Conrad Laib: Ein spätgotischer Maler aus Schwaben in Salzburg (Neue Forschungen zur Deutschen Kunst, 8) (Book Review)

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Antje-Fee Köllermann’s book on Conrad Laib is a magisterial study of his signed paintings and various other works that have been attributed to the artist over the centuries. While this study relies heavily on formal analysis and stylistic comparison in dating Laib’s paintings, establishing their chronology, and determining his artistic origins and development, Köllermann also provides an overview of the iconography, patronage, original location (if known) and function of each work discussed. The author’s discussion of style sets itself apart from earlier scholarship in the level of detail. By focusing on minute details of costume, facial expression, motifs and the organization of pictorial space, the author relies heavily on visual evidence to support her conclusions.

Similar to the study of other German artists of the time, for which there is scant documentary evidence, the author grapples with the question of Laib’s artistic origins. While it is certain that he was in Salzburg in 1447, the creation date of Laib’s wall paintings in the
Franciscan church, it is unlikely that he began his career there, but rather in his native southern Germany. From Enslingen, Laib’s name appears in tax records in the nearby city of Nördlingen. Designated as tax free and with reference made to his profession moler or painter, Laib was already an established master before setting up a workshop in Salzburg. The author posits that Laib was active in Nuremberg, and she supports the attribution of the Epitaph of Katharina Löffelholz in St. Sebald to him. Swabian and Franconian influences remained strong in his paintings prior to arriving in Salzburg.

Consideration is also given to Laib’s artistic development. In comparison to his earlier works, which were influenced by southern German art, Laib’s paintings that were executed in Salzburg are decidedly more Netherlandish in character. (He was also fully aware of developments in art in northern Italy and freely adapted Italian motifs.) What motivated this shift in style? Köllermann posits that Laib’s new stylistic tendencies were likely a result of his contact with Hans Multscher (particularly his Wurzach Altarpiece) and the stained glass in the Besserer chapel in Ulm’s Münster. Whether or not he visited the Netherlands is difficult to assess. According to Köllermann’s chronology, he could have visited the Netherlands in the late 1430s.

As suggested above, one of the author’s goals was to create a chronology of Conrad Laib’s documented and attributed works. Köllermann achieves by first establishing the basic features of Laib’s style through a thorough analysis of his documented works: the Crucifixion from Salzburg (1449) and the Crucifixion in Graz – a later work (1457). Through careful comparison of artistic influences and iconographical motifs, she places the artist in Nuremberg early in his career. Based on the aforementioned artistic dependence on the recent art in Ulm, he would have visited the city before going to Salzburg. Among his earliest works in Salzburg are representations of St. Primus and St. Hermes (dated 1446) and the 1447 Franciscan wall paintings cited earlier. Based on the patronage of the Graz Crucifixion, the author suggests that Laib spent some time in Graz toward the end of his career.
In the creation of a chronology and in her analysis of Laib’s attributed works, Köllermann acknowledges the existence of a workshop and raises questions about the participation of his assistants. She also asks whether Laib immediately became the master of his own workshop upon his arrival in Salzburg or else worked for some time as a journeyman. Concerning workshop practices, of particular interest is her analysis of Laib’s repetition of the basic contours of figures and their scale (from his Salzburg Crucifixion) in his later Crucifixion in Graz. She attributes this practice not only as stemming from the need for efficiency but also as a fundamental element for creating the clarity that is so characteristic of his method for creating pictorial space.

Focusing on a point of contention in the Laib scholarship, Köllermann revisits the various interpretations of the artist’s inscriptions on both the Salzburg and Graz Crucifixions. Concerning the adoption and adaptation of Jan van Eyck’s famous motto, als ich chun, directed toward the crucified Christ by way of its placement (on the saddle cloth of the rider’s horse under the cross; a figure with whom the artist identified himself), an educated viewer would have understood it as an expression of artistic pride and as his desire to compete with the famous Netherlandish artist. Similar to the conclusions drawn from her stylistic analysis, this study of the artist’s inscriptions reveals an artist who was multi-faceted, clever, self-aware, and conscious of the latest artistic styles.

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