JOACHIM PATINIR (ca. 1485-1524) AND THE BEGINNINGS OF LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

Verena Voigt

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster

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Introduction:

RESEARCH LITERATURE (Franz, 1969; Gibson 1989) agrees that the work of Joachim Patinir marks an important stage in development on the road to the representation of perspective in landscape painting. Paradoxically, however, the reappraisal of Joachim Patinir under the aspect of landscape painting has been more harmful than useful for a conceptual interpretation of his work. Only the essay by Reindert Falkenburg (1985, 1988) brought new arguments into the discussion about the interpretation of the content of Patinir's landscape art The present article tries to confront the more recent works, especially those by Franz (1969) and Koch (1968) as well as the earlier appraisals by Baldaß (1918) with the iconographic study by Falkenburg. It is important at this point to observe the assessment of Patinir's landscape structure critically, to reconsider the function of the figure — with the help of Falkenburg's arguments — and to direct the reader's and viewer's attention to the "space antagonism" deliberately introduced by Patinir (Hauser 1953, 1983), within which the human and divine perspectives unfold. A clear focal point for our discussion will be the arguments concerning the dating of the individual creative periods in Patinir's career. In the process of our discussion the salient arguments will be indicated, though this essay will not attempt a new periodization. It would be desirable at some time to use Falkenburg's argumentation in order to achieve a new critical periodization of Patinir's creative stages. In this essay I would like to provide a stimulus for such an undertaking.

The Biography of Joachim Patinir

Netherlandish landscape painting of the first three decades of the sixteenth century is closely connected with the Flemish artist Joachim Patinir. Not much is known about the life and development of the artist. Dinant on the Meuse is given as his birthplace; the exact date of birth remains unknown. Since the portrait illustrated in Lampsonius (illustration 1) depicts the artist as a man in his forties or fifties, ca. 1475 can be assumed as the artist's year of birth (Franz 1969, 31). It is also possible, however, that the portrait was etched after a missing drawing of a portrait of Patinir, which Albrecht Dürer mentioned in his diary of 1521. In this case Patinir's year of birth should be around 1485. Up until now both dates have been used.

It is unknown where Joachim Patinir lived before 1515, the year he started his apprenticeship in the Antwerp Guild of Painters. The similarity of his early works with paintings by Gerard David (ca. 1460-1523) and Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516)

suggest these as his possible teachers (Friedländer 1963, 65). There are grounds to speculate that Patinir started his education in the workshop of a painter of altarpieces and that there, being aware of his talent for landscapes, he began to specialize in this genre.

In the year 1521 Patinir became acquainted with Albrecht Dürer, who was staying in Antwerp. In a diary entry Dürer mentions his friend and colleague, referring to him as a "gut landschafft mahler" (Rupprich 1956, 211). As the result of this encounter two portraits of Patinir came into existence, neither of which has survived in the original. In addition, Dürer gave his friend engravings and drawings of St. Christopher. From Dürer's diary we also know that on the 5th of May 1521 Patinir married for the second time (Hand 1986: 4). Three years later Joachim Patinir died. This information comes from the Antwerp City Archives, where at the sale of Patinir's house, on 5.October 1524, Johanna Noyts is mentioned as his widow. (Koch, 1968, 4). This may indicate that 1524 was the year of Patinir's death.

Joachim Patinir was already very famous during his lifetime. The Spanish painter Felippo Guevara considered Patinir together with Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441) and Rogier van der Weyden (ca. 1399-1464) to be the three most important Flemish painters (Friedländer 1963, 52) His great influence on landscape painting in general was due to the sales of his pictures in the Netherlands as well as throughout Europe.

Joachim Patinir and his Workshop

According to Antwerp Guild lists, Patinir never registered an apprentice. Carel van Mander wrongly indicates Frans Mostaert (ca. 1534-ca. 1560) as Patinir's student. A comparison of ages shows this to have been impossible, however. It is probable that van Mander here, as once before, mixed up Joachim Patinir with Herri Patinir, who became a free master in 1535. Herri Patinir was a nephew of Joachim Patinir; his real name was Herri met de Bles (ca. 1505/10-1584) (Friedländer 1963, 57). Joachim Patinir did not run a school for landscape painting, but he was in charge of a well-organized workshop which supplied landscape paintings for the growing demands of the Antwerp art market. Patinir employed in his workshop mostly figurative painters. It is known, for example, that the figures of his "Temptation of St. Anthony" were painted by Quentin Metsys (1465-1531) (Hand 1986, 57).

Periodization of Patinir's works

It is impossible to establish a reliable chronology of Patinir's works by means of his signatures. Robert A. Koch therefore attempts to date Patinir's work using biographical data and other sources, with convincing results (Koch 1968, 23). In doing so he subdivides Patinir's oeuvre into three major periods.

The Early Works

The early works include all paintings until 1514: the "Landscape with St. Jerome" (Gemäldegalerie, Karlsruhe, nr. 144), the "Landscape with the Flight into Egypt" (Ertborn Collection, Antwerp, nr. 64), the "Landscape with the Destruction of Sodom and the Escape of Lot" (Boymans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam, nr. 2312) and the

"Landscape with the Martyrdom of St. Catherine" (Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, nr. 1002).

The Middle Period

The middle period dates from 1515 until 1519 and includes the "Baptism of Christ" (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, nr. 981), the "Landscape with the Rest on the Flight into Egypt" (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano, nr. 321), "The Assumption of the Virgin Mary" (John Johnson Collection, Philadelphia, nr. 378), the "Landscape with St. Jerome" (Louvre, Paris, nr. 4126) and the "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" (Staatliche Kunstsammlung, Berlin-Dahlem, nr. 608).

This periodization is documented by the purchase of " The Assumption of the Virgin Mary" (John Johnson Collection, Philadelphia, nr. 378) by the German merchant Lucas Rem in 1516. As a merchant Rem travelled extensively throughout Europe. His diaries inform us about his business affairs in Lisbon, Lyons, Cologne and in the Netherlands (Koch 1968, 10), and show his interest in "peculiarly funny things". From these entries we know of his acquisition of some of Patinir's paintings. In 1516/1517 are mentioned the purchases of "The Assumption of the Virgin Mary," "Landscape with St. Jerome" and "St. John the Baptist Preaching" (Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels, nr. 1041). Koch derives the dates of the other paintings from comparisons and analogies in the construction of the landscapes in the background.

The Late Works

The last period covers, according to Koch, the years 1520 to 1524. It includes "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" (Prado, Madrid, nr. 1611), "The Temptation of St. Anthony" (Prado, Madrid, nr. 1515), "St. Christopher" (Escorial, Madrid), "Landscape With Charon's Boat" (Prado, Madrid, nr. 1616), "St. Jerome in a Landscape" (Prado, Madrid). In 1520, shortly after his own wedding, Lucas Rem commissioned three works from Patinir's workshop. One of them is "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" which allows us to also date the painting. "St. Christopher" belongs to the time shortly after 1521, since this painting was made after the engraving and drawing by Albrecht Dürer, which Patinir could have acquired only in or after 1521.

The Phases of Development in Patinir's Work: Landscape and Figure — A Critical Examination of the Periodization-Discussion

Early Works

One characteristic premise not yet looked at in dealing with the criteria of periodization of Patinir's works is the fact that the "level of perfection" in the shaping of perspective could be used as a clue. Ludwig Baldaß, for example, describes the presentation of landscape in the early phase of Patinir's work in deliberately pejorative terms. He speaks of "poor technical mastery" and a "primitive way of foreshortening" (Baldaß 1918, 120). These characteristics serve Baldaß as a sufficient indication to categorize and group the early works.

Heinrich G. Franz describes the "St. Jerome" (Gemäldegalerie, Karlsruhe) in the following terms: "The feeling of flatness defines the setting of the hill scenery." The depiction of the rocks might be influenced by the Italian landscape paintings of Leonardo. They provide the landscape with an "unreal late-gothic touch" and bring out the "significant events of the life of saints" (Franz, 1969: 32). The style-teleological aspect is clear when Franz claims that there is no unique focus, and that specific perspectival observations are absent. The three rock groups in fore- middle- and background Franz considers merely as "heralds" of perspective, since they "already" establish a contrast between closeness and distance (Franz, 1969: 33).

Franz characterizes the structure of Patinir's space in the following way: "The artist pulls distant spaces together to form a pictorial unity. Different parts of the landscape can appear together on the picture surface, and are drawn together into a pictorial unity which does not necessarily constitute a spatial unity or a unity of time" (Franz 1969, 33). The construction of the early landscapes was consequently not meant to follow any rules of perspective, but rather, as Robert Koch rightly states, to express the confrontation of the human world with the divine cosmos, which constitutes the fundamental conflict of mankind (Koch 1968, 19). The goal of early representation was — and this places Patinir among Bosch's followers — to imagine a divine vision which is in contrast to natural perspective. On the other hand, Patinir's landscape may also be seen in the tradition of the "narrative picture" where the meditating observer is provided with a space in which he can "move" while interpreting it.

Middle Period

The middle period is usually seen as possessing the characteristics of a "transitional phase". Franz describes the works of this period as "work with three grounds". The construction of the fore- and middle ground are "already" in perspective. The foreground is still in a tradition of the narrative picture. Baldaß speaks of a marked progress in the construction of "Rest on the Flight into Egypt" (Berlin-Dahlem nr. 608.) Because of the forest in the middle, the picture has acquired a clear spatial focus. To the right ascending mountains, to the left a broad view of a river valley can be observed. Thus the representation of space is far more developed. To be sure, at the point where the background of the landscape touches the rolling terrain of the foreground there is still a bad discrepancy in the proportions (Baldaß, 1918, 114). Baldaß attributes these spatial constructions to technical inability. The artist, according to him, clearly had difficulties in leading from the surface of the ground, seen in bird's eye view, to the surface of the level of the picture. He facilitates the composition by a *repoussoir* of bushes left and right.

Franz, on the other hand, uses the example of "The Baptism of Christ" (Vienna) to assess the middle period in Patinir's work, whereby he continues Baldaß's argumentation. He criticizes the fact that the painting consists of three independent pictorial segments which have been welded together artificially and with difficulty, so that the "joints" are still clearly visible (Franz 1969, 34). This statement shows that Franz at this stage in the work of Patinir expects a unified concept of space perspective based on one point.

The late period

In the late style of Joachim Patinir, Baldaß considers the problems of the incongruity of space resolved. The concept of a *Weltlandschaft* is used by him as a kind of "seal of approval" and applied every time when the "problems" of the early works seem to be solved. The invention of a *Weltlandschaft* in the late work consists, according to him, in the fact that the landscape has developed consistently from the lower border of the picture up to the horizon, whereas the figures become mere "staffage" (Baldaß, 119). This unified view upwards Baldaß notices for the first time in the Charon picture (Prado). For him the problem of the uninterrupted transition of the pictorial space is thus completely solved, since the Styx flows in a straight line from the foreground to the horizon, and separates Elysium and Tartarus (Baldaß, 122). The landscape appears thereby, as in the "St. Christopher" (Escorial, Madrid) as a spatial continuum, whose extension and organization is no longer interspersed and interrupted by motifs presented in frontal view.

The Autonomy of Figure and Landscape

A widely-held wrong assessment in the evaluation of the development of Flemish landscape painting came about as a result of the assumption that landscape developed independently from the respective iconographic program. This idea goes back to Goethe's essay on landscape painting, in which he develops the thesis that landscape had gradually become the primary and the religious subject the secondary element, so that in the process the surroundings had increasingly gained prominence and forced the religious subjects to become smaller, until they shrank into what we call "staffage." In order to preserve a memory of the original goal of the picture, one notices in the corner some holy hermit or other. Jerome with the lion, Mary Magdalen with a hair-garment are seldom missing. Upon closer analysis, however, it can be seen that Patinir's figures seldom decline into staffage. Even if they are not always in the center of the construction of the picture, their iconographic interpretation still shows clearly that they are essential to the meaning of the picture — and are the conceptual focus of the devotional image.

The Imitation of Nature and Construction

Another misinterpretation has to do with the so-called "realism" of the paintings, which supposedly developed gradually in the course of Patinir's oeuvre. Thus Baldaß claims that Patinir designed his chalk-like rocks in imitation of the banks of the Maas in his home country. This claim must be rejected, since it is known that Patinir used pieces of rock for the representation of mountains: "It is likely that he employed small stones as models for his fantastic mountains. Certainly, there seem to be no recognizable locations in his paintings, and his landscapes were certainly more imaginary than reproductive" (Smith 1985, 60).

The limits of Interpretation

The previous assessments are at first glance quite convincing, particularly because they can be demonstrated in the individual works. It may well be asked, however, how Patinir would have represented a river landscape without sticking to the continuity of space.

It can be shown, therefore, that the late style which is considered "advanced" is perhaps merely an adaptation to the demands of the subjects which are to be represented. One can also object to the fact that investigations generally concentrate on the analysis of the spatial representation, and that questions as to the allegorical meaning of the landscapes have seldom been posed. One overlooks thereby the fact that so-called technical deficiencies are an essential part of the pictorial program which needs to be deciphered.

Landscape as space for meditation

Reindert Falkenburg arrives at a new interpretation of the presentation of landscape in his study *Het landschap als beeld van de levenspelgrimage* (1985, 1988). He sees in the Flemish landscape paintings of Patinir not the representation of an ideal landscape, but points to the rhetorical function of several picture-elements — among them landscape— which are supposed to translate events from the story of Redemption into a familiar pictorial language (Falkenburg, 11-57). The lay observer of these devotional images is invited not simply to confide in the canonical writings, but, by means of a recognition of his own world, to relate to the religious message. As evidence for his thesis, Falkenburg points to a thorough-going change in the practice of meditation as a result of the *devotio moderna*. He draws a parallel to the medieval literature of the circle around Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who proclaimed that only an *imitatio Christi* could bring the soul of the believer closer to God (Falkenburg, 42-51). At the same time, a new way of interpreting the life of Christ developed in the form of lay assemblies which saw themselves in opposition to the feudal Church of the Middle Ages. The reading of the Holy Scripture in the vernacular, and chronological representations of the life of Christ, like the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* of an anonymous Tuscan monk, were the literary precipitation of this new faith. The fundamental attitude of these assemblies consisted in no longer considering Christ as a divine redemptive figure, but as the Son of God born of man. The humanizing representations of Christ were strengthened also through the translation of the meditation literature into the respective vernaculars (Falkenburg, 47). It is against this background of the tradition of devotional images in sequences of scenes — such as representations of the Stations of the Cross — that Falkenburg interprets the landscapes in the devotional paintings by Patinir. The naturalistic representations of landscapes are supposed to supply the observer, besides the meditative stations of the life of the saints, with additional possibilities of identification, in order to imitate the "exemplary" way of life step by step.

The Allegorical Interpretation of Landscape: the Example of St. Jerome

Falkenburg claims that the landscapes by Patinir can be read as "allegories of life's pilgrimage" (59-97). The landscape is thereby so constructed that in it two different ways of life can in each case be adopted, the good and the bad. The idea of life's pilgrimage is derived from Christian doctrine in which is said that man is only a guest on earth, wanders without a home, and knows only that death is his final goal (Hebr. 11: 13). The redemptive message tells us that God has prepared a city for those who remain on the right path and serve him in poverty (Hebr. 11: 16), but that this city remains closed to those devoted to

voluptuousness. St. Jerome, recognizable because of his attributes, the lion, the crucifix, the skull, and the Bible, is accordingly on the right path.

The parting of the roads is related by Falkenburg to the etching "Hercules at the Crossroads" by Sebastian Brant (Basle 1497). Two roads are alluded to: that of voluptuousness and of virtue. Falkenburg shows that this iconography can frequently be found in interpretations of landscapes because here the representation of roads bifurcating is especially appropriate. Iconographically the following reading suggests itself: the easy road goes through a flat, comfortably travelled landscape, through cities and harbour areas which are seen as places of voluptuousness and sin. The "difficult road," on the other hand, leads across precipitous paths and through a rocky landscape in the high mountains.

This landscape iconography is derived from Matthew 7: 13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." St. Jerome, it seems, goes through the narrow gate. The blind man and his guide in the flat landscape in the background of the painting, by contrast, have lost the right way.

In other places Falkenburg presents other details of landscapes which are to be understood as allegorical (83-92). Thus he compares the two bridges, the small one which leads to the abbey and the one crossed by the blind man. The former is, according to the *Tabula Cebetis* the road to true wisdom, the latter the road to ignorance. To the iconography of the lost road belongs furthermore the crossing of the forest, for the forest is considered the place of confusion and sinful temptations. Dante wrote: "Precisely in the middle of my life's journey / I found myself in a dark wood / because I had lost the right way." It becomes clear that the forest not only connects the pictorial levels, but has an iconographic meaning.

The cloud formations, too, can be fitted into the iconographic context. The thunderstorm threatens the people in the city. Falkenburg points to the fact that in the city on the bay there is quarrying. The people of this city have not built their houses on rocks, as is the case with the church on the hill. Again, a verse by Matthew explains the iconography: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the stream rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the stream rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7, 24-27). Here again the observer is to compare: St. Jerome has built his house, like the abbey in the background, on rock. The people in the city, on the other hand, as can be seen from their location on the coast, built their city on sand, and thus court destruction.

The connection between the foreground and background scene stems from the *Legenda Aurea*, which states that St. Jerome went into the desert to atone for his sins. One day, a lion comes to him with a thorn, the symbol of sin, in its paw. Jerome removes the thorn from the paw, as can be seen in the foreground. Out of gratitude, the lion joins the saint and shares his life in the abbey. He is given the task of guarding the donkey which

belongs to the abbey. He is, however, neglectful in his task, so that merchants passing by succeed in stealing the donkey. Repentant, the lion returns to the abbey. From now on he has to take the place of the donkey and to carry the burdens. Aware of his double guilt, he undergoes the punishment patiently. When some time later the merchants return, he succeeds in freeing the donkey, as can be seen in the background. Roaring loudly, the lion chases the merchants to the abbey, to lead them to their just punishment. St. Jerome shows himself once again as a compassionate Church Father. He forgives the merchants as well as the lion for their sins. The background scene before the abbey shows how the merchants fall on their knees before the saint, while the lion stands behind them repentantly (Voragine, 817-823).

The Divine Law and the Human Law

It may be noted that the iconography centers around the theme of guilt, atonement and forgiveness. The painting shows two perspectives, the first concerned with one who asks forgiveness, which is the human perspective, and the second with the one who forgives, which in this case is St. Jerome. This dualism, which we already encountered in the allegory of the two paths of life, also pertains to the iconography of perspective, namely the (human) glance upwards and the (divine) overview. The claim for a coincidence of the two perspectives is therefore shown to be unfounded.

Striking in the composition of the image (illustration 2) is the strict organization through horizontal and vertical lines. Because of the suggestion of Zinke (1977, 6) — who has drawn attention to the division of the painting in the proportions of the Golden Rule (8:5) by means of the frame of the hermitage — one is tempted to look for further ideal measurements. This search proves successful. Thus the frame of the shelter which divides the picture as well as the horizontal and the vertical which construct the painting as a whole also follow the proportions of the Golden Rule. The horizontals divide the pictorial space into two halves, so that foreground, middle ground and background divide into proportional bands.

In the organization of the verticals there can also be found the division in the relationship 1:1. Seen from the middle line, the lion is situated according to the Golden Rule that structures the left-hand vertical of the painting. In the right half of the painting the two trees are situated on the Golden Rule, once measured from the left, once from the right.

This ideal measure has its roots in antiquity. The columns of the Pergamon temple, for example, had these proportions, and in ancient Rome the triumphal arch of the Emperor Septimus Severus in the Forum Romanum was also proportioned the same way. In the Renaissance, these measures were taken up again and can be found in the construction of the columns of the Pazzi Chapel of Brunelleschi. The proportions of the Golden Rule were considered "divine proportioni" by the theoreticians of the Italian Renaissance, according to which God created the world.

Thus the iconography of the different perspectives is connected with the function of the images. There is a divine view of the world, which shows itself in the overview-perspective, and a human perspective, the upward glance, which allows the spectator of the

images to comprehend the scenes with the small figures. In his meditation the spectator becomes aware of his own life's pilgrimage by relating to the exemplary actions of the figures — similar to the Church's Stations of the Cross —, and by asking questions such as: which of the figures in the painting are wandering on the right path, and where do I stand myself?

The religious devotional art of the Middle Ages was static. The accessible devotional images of Patinir, on the other hand, build bridges between the personal life of the believer and the life of the saints. Ironically, the "translation" of the events of the history of redemption into a familiar language had the effect of loosening the religious ties of the believers. The message of redemption acquires, through a greater degree of common knowledge, a higher degree of verifiability. The meditating believer can therefore make up his own mind. A realism which can be called "rhetorical" thus prepares the way for a more differentiated audience, no longer only under the dictates of the clergy.

Conclusion

It is clear that the so-called imperfections in the representation of space are not the result of a backward technique, but that they emphasize the meditative character of the representation of the saints in their landscape. The incongruency of zones of space and the "antagonisms" in the conception of space (Hauser, 1953, 423) are meant to clarify the difficult road which man in the early sixteenth century had to travel. A rhetoric which in an almost "psychological" way seeks contact with the spectator thereby approaches the mannerisms which can be found in the successors of Patinir. The world-view and the code of ethics of Patinir himself, however, appear still unbroken and in the tradition of the Middle Ages, for man — if he follows the laws and the ways of God — finds himself in the middle of the redemptive order and in the grace of the divine.

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