

Two Unpolychromed Riemenschneiders at The Cloisters

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THE CLOISTERS possesses two linden-wood sculptures by the Würzburg master Tilman Riemenschneider, the illustrious exponent of German Late Gothic unpolychromed wooden sculpture. It is my belief that both the Three Helpers, SS. Christopher, Eustace, and Erasmus (Figure 1), acquired in 1961, and the Seated Bishop, perhaps either St. Kilian or St. Erasmus (Figure 2), acquired in 1970, were originally unpolychromed.¹ Justus Bier has already published the history and iconography of the Three Helpers,² which was probably from the altarpiece of the Fourteen Helper Saints in Need, a work commissioned for the Würzburg Hofspital chapel by Johann von Allendorf in 1494.³ The group to which our three figures belonged may have represented all fourteen saints within the predella of an unpolychromed retable.

1. This is not to say that their surfaces were not treated in another manner. In general, efforts to determine the original appearance of Late Gothic sculpture have been made difficult because during the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in particular much of this sculpture was "abgelaugt" (ruthlessly cleaned) and repainted. Although the nineteenth-century restorers sometimes correctly removed post-Gothic paint from retables that were originally unpolychromed, in some cases they mistakenly removed the original and/or subsequent paint in the belief that the surface was originally unpolychromed. This happened to the celebrated late fifteenth-century Kefermarkt Retable, which was originally polychromed. The most important literature concerning late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century South German unpolychromed sculpture includes Walter Paatz, *Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre der Spätgotik* (Heidelberg, 1936) pp. 81–82; Marlene Benkö *Ungefasste Schnitzaltäre der Spätgotik in Süddeutschland*, unpublished dissertation, Munich, 1969; Johannes Taubert, "Zur Oberflächengestalt der sog. ungefassten Holzplastik," *Städel Jahrbuch* (1967, N.F. 1) pp. 119–139. Benkö's dissertation presents a comprehensive bank of data but relies too little on first-hand information. Her closing observations on the origins of this phenomenon are not conclusively

When the group was shown to specialists at the Victoria and Albert Museum nearly twenty-five years ago by George Saint, an English private collector, it was covered with a recent heavy layer of brown paint; this was subsequently removed at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The horizontal worm galleries running along the surface beneath the paint indicated that the sculpture had at one time been painted. Upon its purchase by The Cloisters, Mojmir Frinta removed a recent application of linseed oil that gave the surface an unpleasant, hard shine. From the time of its acquisition there was some disagreement concerning the original nature of its surface finish,⁴ but a systematic analysis of Riemenschneider's surviving sculpture and available documentary records shows quite clearly that the sculptor created many of his pieces with the intention that

warranted and largely reiterate Paatz's earlier hypothetical observations.

2. In the catalogue for the Riemenschneider exhibition in the North Carolina Museum of Art (Raleigh, 1962), also in "Riemenschneider's Helpers in Need," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 21 (1962–63) pp. 317–326. Formerly in the collections of Lord Delamere and Mrs. Mary Saint, the Three Helpers was on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum 1951–56.

3. A later Fourteen Helpers relief for the outside wall of the Hofspital chapel was mistakenly identified with this commission for quite some time. The figures of this second relief, dated 1514, now in the Mainfränkisches Museum, Würzburg, show a blend of Gothic and Renaissance characteristics and were carved by one of Riemenschneider's pupils. Representations of the Fourteen Helper Saints in wall paintings and retables became most popular in Bavaria after Hermann Leicht's vision of 1446, in which the Fourteen Helpers instructed him to build a chapel where the Upper Franconian church of Vierzehnheiligen now stands.

4. G. Schoenberger, T. Hoving, and C. Gómez-Moreno believed that it was originally unpolychromed; J. Rorimer believed that it was originally polychromed.



FIGURE 1

Three Helper Saints, by Tilman Riemenschneider. Probably commissioned in 1494. Linden wood, height about 21 inches. The Cloisters Collection, 61.86

they were to remain unpolychromed. Riemenschneider often completed his figures by highlighting certain physiognomic details, and he sometimes applied a pigmented glaze over the surface of the wood. On the basis of the refined subtleties in its carving, the details which would have been obscured by polychromy, and the faint traces of paint on the eyes, it can be assumed that this piece was to remain unpolychromed also.

The decorative details include the incised strip and scallops that border Erasmus' cope and the ornamental design on the band holding it together, and the cross-hatching on the triangular cap of the sudarium attached to the crozier. The remaining fragments of Erasmus' miter lappets reveal a simple pattern of dotted diamonds, as on the Seated Bishop's miter lappets. However, the imitation of fur on Eustace's tunic is perhaps the most instructive, since even a single coat of paint would obscure its texture.⁵

Without documentation it is impossible to determine the precise identity of the Seated Bishop. Kilian, the patron saint of Würzburg Cathedral, is often identified by a sword and crozier, whereas Erasmus frequently bears a crozier and a windlass wound with intestines. By the time of a restoration in the eighteenth-century the bishop had already lost the attribute or instrument he had borne in his right hand, since the missing or broken hand was then replaced, and the hole above the

5. Riemenschneider, unlike other sculptors, Hans Leinberger in particular, only rarely imitated textures.

6. The poorly carved flat hand, removed in the 1971 restoration, dates to the time of the eighteenth-century paint. The original right hand must have been raised at an angle. The eighteenth-century restorer had to cut a piece from the protruding garment fold in order to place the hand in a horizontal position. The hole above the knees, presumably securing the bishop's other attribute, was not filled in with paint, indicating that the left hand and attribute were still intact. On the basis of the photographs in the 1904 and 1908 publications of the Seated Bishop, it can also be determined that the twentieth-century restorations predating the acquisition by The Cloisters included the addition of a new base, since removed, and the filling of the deteriorated wood at the bottom of the piece.



FIGURE 2

Seated Bishop, by Tilman Riemenschneider. About 1495. Linden wood. Height 35 inches. The Cloisters Collection, 1970.137.1

FIGURE 3

The Evangelist Matthew, by Tilman Riemenschneider. From the predella of the Münnerstadt Retable, 1490–92. Linden wood. Height about 30 inches. Berlin-Dahlem, Staatliche Museen (photo: Staatliche Museen)



FIGURE 4

Seated Bishop, detail

right knee, which presumably secured the attribute, was filled with paint.⁶

If doubt ever existed as to whether the Seated Bishop was carved by the master himself, the recent removal of paint by Rudolf Meyer at The Cloisters again facilitates an appreciation of the fine carving and points directly to the master's own hand.⁷ Stylistically, the Seated Bishop is closest to the Münnerstadt Retable predella figures of 1490–92 (Figure 3). Riemenschneider created his own medieval vocabulary of types, each an idealized yet highly individual identity depicted with graphic realism. The facial type with which the Seated Bishop might best be identified was already used for Erasmus in The Cloisters' Three Helpers in 1494 (Figures 4, 5). If the figure of Erasmus resembles Rie-



FIGURE 5
Erasmus, detail of Three Helper Saints

menschneider's effigy of Prince-Bishop Rudolf von Scherenberg, carved on his Würzburg Cathedral tomb monument between 1496 and 1499, how much closer our Seated Bishop is to the ninety-three-year-old Rudolf (Figure 6). Riemenschneider may have carved it while completing the Scherenberg monument. Another fig-

7. The piece is considered to be by Riemenschneider's own hand by Bier, an opinion shared by Alfred Schädler, director of the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. It was published early in this century, at which time it was still covered with eighteenth-century paint. The Seated Bishop was first published with the notation "attributed to Riemenschneider" in the *Offizieller Katalog der Ausstellung von Meisterwerken der Renaissance aus Privatbesitz*, veranstaltet vom Verein bildender Künstler Münchens "Secession" e. V. vom 3. Juni bis 30. September 1901 in kgl. Kunstaustellungsgebäude am Königsplatz, II. Auflage, ausgeben am 29. Juni 1901 (Munich, 1901) p. 26, no. 194. Three years later it was published and illus-



FIGURE 6
Prince-Bishop Rudolph von Scherenberg, by
Tilman Riemenschneider. 1496–99. Marble.
Würzburg Cathedral (Foto Marburg)

ure, the standing St. Kilian (?) in the Mainfränkisches Museum, Würzburg, probably carved by Riemenschneider about 1500,⁸ is likewise strikingly similar to the figures of Erasmus, the Seated Bishop, and Rudolf von Scherenberg, although the open lips and firmer

trated as "attributed to" Riemenschneider in the *Album de l'exposition d'objets d'art de 1904, St.-Petersbourg* (St. Petersburg, 1907) p. 227, fig. 110. It was last published with the notation "Art des Tilman Riemenschneider" in Julius Leisching *Figurale Holzplastik I* (Vienna, 1908) pl. LV, no. 116. The second reference was given me by J. L. Schrader and V. Ostoia, the first and third by J. Bier.

8. *Weltkunst XX* (1950) Heft 19, p. 3; *Franconia Sacra*, Jubiläums-Ausstellung, Mainfränkisches Museum Würzburg (Munich, 1952) p. 34, A22; Mainfränkisches Museum Würzburg, *Neuerwerbungen, 1946–1956, Mainfränkisches Jahrbuch*, Band 8 (1956) Sonderdruck.



FIGURE 7
 St. Kilian, by Tilman Riemenschneider. 1508–10. Linden wood. (After Max von Freedren, *Tilman Riemenschneider* [Munich, 1965] pl. 74)

flesh do not indicate the same age as the other figures. Riemenschneider's lifesize bust of St. Kilian (Figure 7), which was created for the Würzburg Cathedral high altar and burned in the Würzburg Neumünsterkirche in 1945, whence it was brought about 1700, can also be compared with *The Cloisters' Seated Bishop*. The same hair style is shared by the *Seated Bishop*, and also the Erasmus, and the two center fields of the miters borne by the *Seated Bishop* and St. Kilian are adorned with similar ornaments. In the case of the *Seated Bishop*, the ornaments have almost all disappeared, since they were originally applied with glue. Of the fifty-three pearls, stones, and beads that once decorated the mitre, only

FIGURE 8
 The Gerolzhofen Retable, by Tilman Riemenschneider and workshop. About 1515. Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum (photo: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum)



fifteen pieces and fragments remain. Likewise, as determined from the remains of glue, two roundels that once helped to hold the cope together are now missing. A further comparison between the decorative elements on Riemenschneider's Seated Bishop and his other pieces provides only inconclusive evidence for the dating of the bishop since these same elements were employed by Riemenschneider throughout his career.

The height of the Seated Bishop, 35 inches, makes it questionable whether it belonged within the main body of a retable. It actually may have rested in the superstructure above the main body, as Gerstenberg suggested of a comparably sized seated figure of St. Stephen in the Mainfränkisches Museum.⁹ Our Seated Bishop may have belonged to a retable similar to either Riemenschneider's retable for the Gramschatz parish church (Lkr. Karlstadt) or the Johanneskapelle in Gerolzhofen (Figure 8), both dating about 1515 or slightly earlier.¹⁰ However, these two retables may have been painted immediately upon their completion.

Before the Seated Bishop was covered with oil paint and varnished in the eighteenth century, it was covered with a half-opaque varnish consisting primarily of linseed oil and a resinous material in order to prevent the paint from being absorbed into the wood.¹¹ An original coat of varnish, applied by Riemenschneider, seems to have existed beneath everything else. Upon removal of the eighteenth-century polychromy the original brown irises and pupils of the eyes emerged in this coat of varnish.

Now that the paint has been removed, the construction of the figure is more easily visible. It was carved from a single linden trunk to which a separate piece of



FIGURE 9
Seated Bishop, back view

9. The St. Stephen measures about 30 inches high. The Seated Bishop is nearly the same size, except that it wears a high mitre. For the St. Stephen, Kurt Gerstenberg, *Tilman Riemenschneider* (Munich, 1950) p. 194, fig. 125; Max von Freeden, *Tilman Riemenschneider* (Munich, 1965) p. 47, no. 86, fig. 86.

10. Riemenschneider himself probably participated in carving both retables, though they are largely workshop productions. The Gerolzhofen Retable was composed of a central body, housing standing figures of John the Baptist, the Virgin and Child, and formerly St. Wolfgang, now lost. The wings are divided into two panels with reliefs depicting scenes from the life of John the Baptist. Above the body, the missing figures of SS. George and Kilian once flanked a Crucifixion.

11. It can be determined that the paint did not date to the early sixteenth century. No gesso existed beneath the painted surface, which exhibited colors customarily used in the eighteenth century, including the light blue lining of the cope.

wood was glued after the figure had been roughly carved and hollowed out. Apparently, the main trunk was too small for the conceptions of the sculptor. This second piece, doweled near the right elbow, runs vertically from the bishop's right shoulder and includes part of the chair. The part of the base directly below may have belonged to the second piece of wood. Another small piece of wood was applied to the piece of drapery extending over the bishop's left knee, and this too is secured by glue and a dowel. A large block of linden was inserted under each arm, probably in an attempt to substitute the knotty or irregular wood lying directly beneath the arms (Figure 9). From the front, the block

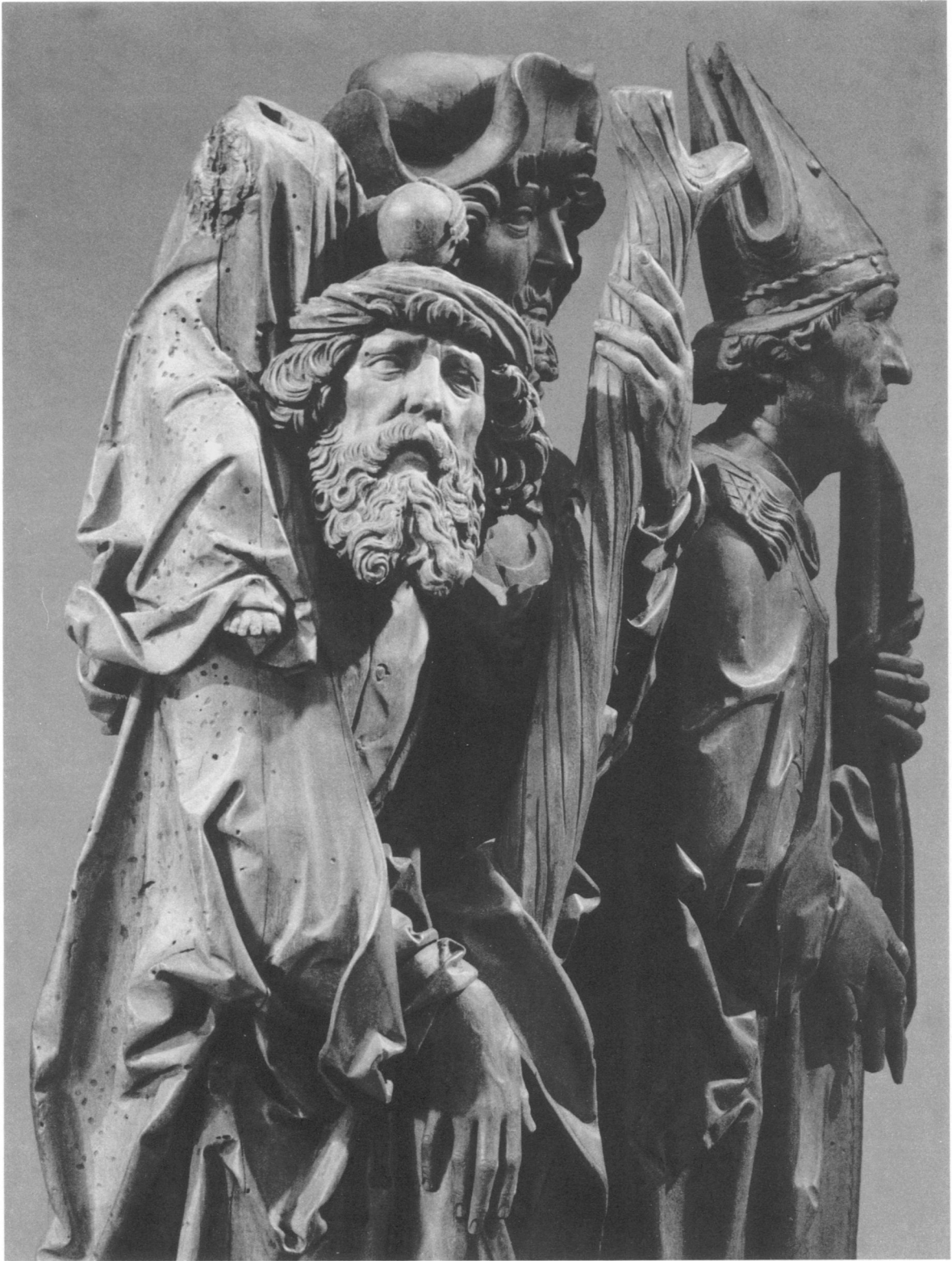


FIGURE 10 Christopher, detail of Three Helper Saints

beneath the bishop's left arm constitutes a sizable part of the cope and alb. In addition to the two large blocks and the six chips that were applied from behind whenever the sculptor accidentally cut through the wood, several wedges were added, particularly among the knotty areas, indicating Riemenschneider's concern for a harmonious surface without gesso and polychromy. This method of replacing irregularities in the surface of the wood is evidenced in many of Riemenschneider's other pieces and varies from the customary manner of filling small holes with tanning bark, flour, and size (glue). The latter procedure, far simpler, was used in anticipation of linen, gesso, and paint.¹²

In reference to The Cloisters' Helper Saints it should be noted that the long piece of wood constituting the far right side of Christopher's garment and the length of the Christ Child's right side (Figure 10) is not a modern attachment, but instead is typical of other Riemenschneider figures including the Seated Bishop. We cannot be absolutely sure of Riemenschneider's reasons for adding the piece, but it may have been due to irregularities in the wood rather than to the fact that the original block proved to be too small. An inconspicuous attachment forming the continuation of Christopher's garment behind his right foot is also typical of Riemenschneider's sculpture.

Within the context of the Late Gothic wooden retable the term "unpolychromed" is quite unspecific. Taubert has demonstrated that the ambiguity of this term is perhaps best clarified through a more elaborate system of classification into three groups of retables.¹³ Riemenschneider's sculpture falls within Taubert's first class, which is best deserving of the appellation "unpolychromed" because usually only details such as the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and nostrils were tinted. A second class, characterized by a slightly less restricted use of color, might best be called "partially painted." A third class derives its name from the "half-painted" figures rendered in flesh tones and white garments with gold highlighting. However, Taubert's "unpolychromed" retable may have been varnished, as was much of Riemenschneider's retable sculpture, although not the Creglingen Marienaltar, about 1505–10, which exhibits an unusual amount of detail and variety of effects.¹⁴

A recent restoration of Riemenschneider's Rothenburg Heiligblutaltar of 1501–04 revealed the existence of an original glaze consisting of egg white and oils pig-

mented with ocher, black gypsum, and white lead.¹⁵ The glaze must have been applied by the workshop immediately after Riemenschneider tinted the isolated features, since no dust is traceable beneath it. The glaze not only protects the sculpture but also imbues the wood with a richer sense of depth and life and heightens the refraction of light upon its surface. Its pigmentation disguises the minor irregularities and discrepancies of tone in the linden wood, and likewise obscures the color disparity between the white linden wood figures and the red fir framework.¹⁶ Fir was invariably used in the construction of the framework of South German polychromed retables, and in the Marienaltar Riemenschneider made no attempt to mitigate the differences in the color of the unglazed framework and figures.

Paatz suggests that Riemenschneider's technique of highlighting facial details and drapery borders may reflect his training as a stone sculptor or may be the result of a division of labor between the sculptor and the Fassmaler (painter of the sculpture), who was to be separately contracted by the patron.¹⁷ However, this division was more unusual than Paatz indicates. Moreover, his first suggestion is unjustified because Riemenschneider's technique of painting stone was far more decorative than his method of highlighting wooden sculpture. The appearance of various forms of unpolychromed wooden sculpture and choir stalls in the late

12. For a further explanation of the preparatory procedures for polychromed wood sculpture, H. Huth, *Künstler und Werkstatt der Spätgotik* (Darmstadt, 1957) pp. 55–61.

13. Taubert, "Ungefasste Holzplastik."

14. Benkö, *Ungefasste Schnitzaltäre*, p. 28, reports that she was informed by Herr Hammer, who restored the retable after 1959, that the hair of the figures was soaked in vinegar to achieve a variation in the tone of the wood.

15. The constitution of the glaze was determined by the Doerner Institut during the restoration undertaken from 1962 to 1965 under the direction of J. Taubert of the Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege. The earliest recorded restoration of the Heiligblutaltar was undertaken between 1854 and 1857; Anton Röss, *Die Kunstdenkmäler von Franken, Stadt Rothenburg o. d. T.* (Munich, 1959) p. 91.

16. E. Oellermann, "Die Restaurierung des Heiligblutaltars von Tilman Riemenschneider," *24. Amtsbericht des Bayerisches Landesamtes für Denkmalpflege* (Munich, 1966) p. 81. Oellermann has observed remains of a similar original pigmented glaze on other important works by Riemenschneider, including the right wing of the Heiligkreuzaltar in Dettwang and on the Münnerstadt Retable Evangelist figures.

17. Paatz, *Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre*, p. 82.

fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries should not force us to search for this kind of solution. Even if Riemenschneider's wooden sculpture is among the earliest unpolychromed retable sculpture, he was nonetheless familiar with Jörg Syrlin the Elder's Ulm Minster choir stalls, begun in 1469, and probably also the Constance choir stalls by Nicolaus Gerhaerts van Leyden in 1461.

Riemenschneider's earliest documented retable, the Münnerstadt Retable, dismantled in 1831, was unpolychromed when delivered to the Münnerstadt parish church.¹⁸ In 1502, approximately ten years after its completion, Veit Stoss was contracted "zu vassen, zu malen, vergulden und auszubereyten" (to make the proper arrangements for polychroming and gilding the retable) while he was in Münnerstadt.¹⁹ Stoss also painted the unornamented wing exteriors. The members of the Münnerstadt town council may have become dissatisfied with the appearance of the retable after it was delivered by Riemenschneider and requested that the work be painted.

It can easily be determined that the Rothenburg Heiligblutaltar, the Creglingen Marienaltar, and the Dettwang Kreuzigungsaltar were never painted at any date. Of three further works created by Riemenschneider for the Windsheim parish church, the first two were painted at a date considerably later than the time of their completion by the sculptor. The choir screen group of Christ, John the Evangelist, and the Virgin, dated 1494–1500,²⁰ was painted in 1520–22 by Hans Hertenstein, and the Crucifixion choir retable figures of 1494–97²¹ as well as the unadorned wing exterior were likewise painted in 1520–22 by Hertenstein. Riemenschneider delivered both works unpolychromed. Since the payment to Hertenstein for the Crucifixion group was only 8 ½ guilders, compared to 250 guilders to Hertenstein for the retable, the three Crucifixion figures must not have been fully polychromed. After the three figures were installed on the high choir screen, where they were poorly visible, the patrons may have discovered the need for painted accents to bring the figures to life. Both Windsheim works burned in the fire of 1730, but the most important pieces of the Zwölfbotenaltar (now in Heidelberg), the figures of the central body, carved in part by Riemenschneider himself, and the wings, primarily workshop productions, must have been ripped from the altarpiece and thrown into the streets where they were spared from the flames.

Eventually, in 1840, they were brought to Würzburg, at which time they were restored.²²

The same woman who donated Riemenschneider's Zwölfbotenaltar of 1509–11 was responsible for the payments of 105 guilders for the painting of the sculpture in 1512 by Jacob Mühlholtzer of Windsheim.²³ The retable depicted six standing disciples with the Salvator Mundi in the central body and three disciples in relief on the interior of each of two wings. Again, Riemenschneider may have preferred that his retable remain unpolychromed; however, the main body and the figures were painted shortly after Riemenschneider delivered the work. At the time of the 1950 restoration, the 1617 paint applied by Johann Weidner was removed, revealing fragments of a light ochre-colored ground on all but the faces, hands, feet, hair, and beards. Perhaps Riemenschneider, who must have known Mühlholtzer, instructed him to preserve as much of the fine carving as possible. This could be done by eliminating gesso on features or by using an unusually thin layer of gesso. Bier suggests that Johann Wagenknecht was the painter of many of Riemenschneider's

18. The main body of the retable depicted the Assumption of Mary Magdalen flanked by SS. Kilian and Elizabeth, the predella housed four Evangelist busts, and the superstructure held a Throne of Grace and figures of Mary and John the Evangelist, crowned by the topmost figure of John the Baptist. The wings depicted four scenes from the life of Mary Magdalen. The Münnerstadt Retable underwent other changes before it was dismantled; J. Bier, *Tilman Riemenschneider, Die Frühen Werke* (Würzburg, 1925) p. 16. For complete bibliography, Paatz, *Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre*, p. 78, note 245.

19. The contract is in Bier, *Riemenschneider, Frühe Werke*, p. 96. In 1504 Stoss received 220 guilders, whereas Riemenschneider received only 145 guilders. In 1954 the last vestiges of the original and later paint were removed from the sculpture, once housed within the central body of the retable.

20. For documentary sources, J. Bier, *Tilman Riemenschneider, Die Reifen Werke* (Augsburg, 1930) pp. 165–166.

21. For documentary sources, *ibid.*, pp. 160–165. Although Riemenschneider's contract indicated that the exterior of the wings should display figures in relief, "steende pild," he left the exterior unadorned.

22. For lengthy bibliography of the Zwölfbotenaltar, Paatz, *Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre*, p. 89, note 288. The retable was created for the altar of the side chapel dedicated to the twelve Apostles and St. Nikolaus, a figure of whom was doubtless represented within the superstructure.

23. The widow Elizabeth Paknapenn (Backnapp) paid Riemenschneider 80 guilders for the Zwölfbotenaltar. The wing exteriors bear painted representations of SS. Luke and Mark dating to 1617. Unlike Riemenschneider's other retables, the wings depict standing Apostles rather than numerous narrative reliefs.

other works.²⁴ Riemenschneider may have instructed him as well to preserve as much of the fine carving as possible. In describing sculpture with an unusually thin application of paint, Hubert Wilm coined the term "Bildwerke mit Meisterfassung."²⁵

Riemenschneider preferred to conceive his open retables in terms of a monochromatic tableau and preferred to leave the exterior of the wings altogether unadorned. The exterior of the Ulm Minster high altar, 1473–80, by Jörg Syrlin the Elder and Michael Erhart, may also have been unornamented,²⁶ as was the exterior of the first of two pairs of wings of Veit Stoss's Cracow Retable of 1477–89. The flexibility of the Wandelaltar (retable with movable wings) and its ramifications was thereby drastically reduced and replaced by something altogether different. The effect is rather like that of a rock which, when split in two, reveals an incrustation of fine crystals, all the more beautiful because they are mysteriously concealed within so unassuming a vessel. The autonomy of the sculpture contained within the unadorned retable is thereby strengthened, especially when the sculpture housed within the retable is unpolychromed.

The highly modulated surface of the sculpture, influenced by Netherlandish art, particularly the sculpture of Nicolaus Gerhaerts, and in part by contemporary German prints, especially those of Schongauer, was one of several indispensable elements constituting Riemenschneider's successful unpolychromed retables. Riemenschneider's unification of interacting figures, inconceivable without the crowded groupings first proliferated in Netherlandish retables, was as important as his widespread use of a chapel-like setting which he applied to the entire central body of the retable conceived as one single unit. He may have referred to any of the Master W's preparatory prints for sculptors and joiners illustrating the Netherlandish loggia. Perhaps his most significant achievement was the synthesis of actual windows with an illusionistic chapel-like room, most effectively exploited in the Heiligblutaltar and the Marienaltar.²⁷

Although the dismantled Münnerstadt Retable, 1490–92, is the earliest known South German unpolychromed retable, Riemenschneider was not necessarily the originator of the movement. He did, perhaps, take the greatest advantage of the unpolychromed retable. As mentioned earlier, several varieties of retables with

surface finishes ranging from unpolychromed to "half painted" appeared almost simultaneously. Two Swabian reliefs in the Ottobeuren monastery museum depicting Christ Appearing to His Mother and the Noli Me Tangere, about 1530, exemplify the "partially painted" sculpture. As with Riemenschneider's figural sculpture, the eyes and lips are tinted.²⁸ However, paint also ornaments Mary's red book cover and borders of the garments, and a pomegranate pattern on the baldachino behind Mary is likewise painted. In the same relief a wall composed of blocks is articulated with white joints, and in the other relief the landscape is accentuated with green paint. All of the paint lies directly on the surface of the wood without gesso, and a glaze covers the figures just as a glaze originally covered the surface of Riemenschneider's Heiligblutaltar. The paint on Master H.L.'s 1526 Breisach "half painted" retable is also applied directly on the surface of the wood.²⁹ The flesh parts of the central figures are characteristically painted and isolated details are emphasized with color. Likewise, the flesh parts of the

24. Bier mentioned this to me in a recent discussion; see also J. Bier, *Tilman Riemenschneider, Ein Gedenkbuch* (Vienna, 1948) p. 36, pl. 101.

25. H. Wilm, *Die Gotische Holzfigur, Ihr Wesen und ihre Entstehung* (Stuttgart, 1944) p. 130.

26. Paatz, *Süddeutsche Schnitzaltäre*, p. 81.

27. Nikolaus von Hagenau's Strasbourg Fronaltar of 1501, the Lautenbach Retable, about 1491–94, and Gerhaert's Constance Retable of 1465–66 expanded upon the chapel-like niches, and among extant German retables the earliest example of one single chapel-like construction composing the body of the corpus occurs in Michael Pacher's St. Wolfgangaltar, 1471–71, where the blind tracery is all but obscured by the angels and drapery surrounding the Crowning of the Virgin; H. Schrade, *Tilman Riemenschneider* (Heidelberg, 1927) pp. 20, 121. The development of the stage-like retable setting is anticipated at an early date in a limestone construction dated to the second quarter of the fifteenth century from the church of St. Quentin in Tournai (now in the Musée St. Luc); K. Gerstenberg, "Riemenschneiders Kreuzaltar in Dettwang," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* VII (1938) p. 210, fig. 6.

28. Taubert, "Ungefasste Holzplastik," pp. 132–133, figs. 14, 15.

29. The blue back wall, emphasizing the figures, was borrowed from the fully polychromed retable. See Grieshaber, "Der Hochaltar im Münster zu Breisach, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte altdeutscher Kunst," *Kunstblatt* (1833) no. 9, pp. 33 ff.; Grüneisen, "Der Hochaltar im Münster zu Alt Breisach, Von Dr. M. Rosenberg, Buchbesprechung," *Christliche Kunstblatt* (1878); J. Sauer, "Der Hochaltar des Breisacher Münsters," *Pantheon* XXIX (1942) p. 12; W. Noack, *Der Breisacher Altar*, Langewiesche-Bücherei, p. 4; Benkö, *Ungefasste Schnitzaltäre*, pp. 88–93; Taubert, "Ungefasste Holzplastik," p. 127.

figures of Jörg Syrlin the Younger's high altar for the Alpirsbach monastery church, about 1520, were painted and the altarpiece exhibits other painted ornamentation.³⁰ The Alpirsbach Retable is particularly significant because the glaze covering the wood matches the brown grisaille of the wings, which in terms of color does not detract from the wings. Whereas Riemenschneider preferred the combination of unpolychromed wooden sculpture and carved wooden wings, here Syrlin preferred unpolychromed sculpture and wings painted in a neutral color.

Nicolaus Gerhaerts' activity in southern Germany was the single most important determinant in the development of late fifteenth-century South German sculpture, but it is difficult to prove whether he renounced color in his influential Constance Retable of 1465–66 and thereby should be credited with the introduction of this Netherlandish practice to southern Germany. The appearance of unpolychromed retables elsewhere in Germany does seem to indicate that the sources may lie in the Netherlands, or at least that the stronghold of unpolychromed sculpture was not focused exclusively in southern Germany. Riemenschneider may have been inspired either by Lower Rhenish or

South German sculpture, or perhaps by both. As a journeyman he worked in Ulm and must have traveled down the Rhine, though how far cannot be said for sure. His monochromatic tableaux do not stand alone at the end of an era. They belonged to a particular Late Gothic aesthetic paralleled best in the numerous variations of grisaille painting, in monochromatic stone sculpture, and in the black and white graphics so popular in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Whatever Riemenschneider's source of inspiration, the success of his sculpture frequently depended upon the renunciation of polychromy. The lyricism of his tormented faces is so subtle that even the thinnest layer of paint could obscure its intensity. It is fortunate that The Cloisters owns two Riemenschneiders that exhibit these characteristics.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to J. L. Schrader, Vera Ostoia, Carmen Gómez-Moreno, and Justus Bier for their suggestions and to Rudolf Meyer for much technical information concerning the Seated Bishop. I am especially indebted to Carmen Gómez-Moreno for her kindness during my internship at the Museum.

30. Paul Keppler, *Württembergs kirchliche Kunsterthümer* (Rotenburg a.N., 1888) p. 259; Marie Schuette, *Der Schwäbische Schnitzaltar* (Strasbourg, 1907) p. 193; Gertrud Otto, *Die Ulmer Plastik der Spätgotik* (Reutlingen, 1927) pp. 191–192; Richard Schmidt, *Kloster Alpirsbach* (Königstein im Taunus, 1965) p. 14; Benkö, *Ungefasste Schnitzaltäre*, pp. 120–124; Taubert, "Ungefasste Holzplastik," pp. 126–128.