

A MASTERPIECE BORN OF SAINT ANTHONY'S

Matthias Grunewald's 16th century *Isenheim Altarpiece* glorified suffering and offered comfort to those afflicted with a dread disease

By Stanley Meisler, *Smithsonian*, September, 1999

The *Isenheim Altarpiece*, painted by Matthias Grunewald almost 500 years ago, is regarded by scholars and critics as a sublime artistic creation, an icon of Western civilization like Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Yet, in all of last year, barely 250,000 people came to the Unterlinden Museum in the French Alsatian town of Colmar to look at this masterpiece of Northern Renaissance art. That is a paltry number compared with the millions who crowd into the museums of Paris and Rome and New York every year to render homage to similar stirring creations. "Of the handful of the greatest works of Western art," New York Times art critic Michael Kimmelman wrote after making a pilgrimage to the altarpiece in 1998, "it's the one that may have been seen by the fewest people, certainly by the fewest Americans."

Colmar, a pleasant town of 80,000 with quiet walkways and flowered canals, is far from the main tourist routes and sites of Europe. The town does boast the historic home of Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi, the sculptor of the Statue of Liberty, as well as a nearby restaurant that was awarded the Michelin Guide's highest ranking of three stars. Nonetheless, relatively few visitors take the trouble to visit this small city near the German border.

Yet, though the altarpiece has never been viewed by masses of people, it has demonstrated a profound influence on the few. When he first came upon the work in the 1920s, Elias Canetti, the Bulgarian-born author and future Nobel laureate, did not want to leave at closing time. "I wished for invisibility," he said in his memoirs, "so that I might spend the night there." He completed his celebrated novel *Auto-da-Fe* in Vienna in a room bedecked with reproductions of the masterpiece. The German composer Paul Hindemith based his 1930s opera *Mathis der Maler* (*Mathis the Painter*) on Grunewald and the altar. In 1932, the altarpiece inspired Pablo Picasso to complete a series of ink drawings of the Crucifixion. Although most of his figures, in the Picasso manner of that era, resembled sculpted bone, a discerning viewer could make out distinctive allusions to Grunewald.

Grunewald painted the panels of the altarpiece from 1512 to 1516 in a chapel of a hospital and monastery run by Antonite monks in the town of Isenheim, about 15 miles south of Colmar. The monks took their name from Saint Anthony, whom they venerated as a healer and sufferer who pioneered the idea of monasticism in Christianity. The Antonite order operated the hospital in Isenheim largely for those afflicted by a disease known then as "Saint Anthony's fire."

That disease (now rare and called "ergotism") struck down many in periodic epidemics during the Middle Ages. Saint Anthony's fire set off painful skin eruptions that blackened and turned gangrenous, often requiring amputations. The eruptions were accompanied by nervous spasms and convulsions. Many victims died.

Saint Anthony's fire came from the poison of a fungus that clung to rye and was inadvertently pounded into the flour used to make rye bread. The cause, however, was not known in Grunewald's time. The monks treated the sick with a balm made from herbs and other plants and with prayers to Saint Anthony, who was believed to possess miraculous curing powers. The monks also tried to bolster the faith of the sick by reminding them that Christ—and Saint Anthony as well—had suffered even greater torments. Grunewald's altarpiece played an important mystical and psychological role in the Isenheim treatment program.

Grunewald, a contemporary of fellow German painter Albrecht Dürer, was an artist and engineer whose previous work, while distinguished, never reached the breathtaking heights of the altarpiece in Isenheim. At the direction of the Antonite



Grunewald's altarpiece is renowned for its vivid, glowing portrayals of uplifting scenes, such as that of the Madonna and Child, as well as more tortured images.

monks, he took an existing altarpiece of wood carvings and transformed it into a stunning, many-layered polyptych of two large paintings and seven smaller ones on surrounding wooden panels.

The resulting work was designed to show three different sets of scenes, depending on how many "wings," or hinged panels, were swung open. A terrifying Crucifixion dominated the altarpiece when all the wings remained closed. Opening the first pair of wings revealed an Annunciation, a glorious Nativity and a mystical Resurrection. When the second pair of wings was swung back, the piece, now completely open, would delve into the troubled life of Saint Anthony. The different phases could be shown in the chapel at different times of the year: the Nativity at Christmas, for example, and the Crucifixion on Good Friday. But no matter what scene was exposed, the altarpiece would bristle with meaning for sufferers of the dreaded Saint Anthony's fire.

The closed stage endowed the altarpiece with its greatness. J. K. Huysmans, the 19th-century French novelist, wrote that when one came upon the "horrific nightmare" and "pitiful horror" of the Crucifixion, it was "as if a typhoon of art had been let loose," and was sweeping you away. Christ's tense hands and feet writhe under the pain of the nails driven through them. His emaciated body is strewn with sores. The Isenheim patients could have no doubt about his suffering.

The middle stage, with one set of wings open, features a Nativity scene in which Mary and the Christ Child are serenaded by a strange choir of viol-playing angels. A tub, a chamber pot and a crib at Mary's feet are stark, realistic notes in an otherwise supernatural scene.

The most hopeful and unusual section of the middle stage is the panel that portrays the Resurrection. Aglow and surrounded by light, Christ bursts out of his tomb, a slight smile on his red lips, his skin as white as alabaster. Nothing remains of his suffering save for a neat red slash on each palm and foot and a slim scar on his side. In this work, Huysmans maintained, "Grunewald shows himself to be the boldest painter who has ever lived."

The final stage, with all wings open, is not all Grunewald. The altarpiece was designed to hold an existing display of gilded wooden sculptures created by Niklaus Hagenauer some 25 years earlier. The sculptures include large figures of Saint Anthony and other saints associated with healing. They are flanked by two wings painted by Grunewald that dramatize episodes in the life of Saint Anthony.

On the left, Anthony meets Saint Paul, a fellow hermit, in an eerie forest. The scene is tranquil, and special plants sprout near the feet of the saints—plants used for the balm administered by the Antonite monks. But tranquility vanishes in the other wing as Saint Anthony battles the fury of ferocious demons trying to torment him into abandoning his faith.

For the past two centuries, no one has seen the altarpiece the way the monks and patients did when it loomed over the chapel of the hospital in Isenheim. The work was dismantled long ago. A visitor today can see all of the altarpiece's paintings, but they no longer open onto each other. Wooden models on the wall demonstrate how the polyptych once worked.

Scholars and tourists sometimes complain and demand that the museum put the altarpiece back together. "But how do you do this?" asks Catherine Leroy, a curator in charge of the altarpiece and other medieval art in the Unterlinden Museum. "Which part do you show and when? How do you work out a system to make the altarpiece open and close automatically?" The museum has managed to keep Grunewald's paintings in good condition partly because the wooden sections are separated and do not smack against each other. Says Leroy, "To show it any differently than we show it now would be indefensible."

Much like the mystery of William Shakespeare, the identity of Matthias Grunewald remains shrouded in confusion and conjecture. The name Grunewald itself, in fact, is not correct. A German painter and historian, Joachim von Sandrart, mistakenly assigned it to the artist in a book published in 1675. Most scholars now believe that Grunewald's real name



Saint Anthony – whose name was taken by the Antonite monks and given to the disease that afflicted their patients – figures almost as prominently as Christ in the artwork.

was either Mathis Gothardt or Mathis Gothardt Neithardt, but they continue the convention of using the wrong name. The details of Grunewald's life also remain largely a mystery. What is known is that he was born around 1480 in the German Bavarian town of Wurzburg. He became a painter, an engineer, a manufacturer of paints and soap, and the designer of, among other projects, the reconstruction of the Aschaffenburg Palace in Bavaria. His reputation as a painter must have been considerable, for the Antonite order in Isenheim was wealthy and sought renowned artists to decorate its chapel. Today, barely a dozen of his major works exist, residing mainly in German museums and churches. There is only one Grunewald painting in the United States—a small Crucifixion scene in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. And, of course, there is the altarpiece at Colmar.

The Isenheim Altarpiece flirted with danger more than once in the bizarre history that followed its creation. For several centuries, admirers were sure that Dürer, the acknowledged Northern European master, must have painted it. Near the end of the 16th century, Rudolf II, the Holy Roman Emperor, tried to buy the polyptych from the Antonite monks for his collection. But the monks refused to sell.

Attention to the altarpiece dwindled over the years as the hospital became less important. The cause of Saint Anthony's fire was discovered, and millers began to root out the poisonous fungus from the rye. In 1777, the Antonite monks lost their identity when the Knights of Malta took over the order. The French Revolution soon unleashed a bitter onslaught against the Catholic Church and its property. Mobs stormed the Isenheim complex in 1793 and looted the chapel. The sculpted base and crown of the altarpiece vanished. The panels were dismantled. Two government officials, however, managed to save all the paintings and most of the sculptures and store them in the library of the former Jesuit school in Colmar. Ultimately, the Isenheim chapel burned down.

In the middle of the 19th century, a society of art connoisseurs persuaded the city of Colmar to give up plans to demolish the former Dominican convent known as the Unterlinden. Instead, the society was allowed to transform it into a museum to house the Isenheim Altarpiece and other religious art rescued from the revolution.

The altarpiece's move to Colmar had already awakened interest in Grunewald and his work. A policeman who liked to delve into art history in his spare time proved that the paintings were the work of Grunewald and not Dürer. Later scholars shed light on Grunewald's identity. But it was not until the novelist Huysmans published his passionate praise at the turn of the century that word spread throughout Europe of the altarpiece's value and uniqueness.



A 1905 drawing shows how the altar may have originally looked, with wings open.

When World War I erupted in 1914, the paintings were in German hands. France had lost Alsace, Colmar, the Unterlinden Museum and the Isenheim Altarpiece in the Franco-Prussian War more than four decades earlier. Out of fear that the altarpiece would be damaged in fighting along the French border, the German Expressionist painter Max Beckmann urged his government to move it for safekeeping. The government agreed and put the paintings in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Upon visiting the museum, the novelist Thomas Mann described the paintings as "among the strongest that ever came before my eyes." The Prague-born poet Rainer Maria Rilke, urging a friend to visit him in Munich, held out a chance to see Grunewald's altarpiece as an incentive.

The paintings underwent their last major restoration in Munich, one that the French suspected was too heavy-handed. Leroy, the Unterlinden curator, says, "We still know very little about what they did." Alsace reverted to France after the war, and the Germans reluctantly returned the altarpiece to Colmar after long negotiations.

On the eve of World War II, the French, fearing that Colmar was too close to the German border, moved the altarpiece to a castle in southwestern France, near Limoges. After occupying France, the Germans transported the work closer to Germany, putting it in a cave in the Vosges Mountains in Alsace. When the war ended, Allied soldiers and German prisoners returned the piece to the museum in Colmar, where it has remained ever since.

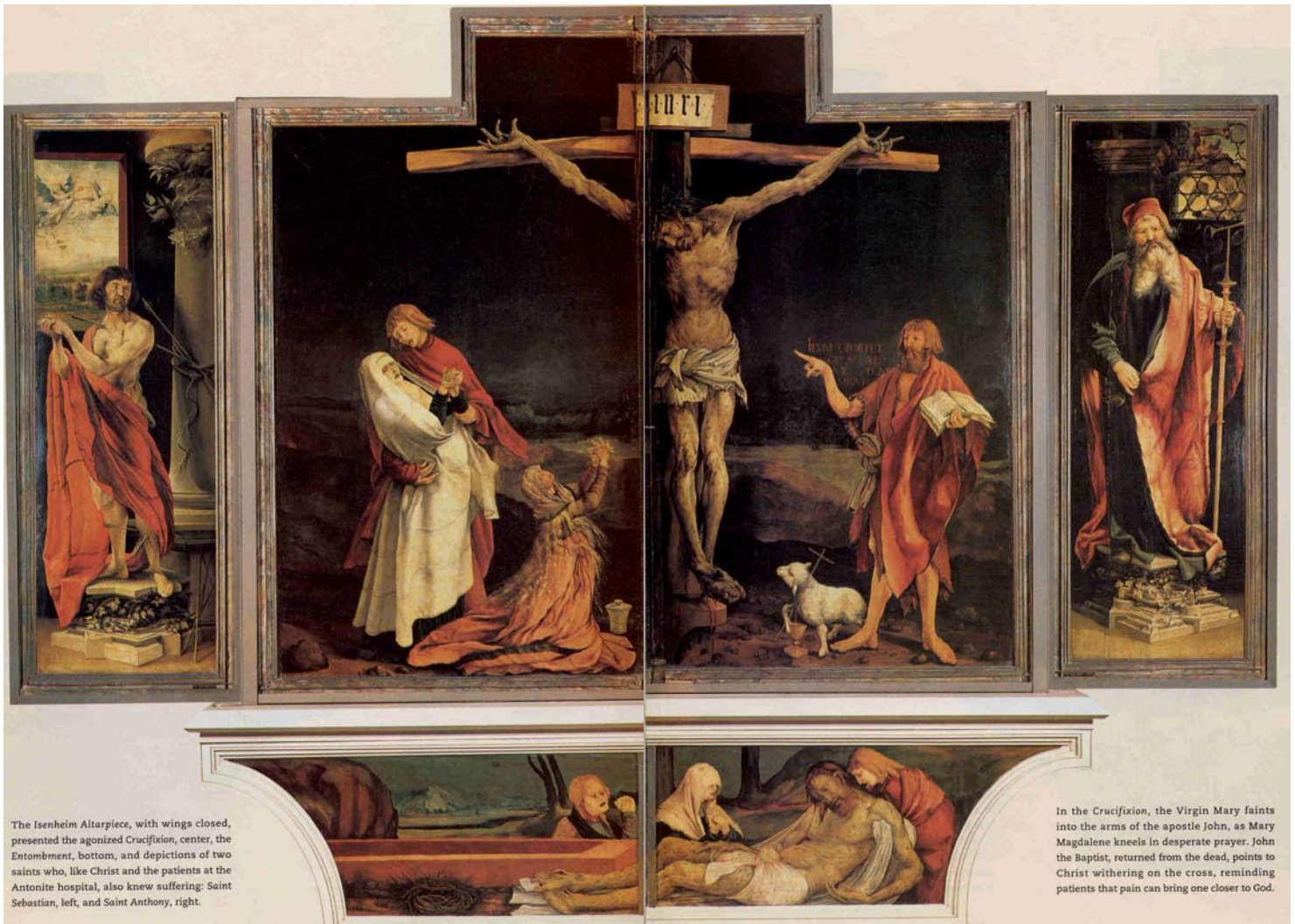
Scholarly interest in the altarpiece, which peaked between the wars, continues today. The Library of Congress catalogue cites more than 20 new books on Grunewald, in English, French and German, since

1975. But, while interest in the Isenheim Altarpiece has not slackened in academic circles, there has been a decline in the public's interest. More than 350,000 visitors came to the Unterlinden Museum in 1987. Last year the number was down to 250,000. Catherine Leroy attributes the decrease largely to the end of the Cold War. "Many Germans who used to vacation in France are now going eastwards to countries that they could not visit before," she says.

For today's pilgrim to Grunewald's masterpiece, however, there is a blessing in the relative lack of other visitors. You're often free to sit for hours, savoring the power and beauty of the paintings. No one blocks your view. You do not have to elbow anyone to see portions up close. There is so little noise you can hear the intake of breath. You cannot have such blissful privacy amid the massive crowds in front of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre or within the Sistine Chapel in Rome. For that alone, it's worth the trip.

BY **STANLEY MEISLER**

Author **Stanley Meisler** first came upon the Grunewald altarpiece in the 1980s as a Paris correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*.

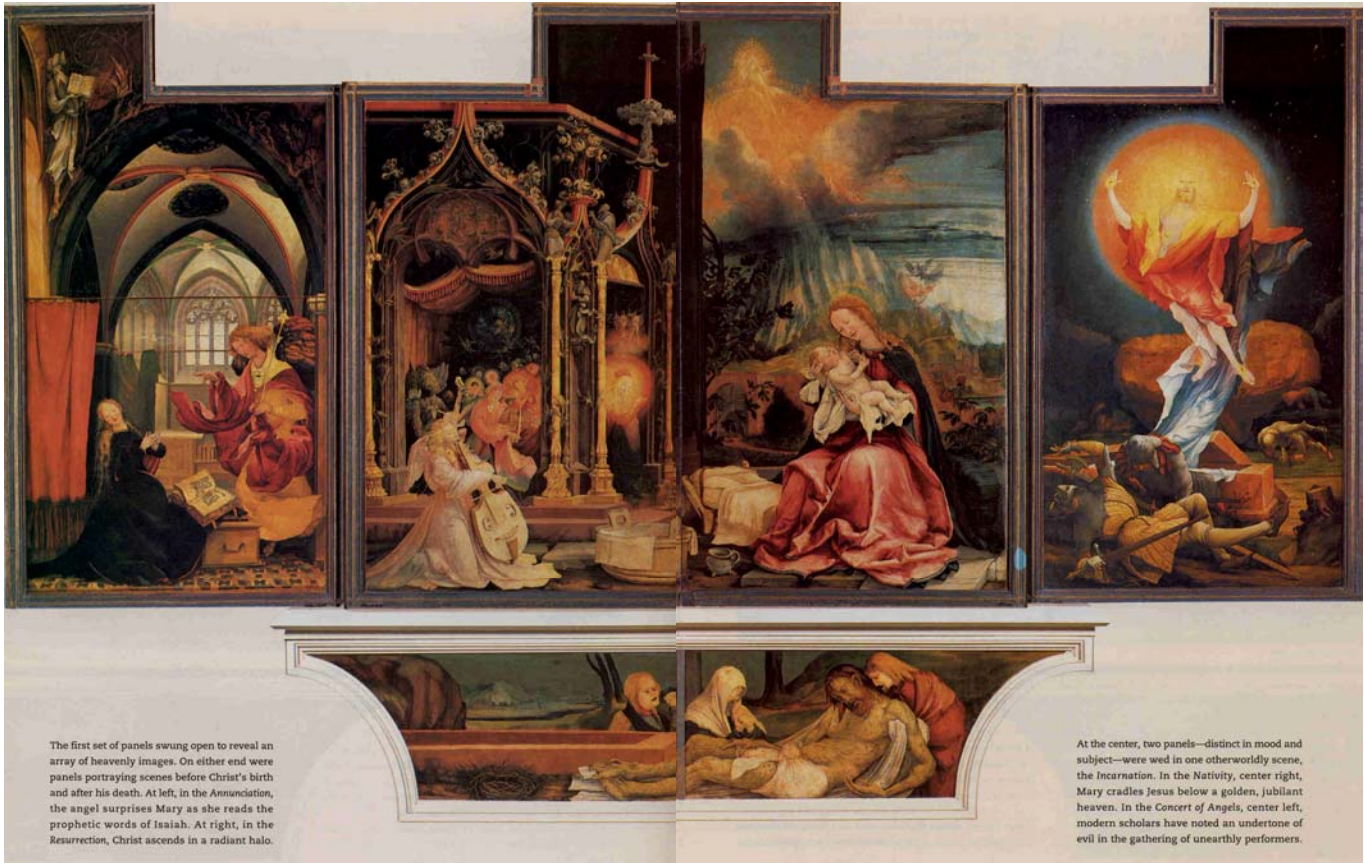


The Isenheim Altarpiece, with wings closed, presented the agonized Crucifixion, center, the Entombment, bottom, and depictions of two saints who, like Christ and the patients at the Antonite hospital, also knew suffering: Saint Sebastian, left, and Saint Anthony, right.

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At the center, two panels—distinct in mood and subject—were wed in one otherworldly scene, the Incarnation. In the Nativity, center right, Mary cradles Jesus below a golden, jubilant heaven. In the Concert of Angels, center left, modern scholars have noted an undertone of evil in the gathering of unearthly performers.

With all wings open and the Entombment panel removed from below, the gilded carvings of a preexisting altarpiece were revealed. The sculptures in that work include a portrayal of Christ and the Twelve Apostles, and figures of Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Saint Anthony. On either side were panels dramatizing moments from Saint Anthony's life. On the left is the *Visit of Saint Anthony to Saint Paul the Hermit*. In the surreal *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, on the right, patients may have identified as much with the bloated, pockmarked creature in the foreground as with the beleaguered saint.



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