

Masza Sitek

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

'Hans Süß von Kulmbach and Poland.' Historicizing and redefining the issue

My dissertation addresses the research problem labelled customarily 'Hans Süß von Kulmbach and Poland.' A twofold investigation has been undertaken. One level is that of the subject matter. The eponymous artist was Albrecht Dürer's colleague and one of Nuremberg's leading suppliers of panel paintings as well as designs for altarpieces and stained glass windows. Unambiguous records of Kulmbach's interactions with Polish clientele remain, however, an elusive object of scholarly desire. Hence it is crucial to redefine the strategies of handling sources with regard to the legacy of the postmodern critique. New historicism can be an important point of reference here.

Prior to attempting any new reconstruction of the 16th-century state of affairs, due attention must be paid to the issue as such. That is, to the issue as it has been formulated in the course of the history of research. It was in the mid-19th century that it entered the agenda of Polish, and subsequently German, antiquarianism and art-history. After a trial-and-error period, Kulmbach's name was linked to a collection of outstanding pieces preserved at the churches of Krakow. By 1900 the 'dilettante' conjectures about his temporary residence in Poland were turned into a binding dogma by the 'scientific' art history. The painter has even occasionally been credited with the position of the Polish king's court painter. Kulmbach's business in Krakow is popularly claimed to have involved collaboration with silver- and goldsmiths, bronze sculptors, woodcarvers and stained-glass painters. Most interestingly, the Italianizing artist from Nuremberg has been hailed as Poland's messenger of the mature Italian renaissance.

Such daring, overall narratives are not to be dismissed – in compliance with the Derridean deconstruction, which implies infinite shifts in meaning rather than debunkery. It is a vital part of my project to disclose and study the historiographic schemata that served – and still serve – to arrange the piecemeal historical material. Equal status is given to the stories which potentially inhere in the art-historical narrations: those of national self-assurance and national self-criticism, of the young discipline's claims to legitimacy etc. Although the

‘Kulmbach and Poland’ problem dissipates into a mosaic of overlapping constructs, my dissertation takes up the baton and seeks to produce an alternative, time-specific account of the same basic fact. Namely, the fact of the painter’s undisputed masterpieces being preserved in Krakow.

Thereby, the first task is to present in a non-narrative way what by current standards (*sic*) can be regarded as ‘raw data.’ In this respect, my investigation owes much to the ongoing cooperation with conservation professionals who have treated works by Kulmbach. Significantly, the six painting supports recently examined in Krakow display a fashioning that was commonplace in Franconia but apparently absent from Lesser Poland. Studies on the panels’ materiality count among the envisaged ‘small stories,’ which are intended to adhere to the available evidence, both physical and documentary.

The latter postulate informed the choice of further methodological inspirations, including the inexhaustible semiology of Ch. S. Peirce and the actor-network theory. Kulmbach’s Krakow commissions are thus traced back to the interweaving networks comprising everything that was at work in the social practices of the 1510s. One example is the interplay of things, images, movements, words, bodies and ritual actions within liturgical zones (*Verehrungszonen*) in late-medieval churches. Interactions within a particular geographical area are in turn examined by the ‘constellation’ research model, which has already brought notable results with respect to the city of Dürer – and of Kulmbach.