

**PRESS RELEASE**

# **HEAVEN ON DISPLAY. THE ALTENBERG ALTAR AND ITS IMAGERY**

**22 JUNE TO 25 SEPTEMBER 2016**

**Press preview: Tuesday, 21 June 2016, 11 am**

**Städel Museum, exhibition gallery of the Department of Prints and Drawings**

**Frankfurt am Main, 10 May 2016.** From 22 June to 25 September 2016, the Städel Museum is devoting a concentrated presentation of choice objects to the art of the Middle Ages. The exhibition “Heaven on Display” will feature one of the most striking church choir ensembles that have come down to us from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the Early Gothic *Altenberg Altar*, and its rich imagery. Apart from presenting the high altar retable – complete with a shrine cabinet, a statue of the Madonna and wings with painted depictions of the Passion and the Life of the Virgin – the show will also reunite the ensemble of extremely precious objects once surrounding the altar of the former convent of the Premonstratensian Sisters in Altenberg an der Lahn. Works of panel painting and sculpture as well as textile art and goldsmithery will bring a complex inter-referential system of imagery to life and impressively re-enact the interplay of various media in a specific choir ensemble of the early fourteenth century. The thirty-seven objects will be on view together for the first time since the convent’s secularization at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At its centre, the exhibition will feature the folding altarpiece that graced the high altar from around 1330 onward. Acquired for the Städel Museum in 1925, the wings of the altarpiece are among the earliest as well as the most outstanding works of German panel painting. Within the framework of the special exhibition, these key works of the Städel’s Old Masters collection will now be presented comprehensively in their historical, artistic and functional context. The show is based on the results of research carried out over several years as well as recent technological examinations of the retable conducted to gain insight into how the imagery of the high altar was viewed within, but also outside, the framework of worship services.

The exhibition is supported by the Kulturstiftung der Länder.

The spectrum of objects belonging to the *Altenberg Altar* and on display in the show is quite broad, encompassing reliquaries originally presented in the interior of the shrine cabinet, altar cloths of around 1330 embroidered with figural depictions and bearing patrons’ inscriptions, gold work and altar crosses of the thirteenth century,

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figural glass paintings from the early fourteenth-century choir window, etc. The survival of altar cloths belonging to an altar ensemble of the Early Gothic period is in itself unparalleled. Concurrently with the panel paintings, they were produced as embroidered pictorial compositions of imposing size and quality to decorate the altar table in front of the altarpiece. The exhibition will include two of these embroidered linen cloths and – in several original sections sent to Frankfurt from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and elsewhere especially for the show – also present the central apse window formerly displaying a pictorial cycle of its own behind the high altar retable.

The various objects of the convent church ensemble are interrelated both functionally and with regard to content. A depiction of an enthroned Madonna and Child being worshiped by the three Magi is not only found prominently placed in the central choir window's glass paintings dating as far back as ca. 1300, but is also present in the richly polychrome sculpture at the centre of the retable of 1330 and in the pictorial programmes of the embroidered altar cloths.

“The deliberate repetition of one and the same motif in various media and in different locations reinforced the key importance attributed to the figure depicted here – the Mother of God as the main patroness of the Altenberg convent”, explains Jochen Sander, the exhibition's curator. “Within that context, the high altar, with its embroidered, painted and sculpted images – but above all its salvation-bringing relics of saints – literally served the medieval viewer as a ‘display window’ of heaven.”

The wings of the altarpiece were hinged in such a way that the shrine could be completely opened or closed, but also partially opened, and thus permitted various ways of staging the central figure of the Virgin Mary and the reliquaries accompanying her. The presentation could be further varied through the choice of altar cloth – there were originally three – and its respective embroidered pictorial programme.

A 3D visualization and a control panel will enable the exhibition visitor to experience the synergy of the various objects of the choir from different simulated vantage points. An audio station will moreover explain how the altarpiece wings and the high altar were displayed on the various feast days of the Christian year.

The altar and other objects in the show remained in the Altenberg convent until its secularization, and in 1803 became the property of the princes of Solms-Braunfels. Many of them are therefore still in the holdings of the Braunfels castle museum today. In the nineteenth century, however, owing to the outstanding quality of the Altenberg church ensemble, there was a great amount of interest in the items, and many of

them made their way into prominent collections worldwide – from pre-eminent private collections and those of the city of Frankfurt, the Wartburg-Stiftung in Eisenach and the Bayerische Nationalmuseum in Munich to the Hermitage in St Petersburg and New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. The presentation at the Städel Museum will now reunite these objects, giving visitors an opportunity to experience them as a synthesis of the arts in their original context.

With the aid of the objects it showcases, the show will moreover offer a very personal impression of a saint who has undoubtedly been one of the most popular since the Middle Ages: Elizabeth of Hungary. Her youngest daughter Gertrude, entrusted to the care of the Altenberg sisters as a small child, became the convent’s superior at the age of twenty-one and played a decisive role in determining the church furnishings now on view in the exhibition. A tapestry executed around 1270 illustrates the life of Elizabeth and her husband, Landgrave Louis IV. This work may have been presented behind the altar mensa on high feast days before the installation of the altarpiece, and thus have been its textile predecessor. A second large tapestry with embroidered figures, likewise produced under Gertrude, was shown on days commemorating the family. The two hangings join with other objects from the convent – for example the arm reliquary of St Elizabeth, her silver jug and a ring allegedly once belonging to her husband – to provide insights into the story of Elizabeth of Hungary and her family. At the same time, the works bear witness to the far-reaching contacts cultivated by the landgrave’s daughter and thus to political history on the regional and international levels.

The special exhibition will moreover present the results of recent technical examinations of the retable paintings. These results and the textile works to be placed on view in the show will together provide entirely new insights and perspectives regarding the accessibility of the high altar imagery to medieval churchgoers and their reception at close range. The latest findings lead to the conclusion that the outsides of the altarpiece originally exhibited a decoration system comprising further depictions of saints and inscriptions that fit in seamlessly with the paintings on the wings. The sides and back, that is to say, were integral elements of the retable design and meant to be viewed at close quarters. The back of the altarpiece thus supplements the display side with an additional level of meaning and was apparently also conceived for extra-liturgical use, for example private devotions. These discoveries will create an entirely new foundation for the extremely suspenseful art-historical and cultural-historical discussion on the function of high altar imagery in the Middle Ages. The exhibition catalogue documents the recent findings. In addition, a publication to be released concurrently with the show – *Aus der Nähe betrachtet. Bilder am Hochaltar und ihre Funktionen im Mittelalter* (German edition), with the proceedings of the 2015 Passavant-Kolloquium at the Städel

Museum, edited and introduced by Jochen Sander, Stefanie Seeberg and Fabian Wolf and with texts by numerous scholars of many countries – will present further detailed results and research contributions on these themes. The findings of the X-ray fluorescence examination will also be published digitally in detail at [www.staedelmuseum.de/ausstellungen/altenberger-altar](http://www.staedelmuseum.de/ausstellungen/altenberger-altar), where they will be permanently accessible.

#### HEAVEN ON DISPLAY. THE ALTENBERG ALTAR AND ITS IMAGERY

**Curator:** Prof Dr Jochen Sander, deputy director and head of the collection of Dutch, Flemish and German painting before 1800, Städel Museum

**Exhibition dates:** 22 June to 25 September 2016

**Press preview:** Tuesday, 21 June 2016, 11 am

**Information:** [www.staedelmuseum.de](http://www.staedelmuseum.de), [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

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**Location:** Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

**Opening hours:** Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am – 6 pm, Thu, Fri 10 am – 9 pm

**Admission:** 14 EUR, reduced 12 EUR, family ticket 24 EUR; admission free for children under 12; groups (minimum 10 persons): reduced admission fee per person. Groups are required to book in advance by contacting us at +49(0)69-605098-200 or [info@staedelmuseum.de](mailto:info@staedelmuseum.de)

**Advance ticket sales online at:** [tickets.staedelmuseum.de](http://tickets.staedelmuseum.de)

**General guided tours of the exhibition:** Fri 7 pm, Sun 11 am. The price of the guided tour is included in the admission fee. The number of participants is limited; previous booking is not required.

**Catalogue:** The exhibition catalogue is being published by the Deutscher Kunstverlag and edited by Jochen Sander, with a foreword by Max Hollein and texts by Jochen Sander, Julia Schultz, Stefanie Seeberg, Christoph Krekel, Christiane Weber and Fabian Wolf. Bilingual edition in German and English language, 186 pages, 24.90 EUR (museum edition).

**Accompanying publication:** The exhibition will also be accompanied by the conference proceedings of the Passavant-Kolloquium of 13 and 14 November 2015, entitled *Aus der Nähe betrachtet. Bilder am Hochaltar und ihre Funktionen im Mittelalter*, edited by Jochen Sander, Stefanie Seeberg and Fabian Wolf, with contributions by Angela Kappeler, Stephan Kemperdick, Peter Knüvener, Christian N. Opitz, Victor M. Schmidt, Johannes Tripps, Gerhard Weilandt, Matthias Weniger, Jörg Widmaier and Susanne Wittekind; colour illustrations throughout, 192 pages, 19.90 EUR (German edition).

**Social Media:** The Städel Museum is communicating the exhibition on the social media with the hashtags #AltenbergerAltar and #Staedel.

**Supported by:** Kulturstiftung der Länder

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