gerhaert von Leiden's boxwood "Virgin and Child" shows how Riemenschneider was influenced by Gerhaert's virtuosity and fluent, almost expressionistic, carving style. Gerhaert conveys the divine by using drapery with volume and drama: the gravity-defying drapery subverts the physical, symbolizing a divine force. Riemenschneider

learned this formal technique from Gerhaert and used it selectively in his work, although his sculptures are always of this earth and never completely transcend their materials. Compare Gerhaert's sculpture with Riemenschneider's "Virgin and Child on the Crescent Moon," who possesses just a bit of world-weariness along with her regal bearing. Riemenschneider has bor-



ABOVE—"St. Matthias" (c. 1500–1505); limewood; 41½" x 12⅝" x 7½".

OPPOSITE—Tilman Riemenschneider's "Assumption of the Virgin" altarpiece (c. 1505–1510) in situ, Herrgottskirche, Creglingen, Germany.

rowed Gerhaert's compositional method of surrounding a small s-shaped figure with a spiral of drapery and forms, but she stays firmly rooted to the earth, unlike Gerhaert's atmospheric Madonna.

Veit Stoss, a contemporary of equal stature, was included because the work of Riemenschneider and Stoss is often contrasted as the two stylistic extremes of the

period. Riemenschneider's sculptures were placid, formally contained, even conservative, whereas Stoss' were solid and dynamic, with areas of risky carving. "Mourning Virgin", although badly damaged, shows Stoss' more dramatic drapery flapping upward from the Virgin's knee and the face, with numerous three-dimensional tears, expressing insurmountable grief.

The sculptures of Riemenschneider, and those of his contemporaries, were usually designed to have a "monumental" character in any scale, to give grandeur and dignity to the religious subjects. This was achieved by the selection of a calm and controlled expression, a regal pose, balance and proportion, and of course, a carving style that conveyed affection and respect for the subject. The proportions of figures were nearly always foreshortened because they were made to be installed considerably above eye-level, often in high niches or altars in a church. Riemenschneider's saints ("Saint Matthias" for example) often have extremely large heads and rather dainty feet when viewed straight-on, but when viewed from a lower vantage point appear naturalistic. It's also interesting that furniture and architectural elements are harshly schematic and often roughly hewn in contrast to the figures, and this tends to give a sense of heightened reality to the human form.

Much of the emotional impact of Riemenschneider's sculptures comes from the perceptual complexity of their installation. There is an "arc of address" that gives a range of optimal points-of-view for observing a sculpture, where each viewpoint gives a different but interesting silhouette and arrangement of features—ideal for a public installation in a church. Changes in the modeling of forms by light and shadow throughout the course of the day, too, seems to have been considered by Riemenschneider in the planning of a sculpture's installation. Texture and types of forms would produce different types of highlight and shadows, with deep concave forms yielding the darkest shadows and burnished convex shapes the brightest highlights, and these would alter dramatically when light from the sun came from the west instead of the east, or if it was overcast rather than sunny.

Riemenschneider was one of the first sculptors of the pre-Reformation period

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to experiment with monochrome (painted or stained a single color) surface treatment of the wood, rather than the more traditional polychromed (painted with many colors) surface. Innovations in printmaking during this period nurtured a growing interest in black and white gradation of images in general, and may have been a possible inspiration for monochrome sculpture as well. Western culture has had dramatically changing taste with regard to monochrome and polychrome sculpture. The taste of the 19th century in particular was so antithetical to polychrome that the integrity

of many medieval works was destroyed by aggressive stripping, scraping, or cleaning. It's ironic that this was done in reverence of classic Greek sculptures, which they admired for the formal beauty of the sculptures in monochrome, but which were originally polychromed.

tain projects. The joiner would produce the cabinetry and ornamentation for altarpieces. Sometimes, in fact, the joiner held the contract for the project and hired the sculptor as a sub, as in Riemenschneider's "Assumption of the Virgin" altarpiece in Creglingen. A *fassmaler* was a highly skilled craftsman and was quite expensive, but the value and beauty of medieval sculpture was greatly enhanced by polychroming. "Saint Lawrence" shows the use of gold leaf on the tunic to imitate costly silk, luminous flesh tones including tinted veins in relief on the saint's hands, and a carefully rendered leather-bound book.

face. The *fassmaler*, by contrast, would use hide glue mixed with chalk (gesso) to create an opaque and smooth base for paint.

The surfaces of Riemenschneider's sculptures are for the most part uniformly burnished, but there are also areas of texture, especially in the sculptures originally intended to be monochrome, that are quite dynamic. These were made with a rocking gauge or various special punches, such as a star, half-moon, flower, circle, Maltese cross, and rosette. In the "Noli Me Tangere" relief panel ("Christ appearing to Mary Magdalen") from the left wing of the Műnnerstadt altarpiece, great



of many medieval works was destroyed by aggressive stripping, scraping, or cleaning. It's ironic that this was done in reverence of classic Greek sculptures, which they admired for the formal beauty of the sculptures in monochrome, but which were originally polychromed.

In the Middle Ages it was typical for a sculptor to subcontract work with a *fassmaler* (a painter subcontracted to polychrome a sculpture) and a joiner on cer-

One of the best preserved monochrome sculptures by Riemenschneider, the Holy Blood altarpiece in Rothenburg, most likely had an original surface treatment of egg white and oils with ocher, gypsum, charcoal, and lead white over both the carvings, as well as the shrine and ornaments. Other research indicates that hide glue, combined with a few pigments like ochre and charcoal, were often used on bare wood to give a uniform sur-

*LEFT*—Niclaus Gerhaert von Leiden's "Virgin and Child" (c. 1470); boxwood; 13¼" x 5¼" x 3".

*CENTER*—Tilman Riemenschneider's "Virgin and Child on the Crescent Moon" (c. 1521); limewood; 34¼" x 10⅝" x 7½".

*RIGHT*—Veit Stoss' "Mourning Virgin" (c. 1500–1510); pearwood; 12⅜" x 3⅞" x 3⅞".

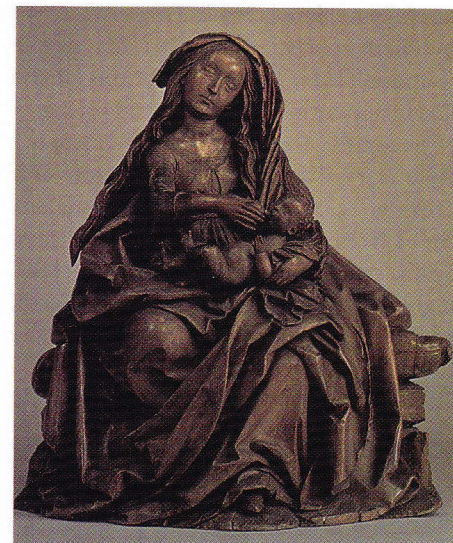


depth and intricate patterns are achieved with *tremoliert*, a carved zigzag pattern.

Linden is a wonderful wood for carving: it is a fine-grained hardwood, of uniform density with subtle grain patterns, not too hard, extremely predictable, and somewhat resistant to cracking and checking. The species of linden used by Riemenschneider were *tilia cordata* (small-leafed lime) and *tilia platyphyllos* (broad-leafed lime). As a remnant of pagan tree worship, the linden's symbolic identity as a female tree deity was still understood and respected by the community. While it was, and still is, a relatively common tree in south Germany, it was rarely used for lumber, and was not easy to come by. Sometimes a patron or other landowner would provide a tree from his own ancestral estate; other times Riemenschneider was able to procure wood from the city's protected forest.

Limewood sculptors made strategic use of wood structure and grain when designing and carving a sculpture. Larger works were roughed out while the wood was still green, allowed to dry for a while, and then carved in detail. C-section halves of a tree trunk with the heartwood removed were most often the starting point. Sculptors were trained to minimize the potential for checking by removing deep grooves of drapery, for example, allowing for greater shrinkage further out from the heartwood. Backs were hollowed out for this same purpose. The head of a figure would always be shifted aside, further away from dangerous heartwood. Flat horizontal shelf-like forms were to be avoided at all costs because of the inevitability of checking. The larger the scale, the greater the risk, and the more savvy the sculptor had to be. Michel Erhart's "Seated Madonna and Child" is a great example of how good design can minimize the inherent weakness of the wood. The Christ-child's toes and fingers, which are about 1/4" or less in length and at risk for breakage, are all either grouped together or lined up vertically with the grain. The effect is that the child's body is remarkably natural and animated with delicacy as well.

The broad range of Riemenschneider's sculpture included elements from altarpieces, cult figures, objects for private devotion, sculpture with a secular function—"Lüsterweibchen" ("little chan-



TOP LEFT—Attributed to Michel Erhart: "Seated Virgin and Child" (c. 1480); limewood; 15<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 14<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>".

TOP RIGHT—"Lüsterweibchen" (c. 1510–1515); limewood with polychromy, antlers, iron; 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 10<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 16".

ABOVE—"Noli Me Tangere" relief from Münnertstadt altar (c. 1490–1492); limewood; 56<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 40<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 1<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>".

LEFT—"St. Lawrence" (c. 1502); limewood with polychromy; 37<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>".

dolier woman") is a decorative traditional chandelier commissioned for City Hall—and models he carved for assistants. Most of the work was commissioned by a patron for a specific purpose, though Riemenschneider's studio also produced pieces that were sold ready-made, either directly from the workshop where customers could see works-in-progress and purchase smaller pieces, or at markets and fairs at other locations.

Riemenschneider's sculptures were successful when evaluated by criteria from the Gothic period, but he was one of the first German artists to successfully incorporate the humanist ideas of the Italian Renaissance as well. The subjects of his sculpture were nearly always popular traditional images from Christian iconography, since most patrons were religious leaders or municipalities seeking commemorative works for altars or shrines.



Saints, Madonnas, and crucifixions were frequently commissioned works for churches and cathedrals, as were memorials and tomb sculptures with life-like portraits of the deceased. Riemenschneider made use of humanist ideas in order to impart more of a specific identity and individuality to many of his figures, rather than the traditional idealized representation of earlier medieval sculpture. His blatantly sensual and tactile treatment of the wood played into the content of the work, as he sought to articulate the human

carefully rendered details. Drapery is more subdued, consisting of only a few simple rounded folds, and the emotions of the Virgin appear more reserved and private.

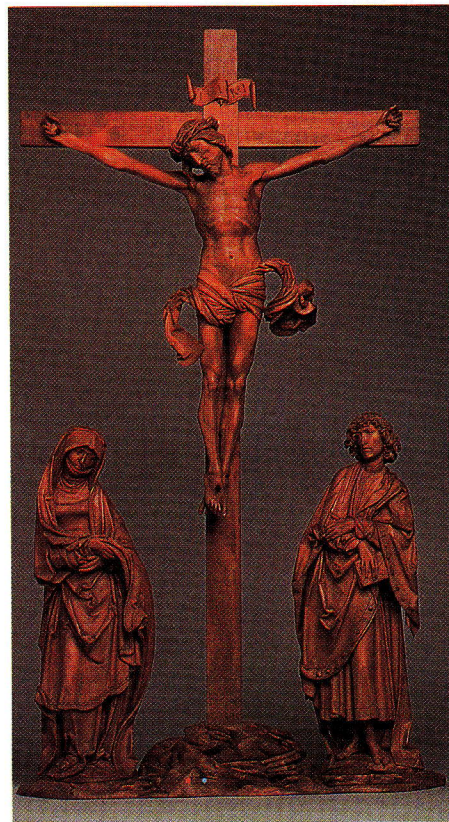
Secondly, though Riemenschneider's style is easily recognizable—there is a prevalence of stylized placid or melancholic faces with eyes slanting down, large heads, and elongated forms—he increasingly used surprising touches of realism, such as the compressed flesh of the Child's thigh in "Virgin and Child on a Crescent Moon" and the ornately

rebuilt; an altarpiece was even nailed shut for almost two hundred years; it has been attributed, unattributed, and re-attributed; one scholar has sought to prove that Riemenschneider was two different artists, one vastly more accomplished than the other! We can only be grateful and delighted that so many of his works have survived for five hundred years and that they were brought together in a wonderful exhibition and catalogue. Anyone who works in wood will appreciate the formal depth of the work,



ABOVE—"Matthew", "Mark", "Luke", "John" (c. 1490-1492); limewood; each approximately 29" x 15" x 10".

RIGHT—"Crucifixion Group" (ca. 1500-1510); limewood; Christ 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ " high, Virgin 17 $\frac{5}{8}$ " high, John 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ " high.



aspect of the divine, exemplified in his masterful "Crucifixion Group."

Riemenschneider's style throughout his career always retained a certain clunkiness, formal compactness, and physicality, while imparting a very innovative facile and gestural quality through the carving technique. "Matthew," "Mark," "Luke," and "John", from the predella of the M $\ddot{u}$ nnerstadt altarpiece, are great examples of this formal compactness. Made to fit into a small horizontal volume at the base of a larger altar, these figures each have a specific personality and internal drama of symbols and forms.

The exhibition clearly showed the progression of Riemenschneider's style in three different ways. The major progression has been described as an evolution toward "clarity of form and restraint of expression." Late works, like "Virgin and Child on a Crescent Moon" (c.1521-1522), show an increased flattening of forms and a reduction to a few essential,

embossed book held by "Female Saint." It's unclear whether Riemenschneider worked directly from models, but in comparing the saints and Madonnas with the tomb figures we can see that some seem to be based on specific individuals, perhaps even recognizable people of his day.

Lastly, the work reveals an evolution of Riemenschneider's compositional strategy, from a uniform level of detailing to a more controlled and judicious application of details. The strategy produces a more intimate work of art that draws the eye of the viewer from place to place. The work seems less fussy, rougher overall, and even unfinished sometimes, but it rewards the viewer with crescendos of drama or detail.

Five hundred years ago, Tilman Riemenschneider made some of the most articulate and sought-after carved wood sculpture of his time. Since then, his sculpture has gone in and out of style; it has been stripped, repainted, and

his vision uniting the human and the divine, and his sublime mastery of the art of woodcarving.

*Susan Hagen is a sculptor working with the Medieval tradition of woodcarving. She lives and works in Philadelphia.*

This exhibition opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It contained 60 sculptures in 45 ensembles, gathered from museums, churches, and private collections in Europe and the United States. An excellent full-color catalogue is available from the bookstores of both museums.