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Maniura, Robert The altarpiece of the Man of Sorrows in the Church of St James, Levoča and the scope of art history. In: Annual Conference of the British Archaeological Association. Košice: Medieval Art and Architecture in Eastern Slovakia, 20-24 July 2022, Košice, Slovakia. (Unpublished)

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The Altarpiece of the Man of Sorrows in the Church of St James, Levoča and the Scope of Art History

First of all, I'd like to offer my thanks to the conference organisers for giving me the opportunity to contribute and to our hosts here for sharing their expertise during the presentations and the visits. This has been an immensely stimulating week and I'm very grateful to the experience.

Speaking last at such a rich conference is a rather daunting task and I am acutely aware of my ignorance. By the standards of English-language art history I am an expert on the art of 'central' and 'east central' Europe, on the basis of having worked on Polish material, and that, I think is the basis of my invitation. But when I received that invitation, I freely admit that I knew nothing about the arts of eastern Slovakia. I've done my best in the meantime to inform myself, but there are a good many people here today who are much better qualified to speak than me - especially on the object that I've chosen as my focus:

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the altarpiece of the man of sorrows – the *Vir Dolorum* – which I saw, along with others of the British contingent I imagine, for the first time on our trip to Levoča yesterday amongst the riches of the church of St James which Dusan talked us through.

I'd like to try, however, to generate something positive from that ignorance, by reflecting on what we stand to gain from a fuller understanding of what, too many of us, remains very unfamiliar material. This altarpiece serves a good example.

When Zoe and Jana first approached me about taking part, I scoured the draft programme and recognised the name of Levoča, largely because of Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann's brief comments on Pavel of Levoča and the great high altarpiece of St James in his book *Court, Cloister and City* – famously, even taller than Veit Stoss's high altar for St Mary's in Krakow, which I knew tolerably well.

But as I explored the other contents of the church using the web resources available to me, I came across something that looked rather familiar: the altarpiece of the Man of Sorrows.

Why familiar?

Those of you with long memories and a taste for Central European travel may be aware that I've spoken at a BAA conference before: in Kraków in 2011. Then I gave a paper on the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Wawel Cathedral

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- here seen looking south west - one of whose surviving 15th century elements, probably original to the Chapel, is a winged altarpiece the left hand wing of which you can see propped up on the left of this image. The open altarpiece has in its corpus,

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polychromed and gilded sculptures of Christ as Man of Sorrows and the Sorrowing Virgin.

Above, six bust-length angels hold the instruments of the Passion and in a crowning traceried gable are eight bust-length figures of prophets.

The altarpiece is undocumented, but the chapel which houses it is the burial chapel of King Casimir IV of Poland 1447-1492, and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1440, and his queen, Elizabeth of Habsburg, the daughter of Albrecht II, King of the Romans, whom he had married in 1454. Heraldry fitting that royal couple can be found on shields supported by pairs of angels at the bottom of the corpus - the arms of the Duchy of Austria on the left, the Kingdom of Poland in the centre and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania on the right.

The interior of the wings show a sequence of Christological scenes (the Presentation in the Temple and Christ teaching in the Temple on the left, and the Crucifixion and the Deposition on the right.) These four panels are surmounted by gilded tracery and have tooled gold grounds.

The outside of the wings

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Bear four painted Marian scenes.

It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that my attention was caught by the altarpiece currently installed at the East End of the south aisle of the church of St James in Levoča

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which has in its corpus, gilded and polychromed statues of

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Christ as Man of Sorrows, the Virgin Mary and St John, with the arms of another royal couple beneath –

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Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, 1458-1490, and his queen Beatrice of Aragon, whom he married in 1476. The arms are emphasised by inscriptions on a banderole which runs along the upper border of this section, just visible in the black and white detail: *Clinodium Mathie Regis*

The interior of the wings has painted images with tooled gold grounds and the exterior of the wings

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Has a Marian cycle.

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I don't wish to suggest that the relationship between these two works is particularly close. There are clearly significant differences in iconography – the Levoča altarpiece has St John as well as Christ and the Virgin in the centre, it has paired saints on the open wings and the choice of Marian scenes on the exterior is subtly different. There are also stylistic differences. But these two objects are manifestly very closely similar kinds of thing and embody related visual traditions.

The point that I wish to make by relating this narrative of my thought processes is that, although I have continued to work on the Chapel of the Holy Cross including the altarpiece of the left, nothing in the literature has led me to an awareness of the altarpiece on the right at a site a mere 160km away. For the UK contingent in the audience, that's roughly the same distance as from London to Leicester.

And this strikes me as odd and unsatisfactory and is the prompt for these reflections.

Both altarpieces are rich and imposing complexes of micro-architecture, sculpture and painting bearing the arms of major royal houses. They are both manifestly significant objects and worthy of study. Yet neither finds a place in the standard canon of late medieval and early modern European art as it is studied internationally. More than that, the structure of the discipline of the history of art is such that, even having made an approach to one of them, there is no obvious path to the other.

I don't want to oversimplify this. I'm not for a moment suggesting that there is insufficient exchange between Slovak and Polish art historians, or a lack of awareness of the movement of artworks, artists and ideas across regions transcending state boundaries. But the discipline is organised on state lines along with the university system and the study of works outside an internationally recognised canon tend largely to be confined to local scholarship. I think it's also fair to say that the discipline still tends to encourage a kind of benchmarking to the output of what are regarded as the most innovative artistic centres - for painting and sculpture in Latin Christian Europe in this period that means Italy and the Netherlands - as a standard interpretive step, so the privileged international comparisons are those between the region being studied and these engines of artistic change. A mind map of the resulting conceptual relationships might look something like the UK rail network.

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I've already mentioned the distance between London and Leicester so let's stick with that. It's relatively easy to get from London to Leicester by train. It's also relatively easy to get from London to Milton Keynes by train. It is much less easy to get from by train from Leicester to Milton Keynes or vice versa. Similarly, as we shall see, it is arguably relatively easy to get from Krakow or Levoča to, for example, Brussels by art history. I have found it comparatively difficult to get from Krakow to Levoča by art history.

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Indeed, I only arrived yesterday, arguably at least a decade late.

The comparisons with the innovative western centres are, almost by definition, unfavourable. Art history is traditionally a story of innovation, of development, of increasing sophistication, and Central Europe isn't seen to fit well into the story. These value judgements are sometimes quite explicit. Consider these comments from the authors of two of the standard survey books on the so-called Northern Renaissance:

Jeffrey Chipps Smith: 'although the cultural patrimonies of Britain, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe are significant, these lands contributed less frequently to the broad artistic innovations that swept across Europe during the period'. Nice, in the present context, Britain and Eastern Europe are brought together.

Or this from Craig Harbison: 'This definition of 'the North' deliberately ignores, Scandinavia, Russia, Poland, Bohemia and the Balkans [note that even the list of what he is ignoring ignores Hungary]. The affairs of state that drew their western neighbours sometimes into conflict, sometimes cohesion, left the 'outer' states of Europe marginalized, intent on their own problems unless one of the 'inner' European states turned a land hungry eye on them. They were also 'outsiders' in the history of European art at the time of the Renaissance, having their own traditions and remaining virtually aloof from the rest of European art until late in the sixteenth century.'

A rather extraordinary statement, I think you'll agree, in the light of what we've seen this week.

Here, I'd like to focus on one aspect that I think contributes to these judgements and to the disciplinary marginalisation of an entire region, and it is a matter of material.

When I made my first approaches to the Cracow Chapel,

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I had comparatively little to say about the altarpiece. My focus was on the wall paintings, but that is another story. I returned to it as part of a more recent project in which I set myself the task of exploring parts of Europe with which I was unfamiliar - and that includes Spain. I became interested in the work of the late 15th century Barcelona painter Jaume Huguet,

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who, in common with many other Aragonese painters of the period, used copious

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gilded relief ornament. And that got me interested in the use of gold.

Turning back to Kraków,

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Gold is inescapably an issue. As it is

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At Levoča. Not just with this altarpiece, of course, but with

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the others in St James, and, of course

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At Bardejov.

This might seem like a statement of the obvious. And indeed, having the opportunity to view this material, it is. But consider this: the call for papers for a conference held in Paris in June this year, 'Gold in Renaissance Western Europe. Interdisciplinary Approaches' said this:

‘Although gold backgrounds gradually disappeared from Western European painting – mainly during the fifteenth century – and art theorists condemned the use of this material, gold was not completely abandoned in practice, as shown by certain artworks produced by painters as innovative as Rembrandt and Vermeer in the middle of the seventeenth century.’

This really annoyed me, and I inveigled my way into the conference and gave a paper pointing out that though gold backgrounds may gradually disappear during the 15th century if you look at ‘Western Europe’ (though to come to that conclusion, you’d still need to exclude Spain), but that the relevant cultural unit is not Western Europe, but Latin Christendom. And if one takes account of Central and East Central Europe, then gold backgrounds don’t gradually die out in the 15th century, they carry on well into the 16th. My title, by the way, was the Golden Norm and the startling concentration of surviving objects in this region manifest that norm very clearly indeed. The extensive use of gold remains standard in large parts of Europe. Parts of Italy and the Netherlands are exceptions.

But is this not just what Harbison had in mind in writing about regions with ‘their own traditions and remaining virtually aloof from the rest of European art’?

Well no, that can’t be sustained and in the remaining part of this paper I’d like to explain why.

I have been picking on Jeffrey Chipps Smith and Craig Harbison for their generalisations about the arts of Central and East Central Europe and that is arguably unfair given that they were both trying to limit the scope of an introductory text. My lingering concern, though, is that introductory limitations can become deeply ingrained. However, there is a much more high profile contribution which needs to be taken account of which has arguably wormed its way insidiously into the consciousness of the discipline. This is Michael Baxandall’s famous formulation in the first part of *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth century Italy* in which he traced a transition from the valuing of costly materials to the valuing of skill, largely by references to clauses in contracts but also with reference to theoretical texts, famously including Leon Battista Alberti’s disparaging comments on the extensive use of gold in painting in his *De Pictura*.

It’s a justly celebrated passage and it is a characteristically acute interpretation of a trend observable in some parts of 15th century Italian painting. Baxandall is careful to acknowledge that the development was by no means universal even in Italy, but the qualification comes with a judgemental sting:

‘The fifteenth-century client seems to have made his opulent gestures more and more by becoming a conspicuous buyer of skill. Not all clients did so: the pattern described here is a perceptible drift in 15th century contracts, not a norm with which they all comply. Borso d’Este was not the only princely primitive out of touch with the decent commercial practice of Florence and San Sepolcro. But there were enough enlightened buyers of skill, spurred on by an increasingly articulate sense of the artists’ individuality, to make the public attitude to painters very different in 1490 from what it had been in 1410.’

The continued valorisation of costly materials is ‘primitive’ and, in some sense, implicitly indecent. This stance has been internalised by the discipline to the extent that, for example, a respected commentator on the art of fifteenth-century Spain could write recently of gilded relief ornament as

'a regressive trait of painting in Aragon and Catalonia'. I strongly suspect that the same issue is at play in the marginalisation of the kind of work that I'm looking at here: the reliance on costly shiny surfaces is seen to betray an unsophisticated, provincial outlook.

But, there is respect in which these works clearly engage with Baxandall's 'decent commercial practice'.

I'll begin with the Krakow altarpiece because here it is most explicit. All commentators agree that the painted elements owe a great deal to Netherlandish painting. This is clearest on the exterior of the wings.

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The concern with surface texture, especially the lustre of metal such as the vessels in the Circumcision,

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goes beyond anything otherwise seen in contemporary Cracow painting.

The very framing of this scene, which invites the viewer to elide the threshold of the depicted room with the frame of the picture, arguably reveals knowledge of the analogous devices in the work of van der Weyden and Bouts. That is perhaps even clearer

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In the Annunciation which also has characteristically Netherlandish still life elements.

An argument has indeed been made that the strong Netherlandish elements might indicate that the paintings at least are actually from the Netherlands, Brussels being one possibility. I'm not going to attempt to resolve that here, but merely observe the dominant discourse around this work's Netherlandish-ness. The subtitle of a recent article on the Cracow altarpiece, by Magdalena Łanuszka of 2015, names it 'the most Netherlandising work of Jagiellonian patronage' (that is of the dynasty to which Casimir IV belonged).

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The paintings of the Levoča altar are perhaps not so obviously Netherlandish and tend to be discussed in terms of more local precedents, but, whatever their immediate sources, these paintings are manifestly in that widely diffused tradition. In the Annunciation, for example, the motif of the framing arch appears again as in the Krakow panel, and here figures arguably ultimately derive from compositions like Rogier van der Weyden's on the left wing of the Columba altarpiece.

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As a result, these works thus embody a challenge which I'm not aware of hearing voiced before.

The challenge is this: the most Netherlandish aspects of these works are on the outside.

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We have tantalisingly few firm records of when such objects were opened - and I'm not aware of any documentation relating to this object - but the evidence we have that does survive - the most famous being the *Mesnerfluchtbuch* from St Lorenz in Nuremberg, indicates opening on particularly important feast days. The outside of folding altarpieces is generally understood to be the most mundane part of the object - the part that is most frequently exposed to view. The challenge is that the innovative artistic devices traditionally accorded most prestige by art history, including a reliance on pictorial illusionism and the avoidance of extensive gilding are clearest in the altarpiece's everyday state. The prestigious open state seems more old-fashioned.

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But the extensive gilding which articulates the transition to the higher status parts of the object is employed quite explicitly in the knowledge of the innovative devices manifest on the exterior. This is clearly not unsophisticated work, for undemanding patrons dazzled by lots of gilding – in Alberti's words 'rays of gold that almost blind the eyes of the spectators from all angles'. This is work fully engaged with Europe-wide artistic developments but evidences alternative priorities.

This is reinforced if we turn to the possible patronage. The altarpiece of the man of sorrows is undocumented, but we have the arms of Matthias Corvinus and Beatrice of Aragon. That gives us a date between 1476 and 1490. Does it also give us a direct patron?

The inscriptions explaining the heraldry are an intriguing feature, perhaps indicating some uncertainty about whether it could be readily understood, and that might raise questions about its original location and intended audience.

It is perhaps prudent to consider the altarpiece as part of the extended sense of the King's patronage explored by the late, great Robert Suckale and supports his point about the stylistic variety of that patronage. Matthias Corvinus is most commonly associated in the history of art with the patronage of and collecting of Italian art. If his patronage of this object is at all direct we have further evidence of the knowing use of this opulent kind of artwork. Matthias Corvinus was by no means a 'princely primitive' to use Baxandall's phrase.

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To return to my starting point and the comparison with the altarpiece in Krakow, what do we make of these two great rivals – Casimir and Mathhias Corvinus – employing closely similar visual strategies? Interestingly, Casimir IV is usually regarded as something of a princely primitive in terms of the visual arts, partly, because of the apparent lack of coherence of the components in his burial chapel. But stylistic uniformity is arguably less of a concern in this part of the world. If we fail to study material like this because it doesn't fit our notions of artistic progress, we risk developing a flawed idea of what might constitute, in Baxandall's words, 'decent commercial practice' in this period.