

**Corpus der Mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein. Band I, Hansestadt Lübeck , St. Annen-Museum. Editor Uwe Albrecht. 450mm. 661p, 672 ill (colour and bl/wh.) Verlag Ludwig, Westring 431-451, 24118 Kiel, 2005. ISBN 3-933598-75-3. 49.00 eur.**

### **Reviewed by Erla Bergendahl Hohler**

The old convent of St. Anna in Lübeck is a peaceful place. The sun-lit cloister is lined with tall, silent sculptures. A few tourists talk quietly in a corner; the odd schoolclass trots respectfully around. Here rest, at the end, all the Virgins, all the saints, the violent depictions of the Crucifixion and the riotous and colourful altarpieces, collected after their long life in the churches for which they were created.

The area of Schleswig-Holstein contains an enormous treasure of works of art from the Middle Ages. More than 1400 altarpieces, free-standing sculptures, panel paintings or pieces of furniture are in churches or museums; the overwhelming majority are late medieval; the latest were made just before the Reformation. There are plenty of Post-Reformation works preserved in the churches, too, but the character has changed. Curiously, few of the earlier workshops appear to have continued their production after c. 1525.

The Lutheran reform movement was tolerant. Religious sculpture was mostly left in the churches, monasteries of course excepted. Larger churches, with so many side altars, gave figures away, or sold them in order to acquire more modern works. The gigantic coloured and gilt altarpieces were too precious to destroy. Guilds and fraternities protected their own foundations. As a result, the works survived.

Scholarly, as opposed to romantic, interest was awakened, as in other countries, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1818, after the demolition of the Dominican Burgkloster, which contained a great many of the fraternities' donations, the Town council of Lübeck decreed that any destruction of ancient monuments or art should hereafter be subject to the council's judgment. A small step, but decisive; it resulted in one of the greatest collections of medieval church art in Germany.

From the 1890s, the steadily increasing number of cleared-out medieval church fittings were stored in the Katharinenkirche. In 1892 most of them were exhibited in the old Cathedral Hospital. The collection continued to grow, however, and the build-

ings of the old convent of St. Anna were selected as more suitable. Officially opened in 1915, the museum has since concentrated on exhibiting mainly the art objects. But it also contains a great deal of furniture, chancel screens, textiles etc., not so easily accessible. An extensive catalogue, written by J. Wittstock and based on the previous work by Max Hasse (1964), was issued in 1981.

The present catalogue, however, is part of a more ambitious deal. The Art History Institute of the University of Kiel started up a research project in 1990, intending to publish the complete corpus of wooden sculpture in Schleswig-Holstein. The need to revise the documentation of the objects in the museum in Lübeck became pressing. Literature about these works had now reached an over-complex amount and needed sorting out, and the often original polychromy of the works invited thorough examination, employing all the technical aids now developed. The project was enlarged: a second volume (hopefully in 2008) will treat the sculptures still preserved in the churches in Lübeck and Travemünde, and several more volumes are planned. The plan also includes other wooden carved artefacts, such as bits of tracery from altar pieces or furniture, previously unpublished, but probably an interesting back door to conclusions about workshops and related problems.

The late medieval sculpture production in the Hanseatic towns was enormous. Works were exported to all Baltic towns, and to Norway as far as Vardø. Wood-carvers and painters left Germany to found new workshops in Hanseatic key settlements: Stockholm, Visby, Åbo, Tallinn, Riga. As a result, the whole geographic area forms one gigantic challenge to art historical scholars. There has been a great increase in the general research everywhere over the last 20-30 years, with such works as J.V. Bonsdorff's study on *Kunstproduktion and Kunstverbreitung im Ostseeraum des Spätmittelalters* (1993) and P. Tångebergs *Mittelalterliche Holzskulpturen i Schweden* (1986). Large numbers of theses and dissertations have vastly increased the detailed information on the subject, and the development of the technical conservators' profession has furnished quite new prospects. The high-quality products were essentially made for the local market, and Lübeck was the centre of the production. So the St. Annen-Museum and the local churches contain all the best works. And here is the Catalogue to prove it.

A great many people: art historians, conservators, and scientists, have co-operated to produce this, and the editor Uwe Albrecht's list of gratitude is long – scholarship and financial support have united to provide this book. His introduction is followed by the photographer's very interesting account of her work: removing canvases from their frames, taking the many small figures out to photograph their back- and under-sides, and how photographs of paintings in churches, with all their gilding, had to be taken at night, so as to avoid reflexes. We are also given a history of the collection

(H. Vogeler), of the various ways of presenting it over the years, and the exhibitions and "exhibition philosophies" – of great interest to students of museology.

The catalogue itself comprises all the altars, sculptures and paintings in the museum, whether exhibited or stored. It is arranged chronologically, in 9 periods of time, from the earliest works of the late 13<sup>th</sup> cent. to the latest from just before the Reformation, and in the best tradition of German scholarship, the objects in each group have then been systematically organized by function. The 249 entries, some of which are admittedly chests, bench sides, or just beautiful tracery panels, have all received new and careful attention. The dates given to the works may be within a time-frame of 25 years, or they may be very precise. Dendrochronology is of course the new mantra but does not seem to play a very important rôle here. Documents: town books, church inventories, guild memorial books, are however plentiful, and artists also often signed their works. The frontispiece of the catalogue shows the self-portrait of Hermen Rode, his name written on his golden collar, looking with interest and sad reverence at the burial of St. Luke, the patron saint of all painters, and inserted as a detail in the large retable of the Lukas-fraternity from the Katharinenkirche.

The catalogue entries are organized in the way which has now become usual, e.g. in the two similarly comprehensive catalogues from the Cologne Schnütgen Museum, *Die Holzskulpturen des Mittelalters Vol. I, 1000-1400* (1989) and *Vol. II, 1400-1540* (2001) with all the technical information placed first – rightly so, as this is where new information about production, artists, or dating is concealed. An enormous amount of research has gone into these technical examinations. The visual descriptions are also extremely detailed, and very much more informative than the short descriptions in the 1981 catalogue.

But this is a catalogue, pure and simple. General overviews of stylistic influences or development in the Hanseatic art production have little place here. Such questions were gone into in some detail in the previous catalogue from 1981 (Wittstock). But a summary of earlier literature, with an evaluation of scholars' opinions, follows each entry. Anyone wanting to pursue the argumentation seriously will, however, need access to a really vast German library, as the interest taken in these works since the 19<sup>th</sup> cent. has been so enthusiastic. Having tasted the catalogue, the present reviewer feels that it might be worthwhile.

---

**Erla Bergendahl Hohler** (f.1937) er professor em. i middelalderens kunsthistorie, Univ. i Oslo (KHM). Publiserte arbeider: stavkirkeornamentikk, romansk og gotisk billedkunst, sigillografi, ikonografi, og metodeproblemer i studiet av middelalderens kunst.

---