

# Press Release

from 5<sup>th</sup> April 2022

## The Middle Ages: The Art of the 15th Century. Preview

7<sup>th</sup> April 2022 – 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023

**The Germanisches Nationalmuseum's collection of medieval paintings and sculptures ranks as one of the most important of its kind in the world. Selected highlights from this unparalleled collection of high-calibre artefacts are now on display in a special exhibition that opened on 7 April 2022. On the one hand, the works of art reflect the groundbreaking innovations that took place in art as the 15th century progressed. And on the other, the works provide a first glimpse – a preview – of the new exhibition concept for the permanent collection display of medieval art, whose galleries are currently closed for renovation and are due to reopen in 2024.**

*In a statement, museum director Prof. Dr. Daniel Hess said: "For me, the Late Middle Ages, much like our present day, was a fascinating time of great uncertainties, change, and a sudden broadening of horizons. That's why this era appears so modern and insightful for us today."*

The precious silver bust of Saint Zeno marks the start of the presentation. On view in Nuremberg for the first time in 70 years, this masterpiece of late medieval metalwork was until recently on long-term loan to the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich. The bust bears testimony to the cult of relics and veneration of saints in the 1400s and is at once an outstanding example of the collaboration between very different artistic disciplines that was common at the time – it was made by a goldsmith after a model crafted by a wood sculptor.

### **Winged Altarpiece as Gesamtkunstwerk**

The 1519 winged altarpiece from Saxony on view beside the bust is also very much a joint product. A wide range of craftsmen worked together on the structure, panels, sculptures, and the decorative elements, including panel makers, panel painters, wood sculptors, cabinetmakers and joiners, metalworkers, gilders, and polychromists. Over time, such towering retables

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were often dismantled. Their sculptures would often be presented out of context as stand-alone pieces and their panel paintings hung to decorate walls, in many instances obscuring the image on the reverse. In the museum context, they are rarely seen as actually belonging together. A video shows the opening and closing of a winged altarpiece, an act referred to in German as the “transformation” of the altarpiece. The video illustrates its original function as a piece of sacred art in a church, and demonstrates the practical and symbolic purpose of painting panels on both sides.

The “Tegernsee Crucifixion” was also once part of an altarpiece. Measuring almost 2 metres in height and 2.70 metres in width, its size alone is impressive, but it is just a fraction (roughly a quarter) of the original dimensions. The monumentality of the entire altarpiece is astonishing. The multifigure scene of Calvary is also itself a captivating sight. Although a religious painting, the scene nevertheless sheds light on everyday life in the Middle Ages: at the bottom left of the panel, for example, we see a looter who has apparently just pilfered a boot from one of the crucified thieves, which he is now trying on himself – well prepared, he clenches a shoehorn between his teeth.

Typical of the period is the unflinching depiction of brutal acts of violence, evident in the gushing streams of blood. How do we deal with depictions of such explicit violence today? And how did viewers react to such scenes back then? Well thought-out compositional use of light and shadow helped create a greater sense of realism, and great care was taken to imitate materials such as gold brocades. The shift towards greater realism can also be found in the polychrome finish given to sculptures, as seen in an Entombment of Christ from 1490.

## **Serial Production and Exports**

In the Late Middle Ages it first became possible for workshops to produce works of art in large numbers in a timely and relatively uncomplicated manner – and as such, the 15th century saw the emergence of serial production. Once invented, the techniques of book printing with moveable type and printmaking developed rapidly. A two-volume Bible by the important German printer Anton Koberger is on display as an example that combines both reproductive techniques. Also on view are stained-glass paintings by the

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Strasbourg Workshop Cooperative – an association of five workshops that joined forces. Workshop employees would journey across Europe with samples and presentation pieces in an effort to acquire new customers. It is during this period that we first see artists relying on networking, the division of labour, and modern distribution methods. For example, such cooperation made Strasbourg windows highly sought after across the continent.

## Sympathy and Veneration

Stained-glass paintings bathed church interiors in a transcendent light as a means of appealing to people's senses. The sometimes shocking depictions on panel paintings were also emotionally moving. The intent behind such works was to move the faithful and allow them to share in the holy suffering; the veneration of saints through relics reached its peak.

The Virgin Mary occupied a special role among the panoply of saints. According to Church doctrine, she was the only human being who was assumed body and soul into heaven. A figural group representing the coronation of the Virgin, measuring more than two metres in height, stands as an impressive end to the display. God the Father, Christ crowning his mother, and the kneeling Virgin are depicted on a monumental scale. They originally formed the centre of a retable created by Hans von Judenburg for the parish church in Bolzano. Created around 1420, it is also the oldest object in the exhibition.

## Digital Media Stations

In addition to the around 25 works of art, digital media stations allow visitors to explore the subjects in greater depth. In short interviews, curators and conservators shed light on individual aspects of the presentation, while videos provide information on conservation treatments and direct the viewer's attention to certain details or to other objects that relate to the Nuremberg works but are held in other museum collections.

There is also a feedback point that elicits visitor opinions and interests. The interim presentation thus serves as a preview and as a sounding board for the forthcoming new permanent collection display of medieval art at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

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