German masterwork of 1510 must be seen in Christian Humanist light

by Nora Hamerman and Richard E. Welsh

The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision
by Andrée Hayum
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Professor Hayum's study deals with a world-famous art work now in the museum of Colmar, France. Celebrated in its own day, the multi-panel Isenheim Altarpiece of 1510 by Mathis Gothart Nithart (commonly called "Gruenewald"), underwent a long period of neglect, but interest in it revived so much in the present century that it crops up in every survey course in the history of Western art, where it is usually billed as a forerunner of modern "expressionism," that form of insane cultural pessimism which broke out in central Europe along with Nazism and Communism, and whose practitioners were mostly Nazis, Communists, or other kinds of unwholesome kooks.

This book's final chapter is a nicely ironical account of the critical history of the altarpiece, including the way in which it got adopted for various bizarre "nationalist" and cultish interpretations over the past century. But most of the small volume is an effort to put it back into its own time, with the twist that the author sees a parallel between the healing program to which the Isenheim altarpiece was originally associated, and the desperate circumstances which confront us in the AIDS epidemic today. By blocking out the possibility of scientific optimism, either then or now, Miss Hayum lands us right back in the camp of cultural pessimism. We shall propose an alternative interpretation, one more consonant with the presumed outlook of a major Christian artist at the height of the German Renaissance.

The Isenheim altarpiece was destined for a monastery of the Antonite order (founded by the Eastern holy man St. Anthony), in Isenheim near Colmar, in Alsace. The monastery's primary goal was the care of a plague-like disease which often went under the name of St. Anthony's Fire. The author quotes a description of the symptoms of this horrible disease, dating back to the 11th century: "The intestines eaten up by the force of St. Anthony's Fire, with ravaged limbs, blackened like charcoal; either they die miserably, or they live more miserably seeing their feet and hands develop gangrene and separate from the rest of the body; and they suffer muscular spasms that deform them."

It was in 1597, at the University of Marburg—located about halfway between Isenheim and Gruenewald's deathplace, Halle—that the source of St. Anthony's Fire was finally discovered to be alimentary. It turned out to be caused by ergot, a fungus which grows especially in rye after a damp season and a bad harvest. Ergot poisoning causes gangrene and convulsions, and also, due to a close chemical relationship to LSD, psychedelic hallucinations. If today's anti-pesticide ecology freaks win their battle to return to chemical-free "organic farming," the world could witness a return of such hideous diseases as ergot poisoning, on a large scale.

Three layers

In the practice of northern Europe, altarpieces were composed of multiple folding wings, which closed and opened to form a series of views appropriate to different seasons of the liturgical year. Some time after 1500, the artist who became known to history as "Gruenewald" was commissioned to paint a series of panels which can be folded to form three principal views, around a sculptured wood shrine of St. Anthony which had been made around 1490. The three views are:

1) First, the preexisting sculptured shrine was flanked by two scenes from the life of Saint Anthony.

2) When these wings are closed, a new set of panels is revealed, which depict the *Madonna and Child,* and the *Incarnation Tabernacle* in the central section, plus a new set of wings, with the *Annunciation to Mary* on the left, and Christ's *Resurrection* on the right.

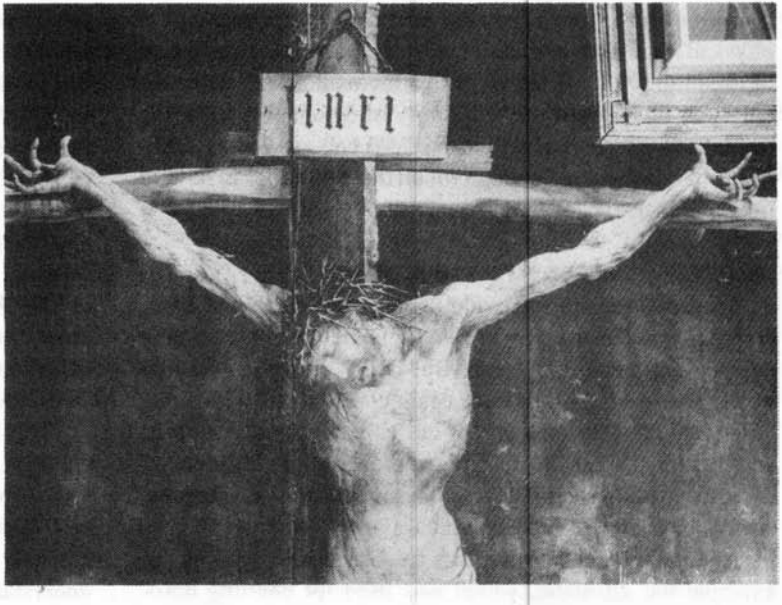
3) When these wings are also closed, the ultimate state of the altarpiece is revealed. In the center is one of the most painful *Crucifixions* painted in the entire Renaissance. The wings in this view portray the two saints associated with curing the plague and other dire illnesses, Sebastian and Anthony, and below is the *Lamentation* over the dead Christ.

Hayum presents these three views as phases of a healing program, and she has a lot of acute observations about how this works.

In view 1, the left-hand scene, *The Meeting of Saints*

Medicinal plants were depicted with the precision of a botany textbook by Mathis Nithart "Gruenewald" in this detail from "The Meeting of Saints Anthony and Paul."

Ergot poisoning, "St. Anthony's Fire," causes gangrene, convulsions, and also vivid hallucinations. This image of a victim in "The Temptations of St. Anthony," was apparently used for diagnosis.



The famous Crucifix of the Isenheim Altar. The physical sufferings of the body of Christ contrast to the incandescent Christ of the Resurrection in another panel.

Anthony and Paul, shows the gamut of available herbal remedies to relieve suffering known in the early 16th century, with botanically precise renderings of the plants comparable to contemporary drawings by Leonardo da Vinci. The right-hand scene, *The Temptation of St. Anthony,* includes in the foreground one "demon," separated from the tormentors of Anthony, showing the symptoms of a person afflicted with St. Anthony's Fire. Hayum observes that this figure was used to assist in diagnosis! According to documents, patients admitted to the Antonite hospitals were taken into the chapel the day after admission and examined to see if their disease was the "infernal fire"—in front of the altarpiece.

In view 2, the approach is clearly different. The most extraordinary feature is the radiant, "inorganic" colors. Hayum notices that three angels play three different sizes of viols, and cites a late-15th-century treatise on the effects of music by Johannes Tinctoris, which says that "music lifts sadness, chases away demonic forces, causes ecstasy, helps in the contemplation of the supernatural, and cures the sick." Indeed, the use of three viols reflected a very up-to-date notion of the idea of a tripartite harmony in the universe, for which viols were the standard musical symbol.

In view 3, the *Crucifixion* scene contains, in addition to the usual figures of the Virgin Mary, St. John, and Mary Magdalene, an admonishing St. John the Baptist at the foot of the cross. On the cross hangs an intensely suffering, diseased Christ. Certainly on the eve of the Protestant Reformation, when the issue of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic sacrament was a hotly debated point in Germany, this hyper-realistic image of the bodily suffering of the Redeemer was a startling reminder of the Passion in which Christ was scourged, mocked, and forced to carry his heavy cross up

the hill of Golgotha, and then hung on the cross for long hours in agony—hardly the usual crucifix in which Christ looks as though "he had just stepped out of a bubble bath," as one 20th-century theologian puts it pungently. Hayum, who devotes a whole chapter to the significance of the painting for the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, also notices that the center line of the panels "amputates" the arm of Christ in the *Crucifixion,* and his legs in the *Lamentation* panel below. Amputation was one of the standard remedies applied to St. Anthony's Fire.

Hayum summarizes her thesis: "Each state of the altarpiece addresses itself to the problem of disease and healing in a special manner. The open state, with the narrative scenes of St. Anthony, presents the condition of disease, along with medical techniques for its alleviation. The closed *Crucifixion* state, outlining a phenomenology of death, allows for the possibility of divine intervention and of identification with the divine. The middle state arms us against the mysterious sources of infection, offers the alternative route of psychophysical treatment, and shows us a gloriously imagined estate of the future. . . . Whereas at this moment academic medicine was taking root in the vicinity of Isenheim [at Basel], the path of disease was still mysterious enough and its manifestations devastating enough for all these methods to be held in comprehensive awareness and trust."

Science versus environmentalism

In short, the spiritual side of the altarpiece's message, communicated especially in view 2, is seen as contrasting to the physical healing process. But is this really so? Hayum writes that today, AIDS once again confronts us with a disease that seems to overwhelm our capacity to deal with it, and that this makes the multiple approaches of the Isenheim Altar more understandable. She lays much stress on the presence of astrological and alchemical symbols and paraphernalia in this, and other, paintings by Gruenewald, citing for example the astrolabe, which was used for charting horoscopes.

But wait a minute! The astrolabe, an instrument used to take the altitude of a star, was also used in navigation and astronomy, and its development over the century was a crucial ingredient in one of the greatest breakthroughs of the era—the navigation of the deep ocean sea, which led to Columbus's and other voyages of discovery. Moreover, in Catholic theology, consulting astrologers is seen as sinful; St. Augustine, whose rule the Antonite order had adopted in the 13th century, puts astrology at the top of his list of mortal sins, before murder, stealing, and adultery—evidently categorizing it as the worship of false gods, forbidden by the First Commandment of the Decalogue.

Hayum's own account of the few facts known of the life of the artist seems contrary to this "magical" thesis, as well. Mathis Gothart Nithart ("Gruenewald") most likely born in Würzburg in 1475-80, died in Halle in 1528, and was the rough contemporary of Raphael. Besides being a painter, she reports, "he functioned as supervising designer and engineer for the rebuilding of Aschaffenburg Palace. Other documents mention his being consulted as a waterworks expert. He was apparently involved in the manufacture of paints, later of soap—a career thus bearing some comparison to Leonardo's in its diversity, its combination of art and engineering or technology; in a relative small painterly output; and even in the ill-fated history of some of his works."

As a Leonardo da Vinci-like figure, Mathis Nithart was not only offering to the afflicted patients at the hospital in Isenheim an artistic map of their physical and spiritual healing; but could well have been involved in research that was destined to help fight disease in new ways.

Had Hayum not confused science with quackery (in calling the astrolabe an "astrological" device), she might have been able to identify or suggest further rich relations between art and both science generally, and scientific medicine in particular. With the information at hand we can only speculate, but that information is very suggestive. In the period of the Renaissance, there were two major areas of scientific development, each of them crucial both for the progress of knowledge as such, and for the technological advancement of society. These were, first, the complex of geometry, astronomy, optics, navigation, and cartography; and second, metallurgy, chemistry, physiology, and medicine. Each owes its inspiration to the great Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa (1401-64); and Nicolaus, in turn, came out of the Rhineland movement that apparently nurtured Gruenewald as well, called variously "the New Devotion," or in its institutional form, the "Brothers of the Common Life."

The Brotherhood, a lay organization, concentrated its energies on founding and staffing schools, and, like the Antonite order, hospitals. Among those whose early education or affiliation can be traced to the Brotherhood are Nicolaus himself, Erasmus, and—most important for extending our understanding of Gruenewald—the chemist, physician, and surgeon known as Paracelsus. This is where Hayum's "astrology" looms up as a stumbling block, for the accusation of "magic" is precisely the means by which Paracelsus's true contributions to science have been obscured from his own day to the present.

Suppose, for example, that the startling, almost fluorescent colors of the Isenheim altarpiece in fact represent the spectral emissions of chemical processes—particularly where the heating of metals might be involved? One of the signal contributions of Paracelsus to medicine was the demonstration that certain metals, in proper compound form and in proper dosage, served as cures for some diseases far more efficaciously than any of the prevalent herbal remedies. (In particular, he developed a fairly effective cure for syphilis, which, by the early 16th century had become the new "plague" of Europe.)

However, it was not simply the use of metals as such

which distinguished the medicine of Paracelsus (skilled as he was in that); rather, it was the novel conception that each disease represented a specific entity, or better, a specific disordering process spread by a specific form of "seed"—this centuries before the development of the germ theory of infectious disease. Obvious as this may seem now, in its day this was a most subversive doctrine, challenging the authority of Aristotelian medicine which declared all disease to be simply an "imbalance" of the mythical four bodily "humors." Prevailing treatment therefore sought simply to drain off the presumed excess humors (by bleeding or induced vomiting), or to supply the deficient ones (by the appropriate compounding of herbal and other medicines—generally useless). Paracelsus and his theories were suppressed in their time, but a century later, bore fruit in the founding of modern chemistry by Jean-Baptiste Van Helmont, who with his students, produced and named the first known gases (as distinct from the Aristotelian "element" called "air"); proved digestion to be a chemical process (not the Aristotelian "cooking"), dependent on substances now known as enzymes or catalysts (then called "ferments"); initiated a program of experimental physics and chemistry first outlined by Nicolaus of Cusa; and established the first university chemistry laboratory.

However, just as Hayum calls the astrolabe an "astrological" rather than an "astronomical" device, so Paracelsus has been termed a "magician" or "alchemist" rather than a chemist and physician. Therefore, when Gruenewald incorporates "alchemical" representations into his painting, as Hayum demonstrates, we can reasonably conclude that his intentions are not magical at all, but strictly scientific—which she does not recognize (or recognizing, does not allow).

In fact, Paracelsus himself spent two years at Colmar, a mere 15 years after Gruenewald's work had been completed, and otherwise frequented much the same Rhineland circuit. Like Gruenewald, he was skilled in industrial technologies (otherwise referred to by Hayum as "alchemy, that occult branch of science dealing in material transformations"), processes under intensive study and development at that time by Leonardo in Italy, and by the metallurgical establishments of Germany. Therefore, it is most intriguing, that the "alchemical" symbols in the Isenheim altarpiece occur in the middle of the three sequential forms of the painting. Whereas the herbal medicines are shown in the first, outer portrayal (the meeting of Saints Anthony and Paul, and St. Anthony's Temptation), the "alchemy"—the processes of material transformation at the cutting edge of science and technology—are shown within the sequence from Annunciation through Incarnation to Resurrection (which are also the panels with the most incandescent colors). In other words, we can see these panels as the unity of those processes which transform both man and the universe from lower to higher levels, both in man's ability to transform nature, and in the transformation of man himself through Christ. That, indeed, is the vital legacy of Christian Humanism.

Books Received

Peace Without Hiroshima: Secret Action at the Vatican in Spring, 1945, by Martin Quigley, Madison Books, Lanham, Md., 1991, 173 pages, hardbound, $22.95.

Inquisition: The Persecution and Prosecution of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, by Carlton Sherwood, Regnery Gateway, Washington, D.C., 1991, 705 pages, hardbound, $29.95.

Silent Coup, The Removal of Richard Nixon, by Len Colodny and Robert Gettlin, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991, 507 pages, hardbound, $24.95.

A Very Thin Line, The Iran-Contra Affair, by Theodore Draper, Hill & Wang, New York, 1991, 690 pages, hardbound, $27.95.

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The Crisis Years: 1961-63, by Michael Beschloss, HarperCollins, New York, 1991, 816 pages, hardbound, $39.95.

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The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, by Christopher Lasch, W.W. Norton, New York, 1991, 591 pages, hardbound, $25.

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Transition to Democracy, by the National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1991, 93 pages, paperbound, $19.