

Artistic activity in Colmar and Strasbourg in the late Gothic period (1470 – 1500)

During one of his visits to Alsace in 1492, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I stopped in Strasbourg and Colmar. The two cities were wealthy and heavily populated (17,000 inhabitants in Strasbourg, 7,000 in Colmar). Artisans, including painters, sculptors, goldsmiths and master glassmakers, were organised into guilds that stipulated everyone's rights and duties. In the last quarter of the 15th century, Strasbourg boasted no fewer than eighteen painters and eight sculptors, whereas there are records of eight painters and three sculptors in Colmar.

Artistic activity in Colmar was dominated by the art of Martin Schongauer (c.1445 – 1491). The Colmar artist acquired a following, and alongside works inspired by his prints, others were produced by his followers, painters based in Colmar who reproduced his style but lacked the master's artistic genius.



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Last Supper* and *Ecce Homo*, c. 1500, oil on wood panel

In the small *Crucifixion* or the panels of the *Last Supper* and *Ecce Homo*, which were once the two sides of a double-sided panel, the forms were inspired by an engraving of Christ on the Cross, or a composition seen on the Altarpiece of the Dominicans, but the connection goes further still. The artist must have been trained by "Martin the Beautiful", from whom he learnt the technique of creating

an ordered hierarchy of folds in the drapery that gives volume to the apostle in the foreground of the *Last Supper* and the *perizonium* around the hips of Christ's lifeless body.



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Crucifixion*, c. 1480, oil on wood panel

The painter responsible for the wings of the *Altarpiece of the Life of the Virgin* from the Franciscan church would not have travelled to Flanders, but is likely to have trained with Martin Schongauer, which probably explains his decision to include a careful depiction of Joseph's carpenter's tools and the belltower of the collegiate church of St Martin in the bottom of a valley in the *Nativity* panel.



Upper Rhine, Colmar, *Life of the Virgin Altarpiece: the Nativity*, 4th quarter of the 15th century, oil on panel

The altarpiece may have been commissioned from Urbain Hutter, a painter in Colmar attested between 1471 and 1497. The attribution was made in the past due to similarities between the two panels and the mural paintings adorning the cloister of the Dominican friars in Colmar.

These similarities are now difficult to demonstrate, however, as the cycle of the Passion painted by Hutter on the walls of the east and south galleries of the cloister at the former Dominican convent is unfortunately in a state of preservation that provides no scope for comparison. *The Crucifixion* from the Franciscan church and the *Miracle of the Roast Chickens Brought Back to Life* seem to come from the same workshop in Colmar, which was also indebted to Martin Schongauer, but had abandoned the charm of his compositions for an equally anecdotal but clumsier style.



Upper Rhine (Colmar?),
The Legend of Saint James: The Miracle of the Roast Chickens, c. 1480, oil on wood panel

His influence is equally strong in the figure of the young woman who appears twice in stained glass windows that must have been made in Freiburg im Breisgau. The treatment of the drapery and the hair is reminiscent of the charm of Martin Schongauer's creations.

The defining figure in artistic creation in Strasbourg remained Nicolaus von Leyden (active from 1462 to 1473). The sculptor, who definitely came from the Netherlands, is documented in Strasbourg for the first time in 1464. His creations seem to be animated by an inner energy driving the movement of the bodies, as well as the movement of the drapery that accentuates the gestures whilst emphasising the volumes, and even the expressions of the faces, which are

delicately captured in the stone. His innovative works were a major influence on sculpture in the Upper Rhine, and in Strasbourg, his art was perpetuated by his followers. The sculptor responsible for the *Virgin of Niedermorschwihr*, for example, contrasts the voluminous, serene figure of the Virgin with the restless Infant Jesus holding a lock of his mother's hair in one hand and caressing her thumb with the other.



Upper Rhine, Strasbourg, *Virgin of Niedermorschwihr*, c. 1500, polychrome wood

The Virgin's placid pose fits well with her melancholy expression deriving from the knowledge that her son will die on the cross.