

Choir Stalls and their Workshops

Choir Stalls and their Workshops:

*Proceedings of the Misericordia
International Colloquium 2016*

Edited by

Anja Seliger and Willy Piron

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ben</i>	Benedictines
<i>C</i>	Cistercians
<i>Cath</i>	Cathedral
<i>Dep</i>	Department
<i>G</i>	Geselle (journeyman)
<i>J</i>	Junge (young unskilled employee)
<i>M</i>	Meister (master)
<i>MrG</i>	Meistergeselle (master journeyman)
<i>N.B.</i>	Notes
<i>N seats</i>	Number of seats
<i>N sets</i>	Number of sets
<i>Nor</i>	Norbertines
<i>Par</i>	Parish church
<i>R.C.</i>	Regular Canons
<i>S.C.</i>	Secular Canons

INTRODUCTION

ANJA SELIGER AND WILLY PIRON

Choir stalls represent one of the most important and complex artistic assignments that could be commissioned by medieval cathedrals, monastic churches, and even parishes. Due to their highly complex image programs research on choir stalls has focused primarily on iconographic aspects and formal and stylistic analysis. Religious and profane iconography, as starting points for investigations of the artistic design, have mainly been studied in relation to other artistic elaborations, such as book painting, and their proliferation both in the Middle Ages and more recent times. Additionally, the research of *Misericordia International*, an international multidisciplinary network for broad-based research on choir stalls, was mainly focused on iconography.

Symptomatic of this approach – and not only restricted to choir stalls but in general – is that “art historians traditionally focus on the finished work, yet attention to the creative process of making allows us to consider how medieval builders and artisans constructed monuments, made objects, and planned workflow for large-scale projects. Furthermore, this line of inquiry allows us to consider spatial planning and haptic encounters.”¹

In regard to choir stalls, complex questions arise: If inscriptions give names, then whose? Is the executive craftsman himself listed, or is it the contracting entrepreneur, who stands as a substitute for his workshop? Or perhaps the sculptor who was responsible for figurative sculpture is also to be conceived therein? In any case, it is certain that choir stalls could not be produced by a single individual artist; rather they were created by a group of craftsmen. What division of labour took place in the medieval workshop? And how can we reconstruct the works of a workshop, apart from stylistic criticism?

¹ Quoted from the call for papers for the session “Material processes and making in medieval art” of the latest International Congress on Medieval Studies (ICMS) in Kalamazoo (12–15 May 2016), which was devoted to the material economic mechanisms of art production.

Studies dedicated to choir stall workshops and their working conditions are absolute exceptions. One of these exceptions is Barbara Rommé's article on the Sürlin workshop in Ulm (Germany); her research answered many social and economic questions on the basis of tectonic comparisons of various stalls. Rommé's analysis of the methods of production has shown that the younger Sürlin carpentry workshop was already structured at the beginning of the sixteenth century in such a way that it was able to manufacture stalls in a kind of small series production.² Whether and to what extent these more efficient forms of work influenced the demands of consumers with less financial power for representative furnishings and founding behaviour in general is only one of the remaining discussion points.

Regarding other European workshops, information about their working conditions and the work flow was mentioned more incidentally at the edge of monographic studies or published sporadic in the frame of articles.³ Research on choir stalls benefits from the intensive exchange within *Misericordia International*, with scientists of neighbouring disciplines opening new interfaces between disciplines and subjects of investigation, and giving new impetus to the exploration of choir stalls. The basis for scientific exchange is the bi-annual international conference.

To remedy the relative lack of research in this area, it was a logical consequence to dedicate the latest *Misericordia International* colloquium to the workshops. Held from 23 to 26 June 2016 at the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-University in Greifswald, it was the very first conference to focus on the workshop context of the choir stalls; it covered an obvious need for research and therefore included much hitherto unknown research material, and additional first results based on initial research. All approaches were characterised by considering the production of choir stalls as a holistic process.

It is a great pleasure for us to present the contributions to the public as an impetus to a broader and a more comprehensive knowledge on the topic

² Barbara ROMMÉ, "Die Chorgestühle von Jörg Sürlin d.J. Produktionsformen einer spätgotischen Schreinerwerkstatt in Ulm", *Jahrbuch der staatlichen Kunstsammlung in Baden-Württemberg*, 27 (1990), 52–72, 70. The younger Sürlin, when signing his works, always wrote his name with a "ü", in contrast to his father who preferred Syrlin with a "y".

³ The most influential article is Thomas COOMANS, "From Flanders to Scotland: The Choir Stalls of Melrose Abbey in the Fifteenth Century" in: Teryl N. Kinder (ed.) *Perspectives for an Architecture of Solitude. Essays on Cistercians, Art and Architecture in Honour of Peter Fergusson* (Medieval Church Studies, vol. 11; Studia et Documenta, vol. 13), Turnhout 2004, 235-252.

of workshops. Our sincere thanks go to all the conference speakers, who contributed greatly to the success of the meeting with their enthusiasm and discussion. We regret that due to the very tight publication timetable, unfortunately not all of the speakers could submit their texts to this volume. We have therefore added one additional contribution to the conference proceedings.

The chapters in this volume represent the wide range of the conference's topics of the workshop and art production. In several case studies the colloquium in Greifswald investigated the substantive and economic mechanisms of medieval and early modern art production and the process of manufacturing choir stalls. The papers explore questions such as the role of migrant craftsmen in the merger of regional characteristics, as well as the mechanisms for the spread of new styles and techniques such as marquetry, and which workshops they mediated. The new material also examines various collaborations between carpenters, sculptors and painters during work in progress. New archival materials are presented that answer business-related questions and illuminate the problem of art centre and periphery. An often-discussed phenomenon is the relation between travelling craftsmen and both monastery and urban immobile workshops. Technical drawings and models still play an important role in carpentry and cabinet-making today, just as they did in the process of choir stall manufacturing.

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, although only little known, is rich in the number of choir stalls and could be described as a flowering choir stall landscape at the beginning of the fourteenth century as well as in the later Middle Ages. The articles on Doberan and Anklam testify to the fact that Pomerania has always attracted innovative and well-skilled craftsmen.

A section on stone chairs explores the relationship of choir stalls to related seating furnishings such as sedilia, and examines differences in the attachment of the iconographic image programs. An aspect of choir stalls that has never been thoroughly researched is the inscriptions. Choir stalls are, of course, not situated in a vacuum, but are linked to a wide variety of clients' conditions and requirements. Therefore, the question of the role of contracting entities and other influences and demands appears in all investigations.

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Berlin and Nijmegen, Winter 2016/17

PART I:
WORKSHOP PRACTICES

GETTING THE IDEA: THE ROLE OF DRAWINGS IN THE MANUFACTURING PROCESS OF CHOIR STALLS

ANJA SELIGER

Introduction

Due to their highly complex imaging systems, choir stalls are categorised among the most important and complex furniture in medieval churches. The artistic challenge of creating new stalls needed to begin long before the first tree was cut down and the manufacturing process started. Both client and craftsman needed to make several decisions: on general aspects such as size, number of seats and overall shape, but also on the design of details and the iconographic program. The purchasing client – normally a monastic congregation, a chapter or the parish council – and the craftsman might have individual conflicting requirements, ideas, and maybe even a different preconception of how the stalls should look. Their initial mental images of the finished product might vary considerably, so it was important to transform these different points of view into an acceptable compromise.

There were several means by which a design could be created that would be agreeable to all parties. Sometimes client and craftsman visited existing choir stalls of a similar design to those planned,¹ the intention of these visits was to clarify requirements and to avoid misunderstandings.

¹ For example, the churchwardens of Saint Nicolai in Kalkar and the craftsman “Kistemeker” Henrik Bernts from Wesel went to Cleves in order to visit the stalls of the Franciscan priory there, which would serve *ad exemplum* as a model for the new set. Guido DE WERD, *Die St. Nikolaikirche zu Kalkar* (München/Berlin: DKV, 1983), 26. Account books from St Martin in Memmingen contain records of payments for travelling in advance of the fabrication of new stalls. See Günther BAYER, *Memmingen* (Memmingen, 1983), 19.

Moreover, building a set of stalls *ad exemplum* (or, in modern terms, copying) was common practice in medieval art production, and it was a valid way to demonstrate a certain level of aspiration. A second design technique was to build models, either full size or small scale, before the manufacturing process was initiated. The principal advantage of such prototypes was their haptic, three-dimensional form, which, when posed at the intended place, established an authentic test environment.²

Somewhere in between these two modes, and by far the easiest practice for specifying a design, was a drawing: an initial rough draft followed by a more detailed or final draft, similar to a technical drawing. From the examination of written sources we can deduce that drawings were central and regularly used in the production process of medieval choir stalls, either with or functioning as models. Despite their importance, they are little known and under-investigated within the scope of choir stalls research. A survey of the research material reveals that, in comparison to the manifold choir stalls which remained *in situ*, medieval drafts of choir stalls are very few and far between.

In this chapter I will draw attention to three drawings dated to the thirteenth century: two sketches in the portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2], and the so-called Reims Palimpsest [Fig. 3]. None of them shows an entire choir stall, but rather individual components, the reasons for which will be explained in the following investigation. In addition I will examine the only drawing showing a whole seating furniture, dated to the late fifteenth century. It shows a *sedilia*, or *Vespertolium*, consisting of three seats for the priests who celebrated mass at the main altar [Fig. 4].

The size of all drawing types could range from small scale to full size, although no examples of the latter have survived the passage of time. The functions of the drawings examined in this chapter are in many ways equivalent to medieval architectural elevations, but as the number of both maintained drawings and archival sources about their use is very poor – especially from the earlier period – we cannot assign to them one single function. As a result, a number of interpretive problems occur, problems that I will attempt to clarify in the course of the following pages.

The use of drawings in written sources

Written documents confirm the important role of drawings, and occasionally elucidate their usage. One of these archival sources belongs to the Utrecht

² For more information on models, see Angela Glover's chapter in this volume.

Cathedral in the Netherlands. Master Jan Gossaert van Mabuse, the designer of the new choir, was paid in 1522 for two drawings: a small-scale design, probably on paper, and a full-size drawing on wood.³ The full-size drawing was definitely a working drawing, used directly in the workshop or on the construction site. The Utrecht source gives the reason why these working drawings were maintained: the craftsmen cut the wooden panel along the outlines of the drawn stall and then used it as template for all identical components. Most likely the panels were reused for another set of stalls, as was the case for the group of work in Stendal (Germany). They were usually only destroyed once they were no longer needed or once their condition had deteriorated.

The Utrecht source gives us the additional information that Master Jan was called *pictor* – not “joiner” or “carpenter”, as was common at that time in German-speaking regions. This fact may mirror a changing workshop practice at the outset of early modern times, characterised by a stricter division of working fields. The design was developed by an artist: carpenters and carvers were not involved in the artistic process. And although the carvings were executed under the leadership of Jan Gossaert, the manufacturing process failed due to the new style, unfamiliar to the craftsmen and compounded by the high artistic level postulated by the artist.⁴ This shows that it was necessary to develop the design in conjunction with the construction process; both artist and craftsman needed to work together in order to create the new stalls successfully.

The *Vespertolium*

Within the practice of the fifteenth century, the so-called *Visierung* was the most important drawing. In German the vernacular term *Visierung* indicates large-scale elevations of architectural structures or seating furniture consisting of only a couple of seats. The technical term also indicates “the final design, executed by the artist (who is in this case the carpenter, N.B. author) and approved by the client, which was to be followed closely by the artist and his assistants during the execution of the work itself”.⁵ By this definition the *Visierung* was usually a part of the contract.⁶

³ W. H. VROOM, “Jan Gossaert van Mabuse als ontwerper van koorbanken in de Dom van Utrecht”, *Oud Holland*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (1964), 172–75, 173.

⁴ VROOM 1964, p. 175. This may indicate a first glimmering of the separation of the arts from the *artes mechanicae*, the crafts.

⁵ Robert W. SCHELLER, *Exemplum, Model-Book Drawings and the Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (ca. 900 – ca. 1470)* (Amsterdam: University

The best-known correlation of contract and *Visierung* is probably that documented for Ulm Minster and the well-known workshop of the Syrlin family. According to the contract for the choir stalls in the parish church of Ulm, which Jörg Syrlin the elder signed in June 1469, a drawing had to be submitted in advance. This “*visierung, so er denne in furgehalten geben*”⁷ was the basis for the manufacturing process. Unfortunately this drawing is no longer in existence, so the choir stalls in Ulm are not central to this investigation.

A second example also related to Ulm Minster and the Syrlin family is a *Visierung* of Jörg Syrlin the younger, called the *Vespertolium* [Fig. 4]. This *Visierung* is now preserved in the civic archives of Ulm.⁸ It shows seating furniture for priests and deacons to be used during certain phases of worship when they were not celebrating mass at the main altar. The drawing of the *Vespertolium* is finished in brown ink on two sheets of parchment, with an overall size of 115cm by 28cm. The inscription at the front of the central seat dates it to the year 1475, but there is no signature.

The body of the seat was constructed on a hexagonal floor plan crowned with a canopy and three slender spires. The seat is frontal barred by a parapet. Each seat is built into a deep niche with figurines on its back panels. The one in the centre represents a priest from the Old Testament, with the outer back panels each depict an apostle.

Due to the contract for the *Vespertolium*, which explicitly mentions this *Visierung*, older research attributed the drawing to Jörg Sürilin the younger,⁹ who manufactured the seat and completed the work by 1484

Press Amsterdam, 1995), 10, emphasises that in Italy the terms *modello* and *esempio* are used with the same meaning as *Visierung*.

⁶ Günther BINDING: *Baubetrieb im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag, 1993), 206. Drawing studies could include elevations of whole structures, and details as well as copies of other drawings (floor plans and elevations), as is assumed for five sheets in Basel and two others in Vienna associated with the stalls of 1517 in the Fugger chapel at Augsburg, Germany. See Tilman FALK, *Katalog der Zeichnungen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im Kupferstichkabinett Basel*. Vol. 1 (Basel: Schwabe & Co. AG Verlag, 1979), Kat.-Nr. 697–701, 161f. and plate 146. Thanks to Angela Glover for this reference.

⁷ Hans ROTT, *Alt-Schwaben und die Reichsstädte*, Quellen und Forschungen zur südwestdeutschen und schweizerischen Kunstgeschichte im XI. und XVI. Jahrhundert, Vol. 2, (Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder, 1934), 51: “*do er denne arbeiten wirdet, der visierung, so er denne in furgehalten geben*”.

⁸ Ulm Civic Archive, Inv.-Nr. 18.

⁹ The younger Sürilin, when signing his works, always write his name with a “ü”, in contrast to his father who prefers Syrlin with a “y”. Barbara ROMMÉ, *Serielle oder nur Massenhafte Produktion? Rationalisierungstendenzen in der Kunst der*

seven years after the design of the furniture was drawn. In later years the question of attribution was reopened, with the result that Syrlin the elder may also be considered as potential author of the drawing. A co-operation between father and son is also possible. The main argument of this attribution to the father is the drawing technique, which corresponds very well to Syrlin's architectural drawings and the *Visierung* of a retable, characterised by hair-thin lines.¹⁰ In addition, deep niches in the dorsal are defining characteristics in both the *Vespertolium* and the choir stalls, finished in 1474; therefore, the drawing is assigned to the initial design of the Münster furnishings. However, as this drawing technique was very common in workshops of this time, authorship cannot be definitively assigned. In addition, further formal characteristics show the hand of the young Sürilin, who adopted new stylistic developments such as heavily overcut gables and pinnacles curved into the space, which also includes the use of tree-like gables and pinnacles.¹¹ Although this chapter is not the best place to settle the question of attribution definitively, the most logical conclusion to draw from the collected evidence is that the drawing seems to be a collaboration between father and son.

Returning to the question of function, the *Vespertolium* is a *Visierung* in its proper sense. As pellucid as possible, the *Visierung* illustrates the spatial arrangement of the components. The top or slight bird's-eye-view of pedestal, parapet and bench indicates that these components are in the lower part; their overlapping indicates its depth and that the components are located in different layers. The figurines are also shown in slight top view since they are in the lower zone. Deeper spatial parts are marked by shadows, characterised by short parallel lines as though they have been used extensively in the canopy.

Unfortunately it is hard to prove to what degree the drawing and seat match, since the *Vespertolium* was destroyed in 1766. The only evidence

Spätgotik und Renaissance, in Ann MORATH-FROMM, Gerhard WEILANDT (eds.), *Unter der Lupe, neue Forschungen zu Skulptur und Malerei des Hoch- und Spätmittelalters*. FS für Hans Westhoff zum 60. Geb. (Stuttgart: Südt. Verl.-Ges., 2000), 277–90, p. 279.

¹⁰ Johann Josef BÖKER et al., *Architektur der Gotik, Ulm und Donauraum. Ein Bestandskatalog der mittelalterlichen Architekturzeichnungen aus Ulm, Schwaben und dem Donauegebiet* (Salzburg: Wien Müri Salzmann, 2011), 109 N° 37, assigns the drawing to Syrlin the elder. See also Barbara ROMMÉ, “Das Schaffen von Jörg Sürilin dem Jüngeren”, *Ulm und Oberschwaben*, Vol. 49 (1994), 61–110, p. 69.

¹¹ The sedilia in the monastery church in Blaubeuren, executed by Sürilin the younger in 1495/96, shows similar characteristics. It is also possible that he copied the *Vespertolium*. The choir stalls, which are a few years older than the sedilia, already show more developed ornamentation.

for the realia in terms of manufactured furniture is an old photograph showing three wooden statues [Fig. 5], reused in another piece of furniture and destroyed in World War II. The photograph shows that the overall structure of the figurines was determined by the *Visierung*,¹² but artistic freedom – or, more precisely, iconographic freedom – was still possible. The side figurines planned as apostles have been executed as prophets. Also the formal composition of the central figure differs from the drawing: the priest holds a banderole and indicates the inscription with his left hand, instead of having empty hands held in front of the body ready for prayer, as was planned in the drawing. This iconographic program refers strictly to a typological juxtaposition. But while in the drawing the typological idea is represented by images from Old and New Testament, in the wooden *Vespertorium* the anti-typological part has been transferred to the minster clergy by reducing the auxiliary figures to the Old Testament.

Thanks to the figurines it is possible to reconstruct the size of the wooden *Vespertorium*: the scale of 1:12 means that the overall height of the piece of furniture was 12.5m.¹³ The huge canopy and its spires, which reach as high as the vault springers, are the artistic highlight within the liturgical furnishings. An idea of the overall impression of the *Vespertorium* can be given by another furnishing which was also manufactured by Jörg Sürin the younger in the year 1496: the sedilia in the Cistercian monastery in Blaubeuren, Germany [Fig. 6], which, although it is not comparable in height, also mediates the main properties and reflects the overwhelming charisma that was exuded by the *Vespertorium*.

Villard de Honnecourt

Of a totally different nature but no less impressive are the drawings of the choir stalls in the so-called portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt, now preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, MS Fr 19093. As they have been reprinted several times in related key literature they are probably the best-known drawings of choir stalls.¹⁴ The portfolio consists

¹² Gerhard WEILANDT, “Der wiedergefundene Vertrag Jörg Sylrins des Älteren über das Hochaltarretabel des Ulmer Münsters”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (1996), 437–60, p. 455.

¹³ BÖKER et al. 2011, p. 109.

¹⁴ Examples are: Walter LOOSE, *Die Chorgestühle des Mittelalters*, Heidelberg kunstgeschichtliche Abhandlungen, vol. 1 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1931), Tafel 37 & 38; Martin URBAN, “Lemma Chorgestühl”, in *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, Otto SCHMITT (ed.), vol. III (1954), Sp. 515, Fig. 2; Hannelore

of a collection of thirty-three parchments showing a wide range of architectural elevations, designs for figurines, ornaments, animals, and three drawings of components belonging to choir stalls. The average size of the parchments is 24cm by 16cm.

The drawings consists of two elevations of decorated stall-ends (called *poppet* by Villard), a large and rich one on folio 29v covering almost the whole sheet, and a smaller, simple one on folio 27v supplemented by a section of an intermediate divider of the choir stall seats.¹⁵

All components are drawn with light sepia ink and then gone over with a darker sepia to reinforce the lines. Selected lines such as the vertical and main horizontal lines (which indicate for example the substructure or the level of the *accoudoir*), are executed with drypoint as preliminary drawings. In addition, extensive use of preliminary drawing with graphite and reinforcement with darker ink can be observed on folio 29v.

The shape of the stall-ends is based on an upright rectangle, divided into a two-part composition: the lower register is filled with architectural elements such as blind gemel niches and attached columns. An architrave supports two semi-circular stems fusing in the centre of the design. All components are characterised by a more or less extensive combination of floral elements. Leaves and berries cover the volute as well as the knob (*appiu-main*) on the *parclose*.

The scientific community is united in judging that the stall-end on folio 29r is a masterpiece and “by far the most detailed non-figurative drawing in the portfolio”.¹⁶ Furthermore, the open leaf-volutes are called “among the most successful and sensitive design of the Middle Ages”.¹⁷ This shape was used widely during the whole of the thirteenth century and later, especially in the Lower Rhine region.

Although older research named the portfolio *lodge-book*, which implies that it was not only drawn but also used by architects, it is not known whether Villard was an architect, a carpenter or a woodworker. We

SACHS, *Mittelalterliches Chorgestühl* (Leipzig: Köhler & Amelang, 1964), Fig. 1–3.

¹⁵ Folio 27v. also contains a figurative drawing covering one side of the parchment in full height.

¹⁶ Carl F. BARNES Jr., *The Portfolio of Villard de Honnecourt (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr 19093): A New Critical Edition and Color Facsimile*, with a glossary by Stacey L. Han. Farnham (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 186.

¹⁷ Francios BUCHER, *Architector. The Lodge Books and Sketchbooks of medieval Architects*. Vol. 1 (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 158.