

# To be [titled] or not to be [titled]? Art history and its 'well-(un)known' masters: introductory remarks

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When examining medieval monuments in Europe, one sooner or later encounters a series of works of art whose stylistic appearance, iconography, motifs and compositions seem to be closely related. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, these works, have led and continue to lead art historical research to interpretation attempts that are intended to describe the obvious, but not certain, connections.

This is where the long art-historical methodological tradition of speculative naming begins. Perceptions that cannot be named in more detail become comprehensible through constructs of attribution to persons who can be named. The perhaps newly discovered artistic connections between individual works gain in importance, visibility and attention through the naming. This is appreciated not only by the experts but also by the press, the interested public and, not least, by potential research project sponsors. In addition, the creation of a speculative name often leads to the construction of a personal network of fictitious employees, who can apparently be distinguished hierarchically on the basis of their skills. Secondary groups of works are assigned to possible successors or pupils by style analyses. This framework therefore offers the possibility of moving further works of art into a closer or more distant context. This discussion focuses on this methodology.

## Scholarly discourse

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Vöge (1868-1952) and Adolph Goldschmidt (1863-1944) laid the foundations for an art history of the great continental medieval names. Vöge developed his method of writing the artists' history on the basis of Gothic sculpture in France, while Goldschmidt inventoried medieval works of art. In this tradition stood Johnny Roosval (1879-1965),<sup>1</sup> who documented and classified Gotland's medieval art and invented names for the unknown artists he considered responsible. In his opinion, the masters Byzantios, Majestatis and Calcarius produced the stone sculptures of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Egyptianus was responsible for the fourteenth-century church buildings, and the Passion master, the Othems master and the Union master created the fifteenth-century wall paintings. In the first half of the twentieth century, Carl Georg

<sup>1</sup> Jan von Bonsdorff, 'Tyskland, Norden och medeltiden. Johnny Roosval och Adolph Goldschmidt', in Martin Olin, ed, *Konsten och det nationella: essäer om konsthistoria i Europa 1850-1950*, Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2013, 93, 101-102.

Heise, Harald Busch and Alfred Stange were particularly active in the field of medieval art in Northern Germany. They are among the pioneers of the method.

A critical examination of the constructs of speculative names did not begin until the 1990s, and in the scholarly discourse it ran parallel to the revival of art geography. Both perspectives were and are particularly sensitive in the art history field, as in the 1930s and 1940s they finally led to theses that sought to identify politically motivated, Nazi national styles. Research on the use of the term 'art landscape' moves on thin ice, since it remains closely interwoven with artists in the form of their origins, biographies and personal styles – categories which were abused in art geography in the early twentieth century. At the same time, such an entanglement prompts a revision of the concepts.

The rediscovery of art geography therefore created an awareness of the constructs of attribution. Suggestions were thus sought to meet the need to identify unknown artists on the one hand and to point out strategies of interpretation and biographical constructions associated with them on the other. In 1999, Jan von Bonsdorff, using the example of the so-called Imperialissimaster, a speculative name creation of 1916, for the first time called for a critical examination of efforts at linking and interpreting medieval wooden sculpture and thus for the avoidance of arbitrary interweaving of analyses, contextualisation and perceptions inherent in the work.<sup>2</sup>

In the same period, 2001, the exhibition *Genius Without a Name*<sup>3</sup> about the so-called Master of the Bartholomew Altar took place in Cologne. In this exhibition, numerous researchers attempted to draw a portrait of a stranger based on the works attributed to him. In order for this exhibition to take place at all, it required an 'agreement [ ... ] as to what the object of consideration for the respective study was [and] how closely the oeuvre created by the same hand or the same hands as the named work should be outlined.'<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, here too the problem of hand decisions and dating suggestions became apparent in heterogeneous works, which are ultimately attributable less to a master than to a workshop.<sup>5</sup>

On the revision of art history methods, Peter Tångeberg recently pointed out the lack of durable attribution criteria that make formal, stylistic and technical peculiarities objectively comprehensible. He rightly takes a critical view of the

<sup>2</sup> First used by Rudolf Struck, then taken over by Carl Georg Heise and Eivind S. Engelstad. Francis Beckett changed the name to Bergenfahrermeister and Walter Paatz wrote his first catalogue of works. The provisional name (in German 'Notname') Imperialissimameister prevailed through Viggo Thorlacius-Ussing, Max Hasse, Sten Karling, C.A. Nordman and in current research, Jan von Bonsdorff, 'Imperialissima-mästaren som kategoriseringsproblem', *hikuin* 26, 1999, 45. Further critical remarks are by Julia Trinkert, 'Von Nordschleswig bis Mecklenburg. Forschungsstrategien zum Umgang mit Werken des sogenannten Imperialissimameisters', in Kerstin Petermann, Anja Rasche, Gerhard Weilandt, eds, *Hansische Identitäten*, Petersberg: Imhof 2018, 199-212.

<sup>3</sup> The German title is called 'Genie ohne Namen'.

<sup>4</sup> Stephan Kemperdick and Matthias Weniger, 'Der Bartholomäusmeister. Herkunft und Anfänge seines Stils', in Rainer Budde and Roland Krischel, eds, *Genie ohne Namen. Der Meister des Bartholomäus-Altars*, Köln: DuMont, 2001, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Krischel, 'Der Meister des Bartholomäusaltars', 21.

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description of external similarities that has been customary so far, which, in combination with the notion of a dominance of Lübeck art production in Northern Europe, define expectation and falsify objective perceptions.<sup>6</sup>

### Masters and/or perspectives?

In recent years, two major exhibitions with many visitors again have raised the masters' question. In 2011, the national exhibition of Saxony-Anhalt at Naumburg with the promising title *The Naumburg Master. Sculptor and Architect in the Europe of Cathedrals*<sup>7</sup> presented a phenomenon that for quite some time had been understood as a myth in art historiography<sup>8</sup> in a supposedly new light. A few years later - as a highlight of the Luther Decade in 2017 - the Museum Kunstpalast in Düsseldorf showed Lucas Cranach the Elder as a true genius of Renaissance painting, displayed his influence on other artists and Reformation art and last but not least portrayed him as a real businessman in the exhibition *Lucas Cranach the Elder. Master - Brand - Modernity*.<sup>9</sup>

Both events produced many accompanying publications, most notably a three-part catalogue of more than 1500 pages about the Naumburg Master. One can imagine that almost every aspect of the exhibition theme was illuminated therein, except for the question of the master's identity and personality.<sup>10</sup> In this case the exhibition organisers might have felt obliged to resurrect a historic taboo, not only because of the absence of relevant contemporary sources but most of all because art historiography of the 1930s and 1940s focused on this aspect from a racial point of view. The Naumburg exhibition was even more interested in pursuing a European dimension of its protagonist without being suspected of taking up a nationalist view

<sup>6</sup> Peter Tängeberg, 'Ausweglose Forschung? Nachsätze zur Stockholmer St.-Georgs-Gruppe vier Jahre nach dem Erscheinen meines Buches, nebst einigen Bemerkungen zum neuen Band des Corpus' der mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein', in Jiří Fajt and Markus Hörsch, eds, *Niederländische Kunstexporte nach Nord- und Ostmitteleuropa vom 14. bis 16. Jahrhundert. Forschungen zu ihren Anfängen, zur Rolle höfischer Auftraggeber, der Künstler und ihrer Werkstattbetriebe*, Ostfildern: Thorbecke, 2014 (= *Studia Jagellonica Lipsiensia* 15), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Hartmut Krohm and Holger Kunde, eds, *Der Naumburger Meister: Bildhauer und Architekt im Europa der Kathedralen. Katalog der Ausstellung im Dom, Schlösschen und Stadtmuseum Hohe Lilie in Naumburg vom 29. Juni 2011 bis 02. November 2011*, Vols. 1-3, Petersberg: Imhof 2011/12.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Straehle, *Der Naumburger Meister in der deutschen Kunstgeschichte. Einhundert Jahre deutsche Kunstgeschichtsschreibung 1886-1986*. Phil. Diss. München, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Görres, Beat Wismer and Anne-Marie Bonnet, eds, *Lucas Cranach der Ältere. Meister – Marke – Moderne. Katalog der Ausstellung im Museum Kunstpalast Düsseldorf vom 08.04.2017 bis 30.07.2017*, München: Hirmer, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Exceptions in the catalogue were Jens-Fietje Dwars, 'Fortgesetzte Spiegelungen: Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Rezeptionsgeschichte des Naumburger Meisters', in *Der Naumburger Meister: Bildhauer und Architekt im Europa der Kathedrale*, vol. I, 43-64 and Marc Carel Schurr, 'Zu wievielt war der Naumburger Meister', *ibid.*, vol. 3, 474-487. The debate does not seem to be over yet. See most recently Guido Siebert, 'Der Naumburger Meister und seine Schüler – Virtuosität und Nachahmung in der Bildhauerwerkstatt des Naumburger Westchors', *Saale-Unstrut-Jahrbuch*, 24, 2019, 75-86.

again. Not without reason, the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel, and the President of the Republic of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, therefore bestowed their patronage in words. The Naumburg Master was presented as a French-born artist, whose work led him to the remotest places in the Holy Roman Empire, towards Naumburg or Meissen.<sup>11</sup> The political implications of the whole undertaking become even more obvious when one considers that Naumburg also wanted to apply for UNESCO World Heritage Site status, which was finally achieved in 2018.

Conversely, the Cranach show was more aware of the traps that arise with such an exhibition concept. Of course, the incomparably larger source situation played a decisive role, which easily complemented other traditional methods such as *Stilkritik* (style criticism). In addition, the exhibition focused on new methodological considerations. While examinations according to art technological aspects seem to be more or less usual in the meantime not only for Cranach,<sup>12</sup> Bodo Brinkmann has dealt with the question of how historical knowledge (in this special case on Lucas Cranach, but other events can easily be compared<sup>13</sup>) can be transferred or formed into the digital era.<sup>14</sup>

Comparison of the two exhibitions reveals certain patterns and questions in Old Masters research. Since the 1930s, in most cases it has mainly been museums that deal with the well (un)known masters. Yet no one has ever questioned the role of museums in the issue of attributions. Does a look at the potential number of visitors steer the master's question? From a methodological point of view, art historians should be aware of differentiating their research field: can the same standards be applied for every long-gone master? When and where should be the difference in answering questions about these masters? Taking into account the copious research data dating back to the development of art history as a scientific discipline, one may ask if the very perspective of the vast inventories and their authors, who still force their view of things upon us, should be considered. Perhaps the processing of written inventories in databases (scarcely available online so far) would be a worthwhile way out of the all too entrenched research tradition. This would mean creating new research tools which would allow more dimensional queries and research results - beyond only one single, specific question. Do we then need masters anymore?

<sup>11</sup>A particularly critical position is taken by Peter Kurmann, 'Der Naumburger Meister. Ein Wiedergänger der Kunstgeschichte?', *Kunstchronik*, 66, 2013, 481-488.

<sup>12</sup>Gunnar Heydenreich, 'Cranach? Fragen der Zuschreibung im Lichte kunsttechnologischer Untersuchungen', in Daniel Görres, Beat Wismer and Anne-Marie Bonnet, eds, *Lucas Cranach der Ältere. Meister – Marke – Moderne*, München: Hirmer, 2017, 72-81.

<sup>13</sup>E.g. Iris Kalden-Rosenfeld, *Tilman Riemenschneider – Werkstattleiter in Würzburg. Beiträge zur Organisation einer Bildschnitzer- und Steinbildhauerwerkstatt im ausgehenden Mittelalter*, Ammersbek bei Hamburg 1990.

<sup>14</sup>Bodo Brinkmann, 'Die Cranach-Forschung im digitalen Zeitalter - Von Friedländer/Rosenberg zum Cranach Digital Archive', in Daniel Görres, Beat Wismer and Anne-Marie Bonnet, eds, *Lucas Cranach der Ältere. Meister – Marke – Moderne*, München: Hirmer, 2017, 92-97.

## New tendencies

The masters are dead - long live their names in the echo chamber of the art history discipline? In this guest edited section, the question of whether this method still has a chance of entitlement in an art history methodological canon is posed. This section should be understood as a platform questioning both methodological and practical approaches by art historians working on artists in medieval and early-modern times (e.g. museums, monographs etc.).

The articles in this feature section centre on art historiography of medieval wooden sculpture in Leuven, the Lower Rhine, Maasland, Silesia and Finland. The questions to be asked circle around 'The problem with Leuven sculpture around 1500: the creation of anonymous sculpture workshops', 'Masters without names in medieval Silesia - Master of the Years 1486-1487, Master of the Polyptych from Giessmannsdorf and Wilhelm Kalteysen von Oche', 'Art centres in the Lower Rhine and the Maasland revisited - research potential of a methodological reorientation of medieval art history' and 'Interpreting an anomaly: the encounter between Olga Alice Nygren and Carl Axel Nordman with the Crowned Saint Anne'.

Marjan Debaene focuses on the Brabantine city of Leuven, which was a regional sculpture production centre that followed artistic trends being set in Brussels in the late middle ages. The Leuven sculptors had a varied clientele and received commissions from far beyond the city walls. However, they were not organised in their own corporation and therefore did not apply a system of trademarks to allow quality control. The result was that in the archives many sculptors are known by name, but they can hardly ever be linked to a body of work. Conversely, many remaining sculptures cannot be attributed to a specific sculptor. Marjan's article discusses the case of two anonymous Leuven masters who were provisionally named in the 1970s and who have been assigned a body of works as their oeuvre: The Master of the Crucified Christ Figures and the Master of Christ on the Cold Stone. These 'Notnamen' ('provisional names') are filled with speculation, as the researchers that created these unknown masters made some methodological errors. Since the 1970s, research has barely progressed, and the 'Notnamen' have often started to live a life of their own. Marjan's article offers a different approach to analysing these sculptures and possibly re-grouping them, by showing that stylistic analysis and connoisseurship are only some of many tools and methodologies that can be used to research anonymous late gothic sculpture, such as technical research and cultural space contextualisation, the ultimate goal being to achieve a more nuanced and far richer image of the sculpture workshops active in Leuven around 1500, where the names or 'Notnamen' of the sculptors are of lesser importance.

Agnieszka Patała describes in her contribution the phenomena that archival research established the names of more than 150 artists active in Silesia between 1340 and 1520. Paradoxically however, until 2004 it had remained impossible to definitively link any preserved painted or sculpted artwork with any of these known artists' names. This impasse was reflected in the catalogue of the exhibition

of Silesian medieval art published in 1929.<sup>15</sup> In order to handle and classify the presented objects, its authors brought several anonymous masters into further focus by providing them with names taken from the most significant artwork attributed to them. Their oeuvres were then expanded with additional stylistically related works, which consequently established the model of classification of Silesian late Gothic art that remains in use today. Agnieszka's paper aims to present the effects of the long-term application and development of the model created in 1929. Another objective is to analyse of the consequences of the archival discovery that let scholars identify the so-called Master of the St. Barbara Altarpiece as Wilhelm Kalteysen von Oche.

Julia Trinkert draws attention to the medieval wooden sculptures in the Lower Rhine and the Maasland region from the period 1350-1530, which have been the focus of art historical interest several times. Various inventory and exhibition projects in the twentieth century comprehensively recorded and arranged the numerous works available in the region and assigned them to different, known or unknown, artists or art landscape groups of works of art landscape, according to the status of the respective research claim. The basis of a revision lies in the application of large-scale research efforts toward medieval wooden sculpture and panel painting in the regions of Mecklenburg and Nordschleswig/Sønderjylland. Her idea is to attempt to apply a comprehensive digital mapping of wooden sculptures in the Lower Rhine region, which on the one hand could help to identify small, peripheral art centres and on the other hand could make the distribution channels of art transfer comprehensible.

Elina Räsänen concentrates on two Finnish medievalists, Carl Axel Nordman (1892-1972) and Olga Alice Nygren (1898-1981), and their interpretations of a late-medieval polychrome wood sculpture depicting the crowned Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child. The former was a distinguished scholar and state antiquarian, whereas the latter was a relatively unnoticed art historian who remains so. Nordman's interpretation relied on the role of the carver master, whereas that of Nygren was based on the cult of St Anne. In addition to drawing scholarly attention to one little-known but iconographically interesting medieval sculpture, this article sheds light on the subtle mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion which underlie the construction of professional careers in the art history field.

The contributions to this feature section were made during the session of the same name at NORDIK<sup>16</sup> 2018 in Copenhagen, hosted by the guest editors.<sup>17</sup> They are now made accessible to a wider audience thanks to the authors' willingness to participate in the scientific debate on possible methodological revisions in medieval art history. The wish it that this is a prelude to further fruitful discussions in this field. Where is the origin of this method to be found? What impact do traditional interpretations have on today's research? What impact do they still have on understanding the development process of medieval and early-modern art? How can we deal with missing links? What do high assumed loss rates mean for

<sup>15</sup> Heinz Braune, Erich Wiese, *Schlesische Malerei und Plastik des Mittelalters. Kritischer Katalog der Ausstellung in Breslau 1926*, Leipzig: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1929.

<sup>16</sup> The Nordic Association for Art Historians

<sup>17</sup> The conference was held under the title '[no title] – NORDIK XII 2018 Copenhagen', 25-27 October 2018.

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interpretation models and attribution constructs? What intention can be seen behind the present-day term 'Notnamen'? What would art history be without a name?

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<sup>18</sup> *Corpus der mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein*