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Information on selected highlights of the medieval collection



What story can be seen in the painting?
Why does the wooden figure have an opening
at the back? And what was the function of
the embroidery?

**Discover the background to selected
highlights of the medieval Collection!**

The medieval collection can be seen in
several exhibition rooms on the ground floor.
You can take the information with you through
the rooms in printed form. Or you can scan
the QR code.

Introduction to the medieval collection

Over 500 years ago, Christian life in the European Middle Ages was characterised by a belief in God and the immortality of the soul. Everyday life was marked by the hope for "salvation" after death, which could only be achieved through pious deeds.

In order to honour God and prove themselves to be good believers, people built magnificent churches and monasteries, which they decorated with precious representations - paintings, sculptures, textiles and stained glass windows. Smaller devotional pictures and illustrated prayer books were used in the private sphere. The most important pictorial themes were scenes from the Bible or later Christian legends. Unlike Judaism and Islam, in Christianity does not recognise a general prohibition on images.

As museum artefacts, the works of art on display here are no longer in their original religious context. But even today they tell stories of life and death, love and pain, joy and suffering, hope and despair. Stories that are appealing, impressive, thought-provoking, surprising and irritating. Therefore, everything you perceive, think and feel on your tour is justified.

Angels - heavenly and earthly music



The centre-panel of this three-part altarpiece shows the central main figures of Christianity: Jesus Christ and his mother Mary beneath a magnificent architectural setting. They are praised by angels playing music. I wonder what the angelic music sounds like?

In contrast to this heavenly sphere, an urban square can be seen in the background, which was familiar to the painter's contemporaries. The central picture is flanked by St. Catherine and St. Barbara - fashionable women from head to toe! The contemporary, elegant clothing was intended to emphasise their uniqueness and exemplary nature.

The splendid interior side of the altar retable-piece shown here, also known as the festive side, was only revealed on special occasions such as Easter or Christmas. The hinged side swings were usually closed. The painting on the outside exterior of the wings has not survived.



The richly painted music sheets behind the curtains, which protect the light-sensitive material from damage, once belonged to a song book. This so-called gradual was made by hand by the nuns of St Clare's Convent in Cologne, who lived in poverty.

The aim of the nuns' carefully colouring the parchment pages was not to earn their living, but was - similar to prayer - a meditative practice to concentrate on God. One of the nuns, the head of the convent, Petronella, even had herself depicted on every single sheet.

But what was the purpose of the framing decorations, people, animals and hybrid creatures? These imaginative depictions are amusing caricatures, so-called drolleries, which were quite common in medieval book illumination and provided variety and entertainment.



The painting shows a cheerful banquet at court: the party is wearing sumptuous clothes, the table is laid and music is playing. Three musicians are playing their wind instruments, known as shawms. Only at second glance one recognises a gruesome scene at the bottom right: the head of a decapitated man on a platter!

How do joy and suffering fit together in this depiction? The painting, which was once part of a large altarpiece, shows the biblical story in which King Herodius - incited by his wife Herodias and his stepdaughter Salome - orders the execution of John the Baptist. During the banquet, Salome appears with the head of the Baptist to prove his death.

The Virgin Mary through the ages



On the lap of the enthroned Virgin Mary sits her son Jesus. He is depicted as a small adult in keeping with his royal role. In his hands he holds a globe and a book, as attributes of dominion and wisdom.

The sculpture from the Romanesque period is more than 800 years old. It is the eldest work of medieval art in the museum's collection. The rigid posture with the gaze forward is characteristic of the time of its creation. However, the Christian motif of mother and child can be traced back to much older cult objects: take a look at the two Egyptian depictions of the goddess Isis with her son Horus (in the display case to the left).



The Virgin Mary holds the naked infant Jesus in both her hands. The child is playfully moving his legs and presents a bunch of grapes - a reference to his later suffering and death on the cross, as wine symbolises Jesus' blood. The fact that he is naked was intended to emphasise that he was sent to earth by God as a human being of flesh and blood.

The late Gothic sculpture was created about 300 years later than the Romanesque sculpture. It shows the motif of mother and child in a more lively and emotional way. In the current presentation the sculpture perceived rather as an autonomous devotional image, but its orientation suggests that it was originally accompanied by other figures, probably Mary's mother Anna or the Magi who worshipped the infant Jesus.

Life and worship of the infant Jesus



The fact that this painting represents the pregnant Virgin Mary only becomes clear on closer inspection! This is because the painter did not depict her with an obviously protruding belly, but painted the yet unborn Jesus floating, as it were in front of her body. In this way the artist illustrated the particularity of Mary's pregnancy with Jesus, who is distinguished by halo and aureola.

But what is Mary looking at, and why does she raise her hand? The painting, cut on all sides, is a fragment of a larger wooden panel that probably belonged to an altarpiece showing the biblical scene of the Visitation. In this narration Mary visits her much older relative Elizabeth who is, just as herself, unexpectedly pregnant. , greeting and rejoicing. And, of course, when they meet, they greet each other full of joy.



Looking towards us, the naked infant Jesus is surrounded by three old men. One of them is holding the child with a white cloth, while another excises the foreskin with a knife. A third man with glasses reads ritual texts.

The image depicts the ancient ritual of circumcision, which in Judaism seals the covenant with God until today. Based on a recommendation by the Prophet Mohammed, it is also practised in Islam.

According to biblical tradition, Jesus as a child of Jewish parents was also circumcised. Mary and Joseph are actually not allowed to witness the event, but they peer over a curtain supposed to serve as a partition. A number of details indicate that the painter was familiar with the ritual, such as the folding table and the drip, as well as the empty chair that provides for the expected Prophet Elijah.

However, some scholars are of the opinion that the facial features are depicted in an exaggerated manner, which indicates an anti-Semitic attitude. In the same vein they interpret the fact that the painter used pseudo-Hebrew characters to decorate the precious garments of the Jewish protagonists. At the time, Christians blamed Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus, and subsequently devalued them or even took violent action against them.

Church hall



Soot-blackened, naked figures huddling in a pit of flames, desperately plead for help. Four angels hurry down from the night sky, holding out bread, water and clothing. Further up, some of the redeemed are already being received by Jesus.

The painting, which is part of an altarpiece, depicts the salvation of souls from purgatory. According to Catholic doctrine, the souls of the deceased must remain in purgatory until they have been cleansed of the sins they committed during their lifetime. Other religions such as Judaism and Islam have similar ideas about the soul's afterlife.

The kneeling donor figures in the foreground, depicting the knight Werner von Pallant from Linnich in the district of Düren with his family, give an idea of how the Catholic concept of the afterlife influenced people: The Latin prayers on the banners illustrate that the founder hoped for the quickest possible redemption after death. Just as the depiction shows in a kind of vision.



A nun on her deathbed, surrounded by a dozen people: The embroidery depicts the death of St Clare of Assisi in 1253. As a companion of St Francis, Clare had orientated her entire life towards God and thus inspired many women in Europe. Two nuns, followers of the order of Poor Clares founded by her, pay their last respects with funeral candle and Bible.

Clare is embraced by the Virgin Mary, while Jesus is standing at the bedhead and blesses her. To the right, aside a group of women including St Mary Magdalene, St Barbara and St Catherine, Empress Cunegonde is shown with a church model, as the latter is regarded as a specifically Franconian saint- The embroidery might have been created in Franconia - perhaps in the Bamberg monastery of St Clare. This fabric adorned the front of the altar table on special occasions, for example on the anniversary of St Clare's death.

Carved altars as an export and economic factor/ Where does the wood come from?



This centre-part of an altarpiece depicts the Adoration of the Magi as described in the Bible. They pay homage to the infant Jesus shortly after his birth with precious gifts.

The figures as well as the landscape backdrop and the architectural set piece were carved in series and then assembled. This "modular principle" enabled the workshops to work quickly and cost-effectively based on a division of labour and also meant more affordable prices and shorter delivery times for customers.

Only a few altarpieces from the Flemish city of Mechelen have survived. Usually movable side wings were attached to the outer edges of the centre-part. Can you still recognise the traces of the hinges?



The youthful king from Africa is depicted in a graceful pose, holding a jar of incense in one hand and its lid in the other. He is wearing contemporary courtly fashion: a hip-length doublet with wide sleeves, tight trousers and pointed boots with a folded shaft. He is one of the Magi who, according to biblical tradition, brought gifts to the newborn infant Jesus.

Apart from the three ages of life, the kings often symbolised the three known continents of Europe, Asia and Africa. Their different origins were intended to emphasise the global significance of the Jesus.

The wood used for this sculpture is Swiss stone pine, which indicates that the figure was created in the Alpine region, where this tree species is native. The size of the sculpture gives an idea of the immense dimensions of the altarpieces for which the figure was originally intended!

A century of sculpting in Ulm



The Virgin Mary is standing, her torso leaning to the left. On the opposite hip she carries the naked infant Jesus. With her long cascading cloak she offers protection to a number of figures which are depicted in a much smaller scale.

The type of this so-called Virgin of Mercy developed in accordance with the jurisprudence of the time: women of high rank could offer protection to persecuted people by wrapping them in their mantle. This process was transferred to Mary as the intercessor of the people. While Mary and the infant Jesus as divine beings are shown friendly and graceful and also carved with much detail, the people seeking protection appear rather serious and with regard to their artistic execution less refined.

But why did the carver hollow out the back of the figure? The sculpture, which is attributed to master Hartmann from the city of Ulm, originally stood as an autonomous wall figure in the church of Herlazhofen in the Allgäu. The hollowed-out back was not only intended to reduce its weight, but also to prevent the wood from cracking.



St Vitus is in a cauldron of sizzling oil. According to a Sicilian legend from the 6th century, he was martyred in this way because of his Christian faith. Nothing hints at his terrible pain, he holds his hands folded in prayer and endures the torment.

The craftsmanship of the sculpture is characteristic of the new realism of 15th century art. With an insinuation of bone and muscle structure the face and the torso are rendered rather realistically. While the figure from the workshop of the Ulm master Michel Erhart is more than 500 years old, the cauldron was reconstructed in the 1990s according to comparisons with other depictions of St Vitus.



A young woman nearly completely covered with body hair) is carried up to heaven by angels. This depiction, which at first glance appears rather unusual, shows the Assumption of St Mary Magdalene.

According to legends based on biblical texts, the former prostitute went into the desert as a penitent ascetic, where her body grew fur-like hair for protection. After her death, Mary Magdalene was carried up to heaven by angels – here the slight sway of her body emphasises the fact that she is floating upwards. The sculpture was originally part of a Swabian centre-part of an altarpiece.

Sculpture and relic/ Moving, as if it were alive



Would you have guessed that this smiling female figure originally served as a container for storing bones? These so-called relics were associated with this specific sacred figure and were therefore regarded as venerable. They could be placed in the figure via an opening at her back.

Perhaps the young saint represented here is St Ursula, who was venerated in Cologne, or one of her virgin companions. The trade in relics created a great demand for suitable containers, in Cologne as well as in many other cities. Some more specimen are on display in this room. The cult of relics also had its impact on Aachen, where textile relics are kept in the cathedral until today: the dress of the Virgin Mary, the napkin, the loincloth of Jesus and the beheading cloth of John the Baptist.



Jesus is dead: his eyes are half-closed, his mouth slightly open, his legs crossed. He is wearing a loincloth only, held together by a voluminous knot.

As the presentation of this so-called crucifixus shows, the separately carved arms can be moved! This meant that on Good Friday, the day of his death, one could remove the crucified body from the – in this case no longer existing – cross in order to lay it into a grave and mourn it. This re-enactment should give believers an opportunity to witness the passion of Christ more intensely.

In this room a number of similar "acting sculptures" are gathered, for example a Jesus on the palm donkey. This was pulled through the streets on wheels on Palm Sunday, the day of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.