**Grunewald, Matthias**

Matthias Grunewald, c.1475-1528, whose real name was Mathis Gothart, called Nithart or Neithardt, was a major figure in a generation of great northern German Renaissance painters that also included Albrecht Dьrer, Lucas Cranach, and Albrecht Altdorfer.

Grunewald remained relatively unknown until the 20th century; only about 13 of his paintings and some drawings survive. His present worldwide reputation, however, is based chiefly on his greatest masterpiece, the Isenheim Altarpiece (c.1513-15), which was long believed to have been painted by Durer.

Grunewald grew up in Wьrzburg near Nuremberg, and from 1501 until 1521 he was proprietor of a workshop in Seligenstadt. He traveled to Halle for commissions, and, although he was apparently a Protestant and a supporter of Martin Luther, he executed several commissions for two bishops of the Mainz diocese.

Grunewald's earliest datable work is the Mocking of Christ (1503; Alte Pinakothek, Munich), a colorful, vehemently expressive painting demonstrating his ability to create dazzling light effects. The painting depicts Christ blindfolded and being beaten by a band of grotesque men. The figures are thick-bodied, soft, and fleshy, done in a manner suggestive of the Italian High Renaissance. Elements of the work also show Grьnewald's assimilation of Dьrer, specifically his Apocalypse series. Different from High Renaissance idealism and humanism, however, are Grьnewald's uses of figural distortion to portray violence and tragedy, thin fluttering drapery, highly contrasting areas of light and shadow (CHIAROSCURO), and unusually stark and iridescent color. It is these elements, already in evidence in this early work, that Grьnewald was to develop into the masterful, individualistic style most fully realized in his Isenheim Altarpiece.

The Isenheim Altarpiece was executed for the hospital chapel of Saint Anthony's Monastery in Isenheim in Alsace and is now at the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, a nearby town. It is a carved shrine with two sets of folding wings and three views. The first, with the wings closed, is a Crucifixion showing a harrowingly detailed, twisted, and bloody figure of Christ on the cross in the center flanked, on the left, by the mourning Madonna being comforted by John the Apostle, and Mary Magdelene kneeling with hands clasped in prayer, and, on the right, by a standing John the Baptist pointing to the dying Savior. At the feet of the Baptist is a lamb holding a cross, symbol of the "Lamb of God" slaughtered for man's sins. The drama of the scene, symbolizing the divine and human natures of Christ, is heightened by the stark contrast between the vibrantly lit foreground and the dark sky and bleak landscape of low mountains in the background. When the outer wings are opened, three scenes of celebration are revealed: the Annunciation, the Angel Concert for Madonna and Child, and the Resurrection. Grьnewald's unsurpassed technique in painting colored light is epitomized in the figure of the rising Christ; his dramatic use of writhing forms in movement is also seen here in the figures of Christ, the arriving angel, and the Madonna.

**Grunewald's dark vision**

The final flowering of the Gothic came relatively late, in the work of the German artist, Matthias Grьnewald (his real name was Mathis Neithart, otherwise Gothart, 1470/80-1528). He was possibly an exact contemporary of Durer, but while Dьrer was deeply influenced by the Renaissance, Grьnewald ignored it in his choice of subject matter and style. Much of his work has not survived to this day, but even from the small amount that has come down to us, it is possible to see Grьnewald as one of the most powerful of all painters. No other painter has ever so terribly and truthfully exposed the horror of suffering, and yet kept before us, as Bosch does not, the conviction of salvation. His Crucifixion, part of the many-panelled Isenheim Altarpiece, is now kept in Colmar. It was commissioned for the Antoinite monastery at Isenheim and was intended to give support to patients in the monastic hospital. Christ appears hideous, his skin swollen and torn as a result of the flagellation and torture that He endured. This was understandably a powerful image in a hospital that specialized in caring for those suffering from skin complaints.

The more accessible Small Crucifixion engages us very directly with the actual death of the Saviour. The crucified Lord leans down into our space, crushing us, leaving us no escape, filling the painting with his agony. We are hemmed in by the immensities of darkness and mountain, alone with pain, forced to face the truth. The Old Testament often talks of a ``suffering servant'', describing him in Psalm 22 as ``a worm and no man'': it is of Grьnewald's Christ that we think. In this noble veracity, Gothic art reached an electrifying greatness.