

Press release

THE RIMINI MISSION

Material, History, Conservation: The Rimini Altarpiece

Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung
Extended until 25 September 2022

Frankfurt am Main, 2 November 2021. It is one of the world's most important late medieval works of art made of alabaster and a major work in the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung: the Rimini Altarpiece (c. 1430). As of 3 November 2021, following extensive conservation, it will once again be on view in the museum's outstanding permanent exhibition. Over the past four years, a wide range of conservation and conservation measures have been carried out on the Rimini Altarpiece, primarily a particularly gentle surface cleaning using laser technology as well as gypsum-saturated agar gel compresses. In addition, a comprehensive art-technological examination of the work was carried out. Not only were fundamental insights into the technical construction of the altar gained, but further scientific research by the BRGM (Bureau de Recherches Géologiques et Minières) in Orléans also revealed the region where the alabaster stone was quarried – results that will provide new impetus for art historical research into the oeuvre of the Master of the Rimini Altarpiece. In a concentrated special exhibition, the results of this international conservation project will be made impressively visible to the public. In four sections, the Liebieghaus scholars Harald Theiss (Head of Conservation) and Stefan Roller (Head of the Medieval Collection) explain the characteristic properties of the material alabaster, as well as the individual steps of the art-technological analysis. In addition, they illustrate the challenges of conserving this highly sensitive material and address questions of sculpture technique, as well as the original colouration of the artwork. The highlight of the special exhibition is the presentation of the masterpiece in a custom-made 4.0 × 3.5-metre display, the form of which is based on contemporary Dutch altars.

A publication will be published by Deutscher Kunstverlag to accompany the exhibition, summarizing the results of several years of research supplemented by art historical contributions. It is the first monograph on the Crucifixion Altar from Rimini.

'It was a great mission we embarked on more than four years ago – the conservation of the alabaster Rimini Altarpiece, one of the most important as well as one of the most fragile artworks in the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. Thanks to extensive research and conservation work at Frankfurt's Liebieghaus, exchange with leading international scientific institutions, and the generous support of our sponsors, 'THE RIMINI MISSION' gradually came to successful realization. The aim of the exhibition and the accompanying publication is to make the experience we gained and findings we gathered over the course of the project accessible to a broad public. The new presentation of the artwork now offers our visitors a sense of the once-exquisite appearance of the Rimini Altarpiece alabaster. The Liebieghaus has a new highlight in its collection', comments Philipp Demandt, the director of the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung.

The exhibition 'THE RIMINI MISSION' is supported by the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain gGmbH, and received additional support from the Städtischer Museums-Verein. The preparatory conservation work and the publication were made possible by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung.

The Artwork

‘The Rimini Altarpiece is to this day one of the most elaborate and best-preserved late medieval figure ensembles made of white alabaster. Scientific interest in it continues unabated’, remarks Stefan Roller, the head of the Medieval Department at the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung. The Rimini Altarpiece is one of the most elaborate and best-preserved late medieval figure ensembles made of white alabaster. The centre is a Crucifixion of Christ made of several blocks, flanked on each side by six apostles. The fully rounded and once partially coloured sculptures originate from a retable in the pilgrimage church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Rimini-Covignano. They were, however, created in the southern Netherlands around 1430, possibly in Bruges. The great art-historical importance and the uniqueness of the Rimini Altarpiece is indicated by the fact that, internationally, the work lends its name to a large part of the alabaster sculptures of the early fifteenth century. The artist attribution ‘Master of the Rimini Altarpiece’ can thus be found in museums and art collections from Warsaw, Berlin, Munich, and Barcelona to Paris, London, New York, and Los Angeles.

The highly idealized sculptures of the Rimini Altarpiece largely follow the characteristic formal aesthetics of the so-called Beautiful Style, which is also known as the International Style due to its Europe-wide spread between c. 1380 and 1430. However, the realistic rendering of several of the anatomical and physiognomic details of the two crucified criminals indicates a stylistic change. A new interest in the observation of nature is evident here, which can also be observed in the Dutch painting of Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin, and Rogier van der Weyden at the time and was ground-breaking for the art of the following decades.

According to Stefan Roller, the head of the Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung’s Medieval Department, ‘The new presentation does justice to the considerable art-historical status of the Rimini Altarpiece. Just as the Mount Calvary and the apostles benefited immensely from their conservation, they now also profit from the new display. It serves to frame, structure, and accentuate them and – quite in keeping with the conception of the medieval patrons and carvers – provides a fitting stage for the Crucifixion as a core element of the Christian history of salvation, and one which heightens the impact of the depiction by introducing a vividly dramatic dimension.’

The Conservation Project in an Exhibition

‘No scientific work has hitherto been concerned explicitly with the material and working methods used for the Rimini Altarpiece object group – a desideratum. The sculptural properties of the material alabaster and the artistic-technical production process together yield a great amount of information that can be exceedingly helpful for the reliable assessment of the works of the Rimini Master’, remark Harald Theiss, the head of the Liebieghaus conservation workshop, and the conservator Miguel González de Quevedo Ibáñez about their scientific objectives. The conservation project, which began in 2017 and was funded by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung as part of the ‘Kunst auf Lager’ (Art in Storage) initiative, is now coming to a close with the special exhibition and the accompanying publication. The Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung acquired a laser especially for cleaning the highly sensitive material. The public was able to follow the work in the museum’s demonstration workshop and through educational and mediation opportunities. In recent years, together with further conservation measures, distortive additions to the work of art which, from today’s perspective, were questionable from a conservation point of view, were remedied.

Furthermore, in cooperation with the research laboratory of the BRGM Orléans and in close collaboration with the Musée du Louvre, it was possible to determine the exact stone substance. 'It is only within the past few years that it has become possible to determine the geographic origins of alabaster. In the case of the stone used for the Rimini Altarpiece, the result came as an absolute surprise. In view of the fact that experts in the field have come to favour the Southern Netherlands as the figures' origins, these findings raise questions we pursued in great depth in the scientific publication', explains Stefan Roller, the head of the Medieval Department. Alabaster is one of the most sensitive types of stone. As a crystalline form of the mineral gypsum, it is both water-soluble and not heat-resistant, as well as extremely susceptible to pressure and fracture. The Rimini Altarpiece impressively reveals the artistic-aesthetic possibilities this material offers the sculptor. It can be carved and sanded quickly and unusually finely and filigree with light pressure. For the conservation of the masterpiece, various challenges arose from the susceptibility of the material, since traditional conservation procedures are usually accompanied by damage to the stone.

The Liebieghaus conservators Harald Theiss and Miguel González de Quevedo Ibáñez sum up as follows: 'The careful examination of the technical composition of all the objects in the Rimini Altarpiece ensemble not only provided a basis for its conservation. Like stylistic-critical deliberations, information on material and technique also helps us to understand the artwork better. The experimental reconstruction carried out by Thomas Hildenbrand and the practical studies on surface finishing and polychromy aided us in deliberating the artistic-technical issues above and beyond the original material and paved our way to important conclusions regarding the carving and polychromy of Medieval alabaster sculpture in general. These are helpful findings for further research on these matters in the future.'

In the exhibition, the damage to the Rimini Altarpiece is presented in detail, and an overview is given of the complicated conservation requirements that were often not recognized, taken into account, or misinterpreted when treating alabaster in the past. The method developed by the conservation team of Harald Theiss and Miguel González de Quevedo Ibáñez and tested by external scientists using lasers and plaster-saturated agar gel compresses is explained and comprehensibly illustrated with numerous work samples. It is explained step by step how this procedure made it possible to clean the delicate alabaster without damaging it in any way. Furthermore, it is explained why and how the additions from more recent times, which were in need of revision, as well as numerous repaired fractures, were remedied and renewed. The art-technological examination of the Rimini Altarpiece also revealed numerous unanswered questions about the sculptural production process, the original optical appearance of the surface finish, and the colouration of the medieval alabaster sculpture. The scholars were able to provide initial answers to these questions with an experimental sculptural reconstruction of the figure of the apostle Bartholomew from the altar ensemble that was supported by the Städelchen Museums-Verein e.V. A detailed practical study of the surface finish and colouration of first-class medieval alabaster works completed the research.

Duration of the exhibition: 3 November 2021 to 24 April 2022 – extended until 25 September 2022

Press Preview: Tuesday, 2 November 2021, 11:00 am, in the Metzler Hall in the Städel Museum and Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung

Curators: Dipl.-Rest. Harald Theiss (Head of Conservation, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung) and Dr. Stefan Roller (Head of the Medieval Department, Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung)

Venue: Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, Schaumainkai 71, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Opening Hours: Tues., Wed. 12:00–6:00 pm, Thurs. 10:00 am–9:00 pm, Fri.–Sun. 10:00 am–6:00 pm, closed on Mondays.

Press Information: 'THE RIMINI MISSION. Material, History, Conservation. The Rimini Altarpiece', Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung, 2 November 2021

Information: www.liebieghaus.de

Visitor services and guided tours: info@liebieghaus.de, Telephone: +49(0)69-605098-200, Fax: +49(0)69-605098-112

Admission: Tickets available online on shop.liebieghaus.de, 10 €, concession 8 €, free admission for children under 12 years of age

Publication: The exhibition is accompanied by a book in German and English, published by Deutscher Kunstverlag and edited by Stefan Roller and Harald Theiss, with a foreword by Philipp Demandt and contributions by Miguel González de Quevedo Ibáñez, Wolfram Kloppmann, Joannes van den Maagdenberg, Stefan Roller, Iris Schmeisser, and Harald Theiss. German edition 300 pages, 39.90 € (museum edition), German/English edition 300 German plus an 131-page English companion book, 44.90 € (museum edition).

Sponsored by: Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain gGmbH, Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, Städtelscher Museums-Verein e.V.

Social Media: The Liebieghaus Skulpturensammlung communicates the exhibition in social media with the hashtags #MissionRimini and #Liebieghaus.

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