



**PAINTER OF THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION**  
**LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER**

**ST NICHOLAS' ALTARPIECE IN**  
**GRIMMA (GERMANY)**

*Lucas Cranach the Elder is one of the greatest painters of the German Renaissance. With his workshop, this great friend of Luther executed about 400 works, among which the large St Nicholas' Altarpiece in Grimma of the year 1519.*

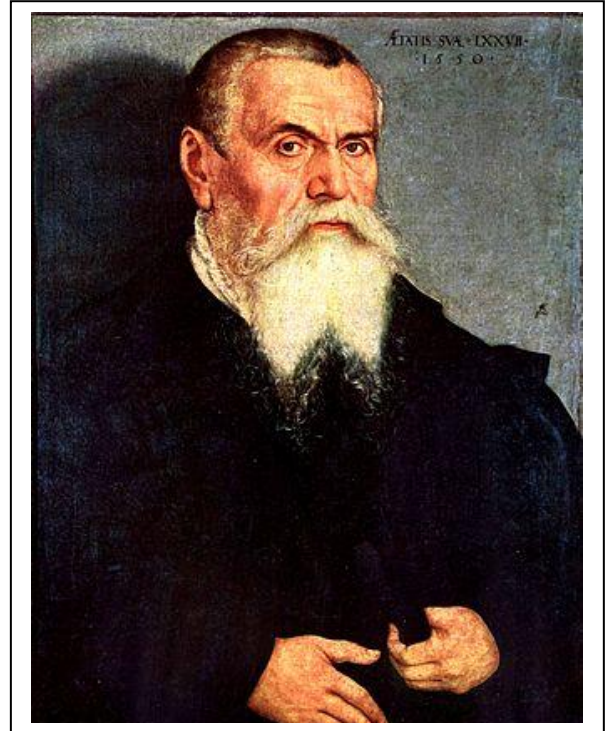
Unfortunately, about the origins of this Altarpiece we have only this scanty news: "According to the Crell's Chronicle St Nicholas' Altarpiece was executed in the year 1519 and cost 220 fl." Afterwards, almost a "**damnatio memoriae**", we have to wait the XIX century to find few other news. Recently (2004-2007), the Altarpiece has been restored by Dörte Busch and Dirk Jacob, who have described the restoration proceedings in a scientific review (*Beiträge*), that I received by our friend prof. Wilhelm Forst.



# CRANACH THE ELDER THE LUTHERAN PAINTER

Painter and engraver, among the best interpreters of German Renaissance, Lucas Cranach was born in Kronach in 1472 and died in Weimar October 16 1553.

The paintings of the beginning of XVI century make him one of the major representatives of the Danubian school, that, born in Austria, spread rapidly in Bavaria and throughout all Germany. The artistic novelty of this school was in proposing a new relationship man-nature. Unlike Middle Age art, this school was very sensible to the detail and even to strange aspects. Lucas Cranach joined this movement after 1498 when, leaving his father's workshop, travelled along the Danubian valleys, showing great interest in humanistic milieus.



However he did not break completely his links with the late-gothic tradition. This way he could pass very easily from religious subjects (St Jerome, 1502; Crucifixion, 1503; the Rest during the travel to Egypt, 1504) to the mythological ones, till the landscapes full of movement and curious figures. Later, joining the Lutheran spirituality, he added many current themes to glorify the Protestant Reformation and to criticize the Catholic Hierarchy.

After he moved to Wittenberg in 1505 he became the court painter of the powerful elector of Saxony Friedrich the Wise, who later became the protector of Luther. Little by little the landscape, that before was the main interest in his artistic feeling, became less central, but took a decorative function to the benefit of very expressive human figures, whose clothes were painted with particular attention.

Around 1509 he knew and became friend of Luther. After the break with the Roman Church, this latter opposed the iconoclastic ideas of Andrew Carlostadio



and allowed Cranach and his workshop (including now the sons Lucas Cranach the Younger and Hans) to continue their work at the service of the Reformation. He was chosen for example to illustrate the Bible that Luther had translated into German.

He held various public offices, like mayor and judge. He is known to have sentenced to death many women under the charge of being witches.

Personally or with his workshop he executed about 400 paintings. The most important among them are the following:

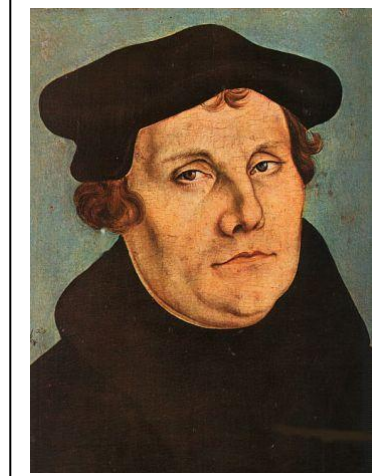
*Resting of the sacred Family*, 1504, Berlin,  
*St Catherine's martyrdom*, 1506, Budapest  
*Christ and the adulteress*, 1515, Naples,  
*St Eustace*, 1515 circa, Wien,  
*Mary Auxiliatrice*, 1520, Innsbruck,  
*Adam and Eve*, 1528, Florence,  
*Portrait of Luther and his wife*, 1529, Florence,  
*Venus and Cupidus*, 1529, London,  
*Judith with Oloferne's head*, 1530, Wien  
*Three Graces*, 1531, Louvre, Paris,  
*Crucifixion with the Centurion's conversion*, 1536, Washington

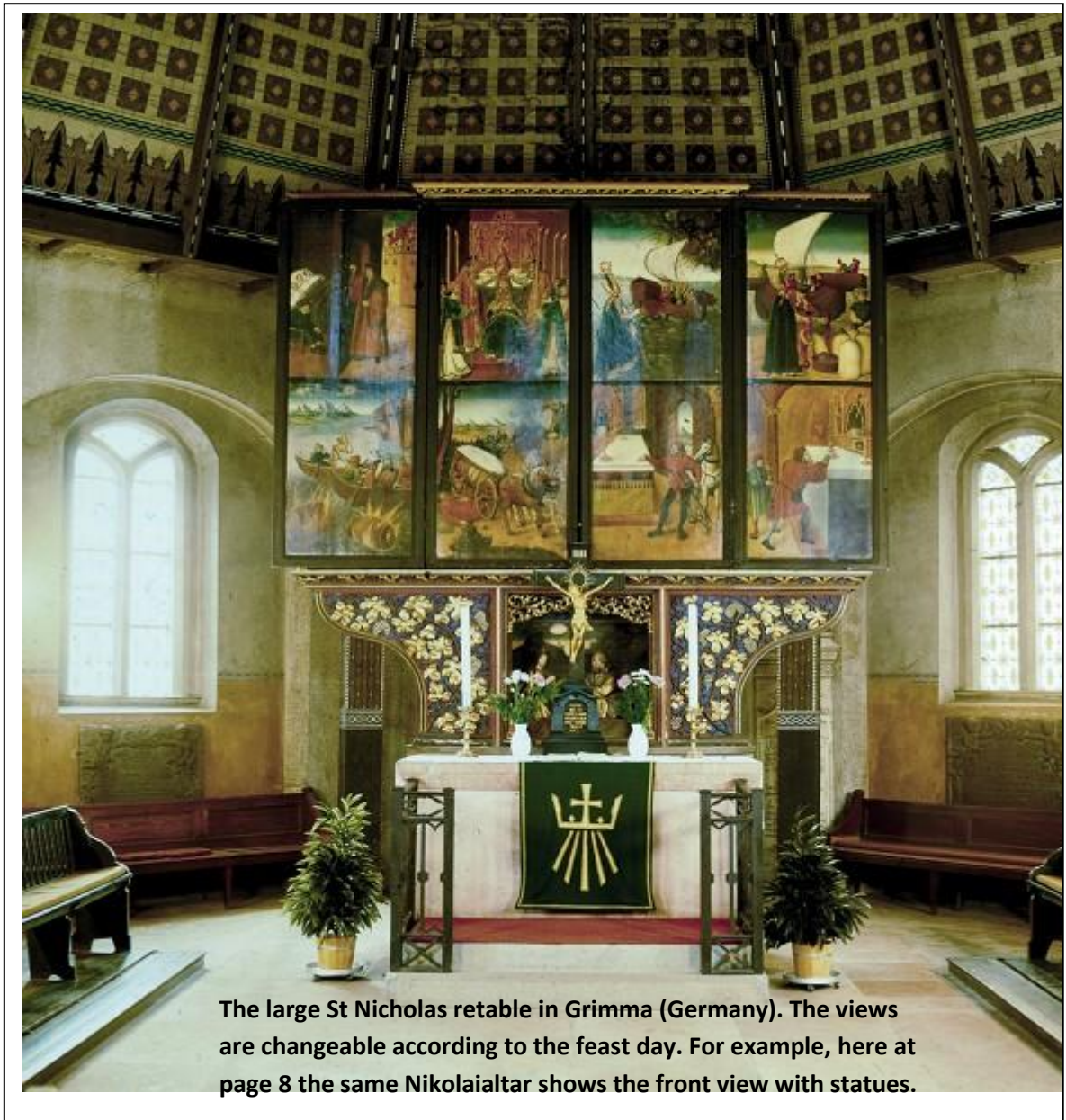
*Portrait of Luther and Melancthon*, 1543, Florence



**Above:** Differences between the true Religion of Christ and the false Church of the Antichrist. On the left: The Lutheran Preaching inspired by God and centered upon two sacraments, Baptism and Eucharist. On the right: the Roman Catholic Preaching inspired by the Devil. Through many sacraments it is all concerned in making money

**Here at right:** Martin Luther





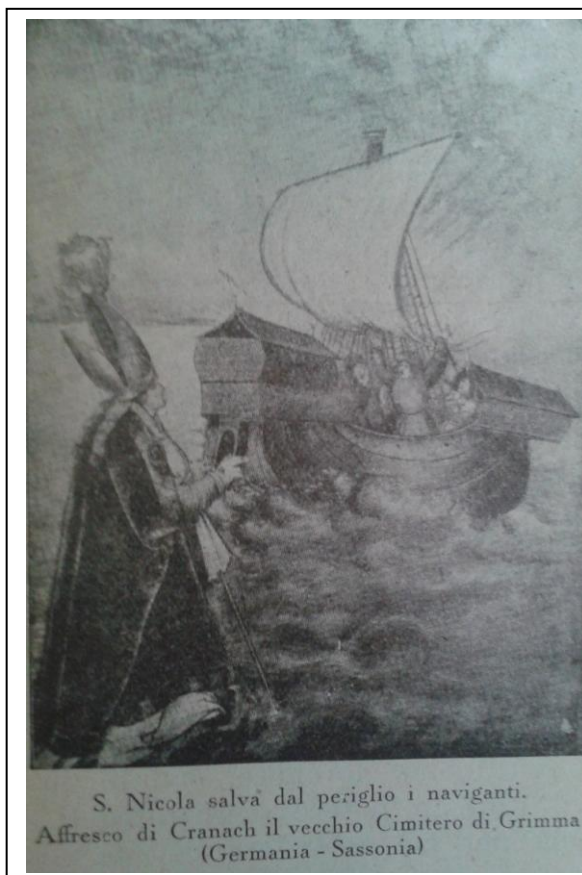
The restorers of the Nikolaialtar in Grimma: Doerte Busch and Dirk Jacob.

Professional restorers they have carried out very important restorations in Germany. Here while in December 2010 they relocate the statues in the niches of the church St. Petri in Esperstedt.

# THE SOURCES OF ST NICHOLAS ALTARPIECE IN GRIMMA

My “encounter” with Lucas Cranach began with the reading of the little book *St Nicholas in history, in the legend and in the art*, Bari 1948 by Federico Renzullo. To the paintings by Cranach (he speaks of Cranach, not of his workshop) is reserved a particular place.

Unfortunately, this little book has no illustrations in color, but only black and white. Furthermore, the images are of very low quality. Here is an example:



Although I am not an expert of art, the name of Cranach was familiar to me (probably through Luther’s portraits). Therefore I felt the desire to see the pictures in color. Strange enough my friends in Germany could not find them. Only prof. Wilhelm Forst, a friend of our St Nicholas Research Center of Bari, succeeded in finding them in a scientific Review containing the article by the two restorers:

**Dörte Busch e Dirk Jacob,**

**Der Nikolaialtar  
aus der ehemaligen Nikolaikirche  
zu Grimma,**

*in Beiträge zur Erhaltung von Kunst-  
und Kulturgut, Heft 2, 2009, pp. 47-58).*

In the notes at the end of the article I could select this bibliography:

-Ingo Sandner, *Spätgotische Tafelmalerei in Sachsen*. Dresden, Basel 1993. -

*Crell's Chronik* -

Christian Gottlob Lorenz, *Die Stadt Grimma im Königreiche Sachsen, historisch beschrieben*, Grimma 1871.

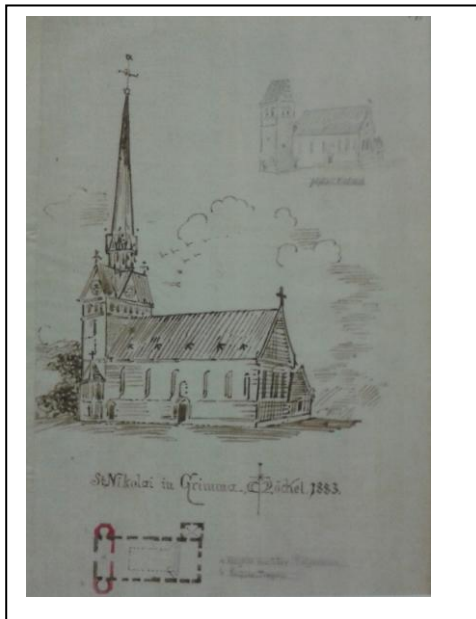
-Ute Bednarz, *Der Altar der ehemaligen Nikolaikirche zu Grimma*. Unveröffentlichte Diplomarbeit, Leipzig 1990. -

Cornelius Gurlitt, *Beschreibende Darstellung der älteren Bau- und Kunstdenkmäler des Königreichs Sachsen*. Amtshauptmannschaft Grimma, Dresden 1897.

-Pfarrer Resch, *Das Ende der Nikolaikirche*. In: “Unsere Kirche - Monatsblatt der Kirchengemeinde Grimma”, November 1926



The note number 3 (p. 57) contains the most important information: **According Crell's Chronicle St Nicholas Altarpiece was executed in the year 1519 and costed 220 fl.** (Cfr. Chr. G. Lorentz, *Die Stadt Grimma*, p. 100). Further written mentions of the altar and about the altarpiece are not known [“nach Crell's Chronik wurde er (der Nikolai-Altar) im Jahre 1519 erbaut und kostete 220 fl. (Chr. G. Lorentz, *Die Stadt Grimma*, p. 100). Weitere schriftliche Erwähnungen des Altars und des Retabels sind nicht bekannt].



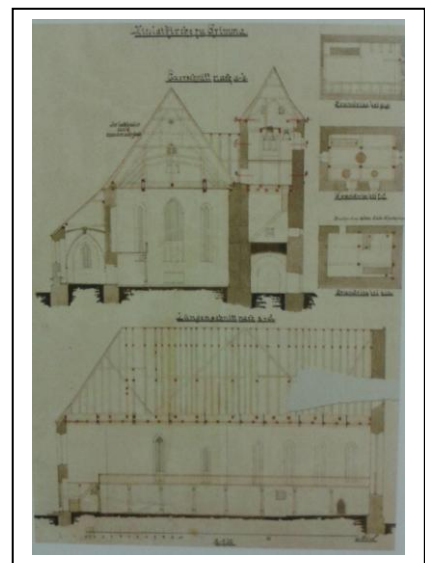
Obviously, the brevity of the news has resulted for me very indigestible. I could not accept that a source that was so precise on the date and on the cost of the altar would say nothing else and remain completely mute.

Therefore I could not avoid losing myself into Internet searching this **Crell's Chronicle**. Through the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (1876), I acquainted myself with a great number of Crell(s). Among them is worthy of mention the jurist Cristoph Ludwig Crell (1671-1733) who in Leipzig attended the courses in the **Nikolaischule**, where the father was rector (ADB 1876, p. 586).

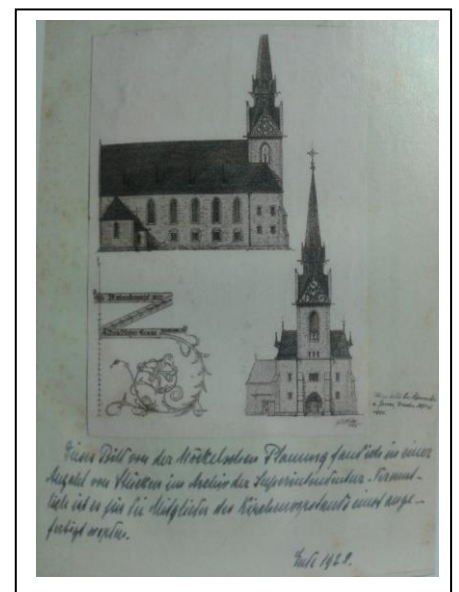
Finally I clicked on a Review with the title “Sapere Aude”, heft 47, Juni 2000. At the page 997 is written that the local Grimma's historian Christian Gottlob Lorenz

consulted many manuscript documents, among which *eine Abschrift der ungedruckt gebliebenen Chronik Grimmas von Crell/Schneider für die Zeit von 1660 bis 1780* (transcription of the remained **unpublished Chronicle of Grimma** by Crell/Schneider for the period 1660-1780).

*Unpublished*. At this point I stopped. Considering that the two restorers should have read the equally unpublished thesis of Ute Bednarz, I arrived to the conclusion that at the moment I could give nothing more to the *St Nicholas News* readers than what can be found in those “Beiträge”.



Strange enough, in spite of its size, beauty and authorship, the St Nicholas' altarpiece has drawn almost no attention on the part of Art historians.



# THE HISTORICAL MOMENTS OF THE GRIMMA ALTARPIECE

ACCORDING TO  
DÖRTE BUSCH AND DIRK JACOB,

Translated from the German into Italian by  
**Mirella Tempone**

*One of the major altarpieces of the Saxony, executed at the beginning of the XVI century, is in Grimma on the Mulde river. It is composed by three couples of volets in order that during the liturgical year, besides the current feast view, it is possible to show the back panels too. In this altarpiece could be admired the central wooden sculptures as well as the side antas. The statues are those of St Barbara and Margaret, the three saints Norbert, Nicholas of Myra and Erasmus, besides Christopher and a saint deacon, probably Lawrence. They are placed on consoles, whose visible sides are inlaid works with flower decorations. Above them are located canopies with similar inlaying.*

*The painted scenes of the two large compartments on the back side are ordered on two rows that have to be read from the left to the right.*

*The first compartment contains the paintings on the back of the main central reliquary view. Both painted rows are related to the central figure, Saint Nicholas. They show eight scenes from the life and miracles of the Saint.*

*The second compartment show, both in their mobile lateral side and in their fixed central side, moments of our Lord's passion.*

*In the niche of the predella is shown Jesus' birth with the traditional figures of Mary and Joseph, with the child in the crib, while the ox and the little donkey are looking at them. In the background the pastors are hearing the happy announcement. The sidewalls of the predella are decorated with arbours. The closing sides of the predella are decorated with pre-Renaissance vegetables. Once the predella had little sliding doors, that today are lost. Of the*

*ancient fastigium, in which were inlaid three figures, today there is only an engraving on the covering, while the figures do not exist anymore.*

*The polyptych, 2,68 x 5,36 meters, is attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder's workshop. It was destined to be located in St Nicholas church in Grimma. Today is in the church of the Holy Cross cemetery of this city.*

*It is known very little about it's origin, the commissioner, the painter and the inlayer. The country of origin of the inlayer is not however to be found in the Saxon cultural milieu. Written news on the altar of St Nicholas could be found in great number only starting with the XIX century.*

*Around the year 1865 the building conditions of the romanesque St Nicholas' church, in which the altarpiece was located on the major altar, were so bad that it wasn't possible to celebrate normal liturgical services. This circumstance caused many discussions about the necessity and the opportunity of a restoration. In the meantime the conditions were getting worse. The local community did not want and was not able to finance the necessary interventions. So, in the following years the building fell into neglect. Only in 1883 the ing. Möckel of Dresda was charged with carrying a survey. He then presented some reconstruction projects of the St Nicholas church that today are preserved in the Aktenarchiv of the ecclesial community of Grimma.*

*That same year the altarpiece was put in a closed place, because the glasses of the windows were defective. Given the lack of funds, they thought to sell the church to the Roman catholic community, but at the end they decided for the demolition.*

## **From this article by the two restorers we can borrow some other news:**

*In the year 1888 the romanesque St Nicholas church was demolished. In that area today is the bus station. The altarpiece was transferred to the chapel of the cemetery of Grimma.*

*In 1910 the little church was restructured and enlarged, because it was too little to contain the altarpiece. After examining various possibilities, it was decided to leave the altarpiece where it was. Afterwards the three statues of St Peter,*

Mary and Paul were again located on the top of the altarpiece. Other pieces were lost.

In 1911 the paintings underwent a restoration in which, according to the restorer Hentschel in 1949, it was made an excessive use of varnishing that darkened the paintings.

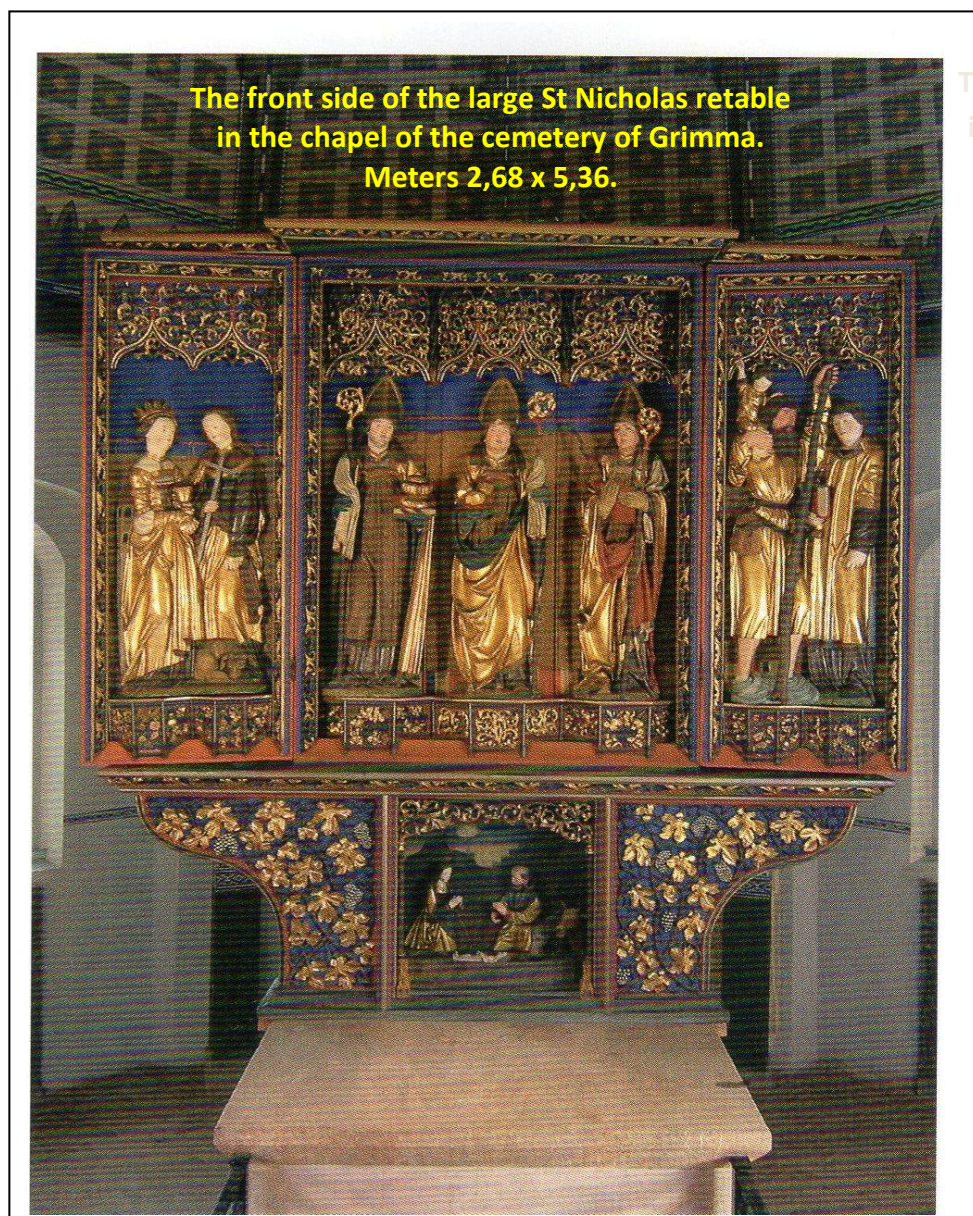
In 1945, during the war, the paintings were damaged, especially the panels of the Passion.

In 1974 the sculptures were reinforced, and other works for a better preservation took place in 1985 on the part of the students of the Restoration school.

Between 2004 and 2007 the altarpiece was restored by the two above mentioned scholars, who introduce the description of their work with these words:

*The Nicolai Altar from the former church in Grimma. The late medieval winged altar was restored between 2004 and 2007. The reason for its treatment was the damage caused by earlier interventions, necessitating comprehensive retouching. The paintings of the two wings originate from around Cranach workshop, the provenance of the sculptures remains unknown. The results obtained on the provenance and history of the retable is described below.*

While Federico Renzullo identified the authorship in Cranach himself, the two restorers Dörte Busch and Dirk Jacob (like the current German opinion) believe that St Nicholas panels were executed by a painter very close to Cranach the Elder.



The view of the large retable in the church of the cemetery of Grimma. Meters 2,68 x 5,36.





The Wittenberg retable. Instead of Saints, here Cranach the Elder painted the main figures of the Reformation. Style similarities with St Nicholas paintings are evident.

**Dörte Busch e Dirk Jacob**

# **CRANACH THE ELDER AND HIS WORKSHOP**

Translated from the German  
by

**Wilhelm and Martin Forst**

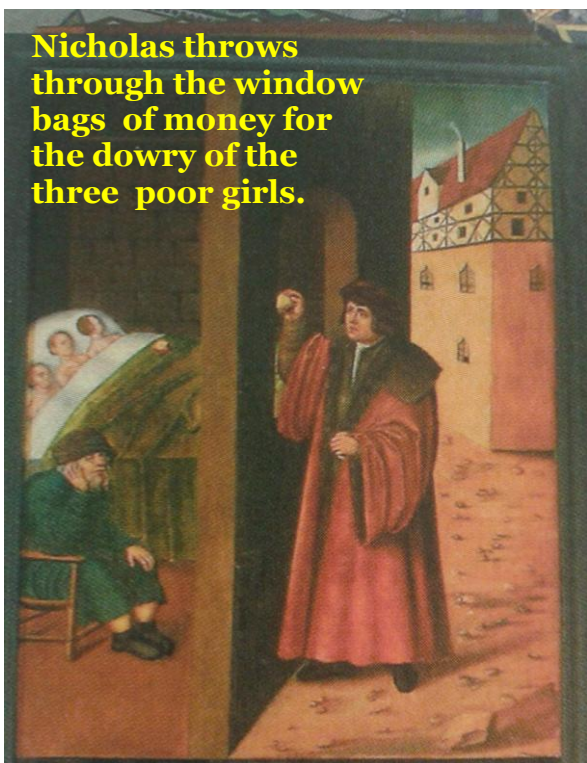
## **Painting Techniques and Materials of the Original Design**

According to medieval practice, the prepared panels were fitted into rabbet frames, and the branch knots and wood gaps were hidden with oakum or canvas.

Then the white primer was applied in several, but thin layers. There are no indications of a white-lead-containing imprimatura in an ocher or brownish color, as they were common until around 1510, e.g. in Cranach's work. The pictures on the two views of the altarpiece were created by different masters, whose painting techniques do, however, not differ significantly.

The possibly four painters involved can be assigned to the Cranach circle. This becomes apparent not only from borrowed image motives and modes of representation, e.g. in the representation of the Crucifixion. In far as painting techniques are concerned, those pupils and collaborators of the elder Cranach, must have been in his workshop until 1510, follow his example in all work habits. This can be observed in particular with the master of the high altar of Döbeln, who may also be responsible for the entire underdrawing of the altarpiece in Grimma.

**Nicholas throws  
through the window  
bags of money for  
the dowry of the  
three poor girls.**



**The first of the four scenes of the upper row of St. Nicholas panels. Note the youthful face and the merchant cloths.**

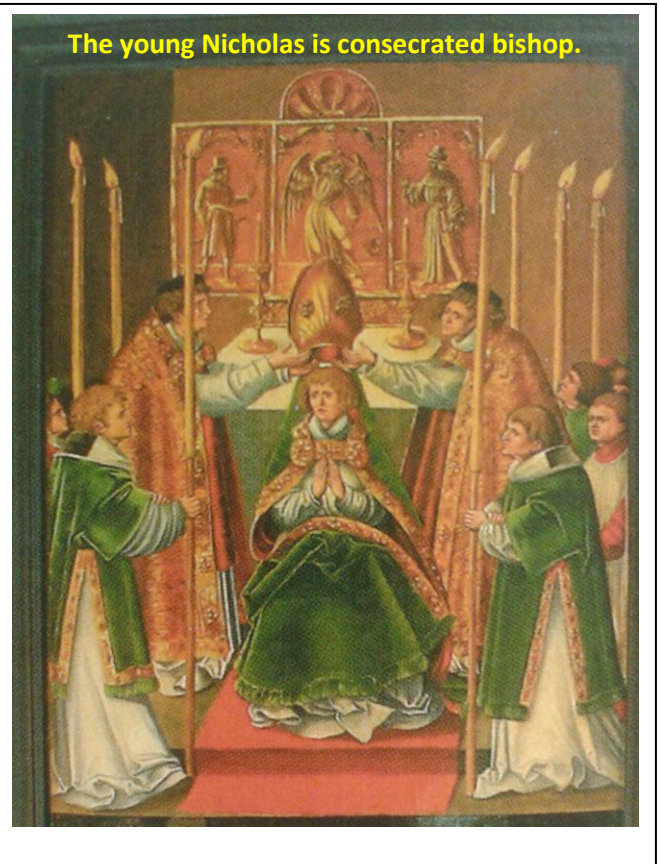
He applies his colors in a similarly lively manner wet in wet (without the craft-oriented structure); he accentuates the light without a texturing “scaffold” of white-lead. His efficient painting style suggests a longer collaboration with Cranach, perhaps he even was a pupil.

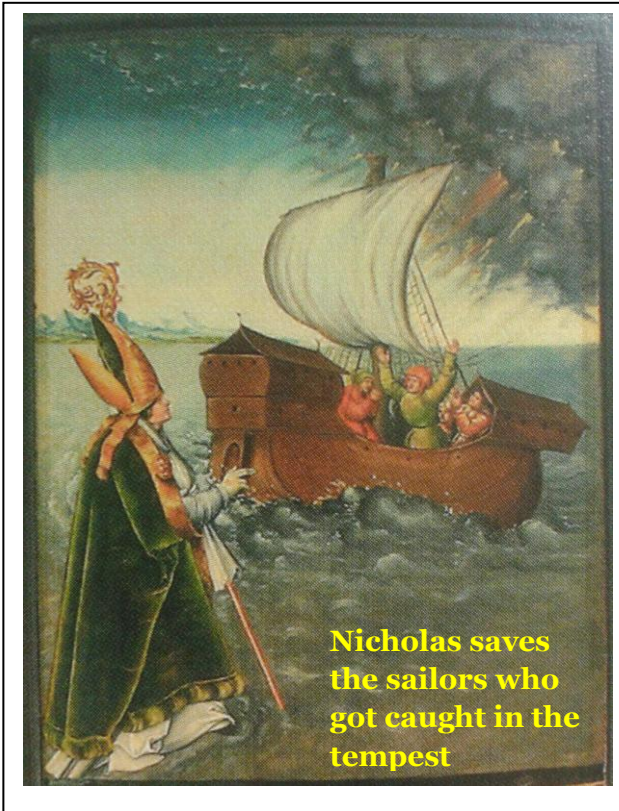
A considerable shortcut in painting that can be observed in the work of Cranach and his collaborators, consists of forgoing repeated white lead heightenings and instead letting the luminosity of the white primer play a part. On the basis of the local tone as underpainting the shapes are made more precise and differentiations or perspective effects are achieved by means of light accents and contouring. For the flesh parts, the abridged, yet multi-layered composition consists of the light being textured in a single step on an extremely thin glaze in local color tone so that, the end result can be achieved by means of a few glazes and shadows.

On almost all panels, Cranach started with the creation of the basic tints of the flesh parts. In his early work, he did this by delicately dabbing an ochre brown translucent local tone, whose brightness was varied according to his needs. Following that, he took a first stab at texturing the light by means of white lead blended with colored pigments wet in wet. In the second step, he created the local tones of the garments, which were mostly finished with only two further steps, namely the creation of shadow and light.

Following the creation of the local colors, brightly colored glazes which deepen the shadows were applied. Subsequently, the painter heightened with opaque colors or placed bright lights. At times, the paints were applied wet in wet. The early Cranach is called the “pioneer” of this abridged painting style, which developed not least due to the increasing use of oil as a binder.

**The young Nicholas is consecrated bishop.**





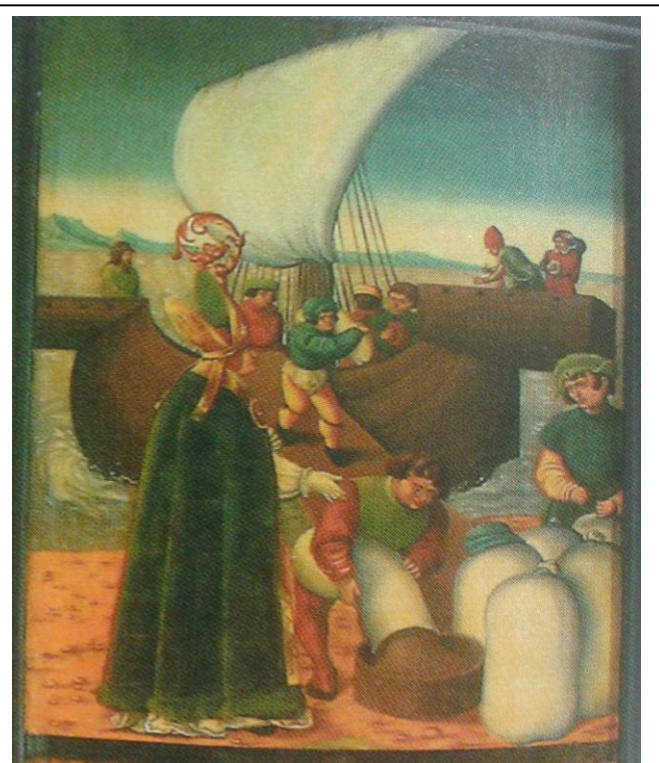
painted “alla prima” (with only one of them). The execution of the faces is very elaborate and more graphical than on the second view. Details such as wrinkles, veins on the back of a hand, eyelids, eyelashes, reflections in eyes and teeth are depicted with the most delicate brush strokes, although the representations are very small compared to the paintings and the entire altarpiece, and cannot be seen from the normal distance of a beholder. All figures are contoured with loose, safe lines in brown or black color.

Of very high quality in and of themselves are the representations of landscapes with mountains and castles, the images of clouds and waves on the water. In contrast, the interiors seem rather clumsy, with the exception of the altars in gold ocher, lead tin yellow and umber, which are painted in camaieau.

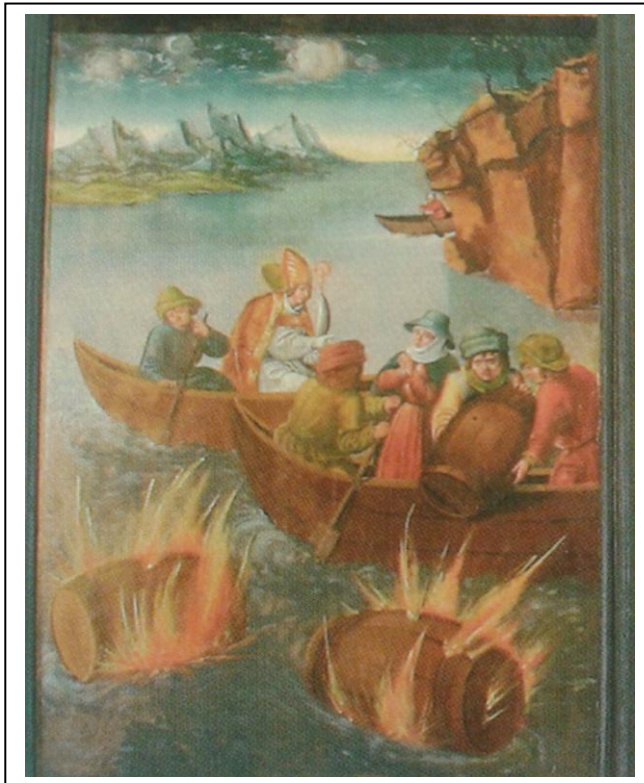
At the panels of the saint Nicholas altar, it can be noted that, in general, the same painting technique was applied there. However, it is the painting of the Passion that comes closest to the painting technique of Cranach.

Differences in the execution among the panels of the Passion suggest that they were created by two or three painters. The differences are apparent from the different head types also, different parts of the painting executed with different degrees of accuracy: while one of the painters tends to leave areas of the underpainting unchanged, another painter fills the surfaces meticulously, so that the underpainting is completely covered. However, it is not possible to assign entire scene or panels to one particular painter; the respective parts are distributed over the entire Passion side.

The paintings of the Nicholas legend (first view of the altarpiece) are executed in the same technique. There are parts with few glaze layers as well as areas



Nicholas persuades the captains, who come from Alexandria of Egypt, to leave in his city of Myra, where the population is struck by famine, part of the grain they transport to Constantinople.



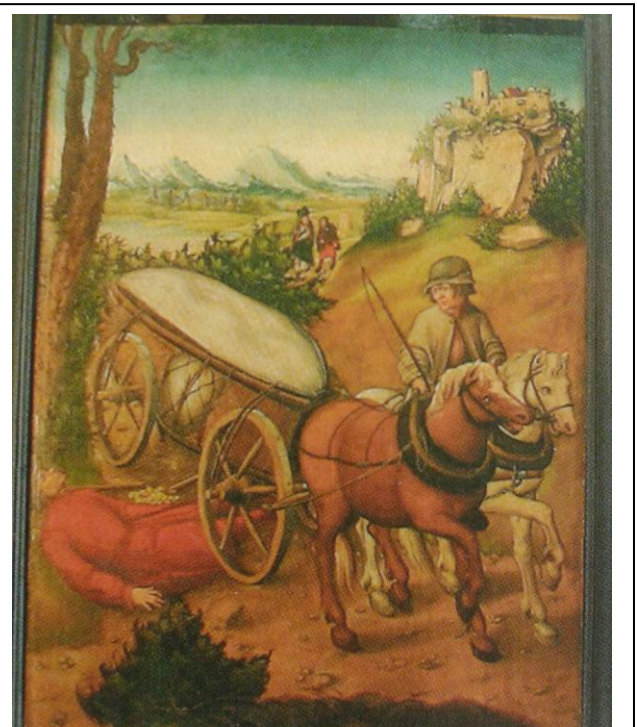
**The first of the four scenes of the lower row of the St. Nicholas' panels. Nicholas saves the pilgrims going to his shrine. At their departure the devil, under the form of a woman, had given them a malefic oil. But St Nicholas unmasks his trickery and soothes the tempest caused by the malefic oil.**

There are no major artisanal, stylistic similarities between the first and second views of the altarpiece to be found so that it cannot be assumed that the painter of the St. Nicholas legend played an influential role in the painting of the Passion side. In contrast, the characteristic underdrawing for both views of the altarpiece, which is executed with thin fluid paint and pointed brush, most certainly comes from a single hand. It is limited to outlines and hinted-at contours; light and shadow are not specified in the underdrawing, neither by hatching nor by washing .

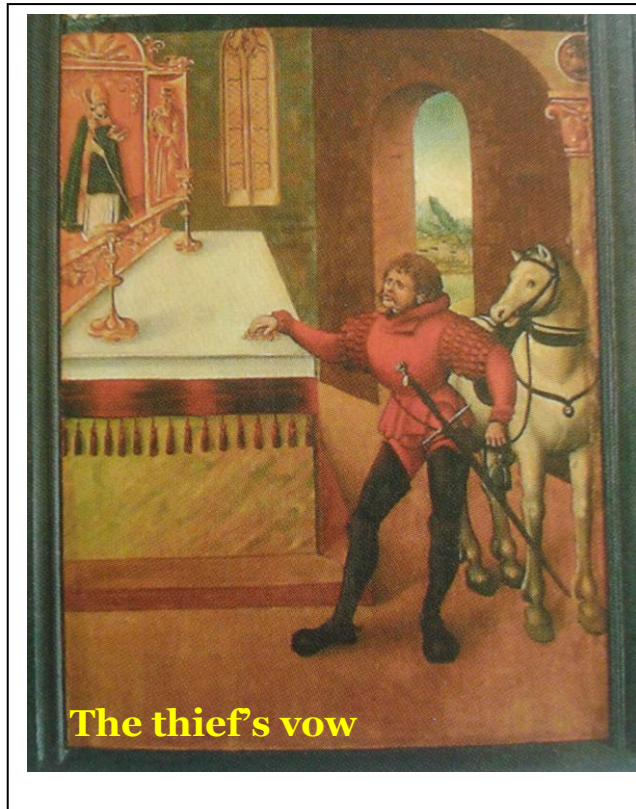
A different, very delicate and detailed underdrawing, which was executed with black pencil, can be found in the area of a grain sack on the upper painting of the

right movable section. The drawing shows a man's head with portrait-like traits. The upper body is sketched only by outlines, hat and head posture are similar to the adjacent figure of a sailor. The fact that, despite the rigid contour lines, the head posture and facial features were captured successfully suggests that they were transferred by means of pouncing (= perforation needle).

In general, the painting is formulated more precisely than the underdrawing pretends, as can be seen in the second scene of the first view, where the underdrawing of the heads is reduced to kringles and swung lines. Strangely, other important image details have been omitted or reduced in the pictorial implementation of the underdrawing, such as a window or candles. Corrections typical of the painting process can be found across all panels.



**The Christian's perjury. Asking an Hebrew to hold for a moment his stick full of money, a Christian swears that has already paid back his loan. Going away he is knocked down by a cart and killed, while the stick breaks and the coins scatter. According to the Hebrew's desire, Nicholas resurrects him and the Hebrew turns Christian.**



**The thief's vow**

Seven out of the eight scenes of the St Nicholas' panels are well known episodes of his life and miracles. The seventh one (third of the lower row) is less known because is a Bavarian local legend. This one with the previous one (The Christian perjury) and the following (The golden cup) form a trio dedicated to honesty and to the holding to his word.

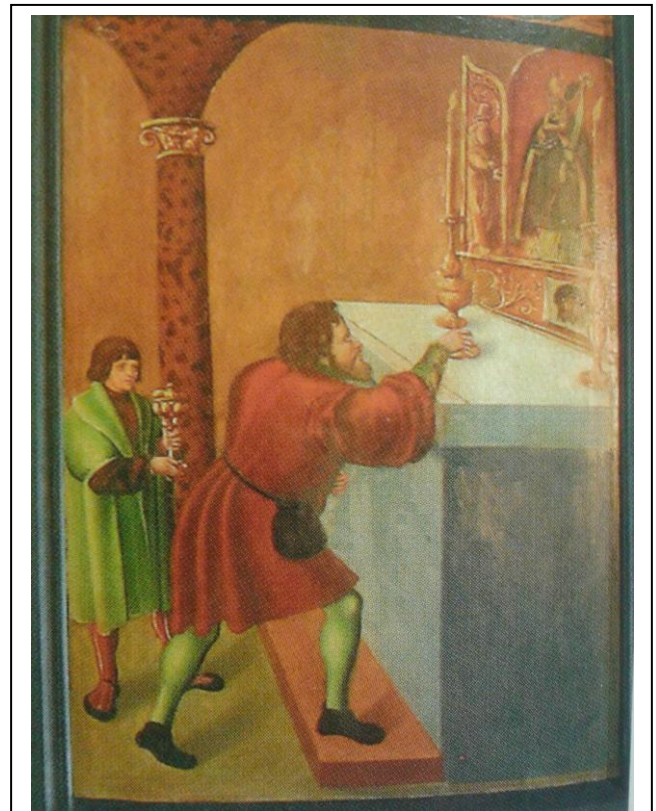
According to this legend, in Bavaria there was a man that had become rich very dishonestly. In order to calm his conscience for his so many thefts, he used make donations to the church.

After some years, his illegal activities became known to the responsables of law and order. He was therefore compelled to look for hiding places. Once constables and officers were very close to capture him near the Danube. He then saw on the other side of the river a chapel that he knew dedicated to St Nicholas. Soon he made a vow: if he would have escaped to the pursuers through the river he would have made a donation of so many golden coins according to the value of his horse.

Things developed as he had hoped. He crossed the river with his horse and once near that St Nicholas chapel decided to hold to his promise.

He entered the church with his horse and went near the altar. He counted the money, coin after coin, and put them on the altar, looking at the Saint as if now he had satisfied his vow. Then he made a bow and took the reins of the horse trying to draw him outside. But the horse didn't move an inch. He tried again, but the horse did not obey. When he perceived that there was nothing to do, he went again near the altar. He took the bag and counted many other coins, putting them with a sigh on the altar. As soon as he had put the money on the altar, the horse moved toward the exit. Seeing the movement of the horse, the thief looked at the Saint and said:

O Saint Nicholas, you are the best expert and merchant of horses I have ever known in my life.



**The golden cup**

The eighth and last scene of the St Nicholas panels shows a miracle very famous in the Middle Age. Like the two previous ones it deals with the importance of holding to his word. A vow is sacred and has to be observed.

For the good of his family and for his great devotion, a man made the vow to donate to Saint Nicholas a golden cup. When the cup was ready he was so admired of its beauty that decided to keep that cup for himself and to commission another one for the Saint. As soon as the second cup was ready, with all his family sailed toward the city where St Nicholas church was. During the navigation he wanted to give the guests the pleasure of watching the golden cup on the table. In the joy of the conversations nobody saw the child taking the cup and going to play near the water. A movement of the ship caused the fall of the child into the waves. When the parents noticed his absence was to late.

In spite of the deep sorrow and the family tragedy, once in the harbor the man went to give the second cup to the Saint. But, as soon as he left the cup on St Nicholas altar, the cup would rebound and fall to the ground. A second time he put the cup on the altar but again it bounced to the ground. The third time again an invisible hand pushed the cup away. Aware of what was happening, the father and the mother confessed their sin to the priest.

The same moment they had repented, Nicholas drew the child from the depth of the sea and brought him back to the parents. The child with the golden cup went to the altar and put it before St Nicholas, who this time accepted the gift. It is easy to imagine the joy of the parents who did not stop embracing and kissing their son, who was still wet of sea water.



**A CURIOSITY** concerning the last of the eight scenes painted by Cranach and his workshop:

**THE GOLDEN CUP** that the boy brings to the altar, after his drowning and resurrection by St Nicholas, is almost identical to one preserved in the Museo Nicolaiano of Bari.



**THE BEST  
WISHES  
FROM BARI  
TO ALL  
ST NICHOLAS  
FRIENDS  
AROUND  
THE WORLD**