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# Anguish, Healing, and Redemption in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece

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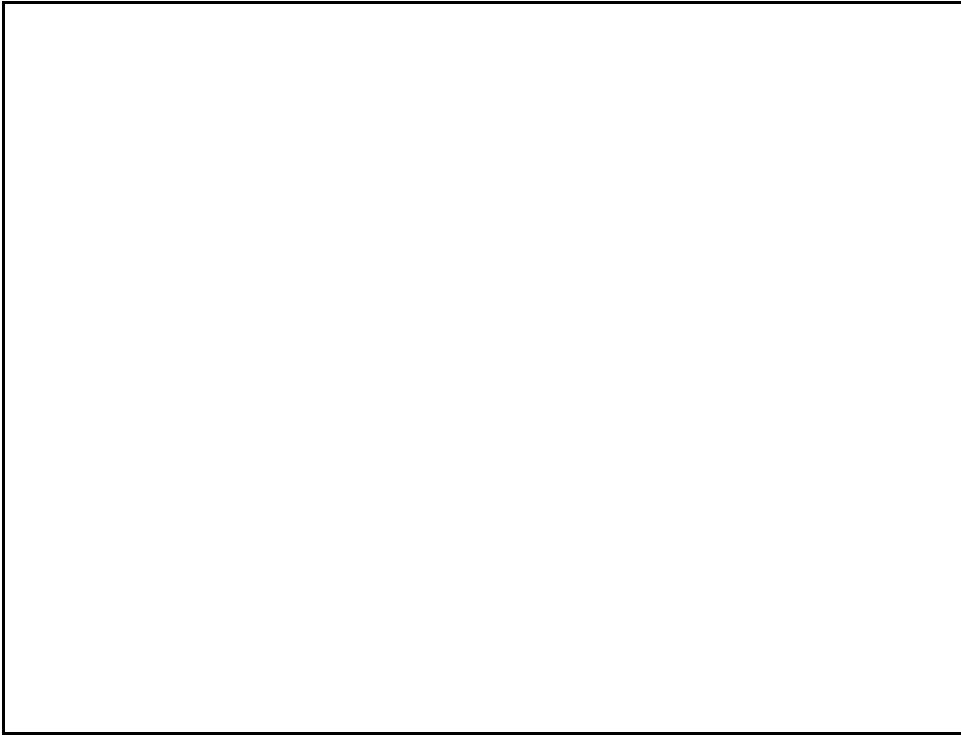
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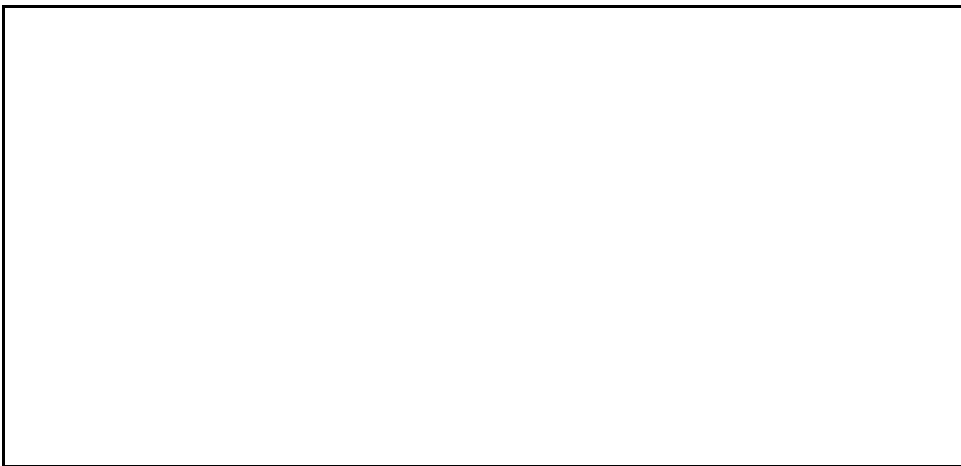
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*Figure 1.* Isenheim Altarpiece, exterior



*Figure 2* Isenheim Altarpiece, middle register



ROBERT BALDWIN

*Anguish, Healing, and Redemption  
in Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece*

As is often noted, Mathias Grünewald was indifferent to much of the Renaissance humanist aesthetic introduced to Northern art by Dürer around 1500.<sup>1</sup> His art avoids the subjects and aesthetic principles of classical antiquity and of the Italian Renaissance. Instead of the beautiful bodies, measured spaces, and serene human intellect found in Dürer's *Adam and Eve* or *St. Jerome in his Study*, Grünewald displays sharp oppositions, mystical yearnings, supernatural eruptions, visionary color, and irrational spaces. In some important sense, all of that was grounded in a late-medieval German spirituality continuing into the sixteenth century.

Yet Grünewald formulated these traditional values with a monumental, dramatic naturalism carefully studied from nature and artfully composed through the use of preparatory drawings. In this, he was a typical artist of the High Renaissance. Like contemporary Italian artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian, his art also showed a rhetorical command over expressive human forms and landscape elements. So too, his coloristic space rivaled that of his more humanist contemporary, Titian. Thus he expressed, or rather, transformed late-medieval values with the powerful, visionary natural rhetoric and terrestrial forms of a sixteenth-century Renaissance style. For all his ties to the Middle Ages, he remained modern in ways that distinguish him from the late-Gothic world of courtly sweetness and delicate suffering seen in fifteenth-century German artists such as Schongauer, Stefan Lochner, and Meister Francke.

Grünewald's greatest work was the Isenheim altar (1510-15), an unfolding altarpiece with three levels painted for the chapel of

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an Antonite monastery in Isenheim and now in a museum in Colmar,

south of Strasbourg. The exterior featured a *Crucifixion* flanked by two patron saints of healing, St. Anthony and St. Sebastian, with an *Entombment* below (fig. 1). The middle register depicted an *Annunciation*, *Nativity*, and *Resurrection* (fig. 2). The innermost register offered a sculpture of the *Last Supper* flanked by two painted scenes from the life of Anthony: *The Temptation of St. Anthony* and *The Meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul the Hermit in the Wilderness*.

*Three Institutional Contexts: Sacraments, Hospital, Monastery*

Three institutional contexts informed the Isenheim altarpiece. First, there was the liturgical imagery found in every altarpiece, painted or sculpted, from 1200 on. In the Isenheim altar, this included at least six elements: the Body of Christ in the *Crucifixion* and *Lamentation*; the eucharistic blood at the bottom of the *Crucifixion*, where a sacrificial lamb bleeds into a chalice; the sacramental lowering of Christ in the *Lamentation* and the raising of his body in the *Crucifixion* and *Resurrection*; the ecclesiastical setting of the *Annunciation*; the baptismal bath awaiting the infant Christ in the *Nativity*; and the *Last Supper*, sculpted by a different artist for the innermost register.

Second, the altarpiece was related to the mission of the Antonites as a hospital order and to the painting's location in a hospital chapel at the monastery in Isenheim. Monastic medical care informed the spiritual dynamic of the altarpiece as it unfolded, moving from suffering and death to salvational hope and consolation and a celestial world beyond bodily pain. The hospital context also informed one of the two paintings on the innermost level: *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, where the saint struggles without apparent victory against an overpowering horde of devils, their infected bodies figuring the "demons" of disease and death. Echoing the grim struggle of Christ on the cross, the plight of St. Anthony deepens the torment of the Passion and, in turn, borrows from its example.

Finally, monastic retreat, solitude, and victory over worldly temptation were important in the two paintings of the saints on the innermost level. The discussion which follows addresses only the first two contexts, the altarpiece's liturgical and salvational meaning and its therapeutic meaning in a hospital chapel.

*The Paradoxical Meaning of the Passion*

The exterior *Crucifixion* makes Christ's suffering overwhelmingly brutal and seemingly devoid of hope. The body is savagely beaten and lacerated from the mangled feet rudely forced around a single nail to the tips of the twisted fingers which cry into the darkness, echoing the terrible moment when Christ calls out, apparently forsaken. Conceived on a gigantic scale, Christ's body reaches from the earth to the heavens as if in a cosmic embrace. Spanning the composition vertically, it dominates the picture space physically and emotionally. The huge body hangs down with a terrible, dead weight, a fleshy heaviness bending the roughly-hewn wood as if Christ had been brutally stretched on the "rack" of the cross. The effect also resembles a giant cross-bow bent down in a tremendous tension prolonging the sense of torment long after death. The cross-bow shape also hints at the upward release of the body shown inside in the *Resurrection*. With its precise observation of torn, purplish flesh studied from life and its relentless projection of violence over every surface of the body, Grünewald's painting forces the viewer to share viscerally in Christ's anguish and death. None of this can be experienced with illustrations. The aesthetic and spiritual impact of the altarpiece emerges only with a first-hand visit.

Grünewald made the terrible spectacle of Christ's suffering all the more powerful by setting the broken body against the mysterious darkness which marked the moment of his death. As noted in Scripture, Christ died in broad daylight, his death marked by calamities including earthquakes and a mysterious darkness. While other artists had depicted this darkness since the fourteenth century – one notable example being the Limbourg Brothers in 1416 – Grünewald endowed this darkness with a new emotional drama and complexity typical of sixteenth-century painting. Here darkness intensified the human tragedy and reminded viewers of the cosmic dimension to the Incarnation and Crucifixion.

At a time when Italian artists and patrons either ignored the Crucifixion or understood the Passion as a glorious triumph achieved by an athletic hero, as seen in Michelangelo, Titian, and Tintoretto, some Northern Renaissance artists like Grünewald continued a

late-medieval spiritual tradition rhetorically elaborating the defeat, shame, and ugliness of Christ's death. Grünewald did this with a sixteenth-century artistic vocabulary, expanding the emotional impact of the Passion. Rough parallels might be made to Northern devotional manuals, which by the sixteenth century expanded the Bible's brief account of the Passion to four-hundred page narratives. To increase the reader's emotional involvement, whole episodes of torment were invented, some of which are meant to shock and disgust.<sup>2</sup>

Though some of this description seems perverse and sadistic today, it continued a late-medieval devotional tradition using graphic accounts of brutality to heighten the emotional impact of the Passion. In the end, the brutal language of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Northern Passion narratives was a self-conscious rhetorical exercise, each text striving to surpass its predecessors in the invention of cruel specifics. To read German Passion literature in this context alerts us to Grünewald's equally rhetorical performance in paint: his artistic mastery over the emotionally expressive, human body and his spiritual rhetoric of light, darkness and color. For example, the darkness marking Christ's death was highly selective, leaving the bodies well-lit for maximal legibility and isolating Christ's body all the more starkly.

Once we recognize the naturalism of Grünewald's composition as a carefully-staged, rhetorical *tour de force*, we can better understand how his four crucifixions painted between 1500 and 1526 – at Basel, Washington, Colmar, and Karlsruhe – each developed an increasingly monumental and bleak handling. Though the rhetorical laceration of the body and its compositional grandeur reached new levels in the Isenheim *Crucifixion*, the last *Crucifixion* painted ten years later and now in Karlsruhe is in many ways even more grandiose and terrifying. It will not do, then, to describe Grünewald as an artist of the late Middle Ages, living on like the Gothic architectural sensibility, well into the sixteenth century. Without neglecting his important medieval roots, one should emphasize the originality, flexibility, and power of Grünewald's artistry and its ties to the grand, heroic, self-conscious rhetoric of High Renaissance naturalism.

On the left of Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, Mary, John, and the penitent Magdalen respond to Christ's humanity with various shades of grief and lamentation.<sup>3</sup> On the right, John the Baptist assumes his biblical role as a contemporary prophet heralding the Messiah. Since



John was dead by the time of the Crucifixion, his appearance here works both as a foil to the human mourners at the left and as a witness standing outside natural time and space whose miraculous appearance invites a deeper understanding. With a tranquil though serious demeanor, he points out the hidden divinity of Christ with the inscription, "He shall increase, but I will decrease." Late-medieval devotional handbooks like the Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (still widely known in the sixteenth century) made similar distinctions between Christ's divinity and his suffering humanity.

And to make yourself more deeply compassionate and nourish yourself at the same time, turn your eyes away from His divinity for a little while and consider Him purely as a man. You will see a fine youth, most noble and most innocent and most lovable, cruelly beaten and covered with blood and wounds.<sup>4</sup>

In Grünewald's painting, the distinction made by John between Christ's humanity and divinity works to take us beyond the realm of bodily sight to ponder Christ's hidden divinity. Rupturing the historical narrative, the unperturbed John invites viewers to set anguish and death into the larger salvational drama of the impending Resurrection seen inside.

Once we "see" this, we can more readily recognize and respond to other signs of hope in the *Crucifixion*. In particular, there is the striking liturgical meaning of the exterior as a whole, which took on explicit form in the sacrificial lamb bleeding into a chalice near Christ's feet. By placing the lamb alongside the most horrifying section of the painting, Grünewald transformed an almost sadistic brutality into an image of sacramental healing. That the *Corpus Christi* was ritually presented by the real priest below the altarpiece only strengthened the *Crucifixion's* larger meaning of hope and redemption just as the extraordinary suffering of the painted Christ deepened the spiritual and emotional impact of the sacrament itself. Once we recognize the eucharistic dimension to the lacerated flesh, hope and salvational promise fuse with tragedy and sorrow and hide within them as mysteries of faith.

*The Interior Scenes*

The opening of the altarpiece fulfilled all of the salvational hopes veiled in the exterior imagery of anguish, death, and defeat of the Crucifixion. Darkness was suddenly and miraculously reversed by three mystical scenes of radiant light encompassing the whole of Christ's human life: *Annunciation*, *Nativity*, and *Resurrection*.

With a whirling, dramatic airy arrival worthy of an Annunciation by Titian or Tintoretto, Grünewald's Angel Gabriel burst into the Madonna's space, all but overwhelming her. Here the Virgin's traditional humility as the handmaiden of the Lord became a more human recoiling in the face of a miraculous power bursting through all natural boundaries. For all their differences, Mary's yielding to the sacred shares one quality with St. Anthony's ascetic surrender to the demonic assault shown on the interior. In both paintings, human figures experienced the supernatural as an overpowering force, in turns benevolent or malign. Here we see Grünewald's medieval heritage operating within a Renaissance naturalist aesthetic and giving the latter some of its visionary edge.

Like dozens of fifteenth-century Northern images, Grünewald's *Annunciation* took place in a Gothic church. Here the viewer could see the close identification of the Virgin with Ecclesia and pursue an institutionally-framed, salvational hope, prayer and sacramental healing already announced in the *Crucifixion*. If this was conventional, the humanizing of Christ and the Mother-Church broke new ground in the *Nativity*. Here Grünewald expressed the profound humanizing of the sacred which lay at the heart of the Madonna and Child as a core theme of the new Renaissance art.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to fifteenth-century German Nativities and Madonnas, Grünewald painted something closer to a new-born Christ, complete with awkward though lively movements and a wobbly head in need of support. Studied from life, Grünewald's Christ took on a deeper and more authentic humanity, his infantile vulnerability foreshadowing his weakness on the cross.

Equally novel was Grünewald's Madonna, who appeared with the radiant joy of a new mother holding her child up to an adoring gaze. And by painting the entire scene with a transfiguring color at once natural and mystical, Grünewald extended Mary's feeling to the landscape as a whole. As noted by popular devotional writers but never

painted before, the whole earth rejoiced at Christ's birth.

Grünewald underscored the Madonna's humanity by setting her in a fertile garden located within the larger landscape. Although conventional as an emblem of Marian purity – the rose without thorns – this garden took on new meaning in a natural landscape dominated by a deeply human mother whose radiant love transfigured the world around her. Appearing in a divinely fertile cosmos, Grünewald's Mary became a kind of Christianized Mother Earth, her fecundity humanized in new, Renaissance terms even as it remained a traditional miracle beyond natural law.<sup>6</sup>

Without neglecting the supernatural radiance of Grünewald's Madonna and that of nearby figures, such as the musical angels, smiling instruments, or the glowing, triumphantly crowned figure of Ecclesia – another ahistorical witness<sup>7</sup> – one can compare this Madonna with contemporary humanist images such as Dürer's *Madonna of the Animals* (1502) or Bellini's *Madonna of the Meadow* (1510). While both of these works develop a more humanist Madonna set in a more natural landscape, they help clarify the essential humanism of Grünewald's *Isenheim Madonna* and that of his later *Stuppach Madonna* (1519), where Mary's cosmic fertility and love appeared more grandly in a solar halo circumscribed by a cosmic rainbow. With its Renaissance landscape imagery and cosmic rainbow, the *Stuppach Madonna* is not so different from Raphael's *Madonna del Foligno* (1512).

Grünewald's artistic expression of Mary's love as radiant, atmospheric color also worked to include the viewer more deeply. By expressing sacred love in visual terms as a transfiguring colorism, Grünewald transformed the beholder's visual experience into a deeper spiritual participation in the "radiance" of the Incarnation. To gaze into this colored space is to share in its felt joy.

That the same artist who could imagine a *Crucifixion* of unprecedented savagery could also invent a *Nativity* informed with such delicate, tender, and deeply spiritual humanity only shows Grünewald's tremendous spiritual and emotional range and his artistic command over expressive figures, landscape elements, and pictorial forms such as light, darkness, and color. That these extremes of human experience were combined in a single work only magnified their spiritual power. By looking human tragedy in the face,

Grünewald deepened the tenderness and love created in the *Nativity*, giving it a new authenticity far from the angelic sweetness of fifteenth-century German Madonnas by Stefan Lochner and the Master of the Love Garden, or delicate, courtly Passion scenes by Master Francke.

The radiance and joy of the second register of the Isenheim altar culminated in the sublime luminosity of the *Resurrection*. With its heavy, material tomb and soldiers set within a three-dimensional, perspectival world at the bottom of the composition, the *Resurrection* rises from the same bodily realm seen in the terrible *Crucifixion*. Yet all such bodily qualities disappear as the eye ascends. At the summit, Christ's head dissolves into a flattening blaze of golden light. All traces of bodily suffering have vanished, or rather, been vanquished. Even Christ's wounds, the final remnants of his earthly torment, have become glorious jewels emanating a healing light. Seen against the *Resurrection*, the *Crucifixion* sheds any potential sadism and becomes a more complex image of a love beyond reason capable of assuming the greatest torment and miraculously triumphing over it.

*The Hospital Context and  
the Consolation of Christ's Death*

All this takes on greater poignancy when we remember Grünewald's primary audience was patients spending their final weeks or months in a monastic hospital. In an age without effective medicines or painkillers, hospitals were more like hospices for the poor. Wealthy Christians generally died in their palaces and townhouses, though some joined monasteries at the end in the pursuit of salvation. Rather than healing, the primary purpose of sixteenth-century hospitals was to relieve suffering, isolation, and dying by setting them in a meaningful framework of consolation and hope.

Once we restore Grünewald's *Crucifixion* to its hospital location, where most of its viewers suffered their own physical, psychological, and spiritual anguish, we can recognize in this horrific image a profound beacon of hope, not despite the overwhelming brutality but because of it. For the dying patient, the image of the crucified Christ reassured and consoled by transforming the worst torment into a sacramental image of redemption. Victory was hidden amidst

darkness, despair, and defeat. A decaying, destroyed body yet hinted at its own miraculous resurrection. A crucified God without comfort gave succor to those undergoing their own final struggle.

By confining violence and despair on the exterior, the artist made the viewer's experience of the multi-layered altarpiece into a healing journey away from suffering and death. Here the human and spiritual depth of the *Nativity* comes particularly to the fore. By enfolding the Christ child in the joyous embrace of a radiant, loving Madonna alongside an ecclesiastical *Annunciation*, Grünewald also allowed viewers to see the salvational embrace of the soul by the Mother-Church. Long a core theme in Christian death rituals and prayers, it appeared here in the new, humanist terms of the Renaissance Madonna.

The *Resurrection* extended the larger dynamic of spiritual consolation by setting Christ's victory over torment against the same darkness seen in the *Crucifixion*. In the *Resurrection*, the patient could glimpse radiant hope amidst darkness and death, each confirming and deepening the authenticity of the other. In contrast to the almost hopeless gloom marking Christ's death in the *Crucifixion*, the darkness in the *Resurrection* glowed with the familiar twinkle of the night sky. In Grünewald's *Resurrection*, even darkness and death were now transfigured with a celestial glimmer of eternity and hope.

#### *Grünewald's Visionary Naturalism as High Renaissance*

In its striking and carefully-crafted antithesis to the lacerated body of the *Crucifixion*, the spotless, glowing body of the *Resurrection* shows Grünewald's rhetorical command over the expressive human form. Of course, this flexible naturalism appears within the *Resurrection* itself with its terrestrial lower section and its celestial upper zone. None of this, of course, was artistically possible in the late Middle Ages, or even in the Early Renaissance as we see in a painting of the *Resurrection* from the late fifteenth century by a follower of Martin Schongauer.<sup>8</sup>

In the end, Grünewald's medieval roots should not obscure his High Renaissance forms and self-conscious artistry. Even in the upper zone, we see less a true medieval flatness than an atmospheric, dramatic, visionary space typical of the sixteenth century. Medieval

gold leaf gives way to flowing, coloristic spaces and forms which, for all their differences, share important Renaissance values with works by Titian or with Raphael's *Transfiguration* (1519). However flattening the celestial radiance around Christ's head and shoulders, it also works in strikingly naturalistic terms, as a rising sun burning mystically against a night sky twinkling with stars. Here, in a nocturnal setting which reverses the bleak, supernatural darkness of the *Crucifixion*, day and night suddenly coexist in a glorious, visionary moment overcoming nature's law and vanquishing all death. That Grünewald used natural forms to image miracles beyond nature only confirms his historical position as a Renaissance artist.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Recent literature on Grünewald includes books by Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), and Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Both of these books are discussed insightfully by Joseph Leo Koerner in "The Master's Secret," *The New Republic*, Nov. 26, 1990, 42-46.

<sup>2</sup>One text has Christ's tormentors force his mouth open as they cough up phlegm and spit into his mouth until he chokes. For this and similar texts, many tied to Old Testament prophecies, see James Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (Kortrijk: Van Ghennert, 1979).

<sup>3</sup>Since the late Middle Ages, the Magdalen was shown wailing, while the Madonna grieved moderately and decorously. The Pseudo-Bonaventure puts it thus: "Oh, if you could see the Lady weeping between these words, but moderately and softly, and the Magdalen frantic about her Master and crying with deep sobs, perhaps you too would not restrain your tears." See Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, ed. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie Green (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 309.

<sup>4</sup>Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, p. 330.

<sup>5</sup>Grünewald's Isenheim Madonna can be compared to the Madonnas of Raphael and to Correggio's Uffizi Madonna, where the Child also appears as a newborn.

<sup>6</sup>Renaissance art and literature revived numerous classical texts on Mother Earth and related figures of nature's cosmic sexuality and fertility (Venus, Ceres,

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nymphs, and so on) in fashioning new images on this theme, such as Giorgione's *Tempesta* and *Sleeping Venus*, the hundreds of landscapes with naked goddesses and nymphs, and numerous paintings and prints of satyr and centaur families.

<sup>7</sup>This figure has been correctly identified in Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim*.

<sup>8</sup>This painting is now in the same museum with the Isenheim altarpiece.