From the Charterhouse at Mainz

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From 1779 through 1781, Johann Bernoulli, the Swiss astronomer, geographer, and mathematician, traveled through the Netherlands and Germany, keeping a record of his impressions. While he was in the vicinity of Mainz, he described the famous charterhouse there, a vast monastery situated to command a majestic view of the Rhine. In Bernoulli’s words, “this large and handsome building is square in plan. Each cell of the cloister opens out onto a wide gallery with high arches enclosing a square courtyard from which it receives its light. . . . A solemn stillness governs in this deserted cloister. . . . As I was just on the verge of drawing the nearest doorbell, I heard a noise echoing in the wide gallery, and in the wink of an eye a monk appeared. . . . He approached me, but only because his path led him thus. . . . I explained my mission; he told me in a few words by which lettered name I should ring, then left me. I drew the bell. An old, venerable priest opened the door, greeted me cordially, and led me into his cell, which consisted of a small porch in addition to a kitchen, and a little room which adjoined a small bedroom. . . . He led me from there into his beautiful garden which, alas! was surrounded with high walls. . . . From there, we withdrew into the monastery church, which bordered on the east side of the gallery. It is not large, but nevertheless is splendid, with masterpieces of painting and sculpture offering themselves to one’s eyes at every glance. Above all, the artistically executed stalls of the monks are remarkable. There are thirty-two of them, of which each is said to have cost one thousand thalers.”

In these choir stalls, marquetry, a veneer of shaped pieces of wood and other materials, was brilliantly combined with sculpture in a magnifi-
Back panels, angels, and cornice from three choir stalls constructed for the charterhouse at Mainz. German, 1723-1726. Height 7 feet ½ inch
Gift of Lauritz Melchior, 1952

ON THE COVER: Three monteiths, of China-trade porcelain, silver, and glass. English, xvii century. Heights 63/4, 73/6, and 63/8 inches
Gift of the Winfield Foundation, 1959; gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1958; bequest of Florence Ellsworth Wilson, 1943
Welcken began to achieve notice in positions of authority at Mainz; it was he who was responsible for calling to the charterhouse capable sculptors, architects, painters, and craftsmen to furnish the interior of the church.

Among the craftsmen commissioned by Prior Welcken was a cabinetmaker from Hamburg, Johann Justus Schacht. Schacht was entrusted with the designing of the marquetry decoration of the choir stalls, and was given his choice of assistants for the work.

We know nothing of Schacht’s life before he came to Mainz, although he must have been a distinguished craftsman of good repute. We know correspondingly little of his activities after the work there was completed in 1726. In a letter from Archbishop Lothar Franz von Schönborn, Elector of Mainz, dated January 18, 1726, Schacht was recommended to Friedrich Carl Schönborn von Mainz in hopes that the latter would in turn recommend him to Prince Eugen of Savoy, who was then completing the Belvedere, his summer palace just outside Vienna. The Elector also gave an unqualified recommendation directly to Schacht dated March 29, 1726, and had him sent to the Schloss Pommersfelden near Bamberg to study the marquetry work there. A passport for him and four of his assistants was issued on the same date. But no further traces of Schacht have been discovered, either in the form of documents or objects of his design and execution.

When Schacht began to seek craftsmen to help him execute his commission, he must have had difficulty. Of the numerous preparatory drawings for furniture by members of the Mainz cabinetmakers’ guild, preserved in the state library in Berlin (many contemporary with the choir stalls), only a few give evidence of exten-

Fig. 1. Angels from the choir stalls now in Trier

Fig. 2. View of the parapets and seats of the choir stalls now in the cathedral in Trier. The back panels were removed in the nineteenth century in order to show the arcade behind them
sive interest in the possibilities of marquetry decoration. Neither are there extant many pieces of marquetry-encrusted furniture from this period. It is understandable that Schacht found it necessary to import from all over Germany and Austria the twenty-one assistants who helped him execute the carving and veneering of the stalls. Of course the members of the guild were not unconcerned with this violation of their supposedly guaranteed rights, and an argument between themselves and the foreign craftsmen ensued. It was apparently settled in favor of the foreigners, for the commission was carried out without noticeable interruption. The craftsmen are named, together with their place of origin, in a document signed at the completion of the project in 1726. Schacht must have collaborated closely with other artists and craftsmen throughout the production of the stalls, for his share, though extensive, does not account for the entire project. For instance, Dr. Fritz Arens, in his recently published study of the monastery, suggests that the designer of the architecture of the stalls might have been the great baroque architect, Maximilian von Welsch the Elder (1671-1745), who was active in and around Mainz during the first half of the century. It has been suggested that Welsch also designed the high altar of the charterhouse, which is now in the abbey church in Seligenstadt. Dr. Arens attributes the caryatid sculptures on the charterhouse choir stalls to Burkhard Zamels (died 1757), who was active in Mainz at the time the charterhouse church was being completed and furnished. The figures on the high altar and the two side altars of the charterhouse, also now in Seligenstadt, are traditionally attributed to Zamels.

The functional elements of choir stalls had remained essentially the same in form from the Middle Ages through the baroque era. Often richly carved and decorated, they were a necessary and permanent piece of church furniture. The form of the Mainz stalls described in this article corresponds in all basic respects to that established for choir stalls in the mid-thirteenth century.

The Museum's panels were originally a part of two banks of choir stalls, each consisting of a
row of sixteen connected seats on a slightly raised podium, separated from one another by armrests (Figure 2). The seat boards at each place could be tilted up so that during a service one could sit, stand, and kneel as necessary without having to step out of position. There were no kneeling benches, but in front of the seats was a parapet which formed a kneeling rail fitted with ledges for choir books, and compartments for the storage of the books when they were not in use. Directly behind and above each group of seats was a row of high back panels, surmounted by a heavy cornice.

The decoration of the stalls was indeed sumptuous (see Figures 1, 2). The parapets were separated into panels by pilasters with gilded capitals, and bore marquetry decoration of architectural scenes, floral designs, and leaf and band work. The splendid dorsals, rising from the back ledge of the seats, were masterworks of German marquetry formed of nine varieties of wood—walnut, maple, figured maple, ebony, ash, rosewood, boxwood, figured hazel, and figured alder—and ivory painted green and white, mother-of-pearl, and zinc. The dorsal panels, each the width of a seat, were separated from one another by marquetry pedestals bearing polychromed and gilded caryatid terms of angels in baroque drapery, some of them holding up the Ionic capitals above their heads, some of them simply gesturing gracefully. The lower section of each dorsal was filled by an architectural scene or a floral still life, and the upper by a pair of vertical rectangular panels of leaf and band work in marquetry. The whole was surmounted by a veneered entablature articulated by carved and gilded bead, leaf and band, laurel, and acanthus moldings. The heavy cornice, which jutted out over each term, originally bore above each seat a marquetry panel depicting scenes from the lives of saintly Carthusians.

A stylistic analysis of the Mainz stalls reveals a typically German synthesis of many imported decorative and structural elements, for the most part Italian. The stalls represent a late German version of the baroque style, disseminated from Rome by the Jesuits. The Mainz stalls are superb examples of this style, combining the flair and crispness of the Italian baroque with a heaviness, an emphasis on detail, and a grave exuberance which are peculiar to much German art. Bold color, contrast between stability and movement, and concern for a dramatic presentation, all common to the baroque, are here in full measure. Although essentially rectilinear,
their hands, placed at many levels, carry one's eye actively from figure to figure. Their glances enliven the space around the stalls. They gesture theatrically, obviously aware of the fact that they are participating in an enjoyable spectacle.

This theatricality is amusingly apparent in both two and three dimensions on the choir stalls. One's interest moves from the row of sculptures downward to the panels in the lower portion of the dorsals, filled with representations of stylized, florid altars and architectural settings (Figures 4, 5). The pattern of the surrounding veneer increases the impression of depth that is achieved within the scenes by perspective devices. None of these panels contains figures, but the stage seems to be set for action. These theatrical perspective scenes reflect the same spirit that infuses the work of the great baroque stage designers, among them Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena (1696-1756), outstanding member of a dynasty of architects, painters, and stage designers, whose productions fairly burst with pomp and grandeur. Figure 9, an altar design engraved after Bibiena, displays this vitality. One of Bibiena's predecessors was the Jesuit Andrea Pozzo, whose ideas were published in a book entitled *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum*, which appeared in two parts in 1693 and 1700. Many elements of the architecture in these panels are close indeed to plates of Pozzo's book (see Figure 6). No two scenes correspond exactly, but the Mainz panels might well be free variations on his designs.

As can be seen from our panels, the architecture in the lower sections is bordered, and the two upper rectangular panels completely filled, by leaf and band work, a favorite German decorative pattern derived ultimately from another major Italian contribution, the arabesque motif (Figure 7). An imaginative, decorative combination of plant, and often human and animal, forms in an intricate curvilinear pattern, this was a fifteenth century Italian innovation based on classical Roman designs, and one of the most important for subsequent western European ornament. It had spread to France and the Netherlands by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and not long thereafter became popular in Germany. The flat ribbonlike design that appears in the panels, twisting and turning upon itself in many convolutions, is directly related to
the rollwork style, the northern variant of the arabesque. Together with this bold linear element there remains the essentially Italian fine balance of the whole, achieved largely through the careful disposition of individual floral blossoms and chains. In addition, there are obvious vestiges of Gothic leafwork, which even during the German Renaissance had appeared as a wild tangle of tendrils, but which here is subdued to

Germany at the time the choir stalls were constructed. It was the subject of myriad design books executed in the southern centers of Augsburg and Nuremberg, some of the engravings in which (see Figure 8) bear a close resemblance to the designs that appear on the stalls. These engravings enjoyed great popularity and were widely circulated. Schacht's designs were very probably based upon engravings of this kind.

In general form and decoration the Mainz stalls were representative of a type common in the early eighteenth century: for example, the choir stalls of the cloister church in Weingarten, done about 1720 by Joseph Anton Feichtmayr, which also bear marquetry decoration and caryatid terms of angels. Such caryatid figures were widely employed in secular architecture as well. They appear on the façade of the Zwinger in Dresden (Figure 10), built between 1711 and 1722 by Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann, the architect of Augustus II. They were also used in interiors: on the upper galleries of the Schloss Weissenstein, a villa of the counts von Schönborn in Pommersfelden, built between 1711 and 1718 after designs of Maximilian von Welsch; and on the upper walls of the stairwell of the Schloss Brühl on the Rhine, completed in 1748.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close in Germany, there were stirrings of anticlericalism under the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph II. The secularization of church lands and the reduction of religious orders were among the projects he undertook after the death in 1780 of his mother, Maria Theresa, whose influence had restricted his moves until then. One of the first establishments that fell victim to his reforms was the Carthusian monastery at Mainz, secularized in 1781 and taken over by the University of Mainz. An auction of the church furnishings and treasures was held on September 3, 1787, and many objects were acquired by churches in the vicinity of the monastery. The buildings themselves were torn down early in the 1790s, the ground was purchased from the university by Elector Friedrich Karl von Erthal, and then annexed to the Favorite, the country house of Sibylla Augusta, the widow of Margrave Ludwig Wilhelm.

The choir stalls, however, were not among the objects included in the auction. Instead, the
in fabric, and loaded by heavy cranes onto a large boat for the trip down the Rhine and up the Moselle. The journey began on November 8, 1787. On the boat the stalls were watched over by a wealthy widow, Elizabeth Kerschreiber, and her son Friedrich, whose responsibility it was not only to see that the stalls were not damaged in transit, but to answer financially for any such damage should it occur.

The furniture was installed in the cathedral of Trier in 1787, shortly after it was acquired. Its aspect was slightly different there, even though the stalls were erected in two facing rows, as they had been at Mainz: because a larger area had to be filled, an addition of four seats was made at the end of each row. According to Dr. Walrand, who published an article in 1844 on the choir stalls, the marquetry work was executed by a Dominican in Trier. The Dominican order was among those highly skilled in woodworking, and the friar was able to imitate successfully the work of the earlier group of stalls. His additions are said to be not the equal of the originals, however, either in technique or design.

Sometime during the mid-nineteenth century, after the publication of Walrand's article, the back panels of the choir stalls were removed from the walls and put into storage. The exposure of a Romanesque arcade was the purpose of this well intended, but later widely deplored, dismantling, carried out as part of a restoration of the church to its original twelfth century style. The arcade can be seen behind the choir stall seats as they are now installed in Trier (Figure 2).

The panels lay in storage until 1890, when seventeen of them with their caryatids and cornice were sold to Adolf von Rath, an art collector in Berlin, who installed them as paneling in his dining room. He bought at the same time one of two cupboards very close in design to the back panels of the choir stalls, also executed by Schacht and his assistants. These were probably originally used during the service for the preparation of the oblations and the purification of the chalice after communion. The von Rath cupboard was given in 1918 by Anna von Rath to the Schlossmuseum in Berlin where it was destroyed in the last war. The second cupboard is now in the Bischöflichen Museum at Trier. The rest of the panels remained in storage in the cathedral until

Fig. 9. Altar design after Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena (1696-1756), from Architettura e Prospettiva. German (Augsburg), 1740. Engraving. 20 x 13¾ inches
Whittelsey Fund, 1951

General-Rezeptor of the university, a man named Renard, was instructed to sell the stalls directly. Many bids were received, but Renard chose to accept that of the cathedral of Trier, apparently because the Trier bid was definite, while the others seem to have been merely expressions of interest.

The dismantling and packing of the stalls at Mainz were entrusted to a Maester Schwartz, a cabinetmaker from Trier. They were well packed, with some of the most important pieces shrouded
1903 when they were extracted, restored together with the parapets and seats, and installed as wainscoting along the curved walls of the west choir of the cathedral. They remain there today.

In 1933 the seventeen von Rath panels were sold at auction in Berlin to Lauritz Melchior, who had them installed in the library of his home there. At the outbreak of World War II he removed them for safekeeping to his hunting estate near Frankfort on the Oder, where they remained until the end of the war. Mr. Melchior was then able to remove them to a storage area in West Berlin, the only works of art he could retrieve from his East German estate. In 1951 he offered them as an unconditional gift to the Museum. After the group had been inspected in Berlin, three of the panels and four angels were selected for the collections of the Metropolitan, and the remaining fourteen panels, angels, and cornice were presented by the Museum to the cathedral of Trier, where a number of them are now installed in the west choir, adjoining the back panels which were erected there as wainscoting in the early twentieth century.

Some of the material in this article has been freely translated from the following sources: Friedrich Schneider Eine Künstler-Kolonie des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts in der Karthause zu Mainz (Mainz, 1902); Johannes Wiegand Holzintarsien im Dom zu Trier, Rheinischen Verein für Denkmalpflege und Heimatschütz III, Part II (Trier, September 1, 1909); Fritz Arens Bau und Ausstattung der Mainzer Kartause (Mainz, 1959). I am indebted to Dr. Arens, Dr. Hans Aurenhammer, Joseph Greber, Hans Huth, Dr. Erwin Neumann, and Dr. Erich Steingräber for their gracious assistance to me during my research.

Fig. 10. Façade of the middle pavilion of the Zwinger, built by Matthäus Daniel Pöppelmann (1662-1736), in Dresden, Germany, 1711-1722