



Nativity

Date

c. 1500-1510

Medium

Limewood with polychrome and gilding

Description

Given its size and diorama-like form, this elaborate relief sculpture was likely one of multiple panels making up a winged altarpiece. It depicts a Nativity scene—set in the manger where Christ was born—and includes the infant Jesus lying in a wicker basket supported by two angels; his mother, the Virgin Mary; her husband, Joseph; and a shepherd minding his sheep, seen through a window in the background. Joseph probably originally held a staff, candle, or lantern, which is now missing, as are the wings of both angels. The compositional arrangement is unusual, for both Mary and Joseph look not toward the baby Jesus but

rather downward, toward the space that would have been occupied by the altar, thus linking the scene of Jesus's birth to his eventual death and sacrifice. The work was carved primarily from three joined pieces of linden wood (also called limewood), with some additional wood elements, such as the canopy at the upper left and other details now missing, applied prior to painting and gilding. On the basis of style and technique, it has been attributed to the North Tyrol region and specifically to the city of Schwaz. North Tyrol was the first part of Austria to demonstrate signs of Renaissance influence in the early sixteenth century, probably thanks to its proximity to northern Italy. Schwaz, which owed its prosperity to silver mining, was a center of artistic innovation and the second-largest city in the Habsburg Empire at the time. Although the relief shows technical developments associated with the Renaissance, such as the illusion of depth and the absence of halos, the subject matter and compositional choices (such as Mary's placement in bed) are typical of Late Gothic art, indicating that the work may have been transitional or have intentionally harked back to earlier prototypes, possibly even intentionally quoting an older altarpiece that may have existed on site. The relief was donated to the Emerson Gallery by Robert S. Ludwig, Class of 1972, in 2009 after being on extended loan to the gallery since 2001. It was formerly owned by Richard Oertel (1865–1943), a German art historian with a very strong collection of early German wood carvings. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) This small but elaborate altarpiece was primarily carved from three logs of limewood with some additional wooden elements applied prior to being painted and gilded. Its size and diorama-like form suggests that it was created for the shrine of a small altar. The work depicts the nativity scene, a representation of the birth of Christ, and includes the infant Jesus supported on a cloth by two angels, his mother the Virgin Mary, his father Joseph, and a shepherd in the background. North Tyrol, where this artwork was made, was the first region in which Austrian art began to show signs of Renaissance influence in the early sixteenth century. An increased prosperity due to silver mining allowed the city of Schwaz to become a center of artistic innovation. Although this piece shows elements of technical developments from the Renaissance, its religious subject matter and basic form are typical of Gothic Medieval art. (SOURCE: Wellin Museum permanent collection label, August 2016)

Dimensions

Overall: 53 1/2 x 53 1/2 x 12 in. (135.9 x 135.9 x 30.5 cm)