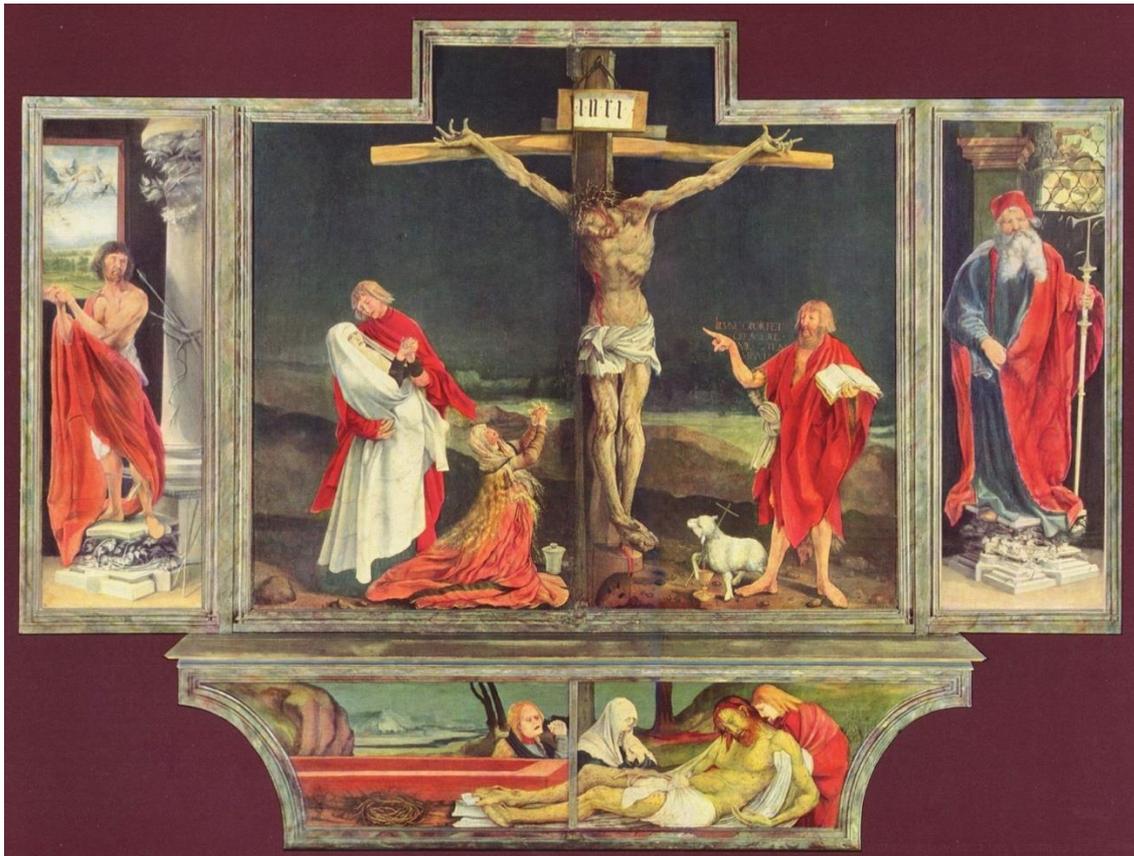


## Divine Identity

### Matthias Grünewald, *Crucifixion from the Isenheim Altarpiece*, c. 1510-16



First view: Wings closed (apart from specific holy days this is the view that would have been seen by a congregation).

Digital image courtesy of Wikiart.org

#### Key facts:

Artist: Matthias Grünewald

Date: c.1510-16

Materials: tempera and oil on linden wood (currently under restoration to remove the yellow varnish)

Size: central panel 269 x 307 cm

Patron: Abbot and Monastic Brothers of St Anthony

Original location: High altar of the Catholic Monastery of St Anthony's hospital chapel, Isenheim, France

Location now: Unterlinden Museum at Colmar, Alsace, now France (at one time part of Germany)

Nationality: Grünewald was German

## **ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

This is a large scale, multi-panelled polyptych (10 painted panels and predella) with three possible viewing experiences - see images. It was commissioned for a specific location which directly affects the meaning of the subject in a unique way. For a clear description read Dr Sally Hickson

<https://smarthistory.org/grunewald-isenheim-altarpiece/>

Subject Matter: Wings Closed

For those not familiar with Christian narratives, check out: <https://smarthistory.org/christianity-an-introduction-2/>; and <https://smarthistory.org/standard-scenes-from-the-life-of-christ-in-art-2/>

- Can you identify the subject matter?
- How can you recognise the individual figures?
- Are their depictions and attributes unusual?

Central Panel: the Crucifixion of Christ can be seen in the central panel with the Virgin Mary, comforted by St John the Evangelist, and Mary Magdalene (identified by the jar of ointment) on the left, and St John the Baptist carrying a book identified by the lamb of God carrying the cross (symbol of Christ's sacrifice), on the right. Note that INRI means Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

Side Panels: the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian pierced by arrows on the left, and on the right a depiction of Saint Anthony the Great. Saint Anthony was the patron saint of those suffering from skin diseases. He was known to have endured great torment due to the skin condition ergotism (from which he died), and the demon, positioned above his shoulder, could be seen to represent the idea that this suffering was never far away. Saint Sebastian (a plague saint), in the other panel, has also undergone suffering – shot by arrows and left for dead, yet the angels behind him suggest salvation.

Predella Panel: The Lamentation over the dead Christ with the two Marys and St John the Evangelist again. The wounded feet are extremely visceral as an image.



The work was intended to be situated in the Hospital Chapel at the monastery of St Anthony of Isenheim (Alsace), founded in the Dauphiné region of France in the 11th century. The Antonine monks of the monastery were noted for their care of plague sufferers as well as their treatment of skin and blood diseases such as ergotism or, as it was then known, Saint Anthony's Fire. This description was given to explain the effect on sufferers:

*"The intestines eaten up by the force of St Anthony's Fire, with ravaged limbs blackened like charcoal: either they die miserably or they live more miserably seeing their feet and hands develop gangrene and separate from the rest of their body: and they suffer muscular spasms that deform them"*<sup>1</sup>

Matthias Grünewald, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, circa. 1512-16. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

### Formal Qualities

Figures:

- How do the poses, gestures and expressions convey extreme emotion?

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<sup>1</sup> Sigebert de Gembloux 1098 quoted in Open University "Viewing Renaissance Art" Chapter 6 Art and Death" p.224

Christ's body dominates the central panel and has been described by Honor and Fleming as 'the most violent' of all the tortured Christs in the history of Western art.<sup>2</sup> The arms of Christ are disproportionate to his body and convey the weight of his body hanging limply from the cross. The gnarled curling hands and feet of Christ and the skin punctured with lesions would have



been instantly accessible to the congregation. They would have understood that Christ was frail and human and suffering alongside them. His agony is also apparent from his emaciated rib cage and open mouth. This image of the divine Christ is all too human.

The Virgin Mary in white seems to be fainting away, eyes closed and mouth downturned, while St John the Evangelist is crying out as he supports her collapse. The kneeling Mary Magdalene gazing upwards is distraught in contrast to the calmer figure of St John the Baptist on the right, exaggeratedly pointing towards Christ's body; he holds a scroll which reads "he must increase, but I must decrease."

Matthias Grünewald, *The Isenheim Altarpiece* (detail), circa. 1512-16. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

*'The possibility of gangrene and the loss of limbs is suggested in the break between the central panels on which the Crucifixion is depicted/Slightly off centre, when the panel was opened, Christ's right arm would be cut-off from the rest of his body'*<sup>3</sup>

The cause of ergotism was discovered in 1597 to be a fungus that can contaminate rye and other cereal crops and causes damage to the nervous system and gangrene of the hands and feet due to the constriction of blood flow to the extremities. It was a disease that could easily have been treated if the culprit had been known. As Jonathan Jones has written, *'[t]he horrific appearance of Christ's flesh on the altarpiece is not pure fantasy, but portrays symptoms the monks were trying to alleviate.'*<sup>4</sup> Thus, both the suffering of the patients and Christ's are directly linked. It is clear, however, that Christ's suffering has ended; his lips are colourless, the immense blood loss he suffered is in evidence and his flesh appears gangrenous. At Christ's feet are four figures, all much smaller in scale. St Mary Magdalen is on her knees; echoing a fainting Virgin Mary, caught by St John

<sup>2</sup> Honor and Fleming, *A World History of Art*, Laurence King, 2009, p.461

<sup>3</sup> de Gembloux 1098 quoted in Open University "Viewing Renaissance Art" Chapter 6 Art and Death" p.224

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Jones, *Hidden Horror*, The Guardian, Wed 12 Dec 2007

the Evangelist. St John the Baptist stands to the left apart from the others; the lamb pictured alongside him is a well-known symbol of Jesus' sacrifice and the inscription above his head translates as "He must increase, but I must decrease". The meaning of this, taken from St John iii:30, foretells the image that is revealed when the wings are open, and the depiction of Christ's glorious resurrection is unveiled. This symbolic placement on the reverse of the crucifixion panel suggests the promise of redemption through the incarnation and resurrection.

*"The Word was made flesh", it is written in the Gospel of St John. No paintings have explored the terrifying implications of that statement further than Grünewald's. Flesh twitches, writhes, smarts, pulses with agony; flesh is a vile sensation, a hideous inescapable burden. In all that, there is to be found the divine. Grünewald's mystical insights were addressed originally to the inmates of a hospital...'<sup>5</sup>*

The biblical backdrop to the crucifixion scene, Golgotha, depicts the sky as black and menacing, the anguished brushstrokes with flickers of languid green are still visible and contrast with the attention paid to every detail in the foreground and, particularly, to the corporality of Christ.

Although painted during the period known as the Renaissance, Grünewald's style is rooted in the northern European Gothic style, with the focus on intense dramatic emotional impact via distortion rather than naturalism. *'There is no trace in any of the figures of an interest in the beauty of the human body or of a desire to establish a "just proportion". Realism is seen in the modelling of the arms, legs and torso of the crucified Christ and in the half-open mouth from which the breath has fled, but Grunewald operates with a highly unrealistic use of proportion and perspective. In a startling development of medieval tradition, Christ as the dominant figure is executed on a larger scale than the other figures: even the sturdy John the Baptist on the right is small by comparison, while the figures on the left are slight and willowy. The frailty of these figures emphasizes their great anguish.'* (<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/northern-renaissance-artists.htm#grunewald>)

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<sup>5</sup> Bell, Julian, *Mirror of the World A New History of Art* p.189



Second view: Wings open (on Sundays to reveal paintings of the Annunciation, Nativity and Resurrection). Digital image courtesy of Wikiart.org. To see this – watch the short animation <https://smarthistory.org/grunewald-isenheim-altarpiece/>

This is characteristically German in its mix of sculpture and painting

- Retable is used as the term for carved altarpieces in which Germany excelled. Often in combination with painting.

Specialist terminology for the retable:

- Corpus: Central body of the structure – a shallow box providing the setting for a narrative, or the representation of the saint or event that the altarpiece is dedicated to. Usually large scale figures, often carved nearly or fully in the round, are the most important and elaborate. The innermost field in the Isenheim altarpiece.

Flugel: Wings – like painted triptychs/polyptychs. Closed and open: liturgical – opened for feast days, closed for workdays and fasts. Protective. Wings could often be painted.

Sarg: Sarcophagus or predella. Emerged particularly in the 15th century: normally the width of the altar table and narrower than the corpus. Raises the retable and provides further subsidiary area to be painted or sculpted.



*Michael Pacher, Sankt Wolfgang Altarpiece, 1471-81, polychrome pine, linden, gilding, oil, over 40 feet (1219 cm) high and more than 20 feet (609 cm) wide, Parish Church, Sankt Wolfgang, Austria. Digital image courtesy of arthistory390*

Extension activity: Compare Grünewald's with an earlier one:



Fully open position (only opened fully on feast days) reveals the corpus, the sculptured figures are by Nicolas of Hagenau. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

## **CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS**

Isenheim is a village about 15 miles (24 km) south of Colmar, Alsace. The monastery at Isenheim had become one of the most important centres on the Upper Rhine by the middle of the 15th century and their abbot was chosen from an international list of candidates and nominated by the Pope. The abbot or preceptor at the time of the altarpiece, Guido Guersi, was from Sicily and he continued a programme of investment in important artworks.

Jeffrey Chipps Smith has commented that Northern Renaissance artists have treated the theme of death 'with exceptional inventiveness'<sup>6</sup> and suggests that the historical period that fostered their development can be directly attributed to this: *'In centuries marked by recurring plagues – especially since the Black Death of 1348 when over one-third of Europe's population died – incurable diseases, famine and frequent wars, including the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, concerns about*

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<sup>6</sup> Chipps Smith, Jeffrey. *The Northern Renaissance*, Phaidon, 2004, p.199

*personal mortality and enduring memory were expressed visually. Estimates about the normal life-span during this period range from 35 to 50 years.'*<sup>7</sup>

Andrew Graham-Dixon has explored this further, stating that, during the early years of the 16th century, there was a prevalent feeling that 'the world was in deep spiritual peril'<sup>8</sup>. The writings of Erasmus had an undeniable impact in motivating a generation of thinkers to seek reformation of the established church and its origins in Rome. In this way, Graham-Dixon believes Erasmus gave 'a decisive twist to the development of humanism in Northern Europe'.<sup>9</sup>

*'Erasmus's ideas spread quickly across the map of early 16th century Northern Europe. Part of the appeal of his intellectual position lay in its extremism, which suited the apocalyptic mood of the times. People were in search of extreme spiritual solutions. Another reason for the popularity of Erasmus's ideas lay in their consistent anti-materialist, anti-elitist tenor. A dislike of Rome's lofty disengagement from the concerns of the people at large, and a suspicion of its excessive emphasis on ceremony, were among the corollaries of his call to spiritual regeneration through the unmediated word of God. ... his work was popularized above all by the new technology of the printing press, which made new and powerful ideas almost impossible to censor.'*<sup>10</sup>

Grünewald was born in Würzburg in 1475 and specialised in painting works for churches in Western Germany, mainly crucifixions. Grünewald was a nickname given to the artist in the 17th century; his professional name as an artist was Mathis Gothard Nithart. Grünewald was only rediscovered in the late 19th century and was celebrated particularly by the German Expressionist artists. In 1525, Grünewald lost his positions at the court of Archbishop Albrecht von Brandenburg in Mainz just after the peasants' revolt of 1524. He then moved to Frankfurt which was closely associated with the Reformation in the very last years of his life. He died in 1528 in Halle, Germany. There is no record of what Grünewald's thoughts were on matters of religion and humanism. Not much is known about Matthias Grünewald, especially in comparison to perhaps the best-known artist of the German Renaissance, Albrecht Dürer.

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Graham-Dixon, Renaissance, 1999 BBC Chapter 4 "Apocalypse" p.184

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

## DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Oil had been refined in the work of the Netherlandish, Flemish and Germanic schools for well over a hundred years and was by this time beginning to be widely used in Italy too. Grünewald is nevertheless quite striking in the effects he achieves with the medium.

*'Grünewald's alla prima\* technique of painting is evident in the many changes made during the execution of the Isenheim panels, most obviously in the Angels' Concert and in the Incarnation. No underdrawings have yet been found under the paint layers. An exceptionally gifted draughtsman, he employed drawings in the traditional manner to make preparatory studies for paintings rather than as autonomous works of art in their own right, as Hans Baldung and Urs Graf were doing soon after 1500. About 35 drawings by Grünewald have been preserved, all of them in black chalk.'*<sup>11</sup>

\**Alla prima* = at the first attempt i.e. with no underdrawing, see *Small Crucifixion* at a high level of magnification to look closely at the effect of his techniques

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-small-crucifixion/vQFwjCut7RnWbg?hl=en>

*'While Grünewald's style has little in common with that of leading Italian masters of the time, this seems to have been a deliberate choice on his part rather than a sign of provincial ignorance. In the panel devoted to St Anthony, the artist almost seems to be flaunting his familiarity with those Italian Renaissance innovations – manifest both in the saint's heroic anatomy and the delicate, Leonardesque blending of light and dark in the background landscape – which the rest of the Isenheim Altarpiece so starkly repudiates.'*<sup>12</sup>

## WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The Isenheim altarpiece has a specific function and is usually interpreted in relation to this:

*'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.'* <https://webmuseo.com>

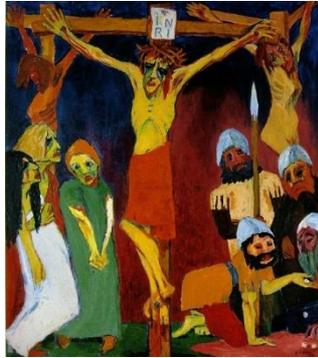
*'The emphatic physical suffering was intended to be thaumaturgic (miracle performing), a point of identification for the denizens of the hospital.'* (Sally Hickson)

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<sup>11</sup> Grove Art online

<sup>12</sup> Graham-Dixon, Andrew, Renaissance, 1999 BBC Chapter 4 "Apocalypse" p.184

However, the altarpiece has also been interpreted as the root of a particular strand of German art once it was used by German Expressionists such as Emil Nolde. For a detailed reception-history of this stand of xenophobic art history see Ann Stieglitz's article.



Emil Nolde, *Crucifixion*, 1912. Oil on canvas



Left Emil Nolde, *Crucifixion*, 1911-1912, oil on canvas, 218.4 x 190.5 cm. Collection Nolde Foundation, Seebull. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Right Map showing location of the village of Isenheim, south of Colmar. Digital image courtesy of Khan Academy

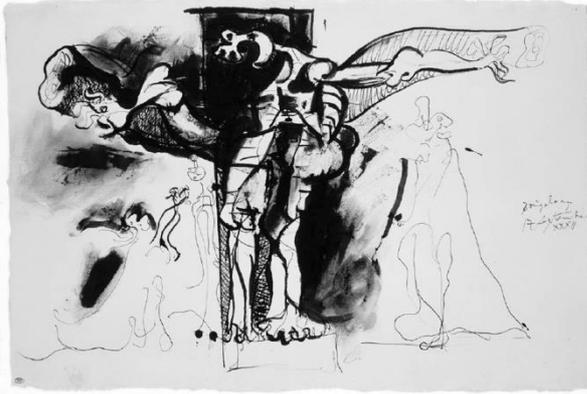
Yet both Pablo Picasso and Graham Sutherland also used it as a source of inspiration. It is unknown as to whether Picasso actually saw Grünewald's Altarpiece but in 1932 he produced a series of black and white ink drawings dedicated to it.

*'We don't know what sparked Picasso's interest in Grünewald's masterpiece, with its brutalised Christ. Most likely, it was brought to his attention by Christian Zervos, founder of the art magazine Cahiers d'art, who, in 1932, was planning an issue of the journal devoted specifically to the Isenheim Altarpiece (as Grünewald's Crucifixion is known).'*<sup>13</sup>

Over the series of drawings Picasso produced (the first three over a matter of days), the scene became more and more distorted, eventually becoming a collection of smooth forms, precariously balanced with only Christ's head at the top of the work still recognisable.

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<sup>13</sup> Sooke, Alastair, The Crucifixion of Pablo Picasso: the crisis that inspired his 'year of wonders', The Telegraph, 3 March 2018



Pablo Picasso, *Crucifixion*, 1932 Ink on paper  
345 x 505 mm



Graham Sutherland, *The Crucifixion*, 1946

Left Pablo Picasso, *Crucifixion*, 1932, ink on paper 34.5 x 51.5 cm. Collection Musée national Picasso, Paris (MP1073).  
Digital image courtesy of Succession Picasso

Right Graham Sutherland, *The Crucifixion*, 1946, oil paint on board, 116.8 x 147.2 x 8.3 cm. Digital image courtesy of Tate  
(N05774)

## FURTHER READING AND LINKS

### Books

- BARONE, Joshua, Isenheim Altarpiece: A Portrait of Agony; a Message of Hope, The New York Times, July 6th 2016
- BELL, Julian, *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art*, Thames and Hudson, 2010
- CHIPPS SMITH, Jeffrey. *The Northern Renaissance*, Phaidon, 2004
- HONOR and FLEMING, *A World History of Art*, Laurence King, 2009, p.461
- WOODS, KIM W; RICHARDSON, CAROLE M. and LYMBEROPOULOU, ANGELIKI eds. (2007). *Viewing Renaissance Art*. Yale University Press/Open University

### Articles and TV

- JONES, Jonathan, Hidden Horror, The Guardian, Wed 12 Dec 2007
- SOOKE, Alistair The Crucifixion of Pablo Picasso: the crisis that inspired his 'year of wonders', The Telegraph, 3 March 2018
- STEIGLITZ, Ann, "The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar after the First World War Author(s): Ann Stieglitz: Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1989)
- GRAHAM-DIXON, Andrew, Renaissance, 1999 BBC Chapter 4 "Apocalypse"