

“The most comprehensive and suggestive *Speculum humanae salvationis*” – how do questions about the construction, style and iconography of Veit Stoss’s Cracow altarpiece affect our understanding of the work?



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[4,567 words]

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The *Marienaltar*

Cover A contemporary cardboard icon *photo by the author*

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NOTES TO THE ILLUSTRATIONS

- a. The panels of both the closed and opened altarpiece are numbered in their reading order, described in Illustration 4 for the closed altarpiece and Illustration 18 for the opened altarpiece which also includes definitions of parts of the altarpiece.
- b. The reading order for the right hand side of the closed altarpiece (Illustrations 14-16) follows that advocated by Skubiszewski (1985) as discussed in the essay
- c. All photographs of the *Marienaltar*, Cracow (Illustrations 3-28) are from Bujak (2007) unless otherwise stated.

1 The altarpiece “of unheard of proportions” (Müller 1966 p.127) that Veit Stoss constructed for St Mary’s Church in Cracow during the 1480’s (the *Marienaltar* in the *Marienkirche*) is the largest of its kind in Europe (Kahsnitz 2006 p.135). It is a polyptych showing the death of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by the apostles as she is assumed directly to heaven by Jesus. Above the central group of larger than life-size carved figures in the *corpus*, Jesus and Mary float upwards, to reappear on thrones with God alongside two Polish Saints Adalbert (Poland) and Stanislaus (Cracow) in the *aufzug* (Illustration 18). The *flügel* (wings) of the opened altarpiece feature the seven Joys of Mary while the closed altarpiece shows the seven Sorrows (Seven 2005: Burkhard 1935 p.33) together with other scenes from her early life. Beneath the *corpus* is a *sarg* of the Jesse tree.

Stoss originated from Horb am Neckar in Swabia in south west Germany (Müller 1966 p.125). Although his contemporary and biographer Johann Neudörffer claims he was born in 1438 (Lossnitzer 1912 p.9), his death in 1533 is more reliably chronicled in the Nuremberg archives and, as he was extremely unlikely to have lived to 95, he was probably born in or around 1450 (Baxandall 1980 p.266). At some point he moved to Nuremberg, and then to Cracow in 1477 to work on the altarpiece, which was completed by 1489. Stoss remained in Cracow working on other projects before finally returning to Nuremberg in 1496. During the remainder of his unusually long and colourful life he created further altarpieces and sculptures in Bamberg and Nuremberg (Baxandall 1980 p.269). His life has been the subject of plays, films and operas (Isphording 1985) although these are virtually unknown outside Germany.

Following Theodor Müller (1966 p.5) I am using the *Speculum humanæ salvationis*, or mirror of human salvation to explain why the *Marienaltar* was produced in the way that it was, and how it might have been understood at the time. The *Speculum* first appeared as a book in 1324, and was widely reproduced rapidly with the development of printing during the fifteenth-century. Its essence was that “all the events of the New Testament were

prefigured by the events recounted in the Old” (Wilson & Wilson 1984 p.10) and it served as the iconographical and theological basis for many artworks produced during the early Renaissance.

Many questions about the *Marienaltar* remain unanswered, and I plan to explore three. After a general introduction to altarpieces, I will consider its construction, and how and why it was commissioned. Next, I will examine Stoss’s sculptural style, and its origins prior to Cracow. It would have been extremely unusual for such a large commission to be given to a sculptor with no reputation, yet no works that can be definitely be attributed to Stoss from before 1477 survive. Finally, I will consider the iconography of the altarpiece, which features scenes and interpretations of events that do not appear in any other contemporary works (Kahsnitz 2006 p.138). These will contribute to conclusions about the altarpiece, how Stoss’s work might have been understood at the time and its lasting significance.

2 The painted or carved altarpiece developed in various forms around Europe following the Lateran Council ruling in 1215 that priests should officiate facing the altar with their backs to the congregation, a decision that “stimulated European art more than any other single event”. (Dunkerton 1991 p.27) Altarpieces or retables (literally, “behind the table”) proliferated, with contemporary accounts suggesting that more than fifty were present in some churches (Baxandall 1980 p.62). There was generally a distinction between the high altarpiece, commissioned by and dedicated to the church or the town’s patron saint, and paid for by public subscription, and smaller family altarpieces paid for by private money, with additional resources provided for the saying of masses. (Kahsnitz 2006 p.9)

Altarpieces had many features in common, but there were regional differences best explained by local issues such as patronage, or availability of materials (Dunkerton 1991 p.204). The subject was often the Virgin Mary in her intercessory role (Welch 1997 p.148) as part of the incarnation, crucifixion or descent from the cross, while the assumption was a popular theme in Italy. The altarpiece became a “vehicle for technical and artistic experiment” (Norman 2007 p.176), and displays became “more physically and more psychologically convincing” (Johnson 2005 p.21), developing from single, separate figures to painted scenes in Italy, and triptychs or polyptychs in the North, using perspective and foreshortening to create greater illusions of reality.

Whether they were seen as part of a *sacre conversazione* (Norman 2007 p.196) or as a mirror of human salvation, they served a powerful role in focusing the beliefs and practices of a largely illiterate population. Some were used in hospitals (Hayum 1993) to provide a focus for suffering or hope for miraculous cure. They can also be seen as organising entities with a practical role in the creation and maintenance of social and political networks (O’Malley 2005 p.418),

In the Netherlands painted altarpieces proliferated, but in Germany, tall Gothic churches with less wall space for murals (Dunkerton 1991 p.26), easier

access to high quality wood and a “rich medieval sculptural tradition’ (Chipps-Smith 2004 p.180) led to a preference for carved limewood. Whereas oak was used in the damper conditions further north, and walnut in France (ibid p.121), the German sculptors favoured the broad leaved lime. It was softer and easier to carve and well suited to the warmer middle European climate. It tended to shrink and split less than other woods, although sculptors had to avoid using the centre of the tree, and figures were carved from a “C” section with a hollow centre. Tadeusz Szydlowski (1935) provides photographs of the hollowed-out rear of some of the *Marienaltar* sculptures taken during restoration work in the 1930s. Because limewood has little surface character, it was usually coated with gesso and painted (polychromed), although later altarpieces were monochrome.

The carved altarpiece was “one of the defining art forms of the Northern Renaissance” (Chipps-Smith p.160), yet it has been almost completely neglected by scholars outside Germany (Marks 1982 p.451). This situation has been remedied slightly by the appearance of Rainer Kahsnitz’s (2006) recent exhaustive and expensive account, but much critical literature remains in German. An exception is Michael Baxandall’s (1980) authoritative account of the development of limewood sculpture in Germany, citing Stoss as among the first generation of sculptors who worked in a broad area between Swabia and southern Poland (Illustration 38) better defined by the bishoprics that provided the commissions rather than any formal political boundaries (ibid p.5). They were “largely unacquainted with antique art” unlike their counterparts in Italy, yet managed to create “an illusion of reality” using “different traditions ... different techniques and materials” (Woods 2007 p.103).

3 By 1477, there were well established trade connections between Cracow and Nuremberg in goods such as furs, wax, leather, metals and salt (von Stromer 1985). Both cities were at communications crossroads – Cracow is roughly halfway between Paris and Moscow, and Nuremberg between the Hanseatic ports and Northern Italy. Nuremberg was the larger city (Eser 2000), but Cracow was the Polish capital, residence of the King with a bishop of cardinal rank and the highly regarded Jagiellonian University. As elsewhere, art tended to follow other trade routes (von Stromer 1985) - the Master of the Wolfgang Altar and Hans Pledenwurff had both supplied painted altars for Breslau (Dietl 2000 p.64) and it was natural that similar developments should occur in sculpture.

A new high altar had been needed in Cracow since the previous one collapsed in 1442, although records of money being pledged for its construction do not appear until the will of Mathias Opoczko (March 1473) leaving 60 guilders “towards the new retable as a likenesses of the previous retable for the high altar in the same church” (Appendix 2 a). No surviving contract for the work exists so when Arthur Burkhard (1935 p.32) mentions one, he is probably referring to a document discovered in 1533 in which the city clerk Johann Heydecke refers to “Magister Veit, a German from Nuremberg ... whose gift and work is praised over the entire Christian earth” (Kahsnitz p.134). Cracow councillors with Swabian connections probably helped secure him the contract - over half of the 24 members of the council were migrants to the city, and the new altarpiece was widely seen as “a work of German art in the church of the German community in the capital of Poland” (Baxandall 1980 p.86) There was considerable scepticism about the project (Lossnitzer 1912 p.37) and it was only through the support of Heydecke that the work progressed (Dietl 2000 p.75). However, that Stoss signed away his Nuremberg citizenship in 1477 (Baxandall 1980 p.266) appeared to indicate his confidence in long term employment in Cracow.

A contract would normally be accompanied by a *visierung* (drawing) made by the craftsman and approved by the client – drawings exist for Stoss’s other altarpieces in Germany, but again, none has been found for Cracow (Kahsnitz

2006 p.134). Whether this is a result of Poland's troubled history or a more deliberate consequence of Stoss's shady business practices (Baxandall 1980 p.195) is impossible to say. In any case, the language of German altarpiece contracts is frequently "too fugitive to catch" (Kahsnitz p.145) and it is difficult to describe a category of art lacking the familiar terms from Renaissance Italy (Baker 1998 p.499). Notably, none of the donations listed by Max Lossnitzer from the Cracow archives makes any reference to Stoss, citing instead named members of the city council (Appendix 2, m-z). The total amount paid for the altarpiece (2808 Guilders) was large for the time, but Janusz Kęłowski (1985) suggests it would only have covered the years 1481-85 when the majority of the carving would have been undertaken. Those dates coincide with Stoss' purchase of a house presumably for his workshop in 1481, and a prolonged return to Nuremberg in 1486.

Sculptors had to work with other craftsmen, such as joiners who made framework, painters, and metalworkers for the hinges and brackets. Surprisingly, there is little evidence of architects' involvement (Kahsnitz 2006 p.17) although bad design and construction led to collapses such as that which precipitated the need for the *Marienaltar*. (Dietl 2000 p.83). Sculptors were also peculiarly vulnerable. There were never enough to form their own guild, so they joined others or acted alone. Without clear Guild rules, conditions for their journeyman years were often rather vague, which helps to explain why it is difficult to follow their movements. Lossnitzer (1912 p.18) notes from his study of Nuremberg archives the growing number of people from 1440 onwards defined as *bildschnitzers* (literally, picture carvers), sculptors who were able and willing to work independently of any requirement to join guilds in stone, marble or wood, valuable since "guild-free Nuremberg" had crushed them a hundred years earlier (Dietl 2000 p.60) .

The work required a large number of assistants, many of whom are named in archive documents. In 1482 Veit's brother Matthias moved to Cracow to assist in the gilding work on the altar, and Kahsnitz (2006 p.134) lists other cabinet makers, gilders and painters. It is likely that Stoss did much of the polychromy himself. Jerzy Gądomski (2005 p.22) points to the botanically precise painting

of plants in the side panels of the altarpiece, but notes different painterly interpretation revealing the work of at least two artists with different pattern books. However, the original painted backgrounds to most of the panels and the corpus are lost. Dieter Wuttke (1982) describes a case of landscape sketches from his travels which Stoss apparently showed to Neudörffer that might have revealed more.

In the *Marienkirche*, Stoss found a very narrow choir closed on three sides with the enormous height of 28 metres. Only a very large altarpiece would be visible from the back of the church (Illustration 2). This presented considerable design and construction problems. In order not to compromise its stability, the *Marienaltar* is the first known example of a retable with rear fixed wings (Dietl 2000 p.86). The equally innovative decision to have carved rather than merely painted figures on all wings (Gadomski 2005 p.21) might have been based on Nicholas Gerhaerts' lost Constance retable of 1465, although no evidence exists for this (Kahsnitz 2006 p.28).

The *Marienaltar* uses two scales of magnitude for human figures (*corpus* and the *flügel*) and three degrees of relief (fully carved, deep cut and surface), and the more traditional gradations of polychromy between the outer and inner sections. The shrinework and tracery is far more elaborate in the inner areas, although much of it is the result of cavalier eighteenth and nineteenth-century renovation (Baxandall 1980 p.268-9). The *aufzug* in particular, central to the altarpiece's meaning, was substantially lowered and restructured, and only the sculptures are authentic (Braziewicz 1999). Originally, there was probably a "giant openwork wall" (Kahsnitz 2006 p.136) across the entire width of the cabinet, blending better with the architecture of the *Marienkirche* and reducing the cabinet-like appearance of the corpus. Twentieth-century renovations restored the original polychromy, although details of the most recent reconstruction (1946-57) have never been published.

4 Issues of style and attribution in art history have been a focus of debate between those favouring the notion of connoisseurship and newer approaches emphasising social, political and economic factors in the production of art and the uses to which it is put. Baxandall (1980) was one of the first to situate works of art in the circumstances of their production (Saumarez-Smith 2008) and he writes of style primarily as a means by which limewood sculptors sought to secure forms of monopolistic dominance in the marketplace (Baxandall 1980 p.121: Puttfarken 1985 p.482). He is particularly dismissive of the passive notion of “influence” describing it as a “curse of art criticism” (1985 p.58).

Stoss’s stylistic origins have long been the subject of dispute, especially in the light of a new interest in the Middle Ages that developed in Poland in the early nineteenth-century and as nationalism began to pervade art history more generally (Kaufmann 2004 p.18). The Polish version of his name, Wit Stwosz began to be used, the romantic writer Jozef Kremer spoke of “*Wita Cracowiana*”, and Jan Matejko’s portrait of the old and blind Stoss with his young grand-daughter (1865) seemed to claim him for Poland (Muthesius 2000). However, the development of an academically institutionalised Polish history of art in the 1870s led to more interest in original documents (ibid) and in Germany, Lossnitzer provided the first and still most substantial summary of extracts from primary sources in both countries, concluding that the issue of nationality was not significant for art history. (1912 p.108). Other researchers searched for Polish origins in the years prior to his 400th anniversary in 1933, although Burkhard (1935 p.32) insisted there was “neither tradition nor precedent” for Stoss’s work in Polish art. Gaps remain in his early life, but following Bolesław Przybyszewski (1952) there is no serious doubt that he was born in Horb am Neckar.

Both German and Polish art historians have sought the origins of Stoss’s style in various parts of Europe, with some stressing Swabia and the upper Rhine and others the Netherlands (Kębłowski 1985). In a wide-ranging account of Stoss’s life and possible models before his arrival in Cracow, Szczesny

Dettloff (1961 p.195) links him to work with the sculptor Nicholas Gerhaert, initially in Strasbourg and then in Vienna in 1469, speculating that he could have returned along the Danube to Nuremberg. He also suggests that Stoss was familiar with the work of Hans Multscher of Ulm, whose stone bust of a Hungarian king (Illustration 21) bears a strong similarity to a small figure on the bottom right of the *corpus* of the *Marienaltar*. Multscher often included small domestic details (bread and wine pitchers) in sacred paintings, and these also feature in Stoss's altarpiece. In noting these and similar domestic details, Tadeusz Dobrowolski (1951 p.24) points to Stoss's obviously crude linear perspective (the tiled floors in Illustrations 6 and 20) but nonetheless praises the "objective, situational reality" that they manage to convey. He also draws attention to possible Polish sources for Stoss's work, in particular the assumption painting by Franciszek z Sieradz (1475) which, like the *Marienaltar*, shows both Christ and Mary as full size adults (Illustration 35), a format only encountered North of the Alps in Poland (Kahsnitz 2006 p.137). Adam Labuda (1988 p.23) cites Mikolaj Obilman's Liegnitz altarpiece (Illustration 37) on which Stoss may have based the Resurrection panel (Illustration 24) as another Polish source.

Eva Zimmerman (1985 p.65) also explores the upper Rhine connection, suggesting that three elements - the body, clothing and the cavities between them - contribute to a complex and realistic representation of movement which can be traced to Gerhaerts, although she also draws attention to similarities with the work of Heinrich Iselin (Illustration 32)

In contrast, Piotr Skubiszewski (1978 p.119) stresses Netherlandish influences in the design of the *Marienaltar*, pointing to the posture of Mary and the wringing of hands in Rogier van der Weyden (Illustration 29) and suggesting strongly that Stoss must have visited the Netherlands at some stage during his journeyman years. Many Netherlandish altarpieces were destroyed during sixteenth-century iconoclasm, and in praising van der Weyden's "stage-like composition" Müller (1966 p.61) speculates about their possible origins in sculpture. Hans Hilger (1985 p.94) notes the similarities between Stoss's Deposition (Illustration 12) and van der Weyden's

Lamentation (Illustration 30), but concurs with Dettloff (op cit) on similarities between an engraving by Martin Schongauer (Illustration 34) and the *Noli me tangere* panel (Illustration 14) in the *Marienaltar*. As Charles Harrison (2007 p.222) observes, prints were valuable resources for sculptors, and could circulate around Europe in a matter of months.

However, no signature, initials or other primary source links Stoss definitively to any undertaking prior to the *Marienaltar*. In a slightly speculative account, Heinz Stafski (1968) examines the Zwickau altarpiece, the painting of which is attributed to Michael Wolgemut and suggests that Stoss might have carried out much if not all of the wood carving (Illustration 36). There are certainly similarities to some of the smaller figures in the *Marienaltar* and both chronologically and circumstantially there is much to support the claim. However, Michael Stuhr (1985) reviewing the evidence a decade later draws attention to more serious differences and concludes that the more rigid design of the human forms in the Zwickau altar cannot have been the starting point for the tremendously effective power of the Cracow apostles (1985 p.86).

5 The use of pictures to tell stories had a long history in Christianity, and had been opposed well before the Reformation in the early sixteenth-century. The Biblical source for opposition to the use of images was Exodus 20:4-5, but as long ago as the sixth-century Pope Gregory I had drawn attention to their value; “in a picture, they who know no letters may yet read” (Norman 2007 p.175).

The high altarpiece of a church was central to its purpose, and consequently its iconography was never left to chance. Many altarpiece stories centred on the crucifixion, but the *Marienaltar* takes instead the apocryphal story of the assumption of the Virgin as described in the Protoevangelium of James (Clayton 1998 p.66), one of several attempts to fill lacunae in the canonical gospels, and part of a more general attempt to increase her role in the church (Breckenridge 1957 pp10-11). The theme, although popular in Italy was not used in many Northern altarpieces. Whether she died (assumption) or merely departed her earthly life (dormition) was a matter of dispute, particularly between Dominican and Franciscan orders, and it was the Franciscan assertion of physical assumption which was probably behind the iconography of the *Marienaltar* (Kahsnitz 2006 p.137), although Baxandall (1980 p.158) draws attention to some Dominican motifs. The *Marienkirche* had been established under the reign of Bishop Odrowaz in the early thirteenth-century “for the praise of ... the glorious young woman Mary who was taken up into Heaven” (Dietl 2000 p.87), and was known as “the Church of the Assumption” (Kahsnitz 2006 p.138). It gained greater prominence in 1477 when Pope Sixtus IV prescribed the celebration of the immaculate conception as binding on the whole church. (Dietl 2000 p.87).

It is not known whether Stoss was involved in the theological design of the altarpiece, although some suggest that it was probably conceived in the Jagiellonian University (Gadomski 2005 p.21), possibly by the humanist Filippo Buonaccorsi (2002) whose bronze epitaph Stoss later carved (in the Dominican Church in Cracow), but whose homosexuality presented problems for the Catholic Church. Certainly Stoss appears to have been part of the “intellectual, humanist elite circle” in Cracow (von Stromer 1985 p.10) which

included Buonaccorsi and Conrad Celtes who founded the *Sodalitas Litterarum Vistulana* in the city in the 1480's (Sauer 1908)

The altarpiece contains around two hundred figures (Dobrowolski 1951 p.18), ranging from the fully carved ones in the corpus to the tiny Cracow residents (Sroka 1999 p.3) around the frame and the semi-relief figures on the outer panels. When closed, the altarpiece displays twelve panels, described in Illustration 4. The order of reading is indicated by the arrows, following Skubiszewski (1985 p.124). The first three columns are fairly straightforward, although the panel displaying Mary's presentation in the temple is unusual in that the young Christ is shown on the altar, beneath which, in a scene not depicted in any other surviving work, and possibly based on Revelation 6:9 (Kahsnitz 2006 p.138) there is a small pile of burning children. There is also controversy around Christ's trip to Hell in the final column (Illustrations 14-16). Dobrowolski (1951 p.18) suggests that the order of these scenes was reversed during seventeenth-century restoration work and that "noli me tangere" should be at the top, whereas Skubiszewski (1985 p.140) argues that representing Christ's meeting with Adam and Eve in Hell as the last stage of the cycle had a long tradition in Medieval iconography. It marks "the end of one epoch in the history of the world and the beginning of a new mankind", and also forms a decisive link between Old and New Testaments in the context of the *Speculum* (Wilson & Wilson 1984 p.195)

The scenes on the inner *flügel* and the *aufzug* represent the seven Joys of Mary. In the *flügel* the relief work is deeper and the colours are brighter, although the carving in the *aufzug* is less detailed (Illustration 28). Attention is drawn particularly from the sweeping gesture of the black king (Illustration 21), through the apostle wringing his hands in the *corpus* which "manages to convey the essence of the whole work" (Müller 1966 p.127) to the resurrection scene on the right (Illustration 24), where Christ appears to spring from the grave surrounded by sleeping guards displaying a kind of perpetual motion (Labuda 1988 p.18).

The *corpus* shows six larger than life-sized fully carved figures in a front row with seven partial figures behind in a stage setting strongly reminiscent of van der Weyden's Prado altarpiece (1435). There is no definitive account of who the various apostles are, and few of the symbols that normally help in identifying them; alternative theories are summarised in Illustration 26. Stoss uses two tricks to increase the impression of space. The space in the centre by the five full-sized apostles and Mary is slightly deeper, so although the apostles immediately behind are only busts or torsos, they add depth to the group without detracting from the impact of the scene, where the kneeling Virgin is supported by a large, heavily bearded apostle whose face forms the narrative centre of the work. The two figures are carved from a single block within which Stoss manage to portray the contrast between strength and solidity and frailty and lifelessness. The apostle looks outward, the dying Virgin looks downward – his hands display strength while hers hang limply in death, in contrast to her hands in prayer as she ascends above. The contrast between Mary's clear, frail form and the stronger, more heavily veined flesh of the apostles is apparent throughout, and the varied polychromy of skin tones throughout the work is particularly noteworthy. On the right of the group, the apostle baring his leg resembles John the Baptist in van der Weyden's Beaune altarpiece of 1450 (Illustration 31), but his inclusion would be iconographically extremely unusual. All three apostles on the right look upwards towards the ascending figures.

The Jesse tree (Illustration 27) is also a central theme of Mariological salvation, based on the prophesy in Isaiah 11:1-3 and the ancestry of Mary (Kahsnitz 2006). Jesse was the father of King David, and hence progenitor of the lineage of kings leading to Jesus and the use of the tree motif dates from the time of St. Jerome (Wilson & Wilson 1984 p.149). It is also important not to overlook the four church fathers (Gregory, Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome) (Fathers 2004) and the four prophets in the frame and spandrels of the *corpus* (Illustration 25) completing the links to the *Speculum*.

Finally, we must remember that until recently, the altarpiece would have been closed for most of the year, even on Sundays, to preserve both its mystery and the more brilliant polychromy within. The wings would only have been opened on specific feast days. Today, the altarpiece is opened every day at noon for tourists, although the act of opening the wings itself has no liturgical function (Kahsnitz 2006 p.16) and they normally remain closed during services earlier in the day.

6 By many accounts, Veit Stoss was a “cantankerous person and troublesome fellow” (Burkhard 1935 p.35), who was probably involved in speculation and other “shady examples of ... early capitalism” (Baxandall 1980 p.195). For him, the making of the altarpiece was obviously a major business opportunity and helped to establish him as a very rich man. On returning to Nuremberg in 1496, he had more money than could possibly have been earned in Cracow through sculpture alone (ibid), and some years later he narrowly escaped execution for forging business documents. Yet in creating sculpture that appeared “suspended between representation and matter” combined with the “insistent presence of the fact of wood carving” (ibid p.191) he had few equals.

In terms of locational issues, Stoss helped spread new approaches to sculpture from Swabia and southern Germany to Cracow. His sons and other followers who remained in Poland became goldsmiths, painters and carvers and part of a school that bears his name (Müller 1966 p.183). His work even found its way to Florence where his statue of St Roche was praised by Vasari (1960 p.174) although inevitably under the wrong name and nationality. Stoss was indisputably an important agent in the networks that helped move artistic ideas around Renaissance Europe.

There is little evidence as to his own religious beliefs. Reformation, and the accompanying destruction of many of the finest late gothic altarpieces came late in his long life. But Stoss had managed to create in Cracow one of greatest devotional works of sixteenth-century art which combined the detailed observation of everyday life with “broad and deep theological content” (Kębłowski 1985 p.48). It brought together the Mariological version of Christian history from Adam and Eve through the Old and New Testaments and beyond and, as Müller (1966) suggests, it forms the most comprehensive and suggestive *Speculum humanae salvationis*.

Notes and Acknowledgements

- 1 Initial translation of German and Polish sources was performed on PC by Systran [www.systran.com] and FineReader XIX for Fraktur [www.frakturschrift.com]. Initial Latin translation was performed by QuickLatin [www.quicklatin.com].
- 2 Thanks to Mike Arthur (City of Wolverhampton College) for assistance with modern German and to Gerry Cohen (Macquarie University) and Gerda Cohen for assistance with medieval German and Polish. Any errors in translation are however my own.
- 3 Thanks to the Bodleian Library in Oxford for providing access to German and Polish books and articles unavailable elsewhere in the UK.
- 4 Because of the size, height and distance of the *Marienaltar* from the viewer and the subdued lighting and crowding in the church, it is very difficult to take satisfactory still photographs. The altarpiece was also rather dusty during my visit. The photographs from Bujak that I have used instead were probably taken with the assistance of scaffolding.
- 5 The quality of some of the black and white photographs taken from photocopies made in the Bodleian Library is not as good as it should be but sadly I have been unable to locate alternatives.

Appendix 1

Extract from Lossnitzer (1912) – original

Beiträge zum Bau des Marienaltars:

10. Krakau, Städt. Archiv; Liber Testamentorum 1427—1622:

a. Fol. 108. Im Jahre 1473. Mathias Dpoczko „item pro nova tabula ymaginum alias tablicza ad sumum altarem in eadem ecclesia comperanda et erigenda LXta floreni speciali“ „feria VI ante Judicium (?) Innocent. (24. Dezember.) 1473.

b. Fol. 120. Stanislaus Ffischbergk „5 mrg. czu der newn toffele do-
selbist“ „feria quinta ante purificationis marie Anno dni. 1477. (31. Januar.)

c. Fol. 120. Dorothea Ewesznicka: „Item III mrg. czu unsir libn frawen
czu der newn tafelen.“

„Item eyn silberen gortil ist bey einen czu her garthnern in V (?)
gulden den sol man awskowfen vnd geben czu den newn crewcen czu
unsir liben frawen.“ „feria VI in vigilia Thome Apost. Anno 1477“
(20. Dezember).

d. Fol. 123. Mathias Muskala „sallicida“ „Item tres florenos et tres
florenos ad novam tabulam“ „sabato ante Viti 1479“ (13. Juni).

e. Fol. 125. Peter Lang: Duch was her yn (seinem Testamentsvollstrecker
Jakob Glaser) bevolen hat awfzurichten ein werg der barmherzikeit al-
hir zue unsir liben frawen zu der kirche vnd ouch zu der toffel, des
sullen sy mit fleise awbrichten also her yn hat bevolen vnd wol vor-
trawet.“ „feria V ante festum Joh. Bapt. 1479.“ (18. Juni).

f. Fol. 135. „Zuzanna mathis Beckinn“: „Item czu der newn toffel
czu unsir liben frawen alhir am ring hat sy gegeben vnd benannt VI
gulden.“ „feria V in die Secti. Stephani 1482.“ (26. Dezember).

g. Fol. 135. „Wylhelms megnshemmir von Thunkelspul (Dinkelsbühl):
„Zum ersten hat her gegeben und benennt czu geben von seynem
guttern X reynische gulden czu der toffel dy man machit of den hohen
altar alhir zu unsir liben frawen am Ringe.“ „feria 4 post Elizabet
1482.“ (21. November).

h. Fol. 127. Peter Schepcz: „Item czu der tofele der Jungfraw
marien X gulden.“ „freitag nach Joh. bapt. 1482.“ (28. Juni).

i. Fol. 145. „Margareta scholwiczynn“: Item V gulden hot sy och
becheiden czu der großen tafele czu unsir liben frawen“. „sabato post
marci evangeliste 1488.“ (27. April).

k. Fol. 148. „Ursula Eustachiußynn“: „Zum ersten gebe ich von meynen
guttern X gulden czu der tofel yn dy kirche czu unser liben frawe am
gringe“ 1489.

Dem Inhalt nach zum größten Teil bei Grabowßki; Krakow i jego
okolice. 3. Aufl. 1836. S. 365 f.

Ferner teilt A. Grabowßki; Starozytnicze Wiadomosci o Krakowie.
Krakow 1852. S. 29 f. nach dem jetzt verschollenen „Liber Duorum
Scabinorum Crac. No. 1474,“ das sich damals noch im Krakauer Stadt-
archiv befand, folgende Vermächtnisse mit:

l. Jan Stano mechanicus vermacht 10 fl. „ad ymagines supra tabulam
que pro ecclesia St. Marie construitur.“ 1478.

m. Georg Lang und Jan Krupel treten die bei Gericht hinterlegten Silbergeräte ab, um die sie mit einem Armenier aus Lemberg prozessierten, und übergeben sie an Jan Kletner, Jan Turzon, Jacob Glaser und Christoph den Stadtschreiber als den Verwaltern und Bauherrn „der newen tofelen czu unsr libn frawn.“ 1480.

n. Beronika, Frau des Jacob Tale beauftragt ihren Mann, 200 ungarische Gulden „pro nova tabula in magno altari in Eccl. B. Virg. Mariae“ auszuführen, was er auch versprach. 1483.

o. Anna, die Frau des Glewitz, gab 24 Mark den Herren Jan Kletner, Severin Bethmann, Jan Turzon „tanquam erectoribus et aedificatoribus tabulae in Eccl. B. V. Mariae.“ 1483.

p. Bartholomaeus Reich vermacht „czu der newen toffel yn unsr libn frawn Kirche of den hohen altar“ 25 fl. 1484.

q. Paulus, der Apotheker, vermacht „enne silberne Koppe obirguldt [nach Essenwein; Kunstdenkmäler Krakaus S. 102 auch anderes Silbergerät] czu der toffel czu unsr libn frawn, dy man bawet of den hohen Altar.“ 1485.

r. Jan Gobil vermacht 10 fl. „czu der newen toffelen czu unsr libn frawn.“ 1485.

s. Lorenz Gobil zediert eine Forderung von 14 fl. „pro tabula magna in summo altare ad Beat. Virginem in circulo“ und gibt in baar 10 fl. „pro eadem tabula.“ 1486.

t. Anna, die Frau des Hutmakers Simon, überweist dem Johannes Thursy ein Haus zum Altarbau 1486.

u. Katharina, die Plattnerin, vermacht 20 fl. ung. „pro fabrica et decoratione tabule sive ymaginis summi altaris Eccl. B. V. Mariae.“ 1487.

v. Barbara, die Witwe des Kaspar Roth, vermacht einen silbernen Gürtel und 9 silberne Löffel „pro tabula nova ad B. virginem.“ 1488.

w. Johann Korbel vermacht 10 fl. „pro tabula ad S. Mariam in circulo.“ 1488 (?).

x. Anna, die Frau des Bartholomaeus, und Martha, die Apothekerin, zwei Schwestern, überweisen das gemeinsame Haus in der Judenstraße an Jan Thursy „czu bawen dy grosse toffel czu unsr libn frawn“; dieses Haus war vorher um 200 fl. verkauft worden (nach Essenwein a. a. D. S. 102). 1488 (?).

y. Lazarus, der Kürschner, vermacht 80 fl. Bargeld, das er in Groschen besaß, und 5 Mark „czu der grossen toffel czu unsr libn frawn“. 1489.

z. Krakau, Stadtarchiv; Consularia Crac. 429. p. 774.

„Michael Avecci de Florencia, frater olim Anthonii Italici, et honorabilis dominus Vincentius de ibidem tamquam interpretes dicti Michaelis et cum eo reposuerunt tria registra cum quibusdam debitis olim Anthonii Italici et dederunt omnia illa debita in eis contenta, si que sunt, famosis dominis Sefrido Bethmann, Johanni Turso, Johanni Clethner et Johanni Schultis, ut illi eadem debita omni autoritate et plenipotencia emoveant, tollant et recipiant et pro nova tabula, que edificatur ad beatam Virginem, convertant et dent pro hiis agendum, iuramenta recipiendum et dimittendum procuratores, tociens quociens voluerint, substituendum et omnia alia pro hiis faciendum tamquam ipsi soli personaliter adessent.“

Appendix 2

Extract from Lossnitzer (1912) – translation

Cracow, City Archive Liber Testamentarium 1427 - 1622 Contributions towards the Construction of the *Marienaltar*

- a. Folio 108 In the year 1473 Mathias Opoczko “Also towards the new retable as a likenesses of the previous retable for the high altar in the same church, to buy and erect it 60 florins” Sixth holy day before judgement [*of the*] innocent? (24 December 1473).
- b. Folio 120 Stanislaus Fsischbergk “5 mrg towards the new tablet, the same” “The fifth holy day before the purification of Mary in the year of our lord 1477.. .” (31 January)
- c. Folio 120 Dorothea Sweznicka “Also 4 mrg for (*the church of*) Our Beloved Lady for the new tablets”
 “Also one silver girdle 5 guilders, this should be sold and given to the new [crewcen] for Our Beloved Lady, sixth holy day by the watch of Thomas the Apostle 1477 (20 December).
- d. Folio 123, Mathias Muskala, “set aside also three florins and three florins towards the new retable ... Saturday before the fifth [?] 1479..” (13 June).
- e. Folio 125 Peter Lang, “Also that which he has commanded to be carried out, a work of compassion for (*the church of*) Our Beloved Lady, and also for the tablet, this should be carried out with diligence, as been here commanded and entrusted ... Fifth holy day before the Feast of John the Baptist 1479 (18 June).
- f. Folio 135 “Zuzanna mathis Beckinn: Also for the new tablet for (*the church of*) Our Beloved Lady, here in the town square, she gave and designated 6 guilders. Fifth holy day of Saint Stephen 1482 “ (26 December)
- g. Folio 135, “Wylhelmus megnszhemnir (???) von Thunkelspul (Dinkelsbühl)”. Firstly he has given and designated from his goods 10 Rhenish guilders for the retable which is being made for the high altar (*in the church of*) Our Beloved Lady on the town square. Fourth holy day after Elizabeth 1482 (21 November).
- h. Folio 127 Peter Schepcz: “Also for the retable of the Virgin Maria 10 guilders. Friday after John the Baptist 1482” (28 June.).
- i. Folio 145 Margareta Scholwiczynn. “Also 5 guilders has she apportioned to the great retable in the church of Our Beloved Lady on the town square .. Saturday after [*the feast of?*] the Evangelist 1488” (27 April).

- k. Fol. 148. "Ursula Eustachiussynn" Firstly I give from my goods 10 guilders for the retable in the church of Our Beloved Lady on the town square 1489"

According to the contents for the most part from Grabowski; *Cracow and its Districts*. 3rd edition 1836, 365f.

Furthermore A. Grabowski reports *Ancient Reports on Cracow* 1852, p. 29 according to the now vanished "Liber Duorum Scabinorum Crac. No. 1474 which at that time was to be found in the Cracow City Archive, the following bequests:

- l. Jan Stano, mechanic, bequeathes 10 florins "towards the likeness above the altar which is being built for the Church of Saint Mary" 1478
- m. Georg Lang and Jan Krupek relinquish the silver utensils which were left at the courts of law, over which they were in dispute with an Armenian from Lemberg and hand them over to Jan Kletner, Jan Turzon, Jacob Slafer and Christoh the city scribe as the administrators and builders of the new retable of the church of Our Beloved Lady." 1480
- n. Veronika the wife of Jacob Tale empowers her husband to pay out 200 Hungarian guilders for the new retable for the high altar in the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which he promised to do. 1483
- o. Anna, the wife of Gliwice gave 24 marks to the gentlemen Jan Kletner, Severin Bethmann, Jan Turzon as the constructors and builders of the new retable of the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary 1483
- p. Bartholomaeus Reich bequeathes for the new retable of the church of Our Beloved Lady for the high altar 25 florins. 1483
- q. Paulus the apothecary bequeathes "a silver dome, gilded (after Essenwein, *Artistic Monuments of Cracow*, p. 102, also other silver utensils).
- r. Jan Gobil bequeathes 10 florins "for the new retable of Our Beloved Lady"
- s. Lorenz Gobil cedes a requisition of 14 florins towards the large retable on the high altar of the Blessed Virgin in the town square 1486.
- t. Anna, the wife of the hatter Simon, makes over to Johannes Thurzy a house towards the construction of the altar. 1486.
- u. Katharina, the Plattnerin, bequeathes 20 Hungarian florins for the construction and decoration of the retable or likeness above the altar in the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary 1487.
- v. Barbara, the widow of Kaspar Roth, bequeathes a silver girdle and 9 silver spoons for the new retable of the Blessed Virgin Mary 1488
- w. Johann Korbel bequeathes 10 florins for the retable of Saint Mary on the town square 1488

- x, Anna, the wife of Bartholomew, and Martha the apothecary, two sisters, make over to Jan Thurly their joint house in the Judenstrasse, to build the great retable for the church of Our Beloved Lady; this house was previously sold for 200 florins. (after Essenwein, a.a. D, p. 102) 1488
- y. Lazarus the furrier bequeaths 80 florins cash, which he possessed in groschen, and 5 marks “for the great retable of the church of Our Beloved Lady 1489.
- z. Cracow, city Archive, Consularia. Cracow 429 p. 774. ‘Michael Aveccus from Florence, brother Anthony the Italian and the honourable Vincent ... have given the all things they owned ... to the renowned Sefridus Bethmannus, John Tursus, John Clethner and John Schult, ... that may keep on behalf of the new retable of the Blessed Virgin” Fifth holy day after the festival of the body of Christ, 6 June 1483

(The book also contains similar lists from the Cracow State Archives)

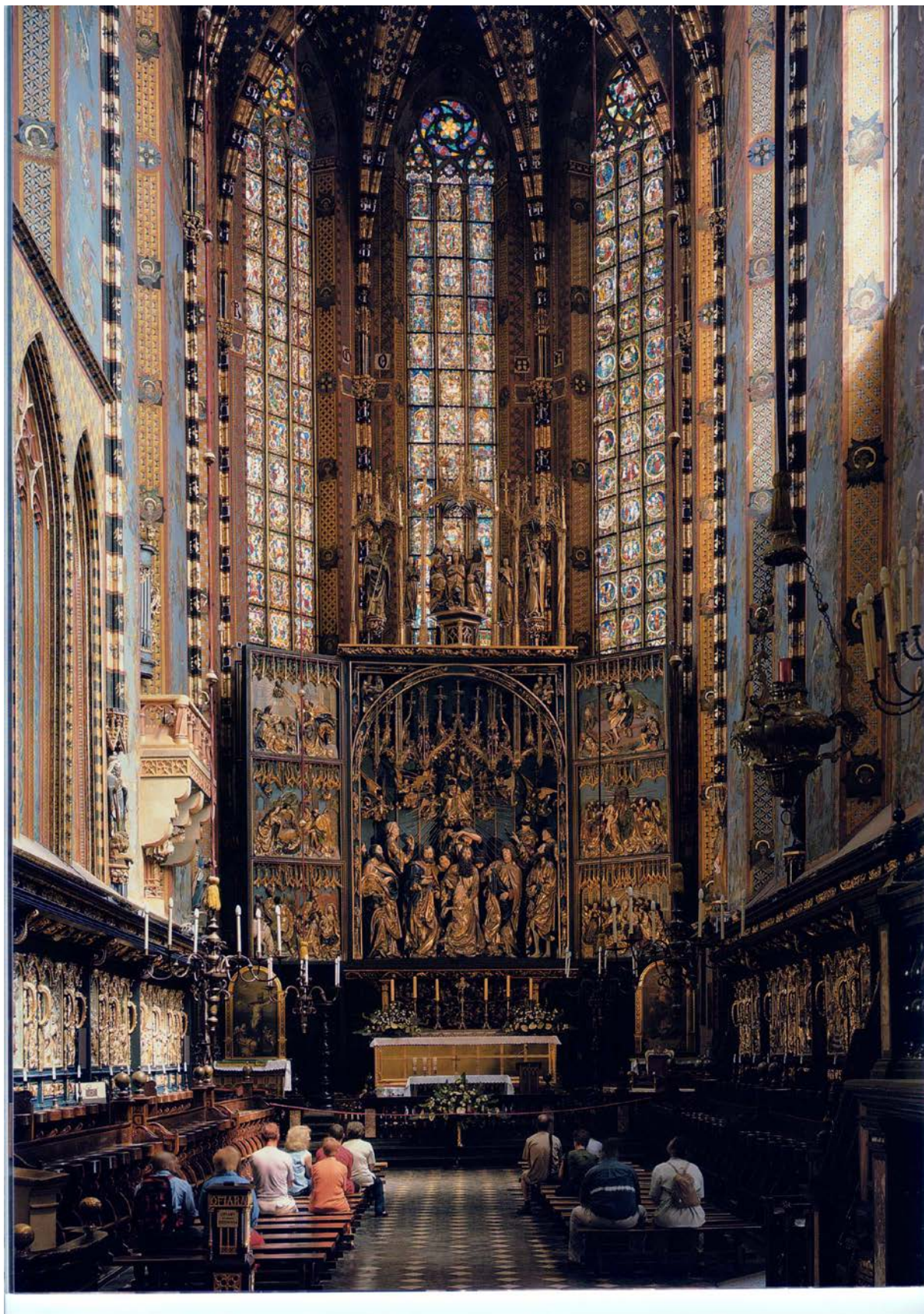


Illustration 1 – the full altarpiece. Reproduced from Gołubiew (2005 p.20), *op cit*



Illustration 3 – the closed altarpiece

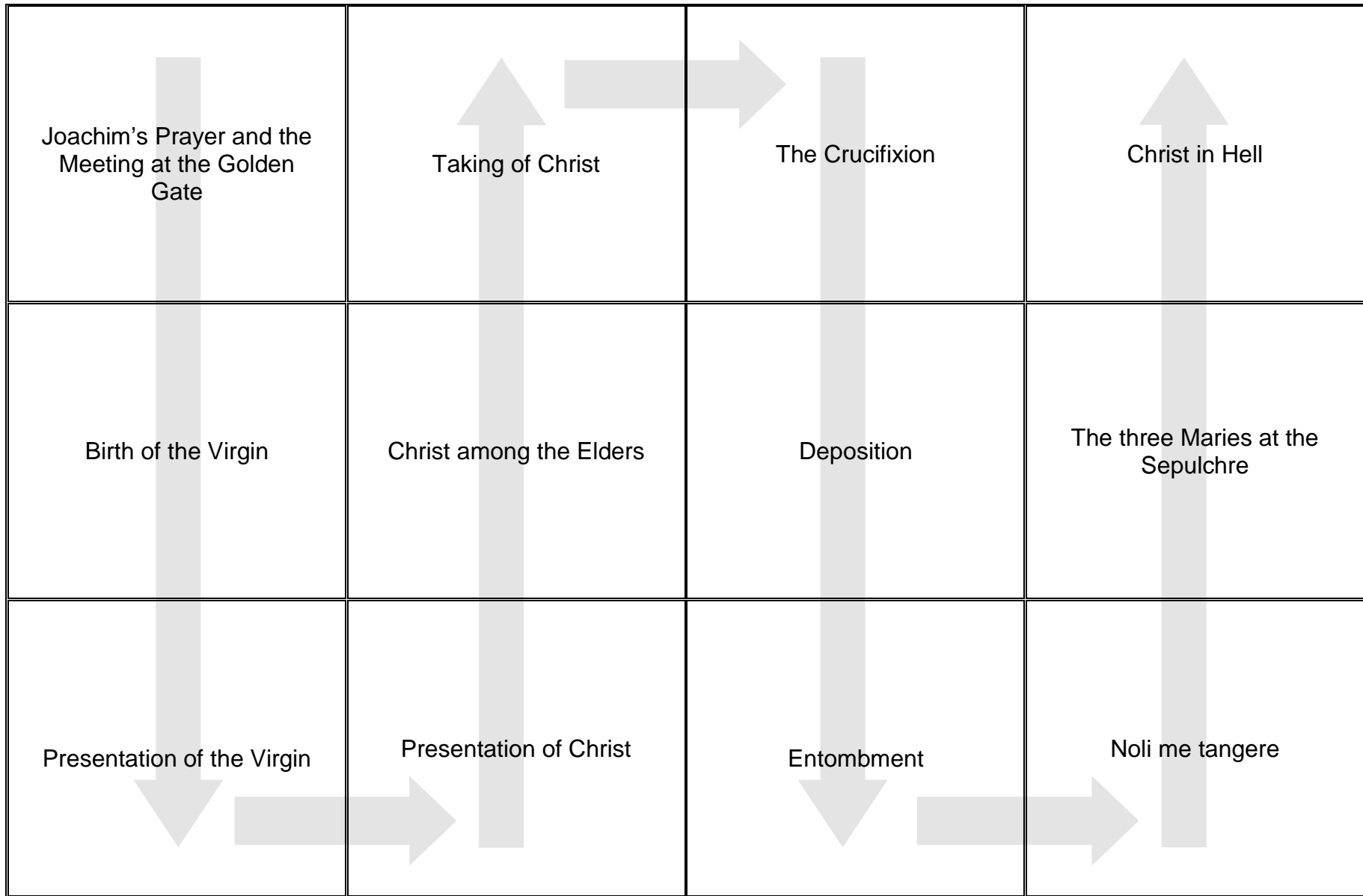


Illustration 4 - diagram adapted from Skubiszewski (1985) p.124, text adapted from Baxandall (1980) p.268



Illustration 5
Joachim's Prayer and Meeting
at the Golden Gate



Illustration 6
Birth of the Virgin



Illustration 7
Presentation of the Virgin



Illustration 10
Taking of Christ



Illustration 9
Christ among the Elders



Illustration 8
Presentation of Christ

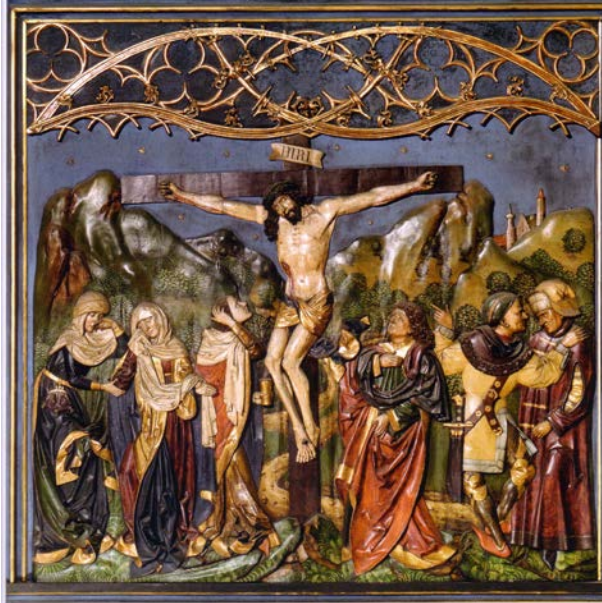


Illustration 11
Crucifixion



Illustration 12
Deposition



Illustration 13
Entombment



Illustration 16
Christ in Hell



Illustration 15
The three Maries



Illustration 14
Noli me tangere

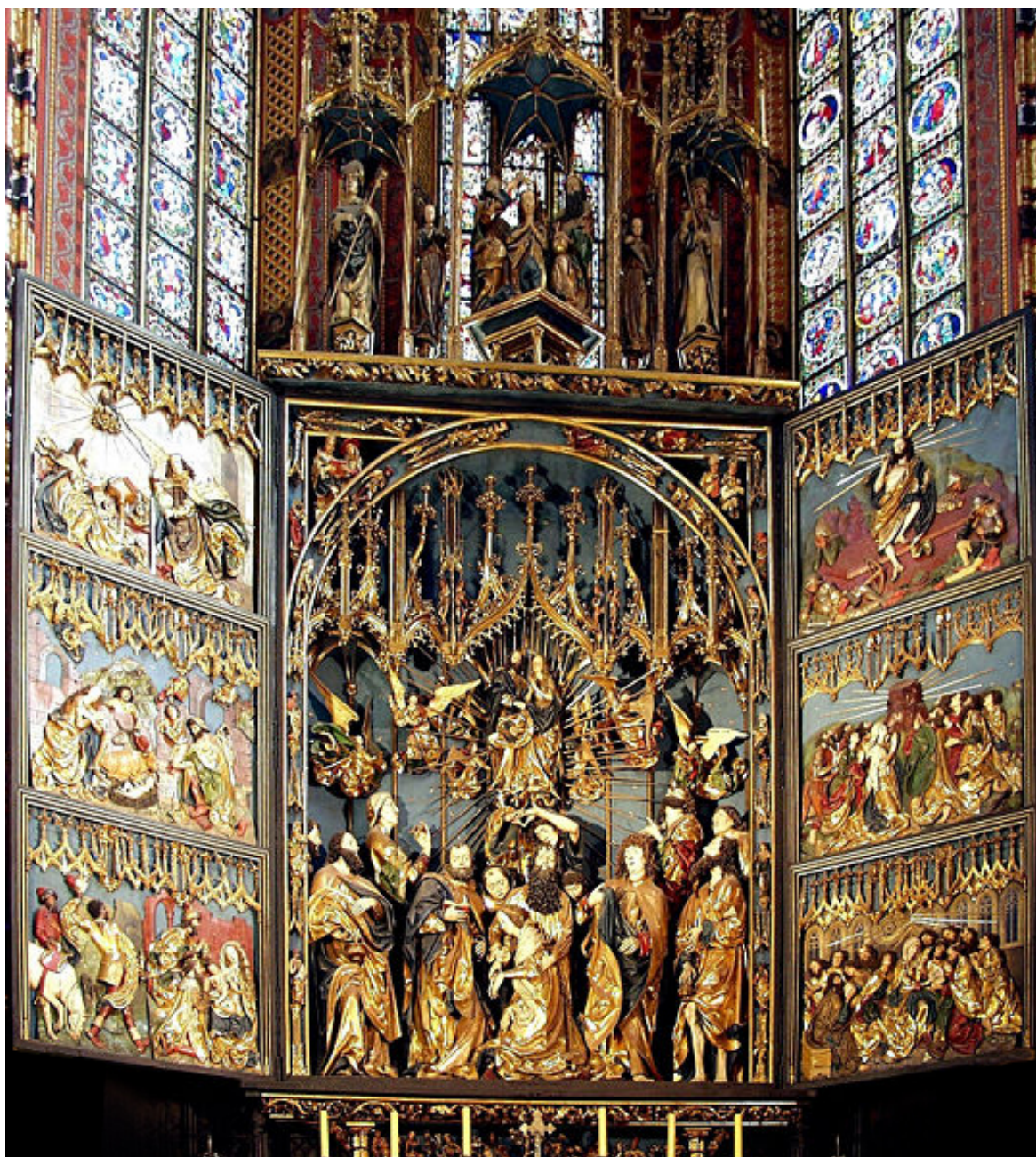


Illustration 17 – the opened altarpiece.

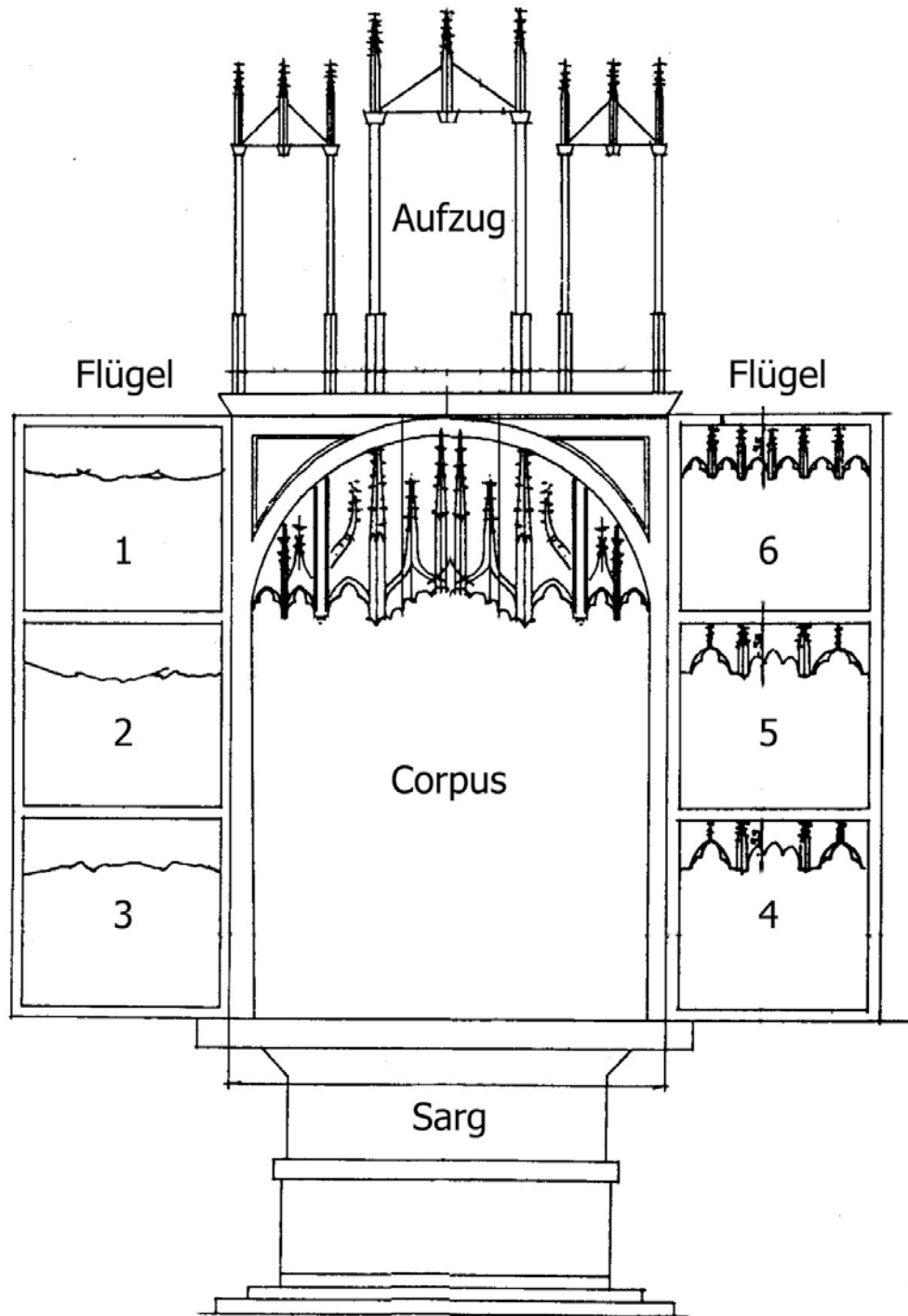


Illustration 18 – diagram of the opened altarpiece. Adapted from Szydłowski (1935 Vol 2 p.2) *op cit*

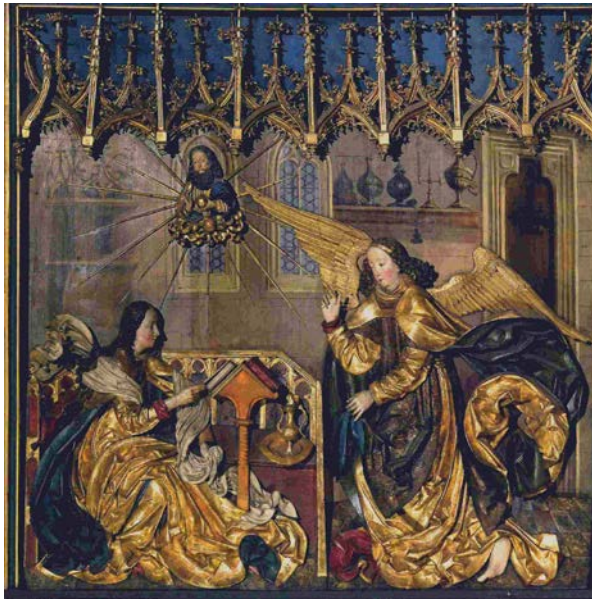


Illustration 19
Annunciation



Illustration 20
Adoration of the Shepherds



Illustration 21
Adoration of the Magi



Illustration 24
Resurrection



Illustration 23
Ascension



Illustration 22
Pentecost



Illustration 25 – the corpus

**Full size figures**

- 1 unknown
- 2 Peter
(not disputed)
- 3 Mary
- 4 James
(Kahsnitz 2006)
Paul
(Bujak 2007)
- 5 John
(Dobrowolski 1951)
Philip
(Kahsnitz 2006)
- 6 John the Baptist?
(Skubiszewski 1978)

Partial figures

- 7 unknown
- 8 unknown
- 9 unknown
- 10 Matthias
(Dobrowolski 1951)
John
(Kahsnitz 2006)
- 11 unknown
- 12 unknown
- 13 unknown

Illustration 26 – labelled diagram of the corpus. Adapted from Bujak (2007) *op cit*



Illustration 27 – The Sarg of the Jesse Tree



Illustration 28 – The Aufzug of the Coronation and close-up



Illustration 29 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, c.1435-40, oil on panel, 220.5 x 259.5, Museo del Prado, Madrid

Illustration 30 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Lamentation*. 1460-1480. Oil on panel, 81 x 130, Mauritshuis, The Hague



Illustration 31 – detail from Rogier van der Weyden, *Last Judgement* Altarpiece, interior, 1443-51, oil on panel, 109 x 549, Hôtel Dieu, Beaune



Illustration 32 – (left) Heinrich Iselin, *Figure of a monk*, Rottweil, Lorenzkapelle. (right) Veit Stoss, apostle from the left of the corpus of the *Marienaltar*, Cracow. Reproduced from Zimmerman (1985 p.76) *op cit*.

Illustration 33 – (left) Hans Multscher, *Head of a Hungarian King*, 1430, Ulm, Rathaüs. (right) Veit Stoss, figure from the bottom right of the frame of the *Marienaltar*, Cracow. Reproduced from Dettloff (1961 p.175) *op cit*



Illustration 34 – Martin Schongauer, *Noli me tangere*, engraving, c.1480-90, reproduced from Baxandall (1980 p.15)



Illustration 35 – Franciszek z Sieradza, *The Ascension of Mary*, Włocławek, Cathedral. Reproduced from Skubiszewski (1978 p.103), *op cit*



Illustration 36 – Workshop of Michel Wolgemut, detail from *Zwickau Altarpiece*, c.1479, St Mary's Church, Zwickau. Reproduced from Stafski (1968 p.160), *op cit*

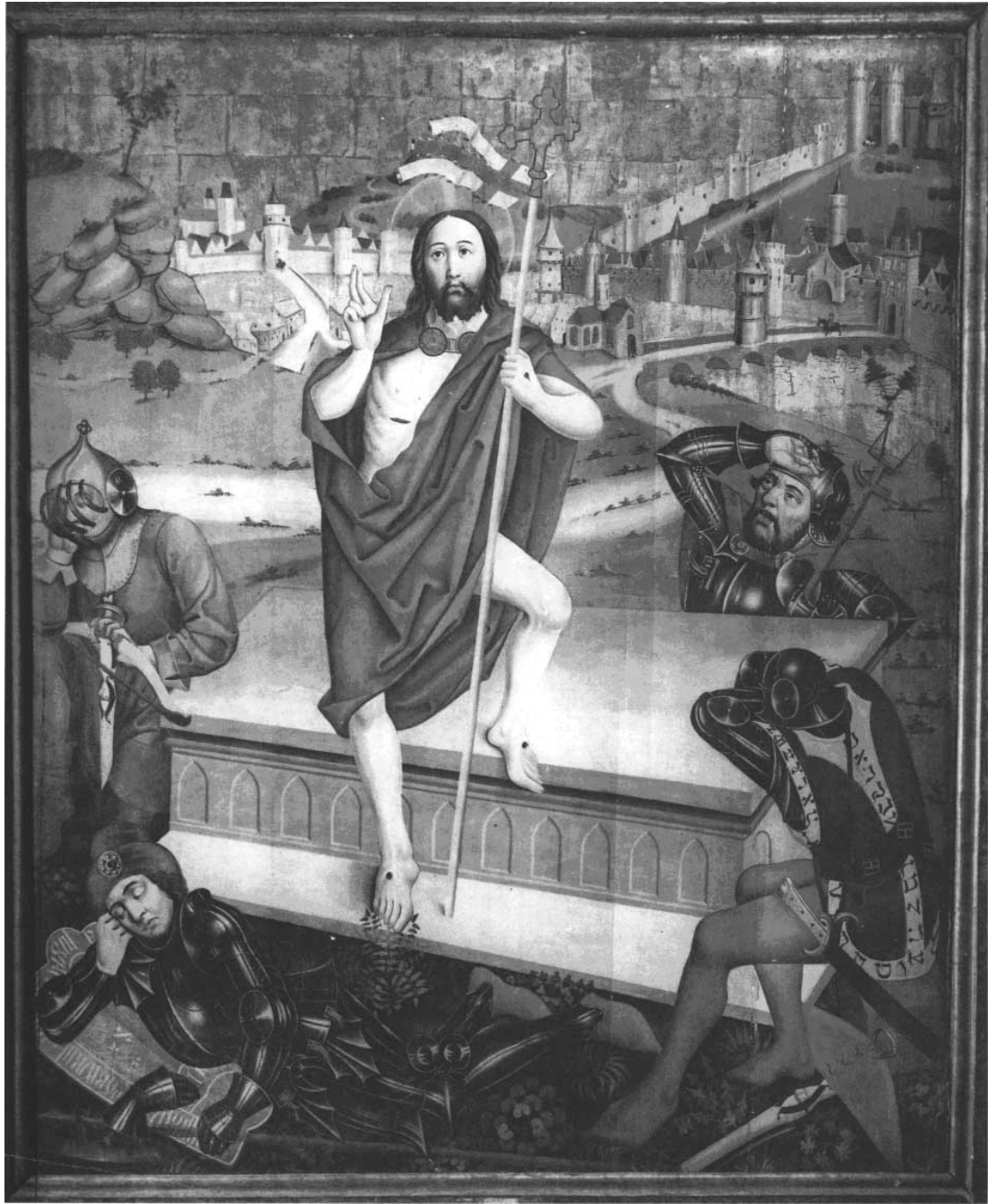


Illustration 37 – Nicolaus Obilman, Nikolaus Obilman(?), wing of the *High Altar* from the Peter and Paul Church, Liegnitz, 1466, Warsaw, National Museum



Illustration 38 – map of central Europe c.1480. Adapted from http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/grmn_1/hd_grmn_1.htm [accessed 7 September 2008]

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