

Germany's Blind Renaissance

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The German Renaissance was notoriously inattentive to the “look” of antiquity. But this blindness has actually been celebrated as the distinctive feature of German art, and not only by art historians with nationalist or irrationalist leanings. A wide variety of philosophers, critical theorists, and art historians have stressed the incommensurability of an anti-optical or “tactile” visuality with the representational models installed by the Italian Renaissance. But the historiographical preoccupation with the opacity of the German image has led to a disciplinary preference for those artifacts that seem to point forward to the modern work of art. “Memorial” artifacts, short on meaning and long on reference to real people and places—for example portraits or tombs—have been comparatively neglected. It may turn out, however, that the fine discriminations made by those antiquarians who deciphered antique inscriptions and designed modern memorials were not so different from the discriminations made by the proto-aesthete. In other words, the antiquarian’s striving toward ideal transparency was a symptom of the same uneasiness with vision that produced the strange-looking German paintings.

THE GERMAN RENAISSANCE WAS PERVERSELY INDIFFERENT to the way ancient works of art looked. The encounter between the German sixteenth century and antiquity was played out on the field of the word, in textual criticism, epigraphy, or compilations of historical material. Symptomatic is the case of Conrad Peutinger of Augsburg, the imperial advisor with a large collection of antiquities. Peutinger’s curiosity yielded a true novelty: his *Romanae vetustatis fragmenta* of 1505, which is the first published sylloge, or anthology of ancient inscriptions based on original research. Yet Peutinger never seemed to have much to say about how his coins or objets d’art looked. And the artists close to him, like Hans Burgkmair and even Albrecht Dürer, made

scant use of the collection.¹ Antiquity had no characteristic face, no “look,” even for the learned. The German Renaissance was, apparently, a blind Renaissance.

All this is distressing to some art historians, since the reintegration of antique content with antique form is believed to be an indispensable attribute of an authentic Renaissance.² The early modern German artist often seems mistrustful of vision, as if vision were a mere prosthesis for the sense of touch. The German artist generally did not share the ambitions of artists elsewhere in Europe to reproduce optical experience—either through projective geometry as in Florence, or through impressions of color and atmosphere as in Venice, or through scrupulous descriptions of the surfaces of things as in the Netherlands. The German artist seemed to want to close the gap between eye and object and to produce an image that represented not the results of vision, but the results of a kind of optical palpating of the world. This paradoxical effort to see with the hands, or with the body, has in fact been prized by many art historians as the distinctive attribute of German art.

For example, the Viennese art historian Otto Pächt, in an essay on the characteristic German *Bildauffassung* or “concept of the image” of the late Gothic and Renaissance periods, describes a pictorial space generated by an active, creative gaze, a gaze that swerves and pokes about, shifting position from side to side and back to front.³ Space in the German painting is seen from more than one point of view at the same time. Space is not projected plausibly onto the picture plane but rather shaped to produce eloquent rhymes with the picture’s content and strange psychosomatic effects. Konrad Witz’s allegorical image of *Synagogue*, from his *Speculum* altar in Basel of about 1435, is pressed down, defeated, by the angle of the doorway, bending in unison with the broken banner (fig. 1). The German painting tries to recreate the experience of space, the entry of the body into space, the constant

¹Max Hauttmann, “Dürer und der Augsburger Antikenbesitz,” *Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 42 (1921): 34–50; Erwin Panofsky, “Albrecht Dürer and Classical Antiquity,” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 236–94. But see Tilman Falk, *Hans Burgkmair: Studien zu Leben und Werk des Augsburger Malers* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1968), on Burgkmair’s close association with Peutinger.

²For example, Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper, 1969).

³Otto Pächt, “Zur deutschen Bildauffassung der Spätgotik und Renaissance,” in *Methodisches zur kunsthistorischen Praxis* (Munich: Prestel, 1977), 107–20.

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Fig. 1. Konrad Witz, *Synagogue*, ca. 1435, Basel, Kunstmuseum.
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shifting of the relationship between the body of the subject and the surrounding bodies.

Pächt derived his notion of a “tactile” vision that would somehow verify the shimmering, shifting phantasms served up by the eye from the work of Alois Riegl, the great art historian of turn-of-the-century Vienna. But any number of German and Austrian art historians, aestheticians, and perceptual psychologists of the later nine-

teenth century were deeply interested in the relationship between touch and vision.⁴ Very often this sort of thinking got correlated with nationalist and racist views in unscholarly and repugnant ways. The German artist's lack of detachment from the world, his tendency to in effect pounce bodily upon things, seemed to imply his sincerity and spirituality. For what things meant to the recipient subject, what effects they worked on the soul, was surely more important than merely how they looked. Thus the blindness of the German artist was seen as a prized relic of a premodern consciousness, a mind that observed no debilitating split between itself and the cosmos, a mind that refused the false consolation of a detached and artificially fixed point of view. The taste for tactility permeated the writings of many early-twentieth-century art historians. For example, Wilhelm Worringer, a kind of vulgarizer of Riegl who made a sensation in 1908 with his dissertation, an ingenious meditation on art and nature called *Abstraction and Empathy*; or Fritz Burger, a painter, a brilliant critic, and a prolific art historian, a pioneering exegete of modern painting, a kind of German Roger Fry; or Wilhelm Pinder, a reactionary and rather diabolical figure, an insightful reader of form, a synthesizer in a Spenglerian spirit, and a very effective popular writer. The books of Worringer, Burger, and Pinder had a real influence on artists, critics, younger German scholars, and the general educated readership.⁵

This was a powerful interpretive model, and even the young Erwin Panofsky was vulnerable to it. In his book on German medieval sculpture, or his early essay on Albrecht Dürer and antiquity, Panofsky was not shy about characterizing the "Germanness" of German art. He later recovered German art for the side of enlightenment through his monograph on Dürer, the synthesizing figure who tamed his native obscurantist impulses through his study of perspective, proportion, and classical iconography.⁶ For Aby Warburg, meanwhile, this failure of the early modern German mind to take its distance from the world, to open up a measured gap between subject and

⁴Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou, eds., *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893* (Malibu: The Getty Center, 1994).

⁵Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (New York: Abaris, 1993), esp. chap. 18.

⁶Erwin Panofsky, *Die Deutsche Plastik des 11. bis 13. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Wolff, 1924); idem, "Dürer and Classical Antiquity" (see n. 1 above); idem, *The Life and Work of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943).

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object, this lack of perspective or *Denkraum*, was from the start an alarming symptom of irrationalism and fatalism, associated with the Orient and illiberalism. Warburg saw his own scholarly project as an extension of the original philological and archeological project initiated by the humanist scholars of the Renaissance.⁷

It could be argued that a certain anti-optical and nationalist current survived in writing on German art until as late as the 1970s in the works of art historians born early in the twentieth century, such as Alfred Stange or Franz Winzinger. But by and large, the Second World War dispelled this sort of rhetoric. After the war the dominant art historical models were associated with Heinrich Wölfflin and Panofsky, who were neo-Kantians and had nothing to fear from opticality, and with Warburg. The result was that for quite a long time academic art history, suspicious of tactility and experiential encounters with images, did not so much reconsider early German art as leave it alone.

But recently there has been a resurgence in creative scholarship on German art. And somehow, even in this country, the old anti-optical model has not really been abandoned. What scholarship does now is historicize the anti-optical mode by connecting it to real social circumstances and by explicating the choices cultures have made in adopting one mode over another. Indeed, paradoxically, the anti-optical mode turns out to be the key to everything that is "Renaissance" about German Renaissance art. What emerges is a kind of Renaissance in spite of itself. I am thinking here of Michael Baxandall's already classic book on German Renaissance wood carving, Bernhard Decker's imaginative monograph on Hans Leinberger, and Joseph Koerner's wide-ranging study of the German artist's self-representation.⁸ Such scholarship has suggested how the German nonparticipation in the international project of optical painting was related to the idea of the stylish flourish as a direct trace of the author, an idea itself rooted in craft traditions; or to the German extreme inven-

⁷Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Warburg Institute, 1970); the study by Silvia Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), is outstanding.

⁸Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Bernhard Decker, *Das Ende des mittelalterlichen Kultbildes und die Plastik Hans Leinbergers* (Bamberg: Universität Bamberg, 1985); Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

tiveness in narrative strategies; or to the persistence and prestige of the altarpiece, with its theatrical stagings of cultic presence, and symbolically remembered function as repository of relics; or, conspicuously, to the Protestant reformers' mistrust of the religious image, rooted in part in the fear that the visual data would provoke responses that exceeded the didactic brief that theology had given it. The blindness of German art, in other words, is still its source of interest and appeal.

This approach to the problem of the blindness of the German Renaissance is good historicism; but it is not only good historicism. If the German Renaissance artist was unwilling to offer up a lucid view of the world, or to organize the data of sense into clear contrasts between figure and ground, or to distinguish decisively within the framed picture between center and margin, then in a sense the German Renaissance foreshadows the pictorial preoccupations and achievements of Modernism. Certainly it is the overwrought tension between the center and the periphery of the image, the disruptive urge to break the continuous contour, the attraction to and fear of the excessive and the violent in the image, that make the German Renaissance so absorbing to us moderns. This was the epoch that initiated the realignment of the boundaries between the work of art and the world, between religious devotion and aesthetic reception, between artist and craftsman, that were only later institutionalized by modernity and modern art.

It is no surprise to learn that early-twentieth-century Modernists were in fact drawn to German art. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc's *Blaue Reiter* almanac of 1912 reproduced on the very first page a woodcut from the *Ritter vom Turn*, a profane text published in Basel in 1495. They had seen the woodcut reproduced in Worringer's book on early German book illustration.⁹ The German Renaissance anti-optical space was constantly being resurrected in Expressionist painting; or in film, as in the famous sets for Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* of 1920.¹⁰ Expressionist painters recreated the very inside-outside quality that Pächt was writing about in his analyses of Ger-

⁹Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, new documentary edition, ed. Klaus Lankheit, trans. Henning Falkenstein (New York: Viking, 1974); see also Lankheit's introductory essay, 11–48.

¹⁰Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), chap. 5, esp. 67 ff.

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man altar paintings. At the Bauhaus, meanwhile, the guru Johannes Itten was using early German painting—for example, the *Nativity* by Meister Francke, from the Thomas altar in Hamburg, of the 1420s—to illustrate his principles of pictorial rhythm or “form as movement” (fig. 2).¹¹ This culture that sought out and cultivated tension and disorienting participation is still our culture. In other words, there is a hidden continuity between our art history and the so-called Expressionist art history of the 1910s and 1920s.

Something of this preference for the anti-optical mode also survives in more recent philosophical writing on art, often in unexpected places. It is not surprising that some of the earlier German art history that resisted Wölfflin's or Panofsky's neo-Kantianism, with its trust in vision as a metaphor for the cognitive negotiation between subject and object, would ally itself crudely with versions of phenomenological thought. Phenomenology was dissatisfied with any spectatorial gap between consciousness and object. The full philosophical flowering of this mistrust of vision had to wait a generation, until Merleau-Ponty, who singled out Cézanne as the practitioner par excellence of a tactile painting.¹² Less well known than Merleau-Ponty, but in many ways just as interesting as a writer on art, is the French philosopher Henri Maldiney, a phenomenologist and opponent of structuralist linguistics. Maldiney wrote wistfully about objects that would be at once the signs and the incorporations of thoughts, where expression would be one with formation. He invoked the concept of the *Mal*, the German root of *Denkmal*, which is derived from Latin *macula*, the stain, the irreversible intervention into the world. The concept of the *Mal*, we are not surprised to learn, lay at the root of Cézanne's painting.¹³ Maldiney, meanwhile, found a reader in Gilles Deleuze, and evidently introduced Deleuze to the ideas of Riegl and Worringer. Deleuze, in his own writings, has described several versions of a nonoptical vision: his smooth or nomadic mode, for example, which involves moving through a land-

¹¹Johannes Itten, “Analysen alter Meister,” in Bruno Adler, ed., *Utopia: Dokumente der Wirklichkeit* (Weimar, 1921); reproduced in Itten, *Bildanalysen*, ed. Rainer Wick (Ravensburg: Maier, 1988), 112.

¹²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne's Doubt,” trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9–25.

¹³Henri Maldiney, “L'art et le pouvoir du fond,” *Regard, parole, espace* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1973), 173–207. See also idem, *Art et existence* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1985).

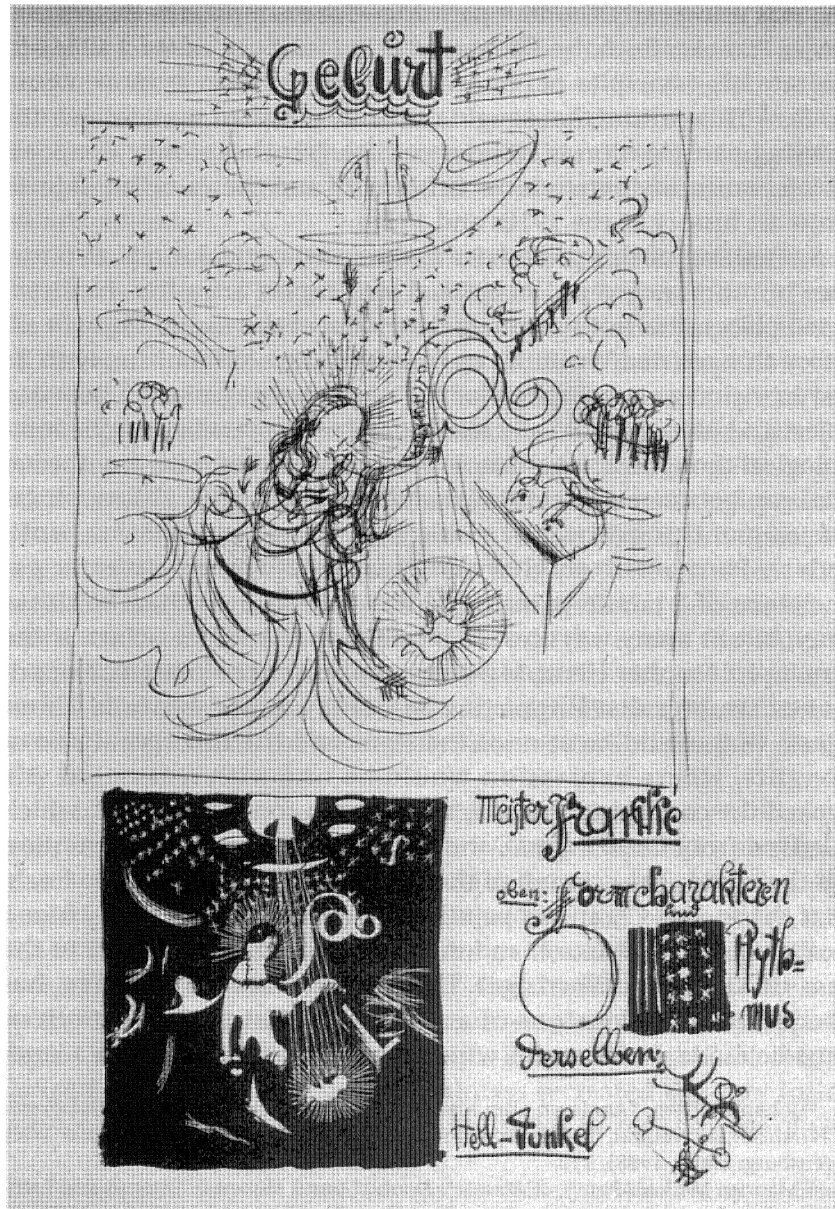


Fig. 2. From Johannes Itten, "Analysen alter Meister," in Bruno Adler, ed., *Utopia: Dokumente der Wirklichkeit*, Weimar, 1921. Used by permission.

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scape, experiencing it without clear orientation and without really seeing it; or his concept of the diagram, which involves a kind of catastrophic, centrifugal presence of the painter within the canvas, and of which Bacon is the great exemplar.¹⁴

But even poststructuralist theory firmly rooted in semiotic doctrine, and therefore in principle hostile to phenomenology, will often celebrate a tactile, somatic, and performative visuality. This visual mode is characterized by deliberate obscurity, opacity, and incoherence. It is offered as an alternative both to classical or Cartesian visuality—supremely optical—and to the empirical, descriptive mode associated with Netherlandish painting. This anti-optical, nondetached mode is associated with Modernism and the sublime, but also with the Baroque or even the Gothic—never the German. And yet the schema of classical-descriptive-sublime *Sehformen*, or forms of seeing, seems to repeat the traditional Italian-Netherlandish-German triad of the older art historians.¹⁵ The poststructuralist art historian Norman Bryson, meanwhile, advocates a mode of visuality unembarrassed by the physicality and temporality of the art-making process and unruffled by the disruption of the myth of pure, innocent vision by social and material reality.¹⁶ Such interests in the tactile, the material, and the irreducible trace of the body's labor, seem to betray regret and impatience with the imperfection of re-presentation, and a perhaps justifiable fear that signifiers are too easily manipulated by the wrong forces. In a word, the interest in the tactile may betray a latent mistrust of semiosis.

The persistence of this mode of thinking within the historiography of German Renaissance art has encouraged a certain preselection of art history's objects. Most of the interesting recent scholarship on German Renaissance art, for instance, addresses in one way or another the process of the secularization of the image in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. According to the dominant model of this process, the devotional image increasingly relied on nonsemantic, or non-message-bearing, elements to hold the attention of beholders.

¹⁴*The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

¹⁵See for example the essays in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988).

¹⁶Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); see also Bryson's essay in Foster, *Vision and Visuality*.

Artists began producing artifacts that frankly delighted their owners: appealing scenes of ordinary life, landscapes, ingenious allegories.

But there were many artifacts produced in this period that do not fall along the secularization axis. I am thinking of what can be called memorial artifacts: portraits, statues, tombs, epitaphs, inscribed tablets. These are works that neither make awkward claims to signify remote and intangible objects nor resign themselves to pleasing their beholders in the present tense. I want to stress that such artifacts refer to their objects and do not merely signify.¹⁷ That is, they offer verifiable information about real objects. And as such they fulfill their purpose through the mere fact of their existence and through the preservation and display of information.

This is by no means a secondary class of objects. Certainly they were close to the center of things in the minds of contemporaries. Renaissance humanists were obsessed with portraits, emblems, and epitaphs. Major artists like Dürer or Holbein who got their start in more or less traditional painting workshops, and who channeled their early talents into large altarpiece projects, eventually devoted considerable time to memorial artifacts. A major talent like Hans Burgkmair devoted much of his energies to monumental work for Emperor Maximilian. Such projects were prestigious and few artists would resist the opportunity to get involved. In fact, many of the outstanding younger talents were moving away from religious painting and sculpture and towards monumental art already in the 1510s and early 1520s, before the success of the Reformation gave those artists clear reasons to do so. The generation born around 1485 to 1495—artists like Peter Flötner, Peter Vischer the Younger, Loy Hering, Hans Daucher, Sebastian Loscher, Hans Schwarz, and Peter Dell—were declining the traditional career path of apprenticeship in a painting workshop in favor of bronze sculpture, medals, plaquettes, but also antiquarian prints and book illustrations. I believe this trend was in large part driven by the young artists themselves, and not only by the wishes of patrons. This hypothesis helps explain why there was so little good German painting after the deaths of Dürer (1528), Matthias Grünewald (1528 or 1532), and Albrecht Altdorfer (1538)—there was still talent around, but it was otherwise occupied.

¹⁷On the distinction between signification and reference, see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 58ff., 163ff.

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How should scholarship address these “memorial” artifacts? Ideally, there would be no need for scholarship at all; we would just read the information we wanted straight off the monuments. But in practice the monuments are not so easy to read. The original procedures of archeological inquiry were developed by Renaissance antiquarians precisely for the purpose of deciphering the monuments of antiquity. Inscribed monuments—coins or epitaphs—are scholarship’s primordial objects. What antiquarian method does is identify through forensic procedures the aberrations and tics that make it possible to locate the text in space and time and ultimately to “purify” the text. Antiquarianism is supposed to stabilize and fix the reference of the monuments so that they will testify more credibly to historical reality. It is a method that is designed to further the ambitions of the monuments themselves.

But our intellectual culture tends not to take seriously the monument’s own voice. Why should we be content with what the inscription wants to tell us? The scholarly mode that the monument asks of us—straightforward reading of offered information—seems too naive, too flat. To read these lucid artifacts on our own terms, we prefer to betray them, and in effect revert to the old familiar blindnesses, the ones that we learned from German painting. We prefer to read between the lines, against the intentions of the makers; to ignore the referential character of the tombs or portraits and instead treat them as representations, whose relationship to any event, fact, individual, or historical discourse is itself a backwards construction by an interpreter. We subject the artifacts to semiotic analysis, which transforms them and puts them to use, our use. The semiotic method thus mimics not the Renaissance antiquarian’s recovery of texts but the secularization process, the *Kultwerk-to-Kunstwerk* transformation. The semiotic method, not surprisingly, tends to privilege the most beautiful and complex objects. Art history in particular is a discipline caught in an oscillating pattern: seduced and then repelled by the phenomenal presence of its object; fascinated by that presence, but then driven to read it as a sign pointing away from itself. This is exactly why social or economic historians often find art historical writing so irritating.

By the same token, the semiotic method is unfair to the memorial objects. Certainly the monument can be read as a complex sign. The monument is a physical presence that is meant to initiate a train of thought, such as remembrance of an absent other, or perhaps reflec-

tion on one's own mortality. Often it engages in tropes like *prosopopeia*, where the monument pretends to speak in the voice of the dead person. Still, in comparison with self-styled works of art, or fictions, the monument is inevitably deficient; the very concept of "work of art" seems inappropriate, and in most cases so does the concept of the "author." The result is that modern scholarship has had little to say of interest—beyond the basic cataloguing, or forensic work—about monuments and medals. One subfield that has seen some very good work is the print, particularly the informational, propagandistic, or polemical print.¹⁸ But in the field of German Renaissance sculpture there is still much to do. Nearly all treatments of the subject privilege the "painterly" or "florid" sculpture of the eve of the Reformation, from the mid-1480s to the mid-1520s.¹⁹

I would like to offer a few reflections on some of these objects and on the ways in which historical research might directly address the asymmetry between the semiotic premises of modern interpretive historical scholarship and the referential claims of the objects.

One category of object that remains somewhat lost in the art history of the German Renaissance is the statue. The statue is strictly a freestanding sculpture of a human body. The statue doubles the body, in real space that is continuous with its beholder's space, and therefore bears a more than semiotic relationship to the body. The psychosomatic basis for the affective power of the statue reveals itself in marginal formats and institutions like the effigy, objects that we cannot always classify as works of art.²⁰ In the Christian West, taboos and conventions severely restricted the production and display of statues. The freestanding statue had strong associations with the pagan idol, and indeed the false gods were easily identified in Chris-

¹⁸See Peter Parshall, "Imago contrafacta: Images and Facts in the Northern Renaissance," *Art History* 16 (1993): 554–79; and the essays in *New Perspectives on the Art of Renaissance Nuremberg*, ed. Jeffrey Chipps Smith (Austin: Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, 1985).

¹⁹Including Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors* (see n. 8 above) and Michael Liebmann, *Die Deutsche Plastik* (Leipzig: Seemann, 1982). The recent and outstanding survey by Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *German Sculpture of the Later Renaissance, c. 1520–1580* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), is by contrast free of this prejudice.

²⁰See the remarkable studies by Wolfgang Brückner, *Bildnis und Brauch: Studien zur Bildfunktion der Effigies* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1966) and Adolf Reinle, *Das stellvertretende Bildnis* (Zurich: Artemis, 1984), as well as the many important examples and discussions in David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

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tian painting by their pedestals (usually round columns), their material (usually bronze), and their nudity. The Christian holy personages were virtually never sculpted and displayed on freestanding columns. Some potentially dangerous, quasi-idolatrous Madonnas were legitimated by reduction in scale: the *Schöne Madonnas*, for example, which were occasionally exhibited on columns inside churches, were much smaller than life-size. To distinguish it from the dangerous effigy, the powerful double of the human form, the sculpted body in late-medieval and Renaissance Germany was normally trimmed and embellished, shrunk and enlivened, in such a way as to pull it unequivocally into the camp of art. The surfaces of figures carved in the "florid" manner were painted and gilded; drapery was animated and billowed in imitation of the linear extravagances of engraving; the body was typically pulled and prodded in the direction of narrative or given an anecdotal or homely flavor. Some were freestanding, but on a small scale; most were embedded in the theatrical machine of the altarpiece, even if in today's museums they are misleadingly displayed on freestanding pedestals. In effect, this was painterly sculpture, continuous in function and form with painting, capable of nearly the same range of iconographic performances and dramatic or narrative effects. This was sculpture that was clearly legible as fiction. The stone Madonna by Erhard Heydenreich erected outside the pilgrimage chapel at Regensburg in 1520, on the other hand, was a revolutionary and controversial breach of convention.²¹ Living persons, incidentally, were never portrayed in full-length statuary.

Although young German artists learned from travel, from local collections, and from prints and drawings about antique statuary, they found few opportunities to experiment in public. One venue was the municipal fountain, where the function (real or vestigial) of the water spout had for centuries provided safe cover for iconographic experimentation. In one interesting episode in Augsburg, Protestant objections to a statue of a local saint apparently opened the way to a radical iconographical move. In 1537 the city replaced the figure of St. Ulrich on a fountain with a life-size, bronze, nude Neptune—apparently the very first life-size bronze figure standing free in a

²¹See Christopher S. Wood, "Ritual and the Virgin on the Column: The Cult of the *Schöne Maria* in Regensburg," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (1992): 87–101, with references to the earlier literature.

public space north of the Alps (fig. 3).²² There was nothing like it even in Italy, although certainly there was more elegant sculpture to be found there. What is interesting is that Augsburg Protestants later objected to humanist interest in the ancient local cult of Cybele. One local worthy complained that “heathen poets and historians had filled the city with idolatrous images.”²³ This response suggests that they suspected there was more to the archeological interest in antique gods than met the eye.

Another category of object that hovers on the periphery of art historical inquiry is the epigraphic monument. Epigraphy was a major interest of the German humanists. The humanists were eager to crown their own existences with inscribed tablets in good Latin and in finely formed antiqua capitals. They could reintegrate what they learned about antique inscriptions with the native tradition of epitaphs. A similarly hybrid object is the medal. The Germans started later than the Italians but eventually produced a huge corpus of medals. The medal is a modern phenomenon with an antique flavor. Although it resembles an antique coin, it actually had its origins in the fifteenth century.

The epitaph’s or the medal’s connection to the individual—the collection of facts—is offered as an absolute connection. The lettering of an inscription is a transparent vehicle; it represents its object—namely, language—perfectly. But the medal also records and publishes other facts about an individual, not only linguistic data but also an image. Ordinarily, a picture refers less reliably to its object than an inscription does. In this case, the instability of the image is minimized by the format of the profile, which reduces the complexity of the skull to a more easily remembered linear form and which mythically remembers the origins of art in an indexical, completely reliable tracing of a silhouette on a wall. The profile partially overcomes the blindness of drawing, the inevitable dependence of drawing on schemas or memory. The profile grounds form in touch. The epitaph and the medal are objects that could almost be read with the fingers.

²²*Welt im Umbruch: Augsburg zwischen Renaissance und Barock*, exhibition catalogue (Augsburg: Augsburgischer Druck- und Verlagshaus, 1980), 2: no. 502.

²³Friedrich Roth, “Das Aufkommen des neuen Augsburger Stadtpir mit dem Capitäl und dem Cisa- oder Cybelekopf um 1540,” *Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Schwaben und Neuburg* 35 (1909): 115–27.

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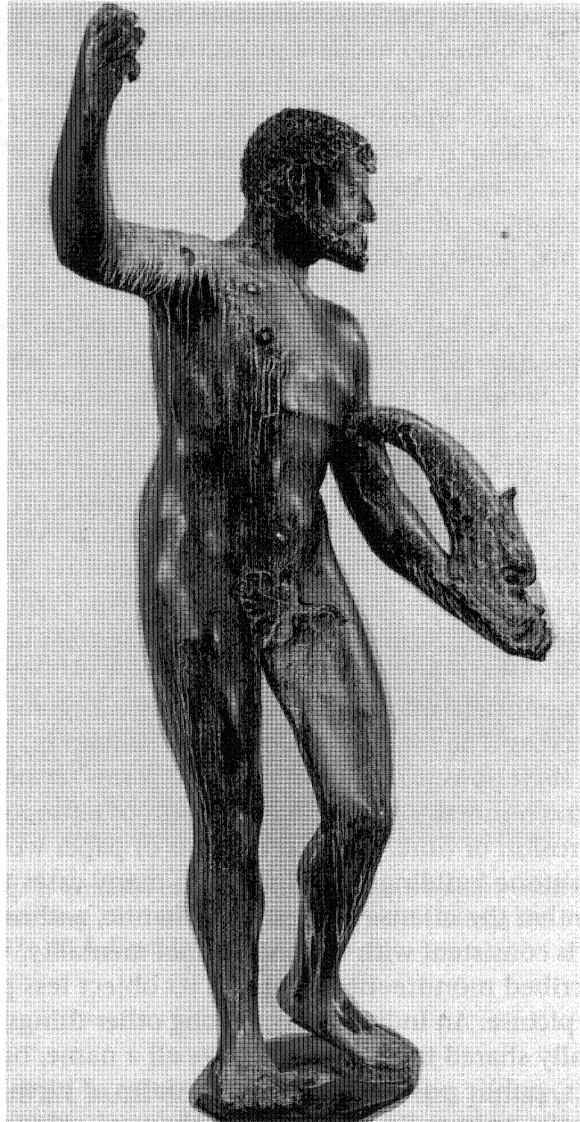


Fig. 3. Neptune fountain, 1537, Augsburg, Jakobsplatz.
Used by permission.

It is no wonder that such monuments appealed to antiquarians. The antiquarian hoped to exclude subjectivity, or rise above it. And the basic purpose of the monument was to grant its beholder as little room for interpretive freedom as possible. Antiquarianism embraced writing as its medium in order to overcome oblivion, which is after all the sorry result of a biological deficiency. The same goes for the acceptance of contour, or indexical form, the perfect antidote for impatience with the contingency and perspectivalism of experienced vision.

In many ways it is more helpful to think of epitaph inscriptions and medals together with prints. Modern inscriptions were published in the sylloges along with the ancient. And crucial to the phenomenon of the medal was the concept of replication. Contour was apprehensible, publishable; it was form as a kind of writing. This understanding of form stands behind the late medieval fascination with the *Urform* of Christ's face or body. An indulgence woodcut of the late fifteenth century, for example, claimed to illustrate the almond-shaped wound of Christ in actual size: "This is the length and breadth of the wound," the text insists; "the little cross measured out forty times equals the length of his body" (fig. 4).²⁴ Pope Innocent promised insurance against death for one day to anyone who kissed this printed cross. The impulse was to repeat, publicize, and eventually publish such powerful forms. Published form—either the linear contour or the nonmaterial, dispensable form of letters—would survive the corrosion of time. The inked sheets of paper were meant to outlive even stone buildings, and indeed in many cases they have. I would argue that the intense interest in authentic, authoritative, palpable forms is consistent with the antiquarian mentality.

The inscribed monument represents its object less problematically than a picture. An individual is, among other things, a compilation of socially shared information, above all a name, but also facts such as titles, public positions, ancestors, dates of birth and death. Such facts exist only as linguistic units; they are extensions of the name attached to the body. Lettering imitates language perfectly, in its own medium, so to speak. There is no need to worry about the link between the monument and its object.

²⁴Richard S. Field, comp., *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1965), no. 260.

Germany's Blind Renaissance

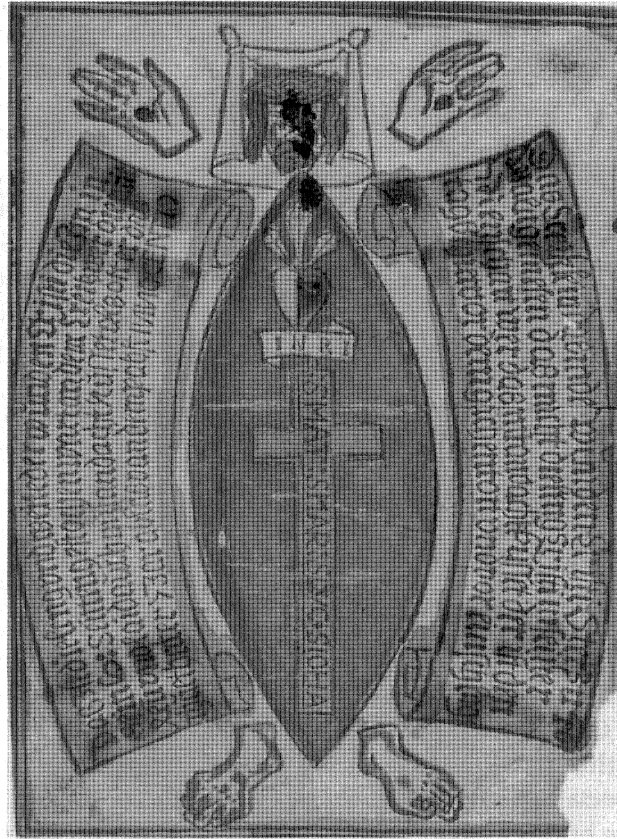


Fig. 4. Wounds of Christ, indulgence woodcut, southern Germany, ca. 1490, Yale University Art Gallery, inv. no. 1971.53.3. Used by permission.

But there are hints of rebellion within this purism. Such monuments also deliberately leave little room for the artist, for the public unfolding of an authorial persona, of the sort that German painting so dramatically permitted in the first decades of the sixteenth century. The German medals and epitaphs are notoriously difficult to attribute. There is little margin for the individual handwriting of the artist to show itself. Thus the paradoxical spectacle of a community of

young, talented, and ambitious artists in the 1520s and 1530s, all striving forward in the field of bronze plaquettes or medals. One curious outlet that the German medalists found for their own ambition was making portrait medals of each other, no matter how obscure and unaccomplished they were. For example, the Strasbourg sculptor Friedrich Hagenauer made a medal of his friend Laux Furtnagel in 1527 when Furtnagel was only twenty-two years old—a mere journeyman, not admitted to the painters' guild until 1546!²⁵ (See fig. 5.) Meanwhile, these artists seized every opportunity to mark or sign the medal by distorting, or as we would say, "stylizing" the profile—for example, by sloping the shoulders or dipping the hat in the Furtnagel medal.

Moreover, there are actually important distinctions to be made among antiqua capital forms, distinctions that contemporaries seem to have had an eye for, as much as they were sensitive to latinity itself, to grammar and abbreviations. A remarkable example is the monument for Vitus Meler in the Augsburg cathedral cloister, carved probably by Gregor Erhart in 1518 and adorned with beautiful, confidently incised Roman majuscules (fig. 6).²⁶ Strikingly, no precise chronology of the development of the "antiqua" epigraphic majuscule in Germany has been established. Yet Peutinger himself, both in a letter to Conrad Celtis and in the preface to his 1505 sylloge, boasted of the "delightful" capital letters that the printer Erhard Ratdolt had specially designed for him.²⁷

Pressure builds up beneath the grid of writing and writerly form, and the optical returns, as if to rescue the monuments from semiotic death. Although such aberrations are harder to detect on medals and tombs, because the arena is so much narrower, we are dealing with essentially the same phenomenon that fueled the dissent over religious statues and paintings. And in fact, the blindness of the antiquarian is the same blindness that produced all the weird-looking paintings. The forensic eye is indeed blind: it ignores the obvious in favor of the insignificant, the aberrations that make the artifact reveal

²⁵Stephen K. Scher, ed., *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance*, exhibition catalogue (New York and Washington: Frick Collection and National Gallery of Art, 1994), p. 233, no. 94.

²⁶Karl Kosel, *Der Augsburger Domkreuzgang und seine Denkmäler* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1991), p. 157, no. 87.

²⁷Conrad Peutinger, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Erich König (Munich: Beck, 1923), no. 35.



Fig. 5. Friedrich Hagenauer, portrait medal of Laux Furtnagel, 1527, Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, inv. no. R3461. Used by permission.

more information about itself than it wanted to. But this eye, this capacity for detecting the aberration, is what makes it possible to smooth out the aberration in the chastised text, the critical edition. And this blindness is identical in structure to the blindness of taste, or appreciation: the sensitivity to the free play of signification that is at

the heart of aesthetic judgment. This structural overlap between the sensitivity to minute aberrations that expand the referential range of the monument—that is, beyond its intentionality—and the sensitivity to semiotic difference that makes an image into a work of art, manifests itself conspicuously in the institution of connoisseurship.

Our own interpretive scholarship, which dismisses the reading of referential monuments as a mere *Hilfswissenschaft*, prior and inferior to hermeneutic or semiotic reading, inevitably patronizes these monuments. Instead, we might see their straining towards perfect lucidity and universality as symptoms of the same uneasiness with vision that produced both the strange German paintings and the iconoclastic reaction to them.



Fig. 6. Attributed to Gregor Erhart, epitaph of Vitus Meler, 1518, Augsburg, Cathedral. Used by permission.