

Brussels, 3 July 2023

## **THE (RE-)INSTALLATION OF THE *CRANACH-TRIEGEL ALTARPIECE* IN THE WESTERN CHOIR OF NAUMBURG CATHEDRAL**

**Considerations of the Scientific Advisory Committee of Future for Religious Heritage, 28 June 2023**

### The Case of the Naumburg Altarpiece

Naumburg Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is sponsored and managed by the United Cathedral Chapters of Merseburg and Naumburg in the awareness of the cathedral's unique historical value. A second aim of the same organisation is to maintain and stimulate a lively use of the cathedral for worship and otherwise in the present and future. Within the cathedral, the western choir stands out for its spectacular rood screen, stained-glass windows and the exquisite twelve donor figures. In recent years, a project was developed, together with the Protestant congregation, to restore, reconstruct, and evoke the altarpiece that was installed on the altar in the western choir shortly before the Reformation. In 1520, Lucas Cranach the Elder created a Marian triptych for the altar that is known to have been dedicated to the Virgin Mary. During the Reformation, in 1541, the central panel was destroyed, leaving only the two wings, which resulted in the west choir losing its ritual focus.

The project to reinstall and reconstruct the Marian altarpiece was developed in the spirit of ecumenical rapprochement and reconciliation, as it intends to – symbolically and artistically – heal the wound caused by the violent destruction of part of the altarpiece during the Reformation. The Leipzig-based artist Michael Triegel was invited to recreate the altarpiece's lost central panel and the predella, building on the manner and content of the preserved wings. The new Marian triptych, a trans-historical "collaboration" by Lucas Cranach and Michael Triegel, was jointly consecrated by Naumburg's Protestant bishop Friedrich Kramer and the Catholic bishop of Magdeburg, Gerhard Feige, during a festive service on 3 July 2022.

ICOMOS Deutschland has expressed its reservations regarding the (re-)installation of the altarpiece, arguing that it obscures the overall view of the twelve sculpted donor figures when entering the west choir and seriously reduces the experience of the stained-glass windows. Moreover, the committee has manifested doubts about the Cranach altarpiece having been created for the altar in the western choir. Furthermore, Cranach's authorship of the side wings was questioned, as well as the veracity of the iconoclastic riot in 1541.

### Considerations by the Scientific Advisory Committee of Future for Religious Heritage

The case of the Cranach-Triegel triptych project was presented to Future for Religious Heritage, who had it discussed by its Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC). The members of the committee, who are individually mentioned below, put forward the following considerations:

1) The initiators of the project provide convincing evidence to substantiate that the Marian altar has always been the focal point of the western choir arguing that: 1) Mary and Child appear in this position on seals since the middle of the thirteenth century, 2) Accounts of the Naumburg Cathedral *fabrica* document the presence of a Marian *Gnadenbild* on the altar from 1485, and 3) The twelve donor statues provide circumstantial evidence to the original placement of the Marian altar because the views of the majority of these figures converge precisely here. Their body postures and facial expressions communicate their *post-mortem* veneration of the Mother of God in order to shorten their time in Purgatory. In a document from 1249, the donors state that they have paid off most of their debt through their foundations, but that they still need the redeeming power of prayers to the Virgin Mary as *intercessora* and patroness of the western choir.

2) New research of historical documents from the 15th and 16th centuries kept in the Naumburg Cathedral archives leaves no doubt that the altarpiece created by Lucas Cranach stood on the altar in the western choir until it was removed following the destruction of its central section, that featured the Virgin Mary, in 1541. The installation of this altarpiece was the culmination of an overall renovation of the cathedral, and especially the western choir, in the years 1517 to 1520, in response to its lively liturgical use. Other elements of this campaign were the repainting of the donor figures and the erection of a tomb for Bishop Johannes von Schönburg, the donor of the altarpiece, behind the altar.

3) For the historical reasons mentioned above, the SAC considers the installation of the wings and the format and subject matter of the reconstructed central section of the altarpiece to be justified. Moreover, the committee believes that the initiators of the Cranach-Triegel altarpiece deserve praise for their search for a balance between the heritage value of Naumburg Cathedral's unique western choir with its screen, donor statues, and stained-glass windows on the one hand and the current liturgical use of the church on the other. Furthermore, the SAC considers the idea of reconciliation between the Protestant and Catholic Church after more than 500 years of separation that was chosen as an inspiring point of departure for the project to be both considerate and praiseworthy.

4) The wings painted by the famous sixteenth-century German painter Lucas Cranach were combined with a contemporary central panel showing the Virgin Mary (and Christ on the rear) painted by the acclaimed German contemporary painter Michael Triegel. It was installed in a reversible manner, in compliance with Naumburg Cathedral's status as listed World Heritage: no intervention was made in the altar mensa as the triptych is stabilized by invisible weights in the predella. Moreover, in accordance with age-old liturgical tradition, the side wings of the altar will be kept closed, concealing the Triegel painting, except on weekends and feastdays. The altarpiece has reinforced the liturgical focus on the altar, where divine services and devotions are now held again, while its historically inspired opening and closing allows the donor figures and stained-glass windows of the western choir to be fully experienced on "weekdays".

5) The SAC believes that the (re-)installation of the Cranach-Triegel altarpiece is fully compliant with the Venice Charter, the foundational document adopted by ICOMOS in 1964, in view of the following statements: "Article 8: Items of sculpture, painting or decoration which form an integral part of a monument may only be removed from it if this is the sole means of ensuring their preservation. Article 11: The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration. Article 12: Replacements of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence".

6) The SAC notices that fixed criteria for the concept of “authenticity” do not exist. Concerning authenticity as a leading concept in all scientific studies of cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories, the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* refers to its Annex 4, *The Nara Document on Authenticity*, which states that “It is thus not possible to base judgements of values and authenticity within fixed criteria. On the contrary, the respect due to all cultures requires that heritage properties must be considered and judged within the cultural contexts to which they belong. (...) Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context, and its evolution through time, authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of the sources may include form and design, materials, and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors”.

**In conclusion, the SAC believes that the Cranach-Triegel altarpiece is a testimony to Naumburg Cathedral’s 700-year history as a *living church* in which unique heritage values have constantly been combined with the building’s function as a place of worship.** Keeping this balance is, first and foremost, the responsibility of the United Cathedral Chapters. **The committee is of the opinion that the installation of the altarpiece does not harm or threaten the unique heritage values of Naumburg Cathedral as acknowledged by UNESCO in 2018** (see the summary of the monument’s Outstanding Universal Value below). Any possible threat of a reduced visibility of the donor figures and stained-glass windows in the western choir is avoided by the fact that visitors can circulate around the altar that has been freestanding in the same position for centuries. **Moreover, the SAC considers the solution to keep the wings of the altarpiece closed on weekdays and only open them on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays as an elegant and adequate compromise:** when the triptych is closed, all donor figures can be seen in an unobstructed manner upon entering the west choir.

Members of the Scientific Committee:

Prof Dr Justin Kroesen (co-chair), Bergen (Norway)

Dr Henrik Lindblad (co-chair), Lund (Sweden)

Prof Dr Andrea Longhi, Turin (Italy)

Prof Dr Harald Schwillus, Halle (Germany)

Dr Rolando Volzone, Lisbon (Portugal)

Dr Jonas Danckers, Louvain (Belgium)

Samidha Pusalkar, M.A. (secretary), Milan (Italy)

## Appendix

Naumburg Cathedral was added to the list of the World Heritage Sites at the 42nd session of the World Heritage Committee in Manama on July 1, 2018. The brief summary of the cathedral’s Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), which was decisive for inscription, reads:

Naumburg Cathedral, located in the south of the State of Saxony-Anhalt, is a unique testimony to medieval art and architecture. Most of the church building dates back to the 13th century. It is composed of a basilical Romanesque nave flanked by two Gothic choirs in the east and in the west. The west choir with the famous portrait statues of the twelve cathedral founders and the west rood screen are the masterpieces of pan-European workshop accordingly named the “Naumburg Master”, who conceptualized all parts of the western choir as a whole and carried out the western choir from the bottom to the roof within six years only. The polychrome reliefs and sculptures of the choir and the rood screen count among the most significant sculptures of the Middle Ages. The overall iconographic concept and the harmonious combination of architecture, sculpture and glass paintings reflect in a unique way the profound changes in the religious

practice and the visual arts of the 13th century. These changes resulted in a hitherto unknown realism and observation of nature, as well as in the recourse to ancient sources.

The cathedral meets criteria 1 (masterpiece of human creativity) and 2 (significant intersection for cultural and technical exchange) of the OUV:

Criterion (1): The episcopal church of Naumburg is unique among the medieval cathedrals due to the west choir conceptualized and designed by a brilliant sculptor – the “Naumburg Master” – and his workshop. The organic combination of architecture, sculpture and glass paintings created an extraordinary synthesis of the arts. The twelve life-sized, colored founder figures in the west choir, the passion reliefs of the west rood screen, the crucifixion group on its portal and the numerous capitals are outstanding examples of the architectural sculpture of the Middle Ages. One of the founder figures – Uta of Ballenstedt – is considered as one of the icons of Gothic sculpture. They are sculpted from the same blocks of stone as the pillar strips, and the various media are integrated in the fabric of the architecture and its manner of construction. A single intelligence stood behind the integrated conception of the architecture, sculpture, and stained glass and merged them into one integral piece of work.

Criterion (2): The workshop organisation of sculptors and stonemasons was established in the early 13th century and is known under the name Naumburg Master. It constitutes one of the decisive conveyors and pioneers of the ground-breaking innovations in architecture and sculpture in the second half of the 13th century. The migration of the workshop of the Naumburg Master, from north-eastern France through the Middle Rhine areas to the eastern boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire and further to south-western Europe, gives testimony to the extensive European cultural exchange during the High Middle Ages.

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