Riemenschneider’s Helpers in Need

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A few years ago an English private collector, George Saint, appeared at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and unpacked from a soft leather bag an intricately carved wooden statue just under two feet high. Despite a heavy coat of modern brown paint and certain restorations it appeared to be a fine German work of the late Gothic period; its style was indeed so distinctive that a strong guess could be made about its authorship. The three beautifully detailed male figures of which the sculpture was composed, with their deeply expressive, somber faces, seemed almost without question to be from the hand of one of the great masters of German sculpture of the end of the Middle Ages. Not only did they bear persuasive resemblance to several of the known works by the Würzburg artist Tilmann Riemenschneider, but also they were portrayed with that poignant blend of skillful realism and intense emotional expression which is the outstanding quality of his style.

The problem was that this work was completely unknown, and at first there seemed to be no clue as to its origin. But at length this proved to be a long-missing piece in a puzzle of attribution that had baffled experts for some time, and it has since been established beyond any doubt that this handsome group, now in the collection of The Cloisters (Frontispiece), is Riemenschneider’s own work, part of a commission known to have been ordered from him in 1494.

There was never any doubt who these figures were supposed to represent. By their gestures, attributes, and dress they could be identified as Sts. Christopher, Eustace, and Erasmus, three of the fourteen so-called “Helpers in Need.” Most of the Helpers were martyr saints; twelve of them had, according to legend, received God’s assurance that whoever turned to them in complete confidence, asking their intercession, would have his needs fulfilled. Two others came to be added to this group: St. Dionysius, who asked God for the same privilege before his martyrdom, and St. Cyriacus, who was known to be helpful in resisting temptation. The group had been a subject for art since the beginning of the

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fifteenth century, but reached its peak of popularity after 1446, when a shepherd, Hermann Leicht, of the Cistercian monastery of Langheim in Upper Franconia reported that the fourteen had appeared to him in a vision and asked to have a chapel built there in their honor. (On this site now stands Neumann's famous rococo church of Vierzehnheiligen, or Fourteen Saints.)

Of the three Helpers portrayed in this sculpture, the easiest perhaps for the modern observer to identify is St. Christopher (Figure 3), patron saint of travelers and protector against accidents. He is ingeniously portrayed wading ashore from a stream, bowed beneath the weight of the Christ Child on his shoulders and assisting himself with a large knotty staff. In life he was supposed to have helped travelers across a dangerous river, carrying them on his shoulders. One day the Christ Child asked his assistance, and was carried halfway across the ford, but his weight suddenly became such an immense burden, and the water rose so swiftly, that the poor carrier was completely submerged. At this point, according to the legend, the Christ Child baptized him Christophoros, bearer of Christ. Here the pose of the Child must in part be imagined, for his head and right arm are missing. His right hand was probably raised in a gesture of blessing. In his left he holds a small globe, the orb of the spheres, which the ancients conceived to surround the world; originally it would have been topped by a small cross. Christopher's head is turned attentively to the left, as if heeding the Child's instructions, his features drawn with the strain of his exertions.

Details of this figure recall several of the known works of Riemenschneider. The bearded face, deeply etched with suffering, is of a type that Riemenschneider often used in the portraits of
apostles (Figure 2), as in his Last Supper, part of the Altarpiece of the Holy Blood in the church of St. James at Rothenburg ob der Tauber. Christopher also wears the same simple garments Riemenschneider characteristically used for apostles: a belted coat, buttoned in front, partly covered by a plain mantle, thrown over the shoulders and gathered in rich folds. The hands—at once typically Gothic with their slender fingers, yet also so naturalistic that even the veins are carved—occur in many of his works, including the one mentioned above (Figure 1). They are, like his intense faces, a virtual hallmark of his style.

While no other treatment by Riemenschneider of St. Christopher is known, St. Erasmus (Figure 5), in his bishop’s robes, is a more familiar subject: the artist made another statue of this saint, for a church at Kitzingen (the piece is now in the Berlin-Dahlem Museum), as well as several sculptures of other bishops. In one of his gloved and ringed hands St. Erasmus carries his crozier, of which only part of the staff and the sudary remain; in the other is a small piece of what must have been his symbol: a spindle. In coastal areas Erasmus was the patron saint of sailors, and his symbol there was a windlass wrapped with cables; but inland this image was misunderstood, and rendered as a spindle with entrails coiled around it, since Erasmus was supposed to have met martyrdom by being disemboweled. For the same reason, his intercession was thought to be efficacious in gaining relief from abdominal pain or colic. The loss of the spindle from the statue may not have been accidental: some previous owner may well have found this explicit image offensive and removed it.

Erasmus’s choir cloak is decorated, as is usual with Riemenschneider, with a band suggested by two incised lines and a punched scallop design. Other details of his costume, but even more his concentrated, brooding face, closely resemble the monument for Prince-Bishop Rudolf von Scherenberg (Figure 4) in Würzburg Cathedral. Rudolf was ninety-three when he died in 1495, and in his portrait Riemenschneider made no effort to hide the ravages of time; here, however, in a sculpture that must have been made around the same time, he seems almost to have reconstructed the old bishop as a younger man.
An odd blend of elegance and reserve characterize the third figure, that of St. Eustace (Figure 6), a Roman soldier martyred in the reign of Hadrian, and the patron saint of hunters. Eustace is portrayed as an aristocratic young knight, wearing armored gauntlets and a kreb, or breast-plate, of the sort used in Riemenschneider’s time; such breastplates and gauntlets as these may be seen, in fact, in Riemenschneider’s tomb monument for the knights Eberhard von Grumbach and Conrad von Schaumberg (Figure 8). The saint’s hat, however, with its large, upturned brim, is not usual in Germany. It was also used by Riemenschneider in a figure in his Lamentation altarpiece at Hessenthal (Figure 9), and he may have borrowed it from Flemish art, with which he came into contact at Strasbourg. Again the most fascinating element of the figure is the face: rather withdrawn, just as the figure is itself withdrawn behind the other two, but with a good deal of manly composure. It bears a certain resemblance to the tomb effigy of Conrad von Schaumberg, although the saint is portrayed as a younger man than the knight. The resemblance to a figure of St. Luke, formerly in the predella of Riemenschneider’s altarpiece at Münnerstadt (Figure 7), seems even closer, especially in the eloquent, melancholy expression about the eyes.

All the works with which the Three Helpers may be compared are from a relatively early period of Riemenschneider’s career. The earliest is the Münnerstadt altarpiece of 1490-1492, and the latest is the Last Supper of 1501-1502. The Three Helpers group shares with these the same sharp linearity of design, the same complexity of interweaving forms, and all the restlessness and motion of late Gothic art in general; even without further evidence it would be possible to say, without too much fear of contradiction, that the sculpture was carved sometime during this decade. However, there is further evidence, which may perhaps allow us to place this group more precisely in time and to solve a historical problem of long standing as well.

A century ago Carl Becker, who wrote the first serious monograph on Riemenschneider (Leben und Werke des Bildhauers Tilmann Riemenschneider, Leipzig, 1849) using in part documents since lost, reported that the chancellor to the bishop of Würzburg, Johann von Allendorf, commissioned the sculptor in 1494 to carve a group of the Fourteen Helpers for the church of a hospital he had endowed. The hospital still existed in Becker’s time, and there was a relief of the Helpers on an outside wall of its chapel, so Becker not unreasonably concluded that it was the one ordered from Riemenschneider. The logic was good, but unfortunately the style was wrong. Not only does the relief, now in the Mainfränkisches Museum at Würzburg, not look like any of Riemenschneider’s works of this period, it hardly looks like Riemenschneider’s work at all. It is a rather bland work, with a number of Renaissance elements entirely alien to Riemenschneider’s conservative, Gothic style; details of dress

indicate, moreover, that it could not have been produced before the second decade of the sixteenth century.

But there exists another document that suggests very strongly just what this relief might be. In the year 1514, as reported in Wilhelm Freiherr von Bibra’s history of his family (Beiträge zur Familien-Geschichte der Reichsfreiherrn von Bibra, II, Munich, 1880, p. 315), a second sculpture of the Fourteen Helpers for the hospital chapel was ordered from Riemenschneider’s workshop by Lorenz von Bibra, then Prince-Bishop of Würzburg. This date fits the style of the existing relief exactly. It seems more than likely that it was executed by a journeyman in the workshop, one who had come into contact with the “modern” ideas of the Renaissance.

But what ever happened to Riemenschneider’s own group? The appearance of this remnant trio seems to provide the answer: at some time in the centuries that followed the group was dismantled, broken up, and dispersed. One may suspect that this occurred late in the eighteenth century, when Prince-Bishop Ludwig von Erthal had the church of the hospital rebuilt by his architect A. S. Fischer. During this period late Gothic art had little or no appeal, and Riemenschneider’s work, which would have been quite out of keeping with the frosty classicism of the new building, may well have been removed, while the workshop relief, with its Renaissance elements, was allowed to remain.

At any rate, Riemenschneider was at that time a forgotten man. Indeed, even now, for an artist whose work is so popular and so famous, very little is known about him. A chronicler of his own time called him a master “famous far and wide,” but following his death he fell into almost complete oblivion until the romantic revival of medieval art in the nineteenth century, when his tombstone, carved with his effigy, was discovered in the cemetery next to the cathedral of Würzburg. Now his work is widely treasured and collected, not only in Germany, but in museums all over Europe and America: in a recent exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art we were able to assemble twenty of Riemenschneider’s works from such collections. But the details of his life can only be gleaned from the
tantalizing suggestions of old municipal records, church accounts, and scattered references in local chronicles. For although he apparently enjoyed a considerable reputation in his own time, it was mainly limited to the region of Germany where he lived, and, as in the case of many German artists in this period, it did not long survive him.

Riemenschneider’s family came from what is now the state of Thuringia, situated at the very center of Germany. Riemenschneider was born in the town of Heiligenstadt, where his father owned property; the exact date is unknown, but it was about 1460. When he was a child, his family moved to Osterode, in the foothills of the Harz mountains, and here his father served as Master of the Mint, controlling the manufacture of coinage for the local dukes of Brunswick-Grubenhagen. Riemenschneider’s background was thus one of some substance, although whether his family was essentially one of artisans (as in the case of Riemenschneider’s famous contemporary Albrecht Dürer), or of patrician burghers, is now impossible to determine. There is no question, however, that the main impetus to his artistic career was provided him by a powerful and well-connected uncle, Nikolaus Riemenschneider, vicar of the cathedral of Würzburg in the duchy of Eastern Franconia. Nikolaus was also Fiskal, or financial administrator, of the whole duchy; he held degrees in both ecclesiastical and secular law, and was an imperial notary. He made it possible for young Tilmann to pursue his studies by having him appointed a curate in a Würzburg church. It is likely that

6. (opposite) Detail of the Three Helpers: St. Eustace


young Riemenschneider in turn used part of his benefice to hire someone else to read masses in his place, while he himself went off to study elsewhere. This was a common practice in the Church, and one of the evils that Martin Luther was to attack vehemently a couple of decades later.

Riemenschneider is thought to have taken up his studies in the Thuringian town of Erfurt. His uncle undoubtedly intended him to become a cleric, and it is probable that his studies were at first directed toward the priesthood. In receiving his benefice, however, he had taken only lower orders, which made it possible for him later to return to secular life and to marry. For it was apparently during his years at Erfurt that he became interested in sculpture. He seems to have worked with an Erfurt stonemason—perhaps in the workshop of the same monastic institution where he was studying theology. At any rate, there exists, on an Erfurt church, a commemorative relief of the Agony in the Garden, carved about 1480, that shows so many compositional similarities with later treatments of the same subject by Riemenschneider that mere coincidence seems unlikely. He must have been familiar with the work of the anonymous provincial artisan who carved this piece, and may even have assisted him on it.

Having completed his education as a stone sculptor, there is evidence that Riemenschneider went as a journeyman to Strasbourg, possibly drawn by the fame of the great Netherlandish sculptor Nicholas Gerhaert van Leyden, who had established his workshop in this Rhenish city. The master himself was no longer in Strasbourg, having accepted a commission for the Emperor Frederick's tomb in Vienna, but so evident is the impact of van Leyden's sensitive realism upon Riemenschneider's work that there can be no doubt that he came under the influence of this school. He seems to have traveled next to the city of Ulm, presumably to learn wood carving, for the guild system of Ulm was unusually liberal in permitting artisans to learn a second craft kurz oder lang (short or long)—that is, without prescribing a fixed period of apprenticeship. It is probable that he worked here under Michel Erhart, a famous sculptor in both wood and stone. It may well have been here that Riemenschneider became aware of the natural expressiveness of plain wood, for in Ulm were such supreme works as the series of carved busts flanking the choir stalls of the cathedral, which were left bare of either paint or gilt. At any rate Riemenschneider omitted such embellishment in his own work, and adopted a purely sculptural approach, whenever his clients permitted him to do so.

Riemenschneider's uncle had meanwhile died, but the young artist nevertheless returned to Würzburg in 1483 and settled there permanently. He may have been attracted by the presence of connections in high and useful places: Chancellor Johann von Allendorf, for example, who commissioned the sculpture of the Fourteen Helpers, had been a close enough friend of Riemenschneider's uncle to serve as an executor of his will. Riemenschneider served first as assistant in the workshop of a Würzburg master. The guild system there, as elsewhere, was very much a closed shop that looked after its own: not being the son of a Würzburg master, Riemenschneider could not himself become a master except by marrying the widow of a master—even a master of another guild. This he did, in 1485, marrying the well-to-do widow of a goldsmith, which enabled him to become a master in the Guild of St. Luke—the guild of painters, sculptors, and glaziers. She brought him three sons and a fine house, the Wolfmannsziechleinshof, with space both for his workshop and for quarters to house his family, his apprentices, and his assistants. The house was still standing in this century, only to be destroyed in a World War II bombing raid.

In contrast to the widespread modern image of the artist as isolated from society, Tilmann Riemenschneider was deeply involved with his society, both as a citizen of his community and as head of his household. He married no less than four times, surviving all but his last wife, whom he married when he was nearly sixty. He fathered five children, and all three of his sons themselves became artists, two of them sculptors. In addition to running a busy workshop, delivering commissions as far off as Münnerstadt in Thuringia and Wittenberg in Saxony, he was also active in politics. He was elected to the city council in 1504, and was master of the fishing waters, curator of Our Lady's Chapel, tax collector, adminis-
trator of the hospital, and head of the city's defenses and building activities. Several times he served as judge in the Upper Council, and for the year 1520-1521 was elected burgomaster, the city's highest office.

Riemenschneider seems to have kept largely aloof from the religious strife that rent Germany in the first decades of the sixteenth century. His tombstone effigy, in which he is shown holding a rosary, testifies that he remained a Catholic. Indeed, he could not have held public office if he were not, for the bishop of Würzburg was also prince of the duchy, and candidates for the city council had to be selected and approved by the chapter of the cathedral. Riemenschneider had, furthermore, been treated very well by the ecclesiastical authorities, who were, after all, his best customers. But at one time he chose to defy, evidently on grounds of principle, his religious and political superiors, in an action that casts more light on his character than anything else we know about him. In 1525 Germany, and Franconia in particular, was swept by the Peasants' Revolt, which was mainly directed against the Catholic nobility and the princes of the Church, although Martin Luther himself also opposed it. The Prince-Bishop of Würzburg, Conrad von Thüngen, proposed to draw together there all the troops of the principality, and to use the city as headquarters for war against the peasants, but Riemenschneider voted with the majority of the city council not only to deny these troops permission to enter the city but also to prevent Würzburg men from serving in the prince's army. He was apparently prompted by the desire to maintain the city's independence from feudal control, and possibly also by sympathy for the underdog peasants, fighting for freedom against serfdom. The revolt was eventually crushed, however, and Riemenschneider was expelled from the council, together with ten of his colleagues who had taken the same stand. Accused of having been a ringleader in the burghers' resistance and of spreading false and inflammatory rumors, he was then clapped into jail. Only after several months' imprisonment was he able to clear himself of these charges.

There was a legend that Riemenschneider was tortured during his imprisonment, and as a result was never again able to practice his art. It is true

that a sixteenth century prison could not have been easy on a man in his sixties, but whatever privations he suffered, two years later he is known to have executed at least one more important commission, restoring the altarpieces in a nunnery church at Kitzingen, and replacing some of the figures, lost or damaged during the war, with his own sculptures. He died four years after that, on July 7, 1531, at the age of at least seventy years, and was buried in the cemetery next to Würzburg Cathedral, where the uncle who gave him his start in life had been vicar more than half a century before. Riemenschneider’s eldest son Georg, himself a master in the Guild of St. Luke, carved his tombstone (Figure 10). Around Riemenschneider’s effigy was cut this epitaph: “In the year 1531 on the eve of St. Kilian’s Day died the honorable and ingenious Tilmann Riemenschneider, sculptor, burgher of Würzburg, upon whom God have mercy. Amen.”

It is now perhaps difficult to understand why Riemenschneider’s work fell so quickly from favor after his death. Part of the blame must fall upon the influence of the Renaissance, with its emphasis upon the values of balance and harmony as opposed to the drama and emotionalism of Gothic art. Even during the sculptor’s lifetime a goldsmith from the “progressive” city of Nuremberg, given one of Riemenschneider’s wooden models to copy, dismissed its explicit sentiment as zu kyndisch – too childish – and gratuitously offered to improve its form. What seemed childish in Nuremberg in the early sixteenth century was the essentially medieval spirit of Riemenschneider’s work. Following the example of the Netherlandish painters of the fifteenth century, and of such sculptors as Nicholas van Leyden, Riemenschneider heightened the expressiveness of late Gothic art by judicious use of the new naturalism of the Renaissance, but never allowed mere visual realism to become an end in itself. The features of the Three Helpers, for example, are carved with enormous persuasiveness and sensitivity – they are extremely “true to life.” But the life portrayed in them is an inward, spiritual one, and the feelings and aspirations imprinted upon them – sorrow, compassion, humility, and above all dedication to an ideal beyond reality – are associated more with the art of the Middle Ages than with that of the Renaissance. The style of the work, furthermore, seems to reveal the man who made it, and to reflect the concerns and anxieties of the age of spiritual unrest in which he lived. It is perhaps this quality beyond all others that makes his work so appealing today. In a time when art is devoted to expressing not so much the harmony of the universe as the paradox and tragedy of existence, and when supreme value is placed upon works that convey sincerely the unique personality of their creator, it is little wonder that the sculptures of Tilmann Riemenschneider command such wide affection and respect.

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