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Dealing with Saints

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Wooden sculptures from the Middle Ages

A new catalogue of the collection

Boasting some 400 individual figures and twenty retabels or altar pieces, the Swiss National Museum today owns an outstanding collection of wooden sculptures from the Middle Ages. Most objects were acquired in the forty years following the foundation of the museum. In 1936, Ilse Baier-Futterer took stock of the collection in a catalogue that is still considered a pioneering work.

Now, some seventy years later, a new version of the catalogue leaves the press, including the acquisitions made since 1936 and mirroring the results of the latest research in the fields of cultural history, history of the arts, technology and natural science. All objects were classified as to the type of wood processed, and some were dated with the help of the AMS C14 method. New photographs were taken of all sculptures, showing front and back, while a number of illustrations focus on typical details.

The result is published in two volumes, the first including individual figures from the 11th to the middle of the 16th centuries, underlining their function as objects of worship and reverence. Also included are so-called «acting» objects used in symbolic representations, and the museum's small stock of profane sculpture. The second volume is dedicated to retabels and altarpiece figures from between 1420 and 1530. The catalogue proper is preceded by a number of articles on the history of the collection, the development of restoration methods and the role of the retabel or altarpiece, as well as on the latter's pictorial programme. Objects are listed according to their function and in chronological order, each text offers a general description and remarks on the state of preservation. As the place of origin remains uncertain in the case of many, if not the majority of objects, establishing a geographical framework was considered of minor significance. Moreover, the concordances and a detailed register account for the objects' place of origin wherever possible. In view of the book's target group – specialists, students and readers interested in the arts – this solution was justifiable.

Dione Flühler-Kreis and Peter Wyer:

Die Holzskulpturen des Mittelalters

Katalog der Sammlung des Schweizerischen Landesmuseums, I Einzelfiguren, II Altarretabel und Retabelfiguren. Photographs by Donat Stuppan. 746 pages, appr. 1000 illustrations, ISBN 978-3-908025-69-6. CHF 240.–, on sale at the museum shop; subscription price (up to the end of 2007) CHF 190.–, also available by E-Mail: claudio.chappuis@slm.admin.ch