German and Flemish in the Härad altarpiece: a provincial Swedish work with far-reaching connections
Earl, Carol
Fornvänn 2008(103):2, s. [89]-101 : ill.
http://kulturarvsdata.se/raa/fornvannen/html/2008_089
Ingår i: samla.raa.se
German and Flemish in the Härad Altarpiece: a Provincial Swedish Work with Far-reaching Connections

By Carol Earl


The provincial altarpiece above the main altar in the parish church of Härad in Södermanland shows diverse influences upon its authors. A close examination of this Late Medieval Passion piece gives us opportunity to compare the impact of German and Flemish works of art in Sweden upon its craftsmen. This transitional altarpiece combines characteristics typical of both German and Flemish retables. Other influences such as the historical development of skilled workers in Sweden, the physical situation of the church in the proximity of Strängnäs Cathedral, its supposed patron saints and the involvement of the commissioner of the work are taken into consideration, as well as the artistic ability of the craftsmen themselves. Finally an analytical approach to provincial works is proposed using the parallel case of the Ljusdal and Öviken altarpieces.

Carol Earl, Drève de Linkebeek 8, BE-1640 Rhode-St-Genèse, Belgium
earlybird@pandora.be

Härad parish’s little Romanesque church, situated in a sparsely populated region in the Swedish province of Södermanland, houses an extraordinary accumulation of Medieval art. There are pieces sculpted in stone and wood, painted on panels or sculptures, and worked in copper and cloth. Just how these works of art were accumulated will perhaps rest a mystery, but the objects themselves reveal a wealth of information about the late Gothic period in Sweden. The importance of the Härad altarpiece – a typical, locally produced work – is in its manifestation of the widely varying influences upon Swedish artisans/craftsmen and their adaptations. In examining these influences and their interpretation in the Härad altarpiece (fig. 1), I will demonstrate an approach to stylistic analysis of local works of art such as the above.

The parish of Härad is located on the road between Strängnäs and Eskilstuna, an important route for pilgrims worshiping the Swedish Saint Eskil during the Middle Ages. The richness of its art could indicate that it functioned as a stage on the pilgrimage. Many Swedish church archives were seized and destroyed around 1530, following the Reformation, including those of Härad. The foundation date of the church is therefore difficult to establish. An analysis of architectural style and details indicate a date of origin around 1200 (Redelius 1994, p. 3).

Some objects of art furnishing the church – like the baptismal font, the holy rood and a reli-

Fornvännen 103 (2008)
quary – date from the 13th century and were probably acquired at the end of its construction. The Passion altarpiece and two shrines (one to the Apocalyptic Madonna and the other to Mary Magdalene) come from the 15th century.

Considering the relative isolation of the Lake Mälaren area and its late development in a European perspective (Stockholm was not founded until 1251), sources of inspiration for Swedish artisans and artists were limited. These sources include imported works of art like paintings and altarpieces, books, illuminated manuscripts, studio drawings, copperplates, block books etc. Books and illuminated manuscripts lost today are documented in wills and archives (Hedlund 1993, pp. 26–36).

Many artists came from other parts of Europe to decorate Swedish churches and castles, perhaps encouraging specialization among Swedish craftsmen. The lack of Swedish craftsmen is documented in Lindberg’s (1989, pp. 152–153) study of Medieval guilds. According to a controversial legend, painters among the local monks also contributed to the decoration of churches and monasteries (Bonsdorff 1990, p. 259–287). In fact, few monks are recorded as pictor (painter or sculptor): one in Vadstena monastery’s register and one assigned to Strängnäs Dominican monastery from Dortmund in 1502 (Reichert 1901, p. 77). Little indicates that Swedish artists traveled in Europe to learn their profession, since as late as 1546, king Gustav I complained about his subjects’ reluctance to learn specialized crafts (Lindberg 1989, p. 152).

In this paper, I will examine two main strands of European artistic influence on the altarpiece from Härad, Flemish and German.

Flemish innovations in technique and composition were adopted widely in European art in general from c. 1390. These reflected an interest in the realistic depiction of material and of our surroundings, in the expression of human pathos and in relating narratives anchored in everyday life. Their “illusion of reality” is a subject treated by Didier Martens (1998, pp. 255–277) and their concept of pictorial space by Roland Recht (2007, pp. 177–185) and Henri Pauwels (1998, pp. 243–253).

German art and altarpieces could have been imported to the Diocese of Strängnäs as early as 1251, the year the Hanseatic Union in Lübeck was invited to participate in the founding of Stockholm. However, Lübeck altarpieces influenced by Flemish art, incorporating narrative scenes, were probably not imported to Sweden until the mid-15th century (Andersson 1980, p. 69; Tångeberg 1986, p. 305). Aron Andersson (1980, p. 67) also noted the paucity of works imported to the diocese of Strängnäs before the first Flemish altarpiece in Sweden, which was ordered by Bishop Rogge during his investiture at Strängnäs Cathedral (1486–1501).

With this framework in mind we will now examine influences on the Härad altarpiece.

The altarpiece from Härad

The Härad altarpiece (fig. 1) is a triptych previously dated between 1450 and 1500. The subject of the piece is the Passion of Christ, one of the most popular motifs during the Middle Ages. The caisse measures 149x149 cm and the wing dimensions are 74.9 by 148.9 cm. The general condition of the piece is very good: only one arm and some decorative tracery are missing. The piece has been restored several times, and the gilding and polychromy have obviously been retouched. The extant predella is not original.

The difference in quality between the Crucifixion scene and the individual statues surrounding it is striking and disturbs the unity of the piece. The figures of the Crucifixion are crudely sculpted, the faces poorly defined in contrast with the sculpted figures in the surrounding compartments. A comparison of the two Mary Magdalene figures presented confirms that two (or more) sculptors have worked on the altarpiece.
The Magdalen in the compartment has a round, turned-up nose; her clothing is sophisticated with complicated draped folds, her turban and veil immaculate. The Swooning group Magdalen’s nose is big and straight, her dress folds are straight and her turban simple.

The individual statues are too small for the side compartments – an indication that they were “prefabricated” and not designed specifically for this caisse.

The position of Mary Magdalen in the left lower compartment of the caisse (instead of the Virgin) must be pointed out as atypical for the iconography of this time. Usually changes in iconographic representation of this type indicate a particular interest in this saint on the part of the benefactor commissioning the work or the church in which it would repose, and their subsequent influence upon the artist’s representation. The additional presence of a separate altar to Mary Magdalen in Härad church demonstrates a specific interest in this saint.

The caisse
A central Crucifixion scene surrounded by individual carved figures in separate compartments is typical of German altarpieces. It resembles that of an altarpiece originally in the Great Church of Stockholm, a Lübeck work, dated 1468 with paintings attributed to Herman Rode (fig. 2; Andersson 1980, pp. 109–110). This altarpiece later came to Österåker church and is now in the Museum of National Antiquities (SHM 3753). The number of side compartments in its caisse is two times those of Härad, but the organization is the same. Its interior wings are sculpted with the compartments containing more statues of individual saints, but the paintings on their exterior represent similar themes and colors as those found on the interior wings of Härad.

At first glance, the altarpiece from Österåker seems to be the prototype for the Härad altarpiece. It would certainly have been seen as an important work of art in Sweden at that time, originally hanging in the same cathedral that
contained Notke’s St. George sculpture. We can safely assume that the author of the Härad piece or the person commissioning it had seen it.

This organization of the caisse is rarely found in Flemish altarpieces, where the compartments surrounding the central scene contain sculpted narrative scenes and the interior wings’ scenes are painted (Phillipot 1990, pp. 111–119; Jacobs 1998, pp. 239–244). Saints’ statues rarely appear on their wings. The only Flemish altarpiece in Sweden that approaches the Lübeck altarpiece from Österåker in composition is that of Folkärna in Dalecarlia, dated around 1500.

The Crucifixion scene of the Härad altarpiece is typical for the Late Middle Ages. The altarpiece from Österåker has a similar presentation with the exception of the number of participants at the foot of the cross. These erect figures surrounding the central scene are presented in stiff, fully frontal positions. Although the draping of the robes of the Virgin and Mary Magdalen are individualized, their faces are from the same mold, sweet, round and smiling. This “iconic” presentation is an important similarity between the two pieces.

However, upon looking closer, we find significant differences. In the Härad retable, Christ’s crown of thorns is plaited. The thieves are hanging from crosses, made not of planks, but of tree trunks. They are blindfolded and scantily clothed. Most striking is their long brown hair. Where do these details come from? A Flemish altarpiece, the Passion of Christ II, conserved in nearby Strängnäs Cathedral (fig. 3), displays these specific characteristics – and other similarities. Referred to as “Lilla Roggeskåpet” in Sweden, Strängnäs II (dated around 1500) was the second Flemish altarpiece commissioned by Bishop Rogge for the Cathedral (Andersson 1980, p. 187). The impression of depth created by the thieves’ crosses on a diagonal towards the interior of the compartment and the rocky ground ascending towards the background features in both altarpieces – a typically Flemish composition (Phillipot 1990, p. 112). This, along with
the treatment of the hair, the blindfolds and the
tree-trunk crosses in both are also typically
Flemish. The position of the thieves’ heads and
feet correspond. In both, the angels’ wings are
straight and open. The treatment of the angels’
robes resembles that of the painted wings of the
first Flemish altarpiece in Strängnäs, Strängnäs
I, dated to before 1493 (Périer-D’Ieteren 1985,
p.77).

The Swooning of the Virgin group at the
foot of the cross merits close examination. The
Härad and Österåker altarpieces have superficial
similarities (figs 4–5): the rigidity of the figures,
frozen in their sorrow, looking out of the altarpiece
towards the spectator. In contrast, the Swooning
scene in the Strängnäs II altarpiece is full of
movement and the reactions of one person to
another’s sorrow (fig. 6). The weakness of the
fainting Virgin is confirmed by the position of
her legs traced under her heavy robe. Mary Magdalen
bends towards the Virgin to take her hand
and arm, her face filled with compassion. The
same expression marks the face of St. John as he
supports the Virgin, turning away from the gruesome crucifixion. Is it possible to compare this
sophisticated scene with the Härad altarpiece in
all its simplicity? In my opinion, the author of the
Härad altarpiece, with his limited talent, has
attempted to reproduce the essential elements of
the Strängnäs work in his Swooning group.

The internal relationship and differences in
height of the figures in the Strängnäs II Swooning
(St. John very tall, the Virgin shorter and
Mary Magdalen between the two) corresponds
with that of the Härad scene. The figure of Mary
Magdalen could safely be called a copy of her
figure in Strängnäs II. Numerous details confirm
this proposition: the position of her body
towards the Virgin, the way she takes the
hand of the Virgin in hers with the other hand
supporting her at the waist, her dress with its
straight bodice where the skirt folds up to the
waist at the same angle, her turban knotted in
the same spots and her shoe pecking out from
under the skirt. The figure of Mary Magdalen
demonstrates clearly the correspondence be-
tween the two pieces.

The location of St. John to the right of the
Virgin, his hand visible on the Virgin’s arm, cor-
responds with the Strängnäs piece, as does his
hair, shorter and straighter than in the Österåker
altarpiece.

Finally the Virgin. The Härad Virgin does not
give the impression of swooning, but the folds of
her robe betray the influence of Strängnäs II.
The Härad sculptor may not have been as tal-
ented as his Flemish counterparts, but he tried
to imitate them. In comparison, the fall of the
folds in the Härad Virgin’s robe are different
from those of the virgin in the Österåker altarpiece.
They arrive from the back to bend around
the Virgin’s bent leg, whence they cascade to-
wards the floor. Her robe or veil lies over her
shoulders as in Strängnäs II. The front of her
dress displays similar straight parallel folds. At
the neck of her dress, the white wimple recalls
the one in Strängnäs II.

Even the group of three soldiers in the Härad
crucifixion have some details of clothing that
correspond with the two soldiers to the lower
far right of the Strängnäs II crucifixion, i.e. the
boots and armor.

Fig. 3. Detail of crucifixion, Strängnäs II. Photograph
Lennart Karlsson.

German and Flemish in the Härad Altarpiece 93

Figwänne 103 (2008)
A question of methodology: documentation was recently published of a local copy of a sophisticated altarpiece, the altarpieces of Ljusdal and Oviken (Höglund 1999). If the letter commissioning the copy of the Ljusdal altarpiece for the Oviken church had not been preserved, one would doubt that these two pieces were related. An initial comparison of the two works shows few similarities other than the choice of iconography and the order of scenes. The difference in colors used reinforces the enormous difference in quality of the sculptures. Whereas blue and gold dominate the Antwerp altarpiece of Ljusdal, the locally produced Oviken piece is predominantly green and red.

When trying to determine if a work of art is a copy or a forgery, we normally search for elements that are out of place, i.e. clothing or objects dating from a later period than that which the work purports to present. In working with primitive copies, the technique is the opposite. Since the skill of the provincial artist is usually limited, his copy is not obvious. One is obliged to search among minor elements such as details, objects, clothing and composition (often exaggerated) to confirm resemblances between the two works. An example in the Ljusdal-Oviken altarpieces is the scene of the Presentation at the temple, where details of the priest’s clothing (rosette and bag) reveal a direct connection between the two works. From this point of departure, one is encouraged to search for other similarities that are then more easily found. This technique applies to the Härad Swooning scene as previously demonstrated. The Ljusdal-Oviken example gives credence to this associative approach as a technique in diagnosing influences on works of art.

The wings
The interior wings have four scenes from the Passion. On the right wing is the descent from the cross and a pietà scene. On the left the Crowning of thorns and the Flagellation. As regards the wing paintings, reference must first be made...
to their condition. This piece has been restored numerous times. The thick layers of paint in many places make it difficult to judge if what we see today is actually what was originally represented. However, in general one can presume that the paintings do represent the originals because they present a uniform ensemble as regards their size, colors, size and number of figures and subject matter. The paintings on the outside of the wings are severely damaged and it would be risky to draw any conclusions based upon them.

Notably different is the treatment of the eyes on the left and right wings. Superficially rounded, hollowed-out eyes are used on the left wing, whereas on the right, they are lightly drawn with brief black lines or deeply set under protruding eyebrows.

A lack of perspective leaves a two-dimensional flat effect despite an effort to create a sense of depth through the use of a diagonally tiled floor, windows in background walls and landscapes in the distance. The character of the paintings leads me to believe that the painter may have been a mural specialist.

The origin of the wing paintings of the Härad altarpiece could lie in illuminated manuscripts. Nearer to hand, however, are the paintings of the altarpiece from Österåker that correspond on most points with the left wing. The same slender, elongated figures are found, not only in illuminated manuscripts, but also in the paintings of the Flemings Roger van der Weyden and Dirk Bouts. Charles C. Cuttler (1998, p. 596) notes the influence of Bouts upon Herman Rode’s Vision of the Virgin to Saint Luke (1485) in its space, warm colors and Eyckian clair-obscure – commenting on the otherwise archaic character of paintings from North of Germany of that time.

The left wing paintings
In the Flagellation scene (fig. 7) the torso of Christ is reminiscent of pre-Eyckian illuminated manuscripts. According to Hoogewerff (1936–47), these illuminations were the source of inspiration later on for the Master of Catherine of Clèves, Wm. Vrelant. Hoogewerff further contends that Vrelant in his turn influenced artists of the Baltic region, including Herman Rode to whom the Österåker altarpiece has been attributed (fig. 8; Hoogewerff 1936–47, vol. 1, p. 468). A copperplate from the small series of the Passion of Christ by Master E.S. (German, active 1440–1467) appears to have inspired the basic composition (fig. 9). However, the position of the arm of Christ over his head is represented neither in the Österåker altarpiece nor in the E.S. copperplate. We do find it in the Litslena (Uppland) altarpiece, a Lübeck work from the period 1470–1500.

The positions of the tormentors could have been taken from a mural on the triumphal arch in Strängnäs cathedral dating around 1460. The bald dwarf holding the rope binding Christ to the pillar is an exact copy. This depiction in its turn seems to have been taken from a copperplate by the Master of 1446, an anonymous German artist, date carved in woodblock. The burlesque touch of exposing a torturer’s naked rump is also found in Master E.S.’s copperplate mentioned above.

Fig. 6. Swooning group, Strängnäs II. Photograph Lennart Karlsson.
The influence of the Österåker altarpiece continues in the scene with the crowning with thorns. It is evident in the face of Christ, the man kneeling before him, the hat of the torturer to his right and the arched openings in the background wall. The position of the legs and arms of the torturers of the two altarpieces correspond with those of another of Master E.S.’ Passion series copperplates. Since the Härad depiction shows the kneeling torturer bald as in the copperplate and lifting his hat as in the Österåker painting, its painter theoretically could have been acquainted with both works and combined them – or had another source of inspiration.

The pleats in Christ’s robe have been carefully treated to accentuate the heavy texture of the cloth and the creases formed upon its reaching the ground, perhaps an influence of the carved interpretation of this scene found in Strängnäs II. Certainly this treatment of material originated in Flemish paintings with van Eyck. The open robe showing Christ’s bleeding torso has no equivalent in either Rode’s or E.S.’s works, but occurs in Strängnäs II. Provincial artists often chose to emphasize the pathetic or cruel aspects of these scenes, adding sores and blood to cover Christ’s body or dripping from the thorns on his crown. The Revelations of St. Bridget of Sweden (14th century) provided surprisingly detailed descriptions of Christ’s sufferings such as the number of strokes (five thousand) received during the flagellation and certainly influenced the imagery of the time (Hall 1974, pp. 80, 123).

The right wing

This wing of the Härad altarpiece differs from the Österåker paintings in that it presents two new themes: The Descent from the Cross and the Pietà (fig. 10). The popularity of the Descent from the Cross in Sweden was probably due to the belief in the miraculous powers of a specific group that was a part of an altarpiece in the Dominican Priory in Stockholm (Andersson 1962,
Copies were executed by Swedish masters like Håkan Gulleson (Njutånger, Hälsingland) and Johannes Sculptor (Östra Ryd, Uppland). It is then not surprising to find this particular theme represented in Hårad’s altarpiece – in spite of it not being represented among the Österåker paintings.

The presentation of this theme differs from the paintings on the left wing in that the figures are massive, their bodies hidden under the heavy drapes of cloaks and clothing, the faces fuller. The grouping of St. John, the Virgin and Joseph holding Christ dominates the left foreground. The right side of the scene is filled with symbolic masses of green rocks or bushes ascending towards the background, perhaps an attempt to reproduce the background common in Flemish carved scenes.

The central figures of Joseph and Christ are treated in greater detail than the others in this scene. Joseph’s face, his eye sunken deep beneath protruding eyebrows and his cheekbone ascending to his temple is finely modeled. Christ’s face in death is fixed in an expression of suffering, his eyebrows framing the deep, closed eyes. The Virgin and St. John, however, have generic oval faces with eyes briefly sketched, lacking the shadowed contours of the central figures. Their eyebrows are, however, severely compressed, expressing their sorrow.

These briefly sketched eyes are similar to those painted by Jordan Målare (painter and sculptor active in Stockholm and Arboga, 1460–80) on the Sollentuna altarpiece (Uppland). Jordan Målare and other Swedish artisans such as Albertus Pictor used copperplates as inspiration for their works (Kempff 1985, p. 29–33). The Tott altarpiece (Aspö, Södermanland) is an outstanding example of the use of copperplates from Master E.S.’s small passion series as the primary source of inspiration for a work by a provincial artisan (Earl 2004). One hypothesis might be that the prints studied by these painters were ones reproduced in such numbers that the hatching of the eyes on the copperplate originals had been reduced to only a few traces – traces which were faithfully copied by the painters.

However, the contrasting treatment of the eyes within the same composition corresponds with the treatment of the eyes and the morphology in the wing paintings attributed to Colyn de Coter of Strängnäs I (Périer-D’Iteren 1984). The Virgin’s smooth oval face with eyes modestly peering downward is found in the Nativity and the Annunciation scenes (fig. 11). Joseph’s knobby face could have been inspired by any number of figures, e.g. the Devil in the Temptation of Christ or the kneeling king in the Adoration of the Magi. Joseph’s turban figures prominently on the standing king in that same scene. The softly rounded features and the bodies hidden under robes falling in heavy folds is characteristic of the treatment on the Strängnäs I panels. The feet of Christ with long bent toes correspond with these panels. Finally, the use of small dots of a lighter hue against a darker rounded form to create the effect of bushes mounting in waves towards the horizon can also be found in the background of the Temptation scene of Strängnäs I.

The morphology of Christ’s feet is repeated...
even in the scenes of the left panels in contrast to his feet having long flat toes in the Österåker panels. Another correspondence between the left panel and Strängnäs I is the voluminous robe enveloping Christ in the Crowning of Thorns. In the Österåker depiction, the robe is skimpy and short. Nicodemus and the other figure on the ladders releasing Christ from the cross are depicted with leggings of a different color for each leg. These leggings are not found in the Österåker panel, but are repeated on two figures in Härad’s Flagellation scene. Without these correspondences between the right and left panels, one would be tempted to propose that the left and right panels were painted by different painters — so contrasting they are in style and composition.

The Pietà also seems to be inspired by the paintings of Strängnäs I. We again find a green landscape in the background. The monumental group of mourners is clothed in voluminous draped robes with only faces and hands apparent. Their faces are smooth ovals with lightly drawn eyes and small bow-shaped lips. Christ’s gory body lays across the inner lining of the Virgin’s robe — he bears only a loincloth and the crown of thorns. Dominating the scene are the folds of material in the robes. Worked in detail in its final broken cascade to the floor, the Virgin’s cloak seems to overflow the borders of the painting.

The Brussels altarpiece in By (Dalecarlia) presents a scene corresponding to the position of the Virgin holding Christ (c. 1510). The Strängnäs I altarpiece also presents us a carved image of this kind, a typical theme for Brussels altarpieces (Nieuwdorp 1993, p. 142). Only the Virgin in Strängnäs I, however, resembles the Härad Virgin in the angle of the head, the way her robe is draped over her head, falling in heavy, broken pleats under the right arm of Christ to the green rocky ground.

In a mural (c. 1435) in Ärentuna church (Uppland), the draping of the Virgin’s veil and angle of her head are strongly reminiscent of the Härad scene. These murals are attributed to the
Mälar Valley School (ATA, Ikonografiskt register 1771:5, IP86) and are worthy of further examination.

There is no exact counterpart of this scene among the works of Master E.S. The morphology and the angle of the Härad Virgin’s head mirror those of the Virgin in prayer of Master E.S., which in its turn seems to have been inspired by the painting “Christ and Maria” attributed to the Master of Flémalle (Bever 1987, p. 39). St. John’s long light hair shows a strong similarity to that of St. John in Master E.S.’s Crucifixion. It is unknown how many of his works survive – a third of the 320 known copperplates exist in only one example (Shestack 1967, p. 4).

The theme of the Pietà was widely spread in Sweden in Flemish, German and local altarpieces. It is impossible to point to any specific source of inspiration other than the stylistic influence of the nearby Strängnäs altarpieces.

Conclusion

The Härad altarpiece displays a mixture of many influences. German ones can be seen in the shape of the caisse and its compartments which correspond to the format of the Lübeck altarpieces. It shows great likeness to the altarpiece from Österåker previously in Stockholm (1468), even though the number of small side compartments bordering the central scene is reduced to half.

The statues of saints surrounding the central Calvary scene reinforce the impression of correspondence between the two pieces. The stubby, round figures of the individual statues are more typical of German art than Flemish. The iconic stances of all the carved figures reflect those of Österåker. The left interior wing paintings take their themes and style from the Österåker piece. The right interior wing paintings present the same color scheme and marry well with the whole. The engraved gold background of the caisse is typical of German altarpieces.

The Flemish influences on Härad can be seen in the use of a carved wood caisse with painted interior wings. Its architectonic décor is more extravagant than in the Österåker piece and typical for Flemish altarpieces. The open-work friezes at the base of the caisse correspond with Flemish friezes.

The author of the Härad altarpiece has directly incorporated elements from Strängnäs II, a Brussels altarpiece, in the sculptures of the corpus. The long dark hair of the thieves, and their clothes, the crosses made of tree trunks, the pointed, straight wings of the angels demonstrate an intimate knowledge of the Strängnäs piece. The thieves’ crosses, diagonally placed, and the rocks in the interior of the scene lending a sense of depth are also present in both works.

In the Swooning scene, the relationship of the participants to each other and the details of their clothing are (evidence for a) direct influence of Strängnäs II. St. John is positioned behind the Virgin in the Österåker piece and Strängnäs I, whereas in Strängnäs II and Härad he is to her right.

Further, we find in the paintings of the wings, particularly in the right wing, a stylistic influence from the wing paintings of Strängnäs I. Strängnäs Cathedral with its wealth of decoration, its murals and altarpieces, has given the author of Härad access to works of art and inspiration not readily available in rural Sweden. This evidence for the influence of cathedral art upon objects found in nearby churches complements the findings of Carina Jacobsson (1995, p. 273) regarding wooden sculptures in the diocese of Linköping.

Finally, the church or benefactor commissioning the work has probably influenced the iconography and perhaps even the style by indicating particularly admired works of art. Not only the placement of Mary Madlene, but also the choice of the Pietà and the Descent from the Cross for the right wing – and their stylistic interpretation – indicate a strong individual presence.

In summary, we see the influence upon the Härad altarpiece of a) foreign works of art in Sweden, such as Lübeckian and Flemish altarpieces; b) local works like the murals in Strängnäs Cathedral; c) copperplate prints; d) the personal preferences of the church or person commissioning the work; e) the artisans interpretation – all combined in one small provincial altarpiece.

The dating of the Härad altarpiece will obviously have to be amended to a date after the
arrival of Strängnäs II in Sweden around 1500, making a realistic date the first quarter of the 16th century.

References


Summary

The provincial altarpiece above the main altar in the parish church of Härad in Södermanland shows diverse influences upon its authors. A close examination of this Late Medieval Passion piece gives us opportunity to compare the impact of German and Flemish works of art in Sweden upon its craftsmen.

The altarpiece combines elements from both German and Flemish works. Primary inspiration seems to come from the Österåker altarpiece, a Lübeck work, with a similar shape of the caisse and its compartments and the iconic stance of the sculpted figures. The colors of the painted wings correspond, whereas thematically only the left wing shows similarities. Flemish features become apparent upon comparison with the Strängnäs II altarpiece, a Flemish work dated around 1500. Its combination of a sculpted caisse with painted interior wings is typical for Flemish altarpieces. The Härad sculptor has reproduced its central Crucifixion scene, albeit clumsily. Details confirming this conclusion are in the general layout using figures of an equal size and a ground of green rocks angled upwards toward the background to create an illusion of depth. In the specific groups, the internal positions of the figures, their attitudes and clothing echo the Flemish original.

Often, the difficulty in ascertaining the models of a provincial copy derives from the inability of the provincial craftsman to faithfully reproduce the original. In this case, one must look for details to disclose the parentage. The case of the Ljusdal and Oviken altarpieces confirms the situation as such. The copier shows more concern with small details than with the proportions of the original – thus while even the number of tassels on a bonnet may correspond exactly with the original, the bearer of the bonnet shows little resemblance to her model. Since the iconography of scenes from the life of Christ or the Virgin were fairly standardized during the Middle Ages as were the order in which they were represented, one cannot only rely upon this type of similarities. One needs the confirmation obtained from specific details to be certain when drawing conclusions. This is also true with the Härad altarpiece.

The paintings on the left and right wings illustrate a transition from German to Flemish influences. The left wing paintings could have been copied from the Österåker altarpiece (dated 1468) whereas the paintings on the right display characteristics similar to those found on the wing paintings of the Strängnäs I altarpiece, a Flemish work dated around 1490.

The proximity of Härad to Strängnäs Cathedral with its Flemish altarpieces and other art including murals influenced either the craftsmen or the commissioner of the Härad altarpiece.

Finally, since the Strängnäs II altarpiece came to Strängnäs around 1500, the Härad altarpiece should be dated to the first quarter of the 16th century.