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A German Nativity Miniature and its Iconographic Significance

Rosemarie Bergmann

A few years ago, the Bibliothèque Royale Albert I^{er} in Brussels acquired a small book containing twenty-nine illuminations illustrating the life and, predominantly, the Passion of the Lord.¹ It can be assumed that these miniatures formed part of a devotional book. This hitherto unpublished manuscript has no known history and contains no indications as to place of origin.

In the announcement of its acquisition, the Rhenish school and a date of about 1425 have been suggested.² However, the base of the frame of the *Crucifixion* miniature (Fig. 1) contains the figure XXXII in Roman numerals while the lid of the sarcophagus in the *Resurrection* scene bears an inscription of which at least “. . . anno domini millesimo XXXII . . .” can be deciphered. Accordingly, one might reasonably conclude that 1432 is the date of the Brussels cycle. This is further corroborated by the style of the miniatures which, despite their provinciality, reflect a definite familiarity with the new achievements of the early Netherlanders — particularly Robert Campin — on the one hand, and with the production of the book-painting workshops associated with the courts of Guelders and Cleve. A complete study of the style of these miniatures has led this writer to believe that they could well have been produced in the Rhine-Meuse area.³

Their iconographic features, general as well as particular, are also best localized in this region. It is in Cologne, in the workshop of the elder Master of the Holy Kinship, where the so-called “Bilderbogen” were produced.⁴ These small size passion picture cycles feature a detailed, dramatized narrative of the ordeals of Christ which also characterize the Brussels book, which has five pages with Christ before his judges and four scenes preceding the Calvary. This emphasis on the Lord’s Passion is also demonstrated by Rhenish and Dutch hour books where the little office of the Virgin Mary is illustrated with passion scenes instead of the traditional subject matter from Christ’s infancy.⁵ Our cycle starts with an Annunciation, placed in an interior, which is the location preferred by northern painters of the fifteenth century. But it is unusual that the angel Gabriel should approach Mary from the right side. Examples of this type seem concentrated along the Rhine and in the Netherlands during the late Middle Ages.⁶

While the iconography of the Brussels cycle is largely based on the main literary sources of late medieval times, namely the Bible, the New Testa-

Bilderfolge *en miniature*,” in *Vor Stefan Lochner*, proceedings of a colloquium held at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, forthcoming in 1977.

⁴ For this master, see *Vor Stefan Lochner* (exhibition, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, 29 March – 7 July 1974), 93-98.

⁵ A.H. van Buren points out in a paper presented at the 62nd annual meeting of the College Art Association (Detroit, 1974) that Honorius of Autun and the Pseudo-Bonaventura identified each hour and its office with one event of the Passion.

⁶ D.W. Denny, who wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on this problem (“The Annunciation from the Right,” New York University, 1965), suggests that greater importance accorded to Gabriel as the instrument of God’s will may in part be responsible for the change in position.

¹ Ms. IV 483; the framed illuminations, executed in gouache on parchment, measure 9.7 × 7 cm. and are all painted on the rectos. The versos were originally left blank, but biblical texts were later added in a sixteenth-century hand.

I am indebted to McGill University for having awarded me a generous travel grant to study the manuscript.

² *La Librairie de Bourgogne et quelques acquisitions récentes de la Bibliothèque Royale Albert I* (Brussels, 1970), 14, no. 11.

³ For a study of the manuscript, see R. Bergmann, “Eine



FIGURE 1. *Crucifixion*. Brussels, B.R., ms. IV 483, no. 22.

ment Apocrypha, the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* of the Pseudo-Bonaventura (J. de Caulibus?),⁷ and the *Revelations* of Saint Birgitta of Sweden, there are elements which seem to point out that the artist of the miniatures was partly inspired by contemporaneous passion plays. A two-storey brick and timber structure is quite unusual for a depiction of the Massacre of the Innocent Children, but it accords well with the theatre practices of the time.⁸ *Christ before Annas* and the *Flagellation* (Fig. 2) feature ruined architecture behind which a crane or pulley appears, and it is well known that such hoisting mechanisms were used in the staging of contemporaneous mystery plays. In the page of the *Noli me Tangere* one notices in a relatively well rendered landscape a picket fence

⁷ Kurth Ruh, *Bonaventura deutsch* (Bern, 1956), 269-273, doubts this identity and states that the *Meditationes* were popularized in Germany and the Netherlands by Ludolphus of Saxony's *Vita Christi* and a frequently copied vernacular compilation of both works, the *Bonaventura-Ludolphiaanse Leven van Jezus*. For this, see H. Beckers, "Neue Funde zur handschriftlichen Verbreitung von Seuses Werken am Niederrhein und in Westfalen," *Leuvense Bijdragen*, LX (1971), 254.

⁸ Grace Frank, *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford, 1954), 163-167.

which is not anchored to the ground and a completely unmotivated brocade hanging. Both, it seems, are reminiscences of movable stage props.

One of the most beautiful scenes of the Brussels series is the *Nativity* (Fig. 3), or rather the Adoration of the Child by Mary and Joseph. It has all the makings of a progressive rendition of the most beloved event in Christian art and, indeed, is comparable to Robert Campin's famous *Nativity* in Dijon,⁹ one of the key works of the Netherlandish *Ars nova* and always cited for its naturalistic rendering of people, architectural space, and landscape. The same can be said for the Brussels page, lovingly manufactured by an anonymous craftsman. No longer does the Madonna recline on a bed; she kneels, although still hieratically enlarged according to medieval concepts, on the bare ground and adores her naked child in a glory of golden rays. The gray-haired and bearded Joseph, located somewhat further back in the dilapidated shed, also adores the new-born Jesus towards

⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), II, 156-158, Figs. 201, 202.

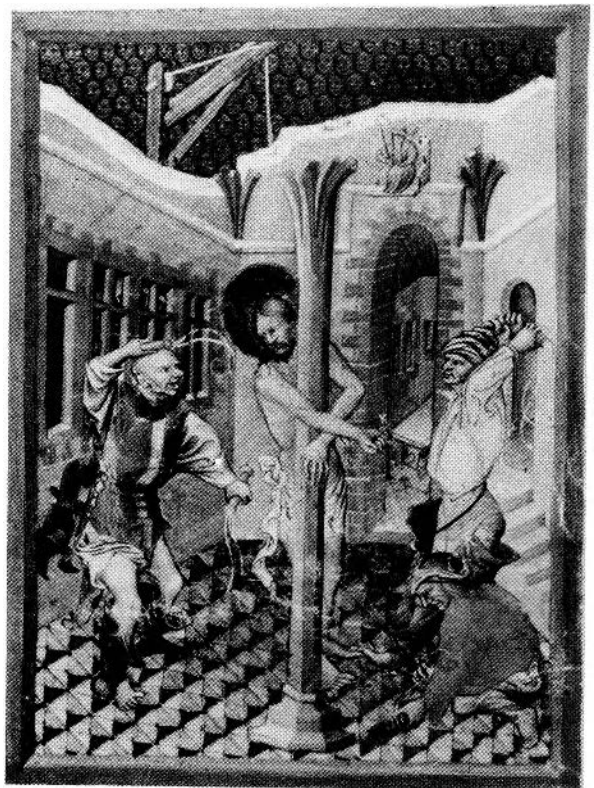


FIGURE 2. *Flagellation*. Brussels, B.R., ms. IV 483, no. 14.



FIGURE 3. *Nativity*. Brussels, B.R., ms. IV 483, no. 2.

whom his glance is directed. His common image as *père nourrice* is underlined by the ladle with the soup, warming over the fire. Ox and ass almost hover over the infant, ostensibly showing their affection. At the right side, two shepherds have appeared and discuss — rather casually, it seems — the miraculous event. A third shepherd and his sheep are placed further back on a hillock; he looks up to three very Cologne angels with a slightly misspelled annunciation message on a scroll. The shepherds strike a genre note in the miniature, similar to that in the Dijon *Nativity*. The wooden lean-to, constructed over a ruined building, cannot possibly accommodate the regal figure of Mary, but the oblique placement of both the shed and the ruins, and the meticulous rendering of architectural detail, show the illuminator's profound interest in the creation of pictorial space. By lining up a post at left and part of a wall at right with the verticals of the frame, the artist gives the illusion that the space of the picture is extended into that of the spectator; he, in turn, views the beautifully panoramic landscape through this framing device as through a window, so that the vista appears far more three-dimensional and real than it otherwise would. A walled and towered city, a river, luminously painted with gold and silver in loose brushstrokes, and three successive hills with farm dwellings lead the eye gradually to the horizon. This sort of intuitive perspective is enhanced by the treatment of light — a major concern of northern painters from about 1400 onward and probably in part due to their geographical situation with long, sombre winters. The artist depicts nighttime here, which at the beginning of the fifteenth century is still a rare subject. A full moon hangs in a dark, steely sky and floods the landscape with a scintillating, whitish light which diminishes towards the foreground, reaching its lowest intensity in the area of the hill with the shepherd and the sleeping town.

The Adoration in the foreground appears more brightly lighted, inconsistent with the treatment of the back- and middleground. The sun being out of the question, the source of illumination can be neither natural nor yet artificial light — the *luce* of Leonardo da Vinci's language. Instead, it is Leonardo's *lumen*, an unreal, divine light which brightens the holy event in the shed. It emanates from God or even perhaps from his son, from the aureole of golden rays. Such symbolic light is conceived of in Christian cosmology from the Pseudo-Areopagite onward, although St. Birgitta of Sweden makes this concept in her visions at once more tangible and popular. She describes how Joseph was not to be present at the actual birth but,

before retiring from the room, brought in a lighted candle. At the moment of the royal birth the divine radiance emanating from the child completely obliterated the light of Joseph's candle.¹⁰ In Campin's *Nativity*, also illuminated by two light sources, Joseph is holding in his hand a candle, which subsequently becomes a favoured symbol in northern painting. Although the Birgittine cave is generally replaced by the shed in Germanic Nativities, they otherwise follow the saint's vision — the nakedness of the Christ child, his position on the bare ground, the kneeling Virgin Mary, the adoration by both parents. It is not surprising that St. Birgitta's humanizing interpretation of the mystic event should have had a profound effect upon the artists. Even before her time the image of the mother adoring her child had been created by the Pseudo-Bonaventura in his *Meditations*. In fact, it seems quite probable that the Swedish saint, who wrote her *Revelations* in Italy in the latter part of the fourteenth century, could have been inspired by pictures which were done according to the Franciscan monk. Thus, the iconography of the life of Christ is in most cases a conflation of both of these well-known works. The depiction of ox and ass in the Brussels miniature is most certainly dependent on the Pseudo-Bonaventura. There is a long history of literature concerning the symbolism of the two beasts from St. Jerome onward, with the ass usually interpreted as the inferior animal. Only De Caulibus reports the charming detail that both animals adore the Saviour and even warm him with their breath.¹¹ Not only their position but also their open mouths suggest this. Yet there seems to be a closer formal relationship intended between the Christ child and the ox and this may still imply something of the traditional symbolism, declaring the superiority of that animal. The popular Franciscan is also responsible for a detail in the unusual iconography of the *Presentation in the Temple* (Fig. 4), where the child holds one of the offertory doves required in the purification rite.¹²

Up to now only open symbolism has been encountered in the miniature. It is, of course, no secret that medieval art and life abound in it. A thorough knowledge of biblical and post-biblical sources is an absolute prerequisite for the understanding and interpretation of images created at the time. Throughout

¹⁰ Millard Meiss, "Light as Form and Symbol in some Fifteenth Century Paintings," *The Art Bulletin*, XXVII (1945), 176, n. 2.

¹¹ Panofsky, 278, n. 1.

¹² Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, eds., *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Princeton, 1961), 62, 64.

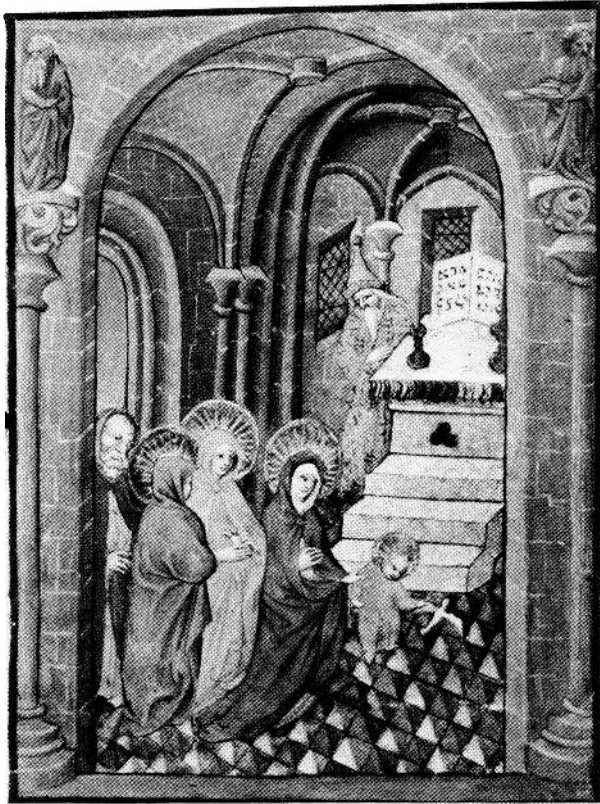


FIGURE 4. *Presentation in the Temple*. Brussels, B.R.. ms. IV 483, no. 3.

the fifteenth century, man still sees things *sub specie aeternitatis*, and the artists in their urge to depict everything most objectively and with verisimilitude tend to disguise symbols under the cloak of reality. The early Netherlanders, above all the great Jan van Eyck, develop this practice of investing common things with spiritual significance to the highest degree of subtlety. But even such modest productions as the Brussels book sufficiently evidence the trend. The *Presentation in the Temple* may again serve as example. Its framing architecture features two sculptured statues on columns, as would church portals. The left figure, old and with a long white beard, is certainly meant to be the Moses to whom the purification law relates, while the right one with a scroll might well be Malachi, whose prophecy was read as the epistle on the feast day of the purification. A rather common disguised symbol in the Brussels *Nativity* is the ruined architecture onto which the shed is built. On the surface this seems to allude to the circumstances of poverty accompanying the birth of the Saviour, but ruins also appear without any external justification in the miniatures of *Christ before Annas* and the *Flagellation*. They are surely representative of Judaism, the Old Order which is

crumbling with the arrival and sacrifice of Christ, the New Order. The typological juxtaposition of Old and New Testament was established by patristic writing and was common practice in medieval times. The *Biblia pauperum* and the *Speculum humanis salvationis* are the best known evidence for the popularity of the concept.

Keeping these attitudes in mind, one might wonder whether the leafless trees in the *Nativity* are just a bit of realism in the depiction of its winter landscape or whether they are not meant to symbolize the dry tree of Adam in contrast with the green trees at the bank of the river. They would be poplars, deciduous trees which lose their foliage in winter. It must be remembered that St. Bonaventura's *Lignum vitae* and Ubertino de Casale's *Arbor vitae* (both, of course, referring to Christ's sacrifice) were well known and well loved by the mystics who, in their sermons, popularized the image of Jesus as the living tree. The early hymn *Pange lingua* as well as the late medieval Christmas song *Es ist ein Reis entsprungen* testify to it. On the same terms the moon — attribute of Mary in the *Canticle of Canticles* and the *Apocalypse*, but not a traditional feature of the *Nativity* — may have symbolic meaning rather than being only an element in the depiction of a night scene. The river may stand, as it does so often in the panels of the early Netherlanders, for the "well of water flowing fresh from Lebanon" (*Canticle*, 4:15).

We have yet to speak of two objects in the little *Nativity* which are, however, very prominently displayed in the foreground of the miniature and must, therefore, be deemed important: the swaddling clothes on the left and the pile of wood on the right. The former, deliberately stylized in curls and fluttering ends, are right in line with the gaze of the Virgin although she is adoring the Christ child. They may be identified with the leggings or hose of Joseph who, according to legend, cut his stockings to make diapers for the infant. Their tubular shape, their number (not four as in St. Birgitta's vision), and the fact that Joseph is barefoot support this identification. He can be seen actually cutting his hose in a small painted panel belonging to a Lower Rhenish polyptych of about 1400, now in Antwerp. The director of the Museum Mayer van den Bergh in that city, understandably intrigued by this unusual motif, has traced its occurrence in art and in written sources and found a fair number of examples, mostly concentrated in the Rhine-Meuse region.¹³ While it has been well known

¹³ Jozef de Coo, "In Josephs Hosen Jhesus ghewonden wert." *Aachener Kunstblätter*, XXX (1965), 144-184. Fig. 26.

to the student of northern painting, the motif of the leggings had never been sufficiently emphasized before. Such leggings are also placed prominently in the foreground of a small panel of the Nativity which forms part of the key altarpiece of the elder Master of the Holy Kinship, previously mentioned as showing iconographic links with the Brussels manuscript. One of the painted panels of Hans Multscher's famed Wurzach altar of 1437 in Berlin also features Joseph's hose with the pieces in the form of stockings being put into the crib, one under the head of the child, the other covering him. In a later work from the same master's workshop, the Sterzing altarpiece from Vipiteno, Joseph is seen actually taking off his stockings. The clearest representation of the motif is found in a Nativity by the Middle Rhenish Master of the Ortenberg altar, now in Lézignan, France. Here both pictorial and inscriptional evidence are present: Joseph adores the Christ child, a stocking placed over one of his knees, while the text "Maria nym dy Hosen min / und wint dar in den lybes kindelin" can be read on a banderole above his head.¹⁴

In the popularizing mystic poetry of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the "Josephshosen" are mentioned frequently; this homely incident helped to scale down the miraculous event to human terms, thus arousing compassion for the poverty of the Holy Family. A certain Bruder Hans, who wrote his *Marienlieder* shortly before 1400 in a Lower Rhenish dialect, mentions as his sources St. Birgitta's *Revelations* and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. He identifies himself as a "nyderlender" who has left his wife for the love of the Virgin Mary and become a lay brother.

So arm was doe die coninc alre riiche,
Sold her ennege wendel duecher haben,
Joseph die moest se schoren
Von sinen alden hasen doe beschaben.

A little further in the poem he returns to the issue:

Ich meynd daz sich der Joseph seer moest schamen
Daz men dich vant in so grozer ellenden.
Si vonden irren heren
In eyn uebelgedectes hoz aen wenden.¹⁵

The manuscript in Leningrad from which these lines

¹⁴ All monuments here discussed are reproduced in De Coo, Figs. 30, 32, 33, 29.

¹⁵ Michael Batts, ed., *Bruder Hansens Marienlieder* (Tübingen, 1963), 115, 121.

"So poor was the king of all empires that for to have some swaddling clothes Joseph had to cut them from his old, shabby hose."

"Methinks that Joseph must have felt utterly shamed to find Thee in such great misery. They found their Lord wound in an unclean hose."

(free translation by the author)

are quoted seems to have belonged to Margareta, Duchess of Cleve. It should not be surprising that most of the sources for the hose legend come from the Lower Rhine, for it was at Aix-la-Chapelle where, among other relics, the swaddling clothes were venerated. The four most important devotionals, shown at regular intervals of seven years to throngs of pilgrims in front of the cathedral, were the shirt of the Virgin, the shroud of Jesus, the linen cloth used for the decapitation of St. John, and "Joseph's hosen do ihesus in gewonde wart und in die krippen geleit wart." A popular woodcut from the beginning of the sixteenth century shows the leggings held up on a rod by two angels, and bears the text: "Secundum frustrum illorum quatuor principalium sunt calige viri Marie gloriosissime sancti Joseph . . ." ¹⁶

Obviously, a flourishing souvenir trade was connected with the pilgrimages, although relatively few objects have survived the ravages of time. These include pilgrims' badges sewn onto hats, specially coined pilgrims' medals, and flasks. In a Netherlandish book of hours from the end of the fifteenth century, one sees the Pentecost scene surrounded with gold and silver pilgrimage medals, one of which features Mary's shirt below the Madonna and child in half-figure.¹⁷

A pilgrim's flask of the early sixteenth century (Fig. 5) even has an amusing sales slogan in its circumscription: "Buy a bottle from Aix-la-Chapelle immediately and keep holy water therein — it is good."¹⁸ The leggings, with their telling tubular shape and pointed ends, are presented by an angel, together with the Virgin's shirt on a pole above a shield with the double eagle of Aachen.

These examples may suffice to demonstrate the popularity of the cult of St. Joseph's hose. Their representation on the various objects is the same in the Brussels *Nativity*, except for the decorative loops of the diapers. They are due to the artist's highly personal drapery style and can be noticed throughout the book.

It is time to turn to the visual counterpart of Joseph's hose, the pile of wood. Naturally, logs are

¹⁶ The italics are mine. For an historical documentation of these pilgrimages see *Rhein und Maas* (exhibition, Schnütgen-Museum, Cologne, 14 May — 23 July 1972), 139-144, with reproductions. Incidentally, the Hogenberg engraving also shows a relic "de ligno Sanctæ Crucis," which makes one wonder whether the Brussels *Nativity* does not, after all, indicate a special connection with the *Aix Venerabilia*.

¹⁷ Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Douce 311, F. 21.

¹⁸ *Rhein und Maas*, 151. Figs. 15, 61.

needed to keep the fire going under the soup spoon — thus serving the realistic rendering of the narrative. But it is disturbing that there is no wood burning on the stone fireplace although it is given such prominence in the foreground through its disproportionately large size. Furthermore, the logs are clearly placed as to suggest the shape of a cross. (There seem to be four of them, perhaps alluding to the four kinds of wood from which Jesus' cross was fashioned, according to Jacopo de Voragine's version of the legend of the Finding of the True Cross.¹⁹) It is suggested that the planks in the Brussels *Nativity* are used as a disguised symbol for the Passion of the Lord, a symbol of his sacrifice. Examples for this in literature and art are legion: the Multscher *Nativity* shows bread and wine as a still life in a niche, the Antwerp one places ears of wheat under the reclining Virgin, and in Campin's Dijon panel wheat appears in the thatched roof, specifically emphasized by highlighting.

For medieval man the image of the cross of the Crucifixion also contained or implied that of the

¹⁹ Ernst Benz, ed., *Legenda Aurea* (Heidelberg, 1963), 379. Crossed pieces of wood also appear prominently in a *Martyrdom of St. Lucia*, now attributed to the Geertgen school; cf. Max Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York, 1969), V, pl. 27.



FIGURE 5. *Pilgrim's flask*. Schloss Cappenberg, Museum für Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Dortmund.

Arbor vitæ and *Lignum vitæ*. It would go beyond the scope of this study to trace the subtly conflated and complex imagery back to its roots in the description of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life growing in paradise (Genesis, 2:9). Later they are interpreted as symbols of sin and redemption respectively. The Greek church father Irenæus (died ca. 202) preached: "In arbore perivimus, in arbore redempti sumus; in ligno mors, in ligno vita pependit" (Sermo 84,3). Four hundred years later Venantius Fortunatus (died ca. 600), like Irenæus living for a time in Gaul, wrote the verses of the hymn *Pange lingua*, familiar to all through its use in the liturgy. The "doctor seraphicus," St. Bonaventura (1221-74), meditates in his *Lignum vitæ* on Christ's sacrifice whereby the tree of the cross becomes identical with the tree of life. His treatise was especially loved by the German mystics and drawn upon for their sermons. In his well known hymn *Laudismus de Sancta Cruce* he calls it the raft of salvation, the tree of life, the sacred wood. The Franciscan movement, which also clearly did most to promote devotional Marian hymnody, put forward with great zeal the concept of the *compassio Mariæ*, of Mary's own share in the suffering of Christ's Passion and death.

The mystical link between the Virgin as mother of Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross, seen as the tree of life, is reflected in allegorical fashion in a small devotional diptych of the early fifteenth century, painted in Westphalia by a follower of Conrad von Soest.²⁰ The Madonna is seated in the enclosed garden, surrounded by a fair number of the liturgically established symbols of her virginity, such as the burning bush, the ark and the altar, the fountain, the *porta clausa*, the tower, and the *rosa inter spinas* from the *Song of Songs*. The child sits on her lap and both regard the crucified Christ on the other panel; his body, in turn, is bent in the direction of the Madonna group. This formal relationship expresses the spiritual bond between them. Christ is nailed to the "living cross," a late medieval pictorial idea which developed under the impact of the written meditations on the Passion in connection with the tree of life. Therefore symbols of Fall and Redemption are shown in juxtaposition on both sides of the cross: the Synagogue as a blind man with a broken banner, the animal offering, a skull with a serpent, and Eve handing death to Adam in the form of another skull on the left; matched on the right by the sacrificial lamb,

²⁰ Reproduction in Alfred Stange, *Deutsche Malerei der Gotik* (Berlin, 1938), III, Figs. 39, 40.

the Ecclesia, a church, and the Virgin who hands eternal life through Christ to a pope, the representative of mankind. This diptych is involved in its details but clear in its meaning through the juxtaposition of the main protagonists on either side of the redemption symbols.²¹

In this interesting example the connection between the Virgin, the wood, and Christ's sacrificial death is expressed in an abstract, iconic fashion; the symbols themselves were nevertheless entirely familiar to the devout beholder through their use in the liturgy. But late medieval piety, aroused by Franciscan mysticism, comprehended the salvation mystery through the experience of the life story of Christ and his mother and, therefore, images similar to those discussed above are relatively rare. Sermons, meditations, visions, religious plays, and Marian hymns appealed directly to the emotions of the believers by endowing the holy story with human feelings. The Passion became a focal point of religious contemplation; a proliferation of vernacular passion accounts, plays, and depictions, as well as the development of individual devotional images such as the *Pietà* and the Man of Sorrows, testify to this fact.

The preoccupation with the Passion and a concomitant peak in the veneration of Mary resulted in the concept of the Virgin's foreknowledge of the future suffering of her son at the time of his birth. While the *Protoevangelium* of James (ch. XVII) already mentions Mary's premonition on the way to Bethlehem, it is once again through the writings of the mystics that this concept acquires currency. In the *Speculum humanis salvationis* (ch. XXV) connection is made between the *Pietà* and Mary holding her infant son. The Pseudo-Bonaventura describes the Virgin standing against a column prior to giving birth; St. Birgitta relates that moment to Mary's vision of her son being tortured at the column.²² She sets the emotional mood for Mary's suffering through foreknowledge and elicits the reader's compassion for it in her *Revelations*: ". . . from the byrth of my sonne vn-to hys deth I was full of tribulacion. I hadde myn eyne full of teres when I byheld in the members of my

sonne the place of nayles, & hys passyon that was to come."²³

Northern painters were particularly eager to translate this concept of foreboding into images and incorporate them into the infancy scenes. The Buxtehude altarpiece from the shop of Master Bertram of Westphalia contains sixteen scenes from the life of the Virgin.²⁴ The penultimate one is unorthodox and, it appears, unique: Mary is seated under a baldachin, knitting the "tunic without seam" (St. John, 19:23-24) worn by Jesus before the Crucifixion. The Christ child has abandoned his toys for a (prophetic?) book and looks up at two tall angels with the instruments of the Passion. Mary casts her glance upon the child, but her solemn expression and her occupation leave no doubt about her foreknowledge of the events to come.

A little later these allusions to the Passion become more disguised, as they are in the Brussels *Nativity*, reaching a climax in the *Ars nova* of the first generation of early Netherlandish painters. Robert Campin's *Betrothal of the Virgin* of ca. 1420 in the Prado (Fig. 6) is marked by a visual contrast between the Old Dispensation, represented by the Miracle of the Flowering Rod on the left side, the New Dispensation, embodied by the Marriage of the Virgin on the right. This is expressed by the conscious if visually unsatisfactory division of the panel by Romanesque and Gothic architecture, standing for Old and New Order respectively, and by an abundance of more or less hidden symbols which cannot be discussed here.²⁵ But attention must be drawn to a prominent detail on the left side: the unusual grouping of a roughly hewn wooden plank and a stone on a straw mat which are placed on some unfinished masonry, clearly part of the Gothic portal on the right. This, however, is to be completed (and the New Dispensation fulfilled) only through the future sacrifice. I suggest, therefore, that allusion is made by the wood standing for the cross, the mat for the wheat (bread of the Eucharist), the stone for the Resurrection — especially as they are laid directly beneath the Sacrifice of Isaac in the lunette, a common typological prefiguration for Christ's death.²⁶

²¹ Another interesting example of a similar nature is a stone sculpture of a standing Madonna from the Middle Rhine, produced about 1400. She is crowned and of the type of the beautiful Madonna. On her left arm she holds the child who is reading and on the right one she carries the tree of life. Its centre is Christ on the cross; in its branches one sees those who were redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus which is further symbolized by the pelican in the top of the tree, giving life to his young with his blood. The sculpture is reproduced in Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (Greenwich, Conn., 1972), Fig. 445.

²² Panofsky, 469, n. 277/3.

²³ W.P. Cumming, ed., *The Revelations of Saint Birgitta*. Early English Text Society, o.s., no. 178 (London, 1929), 12.

²⁴ Hans Platte, *Meister Bertram in der Hamburger Kunsthalle* (Hamburg, 1973), 12, Fig. 40.

²⁵ A discussion of the symbolism and a good reproduction may be found in G. Smith, "The Betrothal of the Virgin by the Master of Flémalle," *Pantheon*, XXX (1972), 115-132.

²⁶ Directly below these symbols of Christ's sacrificial death is a stork's bill (*geranium robertianum*), which Hildegard von Bingen already recommends against sadness and sorrow. It therefore



FIGURE 6. Robert Campin, *Betrothal of the Virgin*. Madrid, Prado.

I also suggest that the Virgin (not turned towards her husband during the marriage ceremony but rather in the direction of those symbols, and standing on their level of depth in the picture) expresses an inner awareness of the destiny of her yet unborn son. The representation of the symbols, disguised but visually prominent, is quite similar in the Brussels *Nativity*.²⁷

This is the spiritual framework within which the *Nativity* miniature from Brussels must be viewed,

makes a relevant allusion to Mary's foreknowledge. See also Lottisa Behling, *Die Pflanze in der mittelalterlichen Malerei* (Cologne-Graz, 1967), 64.

²⁷ The disguise of the wood of the cross in the form of some functional element in Nativity scenes is far from unique. A

keeping in mind the large number of actual passion scenes therein which support the concept. There is, nevertheless, one more infancy page with passion overtones which should be mentioned in this connection, the *Flight into Egypt* (Fig. 7). Far less elaborate than the other miniature, it shows the Holy Family in front of a rough gold ground and a row of leafless

cross-shaped part of the roof construction of the shed is sometimes visible through a hole in the straw covering. Of greater subtlety is the cruciform reinforcement of the door (also symbolic) in Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, where, within the context of the most complex Birgitta-inspired iconography, the torn swaddling clothes of the child also refer to the Crucifixion on the wings. Symbolic wood in infancy scenes not only alludes to the Virgin's foreknowledge, but also expresses her co-passion with the suffering of her son for which she, as intercessor, urges contemplation in the beholder.



FIGURE 7. *Flight into Egypt*. Brussels, B.R., ms. IV 483, no. 5.

trees, travelling over a meadow whose flora is distinguished only by three thistle plants in bloom. Now, a lovely medieval legend tells of a stubborn ass who was tired and had not been fed once during the journey.²⁸ He is furious and complains bitterly to the Christ child. After hearing the beast out, Jesus bends down, breaks a thistle plant, and holds it up to the animal — to whose great astonishment the thistle tastes like honey clover and the finest herbs. Although it is unlikely that this story is represented in the Brussels illumination, the thistle in this *Flight into Egypt* may allude to the Passion. Similar symbolism is evident in a tapestry cushion from the Lower Rhine (Fig. 8), possibly Cologne, in which the framing of its central medallion is fashioned of thick intertwined stems from which thistle leaves and blooms grow, gradually increasing in size towards the edge of the

cushion.²⁹ The connection between the thistle and the crown of thorns is manifest. Moreover, a maiden in fashionable clothes sits within the roundel, touching a unicorn who has placed his forelegs in her lap. According to the *Physiologus*, this fabulous shy animal could only be caught and tamed by a virgin. In the Middle Ages the image became associated with the incarnation of Christ as a symbol for the Immaculate Conception; Virgin and animal are sometimes included in Nativity scenes. The unicorn was logically identified with Christ and his horn was likened to the cross by some theologians,³⁰ almost the same symbolic meaning being mentioned by Bruder Hans in his Marian songs: "Her ist das eyn gehuernte groez, daz mit sines huernes stoez gar vrientlich die hel ontslooz."³¹ The flowers, surrounding maiden

²⁸ The legend is retold by Karl H. Waggerl, "Der stoerrische Esel und die suesse Distel," in *O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum* (Munich, n.d.), 96-98.

²⁹ The cushion measures 61 × 65 cm and is in Berlin, Schlossmuseum: cf. Dora Heinz, *Europäische Wandteppiche* (Brunswick, 1963), I, 163.

³⁰ *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, I (Freiburg, 1968), col. 590.

³¹ Batts, *Marienlieder*, 170.



FIGURE 8. *Unicorn Cushion*. Berlin, Schlossmuseum.

and beast in the medallion, support the interpretation: *lilium convallium* and *rosa inter spinas* are the trusted attributes of the Virgin Mary, but the three blooming pinks between them rather allude to the nails of the Crucifixion (and are so used by Hugo van der Goes in the Portinari Altarpiece). Furthermore, their German name is *Naeglein*, meaning little nail. Thus, the connection between thistle, Passion, and Mary becomes clear. Assuming that it also stands behind the plants in the Brussels *Flight into Egypt*, one understands why the Virgin points to her son with such a

solemn and expressive gesture which seems to speak the words from the *Speculum*: "Now I hold Thee on my lap as a dead body, Thee whom I held on my lap as a slumbering babe."

This other infancy scene, the *Flight into Egypt*, seems then to reiterate the passion overtones of the *Nativity*, where it is symbolized by the wood. Its visual counterpart, the swaddling clothes, can be seen to support a localization of the manuscript in the Rhine-Meuse region, where passion mysticism pervaded medieval life and art to an especially high degree.

*McGill University
Montreal*