in landscape the last possibility of the European. Altdorfer was the first to conquer it.5

Or even worse, if possible, the historical novel by Hans Watzlik, Der Meister von Regensburg. Ein Albrecht-Altdorfer-Roman (1939), one of the many popular biographies of German Renaissance artists published in the Nazi period, where on the last page the painter on his deathbed raises his arm toward a glowing cloud; there may never have been in the world a more noble color than its purple.

He appeared to be praying to the cloud.

With this gesture he expired, obedient to his destiny, together with the dissolving cloud, and his divine eye sank into the twilight of eternity.4

In the second half of the twentieth century, scholarship on Altdorfer and his contemporaries retreated to the background of the discipline, especially in Germany. The critical art history that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s gave these artists a wider berth. In these years art historians began to revisit the history and the hidden ideological motors of their discipline. One of the products of this school was the dissertation on reception by Reinhold Janzen, Albrecht Altdorfer: Four Centuries of Criticism (1980); another was the important study by Bushart on nationalistic tendencies in early-twentieth-century German art history and art theory, Der Geist der Gotik und die expressionistische Kunst (1990). The best scholarship on Altdorfer in these years was strictly historical. Gisela Goldberg and Dieter Koepplin anchored Altdorfer and the early Lucas Cranach in courtly and humanistic contexts. The creative connaisseurship of Karl Oettinger and Hans Mielke brought Altdorfer’s drawings into clearer resolution. The whole tradition of writing on Altdorfer is reviewed thoroughly, and often acerbically, by Noll.

Meanwhile, American and British scholars of the 1970s and 1980s, free of the ideological taboos that discouraged so many of their German contemporaries, turned to the German Renaissance with a new energy. At the time, this material was terra nova for English-speaking art historians. The German image, directly registering the Protestant Reformation, class and gender warfare, witchcraft, and other real-life social and political troubles, made a perfect test case for the social history of art. The topicality and urgency of the images seemed to elude the categories of academic iconographic analysis. The humble media of woodcut and wood carving foiled the aspirations of high formalism. And the émigré scholars who dominated postwar American and British scholarship had left the field wide open, with the exception of Panofsky’s Dürer monument and his lecture courses on German Renaissance art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York. In English, the contextualizing insights and aims of the “Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte” tendency were given a new,

THOMAS NOLL

Albrecht Altdorfer in seiner Zeit: Religiöse und profane Themen in der Kunst um 1500


MAGDALENA BUSHART

Sehen und Erkennen: Albrecht Altdorfers religiöse Bilder


MARGIT STADLOBER

Der Wald in der Malerei und der Graphik des Donaustils

Vienna: Böhlau, 2006. 415 pp.; 8 color ills., 104 b/w. €69

Albrecht Altdorfer, most intriguing of artists, has in the last decades been somewhat neglected by German-language scholarship. Now at all once there are two substantial monographs, by Thomas Noll and Magdalena Bushart, and a bulky volume on the representation of the forest in “Danube style” painting and graphic art by Margit Stadlober. All three are Habilitations schriften, or second dissertations.1 The books exemplify a recent revitalization of research in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland on German art of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The three-volume monograph by Franz Winzinger (1952, 1963, 1975) still looms large over Altdorfer scholarship. Although a post–World War II project, Winzinger’s study was rooted in the 1930s and 1940s, when many German and Austrian scholars, inspired by Max Dvořák’s slogan "Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte,” sought to coordinate art and artists with general spiritual and intellectual trends. One thinks of Charles de Tolnay, Hieronymus Bosch (1937), Wilhelm Pinder, Deutsche Kunst der Dürerzeit (1940), or Otto Benesch, The Art of the Renaissance in Northern Europe: Its Relationship to the Contemporary Spiritual and Intellectual Movements (1945). Younger generations of German scholars, coming of age either under the new sobriety and methodological responsibility of the immediate postwar period or under the newly critical, usually Marxist, art history of the 1970s, were unlikely to be satisfied with the abstraction and generality, the loose fit between painting and worldview, that the “Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte” school offered. Worse still, they detected a flavor of ruralist, populist, even nationalistic or ethnicist nostalgia in the writings of the older generation on German art, and particularly on Altdorfer. The term Donaustil (Danube style), which was coined in 1892 by Theodor von Frimmel, had become a code word for sympathy for the local and the popular, for nature over civilization, for an anticosmopolitan perspective on art history, art, and life. These were the tendencies that Erwin Panofsky was directly confronting in his Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer (1943), where he presented Dürer as a German artist aspiring to citizenship in a pan-European culture of art. After Panofsky—indeed, after the war—it was no longer possible to claim Dürer as a Germanic culture hero. Altdorfer, however, in the writings of Winzinger (1910–1983) and Alfred Stange (1986–1988), persisted as a symbol of a volkische or popular genius. Winzinger, although mostly concerned in his monograph to describe form and stabilize attributions, also wrote eloquently on Altdorfer’s landscapes, where the beholder “discovers in the environment the echo and the reflection of his own feelings, and so is bound into the overall rhythm of nature.”2

In his Malerei der Donaunach (1964), Stange portrayed Altdorfer and Paracelsus, the physi- cian, alchemist, and natural philosopher, as kindred souls, motivated by the same joyous piety, warm sympathy for creation, and love of simple people. Stange’s prose echoes the pathos-saturated pages of Pinder’s Deutsche Kunst der Dürerzeit, which had closed, with a hymn to the pure landscapes of Altdorfer, “one of the few who survived [the end of the Dürerzeit] unscathed. While the others cooled off, he remained warm. He did so, because he was a devoted man. Three hundred years later Philipp Otto Runge saw
sharper edge. Michael Baxandall found in Paracelsus’s comments on physiognomy the basis for a “physiognomic” reading of the sculptured figure of the German Renaissance. Mitchell Merbeck did not so much refute the interpretation of Altdorfer and his colleagues as modern artists as bring out the true worth of this insight, when he showed how the high altarpiece at Pulkau, attributed to the Historia Master, served to publicly legitimate a local cult and anti-Judaic campaign that developed out of an alleged Jewish desecration of the Host in 1338. Pioneering scholarship on German Renaissance art has been conducted in this country by Christiane Andersson, Stephen Goddard, Jane Campbell Hutchison, Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, Joseph Leo Koerner, James Marrow, Keith Moxey, Peter Parshall, Corinne Schleif, Alan Shestack, Larry Silver, Jeffrey Chippis Smith, Alison Stewart, and the rest of the modern artists.

Although Altdorfer’s singular tone and style invite monographic treatment, almost nothing is known about him as a person, much less than is known about Dürer, Cranach, or Hans Holbein, even less than is known about Matthias Grünewald, Hans Burgkmair, or Hans Baldung. Bushart’s exposition of the spare biographical facts and assessment of Altdorfer’s political career and possible patrons are the best we have. Neither Noll nor Bushart has undertaken a comprehensive synthesis of Altdorfer’s achievement. Instead they offer—and this is the classic mode of the New Art History—a series of work analyses guided by argument. What is that argument? Both Noll and Bushart, surprisingly, paint the same overall picture of Altdorfer. On the one hand, they reject the image of a naive provincial painter attuned to the rhythms of nature and the cadences of vernacular storytelling and Märchen, or fairy tales. On the other hand, they disparage the heavy emphasis on the secular aspects of Altdorfer’s work, a bias characteristic of the American literature. Certainly I have been guilty of such a bias, as Larry Silver pointed out in an article on the religious dimensions of Altdorfer’s landscapes, published in these pages in 1999. It is true that American scholars have tended to focus on features of German Renaissance art that point forward to modernism and modern art, such as the emergence of the artist as strong author, as self-fashioner, as savvy manipulator of print technology and the art market, or as seismograph of social discontent. Noll and Bushart, by contrast, describe a well-informed, critically intelligent artist who crafted a unique response to the shifting religious and devotional culture of his time.

The distinction between the sacred and the profane runs like a fault line through Altdorfer’s career, as it does through these monographs. Noll divides his book into two halves, labeled “Heavenly Love” and “Earthly Love.” The first part, which deals with devotional images, begins with a lengthy, effectively freestanding disquisition, amounting to eighty-three pages and 322 notes, on the role of the image in late medieval spiritual life. Noll has assembled a rich chrestomathy of primary texts. The many quotations from such theologians and spiritual guides recent and ancient, vernacular and Latinate, as Bernhard von Breydenbach, Hieronymus Heisterbach, Nicholas Cusanus, Johannes Geiler von Kaysersberg, and Ulrich Pinder, as well as from hymns and prayer books, reveal that the image was widely expected to serve as a stimulant to devotion, leading the devout to an experience of the presence of the divine. The image supplemented prayer and encouraged compassion for Christ and conformitas with his virtues. This is familiar territory to many art historians, but it is good to have so many primary texts collected and so intelligently glossed.

More interesting is Noll’s next move. He turns to a series of Crucifixions by Dürer, Cranach, and Baldung that elevate worship and viewing to an imitative and devotional level of theme. These works, through rotation and internal framing, compel their beholders to reflect on beholding itself. The works comment on the function and use of devotional images in the real world. These sensitive analyses establish the key for the treatment of Altdorfer’s pictures that will occupy the next two hundred pages of the book. Noll moves from the early panels of Saints Francis and Jerome (1507, Berlin), through the woodcut series Fall and Redemption of Man (ca. 1513), to the group of Crucifixion panels, and finally to the Marian images. Altdorfer emerges in Noll’s account as an innovative artist who when treating the familiar subjects felt compelled to bend custom and defy expectation. A “secularization” theorist would be quick to interpret such artistic liberties as signs that the traditional devotional image was losing its aura and its hold over the imaginations of artist and beholder alike. The secularist would be tempted to coordinate Altdorfer’s forceful assaults on pictorial convention with the loss of confidence in the devotional image that was building among intellectuals in these years and would soon animate the Protestant Reformation. Noll refuses this temptation and instead presents Altdorfer’s ingenious tropes as heightenings of the devotional functions outlined in the first part of the book.

His readings of the small woodcuts in the Fall and Redemption of Man series are typical of the book as a whole. Noll maintains that Altdorfer’s dramatic foreshortenings, rotations, zooms, reverse angles, low horizons, and Rückenfiguren, generally, his refinements and revisions of compositional convention, were all designed to intensify the religious experience of the beholder. Altdorfer placed his beholders in direct, almost visionary confrontation with the sacred stories. Noll conceives of the unexpected framings and croppings, the overlapping of figure and frame, call attention to the frontier between fiction and reality. But such reflective devices can be traced back to Rössler von der Weyden and therefore, according to Noll, can hardly be taken as symptoms of imminent secularization. Noll supports his thesis that Altdorfer’s main aim was to concretize the religious narratives, to make them real to public, with an extended reading of Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise on painting. The astonishing figure in Altdorfer’s Composition woodcut (1513), a buckling, turned-haired young man barging into Mary’s chamber, is explained by recourse to devotional texts, where Gabriel figures prominently, as well as to Leonard da Vinci and Rudolf Agricola, who praised paintings that succeeded in imitating reality. Altdorfer’s prints, with their liminal figures and intersections of the picture frame, draw the beholder into the sacred scene. They re-create the beholder as a contemporary of Christ, just as the devotional author Ulrich Pinder and the preacher Bertholdus required, and at the same time stage persuasive fictions of possible worlds as if glimpsed through windows, just as the humanists Alberti, Desiderius Erasmus, or Christoph Scheurl might have desired (p. 176).

Noll’s persistent focus on the devotional ambitions of art brings his book into alignment with the important study by Klaus Krüger, Das Bild als Schleier des Unsichtbaren: Ästhetische Illusion in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit in Italien (2001). Krüger’s thesis, a crucial modification of his teacher Hans Belting’s model of medieval cult image giving way to modern art, is that the supposedly “aesthetic” features of Renaissance art—reflexivity, tension between mimetic and symbolic representation, thematization of beauty—are to be understood not as symptoms of an inevitable autonomization of art but, rather, as refinements of late medieval theories of the religious efficacy of the image. The Renaissance painting, in Krüger’s view, offered itself as a veil-like mediating device between the limitations of the senses and the invisible realms beyond, thus not so much overcoming as fulfilling a medieval Christian conception of art.

Noll’s argument begins to wobble when Altdorfer’s pictures become too artlike. Midway through the book, he arrives at a group of works—the drawings of Apostles on colored-ground paper, and the several drawings of Saint Christopher—whose mannerisms and wit force him to admit that these were basically works of art intended for the collector’s cabinet. It turns out that Altdorfer was after all interested in aesthetic effects. Form’s challenge to content rears up in Noll’s account as if it were a relatively late development in Altdorfer’s career. If that were the case, then Noll would need to explain why Altdorfer’s allegiance to the traditional concept of the Andachtsbild gave way so suddenly. But it is not the case. Altdorfer was making religious images that were at the same time works of art from the very beginning of his discernible career.

The trouble is that Noll has no model, no language, for explaining the emergence of the institution of the work of art. He recognizes that Altdorfer’s pictures are to an unprecedented degree reflexive or self-aware and that they thematize their own fictional-
ity and authoredness. However, he cannot find any contemporary texts that address these images as works of art. This brings him to a methodological impasse. He will not venture an interpretation unless he can find a text to match it. Although Noll is a skilled reader of pictures, his faith in the testimony of the works is limited.

The second part of Noll’s book addresses Altdorfer’s treatments of lovers, mostly unhappy ones. By quitting the religious sphere, Noll again gives the impression that Altdorfer himself followed a trajectory out of the sacred and into the secular, whereas, in fact, Altdorfer’s engagement with profane subject matter dates back to his earliest works. This part of the book is not so much about pictures as about the cultural significance of love stories in Altdorfer’s society. Noll delivers, for example, a forty-five-page report on the various vernacular retellings of the Pyramus and Thisbe story circulating in the early sixteenth century. This report would be incredibly useful for Shakespeare scholars, if they could only read it. Noll also discusses the female heroines Dido and Judith and the problem of marriage, concluding on the basis of many quotations from contemporary literary texts that sexual relations are ambiguous. Noll’s point is that love and sex, especially as represented in vernacular literature, provided a hermeneutic of ambiguity that artists like Altdorfer were quick to seize on.

Magdalena Bushart’s thesis is identical to Noll’s (or his is identical to hers; there is no priority here). The “Renaissance” of the arts represented for Altdorfer “not a break with religious tradition but the challenge to translate the symbolic qualities of medieval art into the new forms and so to meet the altered expectations of a literary-minded and art-appreciating public” (p. 23). She confides that Altdorfer’s pictures with their idiosyncratic compositions and iconographies are “irritating” to the art historian. Like Noll, she sees the works as conceptually sophisticated, capable of satisfying the beholder’s highest intellectual demands, even when they look ungainly or uncouth (p. 53). This, too, is an impressive monograph, tightly and forcefully argued and grounded in scrupulous art historical scholarship and wide reading in primary sources. It deals with more works than Noll’s does and so comes closer to serving as an overall handbook to Altdorfer’s oeuvre. There is much to admire in this book. Bushart is interesting and reliable on a whole range of topics, from the role of prints in shaping careers, to signatures, to the prestige of the Byzantine icon, to the lure of Italian art. The book delivers more than the title promises, for there is plenty here on Altdorfer’s profane works. Like Noll, Bushart encases Altdorfer’s work in texts. She reviews the arguments by Scholastic and later theologians, from Thomas Aquinas to Geiler, that justified the role of the imagination and images in devotional practice. The crucial point that she extracts from these texts is that vision and imagination were prerequisites for cognition. The sense of sight and, by extension, the institution of devotional art are thus granted intellectual legitimacy. According to theologians, religious images were signs that point to the invisible. This precept licensed Altdorfer, in Bushart’s view, to set “pictures and books” into a balanced relationship, “with equal rights” (p. 110): What more could the library-based art historian ask for?

Typical of the book as a whole is Bushart’s reading of the Nativity in Bremen, dated 1507. Here the Holy Family, accompanied by gamboling angels, take their sorry shelter in the ruined shell of a building. Earth and bricks are encrusted with gleaming snow. The sky glows orange. Bushart mocks earlier commentators who described the scene as “romantic” or “atmospheric,” as if Altdorfer had set out to capture the magic of a winter Christmas night (p. 110). But the picture does capture the magic of a winter Christmas night. Bushart claims instead that Altdorfer’s departures from convention were guided by his close reading of contemporary devotional texts. She connects every detail in Altdorfer’s picture to a textual passage. The image of the Nativity as a perforated ruin, which ultimately derives from Petrus Comestor, Historia scholastica, as well as from the Legenda aurea, was interpreted by Ludolph of Saxony as an allusion of the Church as a passageway from earth to heaven. The luminosity of the Christ Child was attested in the Revelations of Bridget of Sweden. The comparison of Christ with the rising sun is found in the Breslarius romanum as well as in Ludolph of Saxony, Ulrich Pinder, and others. The importance of the symbol of the rising sun was stressed by Origens. Pinder, following Isaiah 55, explained that snow symbolized the life-giving power of the divine Word. The sheaves of grain flung down from above by the angels derives from Ludolph of Saxony, who, following John 6, described Christ as bread descended from heaven. The crib as an altarlike stone is also found in Ludolph. The ladder, related to Jacob’s dream, appears in many devotional texts as a metaphor for the approach to the divine. Bushart concludes after this sixteen-page analysis that the picture “serves up a highly complex theological argument in a devotional icon and its salvational meaning” (p. 21), dispelling the beholder’s temptation to be distracted by the charm of the tumbling angels. Most persuasive is Bushart’s observation that the sheaves of grain are depicted not on the ground but descending from above, suggesting to her that Altdorfer was attempting to render Ludolph of Saxony’s interpretation with some precision. It must be admitted, however, that these textual passages tend to match up with Nativities by many different artists, not only this one. As Bushart herself points out, the ladder appears in other works, for example, in a print by Niccolotto da Modena. Altdorfer could easily have adopted the ladder and other motifs from other pictures without having to pore over devotional texts.

Bushart is drawn, like Noll, to the extraordinary Rücksfigur of Gabriel in the Annunciation woodcut of 1513. She observes that Altdorfer creates tension by portraying Mary sunk in pious contemplation only a split second before she sees the angelic interloper. The beholder, Bushart points out, is invited to fill the narrative blank. She then quotes Ludolph of Saxony on the Virgin’s contemplative union with God at this very moment (p. 149). This is all good, but there is an element of the picture, the dominant element, that the devotional text does not, cannot, capture: namely, the looming, comical figure of Gabriel, who looks like a farm boy in an ill-fitting theatrical costume. Altdorfer’s wry recasting of the Annunciation is not prescribed by any text. Both Bushart and Noll are reluctant to deal with or even acknowledge such unorthodox devices, as if to do so would be to impose an anachronistically profane reading on the picture. Neither seems to notice that Altdorfer’s gentle translation no way interferes with the sweet intensity of the holy scene. Bushart, like Noll, has something of a tin ear for the poetry, irony, and wit of Altdorfer’s art. As scholars they are impressive; as critics, less so. Bushart completely misses the rich comedy, for example, of the engraving Mary Seeking the Twelve-Year-Old Jesus in the Temple. According to the text, the child gave Mary and Joseph the slip during the Passover holiday. After three days his frantic parents found him in the Temple arguing with the rabbis. Altdorfer represents the moment when the mother spots her son, poking her head between two columns and looking offstage right onto the famous scene: “Child, why have you troubled us like this?” (Luke 2:48). In the background another couple enters the Temple with a still smaller child in tow. The engraving amounts to a narrative grace note within the Life of Christ, a caprice. One might be reminded of Domenico Tiepolo’s infinitely inventive corpus of wash drawings illustrating the New Testament. Instead, Bushart mortifies the little print, which measures only 2⅞ by 1⅜ inches (6.2 by 4 centimeters), by launching into a review of the various allegorical interpretations of the episode of the seeking parents, then a still longer discussion of the significance of the star on the Virgin’s mantle, raising the possibility that the image is commenting on the possibility of the pilgrimage to the Beautiful Virgin of Regensburg.

Altdorfer’s woodcut Judgment of Paris (1511) is based loosely on Cranach’s woodcut of the same subject (1508). Cranach treats the subject with a mischievous humor, offsetting his pudgy Venus with a horse seen from the rear that casts a knowing glance at the beholder. Altdorfer, in his version, only heightens Cranach’s farcical tone. The nude back of his Venus bulges improbably. Mercury, a cranky veteran, sits inelegantly on the ground. Paris himself sprawls while Cupid above aims an arrow directly at his loins. Eris, the goddess of discord, appears in the costume of a contemporary matri-
The Strukturnetz that grips the paintings and drawings of the "Danube style" symbolizes the inner connection between man and nature. The pictorial nexus is the symbolic form of mystical communion with nature. The fantastic or physiognomic line makes visible the "currents of energy" that the artist detects below the surface of nature. The interwoveness of organic and inorganic nature, achieved at second degree inside the work, is in turn a symbol of pictorial structure in general. In the transition from Gothic to Renaissance, the status of the image was in question. The Danube-style works, "welded together" by line and sympathy, consolidated the image until the autonomous artwork of modernity could take over and the net could be relaxed. The Danube landscapes thus played a crucial bridging role in early modern art history.

You will find all this either extremely inspiring, or not. One imagines readers peering hopefully at the reproductions in search of the "structural net." Stadlober always senses it and can tell with confidence which pictures really have it and which only appear to. Dürer intensified the structural net in a few of his early works. Cranach's experiments with structure were short-lived. Aldorfer was, of course, the great exponent of the mode. The maximally coherent pictures, however, are the intense, emotion-laden fictions attributed to the Historia Master. (Hans Mielke's sensational reassignment of the pen-and-ink illustrations for the Historia vitae Frederici et Maximiliani to the young Aldorfer, unsettling the entire personality of the "Historia Master," is not taken up by the monographs under review.) Is the structural net real? It is an artistic reality, and to speak of it is to believe in it.

Before arriving at the Danube-style painters, Stadlober writes at length about autonomous landscapes, landscape and empathy, landscape and topography, landscape and devotional culture, and the literary, sociological, even legal meanings of the forest. She recounts the emergence of pictorial landscape in late medieval Europe, synthesizing the rich literature on this topic but also stressing many surprising remarks of her own: for example, her intense description of the participatory landscape in a painting by the Ovannual Master, a Resurrection in the Detroit Institute of Arts (p. 53). Another sample of Stadlober's creativity and subtlety is her reading of a passage from a poem by Hans Sachs. The poem's protagonist is a guest in the castle of a woman who personifies Fortitude. Fortitude shows him the panorama of the surrounding landscape. Stadlober argues that for Sachs, the personification of Fortitude, a classical convention, was not tangible enough and needed to be supplemented by a fictive and vividly described reality. Sachs created a new, more effective symbolism by adding the natural landscape below the castle, domains belonging after all to Fortitude and therefore properly one of her attributes, to the schematic allegory (pp. 49-50).

The book goes on to address Aldorfer and the others work by work. Each work analysis has three parts: a description; a discussion of the role of the forest in the work; and a review of the artistic influences or models standing behind the work. There is plenty of straightforward art history in this book, tracing of influences, iconography, and the like. But with its focus on elemental forms, the book transcends art history and becomes something like an iconology of the forest in the original Warburgian sense.

Stadlober's interest in the "sympathetic and atmospheric forest landscape" is not merely historical but actual. She turns on the last page to landscape painting with its promise of harmonious symbiosis with nature as an antidote to modern culture and technology: "The representation of nature in art expresses a basic desire for its positive effect on humankind." She then cites with approval words from Paracelsus: "Thus God distributed all growing things, such that they grow from grace and without any human contribution; and out of the four elements all plants and trees grow from the earth, and must grow, such that man finds and has all he needs" (p. 361). The landscapes of the Danube style project a shared and permanent human desire for communion with nature. Plus ça change . . .

CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD is professor of history of art at Yale University (Department of History of Art, Yale University, PO Box 208272, New Haven, Conn. 06520).

Notes
1. See also the remarkable Habilitation by Sybille Moser, Albrecht Aldorfer: Bild und Wirklichkeit (University of Innsbruck, 2001).