

Art centres in the Lower Rhine and the Maasland revisited: research potential of a methodological reorientation of medieval art history

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Introduction

The medieval wooden sculptures in the Lower Rhine and the Maasland region have been the focus of much art historical interest. 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, according to the status of the respective research claim.

Important here are such renowned names as Master Arnt Beeldesnider, Dries Holthuys, the Master of Elsloo, Jan van Steffeswert and Hendrick Douwermann, who afforded a hierarchical systematisation, including possible students and successors. However, numerous fragments and sculptures cannot be integrated into previously ordered systems and so receive less attention. The basis for a revision of the Lower Rhine and Maasland medieval wooden sculptures lies in the application of large-scale research efforts toward medieval wooden sculpture and panel painting in the Mecklenburg and Nordschleswig/Sønderjylland regions. The concept is to apply comprehensive digital mapping of wooden sculptures in the Lower Rhine region. This could help to identify small, peripheral art centres and make the distribution channels of art transfer comprehensible. Moreover, complete data analysis could provide hints about material usage, commissioning and production processes.

Time period

Wooden sculpture from the first three decades of the fifteenth century has not been the focus of art historians. Traditionally, the number of preserved objects has not been very high due to the increasing production of church furnishings from the second half of the fifteenth century. These more 'modern' sculptures are likely to replace older features. The preserved sculptures frequently do not have a clear provenance and often belong to museum or private collections. Their only known history derives from documentation about their art trade past. Nevertheless, the region of the Lower Rhine and the Maasland (Limburg-Luik) is famous for its high density of late-medieval wooden sculptures, which have a long research tradition stretching back to their famous masters.

Research

The first wave of interest in these monuments—from a German point of view—was established due to the comprehensive exhibitions *Rhine and Meuse. Art and Culture 800-1400*¹ (1973)² and *The Parlers and the schöne Stil*³ (1978)⁴, both of which took place in Cologne, and *The Staufer period*⁵ (1977) in Stuttgart.⁶ 1985, Wolfgang Schmid made the first meritorious attempt to list altarpieces of the High and Late Gothic on a topographical map of the Rhineland in Germany, as part of *Historical Atlas of the Rhineland*⁷.⁸ Schmid characterised the types of altarpieces, dating, material and art landscapes. From then it took nearly another decade for art historical research to address wooden sculpture. This included exhibitions, museum catalogues and corpus projects such as *Late Gothic sculpture from Limburg and Grensland*⁹ by Charles Ceulemans and Robert Didier in Sint-Truiden in 1990,¹⁰ *Upstream*¹¹ in Aachen in 1997¹² and *Late medieval wood sculpture at Maas, Rur and Wurm*¹³ by Dietrich Schäfer in 2001.¹⁴ The art history interest here has always been linked to the art production of ‘well-known’ artist personalities in particular, while non-attributable works disappeared in the depths of the often immense number of book pages. At the same time, interdisciplinary approaches, including positivist methods, data analysis

¹ *Rhein und Maas. Kunst und Kultur 800–1400*

² Anton Legner, ed, *Rhein und Maas, Kunst und Kultur, 800–1400, Eine Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums der Stadt Köln und der belgischen Ministerien für französische und niederländische Kultur vom 14. Mai bis 23. Juli 1972 in der Kunsthalle Köln, vom 15. September bis 31. Oktober 1972 in den Königlichen Museen für Kunst und Geschichte in Brüssel*, 2 vol., Köln: Schnütgen-Museum, 1973.

³ *Die Parler und der schöne Stil*

⁴ Anton Legner, ed, *Die Parler und der Schöne Stil, Europäische Kunst unter den Luxemburgern, Ein Handbuch zur Ausstellung des Schnütgen-Museums und der Kunsthalle Köln*, 5 vol., Köln: Schnütgen-Museum, 1978.

⁵ *Die Zeit der Staufer*

⁶ Reiner Hausscherr, ed, *Die Zeit der Staufer, Geschichte—Kunst—Kultur, Katalog der Ausstellung Stuttgart 1977*, 5 vol., Stuttgart: Württembergisches Landesmuseum, 1977.

⁷ *Geschichtlicher Atlas der Rheinlande*

⁸ Wolfgang Schmid, ‘Altäre der Hoch- und Spätgotik’, *Geschichtlicher Atlas der Rheinlande*, 12, 1985.

⁹ *Laat-Gotische Beeldsnijkunst uit Limburg en Grensland*

¹⁰ Charles Ceulemans and Robert Didier, eds, *Laat-gotische beeldsnijkunst uit Limburg en grensland, Provinciaal Museum voor Religieuze Kunst, Begijnhof, Sint-Truiden, 1.9.–11.11.1990, Sint-Truiden*, 1990.

¹¹ *Gegen den Strom*

¹² Barbara Rommé, ed, *Gegen den Strom, Meisterwerke niederrheinischer Skulptur in Zeiten der Reformation 1500–1550 [... Katalog zur Ausstellung Gegen den Strom. Meisterwerke niederrheinischer Skulptur in Zeiten der Reformation (1500–1550), die vom 12. Dezember 1996 bis zum 2. März 1997 im Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum zu Aachen stattfindet]*, Berlin: Reimer, 1997.

¹³ *Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur an Maas, Rur und Wurm*

¹⁴ Augustinus M. P. P. Janssen, Peter te Poel and Ulrich Schäfer, eds, *Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur zwischen Maas, Rur und Wurm, Laatmiddeleeuwse houten beelden tussen Maas, Roer en Worm*. Heinsberg, 2001.

concepts and technical analyses, became part of the research strategy and broadened the perspective. Michael Rief included an important article about the technical aspects of the production of altarpieces in the late Middle Ages in the Lower Rhine region in the exhibition *Upstream*, focusing on material, the wood trade, commissioning processes, production steps and carving techniques.¹⁵ The possibilities afforded by the first digitisation attempts led to new research questions, indicating new research approaches. Various smaller projects with individual databases were developed, which were not connected to each other and thus stopped at the level of isolated solutions, such as publication on CD-ROMs.

The Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie's multifunctional database tool, including projects such as the *Digital Corpus of Flemish Retables*, provides a platform for virtually unlimited research aims. The museums of the Euregions are also rediscovering the themes of the classical master exhibitions. In the first half of 2019, the Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht welcomed visitors to an exhibition with the promising title *Master of Elsloo: From lonely hand to collection of masters*, curated by Lars Hendrikman and expressly concerned with a revision of the artist's name.¹⁶ Also in 2020, the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne is planning a future exhibition on Master Arnt, whose works can also be attributed to at least one workshop rather than an individual. These efforts hopefully will lead to another wave of interest in medieval wooden sculpture in the Lower Rhine region.

Lower Rhine and Maasland: examples and research desideratum

For the Lower Rhine region, there are few comprehensive studies, which are also outdated in the case of the German art monument inventories.¹⁷ Furthermore, the question arises as to the exact research area, the delimitation of a region on the basis of arbitrary historical, political or ecclesiastical boundaries. Considering the state of research, it also becomes clear that the state of preservation of works from the time around 1400 is low and that the provenance of the works is often—if at all—only fragmentary. These are all factors which, on the one hand, outline the reason for a lack of detailed discussion and, on the other hand, represent difficulties that require a revision. There is still research potential here.

This could be the reason for the lack of research on works such as St. Pancratius in the church of Eijsden-Mesch from the second half of the fourteenth century or the small group of crucifixes in Wegberg and Erkelenz, which were made

¹⁵ Michael Rief, 'Zur Retabelproduktion und Bildhauertechnik am Niederrhein im späten 15. und 16. Jahrhundert', in Barbara Rommé, ed, *Gegen den Strom, Meisterwerke niederrheinischer Skulptur in Zeiten der Reformation 1500–1550 [... Katalog zur Ausstellung Gegen den Strom. Meisterwerke niederrheinischer Skulptur in Zeiten der Reformation (1500–1550), die vom 12. Dezember 1996 bis zum 2. März 1997 im Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum zu Aachen stattfindet]*, Berlin: Reimer, 1997, 39–49.

¹⁶ 22 February–16 June 2019, Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht.

¹⁷ Ulrich Schäfer, 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur zwischen Maas, Rur und Wurm: Ergebnisse einer flächendeckenden Suche', in Augustinus M. P. P. Janssen, Peter te Poel and Ulrich Schäfer, eds, *Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur zwischen Maas, Rur und Wurm, Laatmiddeleeuwse houten beelden tussen Maas, Roer en Worm*. Heinsberg. 2001, 21–52, 21.

around 1400 or at the beginning of the fifteenth century, for which visualisation cannot do sufficient justice. The inventory by Schäfer from 2001, for example, lists 281 objects from the period of the second half of the fifteenth century to 1540, while there are only 39 objects dated before 1450. Moreover, there are only 18 sculptures from the fourteenth century, seven of which might have been made in a Cologne workshop.¹⁸ Ulrike Bergmann supports this observation in her corpus on fourteenth-century sculpture from Cologne, especially for the first half of the century.¹⁹

Reorientation: classical methods and digital art history

This article describes the potential of a methodological reorientation of large-scale research using the example of the Lower Rhine region's medieval wooden sculptures around 1400, focusing especially on a discussion about the terminus of the art landscape and the associated research field of art geography, which is of concern to cross-border spaces both historically and today. The presented method can be both an objective and multifaceted presentation instrument as well as the starting point of a new research project.

Due to the need to bring clarity to the creation processes of works of art, stylistic groupings of phenotypically comparable objects are usually followed by diverse patterns of interpretation.²⁰ Here, person-bound networks are often constructed, whose often fictive actors are temporarily named and hierarchically classified as masters or journeymen due to their abilities. Such aids offer a helpful opportunity to create supposed order and to understand a large part of a set by incorporating further related works of art. A special challenge in very diverse research holdings is the consideration of rather marginal works of art and also those in a poor state of preservation, which have seen extensive renovations or low-quality craftsmanship. This results in contrasts within the inventory that are sometimes difficult to comprehend. The point of departure should be rather to level the objects in question and not to have to assign them solely under the urge to classify them. The need for innovative ordering schemes, especially in the absence of archival sources from the time the objects were created, becomes clear.

For development of a suitable scientific approach to the objects to be examined, the interdependent levels of art-historical perception, connoisseurship and interpretation as the basis of any explanatory strategy need to be considered.²¹ The physical perception of the appearance of a work of art in its forms, colours,

¹⁸ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 31.

¹⁹ Ulrike Bergmann, 'Kölner Skulptur der Hochgotik im wirtschaftlichen und historischen Kontext', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 66, 2005, 59–108, 67.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24666022> (accessed 14 November 2018).

²⁰ Julia Trinkert, 'Transformationsorte der Kunst identifizieren. Überlegungen zu Untersuchungsansätzen der mittelalterlichen Kunstproduktion in Mecklenburg und Sønderjylland', in Christof Baier, Sarah Czirr, Jasmin Grande, Astrid Lang and Wiebke Windorf, eds, "Absolutely Free"? *Invention und Gelegenheit in der Kunst, Liber Amicorum zum 60. Geburtstag von Jürgen Wiener*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, 167–188, 167.

²¹ Trinkert in Baier et al., 'Transformationsorte der Kunst identifizieren', 168.

surfaces and materials determines the experience and understanding of the viewer. These characteristics are consciously compared with already known patterns. They thus form a frame of reference that offers a starting point for the application of subject-specific knowledge for an interpretation. A more neutral method should correct this subjective process in the context of art-historical and style-critical research and thus lead to more objective research results.

Experiences with Mecklenburg

A comprehensive empirical study on the production of altarpieces in Mecklenburg between 1480 and 1540 using digital methods was the subject of this paper's author's dissertation.²² The identification and objective mapping of various work groups in the genres of sculpture, panel painting, and altarpieces visualised a detailed overview of the artistic situation in this period.²³ In the past, Mecklenburg was predominantly neglected with regard to these questions or even denied any autonomy within the region, but this method of investigation reveals a completely different picture. The subdivision of the altarpieces into the individual parts of different crafts opens up the perspective for possible production scenarios to be reconstructed without a mixture of master designations for the entire work.

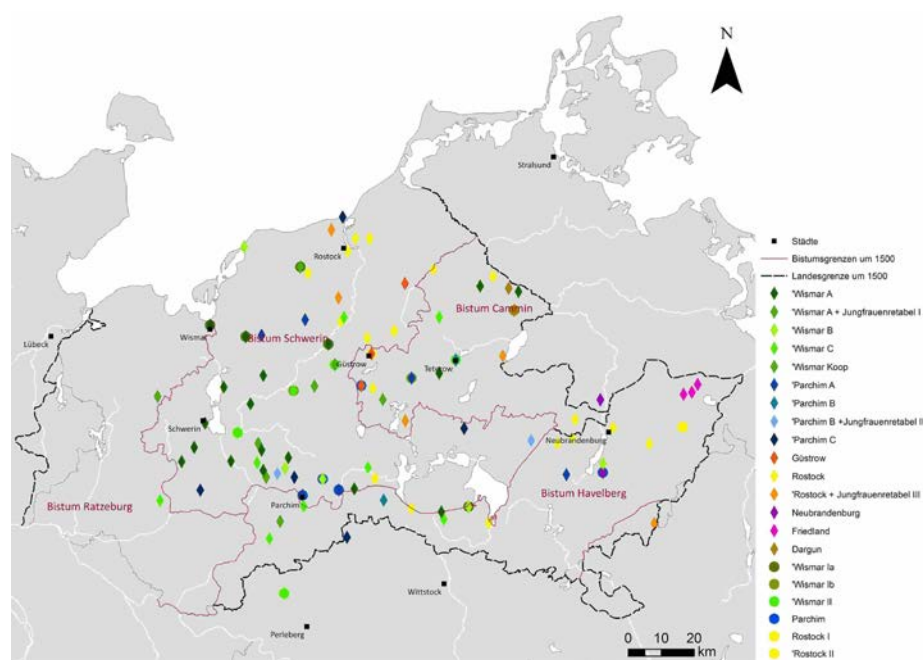


Figure 1 Map of Mecklenburg with indicated art centres. © Julia Trinkert

A mapping of stylistic work groups of wood sculptures and painting forms clusters that give an indication of art centres (fig. 1), even – and especially – when

²² Julia Trinkert, *Flügelretabel in Mecklenburg zwischen 1480 und 1540, Bestand, Verbreitung und Werkstattzusammenhänge*, Petersberg: Imhof, 2014.

²³ Trinkert, *Flügelretabel in Mecklenburg*, 185; Trinkert in Baier et al., 'Transformationsorte der Kunst identifizieren', 169.

archival sources are missing. An examination of the shrine cases, on the other hand, reveals more general construction features, characteristic architectural shrine decorations and individual profile decorations that are less clearly identifiable. Here the observations tend to point to local traditions.

This method can be used to confirm expected art centres such as Wismar and Rostock. Obviously, there were various workshops for all crafts, which could continuously deliver a consistent quality. These two art centres also have complex groups of works with connections to each other and dependencies on works outside the region, which represent a great dynamic due to the mobility of the responsible specialist craftsmen. In addition, smaller local centres have been identified that can be linked to small towns or monasteries. All art centres had their own specific sales areas, which partly overlapped and whose individual – perhaps outstanding – works were also in demand outside these areas.

Experiences with Denmark

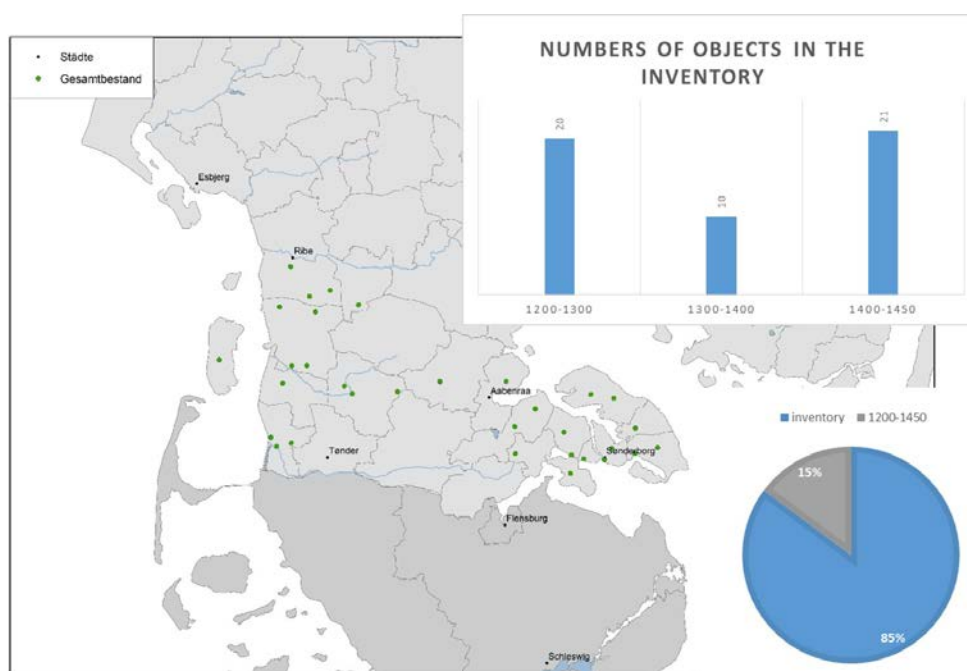


Figure 2 Map and diagram of Sønderjylland, preserved stock of wooden sculptures made between 1200-1450. © Julia Trinkert

A review of the inventory of medieval wooden sculptures in Southern Jutland in Denmark reveals a picture comparable to that of the Lower Rhine. Although numerous works have survived, they are heterogeneous in their dating and completeness. Here, too, there are considerably more works from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Only around 15% of the whole stock of wooden sculpture was made between 1200 and 1450 (fig. 2). If we have a closer look at the question of 'famous masters' of the region, we find a 'Danish' Master of Elsloo, who here is the so-called 'Imperialissima Master', an invented or conventional name (*Notname*) which stands for a large, wide-branched group of works. As usual in art history, primarily in older traditions of art historiography, the Imperialissima

Master was identified with several names of craftsmen found in the archival sources, often with a biography, which had him moving around the region for several reasons and with invented personal relations to other sculptors. In the case of the Imperialissima Master's oeuvre, digital mapping allows object clusters to be found in today's Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Schleswig-Holstein and Southern Jutland. Here the regions around the smaller towns of Parchim, Schleswig, Tønder and Esbjerg seem to be suitable as centres for the production of these groups of sculptures (fig. 3). This would have to be investigated in a more differentiated way.

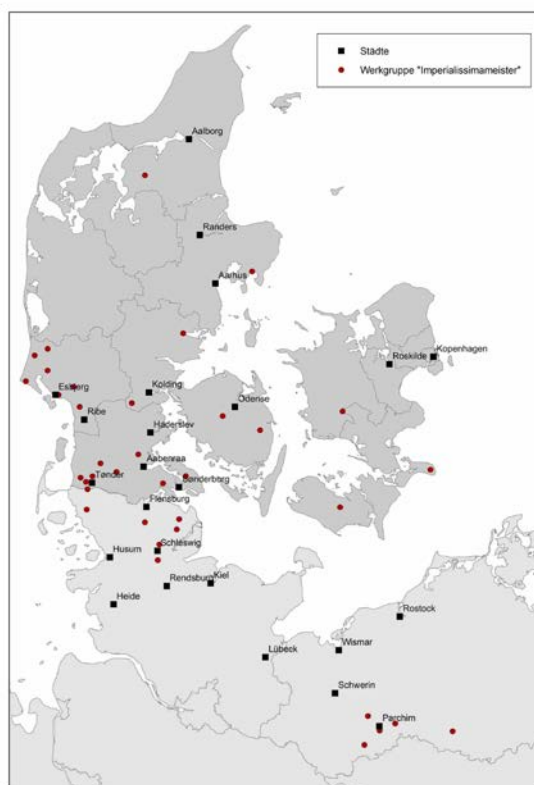


Figure 3 Map of Baltic Sea's Western Coast with groups of sculptures attributed to the so-called Imperialissima Master. © Julia Trinkert

Based on observations and a lack of archival sources in this region, it can be conjectured that in more rural areas the workshops were less institutionalised in guilds than in the larger Hanseatic towns on the Baltic coast. Looser structures enabled the mobility of the specialist craftsmen and thus the transmission and acceptance of artistic content.²⁴ A detailed investigation is still pending. At this point, art historians have to restrict themselves to the description of certain perceptions and phenomena, even if at first glance no satisfactory results can be derived from them.

²⁴ Trinkert in Baier et al., 'Transformationsorte der Kunst identifizieren', 183.

Hypothesis and research design

To transfer such a method to the preserved collections in the Lower Rhine, the requirements for the research design need to be examined. In the investigation of a historical space, the definition of its boundaries is one of the starting points. In Mecklenburg, the research area was oriented towards the historical boundaries of the former Duchy of Mecklenburg in the 1500s and also integrated the boundaries of the ecclesiastical dioceses that formed their own administrative units. In the corpus project in Schleswig-Holstein, on the other hand, the boundaries were arbitrarily drawn with practical considerations on the basis of the political boundaries applicable at the time of Richard Haupt's work on the inventory of art monuments, which concerned North and South Schleswig in present-day Denmark and Germany.²⁵ The research project on sculpture in the Lower Rhine would have to proceed in the sense of the European idea and the boundaries of the various historical—both political and ecclesiastical—governmental units, without taking into account today's national borders, to examine a region and its works of art in their contexts of origin, which were less affected than often assumed by superordinate institutions. Furthermore, the role of the natural environment, which is crucial for trade routes and transport, should not be ignored.

In a further step, a research basis must first be created that takes into account a careful review of the existing inventories of the local art monuments and museum collections. In this context, cooperation with research institutions, monument offices and church administrations is essential. A detailed revision of existing research work can also improve the data sources' quantity and reliability. When collecting data, particular attention must be paid to the objects' provenance. The accuracy of these data determines the significance of the visualisation in the digital mapping.

The current location of the objects has an impact, because it was not unusual to translocate works for different reasons during secularisation. If the works were preserved in the churches, they were frequently renovated or reworked and occasionally embedded in new contexts, such as in baroque retables.²⁶ While this shows the value these objects continually received, the contexts in such cases have been irrevocably changed. Especially at the end of the nineteenth century, as was customary elsewhere, sculptures in the region were 'reconstructed', carved or newly manufactured according to the ideas typical of the time. For example, the studio of Pierre Cuypers in Roermond often worked in the region for this purpose.²⁷ Around 1900, there were also compensatory transactions and a prospering art trade that obscured the works' provenance. The research basis here is a critical review of the sources.

There has been a high loss rate of medieval wooden sculptures in the Lower Rhine. For Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg, a conservation rate of approximately 30% can be reconstructed, which is a remarkable situation for today's

²⁵ Richard Haupt, *Die Bau- und Kunstdenkmäler der Provinz Schleswig-Holstein mit Ausnahme des Kreises Herzotum Lauenburg*, vol. 1-3, Kiel: Homann, 1887-1889.

²⁶ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 50.

²⁷ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 50.

circumstances with regard to the extensive furnishings of all medieval churches in the two research areas. In Mecklenburg, for example, there is evidence of a higher density of preserved works off the beaten track of the great historical trade routes, which were not affected by baroque new furnishings. Similar observations can be made in Schleswig-Holstein. The Lower Rhine region, on the other hand, had a different natural, political, and denominational development, so that the situation still needs to be investigated. Although a thorough inventory should be sought, it can only be approximated, due to the loss rates and the unclear storage places—not least in museum depots and private collections.²⁸

With regard to art production in the Lower Rhine, there is still research potential outside the supposedly known workshops of the 'great masters'. They will not have been fully responsible for the furnishing of all churches in the region—especially because there was a time *ante quem* and *post quem*. Not every congregation was able to order items of furnishings from the large workshops, which employed numerous staff. It would also be interesting to understand the works as the source of their production contexts. Which crafts were involved? What was the nature of cooperation across crafts? What did the commissioners expect? How mobile were the objects? How bound were the craftsmen to their places of work? Which communication channels for knowledge, motives and contacts were used? To answer these questions, the individual objects must be analysed and researched in a work-centred and interdisciplinary manner with teams of art historians and conservators.

From the perspective of economic history, the question arises as to the organisational forms of workshops, the existence or necessity of guilds, the influence of political decisions on production conditions in the region, the significance of trade routes and the role of the materials handled.

Through work groups, which are formed on the basis of style-critical and art-technical methods, relationships arise among the objects, which are to be interpreted as objectively as possible in the next step. A qualitative assessment and the associated attribution to a hierarchical workshop model is not the goal. Instead, similarities are to be visualised—if possible—by means of network analyses and digital mapping in order to draw conclusions about their work genesis.

The Central Place Theory applied in art geography makes it possible to visualise the distribution areas of a group of works.²⁹ An accumulated number of preserved works in the vicinity of higher-order places and lower size places points to a localisation of possible workshops there, even if archival sources are inadequate. Links between the centre and (supposed) periphery thus become recognisable, without simultaneously following the idea of the giving centre and the receiving periphery. Rather, it can be assumed that the demands of the clients were

²⁸ Wolfgang Schmid, 'Kunstlandschaft—Absatzgebiet—Zentralraum. Zur Brauchbarkeit unterschiedlicher Raumkonzepte in der kunstgeographischen Forschung vornehmlich an rheinischen Beispielen', in Uwe Albrecht & Jan von Bonsdorff, eds, *Figur und Raum: Mittelalterliche Holzbildwerke im historischen und kunstgeographischen Kontext [Akten des internationalen Colloquiums auf der Blumenburg bei Selent (7. - 10. Oktober 1992)]*, Berlin: Reimer, 21–35, 22.

²⁹ Schmid, 'Kunstlandschaft—Absatzgebiet—Zentralraum', 23–26.

specific at each location and actively changed in the sense of a transfer culture.³⁰ In addition, mapped distribution areas show the sales market area for certain groups of works and thus also the role of smaller centres in the supposed periphery, taking into account aspects of the regional history.³¹

Examples

This project idea has been piloted by relying on the inventories of wooden sculptures of Charles Ceulemanns from 1990,³² Dietrich Schäfer from 2001,³³ Wolfgang Schmid from 1985³⁴ and the collection of the Schnütgen museum in 1989.³⁵ The first results can only show the direction for further research, because the region can be examined only partially with this selection as the basis for data collection. The known quantity of wooden sculpture made at around 1400 with a clear provenance is at this stage still too low for obtaining a proper picture of wooden sculpture production in the first quarter of the fifteenth century in the Lower Rhine.

However, we can find certain groups of works that belong to each other for stylistic and technical reasons. One is a group of works made around 1370–1380 that includes the head of a Christ or a Saint John the Baptist in Tongeren, an enthroned Saint John the Evangelist also in Tongeren, two standing apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Heers, and saints and a coronation scene from a former altarpiece with unknown provenance, which today belongs to the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 4).³⁶ This group has been attributed to the so-called ‘Maaslandse Mester van de Tronende Figuren Tongeren-London’, which indicates possible production in the Lower Rhine area. The sculptures show clear proportions indicative of a particular style, and thus the grouping makes sense—as far as can be judged on the basis of photographs. The standing apostles display a posture of bodies typical of the late fourteenth century. The garments feature large areas of fabric, delineated by a sharp-edged drape of folds. The expressive faces and the hair structured with different carving irons contribute to the overall impression.

³⁰ Gerhard Weilandt, ‘Transferkultur - Danzig im Spätmittelalter’, in Wolfgang Augustyn and Ulrich Söding, eds, *Original – Kopie – Zitat*, Passau, 73–101, 88, 92; Trinkert, *Flügelretabel in Mecklenburg*, 16.

³¹ Schmid, ‘Kunstlandschaft – Absatzgebiet – Zentralraum’, 26.

³² Ceulemans and Didier, *Laat-gotische beeldsnijkunst*.

³³ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., ‘Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur’.

³⁴ Wolfgang Schmid, ‘Altäre’.

³⁵ Ulrike Bergmann, *Schnütgen-Museum. Die Holzskulpturen des Mittelalters (1000-1400)*, Köln: Museum Schnütgen, 1989.

³⁶ Maaslandse Mester van de Tronende Figuren Tongeren-London, *Saints and a Coronation Scene from a former altarpiece with unknown provenance*, c. 1370-80. Oak, 31.8 x 16.5 cm x 11.8 cm, London: Victoria and Albert Museum, Given by Mr W. Maskell; formerly in the collection of A.W.N. Pugin, Museum no. 411-1889. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Available online at: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O170637/christ-statuettes-unknown/>.



Figure 5 Cross, c.1400. Wood. Wegberg-Beeck. © Julia Trinkert

Figure 6 Cross, c. 1400. Wood. Erkelenz-Holzweiler. © Julia Trinkert

In the years around 1400, there are two examples of wooden sculpture groups. One is the group of crosses in Wegberg-Beeck (fig. 5) and Erkelenz-Holzweiler (fig. 6), made of oak in the first decade of the fifteenth century. The place of production is unknown, but they might be local Rhenish products. The crucified Christ in Erkelenz and the larger of the two in Wegberg-Beeck were in all probability once part of the Triumphal Cross and are no longer at their original installation place in the church today. The conception of the figures, with the thin legs forming an axis of view to the upper body, supports the thesis of the lower view by which the figure was once seen by the observer. The arms are also very thin and stringy and lead the view to the torso. The loincloth is simply draped around the hip and hardly stands out from the body forms. In Erkelenz this is all the more obvious. The crown of thorns, wound from strong branches, weighs heavily on Christ's head. Christ is shown at the moment of exhaling his breath, shortly before his head falls on his chest, as was dramatically depicted at the end of the fifteenth century and later. In the artistic formation of the thorax and the abdomen, similar characteristics are evident, which, however, are not identical in all three figures of this group in their respective formation.

The other group of wooden sculpture comprises the pietàs from Kloster Sint-Agnes van de Zustres Franciscanessen te Tongeren (fig. 7),³⁷ made of lime wood

³⁷ Today in Tongeren, Stedelijk Museum, collectie O.C.M.W., inv. no. 614

between 1400–1410, and from St.-Martinuskerk in Neer (fig. 8),³⁸ made around 1400. The pietà as a pictorial subject is typical for the region of the Maasland and the Rhineland and here since the early fourteenth century. In these two comparable depictions of the theme, the Madonna holds the torso of her deceased son turned towards the observer, while his legs lie parallel on her lap. In terms of proportions, she is also much larger than him. Both figures of the Madonna have the veil pulled far over her head in mourning. The pietà corpusculum, which was particularly popular in Franciscan monasteries, picks up on this depiction style.³⁹



Figure 7 Unknown, *Pietà* from Kloster Sint-Agnes van de Zustres Franciscanessen in Tongeren, 1400-1410. Limewood, 108 cm, Tongeren: Stedelijk Museum, collectie O.C.M.W., inv. no. 614. *plate cat. no. 5* from Charles Ceulemans and Robert Didier, eds, *Laat-gotische beeldsnij kunst uit Limburg en grensland, Provinciaal Museum voor Religieuze Kunst, Begijnhof, Sint-Truiden, 1.9.–11.11.1990, Sint-Truiden, 1990.*

In Tongeren, a cross in St.-Jan-Baptistkerk and a Christ in a Calvary scene in St.-Catharinakerk in Begijnhof, show similarities. They are made of unspecified wood and were produced around 1420 and 1430 by an unknown workshop, which might have been located in the city itself.

³⁸ Unknown, *Pietà* from St.-Martinuskerk in Neer, c. 1400. Nutwood, 96 cm, Maastricht: Bonnefantmuseum. Available online at: <https://g.co/arts/YhcjNvnyCcSejER49>

³⁹ Ceulemans and Didier, *Laat-gotische beeldsnij kunst*, cat. no. 5.

Method and first results

The first attempts to apply this method to the Lower Rhine region have already shown that the quantity of the preserved objects is sufficiently large for interpretations, but the number of preserved objects is still limited.

In the first case, as the quantity of wooden sculptures is sufficient for thorough data analysis and digital mapping, art-historical research could identify art centres, trace cooperation among the crafts, recognise distribution networks of art and knowledge, visualise sales markets and ranges and understand production processes.

When there is a dense stock of works that can be grouped together around a centre, Schäfer assumes that the clear geographical reference of a group of works to a centre allows it to be identified as the seat of the workshop.⁴⁰ This presupposes, however, that a group of works is understood as the product of a single workshop. This view neglects the possibility that a group of works was produced by different workshops or craftsmen, without implying hierarchies of master and pupil or master and workshop.⁴¹ This leads to questions about the role of art centres as places of transformation.⁴² Which forms of artistic tradition can be recognised? How can these forms have been organised? Which structures — workshops, places, cities — were necessary?

In the second case, as the number of preserved objects is limited, with appropriate data analysis and digital mapping it is possible to enlarge the examination region and extend the data collection to previous and subsequent periods. In this way, it may be possible to find explanations for the absence of certain works with specific characteristics. Furthermore, motifs, types and iconography could be examined by data analysis on the basis of a smaller number of surviving sculptures. Following the first attempt for this project to investigate the region's wooden sculpture selectively and around 1400, it is only now possible to have a closer look at the iconography and the motif traditions of the area.

For the region around Maas, Rur and Wurm, Schäfer states with regard to iconography that crucifixes predominate over the depictions of saints and that these are mainly monumental crucifixes that served as triumphal crosses.⁴³ However, the assisting figures of Our Lady of Sorrows and John the Evangelist, which can be expected in this context, are often missing. In the fourteenth century the enthroned Madonnas predominated in the region of the southern Lower Rhine, while in the fifteenth century the standing Madonnas predominated, often in the corona. In the Lower Rhine region in general are crosses, pietàs, and St. Mary with the child in the years around 1400. Around 1500 the representation of St. Anne also increased in the course of the widespread veneration of Anne. According to Schäfer, 28 pieces have survived here.⁴⁴ In comparison to the iconography of wooden sculpture in southern

⁴⁰ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 40.

⁴¹ Trinkert, *Flügelretabel in Mecklenburg*, 221.

⁴² Trinkert in Baier et al., 'Transformationsorte der Kunst identifizieren', 183-184.

⁴³ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 43.

⁴⁴ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 44.

Denmark in the fourteenth century, there is the depiction of triumphal crosses, followed by smaller crosses and some saints. In the first half of the fifteenth century, the altarpieces showing the coronation are still on site while the second and third position belong again to monumental and smaller crosses, followed by saints and the pietà.

In an overview of the statistical data on iconography the researcher has to consider the loss of a substantial amount of original furnishings of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and the historical reasons for prioritising and preserving certain iconography over others.

With a limited set of preserved objects, it is still possible to use digital mapping to visualise the distribution of common wood use or other materials in the production process. Furthermore, mapping can show popular genres or more general furnishings from certain time periods. As Schäfer points out from his statistics on the region around Maas, Worm and Rur, there is a light distribution of sculptures made from walnut in the southern part of the area, whereas the northern part seems to show more oak usage.⁴⁵ Walnut was the most popular material for sculptures from Cologne in the fourteenth century, and oak was used primarily in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example by the Master from Elsloo⁴⁶ and Jan van Steffeswert. Michael Rief states from his broad experiences in handling sculpture for exhibition purposes that oak was used mainly in the region around Kleve, Kalkar and Wesel as well as in Limburg.⁴⁷ However, most of the material data sets from 1360 to 1450 consist of the term 'wood', which implies the necessity for further technical analysis. This could give a clearer image of the popularity of oak, lime and nutwood as material for carving sculptures in the Lower Rhine region. Rief observed the use of nutwood in Gelderland and in Cologne, for example, where lime and oak also existed as common materials.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 22.

⁴⁶ Arnold Truyen, 'Der Meister von Elsloo: ein Künstler ohne Grenzen', in Andrea Pufke, ed, *Der Niederrhein - Kunstlandschaft der Spätgotik: Eine Dokumentation zum 3. Rheinischen Tag für Denkmalpflege in Kalkar, 5. Mai 2013*, Pulheim, 2013, 67–76.

⁴⁷ Rief in Rommé, 'Zur Retabelproduktion', 39.

⁴⁸ Rief in Rommé, 'Zur Retabelproduktion', 39.

Conclusion

Regions with dense inventories of monuments of a certain genre or period are ideal for a reorientation of classical art-historical research. The Lower Rhine is famous for its well-preserved late medieval wooden sculptures, to which research has been devoted at recurring intervals. The merit here exists on the basis of good data, which can be processed with digital methods. The opportunity now exists for asking new questions, rather than only applying new visualisation possibilities without further art-historical relevance as it is sporadically seen in the name of digital art history. The dynamics of statistical and network analyses as well as mapping create tools that allow analysis of works that are less attractive at first glance. What happens now to the many works standing alone for which no art-historical attribution can be made? Schäfer correctly notes that these have always been burdened with a feeling of something missing.⁴⁹ In earlier cultural judgements, these either have no distinctive artistic characteristics or cannot be correctly recognised or described even by a professional audience. However, what if the simple solution is that the other works of the group have been lost over time? Art history should get used to leaving questions open instead of devaluing the related works. Not all of the preserved works of art were created exclusively by 'great masters', but all objects have their legitimacy and require open perspectives to reveal their secrets.

Classical art-historical questions and investigations of course retain their justification. Without these, the research historiography cannot be understood and questions of provenance, function, and meaning could never be clarified. It would be interesting to examine this method and its transferability to other genres. Monumental but still mobile church furnishings could certainly be considered, such as triumphal crosses, choir stalls, tabernacle towers⁵⁰ or baptismal fonts. The limits of this method are probably set by very mobile art genres such as ivory diptychs, books of hours, or vasa sacra, as well as by works from large *Bauhütten* or scriptories. However, variations of the method could be discussed, depending on the specific question.

Requirements of such a methodical reorientation would be solid basic research which compiles and links inventories, detailed provenance research, the integration of art technology and conservation sciences and a critical revision of traditional art-historical concepts and theories, enabling the application of art-geographical and style-critical methods. This is where the great names from the beginning come into focus again. Is it possible to discover previously unknown structures and production mechanisms through a revision of their oeuvres, which will bring the Lower Rhine and the Maasland all the more clearly into the limelight as the centre of medieval art production?

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⁴⁹ Schäfer in Janssen et. al., 'Spätmittelalterliche Holzskulptur', 41.

⁵⁰ 'Sakramentshäuser'

project on bourgeois social climbers in the 18th century. Before she was employed as a research assistant at the HHU and at the University in Kiel in the DFG research project *Corpus of the medieval wooden sculpture and panel painting in Schleswig-Holstein*.⁵¹ She has published on medieval and early modern painting and sculpture in Northern Europe and the Baltic.

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⁵¹ *Corpus der mittelalterlichen Holzskulptur und Tafelmalerei in Schleswig-Holstein*