

Selected Examples of Iconography in German Fine Arts

Authors

Gudrun Bayerlein, Stefanie Braun, Inge Mylius, Simone Lechner-Erbach, Andreas Dorst, Ulrich Krumsieg, Michael Weisbrod.

With collaboration of Laura Weinand, Michael Erdel, Thomas Krämer and Doris Jäger-Flor.

Zepf, University of Koblenz Landau, Germany

Introduction

The aim of this course on German Fine Arts is to present the development of iconographical and symbolic elements in German Arts over the period of the past ten centuries until nowadays.

The course is structured in three parts: The first section (module I) addresses art-historical background of German Fine Arts in the context of “Iconography”, while the second part of this course (module II) considers examples of art-practise that were used then and still have importance in our times. Not each of the above mentioned details of module I will be connected to the chapters of the second module, and neither there is a claim on those presented techniques and practise-examples to be unique or “typical German”.

One outcome of this course surely will be that the dependency of German Arts from developments in other regions and countries – and vice versa - becomes clear. Therefore the third section (module III) is dedicated to those interferences and connections “via art” that will lead to an interactive section where students, teachers and other art-interested persons may leave their comments, post, ideas and maybe even proposals referring to the above mentioned two modules.

Part 1 Art Theory

Iconography is a method of the history of art and other related sciences, which serves the disclosure and interpretation of iconic symbols and their background. Its basic elements are texts and other sources from theology, literature, and history.

As it allows, beyond the purely descriptive treatment of art, the disclosure of iconic significance, iconography has been an important element of art-historical research since the 19th century. As early as in early Christian art important ecclesiastic dogmas were attached to symbolic objects which gradually became universal signs to be easily read and decoded. The Christian creed and its major text, the Bible, were a ruling principle of the iconic and philosophical “weltanschauung” (philosophy of life) well into the 17th century – and thus those of artists and their patrons. For a long time the role of the artist was reduced to that of a craftsman who was to visualize and typify strict paragons. What we today judge and analyze as art are the works which surpassed sheer craftsmanship to become extraordinary representations despite all limitations and to postulate a personal style. With the artistic and social appreciation came an enhancement of subjects. The human being, the world of ancient myths and legends as well as political, social and historic representations became more important during the Renaissance and are further sources of symbolic signs and attributes.

German art has always been closely connected with received European iconography, it took

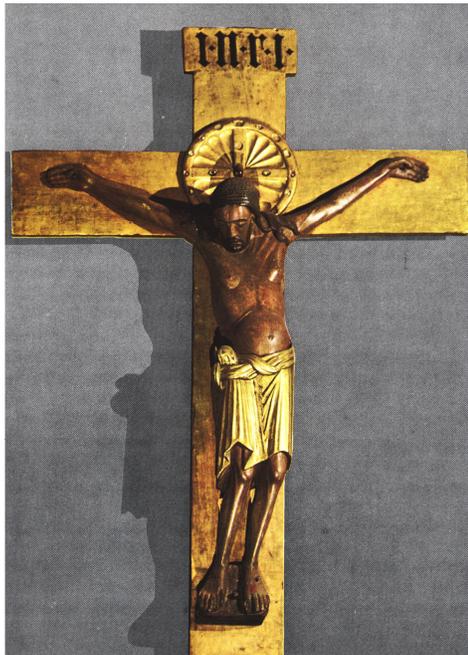
until the 19th century to acknowledge original tendencies. In the end it is the country's peculiarly twisted, at times horrid history and the general turn away from the iconographic canon which strongly characterize German art. But Modernism and contemporary art still do refer to the traditional paragons within their representations.

The survey of selected iconic examples for German history of art shows that iconography and symbolism substantially unite different epochs as well as different countries. What makes it distinctive is the general impression of a genuinely German style. Moreover region plays a more important role than in most other countries, as Germany's being split up into innumerable singular states for a very long time reinforced individual local characteristics and to the present day influences artists and their iconic speech.

Chapter 1: Iconography and Symbolism in the Period of Romanesque and Gothic Art

Ottonic sculpture: The "Gero-crucifix" (Gerokreuz")

The foundation-stone of the Cologne Cathedral was laid in 1248. It is still one of the biggest and most important buildings in Germany. Its Gothic facade and the interior became a paragon for European architecture. Its treasure holds remarkable pieces like the Staff of St. Peter. The cathedral also hosts the shrine of the three Magi, St. Clares Altar, the Altar of the Patron Saints of Cologne and the Gero Cross. It is a demonstration in stone of ecclesiastic power and a prime example for the pictorial transposition of the Christian creed.



The Gero Cross, now hanging in St. Stevens Chapel, has been endowed around 970 by archbishop Gero. His sarcophagus stands nearby.

When it comes to style, it is still difficult to classify this large-scale sculpture from the Ottonian era on a comparative level, as contemporary examples of its size have not survived. Thus it stands singular within a range of several centuries and leaves an enormous space for speculation about influences and precursors, for iconographically this way of representing Christ on the cross makes an entirely new type.

Christ is nailed to a huge wooden cross with four nails. Head and fingers are without strength, but because of the unnatural tension the muscles and sinews of the arms are protruding significantly. Apparently the unknown artist has set great value on the approach to a realistic forming of the body: the hair is falling supply down the shoulders, the belly is coming forward and the knees are slightly bent; the lance wound as a proof of death is visible at his side. The suppaedaneum is there but obviously without function, as the figure hangs limply at the cross-beam.

This interpretation of human suffering expressed in the moment of ultimate pain is in utter contrast to any topoi then common which symbolized divinity, physically unharmed resurrection and the victorious son of God. Apart from the theological reevaluation of the image of Christ the new artistic approach must be seen. The artists interest in the natural representation of the body becomes clear in many details, especially in the muscular system with its innate and flexed areas. This physique assumes a vivid knowledge of the human body.

Upper-Rhenanian Master, Paradise Garden



*Paradise
Garden
Mixed Material
on oaken
wood, 26,3 x
33,4cm
Frankfurt a.
M.,
Städelsches
Kunstinstitut*

It is the courtly charm of the late Gothic florid manner which associates with a realistic view on nature to make the painting appear so unique 42 plants and twelve different birds are to be determined without any doubt. In the centre of the Paradise garden Mary rests on a turf seat. She is reading a book while the infant is sitting at her feet, playing a psalter. On the right-hand side three female figures are shown, gathering cherries, scooping water from a well and the third one playing with the child. On the left-hand side a group of three men intone a song. One of them is the archangel Michael. Head in hand he sits with his companions. The idyllic scene is secluded from the outer world by a high garden wall, this kind of representation being called hortus conclusus. Solely a tree-top towers outside the wall. Next to the exact botanical determination of the birds and plants depicted many of them also serve as Marian attributes, such as the rose, the lily, and the greenfinch. The subject of the Paradise Garden is a popular representation by the end of the Middle Ages. The sacral iconography of Paradise and the profane motives of the Love-Garden have quite consciously been mixed up, surely due to the patrons' requirements.

Light-mystics and the stained-glass-windows at the Freiburg Cathedral

Gothic architecture is based on the idea of the so called celestial city (mentioned in the New Testament). This celestial Jerusalem is described as gorgeous city that replaces earthly world. Gothic cathedrals are an insight in this celestial city. Still more they can be seen as the entrance to paradise.

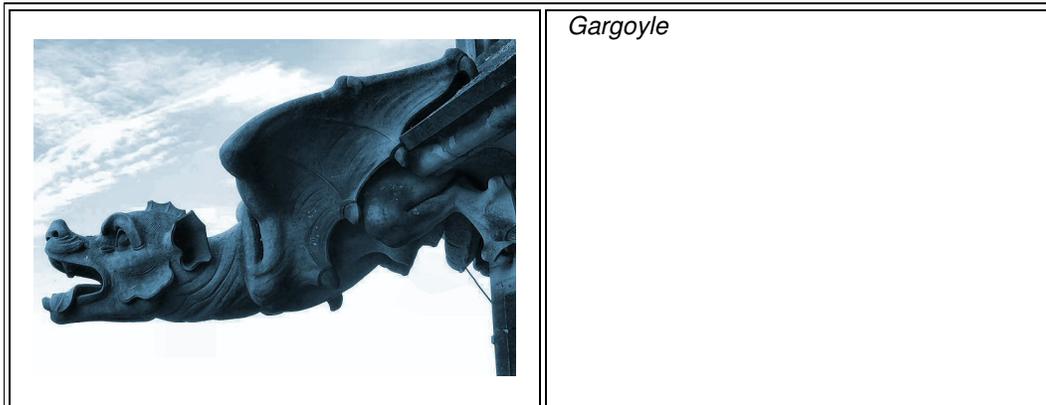
This imagination of a celestial city can not be seen without the experience of light that symbolises divine omnipotence. Compact masonry is replaced partly by huge window-areas, and therefore glasspainting receives a key-role in the artwork of a cathedral. The stained-glass-windows show the former philosophy that light is the basis of all being. Glass typified the reflection of celestial Light in order to show divine wisdom.

By that stained-glass-windows there was created some kind of mystic darkness in the cathedrals interior. The spectators view was/is directed to the coloured glass areas beaming like gemstones.

The message of the stained-glass-windows emerged before printing was developed and focused on intuitive experience. Glass-painting was a mighty means in those times that can hardly be understood today. Gothic art never relied on a perfect form of architecture but always tended to include symbolic or even psychological contents. William Durand (in his oeuvre "The Symbolism of the churches of 1286") mentioned: " The stained-glass-windows in a church symbolise the holy bible that prevent wind and rain and that means: all things that represent pain. On the other hand they send the sunlight into believers heart."

Gargoyles at the Cologne Cathedral

The motifs of the gargoyles were not at all chosen accidentally.



As one thought that demons would shy away from their own image the waterspouters (gargoyles) got the look of those demons of darkness. They were even made responsible for thunderstorms and anything that went wrong in nature and weather. The gargoyles thus became medieval lightning-rods of celestial Jerusalem, whose image on earth was displayed by cathedral buildings. There is a big variety of gargoyles, but altogether they can be aligned to three different "groups": Animals, fabulous creatures and human beings.

All the examples are taken from the Cologne Cathedral.



Squire with playing-cards: A male figure made of sandstone, positioned a bit crooked (water conducted through his mouth).

The card-player can be recognized by his holding the playing-cards in his left hand. Mouth and eyes opened wide, armed by helmet and light but richly decorated medieval clothes.

This gargoyle serves as warner from gambling as he points to the playing-cards in his left hand.

Gambling is a theme that reappears all over the centuries. Whoever gets stuck to gambling has a severe problem, is sick and will need distinct help. As a warning this gargoyle at least underlines the damnability of gambling. Church and clergy put this onto stage and denounce it publicly in order that humans won't fall to this addiction at all.

In this case the illustration of the demonic in this figure seems to be a didactic measure.



Winged devil: We see a winged creature without almost any human traces.

Bearded, with pointed ears, the face inclined to the front, the sinews at its throat extremely tensed, thus this power-bursting creature with the beastlike look presents itself. The back hinds are twinkled to the wall, the front hinds with paws are widespread fixed to the vertical wall, too. The water will be led through its mouth.

Devil as ruler of demons repeatedly appears as gargoyle at the Cologne Cathedral.

This one has got a beastlike shape and is additionally winged. His detailed modelled face carries the expression of deep despair.



The devil: The devil as ruler of the demons appears several times at the Cologne Cathedral (as already mentioned above). This one is marked as „the throat-clutcher“, which can be identified by his grip at his throat.

Clothed exuberantly in flowing drapery he stretches his angry face in the air.

His crouching position gives him a look ready to bail out.

A certain vividness and dynamics can be seen in this sculpture. His wide opened mouth not only gives the water a voluminous space. Big ears and little horns, an archaic nose and his slashed eyes give this sculpture a frenetic impression.

With his claws he clutches his throat. By this grip he seems to expel himself. The term “throat-clutcher” describes gargoyles, that embrace their throat with one hand and indicate choking with their facial expression.

In ancient times superstitious humans feared that the evil would enter their bodies through their orifices of the body (genitals, mouth, ears, nose, anus) and conquer them.

The water flowing out helps to imagine that by the running rainwater the demon could be expelled again.

This makes the gargoyle an almost acting object.

Chapter 2: Iconography and Symbolism in German Renaissance

Albrecht Dürer



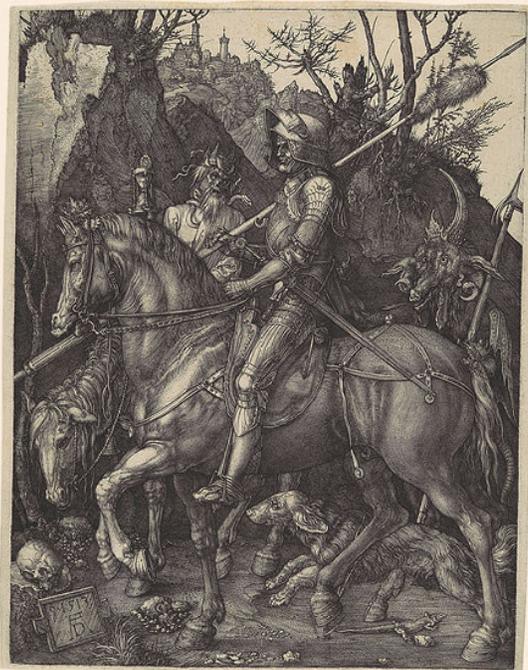
Melancholia I (die Melancholie)
1514, copper engraving, 24,2 X
18,4 cm, Frankfurt, Städel Museum

“Melancholia I” is produced in 1514 as one of the etchings attributed to the “Master-Engravings”.

Other etchings of this series are "Hieronymus in His Study" (1514) and "Knight, Death and the Devil" (1513).



"Hieronymus in His Study" (1514)



"Knight, Death and the Devil" (1513)

On this print, "Melancholia I", Dürer arranges several groups of traditional iconographic signs and items to create a new entity, a kind of spiritual self-portrait that reflects his philosophy derived from Neoplatonism.

A seated winged female figure is resting her head on her left hand. A variety of items are spread all over the floor, any of which can be allocated to either mechanic or the free arts. Dürer's strong concern for mathematics, not only the fundament of his art but also of his weltanschauung, works as a guideline through this composition in particular. The tools of architect, joiner, turner and mason, the "magic square" and the perfectly constructed rhombohedron are but a few examples. At the same time the hourglass is a sign of transiency and the inevitability of death.

In allusion to the classical representation of melancholy, deriving from ancient humoral pathology, the dark face represents the "black gall". Moreover, Dürer involves new humanist tendencies which reinterpret the dark and cheerless-looking figure as the origin of artistic genius.

Besides all unsolved questions and signs of this print the visionary artist himself presents several approaches to interpretation:

On the one hand there is the visual transposition of the theoretical construct of the highly gifted and intellectual human being that pays for these portents with grieve, loneliness and the awareness of the limits of nature, on the other hand we find the creation of an allegory of the new Christian Renaissance artist Dürer tried to represent and whom he managed to impressively impersonate with his extraordinary graphical skills.



Self-Portrait, 1500, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, Oil on Wood, 67 cm x 49 cm

In 1500 Albrecht Dürer painted his Self-Portrait, in many ways a revolution of the common forms of representation and significance.

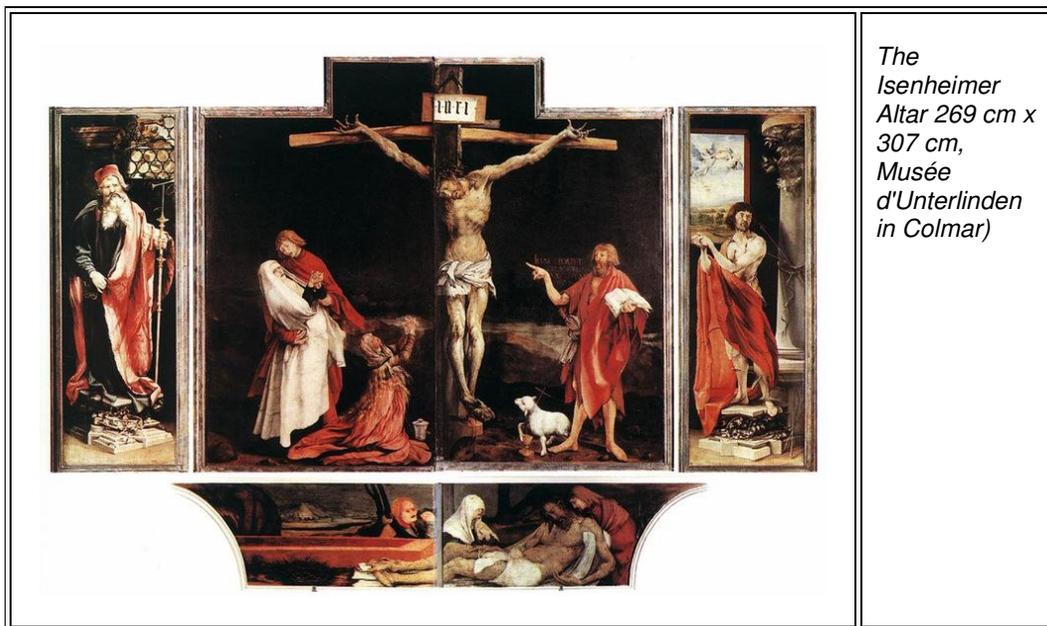
Basically it shows a classical frontal half-figure with a dark backdrop. To the left of the figure's head we find the artist's monogram and the year in gilded letters. To the right of the head a four-line inscription has originally been backgrounded with a gray cartridge now faded.

Dürer presents himself as a self-confident, modern artist, he is not holding a brush or a piece of cloth, rather is he luxuriously dressed in a fur-trimmed coat, his shoulder-long hair curled and his beard meticulously tended – obviously one of the happy few.

The discreetly dark, though visibly expensive wear, the black backdrop and the brown locks of hair with finest highlights makes the pale carnation and the delicate right hand, both situated on the central axis, even more striking. Even though the first glance recognizes the firm scheme of organisation emphasizing axes and lines, the second glance realizes how masterly Dürer moves within these boundaries and how realistic and detailed the surface-structures of skin, hair, and fur is registered, thus combining the character's being idealized with a natural modulation. The artist shows the many strata of his artistic concept by accumulating various principles. Mathematics and geometry play an important role in his oeuvre – he sees them as the basic elements of all beauty, according with the humanist theories of his time. Such is the frontal representation which recurs to the so-called "vera icon". As a topos it signifies the true image of Christ and is derived from the outlines of a face on a shroud believed to be Christ's. Dürer thus falls into line with those artists provided for with creative genius by god, with those who create with divine hand ("divinus manus") and a free mind things unattainable for others. Moreover the "imitatio Christi" was a sign of piety. Finally the reference to Apelles has to be mentioned, with Phidias and Zeuxis among the major artists of antiquity. They demonstrated their skill by perfectly copying nature. Several contemporary texts compare Dürer to the ancient artist and declare him also the "Prince of Art".

Matthias Grünewald

Symbolism in the Artwork of Matthias Grünewald:



*The
Isenheimer
Altar 269 cm x
307 cm,
Musée
d'Unterlinden
in Colmar)*

A) Altar

The word altar derives from latin „altus“ (“heightened place”) and in almost any religion it is the location for sacrifice and adoration as well as other religious activities. The “altar” as elevation symbolises divine approximation. Therefore the artwork “Isenheimer Altar” deserves to be called divine approximation in all. In Christianity the altar is the allegory for the “Last Supper”, on the altar you can find bread and wine. In the medieval they were used - as did Grunewald, too – to teach people religious content and to lead them to true belief. Because of the Isenheimer Altar was located at the church hospital its main duty was to help the sick and to give them hope by the means of Christian belief.

The Isenheimer Altars´ advantage is that it is convertible and consists of various pictured plates. Thus on bank-holidays were shown other pictures than on – for example – on St. Anthonys bank holidays.

B) Anthonys baton. (at the right side wing of the altar):

Here Holy Anthony is pictured with his baton, the so-called “Anthonys baton”. This baton ends in shape of the letter “T”, with two little bells on each side, which are the sign of the “Anthoniters”. They painted this “T” even on their pigs and let them run around painted with this letter, so that all the nearby farmers knew they were allowed to feed from the drops. Therefore the pig is also a symbol for Holy Anthony.

The bells symbolise the connection of heaven and earth. In Christian arts the bells also describe the “voice of the Lord” and they were thought to keep away the evil.

C) Demons.

Already a long time before Grunewald demons – as supposed to be good or bad for humans - were a theme. Christianity declared them as enemies of god, which is also stated in martin luthers translation of the word “Daimon” which meant “devil”.

In the Grunewald era there were a couple of artists who pictured demons. They were mostly show as “chimera”, and artists like Hieronymus Bosch, Martin Schongauer or Baldung Grien let their fantasy run free to show them as “nightmarish” creatures. Even in contemporary arts this was and is practise, for example in the artworks of Max Ernst or Francis Bacon.

On the “Isenheimer Altar” the demons of evil are illustrated. Particularly in the “Seduction of holy Anthony” the protagonist is surrounded by a whole pack of demons. Anthony had sacrificed his whole heritage and retreated to desert. There he had visions in form of those demons incorporating earthly seduction as an allegory of the material world. Easy to demonstrate that this kind of illustration keeps a big deal of actuality even in our modern times.

F) Colour-Symbolism of the „gloriole“ on the picture-plate “Elevation of Christ”

The “Elevation of Christ” shows Jesus hovering above the ground. He is surrounded by a glowing gloriole. Here the symbolism of those brilliant colours becomes manifest: Already in the gospel of John the Baptist is written: “I am the light”.

Even on the “Seduction of Holy Anthony” a gloriole in which God the father seems to be sitting can be seen in the upper left section of the picture. Hovering above all the evil it symbolises for the spectator, that humans in all their misery still have a chance to be saved to receive the good and the divine.

Chapter 3: Iconography and Symbolism in German Baroque Arts

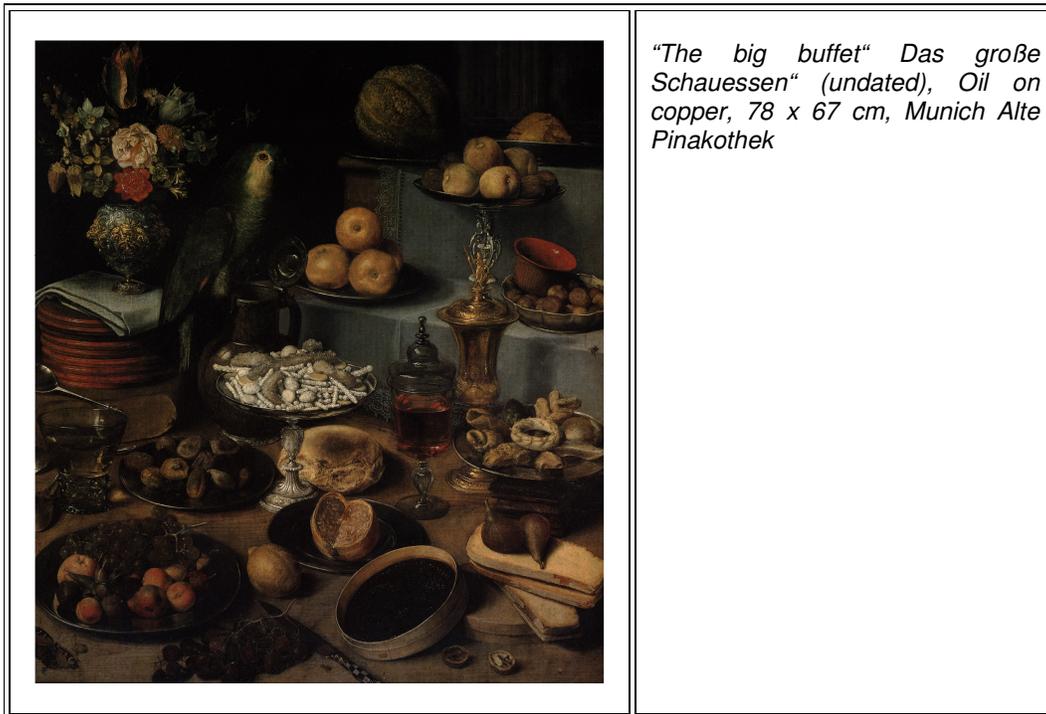
Adam Elsheimer



Few is known about Elsheimers life. He died at 32. His oeuvre contains no more than 49 small-scale oil-paintings. Moreover some gouaches, drawings and miniature engravings have survived.

Elsheimer was born in 1578 in Frankfurt am Main. Barely 20 years old, he traveled on foot via Munich to Venice. In 1600 he settled at Rome where he died ten years later. Despite his early death Elsheimer achieved a personal style as a landscape-painter, essentially in ennobling the landscape and making it an autonomous iconic element. Elsheimers feeling for nature and his ability to interpret its moods, as well as his use of light were to astound and inspire generations of artists. His masterpiece and his best-known night-piece is *The Flight into Egypt* from 1609. Elsheimer preferred copper-plates as the smooth surface was very suitable for tiny brushes and fine details. His gaze on the world scientifically educated, Elsheimer managed to create one of the earliest paintings of Western art that represented the nocturnal sky in a realistic manner. The landscape stretches broadly underneath a full moon, tiny clouds are passing by. The scene is illuminated by three sources of light. A sparkling fire built by shepherds leads into the event. The major figures are in the centre of the painting, to the foreground. The holy family wanders silently beneath the splendid starry sky, in the mild shine of the moon, against the dark silent wood, passing the shepherds fire. The shapes of Mary with the infant Jesus and Joseph are difficult to descry. Mary, riding on a donkey, becomes visible only by the light of Josephs torch. The movement of the composition is characteristic of Elsheimer. No other of his contemporaries was so aware of the fact that the beholder would read the picture from left to right. In the greatness of nature the figures must necessarily become tiny. Elsheimer renders the elements of landscape in a authenticity yet unseen. He also incorporated early astronomical information. Particular constellations and the milky way are represented.

Georg Flegel and his Symbolism in the still-lifes



Flegel, born 1566 in Moravia, lived and worked until his death in 1638 in Frankfurt. He embodies the artistic genre of still-life in Germany in a very independent way.

"The Big Buffet" can be allocated to the sujet 'laid table', to be more exact the fancy-food and "sweetmeat" still-life, because the picture shows well arranged sweets, pastries and fruit. This arrangement marks the "sweet finale" in bigger banquets or the sweet finale of a feast.

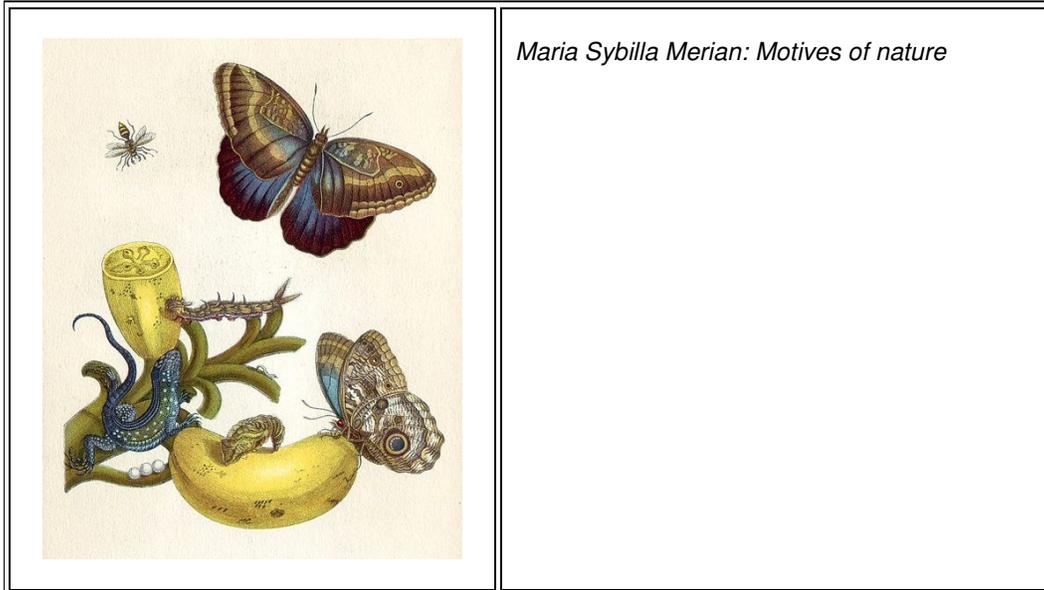
In Flegels composition those edible items are accompanied by fruit-bowls, a bouquet of flowers, cups, tin plates, a spoon, a decorated knife and a parrot. This mixture of rare food, merely representative items and food is expression of wealth and eating habits.

For the fair-and-trade city like Frankfurt presentation of goodies and a representative choice of domestic and imported fruit was quite normal. Nevertheless the arrangement Flegel chose and its meaning is important. Typical for early food-still-life Flegel emphasizes non overlapping portrayal of all items. Besides surface and material of the items several elements of the composition can be interpreted as didactic or preachy cues. Since medieval there exist an iconography of picture elements that were alienated to still-life-painting: The parrot, the pomegranate and butterfly are signs of resurrection, bread and wine as parts of Last Supper embody body and blood of Christ.

Grapes are often connected to Christs human nature, the half-cut nut is a sign for his divinity. Pears are the symbol of Gods love for humans. In contrary the figs – analogue the apple – can be interpreted as the symbol of seduction and the fall of man.

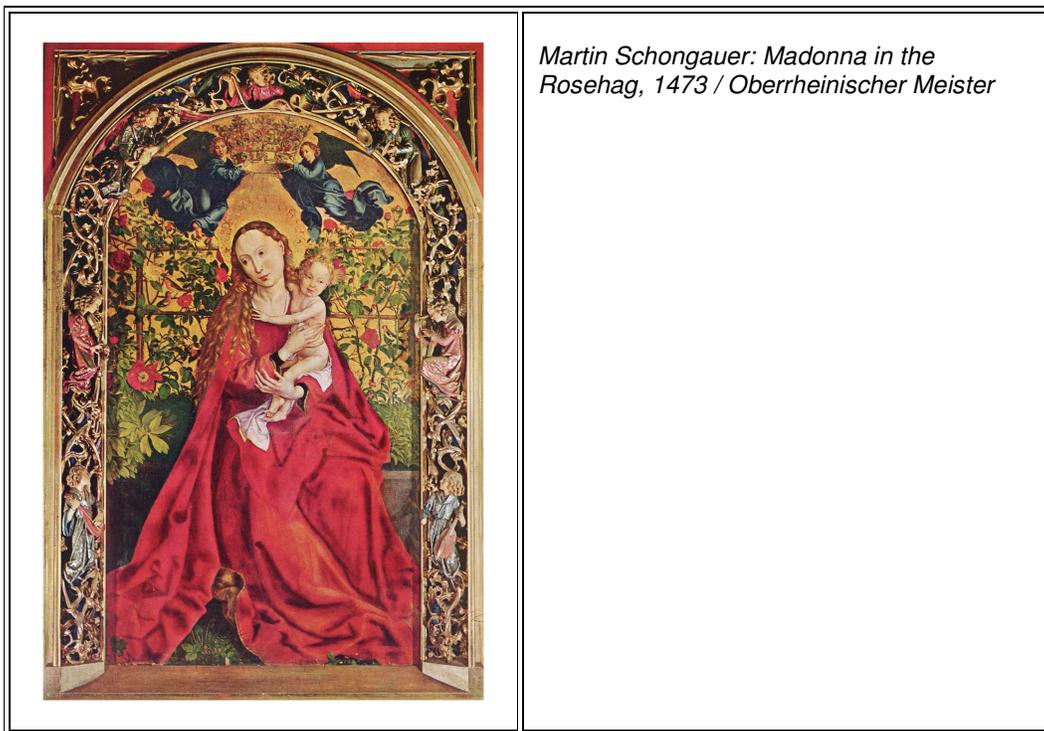
Flegel managed very well this balancing-act between rich luxury still-life and the warning thought of fugacity within his composition of elements. He did so in his own various, manifold but not decadent extravagant way.

Maria Sybilla Merian: Symbolism and Transformations



The Topic will be exemplified in this paragraph by the work of Maria Sybilla Merian. The topic is: "Gods Creation's". Motives of nature as a source of symbolism in German Arts of the 17th century. In the medieval times art refers to religion.

Motives of nature are often a source of complex symbolism and therefore incorporated into illustrations of religious content, for example Martin Schongauer:





Paradise Garden, around 1410



Grünwald: Isenheimer Altar, assumedly 1506-1515

In Renaissance the understanding of reality changes. Nature, its analysis and artistic illustration is dominated by the exact definition of details, plasticity, materiality, light and shadow. The perfect reproduction of nature – not necessarily the perfect technique of reproduction – is the main goal.

In the baroque period there can be stated a separation and displacement in the context of artistic illustration. The main image type is the still life. Here natural and artistic objects reach pictorial and moral importance by arranging them in specific compositions. The artistic illustration of baroque is based on a stand alone study of nature. This study is very important for the illustrating effect of the *trompe l'oeil* (optical illusion). On purpose the latin word „*delectare, docere et permovere*“ (to provide pleasure, to teach and to raise emotions), the still life presents a multilayered structure of meaning. Every motif has importance within its own context as well as in composition. The understanding of art at those times referred mainly to the Bible, to Christianity, moral, classical and humanistic literature, and common knowledge.

Maria Sibylla Merian's illustrations however are nature studies with artistic, scientific and analytical approach without losing reference for the overall „creation of god“. With her illustration of the metamorphosis of a butterfly, Merian attempts to disprove the current attitude that butterflies are „infernal crawlers“.

Symbolical Content of Motives of Nature

Flowers

Iris – yellow flag: Ancient medical plant, symbol of Mary. (in greek mythology the Iris is incarnation/ picture of materialisation of the rainbow). Rainbow as a symbol of reconciliation between God and mankind.

Lilly: White, ancient and common symbol of light, in Christian church symbol of immaculateness and virginity, often in contact with the annunciation to Mary by the archangel Gabriel, sublimation of an original phallic meaning (noticeable form of the stamp of a flower), ancient symbol for King, maybe a symbol of Mary, Queen of the heaven).

Lilies of the valley: Frequent attribute of Christ and Mary, on pictures of annunciation instead of the lilly. Symbol of the salvation of the earth

Viola, Violet: Symbol of Mary, of her humbleness and virtuousness, and - because of the colour - symbol for the passion of Christ

Aquilegia: Originally consecrated to the mothergodness Frija. As a Christian symbol it means the Holy Ghost, seven flowers mean the seven donations of the Holy Ghost, three flowers mean the Trinity.

Narcissus: Christian symbol of Mary, antic: seen in connection with the sleep.

Rose: One of the most used symbol of plants. Antic: dedicated to Aphrodite, red rose coming from the blood and wounds of Adonis – symbol of love and sympathy, of fertility and reference of the deceased and of death. Christian symbol: evidence of the bloodshed and the wounds of Christ. In the middle-age attribute of virgins, therefore symbol of Mary, too. The red rose generally is the symbol of the love of God.

Butterflies: Antiquity: symbol for the eternal life (greek name = psyche), a reference to the god of Love “Eros” was accepted because of the flightiness. Christian Symbol: resurrection and immortality, because of its short life and momentary beauty symbol for fugacity (lat.: vanitas).

Butterflies symbolic content derives from the metamorphosis from the egg (1) to the caterpillar (2) to nymph (3) and to butterflies

- common symbol of fertility
- symbol for ugliness
- symbol of changing/ metamorphosis

The Christian church regards insects as “ devil animals”. Witches were supposed to feed from cream and butter.

Moth: Are attracted by the light and are burning in it. Symbol of dedication and altruistic love of divine light.

Symbols of vanitas

Snail, Fly, wasp, beetle, caterpillar, bumblebee, dragonfly, mouse, rodent “ravages of time”

Birds: Since ever connecting between heaven and earth, materialisation of the immaterial, the soul, in the early Christian Church symbol for the saved souls.