THESE MEDIEVAL FIGURES WILL AMAZE YOU!

29. NOV. 25 – 15. MÄR. 26

PRAY MOBIL

A LITTLE PRAY MOBIL INTRODUCTION

SUERMONDT LUDWIG MUSEUM

MITTELALTERLICHE KUNST IN BEWEGUNG

A LITTLE PRAYMOBIL INTRODUCTION

THESE OBJECTS BRING HISTORY TO LIFE...

Long before cinema, streaming, or virtual reality, people found ways to bring images to life. The movable sculptures of the Middle Ages were the media of their time – they told stories, created illusions, and made the invisible visible.

Today, in an age of digital simulations, these profoundly analog figures fascinate us once again. They remind us that the longing for immersion – for wonder, meaning, and connection – is timeless.

With wheels, pulleys, and hinges, craftsmen created experiences that touched both body and soul. It was an early interplay of technology, faith, and emotion – and, in today's sense, an immersive encounter. Your engagement keeps their stories alive – and sets art in motion.

»Immersion« means diving into another reality, so deeply that, for a moment, the real world fades away.What we now experience through VR headsets, video games, or live role-playing once happened in the Middle Ages through wood, paint, and light. People stood before these figures, saw them move, bleed, or smile – and felt themselves part of the scene, part of the sacred story.

On the following pages, you'll find twenty selected objects that introduce the exhibition. Perhaps your favorite piece is already among them.

Saint George once rolled through the streets on wheels, lance lowered, ready to fight the dragon – a spectacle of courage and divine victory.

In monasteries, the body of a Maria gravida would open to reveal the Christ Child – a quiet moment of empathy, when the miracle of birth became tangible.

And in churches, a movable crucifix bowed its head as blood flowed from the wound in Christ's side – the Passion made immediate, an experience of pain and redemption.

These works show how people in every age have tried to understand life – from birth to death, from care to the hope of resurrection. Then as now, movement meant making things present: the desire to grasp the unseen and to find meaning through representation.

»Look almost like medieval Playmobil figures!«

MOVE YOUR TAIL!

As the horse gathers itself to leap, Saint George holds his lance ready – just moments before the decisive strike. His full attention is fixed on the dragon he must defeat, according to legend, to save the king's daughter. One can easily imagine the creature before him, hissing and snarling at the rider. Mounted on wheels, the horse seems to rise in mid-jump; as it rolled forward, the tail would swing back and forth.

This impressive figure was used in processions and miracle plays, often together with a movable dragon that was led directly in front of horse and rider.

Through the vivid reenactment of the dragon fight, the audience could celebrate Saint George as a heroic model – and witness the triumph of good over evil.

Horse and Rider on Wheels
Herk-de-Stad (Belgium),
Kerkfabriek Sint-Jan de Doper

Saint George on Horseback
Southern Netherlands,
probably late 16th century.

1590

BEND IT LIKE BISHOP!

In the curved crook of the abbot's staff, Christ bends down from the cross to embrace Saint Bernard.

His arms reach outward, the loincloth seems to move – as if the figure itself were coming to life.

The scene is based on a vision: Bernard of Clairvaux saw the Crucified before him, descending to meet him and drawing him into an embrace.

For medieval viewers, this gesture symbolized divine compassion – a moment when heavenly and earthly love touched.

The abbot of the Cistercian monastery at Bebenhausen carried this masterful goldsmith's work, its form recalling Christ's shepherd's staff – a symbol of guidance rooted in closeness and compassion..

1550

Crook of an abbot's staff with
the Embrace of Saint Bernard
Probably southwestern Germany, around 1550

AUTOMATED VANITAS

1513

With a sudden jerk, the skeleton strikes a bell hidden in the lion's mane.

At the same time, its lower jaw moves while the lion's tongue darts out – a scene both vivid and unnervingly alive.

This movable model is a faithful reconstruction of an automaton once belonging to a monumental clock in the abbey church of Heilsbronn.

The jaw and arm of the riding Death, as well as the lion's tongue, could be set in motion by a mechanism concealed within the figures.

Here, craftsmanship and moral warning merge: time passes – and no one escapes its bite..

Death on a Lion, with movable arm and jaw (skeleton) and movable tongue (lion)
Copy: 2016/17; original: Franconia, 1513, Munich, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum

1550

Even the small devil's mask on the wheel clock moved automatically – its lower jaw snapping open and shut each hour.

At the stroke of the hour, the jaw of the tiny devil's face opens and closes: a mechanical twitch, a reminder of time's power.

Both automata offered a striking memento of life's transience: Time runs on – and Death and the Devil lie in wait. The gears turned, and even the mechanism itself seemed to preach: whoever hears the ticking, hears Death.

Wheel clock with movable devil's mask,
Southern Germany or Switzerland, 1550–1580 (?)
With later alterations from the 19th century

RE-MOVE YOUR BABY!

The figure from Regensburg is among the earliest known depictions of the Maria gravida – Mary in Expectation.

Her body, gently arched forward, makes the invisible tangible. In her quiet dignity, Mary embodies the universal image of life in motion – a symbol of hope and new beginnings.

Her hands rest on her belly as if to protect the secret within – and at the same time to show that it is happening, here and now. This Maria gravida is no distant symbol, but a body in motion.

Through a small glass window in the Virgin's belly, the unborn Christ Child becomes visible – what is usually hidden can now be seen.

In the original version, her robe could be opened, revealing the child inside as a relief: a striking visualization of the belief in the Incarnation.

This representation combines devotion and empathy: the divine pregnancy is not only venerated but also compassionately observed.

The rare Maria gravida figures allowed nuns to share in Mary's joys and anxieties.

Bound by vows of chastity, they could remove the Christ Child through a small opening at the back of Mary's body and place it in a tiny crib at Christmas.

The birth of Christ was not only remembered – it was experienced.

Maria gravida (Pregnant Virgin)
Regensburg, around 1300–1310

1300

YOUR PERSONAL JESUS

With alert eyes, the naked Christ Child looks straight at us. **His rosy cheeks and baby fat around neck and thighs emphasize his human nature.**

The lost forearms – once probably raised in blessing and holding an orb – also pointed to his royal role as ruler of the world.

The child's life-size proportions, vivid expression, and naturalistic modeling make the figure particularly striking. Encountering it must have felt almost real.

The sculpture was likely commissioned for private devotion, either in a monastery or a wealthy household..

Standing Christ Child
Ulm, attributed to Michel Erhart (?), around 1470–1475

1470

HOLY, POCKET

One leg stretched out, the other bent – the Christ Child sits on a small chair painted with flowers.

What looks today like a piece of children's furniture was, in the Middle Ages, understood as a throne – a symbol of royal dignity.

The backrest shows a lamb, symbol of Christ's sacrifice, and a bird alluding to his future suffering. In monastic life, this child was no static image but a familiar companion.

The figure, together with its little chair, could be carried from place to place – to prayer in the church, to devotion in a cell, or even to meals in the refectory.

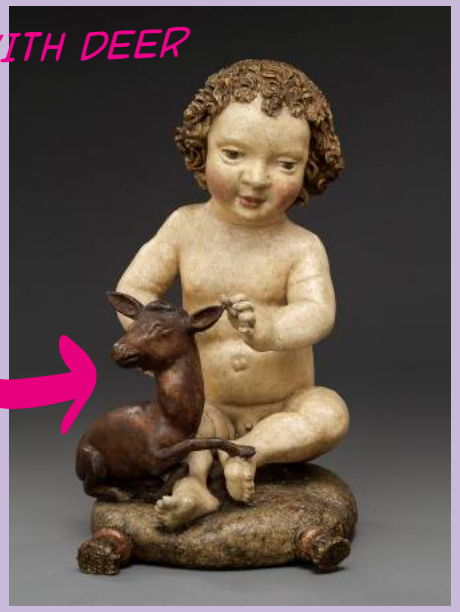
The divine was thus always present where life unfolded – right among the people.

Seated Christ Child on a Chair
Southern Germany, late 15th century / around 1500

1500

TAKE A SEAT!

WITH DEER



WITHOUT DEER

WITH CUSHIONS

With crossed or gently relaxed legs, the Christ Childs sit on cushions that are firmly attached to the figures and serve as their base.

The child with the fawn refers to the psalm verse: *»As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.«* – a moving connection between image and inner longing.

Seated Christ Child figures are rare. Only a few examples from Mechelen and southern Germany are known. At Christmas, they were placed on altars or in convents.

Traces of wear – pressure marks, remnants of paint, rubbed corners – suggest that they were often handled and moved, whether for cleaning, placement, or prayer.

These figures show the divine in a posture of rest – tangible, human, and given a soft place amid devotion. They do not speak of great miracles, but of quiet presence – and of the idea that faith may, at times, simply mean offering someone a place to rest.

Seated Christ Child on Cushions with Deer
Swabia (Ulm?), around 1500
Seated Christ Child on Cushions
Mechelen (present-day Belgium), 1500/10
Seated Christ Child on Cushions
Upper Swabia, around 1500

1500

BEDTIME STORIES

From the late Middle Ages onward, furniture and furnishings were made for the lovingly cared-for Christ Child: little beds, cradles, blankets, and miniature vestments.

They ranged from simple wooden pieces to elaborately carved cradles. Beds and cradles came on rockers or frames, sometimes adorned with figures or delicate architectural details, made of wood or metal.

Only rarely have both child and bedding survived. Some cradles could even be folded and stored in a case bearing a family coat of arms.

The Berlin cradle is especially elaborate: its finely carved wooden parts, with traces of gilding and paint, reveal the skill and care invested in its making. Such pieces speak of care as an act – of holding, rocking, repetition, closeness, and comfort.

And perhaps also of how soothing rituals can be. At first, these beds and cradles appeared only in convents.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, clerics or laypeople – often children – would rock the Christ Child to sleep at Christmas, on the altars of parish and collegiate churches, accompanied by song and dance.

Cradle for the Christ Child
Middle Rhine region (Wetterau), 15th century

HOLY RIDER

Christ rides on a donkey – plainly dressed, one hand on the reins, the other raised in blessing. Not on a horse like a king, but on a humble work animal, he enters the city.

On Palm Sunday, this figure – originally set on wheels – was solemnly pulled through the streets, a highlight of the church year.

1490

Men of the parish led it with ropes or poles, accompanied by singing, branches, and shouts of »Hosanna!« (»Blessed is he who comes!«).

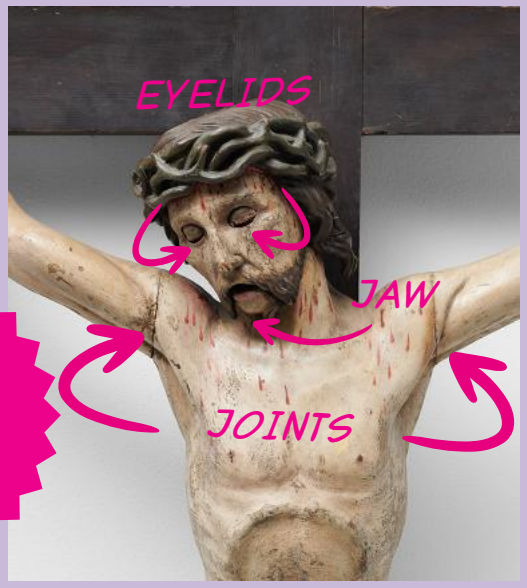
They laid down branches as a sign of reverence. Thus, the congregation was not merely a spectator but part of the event itself. The moving image joined space, motion, and faith.

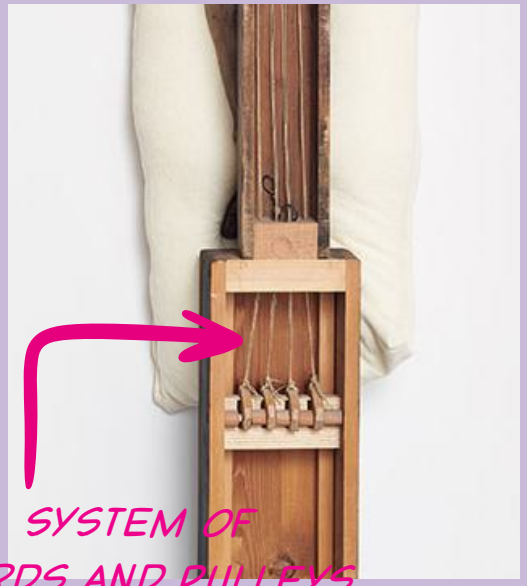
The procession ended in the church, understood as a symbol of Jerusalem.

In this re-enactment, the community became part of Christ's entry – and their own town became the stage of the biblical story.

Christ on the palm donkey with a newer trolley
Southern Germany, around 1490

VIRTUAL REALITY





The more realistic, the more believable – this was especially true for the depiction of Christ on the cross.

The small crucifix from Fribourg has a drill hole that leads from the back to the side wound. Red liquid was probably injected there so that the biblical spear wound during the crucifixion could be impressively recreated, as Christ appeared to be bleeding.

The larger, post-medieval crucifix belongs to a family of movable jointed figures, as does the third in this series.

The open back of the crossbeam conceals a system of pull cords that could be used to animate Christ‘s death: his head tilted, his jaw dropped, his tongue slackened and his eyes closed – all controlled by cords guided over rollers and hooks.

The so-called‘›jointed man‹ shows how, as early as 1500, body parts made of wood and metal were connected in a hinged manner. Several crafts – carving, barrel painting, blacksmithing – worked together here.

These objects illustrate how strongly medieval and early modern art relied on movement: less for deception than for visualisation. The visualisation of life in death made faith physically tangible.

The aim was not to shock, but to make an impact. Craftsmanship served here as illustration – movement as visualisation.

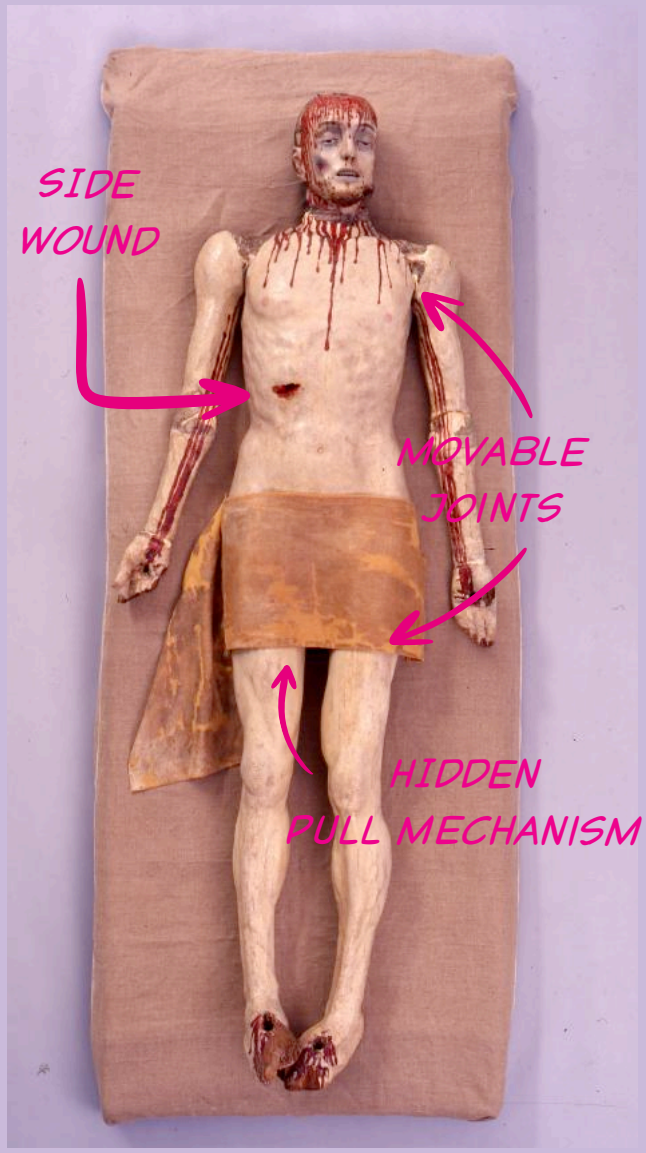
Such mechanisms enabled an immediately tangible imitation of Christ‘s death.

Bleeding crucifix
Fribourg (Switzerland), 1550/60

Crucifix with head parts moved by cord pulls, first half of the 19th century

Corpus Christi (Gliedermann), Italy or Central Europe, around 1500

IT'S A MIRACLE!



The life-size figure of Christ lies before us, marked by terrible suffering – bloodstained and deathly pale.

A body of wood, painted and braced, with concealed joints. The hinges lie hidden beneath cloth; cords run through holes drilled into the core. One pull, and the arms fall. Another, and the legs give way.

From the wound in his side – sealed with colored wax – red liquid once flowed, released from a vessel or a pig's bladder, when the piercing of the lance was reenacted. Everything about this figure was conceived for effect: movement created impact.

Viewers were meant to see what happens when the body dies. The craftsmen knew exactly how far wood could bend, how paint could catch the light, how gravity could perform its role.

These so-called »Miracle Men« – from miraculum, meaning miracle – showed Christ's suffering with unflinching realism: shocking and captivating at once.

During the Good Friday Passion plays, recalling Christ's suffering and death, they enabled a dramatic reenactment of the Passion – the death, the lance thrust, the Descent from the Cross, the Lamentation, and the Entombment.

Clergy and laypeople acted together – the sacred became visible, moving, and alive.

1510

Miracle Man
Saxony, around 1510

HOLD ME NOW!

The Virgin Mary mourns her dead son, holding him in her lap.

In these small-scale Pietà figures, Christ's body is not fixed in place but attached with wooden pegs and can be removed.

The lifeless figure could then be laid at Mary's feet – an image of farewell, release, and separation.

Christ's posture is compact: the arms lie close to the body, the legs slightly bent, allowing the figure to be moved, raised, or placed in a small tomb.

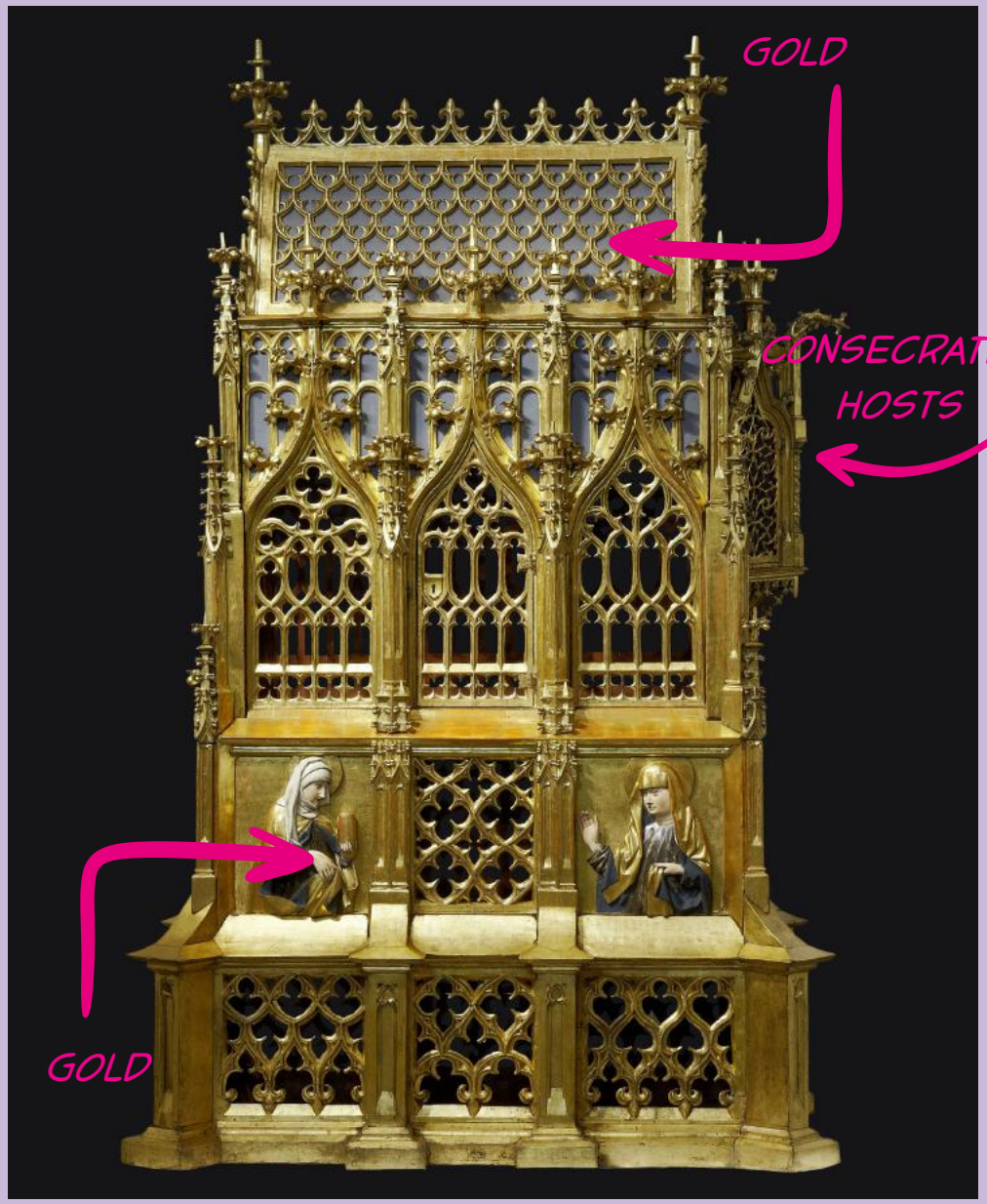
The Christ figure's manageable size and solid form suggest use in monastic settings, probably for private devotion.

The repeated act of mounting and removing the body was part of the prayer ritual – a quiet, meditative gesture through which worshippers could approach the Passion of Christ.

So-called »Pietà Schnütgen« with removable Christ figure, Cologne, around 1450–1470

1450

HOUSE OF GO(L)D



The large gilded wooden shrine recalls the architecture of a Gothic chapel.

Created around 1475, it was probably made for Salzburg Cathedral or the Franciscan Church and later came from the Bürgerspital Church in Salzburg.

Small recesses on the sides could hold a vessel containing consecrated hosts.

Around the base stand four female figures – the Women at the Tomb – who, according to the biblical account, came to anoint Christ's body.

Whether the work served as a reliquary or as a tomb for a figure of Christ remains uncertain.

With its size and splendor, however, it was likely displayed not only at Easter but throughout the year – a sacred object that contained space and movement within itself.

1475

Processional Shrine (Holy Sepulchre for Holy Week liturgy/Reliquary Shrine)
From the Bürgerspital Church, Salzburg Attributed to the circle of Petrus Pistator, around 1475

LIFT ME UP!

An iron loop fixed to the head once held a rope. On Ascension Day, the figure was pulled upward through the »heaven hole« in the church vault – a simple yet powerful device.

The wind-blown folds of the red cloak heightened the sense of upward motion. The figure in the red mantle had a double function: at Easter, it stood on the altar as the Risen Christ; on Ascension Day, it was raised heavenward by means of a rope mechanism.

This Christ from Hesse could also fly – at least for a moment. A pull on the rope, a sudden jerk – and he disappeared above the altar canopy.

Seen from below, only the carved soles of his feet remained, emerging from the clouds: the very image of ascension.

Both figures show how liturgical movement was carefully staged: mechanics, belief, and perception worked together with precision.

The technology was simple; the effect, exact.

Such mechanisms reveal how thoughtfully people in the Middle Ages conceived of movement – not as illusion, but as part of ritual: a controlled journey upward, with purpose and meaning.

Ascension Christ, Freiburg (Switzerland), Master of the Large Noses, 1503
Ascension Christ, Hesse/Thuringia, around 1480

SOMEWHERE OVER …

1430

Christ is shown as the Risen One, his right hand raised in blessing. His body still bears the wounds of the Crucifixion. Particularly striking are the four angels with candleholders – rare survivals – who accompany the Saviour's ascent into heaven with their light.

Both figures are framed by a mandorla, a radiant almond-shaped aureole that, in the Middle Ages, was often called a rainbow because of its multicoloured surface. In remembrance of Christ's Ascension, the figures were hoisted up through the church nave until they disappeared into the »heaven hole.«

When the rope was drawn tight, everything moved together: the figure rose, the mandorla turned slightly, wax dripped, blossoms fell, the space itself seemed to shift.

»Special effects« such as falling petals and wafers heightened the drama of the scene.

What remained in the end was an image: a body vanishing into the light of heaven – a glimpse of what medieval believers longed for after death.

Resurrection/Ascension Christ in Mandorla, Swabia, around 1430/40
Ascension Christ in Mandorla with four angels,Tyrol, angels: second half of the 15th century;
Christ: around 1520/30

YOU SPIN ME ROUND

Controlled from the back, some figures could perform surprising feats:

The head of the Christ Child resting on Mary's arm could be turned by means of a cord.

Madonna and Child with movable head
from Toporec (Slovakia)
Spiš region (Slovakia), around 1320/30

1320

VOICE OVER (AND OUT)

In the Christ on the Cold Stone, there appears to have been a small opening for speech – behind it, a person would recite the Passion texts.

Such devices created an immediate, almost lifelike effect in the Middle Ages: the sacred became tangible and audible.

With the Reformation in the 16th century, however, they fell into disrepute.

Mechanical movements and spoken voices were suddenly seen as deception, even fraud. It was whispered that the figures spoke only after someone had made a donation.

What had once been a sign of faith now caused scandal – a symptom of the shift from trust to control. Between faith and doubt, a new perspective emerged: not on the miracle itself, but on its construction..

1500

Christ on the Cold Stone with speaking aperture
Brussels, Jan II Borman or Pasquier Borman, around 1500

FORGIVE ME!

Those who prayed to the saints and placed their hopes in them could also be disappointed.

When prayers went unanswered, believers sometimes resorted to drastic means.

Some saintly figures suffered actual retaliation when the faithful felt their petitions had been ignored. The story of Saint Nicholas recalls a legend in which a statue of the saint was whipped in anger.

These »corrective measures« were meant to persuade the saint to heed the prayers of the faithful.

Such physical treatment of sacred images reflects a particular relationship to the holy: between trust, disappointment, and symbolic correction, faith moved in close proximity to the body.

These actions may seem strange to us – and yet, they are consistent. The image was not a symbol, but a counterpart.Those who prayed expected a response; those who were disappointed acted.

Reward and punishment – faith as negotiation, balancing trust and control..

1510

Saint Nicholas
Upper Rhine region, early 16th century

YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL!

With flowing hair and a floral headband, Mary appears as Immaculata (immaculata = immaculate). Her youthful beauty illustrates the dogma that Mary was chosen by God and was free from original sin from the beginning.

Since the late 13th century, such figures of Mary have been hoisted through a hole in the church vault on the feast day of the Assumption.

The marks on her head still indicate the presence of a suspension device. Thanks to the fully rounded design, the clergy and the congregation could admire Mary from all sides as she floated upwards – a deliberately staged moment of shared contemplation in which art, faith and movement merged into a single, festive gesture, the congregation united in a glance upwards.

And in this distance lay a promise – that beauty itself could become a sign of heaven.

1519

Maria Immaculata
Henrick Douwerman, before 1520

KAMELLE, KAMELLE!

A white dress, curly hair, delicate wings, and a bowl full of sweets – this is how the people of Aachen know their Streuengelchen, the »little scattering angel,« who floats above the Rosviertel each year during the Roskirmes fair.

Set in motion along two parallel ropes, the angel whirls through the air, showering candies down on children and adults alike.

The origin of this living tradition lies in a medieval legend: A pious servant is said to have regularly given sweets to poor children.

After his death, a small angel continued his good deed – and so began the Streuengelche van de Rues, a »sweet miracle« with a history of more than 300 years that continues to this day.

This custom bridges devotion and festivity, play and symbol, faith and community.

Its guiding thought remains: »Every good gift comes from above« (James 1:17).

The movement from above to below – once a symbol of divine grace – has become an expression of joy and generosity. Either way, it still connects heaven and earth.

Streuengelche van de Rues
Aachen, Mitte 20. Jh.

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