

Masza Sitek

Jagiellonian University, Cracow

Hans Süß von Kulmbach and the milieu of the Jagiellonian Court in Krakow

My dissertation project seeks to investigate the artistic outcomes of interactions between the Franconian painter Hans Süß von Kulmbach (d. 1522) and the entourage of Sigismund I Jagiellon, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. Kulmbach, disputably referred to as ‘disciple’ and the foremost interpreter of Albrecht Dürer and/or Jacopo de’ Barbari, in the second decade of the 16th century was arguably the most important author of elaborate altarpieces and stained glass cartoons in Nuremberg. It was in this prolific period that he received a series of commissions for embellishments of at least three politically significant church interiors in Krakow – favoured places of royal, episcopal or municipal representation. Out of at least three splendid retables now exist a dozen exquisitely painted panels, further ones are known but from iconographic records. Kulmbach’s ‘Krakow business’ may also have involved collaboration with artisans representing a wide range of crafts: silver- and goldsmithing, cast bronze sculpture, woodcarving and stained-glass painting. The main focus of the research is the functioning of the outstanding art objects in a certain social, political and cultural ‘matrix’. Inquiring into Kulmbach’s relation to his Krakow patrons I will revisit the somewhat prematurely established hypothesis that locates the artistic process itself in the residential city of Polish kings rather than in Nuremberg.

METHODOLOGY

The principles of my methodological approach can be encapsulated in the following key concepts: transdisciplinary exchange, new historicism, ‘constellation research’ and ‘Standortstudien’. The cornerstone of the project is the ongoing collaboration with Polish and German conservators who are treating or treated Kulmbach’s paintings in the last two decades. I use the term ‘new historicism’ to subscribe to the postulate that strategies of handling historical materials be redefined in accordance to the legacy of post-modern critique. I am also inclined to adapt the ‘constellation’ research model, which continues to yield intriguing results in recent Dürer studies. This stance involves examining interactions

between people within a particular geographical area – such as the complex network of relationships that encompassed the Jagiellonian court and the urban milieu of Krakow, spreading hereafter

throughout Central Europe and binding together Krakow and Nuremberg with strong, multidimensional ties. The issue of a particular artwork's individual context will in turn require reconstructing constellations of another kind: accumulations of objects in the 16th-century Krakow's sacral spaces, orchestrated by the donors' visual strategies. Only traced back to their original standing place amidst such furnished zones could *ornamenta ecclesie* reveal their original function, i.e. their use in liturgy as well as meaning(s), the explanation of the form and iconographic formulas being thus granted.

SOURCES

It is my firm belief that it is the very work of art that constitutes the principal source for an art historian. Here this conviction reasserts itself, as Kulmbach's life and activity is hardly documented. Crucially, no written evidence has been so far detected of his alleged temporary residence in Krakow. In contrast, the formal and functional characteristics of his paintings and designs do shed light on many a facet of the artistic patronage whose expression they are. Furthermore, technical and technological data proves highly instructive – especially when interpreted by the qualified conservators. To name but one example, the fashioning of six recently examined painting supports appears to indicate Nuremberg as their place of origin. In the same time, it can be rightfully assumed that analysis of written records will bring new valuable clues, inasmuch as no systematic enquiry – which should include all the relevant Church and state archives in Poland as well as edited sources – has yet been undertaken.