Our investigator of iconographic wonders in lesser-known museums travels to Berlin, where the city’s “picture gallery” contains a strong collection of art from Germany and other European countries.

Berlin is well off the beaten track of the London – Paris – Florence – Rome art tour, unless you have the stamina to go on to Venice, Vienna, and Dresden. Moreover, it is a city devastated by war and thereafter long divided by ideology, and it will be years before all the scars are healed. Although the rococo glories of the Charlottenburg and Potsdam palaces are nearby, the city center has no noteworthy ancient buildings left. But it does have a large and beautiful central area of forest land, the Tiergarten. And all visitors are infected by the indomitable spirit and liveliness of the city. Rejuvenation is at its most evident between the Tiergarten and the Potsdamer Platz, where a new central railway station is being built. This area includes the Philharmonie (a superb concert hall) and the Museum of Musical Instruments, as well as the Kulturforum, which houses the Kupferstichkabinett (Berlin’s famous collection of prints), an art library, the Museum of...
Applied Art, and the Gemäldegalerie, the picture gallery.

Unlike the spectacular and colorful buildings towering nearby, the gallery is a very modest affair, lying low across the back of a vast pedestrian podium (illus. 1). Even more surprising, on entering you find yourself in the atrium, a huge long hall of columns, dappled with circular rings of light, and, apart from a sculpture that re-interprets the columns, with no work of art in sight (illus. 2). But, around this, doorways lead to a series of 18 large rooms and 36 small rooms containing 900 paintings, spaciiously displayed in a historically coherent manner. As expected, the gallery is strong in German paintings, but the
holdings of Italian, Flemish, and Dutch paintings are also outstanding – the octagonal Rembrandt room has the finest collection outside Holland. In the basement below, the gallery’s 400 paintings in reserve are on show, with computer terminals spread around offering a historical survey of the entire Berlin collection. It is one of the few national galleries where one feels both stimulated and relaxed.

Two of the Italian paintings at Berlin are well-known. One is by Titian, the other by Caravaggio. The Titian was referred to in my article on the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge in the Summer 2005 issue of this journal (pp. 32-8); it belongs to a series of five paintings of Venus with a musician, two of which are in the Prado, one in Berlin (illus. 3 here), and the others in Cambridge (illus. 5 last year) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York – and that is probably the order of their painting. In the last two, the musician is a young lutenist, and in the other three an organ player. Moreover, Titian developed the symbolism of the series as the ‘sacred and profane love’ idea, and the ‘ring of music’ structure is not evident in the earlier paintings. In the Berlin painting which, with the Cambridge one, Titian almost certainly painted totally himself without using studio assistants, the organist, unlike the organists in the Prado versions, looks at Venus in worship rather than lust. The organ, symbol of the power of music, dominates the left-hand side of the Berlin and Prado pictures, but the organist in the Berlin painting has ceased to play it – the power of love through visible beauty is stronger than the audible beauty and power of music.

The triumph of love over the lesser joys of music is also the theme of Caravaggio’s painting from 1602 (illus. 4). Indeed, the tauntingly smiling Amor boasts his superiority over all human endeavors. This includes science (a square and compass, the instruments of geometry), literary fame, represented by a laurel crown, a reed pen, and an open manuscript, astronomy (the globe), the glories of war, and what was thought to be the noblest of all achievements, the art of good government, represented by a crown and scepter. Music is symbolized by an open music book and two stringed instruments. Chosen by the god Apollo, bowed and plucked strings were more highly regarded than other kinds of instruments, and Caravaggio cunningly depicts both the long-established lute and the violin, a relative newcomer perfected during the later 16th century in Cremona. Neither the music of the past nor of the future can be victorious over love.

Two other Italian paintings in Berlin...
also share a theme – glorification of the Virgin Mary. Illustration 5 is an Assumption by an anonymous Sienese painter from about 1400. It is one of the latest in a series of “ring of angels” paintings said to be inspired by a lost work by Simone Martini. The earliest extant painting in this group is in Munich, also anonymous and, with equal uncertainty, dated about 1340. It is surprising that both the general structure and the detailed representation of instruments in this group of Sienese paintings remained virtually unchanged for over 60 years, even though actual instruments were being redesigned during this period. Artists simply copied one from another. The instruments in this painting, starting from top left and going down and around, are psaltery (plucked with fingers not quills), pipe and tabor, nakers, lute, cymbals, double-pipe, single pipe, vielle (fiddle), portative organ, small drum, and shawm.

Gentile da Fabriano’s Virgin and Child (illus. 6) are serenaded, rather noisily, by fourteen angel-musicians playing from the branches of two trees. The attendant saints are St. Nicholas and St. Catherine, with a fragment of a spiked Catherine wheel at her toe, and an angel at the center of the tree above her plays a musical equivalent, a bell-wheel with six bells, probably tuned to a hexachord (illus. 6a). It is surrounded by loud instruments, symbolizing the glory of the Virgin. Two upper and two lower instruments in this tree all seem to be shawms; the uppermost instrument is a bagpipe, and the other (middle right) could be a hurdy-gurdy, but it is partly hidden by foliage. The instruments in the tree on the left side (6b), the side representing the Virgin’s humility, are all bass. In the middle is a portative organ, and around it, clockwise from top, tambourine with jingles, rebec, lute, harp, psaltery, and vielle (fiddle).

The instrument in illustration 7 is an oddity. It is a syrinx, with five pipes instead of the usual seven, and its tone-production is that of a duct-flute rather than the pan-pipe’s more usual lipped edge-tone. The largest pipe, with its paired little finger-holes, and its contraction then expansion at the bell end, looks like a recorder with four middle

6. Gentile da Fabriano, The Virgin and Child Enthroned, with Two Saints, c. 1395-1400 (Cat. No.1130)
6a. Angel-musicians in the right-hand tree
6b. Angel-musicians in the left-hand tree

finger-holes missing. Are its holes, and those on the other pipes, meant to be fingered? Can they be reached? Or is all this the artist’s imagination? If so, why did he take so much care, as is evident, in depicting it in such perfect detail?

Finally, let us enjoy some uncomplicated pictures of music-making from Holland and Spain. Terborch’s Concert (illus. 8) may, however, have had amorous overtones, since the spinet player was originally a young man with a broad-brimmed hat looking over towards his cello-playing partner; and she wears yellow, a dress-color then suggesting easy virtue. But Terborch later changed him into an older woman, for no known reason though he must have had one. This figure was then itself badly repainted in a late 19th-century restoration. But we still have the beautiful back of the cellist, expressing concentration, although the painting as a whole is suffused with Vermeer-like calm.

The early Velasquez in
ART OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

Illustration 9 is a straightforward scene of music-making in an inn, a genre derived from Dutch kitchen interiors but drawing upon the figure-style of Caravaggio. The boy holding a guitar is about to enjoy his drink, while a man (his father?) sings ecstatically to his own guitar-playing. The guitars may be vihuelas – they are very similar. A third man playing the violin follows the other man closely, and perhaps he is also singing, as Apollo did to his own accompaniment on a viola da braccia. The monkey is probably just the boy’s pet rather than being of symbolic significance.

I should mention at least one German painting out of the many pictures in this gallery that include musical instruments. My choice would be The Ecstasy of St. Paul by Johann Liss, c.1597-1629 (Cat. No. 1858). In St. Paul's vision of Heaven, amongst an array of angels, he is shown players of a violin and of a bass. It is an epitome of Baroque vigor; the bow arm of the bass player, apparently a woman, curves in extraordinary musculature across the center-left foreground. And the picture revels in sumptuous color. It is an object lesson from art on how to play Baroque music, brightly, with vigor and emotional involvement, perhaps even ecstasy.

Anthony Rowland-Jones writes on the subjects of recorder and music iconography for a number of publications. He wishes to express his thanks to the curatorial staff of the Gemäldegalerie, in particular Dr. Stefan Wep pelmann, and Dr. Rainald Grosshans, who co-authored a valuable book on Fifty Masterpieces in the collection with Dr. Jan Kelch, the gallery’s former director, in 2000.

7. Detail from Raffaellino del Garbo (Florence, 1479-1524 or 7), Virgin and Child with Two Musical Angels, (Cat. No. 90), showing the angel playing a syrinx. The other angel plays a psaltery.

8. Terborch, The Concert, c.1675 (Cat. No. 791G).