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EXPERIENCING THE GIGANTIC IN LATE MEDIEVAL ART LA EXPERIENCIA DE LO GIGANTESCO EN EL ARTE TARDOMEDIEVAL

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ABSTRACT

The visual landscape north of the Alps around 1400 was shaped by colossal representations of epic and mythological giants, cast as Christian heroes. Whether in religious or secular contexts, all were executed “out of scale”, measuring between 4-12 meters in height, and installed in locations that prevented assessment of their actual size. Rather than portraying specific characters from particular texts, the figures embody the notion of “the gigantic” as it appeared in contemporary writings: superhuman beings from liminal spaces associated with supernatural powers. I argue that the experience of the gigantic was achieved through the interplay between size (colossal iconic representations of giants) and scale (giants depicted within illusionistic settings). I further suggest that scaling either up or down constituted a key element in constructing the period’s cultural ideologies. Communicating ideas about excess, the giants were experienced as physically and ethically abject and, at the same time, as magnificent and redemptive.

KEYWORDS: giants/giantesses, scale, measurement, experience, Runkelstein Castle, Arthurian Literature, The Pleier’s *Garel of the Blooming Valley*.

RESUMEN

El paisaje visual al norte de los Alpes en torno al año 1400 estaba conformado por representaciones colosales de gigantes épicos y mitológicos, convocados como héroes cristianos. Ya sea en contextos religiosos o seculares, todos fueron ejecutados “fuera de escala”, midiendo entre 6 y 10 metros de altura, instalados en lugares que impedían advertir su tamaño real. Más que retratar a personajes específicos de textos concretos, las figuras encarnan la noción de “lo gigantesco” tal y como aparecía en los escritos contemporáneos: seres sobrehumanos de espacios liminales asociados a poderes sobrenaturales. Justifico que la experiencia de lo gigantesco se logró a través de la interacción entre el tamaño (colosales representaciones icónicas de

gigantes) y la escala (gigantes representados dentro de escenarios ilusionistas). Además, razono que el aumento o la disminución de la escala constituyó un elemento clave en la construcción de las ideologías culturales de la época. Puesto que comunicaban ideas sobre lo excesivo, los gigantes fueron experimentados como física y éticamente abyectos y, al mismo tiempo, como magníficos y redentores.

PALABRAS CLAVE: gigantes, escala, medida, experiencia, Castillo de Runkelstein, Literatura Artística, El Garel de Pleier del Valle Floreciente.

The visual landscape north of the Alps around the year 1400 was shaped by colossal representations of mythological giants, occupying and dominating both urban and rural environments. Originated in the biblical account of the Flood and in the Norse mythologies, giants were reincarnated in courtly romances and epics.¹ Christian heroes and chivalric role models, such as Roland, were thought of and cast as giants, rendered as colossi in harbors and city squares. Northern pagan deities belonging to the genealogy of giants, mostly Donar (Thor), were disguised as Christian heroes and served apotropaic functions.² Christian saints too were transformed into giants, both in texts and imagery, such as St. Christopher, the Giant of Canaan, whose colossal image adorned, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, almost every sanctuary, church exteriors, and even city gates in the German-speaking regions and the British Isles. The Virgin Mary too was rendered as a giant or a gigantic protector of dwarfish humanity, in her role as the Virgin of Mercy.³ Measuring between 4 to 12 meters high, and installed in locations preventing assessment of their actual size, all these giants were executed beyond human somatic experience. Paying homage to Herbert Kessler's exemplary work *Experiencing Medieval Art*,⁴ I attempt here to explore the late medieval experience of the gigantic. Leaving aside the specific characters of giants from particular texts, I argue here that the figures embody the ontological notion of "the gigantic" as found in contemporary romances: superhuman beings with supernatural powers from liminal spaces. Through their enormous dimensions the figures communicated ideas of excess, being physically and ethically abject and, at the same time, magnificent.⁵ I will further suggest that the scaled-up and inflated images constituted a key element in constructing the period's experience of art and the self. As

¹ The Norse giants were mediated through the early thirteenth-century *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson. For a general introduction to the origin of giants, see T. M. BOYER, *The Giant Hero in Medieval Literature*, Boston, 2016, pp. 26-51; J. J. COHEN, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis, 1999, pp. 1-28.

² For example, St. Peter replaced Donar in his function as weather deity, while Roland too, such as Roland of Brandenburg, was supplemented with the attributes of Donar, see TH., LOHMANN, "Petrus und der Wettergott", *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 12/2 (1960), pp. 112-136.

³ For example, the Giant Maria of Castle Malbork (Zamek w Malborku), ca. 1342, measuring more than 8 meters in height, see J. RACKOWSKI, "Kolosalna rzeźba Madonny z Dzieciątkiem w kontekście programu ideowego kościoła malborskiego w czasach Luterana z Brunszwiku" in J. HOCHLEITNER (ed.) *Monumentalna figura Madonny na kościele NMP w Malborku: konteksty historyczne, artystyczne i konserwatorskie*, Malbork, 2015, pp. 47-58.

⁴ H. L. KESSLER, *Experiencing Medieval Art*, Toronto, 2019.

⁵ Even Christian saints could evoke the abject; St. Christopher, for example, was originally a cynocephalus.

a case in point, I will refer to the extensive portrayal of Giants and Giantesses in the Summer House of Schloss Runkelstein.

Commissioned by the brothers Niklaus and Franz Vintler already in 1385,⁶ the frescoes adorning the walls of the thirteenth-century Schloss Runkelstein comprise the largest and most spectacular visualization of the ethos and habits of late medieval courtly life.⁷ Although visualized with unusual scope, the most original and unique cycles are those adorning the later addition to the castle, the Summer House (*Summerhaws*), comprising the west wing of the castle and decorated between 1395 and 1413 with several extensive narratives (*Istoria*) and non-narrative iconic representations of giants and their deeds.⁸ The Summer House is a two-story structure with a balcony that opens onto an inner courtyard (Fig. 1). The first room of the upper floor features episodes from Gottfried von Strassbourg's *Tristan* romance, leading to the Garel Room, where the walls are entirely covered with a fresco cycle of an epic narrative involving numerous giants. Both rooms are connected externally by a balcony decorated with over-life-size representations of chivalric role models: the Nine Worthies; several triads of great heroes, lovers, and warrior-knights from the courtly Arthurian literature; and colossal images of the three greatest warrior-giants and the three most powerful giantesses (Figs. 2, 3).⁹ The lower floor, the so-called Wigalois Room (*Vigeles Sal*), features another Arthurian epic—*Wigalois of Wirnt von Gravenberg* (ca. 1220)—in which the giantess Ruel plays a prominent role. These frescoes are barely discernable today, with all that remains being their general outline.¹⁰ The Summer House could thus be considered as a “visual sermon” on giants. While earlier studies have offered close iconographical and text-image analyses of the frescos, I wish, instead, to offer an ontological and phenomenological interpretation of the experience offered to the beholders by the imagery of giants.

The balcony, literally framing the entire experience of the Summer House, features giants as colossal, iconic images. The showcase of heroes of mythological status begins at the southern end with the Nine Worthies, comprising Hector, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar

⁶ A. GREBE, “Runkelstein als Bilderburg” in A. TORRGLER et al. (eds.) *Die Bilderburg Runkelstein: Erhaltenes, Verlorenes, Wiederentdecktes*, Bozen, 2018, pp. 197-369. For the circumstance of the Vintlers' acquisition and patronage of the castle, see R. WETZEL, “*Quis dicet originis annos?* Die Runkelsteiner Vintler: Konstruktion einer adeligen Identität”, in *Schloss Runkelstein: Die Bilderburg*, A. BECHTOLD (ed.), Bozen, 2000, pp. 291-310; A. TORRGLER, F. HOFER, “Eine Burg für Aufsteiger, Landherren und Fürsten aus der Besitzergeschichte von Schloss Runkelstein”, *Die Bilderburg Runkelstein*, pp. 11-45.

⁷ In addition to note 6, see DOMANSKI, M. KRENN, “Die profanen Wandmalereien im Sommerhaus”, *Schloss Runkelstein*, pp. 99-154. For the cycle of the Summer House, see W. HAUG et al. (eds.), *Runkelstein: Die Wandmalerei des Sommerhauses*, Wiesbaden, 1990.

⁸ A (now lost) inscription in the adjunct chapel of the castle reads: *Anno domini nostri Jesu Cristi a nativitate / millesimo tricentesimo octuagesimo quinto... / ...pr...nte gra / Ego Nicolaus Vintler hoc castrum Runkelstein nuncupatum legaliter comparavi / Tandem anno*, transcribed in GREBE, “Runkelstein als Bilderburg”, p. 200.

⁹ The exact identity of the giants is still debatable, as some of the inscriptions were damaged and can be interpreted in more than one way. They were documented by I. V. ZINGERLE, “Die Fresken im Schlosse Runkelstein”, *Germania*, 2 (1857), pp. 467-469; I. V. ZINGERLE, “Zu den Bildern in Runkelstein”, *Germania*, 23 (1878), pp. 28-30. Zingerle's transcriptions have been criticized by some scholars.

¹⁰ On the Wigalois cycle, see D. HUSCHENBETT, “Beschreibung der Bilder des Wigalois-Zyklus”, in Haug, *Runkelstein*, pp. 170-177.

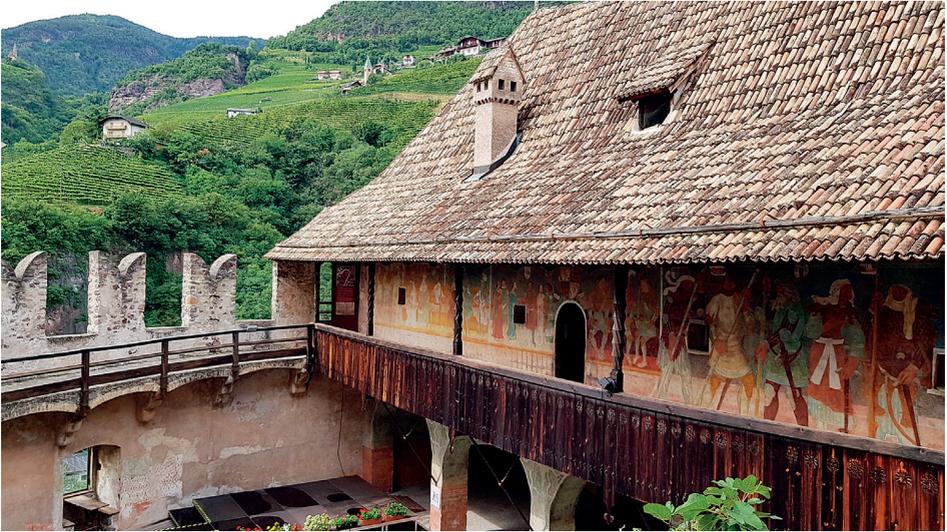


Fig. 1. Runkelstein Castle, Summer House, ca. 1385-1413 (photo: author)

as representatives of pagan Antiquity; Joshua, David, and Judas Maccabeus as Old Testament heroes; and King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon as three Christian kings.¹¹ These nine exemplars are followed by the three greatest heroes of King Arthur's Round Table: Parzival (Percival), Iwein (Yvain), and Gawain; the three greatest pairs of lovers of the courtly romances, identified by inscription: Tristan and Isolde, Wilhelm of Austria and Aglie, and Wilhelm of Orleans and Amelie; and the three greatest epic warriors: Dietrich of Bern, Siegfried, and Dietlieb von Steier, identified through their swords. The spectacle of heroes ends with the colossal imagery of the three greatest warrior-giants—Waldram, Ortnit, and Schrutan—and the bravest warrior-giantesses—Rüel, Birkhilt/Frau Ritsch, and Rachin.¹² These six giants appear twice the size of the other figures, which are themselves rendered larger than life-size. The former therefore constitute not merely images of giants but gigantic representations, icons of enormity. Three crowned miniature figures, identified by a (now lost) inscription as the best dwarves (*besten getwerg*),¹³ appear above the door that leads to the eastern wing, making the giants appear even larger.

¹¹ For the iconography of the Nine Worthies, see H. SCHROEDER, *Der Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst*, Göttingen, 1971; L. ANDERGASSEN, "Re Artù in Italia: Iconografia di un mito cavalleresco", in *Artus a Castel Roncolo*, L. ANDERGASSEN (ed.), Bozen, 2014, pp. 41-72; A. EGOROV, "Charismatic Rulers in Civic Guise: Images of the Nine Worthies in Northern European Town Halls of the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries", in *Faces of Charisma: Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, B. M. BEDOS-REZAK, M. D. RUST (eds.), Leiden, 2018, pp. 205-239.

¹² See note 9 above.

¹³ *Under allen twer[ger] waren das die drei besten [getwerg]*. The inscription is now lost; see ZINGERLE, "Zu den Bildern in Runkelstein", p. 29.



Fig. 2. Runkelstein Castle, Summer House, Balcony, The Greatest Warrior-Giants, ca. 1395-1413 (photo: Stiftung Bozner Schlösser / Fondazione Castelli di Bolzano).



Fig. 3. The Three Most Powerful Giantesses

The groups of the Worthies are hierarchically organized: the greater their significance in the medieval world and their moral lesson the greater their stature: e.g. the Pagan versus the Christian Worthies, and the small-scale figures of the lovers versus the monumental chivalric warriors. Size is used here to express efficacy, virtue, and centrality in the sacred history. It is therefore even more striking that this demonstrative parade of Christian values culminates in yet another, more extreme, inflation of size: the six giants (Fig. 4). Unlike any of the other figures, the bodies of the giants on the balcony encroach beyond the mural borders, beyond their frames and into the bases, beyond the perceptible proportions of their space, unable to be fully encompassed even by modern-day cameras. Although named by inscriptions,¹⁴ their specific identities are of less importance because all six figures are detached from their individual narratives and represented as generalized abstractions of the notion of the gigantic.

Schrutan, for example, the giant on the right of the three male giants, clasps a huge tree trunk.¹⁵ He has long white hair, a wild, uncombed, curly beard, and is crowned with a wreath of branches; all marking him as a hybrid between a giant and a wild man.¹⁶ He is nonetheless attired in knightly armor and, although resembling a wild man, he differs from the truly wild giants recounted in the *Wolfdietrich* saga (ca. 1250):

¹⁴ Most of which are now lost but were largely recorded in the nineteenth century, see in addition to note 9 above, N. RASMO, "Runkelstein", in O. TRAPP (ed.), *Tiroler Burgenbuch*, Bozen, 1981, pp. 109-176; D. PIZZININI, "Der letzte treue Knappe: Ignaz Vinzenz Zingerle und Schloss Runkelstein", in *Krieg-Wucher-Aberglaub*, p. 245.

¹⁵ The inscription reads *schrautan treit berz* (Schrautan, who holds the sword called Berz); see DOMANSKI, KRENN, "Die profanen Wandmalereien," p. 151, n. 23.

¹⁶ On the iconography of the wildman and woman, see R. BERNHEIMER, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology*, Cambridge, 1952, pp. 21-48; Ch. HABIGER-TUCZAY, "Wilde Frau", in U. MÜLLER, W. WUNDERLICH (eds.) *Dämonen, Monster, Fabelwesen*, St. Gallen, 1999, pp. 603-15, and E. R. HINTZ, "Der Wilde Mann—ein Mythos Andersartig", *Ibidem*, pp. 617-33.



Fig. 4. The Giants, view from the balcony's platform (photo: author)

His nose was formed like the horn of a goat. Many heroes lost their lives because of the *Waldaffe* (forest monkey)... the face of the unbaptized man was black. His mouth so broad, as we can read here, no man has ever seen a wider mouth... When he started to commit evil deeds he wanted to gain renown. Now we tell of his ears...: they seemed like donkey ears.

Schrotan of Runkelstein is clearly not demonized and dehumanized to the extent of this monster in the text, but he is still encoded as a giant–wild man hybrid, partly civilized and courtly and partly wild and savage. Denying identification with any specific giant of the epics, he is constituted as a typological allegory.

The giant next to him, in the center of the three, represents another type—that of a king: crowned, elegantly garbed, and with a fashionable short haircut and trimmed beard, although no text related to the figure describes him as such. The inscription that once accompanied him reads “Kinig O[r]t[h]neith treit...rneit,” which could be understood either as Ortwein or Ortnit.¹⁷ In the epic *Ortnit von Lamparten* (1230), the protagonist is not explicitly labeled as a giant: he is a king, huge in stature, assisted in his adventures by a cunning dwarf, and

¹⁷ He is usually identified as Ortnit; see J. HEINZLE, “Die Triaden auf Runkelstein und die mittelhochdeutsche Helden-dichtung”, in HAUG, *Runkelstein*, p. 75.

eventually killed by dragons.¹⁸ His size, his dwarf minion, and his final, ignoble defeat are all clues to Ortnit's true identity as a giant. The 1250 *Rosengarten von Worms* pic, in contrast, features a giant named Ortwin who was the most cunning and crafty among his species, but was not a king.¹⁹ Whatever his true identity, he is visually an anti-type to the wildan giant. The third giant, Waltram,²⁰ portrays a third type: the simple iron rod in his hands, his headdress, long, wild hair and beard, and ragged shirt all suggest his identity as a wild pagan of ancient times.²¹ His headband is archaic in style, recalling those worn by the Hebrew prophets featured on many Gothic jambs, signifying a distant past.²² His old-fashioned sword and iron rod also symbolize a fictionalized view of pagan times or Antiquity.²³ The three male giants thus neither adhere fully to depictions of demonic, frightening giants nor to those of the glamorous, knightly figures in the epics. Rather, they evoke three general abstractions of the gigantic: the wild, the courtly, and the time-honored ancient.

Their female companions, the three giantesses, stand firmly, with the two outer figures turned towards the central one, addressing her in agitated gestures of speech. Since their inscriptions have completely vanished, the exact identity of the middle giantess is vague, but most studies have identify her either as Birkhilt or Frau Ritsch.²⁴ She is the only giantess who is wearing the modest white hood called a *Rise*, which completely covers her hair and neck, evoking the pious *Gebände* worn by elderly widows. Although the epics describe giantesses as extremely ugly, crude, and repulsive, fueled with fearsome rage; *freslich* (terrible or fearsome), *ungefüge* (coarse or clumsy), *ungehüre* (monstrous);²⁵ as uncontrollable as nature itself, possessing superhuman strength that surpasses that of any male, Birkhilt appears very restrained. Contrasting her self-disciplined posture, however, she wears a crown of branches above her hood that indicates her as a wild woman, recalling Schrutan. The spectacular lion pelt worn over her shoulder, a symbol of strength, makes her analogous to Hercules. She too appears as a hybrid: while her headdress and pose mark her as modest and civilized, a pious lady of the court, the sword symbolizes her gender transgression, signifying male knighthood, and her crown and lion pelt locate her within a liminal space between the wild, the powerful, and the regal.

¹⁸ *Ortnit and Wolfdietrich: Two Medieval Romances*, trans. by J. W. THOMAS, Columbia, 1986.

¹⁹ He is described as the "listigste", see *Der Rosengarten zu Worms*, vv. 125, in F. H. von der HAGEN (ed.), *Der Helden Buch*, Berlin, 1811, p. 21.

²⁰ The inscription reads: *her waltram trait alweil* (Sir Waltram [carries the sword called] Alweil).

²¹ TORGLER, "Riesen und Zwerge", pp. 133-36.

²² Exactly the same headband appears in Strasbourg Cathedral on the jambs of the west façade, and the Passion portal, e.g. the second prophet of the right wall, all from circa 1300.

²³ On the notion of "old" as a mark of Antiquity, see CH. S. WOOD, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art*, Chicago, 2008, pp. 1-7, 119-121.

²⁴ There is no firm ground for either of the identifications. To facilitate my discussion, I call the giantess Birkhilt here, according to J. ZUPITZA (ed.), *Dietrichs Abenteuer von Albrecht von Kemenaten nebst den Bruchstücken von Dietrich von Wenezlan*, Berlin, 1870, p. 45; and ZINGERLE, "Zu den Bildern in Runkelstein", p. 29. For her possible identification as Frau Ritsch instead, see DOMANSKI, KRENN, "Die profanen Wandmalereien", p. 109.

²⁵ *diu ist in zorn ain übel wip. / ir ist ouch ruch aller ir lip. . . / zehant si dich enterbet / des libes. / das wil ich dir sagen: ir muot, der ist so grimme, / sie mag dirs niht vertragen. Das Eckenlied*, p. 95 st. 231, vv. 2-12.

To Birkhilt's left, Rüel from the Wigalois romance wears a white wrapped hood evoking a peasant's headscarf, allowing her long hair to flow onto her shoulders while also possibly indicating her as a married woman.²⁶ Her hood and gaze resemble the figure of the prophesizing Elisabeth as featured, for example, in the jamb figures of Reims Cathedral, ca. 1220. Ruel addresses Birkhilt in a speaking gesture, while her left hand rests on her long sword in its scabbard, a gesture typical of knights in audience at a royal court or in civilian, non-military contexts. In *Wigalois*, Rüel is described as naked with a long braid swaying around her hips, a large head, flat nose, and pendulous breasts;²⁷ a description that brings to mind the early thirteenth-century depiction of the giantess in St. Jakob in Kastelaz (Fig. 5).²⁸ None of these demonized, degrading features are visualized in Runkelstein. The giantess's sleeveless tunic, worn over a chain mail shirt, is an outmoded style of armor that signals her belonging to an ancient time.²⁹ The giantess mirroring her to the right is Frau Rachin (Fraw rachyn), again from the *Eckenlied*, who is described in the text as uncontrollably wild and always naked.³⁰ Her monstrosity is moderated in the fresco, as she is dressed in leather-armored military attire, indicating the Roman period. She appears as the wildest of the three giantesses: a simple, thin white cloth—a *Schappel*—barely restrains her disheveled hair, and she waves a rough club, an attribute commonly associated with both wild women and fools.³¹

Hence, while the three male giants embody the notions of the royal, the wild, and the pagan, the three giantesses are more complex, manifesting mixed signifiers alluding to knight-hood, wildness, and paganism, as well as to both the contemporary period and the ancient past. Moreover, whereas in the epics male giants are sometimes converted to Christianity and achieve salvation, the giantesses are always, in the end, subdued and murdered. The frescoes, in contrast, present them as symbols of bravery, empowered over the male protagonists. Hence, any particular identity of all six figures is subordinated to the general experience of the gigantic that they broadcast: as colossal, with enormous dimensions, visible from a great distance. As such, regardless of their specific iconography, they leave an indelible impression on the bodies and minds of their beholders. It is their objectively colossal size and the physical space they occupy, extending beyond the mural frames, that dominate the balcony.

Beholders standing on the balcony of the Summer House cannot perceive the giants in their entirety. This sense of surplus pushes the figures beyond a somatic apprehension, and

²⁶ The inscription, now lost, read *Fraw riel nageltringen*, identifying her as Frau Rüel with her legendary sword, Nareling.

²⁷ *ir här enpflohten unde lanc, / zetal in ir buoge ez swanc. / ir houbet gröz, ir naje flach . . . ir brüjte nider hien-gen: die sîten fi bevienger*; see WIRNT VON GRAFENBERG, *Wigalois, eine Erzählung*, ed. F. Pfeiffer, Leipzig, 1847, st. 161, vv. 26–28, st. 163, vv. 10–11.

²⁸ A. PINKUS, "ein rise starc unde gröz": Temporalities of Salvation in St. Jakob in Kastelaz, *Word & Image*, 35/ 4 (2019), pp. 347–366.

²⁹ Such a costume was common in the first quarter of the fourteenth century but already outmoded by the middle of that century; see E. THIEL, *Geschichte des Kostüms*, Berlin, 1968, pp. 191–206.

³⁰ The narrative of her being subdued appears in Fassung E7, *Das Eckenlied*, ed. Brévar, vol. 2, st. 266, v. 8.

³¹ On the club as an attribute of the fool, see A. GROSS, "La Folie": *Wahnsinn und Nartheit im spätmittelalterlichen Text und Bild*, Heidelberg, 1990, pp. 40, 97–130; Y. PINSON, *The Fools' Journey: A Myth of Obsession in Northern Renaissance Art*, Turnhout, 2008, p. 34.

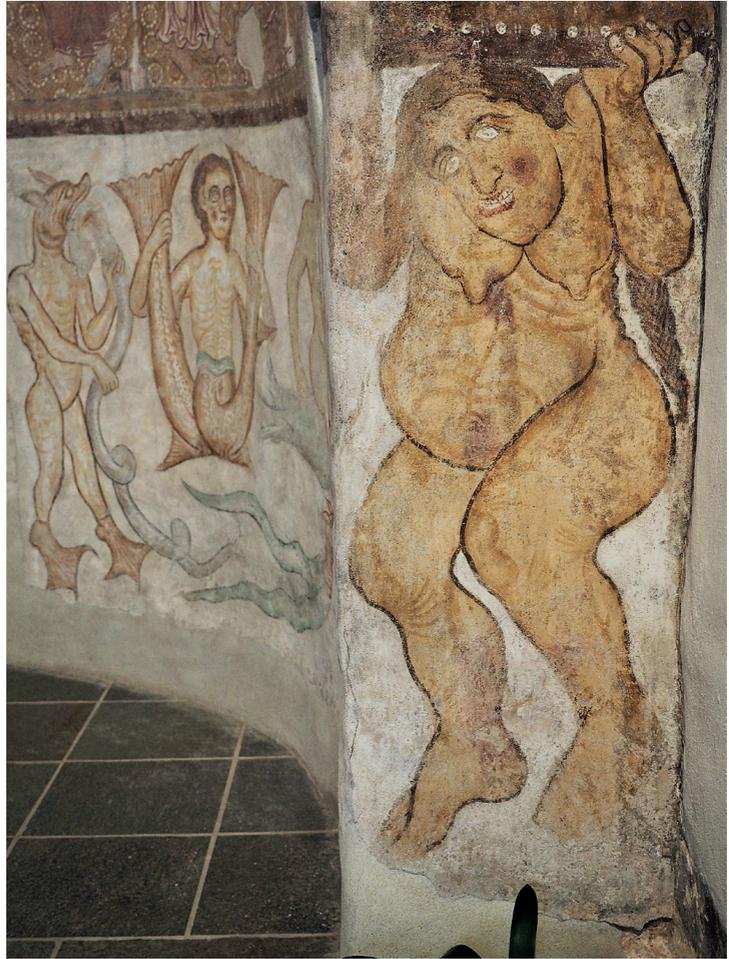


Fig. 5. St. Jakob in
Kastelaz, Naked
Giantess, triumphal arch
of the apse, ca. 1215
(photo: author)

thus evokes an even greater sense of foreignness, alienation, and wonder. The images are either out of scale or off the scale: they are beyond any proportion, overflowing the entire space and defying any attempt at somatic measurement in relation to the viewer's body.³² The sole visual elements that remain "to scale" and comprehensible when standing on this narrow platform, a hair's breadth from the images, are the attributes that mark the giants' quality or type. For viewers in the courtyard below, by contrast, the giants' attributes are too small to be identified: from this standpoint, the key factor is the figures' immense size. Originally, before the nineteenth-century wooden fence was added to the balcony, blocking the view from

³² R. SHUSTERMAN, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 1-2.

the courtyard, the giants would have been visible from a distance.³³ Viewed from within the imposing landscape of the Dalmatian mountains (Fig. 1), they evoke an experience of the magnificent, yet still beyond human perception—immeasurable images that intensify the ambivalent somatic experience of being both awe-inspiring and, concomitantly, threatening and unattainable.

A different construction of giants, and one that adheres more closely to their “personal biographies,” so to speak, is suggested in the Garel Room. *Garel von dem blühenden Tal*, written by Der Pleier around 1260–80, basically repeats the narrative of *Daniel von dem blühenden Tal* by Der Stricker, around 1220, but the later tale places greater emphasis on courtly decorum, with a plot motivated by Christian virtue and chivalry.³⁴ Upon entering the room, the experience of the immense iconic representation of giants in the balcony is inverted. The murals encompass the entire narrative of the giants’ metamorphosis from evil to respectability. Unlike the colossal iconic giants of the balcony, the Garel room provides an alternative visual stratagem for an experience of the gigantic, employing scale as its main perceptive device. The cycle contains 22 narrative panels drawn from *Garel von dem blühenden Tal*, portraying two main narratives in which the young knight Garel plays a central role: the abduction of Ginover (Guinevere) and her return by the knight Lanzelot (Lancelot), and the challenging of Artus (Arthur) by King Ekunaver. Featuring multiple smaller-than-life figures, the murals depict several encounters between Garel and various giants, male and female. These smaller narrative images can be grasped in their entirety by the human eye, and also be measured against the viewers’ bodies through the interplay of spatial perception, illusionistic devices, and relational scaling within and beyond the paintings’ planes. The cycle enacts various forms of relational sizing—namely scaling. Unlike measuring, which uses a set of objective units and norms and aspires to provide an ostensibly objective experience, scaling is a relative and relational act, and therefore encourages a more subjective experience.

Shortly after the abduction of Ginover, the giant Karabin, King Ekunaver’s messenger, appears before King Artus, challenging his court. The text describes Karabin as big and tall as trees, stressing his intimate relation to nature, recalling the intimate relation to nature of the iconic giants featured on the balcony, who appear against the background of the Dalmatian mountains. Karabin is courtly, handsome, and virtuous, elegantly attired and polite, eliciting both fear and respect.³⁵ Unlike the iconic giants on the balcony, the Garel frescoes present an almost literal rendition of the text (Fig. 6). King Artus is enthroned, flanked by his courtiers, while Karabin approaches from the right. The giant has no monstrous features but appears beautiful and humble. He is depicted as blond, young, and beardless, with a fashionable short haircut. He wears modern plate armor (not outdated chain mail) with a magnificent Roman purple military skirt. His helmet hangs across his back and his sword is sheathed, attesting to his peaceful intentions. Moreover, his hands are crossed over his huge iron rod in a strongly

³³ TORGLER, “Riesen und Zwerge”, pp. 123-125.

³⁴ M. STEPHAN, *Daniel und Garel, zwei Ritter von dem blühenden Tal*, Ravensburg, 2007, pp. 4-5.

³⁵ DER PLEIER, *Garel von dem blühenden Tal: Ein höfischer Roman aus dem Artussagenkreise; mit den Fresken des Garelsaales auf Runkelstein*, M. WALZ (ed.), Freiburg, 1892, vv. 240–259. In verses 259 to 260, the author even says that we should thank the giant for keeping his good, courtly manners (*wir suln dem risen sagen danc / daz er so höbschicher site phlac*).



Fig. 6. Garel Room, The Giant Karabin Appears before Artus, ca. 1400 (photo: Stiftung Bozner Schlösser / Fondazione Castelli di Bolzano)

Christomimetic posture that recalls the Flagellation. The only feature distinguishing him from the courtly audience is his scale: he is twice as tall as the other figures, even in his somewhat crouched stance. Unlike the paintings on the balcony, which communicate the essence or qualities of giants through an objective inflation of their size, here the small size of each panel prevents such a simple conceptualization, due to the limitations of the format. Instead, the artist employed a set of illusionistic devices in order to communicate the giant's colossal size: Artus's court is pushed into the background, diminishing its size, and the much larger image of Karabin is placed in the foreground, almost at the edge of the frame. This illusionistic play not only enables the differentiation between the human and the gigantic but also scales the figures in relation to one another, to the frame, to the architectonic elements in the picture, and to the viewers' own bodily perceptions. Therefore, through relational sizing, Karabin is somatically experienced as gigantic, even though, unlike the giants on the balcony, he and the other giants depicted in the Garel room are not colossal in and of themselves. Rather, it is through the play of scaling that they act upon the viewers' somatic, imaginative faculty, allowing them to envision the enormity of the giants.

The next panel depicts Garel trailing the giant, who walks out of the picture frame, in order to reach King Ekunaver. On Garel's journey, he arrives at the Land of Merkanie, where he has his first adventure, rescuing a damsel in distress by freeing her and her father from a tyrant. Garel's adventure is depicted in the middle plane of the fresco. The relocation of the hero across the picture plane in comparison to the previous panel, and the changing perspectival view, engender a sense of movement in the murals as the beholder's eyes move from one panel to the next. Garel is shown riding across a meadow against a rocky background featuring bushes, trees, hills, and a castle. As in the former panel, here too Karabin appears as neither wild nor threatening, and functions merely as a kind of narrative catalyst and visual sign of surplus. The next episodes are dedicated to detours and Garel's various battles on his journey, fighting several clans of giants, consistently conquering his adversaries and turning them into allies, until he is finally ready to challenge King Ekunaver.

Following the textual account, the sixteenth panel, which has not survived, might have pictured Garel's victory over four giants on his way to Kanadic, the land of King Ekunaver. In the text, the leader of the giants, Malseron, appears so immense that Garel believes him to be incredibly powerful—and this same message is conveyed to the fresco's viewers through the nuances of scaling between the figures.³⁶ Malseron and his fellow giants are all described as well-disciplined, powerful, and huge.³⁷ Garel bests them nonetheless and demands their fidelity. Malseron swears loyalty to Garel and promises that the giants will remain neutral in the conflict with Ekunaver. Now his loyal messenger, Malseron agrees to convey the news of Garel's victories and his terms to the king. In the seventeenth panel in Runkelstein, Malseron, together with a human messenger, appear before Ekunaver and his allied kings to deliver Garel's declaration of war (Fig. 7). The human messenger is represented in a Christomimetic pose that precisely

³⁶ *so lanc, daz min her Cärel jach, / so langen man er nie gesach, / swaz er noch Liute het gesehen, / er muost im ouch von schulden jehen, / daz sin kraft waere groz. Garel von dem blühenden Tal, st. 7, vv. 255-259.*

³⁷ *si habent zühticlichen sin . . . die selben hüsgenöze / daz sint risen groze / und sint also manhaft, / daz si mit ir ellens kraft / wol gestriten einem grozen her. / daz muoz mit ir willen sin. Garel von dem blühenden Tal st. 79, vv. 84-96.*



Fig. 7. The Giant Malseron Appears before Ekunaver (photo: Stiftung Bozner Schlösser / Fondazione Castelli di Bolzano)

echoes that of Karabin in the first panel. This parallel makes their divergent sizes overt, and the human messenger appears as a miniaturized version of Karabin. Malseron adopts an active speaking gesture, holding up a massive rod, a pose completely in opposition to the submissive and hunched poses of Karabin at the beginning of the cycle. Even more revealing is the play of scale between Malseron, the human messenger, the kings, and the animals, and which is carefully calculated in order to communicate the physical immensity of the main giant, Malseron; even the horse in front of Malseron appears miniaturized, emphasizing the giant's enormity.

The last appearance of the giants in the fresco cycle occurs after the successful end of the war (Fig. 8). In the foreground, Garel meets Artus, and Lancelot escorts Queen Ginover. The amassed troops appear behind them. Looming above the crowd are the huge faces of four giants. Here for the first time, the visual stratagem is inverted, and the giants are pushed from the front plane to the back. The beholders' somatic experience of the giants is thereby magnified: throughout almost the entire narrative, the beholders have identified and experienced the greatness of the giants by viewing them from up close, but now the giants occupy an even greater space, both technically and imaginatively, on the highest and most distant plane of the fresco panel, emphasizing their magnitude compared to the human throng around them, who, in turn, resemble dwarfs.

The various relocations of the giants in the picture plane throughout the cycle, the changing perspectival views, the various scales, and the illusionistic devices, engender an intensified sense of movement in the murals, mainly transmitted via the giants. The giants are scaled in relation to the Arthurian heroes. Standing in the front plane, as part of an illusionistic device, they appear much larger than their actual size. They then move to the center and finally to the back plane. In other panels, the giants are scaled against humans, fantastic beings, and animals, making horses appear as small pets. Such comparative anchors allow the beholders to scale their own bodies according to the depicted bodies and apprehend the giants somatically. The beholders gain a sense of control over the Other and its otherness, over the threat and fear that these embody in being able to 'hold the world in their hand'. Other giants feature in the background, as almost part of the immensity of nature itself. The process of reading the visual narrative reveals a gradual inflation of the depicted giants' dimensions and their increasing size in comparison to the other protagonists. This culminates in the triumphant scene with the four giants' heads hovering above the entire court.

The Summer House and its balcony thus communicate a sense of the gigantic by means of two different visual strategies: size and scale, which correspond to iconic and narrative representations. It therefore offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on what might be termed the "late medieval scaling turn"—the artistic, technological, and cultural manipulation of relational sizing (scaling) that occurred in the Latin West during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³⁸ This obsession with scaling drastically changed the visual culture of the period, along with its theological and philosophical tenets.³⁹ Scaling affected almost every aspect of

³⁸ A. PINKUS and E. KLAFTER, "Out of Scale: Experiencing Late Medieval Artifacts", in *How Do Images Work*, CH. BEIER, T. JUCKES, A. PINKUS (eds.), Turnhout, 2021, forthcoming.

³⁹ Although several studies have noted the preoccupation with measuring, none to date have dealt with scaling as a consolidated late medieval phenomenon. See for example F. BARTH, *Scale and Social Organization*, Oslo, 1978; J. BODLEY,

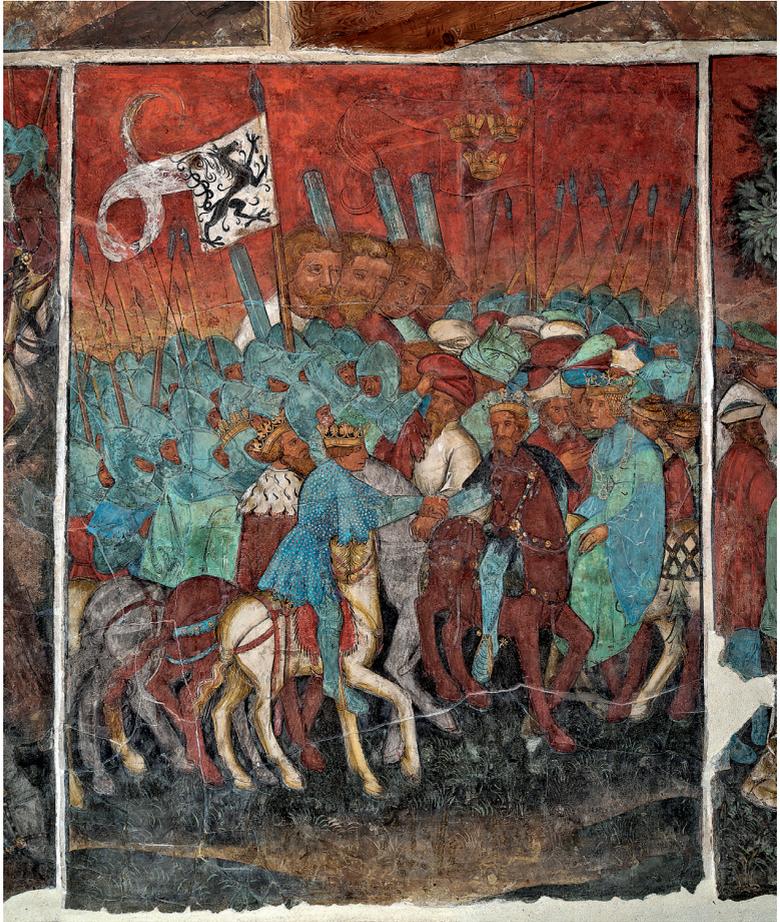


Fig. 8. Meeting of
Garel and Artus;
Lanzelot Brings
Back Queen
Ginover, ca. 1400
(photo: Stiftung
Bozner Schlösser /
Fondazione Castelli
di Bolzano)

daily life—language, literature, devotion, commerce, science, and law—and impacted modes of thinking and ideologies. The notion of scale was a key element in constructing late medieval aesthetics and the conceptualization of identity and self (both individual and communal). While the late medieval preoccupation with measuring has been relatively well researched and several studies have been dedicated to the notion of scale, none have reflected on the all-encompassing cultural implications of scaling on the visual and somatic experience of art.⁴⁰

The Power of Scale: A Global History Approach, Armonk, 2003; J. ESCALONA, A. REYNOLDS (eds.), *Scale and Scale Change in the Early Middle Ages: Exploring Landscape, Local Society, and the World Beyond*, Turnhout, 2011.

⁴⁰ Since artifacts are instrumental in transmission of knowledge in almost every aspect of cultural life, the scaled objects became key players in the construction of the late medieval self; see the groundbreaking work of C. WALKER BYNUM, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York, 2015, pp. 135-176.

Scaling, unlike measuring, is relational and stems from the recognition of how things—artworks, objects, instruments, or people—occupy a given space relative to one another.⁴¹ It mediates ontological categories of being and their interrelationships, which are in constant flux. Hence, scaled artifacts and images are articulators of the shifting relationships between God, humanity, the material world and, in the case of Runkelstein, between the courtly/civilized and the wild world, which is expressed through two distinct phenomenological experiences: measuring the gigantic and scaling the gigantic.

During the Late Middle Ages, many art forms were drastically transformed via scaling, and the manipulation of scale became an essential tool in the crafting of images. Traditionally, monumental artistic media evolved to take on the characteristics of miniature art and vice versa. There is a wealth of examples. In the fourteenth century, spectacular sculptured tympana came to adopt the aesthetics of miniature portable altars and ivories, featuring hundreds of diminutive carved figures.⁴² These architectural elements were then conceptually transposed from outdoors to indoors and structurally miniaturized to form decorative details within carved altarpieces. By the fifteenth century, however, sculptured tympana became almost abandoned, while multifigured altarpieces were being scaled up to form gigantic objects in a pendulum-like process of scaling interchange. The densely populated narratives that characterized both the sculptured tympana and carved altarpieces were also increasingly scaled down to truly miniature proportions that could fit into objects such as prayer nuts. These carved artifacts housed such elaborate narratives as the Passion of Christ in a space as small as five centimeters in diameter.⁴³ Similarly, ecclesiastical architecture was scaled down into microarchitectural elements used to frame various devotional and liturgical artifacts for both private and communal use. And again, with a swing of the scaling pendulum, these microarchitectural elements were monumentalized anew to designate *loci sancti*, such as sacrament houses or the public colossal crosses and civic turriform monuments that served as communal and political foci.⁴⁴ These sacrament houses were monumentalized, towering chambers that dominated church interiors, forming pseudo-edifices within the actual buildings. Their monumentalization conveyed the presence of Christ within the church through his presence in the Host.⁴⁵ Like the development of the monstrance, the sacrament houses were in dialogue with the concept of ocular communion, catering to the visual reception of the sanctified body of

⁴¹ R. HOWITT, "Scale", in *A Companion to Political Geography*, J. AGNEW, et al. (ed.), Oxford, 2007, pp. 132-157; J. KEE, E. LUGLI, "Scale to Size: An Introduction", *Art History*, 38/2 (2015), pp. 250-266.

⁴² L. F. JACOBS, *Early Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces, 1380–1550: Medieval Tastes and Mass Marketing*, Cambridge, 1998), pp. 35-79; A. PINKUS, *Patrons and Narratives of the Parler School: The Marian Tympana, 1350-1400*, Berlin, 2009, pp. 33-66.

⁴³ Most recently, see E. WETTER, F. SCHOLTEN (eds.), *Prayer Nuts, Private Devotion, and Early Modern Art Collecting*, Riggisberg, 2017, pp. 27-45; F. SCHOLTEN, *Small Wonders: Late Gothic Boxwood Micro-Carvings from the Low Countries*, Amsterdam, 2016, pp. 79-104.

⁴⁴ F. BUCHER, "Micro-Architecture as the 'Idea' of Gothic Theory and Style", *Gesta* 15/1 (1976), pp. 71-89; A. TIMMERMANN, "'Freedom I Do Reveal to You': Scale, Microarchitecture, and the Rise of the Turriform Civic Monument in Fourteenth-Century Northern Europe", *Art History*, 38/2 (2015), pp. 324-345.

⁴⁵ A. TIMMERMANN, *Real Presence: Sacrament Houses and the Body of Christ, c. 1270–1600*, Turnhout, 2009, pp. 31-49.

⁴⁶ S. BIERNOFF, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*, New York, 2002, pp. 133-164.

Christ.⁴⁶ These oversized architectural monuments enshrined particularly small monstrosities that contained the even smaller object of the Host. Uniquely, among the many liturgical and sacred objects in the church, only the monstrance was given such prominent housing. This up-scaling went hand-in-hand with a theological debate on the size, quantity, and measure of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. The microarchitectural decoration and miniature details, recalling the goldwork on such monumental structures, produced an experience of excess and surplus.⁴⁷ Prayer books were subject to similar fluctuations in scale, from thumb-sized volumes intended to be held and engaged with by their individual owners;⁴⁸ to the large display volumes produced throughout the Middle Ages being further scaled up to lavish tomes—the so-called Giant Bibles and Giant Choir Manuscripts, much larger than their twelfth- and thirteenth-century precedents.⁴⁹

Being a major feature of artistic production at the time, scaling up or down affected the viewers' somatic responses to the works and their understanding. The power of this change in reception is particularly evident in the figural statuary. The life-size sculptures of Christian saints and heroes that had populated many portals and street corners during the High Middle Ages were newly executed on a colossal scale in the fourteenth century. This inflated sizing of familiar figures imposed a new somatic engagement between viewers, artifacts, and the natural world, hindering the viewers' ability to gauge the sculptures in relation to their own bodies.⁵⁰ This visual surplus transformed the familiar figures into awe-inspiring or sometimes even threatening objects. Whereas life-size sculptures were well-suited to meet the personal, affective devotion exemplified by the practices of *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Mariae*—their colossal counterparts negated such intimate identification and imaginative merging with the sacred image. This expansion of size could evoke a sense of the magnificent and even the sublime,⁵¹ which lay beyond the boundaries of perception of the human mind and body,⁵² such as the "Giant Marias", and even depictions of the Madonna della Misericordia, who appears as an outsized figure sheltering the devout diminutive figures beneath her mantle. The relational scaling of these figures communicated to the devotees the Madonna's protective power,

⁴⁷ The literature on this topic is vast. See P. KURMANN, "Gigantomanie und Miniatur: Möglichkeiten gotischer Architektur zwischen Großbau und Kleinkunst", *Kölner Domblatt*, 61 (1996), pp. 123-146; N. Y. WU (ed.), *Ad quadratum: The Practical Application of Geometry in Medieval Architecture*, Burlington, 2002; R. O. BORK, *Great Spires: Skyscrapers of the New Jerusalem*, Cologne, 2003; CH. KRATZKE and U. ALBRECHT (eds.), *Mikroarchitektur im Mittelalter: Ein gattungsübergreifendes Phänomen zwischen Realität und Imagination*, Leipzig, 2008.

⁴⁸ For a comprehensive collection and study, see A. BROMER, J. I. EDISON, *Miniature Books: 4,000 Years of Tiny Treasures*, New York, 2007.

⁴⁹ D. REILLY, "French Romanesque Giant Bibles and Their English Relatives: Blood Relatives or Adopted Children?", *Scriptorium*, 56/2 (2002), pp. 294-311; G. D. GREENIA, "The Bigger the Book: On Oversize Medieval Manuscripts", *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 83/3 (2005), pp. 723-745. On the phenomenology of the miniature versus the gigantic, see S. STEWART, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, 1993, pp. 37-103.

⁵⁰ J. BARKER, "Frustrated Seeing: Scale, Visibility, and a Fifteenth-Century Royal Monument in Portugal", *Art History*, 41/2 (2018), pp. 220-245.

⁵¹ On the notion of medieval sublime, see S. JAEGER (ed.), *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music*, New York, 2010, pp. 1-17, 157-179.

⁵² H. BELTING, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, Munich, pp. 11-56.

similar to the colossalization of the Roland figures, which became civic apotropaic images.⁵³ Measuring six to ten meters in height, these colossi shaped the urban landscapes of late medieval city squares, harbors, and rivers, hovering high above the skyline and serving to proclaim the city's independence vis-à-vis the ecclesiastical institution, and embodying its independent sovereignty, a visualization of the city's privileges.⁵⁴ The colossal Christopher, whether as a statue at city gates or painted on the external walls of churches, had a similar protective function: according to his cult, whoever made eye contact with the staring gaze of the gigantic figure would be protected from an unhallowed death (with no Last Sacrament) that day.⁵⁵ Up-scaling an object was therefore often related to a protective, apotropaic role.

The corresponding process of miniaturization also affected the colossal sculptures. The giant Roland statues were eventually scaled down to less than life-size, becoming favored decorative elements for fountains towards the end of the fifteenth century. This inversion process similarly characterized the tiny prayer books and prayer nuts that had become popular private devotional objects, allowing people to hold them in the hand and carry them on their bodies. Such three-dimensional miniaturizations, however, also prevented a somatic connection by creating a space that could not be imaginatively entered by the viewers. The resultant images, in addition, were often too small to be fully perceived, let alone identified or subject to negotiation.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, this down-scaling produced the same sensory alienation as the extreme up-scaling. The miniaturization of divine personages placed them too beyond the boundaries of immediate human perception.⁵⁷ Moreover, the miniaturized objects undermined the proportions of their surroundings since they created a self-enclosed world that threw the natural world out of scale in relation to them.⁵⁸ Unlike the act of up-scaling, however, down-scaling gave the beholder a sense of control: even if one could not penetrate the entire visual realm of these artifacts, they could still be held in the palm of one's hand. Therefore, whether through magnification or miniaturization, relational sizing negotiated the place of humankind within the material world, while at the same time generating an experience of unattainability and foreignness.

Both extremes of scale demanded a physical repositioning of the viewer in relation to the images, whether stepping back or leaning in, in order to perceive them in their entirety. Scaling up and down thus appear to be two sides of the same coin, evoking the familiar, the foreign, and the marvelous, made quantifiable through the scaling process. This fascination is clearly articulated in the gradual scaling of the Castle Runkelstein giants. Offering a nuanced phenomenological approach, Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli inquired into the problem of relationality, asking what it means when one can no longer perceive an object as a physical

⁵³ WOOD, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction*, pp. 164-184; A. PINKUS, "The Giant of Bremen: Roland and the "Colossus Imagination", *Speculum*, 93/2 (2018), pp. 387-419.

⁵⁴ D. GATHEN, *Rolande als Rechtssymbole: Der archäologische Bestand und seine rechtshistorische Deutung*, Berlin, 1960, pp. 10-32, 99-101.

⁵⁵ F. WERNER, "Christophorus", in *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie: Ikonographie der Heiligen*, W. BRAUNFELS (ed.), Freiburg, 1994, vol. 5, pp. 496-508.

⁵⁶ A. WINSTON-ALLEN, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* Pennsylvania, pp. 133-52.

⁵⁷ J. PORTER, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 55-56, 142-147.

⁵⁸ STEWART, *On Longing*, pp. 37-69.

whole—as is the case with the giants on the Runkelstein’s balcony—suggesting that this inability may present a way to define what constitutes trans-humanism in both the medieval and modern contexts.⁵⁹ Power too is at stake in images of giants, especially because they embody an excess of power, often bordering on the chaotic and threatening courtly society. Giants, therefore, must be either defeated or baptized in order to convert their chaotic potential to proper order. Paradoxically, however, in the case of the immense enlargement of such figures—whether of St. Christopher, Mary, or the epical giants—it is their protective power that becomes visibly apotropaic, not their chaotic nature.

The delicate dialectic between measurement and scale at play in Runkelstein’s murals engenders in the viewers a multiple sensory experience of the gigantic and its relation to the natural environment and to the domestic and the public settings. The murals present several types of giants and genealogies—giants anchored in Norse mythologies and ancient times reincarnated as general abstractions. The visual properties of the scaled/out-of-scale giants might have served to reflect contemporary perceptions of socio-ethical and gender relations among peoples, races (humans versus giants and, by implication, the Christian devotees versus the Other), and the natural world. Sizing and scaling of the world of phenomena—of humans, half-humans, and non-humans—evoke respectively the familiar, the foreign, and the marvelous, rendering them quantifiable.⁶⁰ Giants are not the main protagonists of the Arthurian literature. Although mostly portrayed as ambivalent in character, if not malicious and repulsive, they are remarkably depicted—not only in Runkelstein but also in all the other cases mentioned in this contribution—as courtly and brave, symbols of chivalric virtues. In Runkelstein they are included in the prestigious company of the Nine Worthies. Representing chivalric ideals, the latter were often supplemented with additional triads of local heroes, representing local bravery.⁶¹ This makes the inclusion of the giants in Runkelstein all the more intriguing, as it might attest to the immediate concerns and identity of the murals’ commissioners. While the Arthurian heroes usually served as role models for the knightly and aristocratic civic strata, it seems that the Vintlers sought to identify themselves with giants. Rising from the civic middle class to the lower ranked nobility of the Ministerialer, and to prominent administrative key-players and patrons of the arts in South Tirol, required the Vintlers to acquire new forms of political and cultural assertion.⁶² Giants were the perfect surrogates for this. Like the giants themselves, the Vintlers were of liminal status, distancing themselves from their modest origins and not yet fully assimilated into the upper aristocracy. Being liminal creatures, between the wild and the courtly, between rejection and acceptance, the giants might have served as the alter-ego of the work’s commissioners—the Vintlers—social climbers and, similarly to the visually civilized and courtly giants, of liminal social status in themselves; but this would be the topic of another study.

⁵⁹ KEE, LUGLI, “Scale to Size”, pp. 254-257.

⁶⁰ I. WEINRYB, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 2016, pp. 148-152.

⁶¹ H. SCHRÖDER, *Der Topos der Nine Worthies in Literatur und bildender Kunst*, Göttinger, 1971, pp. 168-202.

⁶² On the visual self-fashioning of the Ministerialer, see J. A. JR. RUSHING, *Images of Adventure: Ywain in the Visual Arts*, Philadelphia, 2016, pp. 32-33, 77-78, and 245-56; M. CURSCHMANN, *Vom Wandel im bildlichen Umgang mit literarischen Gegenständen. Rodenegg, Waldstein und das Flaarsche Haus in Stein am Rhein*, Freiburg, 1997, pp. 9-10.

