Weilandt, Gerhard: *Die Sebalduskirche in Nürnberg. Bild und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter der Gotik und Renaissance (= Studien zur internationalen Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte; 47)*, Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag 2007
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Reviewed by: Jacqueline Jung, Yale University

Gerhard Weilandt's monograph on the parish church of St. Sebald in Nuremberg is a monumental achievement: twelve pounds of meticulous research, lucid analysis, new revelations, and glorious pictures (413 in all, most in color). It consists of a 424-page investigation of the building and its paraphernalia, 56 pages of notes, a 246-page catalog of the accoutrements of the fifteen altars that stood in the church before the Reformation, a bibliography, and three separate indices. Anyone who has tried to piece together the early biography of a Gothic church from often paltry material and documentary evidence, or has faced the limits on word-count and image reproductions imposed by many academic presses, will peruse this book with a combination of admiration and envy. Would that we all had such richness – both in historical materials and financial sponsorship – at our disposal!

Following a brief introduction, Weilandt's study opens with a diachronic account of the church, beginning with the first glimmers of cult activities surrounding St. Sebald, an erstwhile hermit who, legend had it, wandered Franconia preaching Christianity. His relics, purportedly deposited in Nuremberg by wild oxen and drawing crowds by the late eleventh century, lay at the heart of an earlier basilica dedicated in 1274; because he was not canonized, however, it was not to him but to St. Peter that that church's high altar was dedicated. This fact, long unrecognized in the scholarship, is crucial to Weilandt's purposes. First, it allows him to establish a starting point for a trajectory of increasing self-consciousness and civic pride on the part of the church's patrician patrons, as their institution gradually shifted from the aegis of the metropolitan see of Bamberg – an affiliation declared in the building's double-choired design, which drew upon the plan of Bamberg Cathedral, and its dedication to Peter – to a more independent stature, reflected in later renovations that effaced the visual connections to Bamberg and in the rededication of the high altar.

Second, Weilandt shows that the Petrine identity of the original high altar forms the iconographic linchpin of the program of imagery made for the church in the first half of the fourteenth century. Integrating the myriad figural representations that embellish the exterior and punctuate the interior of the building within a larger system of liturgical and commemorative practices is indeed Weilandt's chief goal throughout the book. Thanks to the wealth of survivals, the thoroughness of the church's pictorial documentation in prints and pre-War photographs, and the detail with which contemporaries such as Sebald Schreyer, who served as 'Kirchenmeister' from 1482-1503, recorded the layout of the building and its furnishings, Weilandt is able to give an extraordinarily precise account of the building as an integrated whole. His chronological overview shows how the themes of the earliest portal programs, made in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, alerted beholders to the altars that lay beyond, and how the standing figures of saints inside the church,

sponsored by a handful of families during a major decoration campaign in 1340-50, likewise served as signposts for nearby altars. The church's visual program shifted in emphasis following the renovations undertaken shortly thereafter, including the expansion and new dedication of the east choir in 1379. In keeping with the heightened self-assertiveness of Nuremberg's governing families, the high altar was rededicated to the local St. Sebald – a bold move that triggered a flurry of pilgrimage and cult activities, a spate of new images of him throughout the church, and, ultimately, his canonization in 1425. One such statue stood on an exterior buttress; together with a standing Madonna and a relief of a 'Judensau,' all made around 1380, it faced the city's marketplace where, just over twenty years earlier, the Frauenkirche had been erected over the local synagogue – dark reminders of the Christian community's violent triumph over their Jewish neighbors.

Such externally directed political statements were rare in the Sebalduskirche, whose wealthy patrons were more concerned with asserting their social stature in the present and ensuring the cultivation of their memories in the future. To that end several families commissioned standing statues of the Man of Sorrows to be placed near their burial sites in the ambulatory and aisles. The sudden creation of these nearly identical sculptures in the last quarter of the fourteenth century Weilandt attributes to the intensified interest in the Lord's body following the introduction of Corpus Christi in Nuremberg around 1340, a feast whose importance at St. Sebald was highlighted by the expansive sacrament niche (ca. 1374) in the north ambulatory. While the Eucharistic aspect of the Man of Sorrows has long been recognized, Weilandt's argument for the image as embodiment of the concept of 'God's mercy' ('Barmherzigkeit' or 'misericordia,' in medieval terms) is a new one. Far from serving as 'Andachtsbilder' through which beholders could experience compassion with the sufferings of Christ, the figures of the 'Schmerzensmann' summoned people to the sites where prayers for mercy were especially needed. In this view, the coats of arms on the figures' consoles were not so much boastful declarations of the respective family's piety as indices of the dead who relied on the grace of God and devotions of the living to effect their speedy release from purgatory.

Weilandt's chapter on the Man of Sorrows as "pictorialized concept" ('bildgewordener Begriff') is the longest of several discussions that challenge our conventional picture of late medieval devotional art as a tool for personal emotional engagement and empathetic response. Both here and in his analyses of the altarpieces and epitaphs in the aisles and ambulatory Weilandt demystifies the images, showing again and again that the selection of narrative scenes and iconic saints was grounded in the altars and relics that resided nearby and in the liturgical celebrations that unfolded in their proximity. The images, he insists, cannot be fully understood outside of the network of other images, objects, and actions in which they were once enmeshed.

This means that the physical location of any given object was crucial in understanding its meaning, and the second main section of the book is lays out the church's sacred topography synchronically, as it stood between the new dedication in 1379 and a final renovation campaign beginning in 1493. Weiland begins by reminding readers of the medieval understanding of the church as a likeness ('Abbild') of paradise – not by literally reproducing the forms of Heavenly Jerusalem but by encompassing a unified whole even while retaining a strongly hierarchical structure. The subsequent chapters lead us through the various parts of the church, bringing together diverse permanent and ephemeral furnishings – stained-glass windows, sculptures, altarpieces, tapestries, candle-holders, vestments, and even illuminated indulgence briefs – to demonstrate how the spaces

coalesced into distinct “zones of worship” (‘Verehrungszonen’). In keeping with the medieval hierarchy of space, Weilandt begins with the east choir, which lodged the dual power-stations of the high altar, where both public and private masses were held, and the shrine containing St. Sebald’s relics, a silver-encased box with a sloping roof and a peephole at one end, which attracted throngs of pilgrims throughout the church’s medieval life. Sebald’s status as the “thirteenth apostle” was emphasized, in this zone, by the presence of St. Peter and the other eleven Apostles in images near the shrine. But the dominant figure visualized here was Christ – specifically, Christ Crucified, whose repeated appearances in the altarpieces and vestments used at the high altar underscored both the significance of the Christological feast days and the real presence of His body in the consecrated host.

For all its emphasis on the holy founders of the Christian ecclesia, the choir at St. Sebold was not a phyiscally exclusive space; we read of numerous instances of laypeople participating in services in the choir. Whereas a series of low choir stalls set the inner choir apart from the ambulatory where pilgrims circulated, a row of three altars marked marked the threshold between choir and “church” – the public space of the nave. The central altar at this threshold zone, set directly under a monumental crucifix, was dedicated to Sts. John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, the northern one to the Apostles, and the southern one to the Virgin Mary. Given these saints’ status as mediators between God and the world, it was appropriate that the holy phalanx both guarded the Sebald shrine and created a lively zone of worship that was accessible to lay visitors. Weilandt suggests that the lovely clay statue of the Evangelist from around 1440, now in the ambulatory, once graced the St. John Altar, forming a pendant to the ‘Strahlenkranzmadonna’ that stands against the neighboring pier; the latter, he argues, shares with the figures of the ‘Schmerzensmann’ a status as a “pictorialized concept,” in this case the new idea of the Immaculate Conception. Together with other sculptures, winged retables, and embroidered antependia that featured Mary and the Apostles, the lateral expanse of the threshold offered beholders a series of points of conceptual ingress into the realm of the sacred.

Whereas the nave, flanked by a coterie of sculpted Apostles on the piers, remained largely devoid of paraphernalia so as optimally to facilitate processions and to accommodate the crowds who gathered there to attend masses and sermons, the aisles and ambulatory accumulated a rich array of furnishings during the late Middle Ages. Not only side altars with winged altarpieces and a changing array of antependia but also painted, sculpted, and woven epitaphs, multimedia family emblems known as ‘Totenschilder,’ Man of Sorrows statues, wall paintings, and stained glass windows stood as enduring testaments to the commitments of the town’s patrician families. The bays of the ambulatory, above all, became sites of intense competition among patrons who strove to outshine each other by commissioning ever-larger and finer-quality works by Nuremberg’s best artists. In the jockeying between the Behaims and Volckamers in particular, which yielded an array of windows and sculptures in the south ambulatory, this reader had to award the prize to the latter, who left us not only a magnificent series of painted epitaphs showing the deaths of Mary and of Christ, now exhibited in Bamberg and Boston, but also Veit Stoss’s spectacular Passion reliefs and wood statues of the Man and Mother of Sorrows – masterworks of late Gothic carving.

For all the self-interest involved in commissioning art for these most heavily traversed areas, the patrons based iconographical decisions not on their own affinities but on the images’ positioning: their proximity to altars and relics, their visibility during certain processions, their relation to other

works within and across spatial axes. The loss of this integration of art into a larger liturgical system in the years around 1500 is the theme of Weilandt's third and final section. At this time we find an expanded range of patrons' social status, with people of middling stature edging into the once exclusively patrician cohort, and a shift in the forms of representation they chose. Imagery increasingly gave priority to personal wishes; the saints that hovered in an altarpiece's wings, for example, were now the patron's namesakes, not the holy people present in nearby relics. Not only those who commissioned new works shed concerns for integration in favor of celebrations of autonomy; so too did artists, and nowhere more spectacularly than in the structure Peter Vischer and his workshop fashioned to house the shrine of St. Sebald. This is the focus of the book's final chapter.

Through careful examination of documentary sources, early sketches, and a showstopping textual discovery, Weilandt illuminates aspects of the design and iconography that have long puzzled experts. He first shows how the shrine's concept emerged from a rivalry with Bamberg Cathedral, whose clergy had recently hired Tilman Riemenschneider to craft an elaborate alabaster tomb for their sainted patrons Henry II and Kunigunde. The Sebald shrine, whose bronze material literally as well as conceptually outweighed that of the Bamberg tomb, and whose microarchitectural elements willfully complicated those that at the portals of that Cathedral, represented the final step in the Nuremberg patriciate's declaration of freedom from the metropolitan see. In contrast to Riemenschneider's creation, Vischer's asserts its Humanist credentials though a proliferation of pagan imagery around its base – a feature difficult to reconcile with its religious function. Here Weilandt brings out a smoking gun: a poem known as the "Historia Herculis", composed around 1515 and dedicated to Peter Vischer's sons, which casts Hercules as a pagan analogue to St. Sebald. In a tour-de-force of iconographical analysis, Weilandt shows how the tomb's enigmatic vignettes match certain characters and situations in the poem, coalescing to form an extended visual demonstration of the conquest of vice by virtue – the major theme of the poem. Upon this basis Weilandt builds a reading of the entire shrine as a paean to virtue, arranged in an anagogical ascent from the base matter of the world (embodied by the snails that serve as supports) through the pagan allegories to the triumphal realm of the Apostles who guard Sebald's body and the fantastic architecture of the heavenly city that shelters the whole. Peter Vischer himself found a place in this company; in contrast to his colleague Adam Kraft, who shouldered the great tabernacle in the neighboring parish church of St. Lawrence, Vischer stands at the same level as Sebald, brandishing his tools as signs of the virtue of work. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, it was no longer the existing "zone of worship" that determined the shape of the church's main treasure, but rather the industriousness and ingenuity of the artist.

For all the triumphalism of Sebald's new shrine, the book ends on something of an elegiac note; as in Hans Belting's 'Bild und Kult,' we see how much was lost as the "era of art," autonomous creations that called attention to the skill and imagination of their own makers, supplanted the "era of the image" – which here refers not to works with a particular auratic presence (as with Belting's cult images) but to works that served a functional purpose within a larger ritual, symbolic, and political system. The book may leave readers melancholy for another reason: it is so successful in demonstrating the interdependence of all the elements of the Sebalduskirche that one is forced to recognize the impoverishment of our understanding of Gothic churches that have been stripped of their liturgical accretions and our understanding of altarpieces, sculptures, and epitaphs that have been relegated to museums. Those of us who work on other Gothic buildings may despair of

ever reconstructing their original appearances and functions as intricately Weilandt does here, but his book should at least inspire new efforts in that direction. For the result is not only an unusually vivid biography of an unusually splendid church but also a celebration of human agency. Once the book is closed, what lingers in the memory are not only the dazzling images of vaults soaring over altarpieces and statues but also the many families we've come to know – those distant generations of Hallers and Behaims and Volckamers and Schreyers, whose hopes and worries, insecurities and pride still resonate in the things they left behind.

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