

Sculpture in Basel and Ulm around 1500

These free imperial cities* located in two neighbouring regions within the Holy Roman Empire, the Upper Rhine and Swabia, played a major economic, and consequently also artistic role in their respective regions. Basel on the Rhine and Ulm on the Danube were magnets for goods and people attracted by their prosperity. Thanks to their highly organised institutions and social structures, there are numerous sources pertaining to artistic activity, enabling us to understand the context within which the art was produced and often providing us with the names of the artists associated with the works.

Swabian sculpture is represented by just three works, produced by the most highly renowned workshops in the city of Ulm, belonging to Niklaus Weckmann and Daniel Mauch. The works by Niklaus Weckmann (documented in Ulm between 1481 and 1526) mentioned in the sources have unfortunately been destroyed, and just one signed work remains: the statue of the Knight Stephan von Gundelfinen in the church of the town of Neufra.

Numerous works were grouped around the statue, including the Musée Unterlinden's two saints, *Mary Magdalene and Agatha* (?).



Swabia, attributed to the circle of Niklaus Weckmann, *St Agatha* (or Genevieve?) and *St Mary Magdalene*, c. 1480, wood (lime), traces of polychrome decoration

They lack their polychrome decoration, but the two low reliefs* nevertheless display the formal qualities of the workshop's output: the modelling of the oval female faces with their full forms and delicate features, and the hair falling in thick, wavy locks.

The small *Altarpiece of St Anne with the Virgin and Child*, on the other hand, is attributed to the entourage of Daniel Mauch (Ulm, 1477 – Liège, 1540).



Swabia, attributed to the circle of Daniel Mauch, *Altarpiece of St Anne with the Virgin and Child* (central sculpture), c. 1510 – 1515, sculptures in polychrome wood (lime)

His undeniably charming works touch us with their intimate expressivity imbued with sweetness, maternal affection and reflection.

The Basel school of sculpture is perfectly illustrated by numerous works from a local source. Guy Guers, the preceptor of the Antonite monastic complex of Isenheim, commissioned a workshop in Basel to make the stalls for his church, although only a few parts survive.

The structure, which dates from 1493, was installed in the choir of the church and must have been made by the same craftsmen who worked with Ulrich Bruder on the stalls* of St Peter's Church in Basel.



Upper Rhine, Basel, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1500, stripped wood (lime), with a few traces of polychrome decoration

The Virgin and Child, which has unfortunately lost its polychrome decoration, can be linked stylistically to a figure of *St Lawrence* attributed to Heinrich Isenhut (active between 1478 and 1500), which is held at Basel's Historical Museum: the two works share the same static, formal pose, a similar treatment of the drapery, and a heavy, elongated face. In contrast, the delicate silhouette of the *Virgin of Calvary* illustrates the art of Martin Lebzelter (active from 1491 to his death in 1519 or 1520). A *Virgin and Child* and a figure of *St James* are characteristic of the workshop of Jos Guntersumer (active from 1489 to 1517) and his son Dominicus (active from 1500 to 1526). The seated posture of the two statues accentuates the static formality of their silhouettes, which is nicely tempered by the treatment of the drapery, with its juxtaposition of undulations and broken folds.



Attributed to Martin Hoffmann, *Man of Sorrows* and *St Martin*, c. 1515 – 1520, polychrome wood

In contrast, the bodies of *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* and *St Martin* by Martin Hoffmann (documented from 1507 to his death in around 1530 – 1531) are very much in evidence, with carefully chosen gestures, lively drapery and expressive faces with very pronounced features. A comparison of these two sculptures with the master's two documented works, the *Busts of Prophets* from Basel's town hall, leaves no doubt as to the origin of the museum's sculptures.

Free imperial cities: under the Holy Roman Empire, cities that were under the direct authority of the emperor and enjoyed certain freedoms, such as the right to strike coins

Low relief: relief sculpture with little depth to its forms, designed to be viewed from the front

Stalls: wooden seats in the choir of a church reserved for the clergy, sometimes with highly ornate decoration