

## The Isenheim Altarpiece

“There, in the former Unterlinden convent, it appears as soon as one enters, a savage work that immediately stuns you with the awful nightmare of a Calvary [...] with its trumpeting colours and tragic screams, with the violence of its apotheoses and its charnel house frenzies, it absorbs and enthralls you.” Like the novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, who described his encounter with the work in a book written in 1908, viewers of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* are filled with fascination and admiration. The altarpiece\* was made for the high altar\* of the wealthy Antonite monastic complex of Isenheim, and has been displayed in the chapel of the Dominican convent of Unterlinden since the opening of the museum in 1853.

The emotional power of this monumental polyptych painted by Grünewald and sculpted by Nikolaus Hagenhauer between 1512 and 1516 derives from the quality of the painting, the richness of its colours and the expressivity of the scenes and the figures. Its seven panels of lime wood and ten sculptures illustrate several episodes from the lives of Christ and St Anthony the Hermit, the patron saint of the community.

### Origin and function

The monastic complex of Isenheim was founded in around 1300 about twenty kilometres from Colmar, as an outpost of the Antonite order of hospital brothers\*, whose vocation was to care for victims of “St Anthony’s fire”. The disease was nothing short of a plague in the Middle Ages, caused by the ingestion of rye flour made from grain contaminated with the ergot fungus, which led to convulsive and gangrenous symptoms.

To treat these afflictions, the Antonites administered the “saint vinage”, an infusion of plants that was brought into

contact with the relics of St Anthony, whilst ensuring the sufferers received healthy food each day. They also provided St Anthony’s balm\*, a healing ointment made from twelve plants with curative properties. In addition to this treatment, the complex had a reputation for the amputation of gangrenous limbs, which was performed by specialist surgeons. The altarpiece was also designed to play its part in the patients’ recovery by offering them comfort and consolation through its very realistic and harrowing presentation of the *Crucifixion* and the hope of recovery conveyed by the scene of the *Resurrection*.

For many years, the paintings and sculptures were erroneously attributed to Albrecht Dürer, but are now recognised as the work of Grünewald and Nikolaus Hagenhauer. Whilst Grünewald’s biography remains obscure, we have more documentation on the life of Nikolaus Hagenhauer. The entire altarpiece was probably made in his workshop in Strasbourg in the early 16th century. The sculptor was active in the Alsatian capital between 1486 and 1529, producing numerous altarpieces, including the polyptych for the high altar of Strasbourg cathedral in around 1500.

Grünewald, the enigmatic artist whose real name was Mathis Gothart Nithart, was born in Würzburg in around 1480 and died in Halle in 1528. He was a painter and hydraulic engineer, a learned figure with an understanding of nature and techniques. His output was relatively modest, consisting of ten painted works and around forty drawings.

### Presentation

As it stands, the altarpiece is presented in an incomplete state; it was dismantled in the wake of the French Revolution,

leading to the loss of the sculpted structure that crowned the work. Structurally, the altarpiece belongs to the category of double-winged polyptychs, meaning it was designed to allow three different presentations, which were probably governed by the liturgical calendar.

## Altarpiece closed



When closed, the altarpiece reveals a terrifying vision of the *Crucifixion* filled with suffering, flanked by panels depicting the two saints who were invoked against epidemics: St Anthony and St Sebastian, to whom people prayed for protection against the plague. Beneath the central scene, the predella\* contains a depiction of the *Entombment*.

## Intermediate presentation (First opening)



The first opening of the altarpiece reveals the luminous panels depicting the *Annunciation*, the *Concert of Angels*, the *Nativity* and the *Resurrection*, all of which express symbols of joy and hope.

## Altarpiece open (Second opening)



When fully opened, the altarpiece reveals a majestic sculpture of the community's patron saint, sitting on a throne between St Augustine and St Jerome. Flanking the sculptures are painted panels depicting *St Anthony Tormented by Demons* and *The Visit of St Anthony to St Paul*. The predella shows Christ as the Saviour of the World amidst the apostles.

**Altarpiece:** refers to a painted and/or sculpted work standing above the altar of a church or chapel. The altarpiece consists of a corpus (the main body), wings, a predella (the base) and a decorative sculpted section above the corpus.

**Balm:** soothing ointment applied to wounds or burns

**High altar:** main altar in the choir of a church where the priest celebrates mass

**Order of hospital brothers:** religious order whose members' vocation was to care for the sick

**Predella:** painted or sculpted work forming the base of an altarpiece