

WHAT WE DO WITH LOVE

GRÜNEWALD AT KARLSRUHE

Ingrid Soren

Paintings, drawings, prints, and carvings collected under the roof of the Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe were gathered from all over Europe during the first six months of 2008 to celebrate the work of Matthias Grünewald (c. 1475-1528). This triple-location exhibition also showed just across the German-French border in Colmar, and his complete drawings were shown in Berlin. Works of art were loaned from all over Europe. Brilliantly curated to show the correspondences between Grünewald's work and that of his contemporaries, the theme of the Karlsruhe show followed the Passion of Christ from the Annunciation to His death. It was a Lenten journey of almost unremitting gloom through a wilderness of ignorance, cruelty, idiocy and unimaginable pain that stopped on Holy Saturday: only one small piece suggested that anything happened after Calvary. The story of Christ told without Easter Sunday is a dark circuit unbroken by light.

An alabaster Annunciation portended nothing of the horror ahead: a graceful angel salutes Mary, beautiful in her modesty, carved in the late 15th century and now belonging to Munich. Two saints by Grünewald - Dorothy and Agnes - illuminated the gallery with their shining presence, while his grisaille of St Lawrence was a study in grace and dignity. A white *portement du Christ* by an unknown Dutch Master was set under the battlements of the walls of Jerusalem: nearby, a painting in mostly ivory tones showed a Christ staggering under the flailing whips and spears of his tormentors (Budapest). Durer had drawn a woman from Nürnberg in a pleated dress, pregnant, a humble bystander in her headdress, one hand folded over her stomach. His drapery on a 'standing apostle' is the work of genius. Among Baldüngs and Cranachs, a windswept St Christopher carrying the Christ-child stood out as the product of Altdorfer's astonishing originality. On the wall opposite, Durer had drawn and painted *ajuga reptans* with a tiny lily of the valley, alive on vellum. Wild comfrey from the brush of Hans Weiditz belongs to Bern.

The Karlsruhe crucifixion painted in 1523-25 challenged me to look anywhere else. Against a black sky, above a blasted landscape obscured by half-light, the rictus hands bear down the cross-beam, the terrible feet are broken, blue, swollen and covered in blood, pierced by a three-dimensional nail. Beyond words, Mary His mother stands below

the Cross in the darkness of noon. There is a stillness in her which is the place beyond pain. St John moves towards his crucified friend, impotent to help, hands joined in helpless supplication, knowing his powerlessness. Grünewald's crucifixions – he painted several – are not really paintings: they are events, they are alive, they change every moment, pulsing with life, absorbing light and shadow through their skin, every moment the same yet different, never still in the centre of stillness.

On the wall to one side hung Grünewald's Basel crucifixion, a smaller painting in tempera on lime-wood: here Mary is beyond grief, heavy with sorrow at her Son in visible pain, the Christ exhausted and paler than the pallor of death, all blood drained away into rivers running between his toes. The hands have turned grey-blue around the nail-wounds that pierce the palms. The Magdalena wrings her hands, as she will do on the Isenheim altarpiece, but less so here. Grünewald must have realised he could go further into the depths of her sorrow. By the door was a serene crucifixion by an unknown Master from the end of the 15th century, with angels flying in a gilded sky like birds of the air. Lucas Cranach's version of Calvary was strangely inadequate, with little sense of pain, or grief, or even meaning.

The Erfurt altarpiece, a tall narrow panel, bristled with the activity of the soldiers who carried out Pilate's terrible sentence – he who asked, 'What is Truth?' The thieves writhe in pain on their crosses. Mary, supported by the Magdalena, wears an exquisite tunic of red and gold brocade. The fingers of one hand, long and flexible as if disjointed by unbelief, reach out to touch the base of the cross. A wild strawberry grows in the grass. The pain of the hanging Christ nearby, carved almost life-size in wood by an anonymous Master of Strasbourg, is held in the rigid shoulders, in a grimace on the dead face, in the tense torso, while a hooded Mary stands by, helpless.

In Cranach's woodcut, Calvary is windswept and bitterly cold, the three crucified men alone in their dying agony. One of the thieves is tied kneeling to his tree, arms brutally pulled back to a cross-branch. The crowd below, chattering, cast lots for Christ's raiment. A well-dressed citizen points to one of the soldiers while his horse drops its head, the only creature to sense the tragedy the crowd is ignoring. The grief of the picture is held in the all-seeing eye of the horse. The crowd, painted by the Master of the Karlsruhe Passion, presses on a bewildered Christ as he staggers under the weight of the Cross, jeered at and mocked. In the work next to it, the artist depicts the mob as even more idiotic, vulgar, coarse, taunting the King of the Jews while a grieving Mary can only look on from a distance. Across the room, the Master of the Bartholemew Altarpiece resorts to surrealism: in one of the few representations of hope in this exhibition a skinny, bent Christ steps out of a blood-filled tomb. The Cross is winched up over his

back, the lever drawing a tap at the base of the tomb where blood gushes forth, draining into the everlasting chalice the life-force that will save the world.

Another Cranach depicted the unexpected, the sense of chaos, the violent mob oblivious to what they are inflicting. The crime of ignorance in face of the unknown, the blunt inability to sense the transcendent, to recognise the great inner truth of love, killing it. The 15th century Master of Worcester showed that same mob, drunken louts spilling out of a Wetherspoons on a Saturday night, mindless and venal, as moronic then as now. The genius here is to hide the Christ amongst their racketing, his head only partly visible. Where is He in the Urs Graf? Lashed and trodden on, a distorted perspective gives us a glimpse only of a twisted body, head forced sideways under the assault. One man, crushed by so many, in a scene of nightmarish stupidity.

Grünewald's charcoal drawing of Christ Crucified is a good reason to go to Karlsruhe, where it belongs, from wherever you live in the world and while you still have breath. Not far away hung Hans Baldüing's thief. He could have been drawn yesterday, spare in detail, a modern man in a G-string, long hair obscuring the hung face, limbs still twitching from the onslaught of an agonising death. Durer's Magdalena nearby was pure loveliness looking up from the foot of the Cross: for this is Durer's métier: not the ugliness of the real, but the transcendent of the optimist who sees beauty and hope in all things. Not so Grünewald who gives us Holy Saturday, the actual physical sensation of despair. Or rather, the actual despair. Yet Durer can do the reality of death: a head of Christ in a few lines of charcoal, jaw slack, last anguish exhaled.

I looked up into the sad eyes of a carved head of Christ hung high, more than life-size - borrowed from Selestat. Savage thorns made of linden-wood crowned a man of great beauty and dignity and humanity. The dead Christ of Hans Baldüing, a woodcut, conveyed the chaos of men struggling with the dead weight of Christ on the ladder down from the Cross. The hopelessness of the helpless body is reflected in the faces of the few who loved and trusted Him enough to stay with Him in those last hours of life. Durer's depiction shows Christ limp, sprawled at the scene of the crime, all breath gone: it's an engraving, and in the finer lines you can almost hear the whisper of life fading. Comfort in this room comes from the only Pietà in the exhibition, a carving about a foot high of a seated Mary, a young girl in a long dress with square neckline, holding her dead Son with infinite gentleness, one hand supporting the weight of His back, the other His wounded right hand that lies lifeless on her lap. He is draped over her drapery, alone but for her compassion. It was one of the simplest and most beautiful pieces in the exhibition, yet every time I returned to this room nobody was looking at it. They were drawn to Grünewald's predella of the dead Christ, a masterpiece of super-realism painted in 1525 and lent from Aschaffenburg: His body extenuates along the base of the frame, head

lolling to the right to face us. The thorns, the ravages of the past days, the grey skin, tell us more than words could. At His feet, as if in the distance, a tiny figure of the grieving Magdalena. But – and here’s the genius – above and behind the corpse, we see a pair of hands in grief, not quite touching Him, painted against the deep azure of her skirts. The sorrow of Mary in the soul of her hands and the folds of her robes. That dark blue absorbs the eye, which is bathed in its significance. It is not the precious lapis of formal masterpieces, the brilliant ultramarine usually reserved for the cloak of the Blessed Virgin, but the commoner blue, less precious azurite darkened with lead-black, the deepest colour we know before darkness falls.

The last room of the exhibition held three small masterpieces. An Austrian ‘Christ with Maria and John’ in tempera on lime-wood, now belonging to Cologne, showed three ornamental figures on a gold ground. It had none of the realism of some of the previous works of art, yet much of the power of what came before, in spite of its tiny proportions. Its formal stillness made it an object of contemplation, an aid to prayer: icon as mantra. A swaying Christ is suspended from nailed hands. Mary, in white, bows her head in sorrow, Saint John hides his face to catch his tears in his sleeves. At the other end of the room, a stark Corpus is hung as if spiked from the branches of a dead tree, blood running down his arms, ribs pushing through the taut skin of the torso. It was only a couple of feet high, but said more than the most monumental of monuments.

The Thyssen-Bornemisza gallery in Madrid owns what was perhaps the crown-jewel of the finale to this unique exhibition (no surprise, since any visitor to the Spanish capital cannot fail to be stunned by the quality and consistency of the collection). There in Karlsruhe was a two-sided panel of 1420 painted by a Master of the middle Rhine. On one side, a descent from the Cross of graphic immediacy and pathos, proving the maxim that less is more. Ladders dissolve into the haloes of the three Maries at the foot of the Cross, wilted with exhaustion, crumpled with pain, desperate in their prayers. Ordinary folk, serious-faced, do not know where to look or what to say. The Christ droops over the shoulders of the men attempting to carry him down the ladder: again we get the sense of what it must have been like, the improvisation of the moment. The painting is archetypal. On the reverse is the painting I wanted to take home with me and borrow for Lent: Christ in black monastic habit tied with the cord of his vows, followed by a nun carrying her cross, equal in size. It weighs down on her shoulder as they pass through a wild-flower-sprinkled meadow under a gold sky. By the time I had reached this point in the exhibition I wanted to do what she was doing, depart from the Babel and cruelty of the world and do what I could to ease the path of One who was prepared to make that terrifying journey alone, isolated and misunderstood, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, the Messiah rejected by men, accompanied by only a few – so few – to his lonely and hideous

death, beyond what any of us can imagine of pain and despair and even doubt. *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

This too is Grünewald's cry. Look into the larger-than-life face of Christ Crucified in the Isenheim altarpiece in Colmar, be shocked by the anguished hands and the tortured feet, and you will share the desolation and agony of the innocent and the blessed. You will see what human nature does with love.

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GRÜNEWALD AND HIS TIME/GRÜNEWALD AND THE ISENHEIM ALTARPIECE: A MASTERWORK IN
PERSPECTIVE/MATTHIAS GRÜNEWALD: DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS
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