

Citation style

Assaf Pinkus: Rezension von: Gregory C. Bryda: The Trees of the Cross. Wood As Subject and Medium in the Art of Late Medieval Germany, New Haven / London: Yale University Press 2023, in *sehepunkte* 26 (2026), Nr. 3 [15.03.2026], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2026/03/40549.html>



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Gregory C. Bryda: *The Trees of the Cross*

In an impressive crescendo of his ongoing intellectual endeavor, Gregory Bryda's *The Trees of the Cross: Wood as Subject and Medium in the Art of Late Medieval Germany* offers a fascinating reading of the complexity of the uses of wood during the late Middle Ages. The study bridges the cultural practices related to wood as both material and idea within and outside the church - literally and conceptually. In late medieval Germany, wood was everywhere: in sanctuaries, altarpieces, crucifixes, choir screens, sacrament houses, cabinets, choir stalls, as well as in the wild and cultivated nature around the church and woven into the fabric of the cities' crafts and manufacturing. The book explores the centrality of wood in religious art and folklore in late medieval Germany not only as a physical material in artworks and as a religious symbol (particularly in relation to the Cross), but also as a key element in rural-agricultural life and the interrelation between seasonal rituals and devotional practices. In its multicultural and multifunctional usage, wood appears in this book as a mediator between the Church, nature, rituals and folklore in complex - and at times even contradictory - practices. The veneration of natural, vegetal materials - as well as certain forms of 'virginal' agricultural landscapes - was initially regarded as pagan, but was later reconfigured and reinterpreted as a form of spiritual conversion and sanctification of nature itself. Through such confluences, the persuasive power of wood emerges as a testimony to the relationship between the sacred world of the sanctuary and the profane world out in the fields. Bryda significantly expands the scope of inquiry into the visual and material culture of the period, also offering new insights into the geography of art; the book embeds the artworks within the everyday life and explores the anthropological relations that underpinned them; ultimately, it offers a fresh and nuanced interpretation of both well-known and lesser-known artworks through a deep investigation into the multiple meanings of wood.

Wood and the diverse vegetal and greenery motifs in artworks gained their novel meaning, it goes without saying, from the holiness of the Tree of the Cross, combined with the late medieval devotion to the Living Tree. At the same time, these motifs partook in a much broader epistemic world of agricultural and folkloristic life, namely the seasonal rites of renewal, especially in spring and autumn, and the liturgy that unfolded concurrently. In that way, tensions between sacred and profane calendars were mitigated. To develop these complex ideas, the first chapter of the book focuses on the Holy Cross, as a nonhuman saint, showing how the Church integrated wood into religious practice as a way of asserting control over the natural world. In a bold and original move, Bryda analyzes previously neglected works of art - often dismissed as "rude", "rural", or "low" - in relation to a range of cultural practices, including agriculture and farming, popular devotional guides, pseudo-scientific treatises (including those related to magic), as well as local legends and myths. In the May celebrations of the Invention of the Cross, wooden crucifixes were taken out into nature in order to imbue vegetation with the potential of divine intervention; in turn, this meant blooming and guaranteed prosperity for the cities. The discussion follows many neglected objects such as vegetal crucifixes that miraculously appeared within trees and other sacred images that manifested themselves in natural materials. These not only echoed the legend of the True Cross but also adapted it to the local landscape - thereby spiritually enacting and sacralizing that very landscape.

The second chapter examines springtime rituals that were absorbed into Christian frameworks and domesticated. Especially illuminating is the discussion of the symbolism of wood, linking the healing powers of Christ and the saints with images of trees and plants, while also exploring the Church's role in promoting nature as a source of healing beyond formal liturgical contexts. While more conservative ecclesiastics objected to the glorification

of nature, German mystics assimilated secular rituals related to rebirth and renewal to facilitate medieval people's understanding of the world around them. The discussion of medieval maypoles and their relation to tree cults demonstrates Bryda's ability to move beyond traditional medieval art history into the realm of cultural criticism. The third chapter delves into the therapeutic effects of greenery, derived from the Living Tree of the Cross. Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece is the natural centerpiece of the chapter, already beautifully discussed in Bryda's *Art Bulletin* article (2018). The author explores the emergence of the *Geistliche Maien*, originating primarily in female monastic communities. This genre included garden or horticultural allegories, often in the context of the Passion, which formed a theological foundation for works like the Isenheim Altarpiece. Botanical, medical, and Christological motifs converged to deliver a message of healing and redemption. The image of the bleeding Christ was likened to a wounded tree oozing resin and turpentine - substances that were not only symbolic but also used in monastic healing practices in Isenheim itself. The Spiritual Woods provided a rich vegetal vocabulary through which bodily violence could be articulated - both textually and visually - thus framing the violence inflicted upon Christ on the Cross in terms of organic suffering and transformation. While the previous chapters focused on springtime vegetation, the third chapter moves forward to early summer herbs. Until now, scholarship has primarily focused on the depiction of Christ's mutilated body on the Cross, often overlooking how Grünewald - like late medieval mystical texts - employed the semantic associations of living materials. The last, fourth chapter considers how writers and artists associated autumnal trees with Christian liturgy and the wine industry, focusing on the example of the Rothenburg Holy Blood Altarpiece, enshrining within it Tilman Riemenschneider's Last Supper.

This masterpiece already formed the core of the brilliant anthology *Riemenschneider in Situ* (2022), which Bryda co-edited with Katherine M. Boivin. Here, Bryda pinpoints the less discussed wooden frame of the work by Erhard Harschner. Rather than seeing the bare, monochromatic wood as an expression of aesthetic restraint, as previously assumed, Bryda argues that it was intended to convey the spiritual and the miraculous. Made entirely of unpainted wood, the material alludes to the relic of the Holy Blood (a miracle that took place in the town), to the blood of Christ, and to (Eucharistic) wine as a product of the land surrounding the church - all mediated through the sacred materiality of the Wood of the Cross. Bryda argues that the two artists embraced the woodenness of the material to articulate the cyclical connection between vine and tree, Cross and wine. Hence, the carved vines framing the altarpiece link liturgy to the agricultural cycle of planting, harvesting, and winemaking.

Rather than concentrating the book's intellectual tension, the short epilogue releases the earlier analytical energy. It briefly addresses the criticism directed at the use of trees and plants in religious and folkloric rituals following the Reformation. Arguing that devotion focused on wood and plants encouraged superstition and distracted believers from the true meaning of the sacraments, reformers tried to restrict such imagery to a more abstract, figurative role grounded strictly in Scripture - a point that is, arguably, almost self-evident. One might instead ask why other arboreal motifs and imagery - such as the Green Man or Leaf Man - were never rejected by the church. In what ways do such images that were not censured attest to ecological changes in the Middle Ages and to the ever-changing relations between man and nature? How might the motif register - and possibly mediate - the widespread process of deforestation that shaped the German- and French-speaking regions between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries?

The Trees of the Cross is a tour de force of Bryda's scholarship - a beautiful study not only in its content but also in its exceptionally rich linguistic form, though at times the phrasing could be simplified to facilitate the reading of highly complex ideas. Bryda's chain of arguments is sometimes overwhelming, and it is not always clear whether his springboard is the visual evidence or whether the artwork is merely instrumental to the validation of

anthropological observations. But this is, at the same time, the persuasive power of his writing. Bryda's study has already been praised in several reviews as a complement to Michael Baxandall's *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* ; yet it goes significantly further, both in terms of the corpus of objects and in methodological scope. Bryda's book is a true desideratum for the field and a genuine game changer. All that remains is to hope that this is but the first of many groundbreaking studies to come.