



COLLECTORS' FOCUS

Wood carving flourished in Southern Germany in the late 15th century onwards, resulting in exquisitely crafted devotional sculptures. Today, these figures and reliefs may be found for as little as £5,000, though the best examples command high prices. **Emma Crichton-Miller**

In the last quarter of the 15th century, the growing wealth of independent cities and kingdoms in Southern Germany – from Nuremberg in Franconia to Kempten in Swabia, and further south into the Tyrol – together with a style of religious devotion intensely focused on two- and three-dimensional images, stimulated an astonishing flowering of wooden sculpture. Religious orders, wealthy burghers and the powerful trade guilds that marshalled Germany's first Industrial Revolution all vied to commission the finest artists to create retables, altar pieces and sculptures to adorn their churches. By the final decade of the 15th century, connoisseurs were commissioning the most celebrated carvers to create devotional pieces for private chapels and also secular pieces for their homes. In 1488, the Swabian church Ulm Minster reportedly boasted 52 altars, each dedicated to multiple saints. It was the Reformation and the violent iconoclasm that it inspired, together with the Peasants' Revolt of 1525, that marked the end of this era of fine carving. From 1522 the stripping of churches spread from city to city, reaching Ulm, for instance, in 1531. It is a testimony to the value already accorded these objects that so many have survived.

By the time of the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, different religious and artistic priorities prevailed. The limewood sculptures of Southern Germany are the work of the perhaps two dozen artists, including the great names Tilman Riemenschneider (c. 1460–1531), Veit Stoss (1438/47–1533), Michel Erhart (active 1496–1522) and Hans Leinberger (active 1516–30). The scholar Michael Baxandall's classic book, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, first published in 1980, has become the bible of collectors. 'Anybody listed in Baxandall is worth collecting,' states Arcadia Fletcher from the London gallery Sam Fogg. Collectors are looking for deeply expressive virtuoso carving together with, as Erik Bijzet, European sculpture and works of art specialist at Sotheby's London, puts it, the skillful use of 'the drapery and hair to convey high drama.'

Given its mostly Christian subject matter, this traditionally stable collecting category is mainly the focus of European and North American collectors. 'This is a very steady market, with the same collectors,' confirms Dr Otmar Plassmann of auctioneers Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne. 'These are both collectors who specialise in late medieval



- 1** Virgin and Child and a group of female saints, c. 1500
Circle of Michel Erhart (active 1496–1522)
German, Ulm
Wood, parcel gilt and polychrome
99.7×73.6cm
Sold for £58,850 at Christie's London in November 2010
- 2** Half-relief with the Death of the Virgin, 1430–40
German, Upper Rhine
Walnut, 82.5×92×30cm
Sold for £529,250 at Sotheby's London in July 2011
- 3** *St Lawrence*, c. 1490
Circle of Adam Kraft (c.1455–1508/9)
German, Nuremberg
Limewood, with original polychrome
106×26×20.5cm
Price on application, Mullany



Mr Bijzet has had success with two restitution cases. Last July, an expressive half-relief of the Death of the Virgin sold at Sotheby's London for £529,250 on an estimate of £60,000–£80,000 (Fig. 2). Dated 1430–40 and carved in walnut, this half-relief originated from the Upper Rhine, perhaps Strasbourg. Mr Bijzet remarks: 'We know very few names from this period, as carvers worked for cathedral workshops. It is only a couple of decades later that Renaissance ideas of the significance of the individual artist began to percolate through. This piece was very well preserved, and then the pathos of it, together with an impeccable provenance, contributed to its appeal.' The second piece, a nearly life-size sculpture of St John the Baptist by the Master of the Harburger Altar, dated c. 1515, 'is a very Swabian sculpture,' Mr Bijzet states. 'It stood out because of its stern appeal to the emotion.' Estimated at £100,000–£150,000, it was bought by the Getty at Sotheby's London in December 2011, realising £313,250.

London dealer Mullany specialises in Haute Epoque fine art, and Nicholas Mullany confirms that most of his collectors are on the Continent. 'Collectors are not focused on particular names. They are targeting quality. Original polychrome and provenance matter. These are becoming increasingly difficult to find.' He currently has available a figure of St Lawrence from the circle of Adam Kraft (c. 1455–1508/9; Fig. 3). Carved in limewood with original polychrome, the statue originates from Nuremberg and is dated to around 1490 (price on application).

Ms Fletcher of Sam Fogg remarks that the issue of overpainting is significant: 'In the Baroque period they quite often overpainted, and while that is part of the story of the piece, it can be unattractive. We would never remove any original polychromy, but we would pay a conservator to remove an overlayer.' Ms Fletcher estimates that a piece from the 'school of' one of the revered Baxandall names would go for £40,000 upwards. 'The religious context may have waned but the art historical context is increasingly adding value.' The gallery has a work attributed to Erasmus Grasser (1450–1518), a Holy Knight (possibly St Florian) dated 1470–1515. Well preserved, and with some paint surface remaining, it should fetch between £100,000–£500,000. Ms Fletcher remarks: 'I think in 20 years' time these things are going to be really valuable.' ^A



art and those who collect masterpieces across all eras. These collectors operate internationally and are looking for very good, very rare pieces, with private collectors bidding against museums.' This doesn't, however, necessarily lead to inflated prices. Andreas Pampoulides, a specialist in early European sculpture at Christie's London, points out: 'The wood market in the last 15 years has really contracted, in comparison with 30 or 40 years ago, unless it is an exceptional piece. Pieces that would fetch £50,000 in the 1960s or 1970s now fetch £5,000.' He remarks that one difficulty is that 'condition is such a priority, with woodworm, damage – especially to the polychrome – and overpainting all being major hazards.' Still, good pieces with names attached can fetch unexpected prices. He cites a parcel-gilt polychrome carved wood relief of the Virgin and Child and a group of female saints, from the circle of Michel Erhart (Fig. 1). Despite considerable overpainting, it was sold at Christie's London in November 2010 for £58,850, on an estimate of £15,000–£25,000. 'There are two or three big American collectors and one major English private collector,' adds Mr Pampoulides, 'but otherwise they are few and far between.'

Mr Bijzet at Sotheby's London, however, offers a different picture. 'When I joined Sotheby's three years ago people said there was a stigma against wooden sculpture. We have had very good success concentrating our marketing on German and Austrian collectors.' The highest ever price for a piece of South German limewood sculpture was achieved at Sotheby's New York in 2008 for a large limewood carving of St Catherine by Tilman Riemenschneider. Dated c. 1505 and estimated at \$4m–\$6m, it sold for \$6.3m. More recently,

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