

Press release

Restoring the Rimini Altarpiece to New Splendour: The highlight of the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung will undergo comprehensive treatment in an ongoing conservation-restoration project over the next few years

Innovative research and conservation project launched – conservation studio goes live at the museum

(Frankfurt am Main, 25 October 2017) The Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung has launched a large-scale conservation project that will focus on one of the collection's most important works over the next few years. The Rimini Altarpiece, one of the most comprehensive and best-preserved late medieval figural groups in alabaster, will undergo a range of conservation and restoration treatments, including state-of-the-art laser technology. An in-depth technical analysis of the artwork will also be carried out. The Liebieghaus has acquired a special laser to ensure that the highly sensitive material can be cleaned as gently and effectively as possible, and has also been able to gain the support of the research laboratory of the Louvre in Paris which will assist in the precise analysis of the stone's material composition. A special conservation studio has been set up for the project at the museum that is on view to visitors and will be complemented by an educational display explaining the ongoing work, an accompanying film and regular updates on the results of the analyses and conservation-restoration work that will be published on the Liebieghaus website, allowing the public to follow each step of the project firsthand. The project is set to run for three years and is supported by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung within the framework of "Kunst auf Lager".

"It had long been a major concern of ours to dedicate a proper, in-depth research and restoration project to the Rimini Altarpiece in order to return this world-renowned masterpiece in our collection to its original state as much as is possible. I'm particularly delighted that we've been able to make the whole exciting process and the resulting insights directly accessible to the public on site at the Liebieghaus," says Philipp Demandt, director of the Liebieghaus.

"Looking at the Rimini Altarpiece from the conservation perspective, it is immediately apparent that there's a huge discrepancy between its tremendous significance to art history and its present, unsatisfactory

condition. As alabaster is one of the most fragile types of stone, the material poses a considerable challenge for our conservators. Many of the usual methods for stone restoration cannot be applied here, so the first step is to carry out a series of tests to ensure the most gentle treatment possible,” explains the head of sculpture conservation, Harald Theiss.

“The successful restoration of key works in museum collections is, at times, more important than new acquisitions,” adds Dr Martin Hoernes, General Secretary of the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung.

The last large-scale conservation-restoration treatment of the ensemble of 18 alabaster figures and figural groups took place in the late 1960s. In addition to the layers of dirt and discoloured coatings, the conservation materials used at that time have, with time, penetrated right into the substance of the stone, where they are increasingly hardening and becoming brittle, so action is urgently needed. Another difficulty is that during the last restoration treatment the original appearance of the central Crucifixion group was substantially altered by lengthening the arms of the cross. This intervention also caused a loss of stability, to the extent that it is almost impossible to move the object without considerable risk, even for routine activities at the museum. It also means that the work cannot be lent to other museums, for example, despite frequent requests from abroad. A detailed art-technical examination of the ensemble will also be carried out within the framework of this project, as no such analysis has been undertaken before. It will include a precise analysis of the condition of the material and a systematic examination of the figures for traces of the original polychrome paintwork.

The Rimini Altarpiece

Acquired in 1913, the Rimini Altarpiece with its white alabaster figures is one of the key works at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung and one of the best-known objects from the museum’s Medieval Department worldwide. Its uniqueness and great significance to art history is underlined by the fact that the work has lent its name to the attribution of many alabaster sculptures from the early 15th century, both within Germany and beyond: for instance, the designation ‘Master of the Rimini Altarpiece’ is listed as the artist’s name in museums and art collections from Warsaw, Berlin and Munich to Barcelona, Paris and London and even in New York and Los Angeles. Its popularity is not only due to the exquisite craftsmanship of the figures, but also to the fact that it is one of the largest and best-preserved examples of a figural group made out of alabaster from the late Middle Ages.

The centre of the ensemble was formed out of several blocks, depicting the Crucifixion of Christ flanked by six apostles on either side. Carved in the round and originally partially painted, the works were once part of an altarpiece in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Rimini. They were not made in Italy, however, but in a workshop that specialised in alabaster in the Southern Netherlands, possibly in Bruges, around 1430. The extremely idealised works adhere for the great part to the characteristic design aesthetic of the International Gothic style, which prevailed across Europe between approximately 1380 and 1430.

The realistic depiction of some of the anatomical and physiognomic details, especially the unsparing portrayal of the broken and contorted limbs of the thieves indicates a change in style, however. A new interest in working from nature is evident that can also be observed in Netherlandish painting from this period, for example, in the work of Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin and Rogier van der Weyden, and paved the way for the art of the following decades.

Updates on the results of the analyses and the progress of the restoration work on the Rimini Altarpiece will be published throughout the entire project on the Liebieghaus website under the section 'Research & Journal' (www.liebieghaus.de/de/forschung-journal). A film about the project is now available on the Liebieghaus's YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/liebieghaus.

Technical details:

Master of the Rimini Altarpiece
Crucifixion altarpiece from Rimini, Southern Netherlands, c. 1430
Alabaster, traces of pigment
Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt am Main

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