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Article abstract

À travers les grandes lignes de composition des cinq panneaux du Retable du Saint-Sacrement de Dierck Bouts, on peut découvrir les formes cachées de lettres grecques révélant les monogrammes sacrés *Alpha-Omega* et *Chi-Ro*, et le nom médiéval contracté de *Jesu*. L’auteur relie le dessin de ces lettres aux alphabets fantastiques de l’époque, mais il conclut que leur emploi cryptographique est l’invention de Bouts, qui a voulu ainsi exprimer dans son retable la « présence cachée » du Christ dans le Saint-Sacrement et dans les sources de l’Ancien Testament. Le thème du retable et son illustration semblent d’autre part avoir été inspirés par les textes de la Messe et des Offices de la Fête du Saint-Sacrement de Thomas d’Aquin.

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'Latens Deitas': the Holy Sacrament Altarpiece of Dieric Bouts

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Scholars have long regarded the Holy Sacrament Altarpiece in St. Peter's, Louvain (Fig. 1), as the masterpiece of the 15th-century painter Dieric Bouts but, although the work is well documented and has been published frequently,[1] no one seems to have commented on the monograms apparently imbedded in the designs of its five panels. The purpose of this note is to suggest some antecedents for the use of letters as the basis of pictorial composition, and to explain its possible significance in this particular case.

The altarpiece can be precisely dated by the terms of the contract drawn up between the artist and the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament on 15 March 1464.[2] Besides specifying the subject-matter, and naming two professors as advisors, this document provided for the final payment to be made one year and three months after the completion of the work. Since the last payment was recorded in February 1468, the altarpiece must have been finished in November 1466.

Since then the central panel has remained most of the time in Louvain, but the wings were removed in 1707, to turn up in the Bettendorf collection in Brussels early in the nineteenth century. Two of the four small side panels found their way

FIGURE 1. Dieric Bouts, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece, 1464-66. Oil on panel, 210 × 356 cm approx. Louvain, Saint-Pierre. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

through the Boisserée collection in Cologne to the Alte Pinakothek in Munich in 1827: the other two passed directly to the Berlin Museum in 1834. After the First World War all four were returned to Belgium under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and reunited with the centre panel in 1928. In 1942 the whole altarpiece was seized by the Nazis, but was restored to Louvain at the end of the war. Today it hangs in the chapel for which it was painted, in the north choir aisle of St. Peter's Church.

The subject of the centre panel, which establishes the theme for the whole altarpiece, is *The Last Supper* (Fig. 2). Unlike most Gothic and Renaissance examples of the subject, in which the psychological drama of the Betrayal is unfolded, the present composition focuses on the Institution of the Eucharist. Our attention is immediately drawn to the figure of Christ by His position at the exact centre of the panel, by His slightly larger size and direct gaze. He holds a communion wafer in His left hand over a chalice, and blesses it with His right, thus duplicating the action of the priest at the moment of Consecration in the Mass. The twelve disciples are arranged symmetrically about the table on either side, with St. Peter at His right hand, St. John at His left. Even the nearer figures, sharply silhouetted against the white tablecloth, form a balancing pair on either side of a large pewter dish in the middle of the table.[3]

However, this rigid pattern is broken by the introduction of four additional figures in contemporary Flemish dress, who witness the sacred event as devout spectators. One stands behind Christ's right shoulder, looking down at the Host; another stands at a respectful distance by the sideboard on the right; two more look out from a hatch which opens in the wall to the left of the chimney piece. Their identity remains a matter of speculation, but it is reasonable to assume that these are donor-portraits of members of the confraternity.[4]

On either side of a vertical axis the architectural setting follows a similar symmetrical arrangement. The room, a late mediaeval hall, is lit by two Gothic windows on the left that open onto a city square and are echoed to the right by the arches of a narrow aisle. On the back wall the chimney piece is flanked by the kitchen hatch on the left while on the right an open doorway leads through a vestibule to a walled garden. Unusual for a Flemish painting, even at this date, is the convergence of the many orthogonals, in ceiling joists, floor tiles, transoms, window sills and furniture, on a single vanishing point, as in Italian Renaissance perspective. However, since this point is located on the mantelpiece halfway between the geometric centre and the top of the painting, the effect is that of a bird's-eye view, which thrusts the figures forward onto the picture plane rather than setting them in deep space continuous with that of the viewer. This flattening of the perspective, together with the symmetry of composition on either side of a vertical axis, emphasizes the formal and iconic aspects of the subject, rather than the narrative and anecdotal.

Mounted in pairs one above the other to form the wings of the altarpiece, the four smaller panels illustrate themes from the Old Testament which in mediaeval thought prefigured the Eucharist. Following the Biblical order from top to bottom and from left to right, these are: *Abraham and Melchizedek* (Genesis XIV: 17-20), *The Passover* (Exodus XII: 11), *The Gathering of the Manna* (Exodus XIV) and *Elijah in the Wilderness* (I Kings XIX: 4-8).[5] In the first (Fig. 3), Melchizedek and Abraham face one another kneeling, their bodies forming converging diagonals linked halfway up by the horizontal thrust of their forearms. In the second (Fig. 4), the Hebrews stand around a table, their

1 M. J. Friedländer, *Die altniederländische Malerei*, III, *Dierick Bouts und Joos van Gent* (Berlin: Paul Cassirer, 1925), trans. H. Norden as *Early Netherlandish Painting*, III, *Dieric Bouts and Joos van Gent* (New York/Washington: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 15-18; F. Peeters, *Le Triptyque eucharistique de Thierry Bouts à l'Église Saint-Pierre, Louvain* (Léau: C. Peeters, 1926); W. Schöne, *Dieric Bouts und seine Schule* (Berlin/Leipzig: Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1938), 8 ff., 88, 96; E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), I, 318; C.D. Cuttler, *Northern Painting from Pucelle to Bruegel* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 139-142; S.N. Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 59-70.

2 W. Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art 1400-1600: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 10-11.

3 On the left is Judas, who stares at the piece of bread partly immersed in red wine in the pewter dish (Mark XIV: 20).

4 The man by the sideboard has been identified as Bouts himself on the basis of a drawing found in 1855 among the papers of the confraternity (E. van Even, *Louvain monumental, ou Description historique et artistique de tous les édifices civils et religieux de la dite ville* [Louvain: C.J. Fonteyn, 1860], 206), but this has been challenged (J.G. van Gelder, 'Het zogenaamde portret van Dieric Bouts op "Het werc van den heilichen Sacrament",' *Oud Holland*, LXVI [1951], 51-52).

5 Since the return of the side panels in 1928 there has been some doubt as to their original order. However, a recent examination of the wood-grain confirms that the *Abraham and Melchizedek* and the *Passover* once formed one long panel, the *Manna* and *Elijah* the other (R. LeFève and F. van Molle, 'De oorspronkelijke schikking van de luiken van Bouts' Laatste Avondmaal,' *Bulletin de l'Institut royal du patrimoine artistique*, III [1960], 5-19).

staves in their hands and dressed for the Exodus. Many elements of the setting are similar to those in the *Last Supper* panel, and again the orthogonals converge on a vanishing point, this time in the upper right corner, thus leading the eye towards the focus of the centre panel. The third (Fig. 5) shows the Hebrews collecting the manna in various containers. As in the first panel two figures kneel in the foreground, forming converging diagonals which cross and continue into the contours of the background hills. The remaining scene (Fig. 6) shows Elijah asleep, with the angel bending over to waken him and show him the bread and cup of wine at his elbow. A winding road leads into the background on the right, where we see Elijah resuming his journey after eating the heaven-sent food. The sleeping Elijah forms a strong diagonal towards the left, again directing the eye to the focus of the centre panel.

As the commissioning of this altarpiece marked the bicentenary of the Feast of Corpus Christi, which commemorates the Institution of the Eucharist, its iconography quite naturally reflects the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas, who composed the Propers of the Mass and the Offices for the new feast in 1264. The central theme of *The Last Supper* is, of course, enshrined in the Canon, the invariable part of the Mass, but it is significant that the moment chosen by Bouts and his advisors corresponds to the Consecration of the Host. In the later Middle Ages this moment was of supreme importance, since the words 'Hoc est enim Corpus meum / For this is my body' marked the transubstantiation of the wafer of bread into the Body of Christ.[6] In the Sequence for Corpus Christi *Lauda, Sion, Salvatorem*, Aquinas expounds the dogma that Christ is completely present in both the consecrated bread and the consecrated wine. It was therefore not essential to receive both elements, and in 1415 the chalice was withdrawn from the laity. The result was a greater emphasis on the consecrated Host, as evidenced in the development of the monstrance for its display, and the formation of confraternities such as the one in Louvain devoted to its veneration.

Similar Old Testament subjects provide a marginal gloss for *The Last Supper* in the illustrations for contemporary devotional books such as the *Speculum Humanæ Salvationis* and the *Biblia Pauperum*,[7] but for the whole range of antetypes mentioned in the contract for the altarpiece we must again turn to St. Thomas. For *Abraham and Melchizedek* we have, besides the mention of Melchizedek in the Canon of the Mass, the first Antiphon for the Second Vespers of Corpus Christi, which reads: 'Christ the Lord, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, offered bread and wine.' The sequence *Lauda, Sion, Salvatorem* mentions both *The Passover* and *The Gathering of the Manna* as antetypes for the Eucharist, and describes the Sacrament as 'The Bread of Angels become the food of travellers,' in reference to *Elijah in the Wilderness*. Further antetypes cited by Aquinas are *The Priests of the Lord offering Incense and Bread* (Leviticus XXI: 6) in the Offertory for Corpus Christi, and *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Genesis XXII), again in the *Lauda, Sion, Salvatorem*. The first of these is closely related to *The Shewbreads* (Leviticus XXIV: 5-9) mentioned in the contract, and the second may have followed it in the original text (there was a lacuna at this point), but neither subject appears in the finished altarpiece, since the backs of the wings were gilded by the painter's sons after his death.[8]

Attributed by Panofsky to Bouts' 'congenital stiffness,' the deliberate, even self-conscious poses of the principal actors in each of these sacred tableaux suggested to Emile Mâle that their arrangement was influenced by the mystery plays, then at the height of their popularity.[9] They appear in any case to create arbitrary patterns in contrasting colours which stand out against the subdued backgrounds and disrupt the natural flow of movement in depth. It is only in time, and perhaps subliminally, that they are perceived as letters of the Greek alphabet. The figures of Melchizedek and Abraham form a capital *alpha*, while the Passover group can be read as a capital *omega*. On the other side the manna-gatherers and the hill contours form a capital *chi*, while Elijah and the angel combine to make an elaborate *rho* with a double curve to the loop. Both the *omega* and the *rho* are tilted towards the vanishing point of the centre panel, as if seen in perspective on a horizontal plane. With the sacred monograms thus formed in mind, it is possible to make out in the centre panel the letters IhV, the mediaeval equivalent for the *iota, eta* and *upsilon* in a common contraction for the vocative case of the name Jesus. Here too they

6 B.J. Kidd, *The Later Mediaeval Doctrine of the Eucharistic Sacrifice* (London: S.P.C.K., 1898; reprinted 1958), 38-40.

7 E.g., W.L. Schreiber, *Handbuch der Holz- und Metallschnitte des xv Jahrhunderts / Manuel de l'amateur de la gravure sur bois et sur métal au xve siècle*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1969-76), XI, *Die Einblattholzschnitt und die Blockbücher des xv Jahrhunderts* (H.Th. Musper), pl. 115.

8 Schöne, 91, 241.

9 E. Mâle, 'Le renouvellement de l'art par les mystères à la fin du moyen âge,' *Gazette des beaux-arts*, III/XXXI (avril 1904), 290.

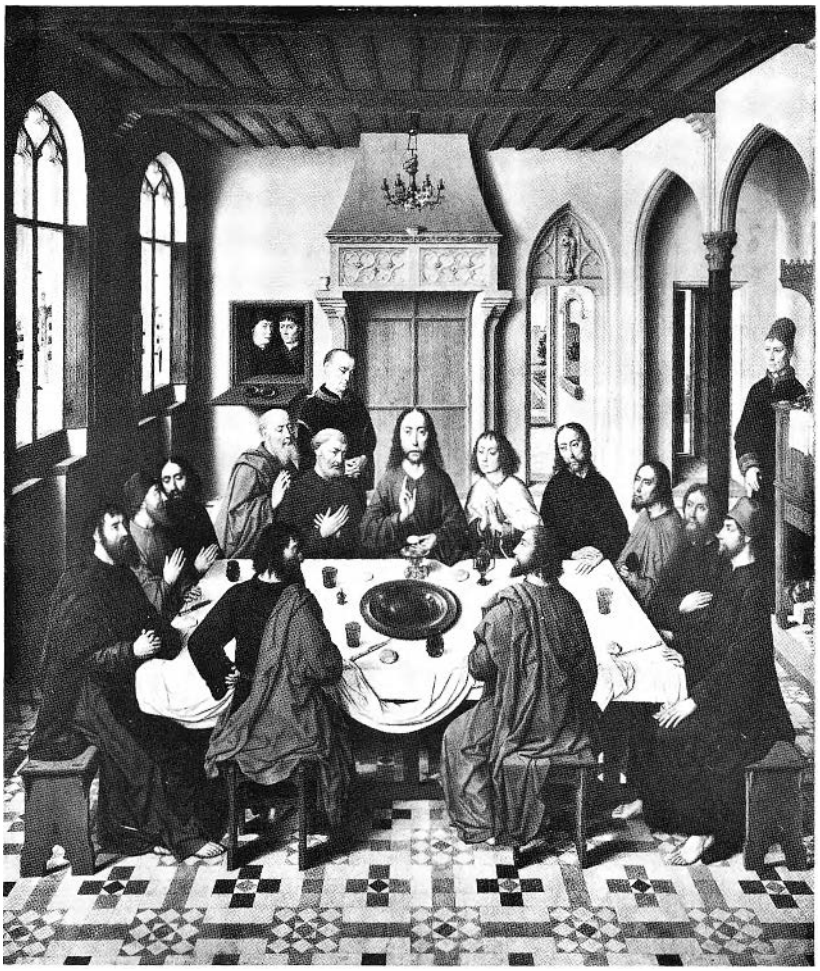

FIGURE 2. Dieric Bouts, *The Last Supper*, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 183 × 153 cm. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

FIGURE 5. Dieric Bouts, *The Gathering of the Manna*, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 88.5 × 71.5 cm. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

FIGURE 6. Dieric Bouts, *Elijah in the Wilderness*, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 88.5 × 71.5 cm. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

FIGURE 3. Dieric Bouts, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 88.5 × 71.5 cm. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

FIGURE 4. Dieric Bouts, *The Passover*, Holy Sacrament Altarpiece. Oil on panel, 88.5 × 71.5 cm. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

converge inwards towards the central vanishing point. While a single cryptogram might be considered a mere coincidence, the presence of five in this altarpiece suggests that they are deliberate. If so, what are the precedents for using letters as the basis of figure compositions, and why are they hidden in this particular case? What other examples can be found in fifteenth-century art?

Quite early in the history of western manuscripts human figures were used to form capital letters, but the device enjoyed its greatest popularity in the first half of the twelfth century. A famous example is the letter Q composed of two monks splitting a log, in a copy of St. Gregory's *Moralia in Job* from the Abbey of Cîteaux.[10] Here, however, the primary image is that of the letter itself, which functions as an initial. The figures are of secondary importance and their activity, presented with some humour, is apparently unrelated to the text. It is perhaps this droll tradition which inspired the two-page woodcut alphabet, dated 1464, in the Print Room of the Kunstmuseum in Basel (Figs. 7 and 8).[11] Here, as in the better known alphabet by the Master E.S.,[12] the letters are formed of figures and monsters. Unlike the latter they are related to rectangular frames in much the same way as most of Bouts' hidden letters. Also, being capitals rather than lower-case, they come much closer to the Greek letter forms.[13] In neither alphabet, however, are they hidden, or imbedded in the composition. Nor are we any further ahead when we consider the equally long tradition of the historiated initial which supplanted the animated letter in popularity in the later twelfth century. In these, the letter merely provides a frame for the figural scene, rather than a skeleton for its composition. In the absence of earlier examples we may well ask

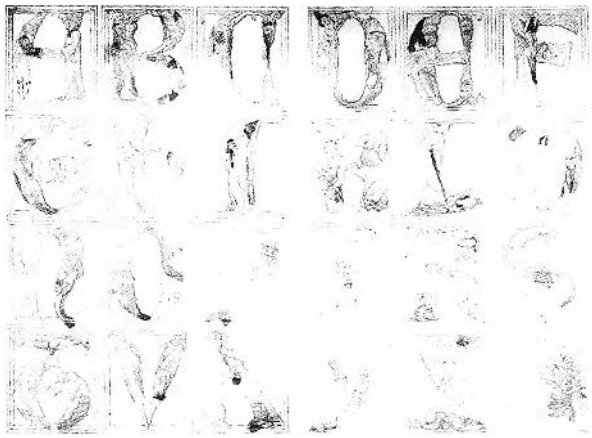

FIGURE 7. Anonymous Netherlandish or French, 1464, Grotesque Alphabet. Two woodcuts, hand-coloured, 39.6 × 26 cm each. Kupferstichkabinett, Basel. (Photo: Kunstmuseum, Basel)

whether cryptography was not an invention of the fifteenth century, or indeed of Bouts himself.

Unusual though a knowledge of the Greek language may have been among Netherlandish painters of the period, a number of them occasionally substituted Greek letters for their Roman equivalents. Jan van Eyck inscribed the frame of his *Man with a Red Turban* in London with his personal motto in Greek characters, 'ΑΑC ΙΧΗ ΧΑΝ (Als ich kann).' Petrus Christus regularly signed his paintings 'petrus xpi me fecit,' as in his *St. Eligius* in New York. While in manuscripts we usually find the lower-case *ihu* substituted for the vocative *Iesu*, in more formal inscriptions, such as the one on the Magdalen panel of Rogier van der Weyden's Braque Altarpiece, this becomes the *IhV* of Bouts' centre panel.[14] Only the *omega* seems to be without mediaeval precedent, its normal form since Early Christian times being like a W. It was with the rediscovery of Classical Greek inscriptions during the Italian Renaissance that the ancient forms were revived, including the horseshoe *omega*. One of the earliest examples must be the inscription in the Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini, which dates from ca. 1450.[15] It is quite possible, then, that one of the learned professors named in the contract suggested the ancient form of this letter, the simplicity of which would recommend it as the basis for pictorial composition.

If the identification of the above cryptograms is correct, we may perhaps explain what they mean in this context, and why they are introduced in this oblique way. Each pair of letters on the wings, as

10 J. Porcher, *Medieval French Miniatures* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1960), fig. 16.

11 Schreiber, IV, n° 1999, 131; XI, 29, 34, pl. 75 (A-X). A closely similar alphabet (n° 1998) is in the British Library.

12 For a useful bibliography, see A. Shestak, *Master E.S., Five Hundredth Anniversary Exhibition* (Philadephia Museum of Art, 5 September – 3 October 1967).

13 Compare the *alpha* with the A; the *omega* with the M; the *chi* with the X; the *rho* with the P; the *eta* with the H.

14 Blum, fig. 28. On the reliquary of the Holy Blood at Boulogne-sur-Mer, made in Paris ca. 1308-10, the inscription reads, 'DE SANGVINE IHV XPI' (P. Verdier, P. Brieger, M.F. Montpetit, *Art and the Courts* [National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 27 April – 2July 1972], II, 105).

15 M.A. Lavin, 'Piero della Francesca's Fresco of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta before St. Sigismund: ΟΕΩΙ ΑΘΑΝΑΤΩΙ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΙ ΠΟΛΕΙ,' *Art Bulletin*, LVI (September 1974), 345-374.

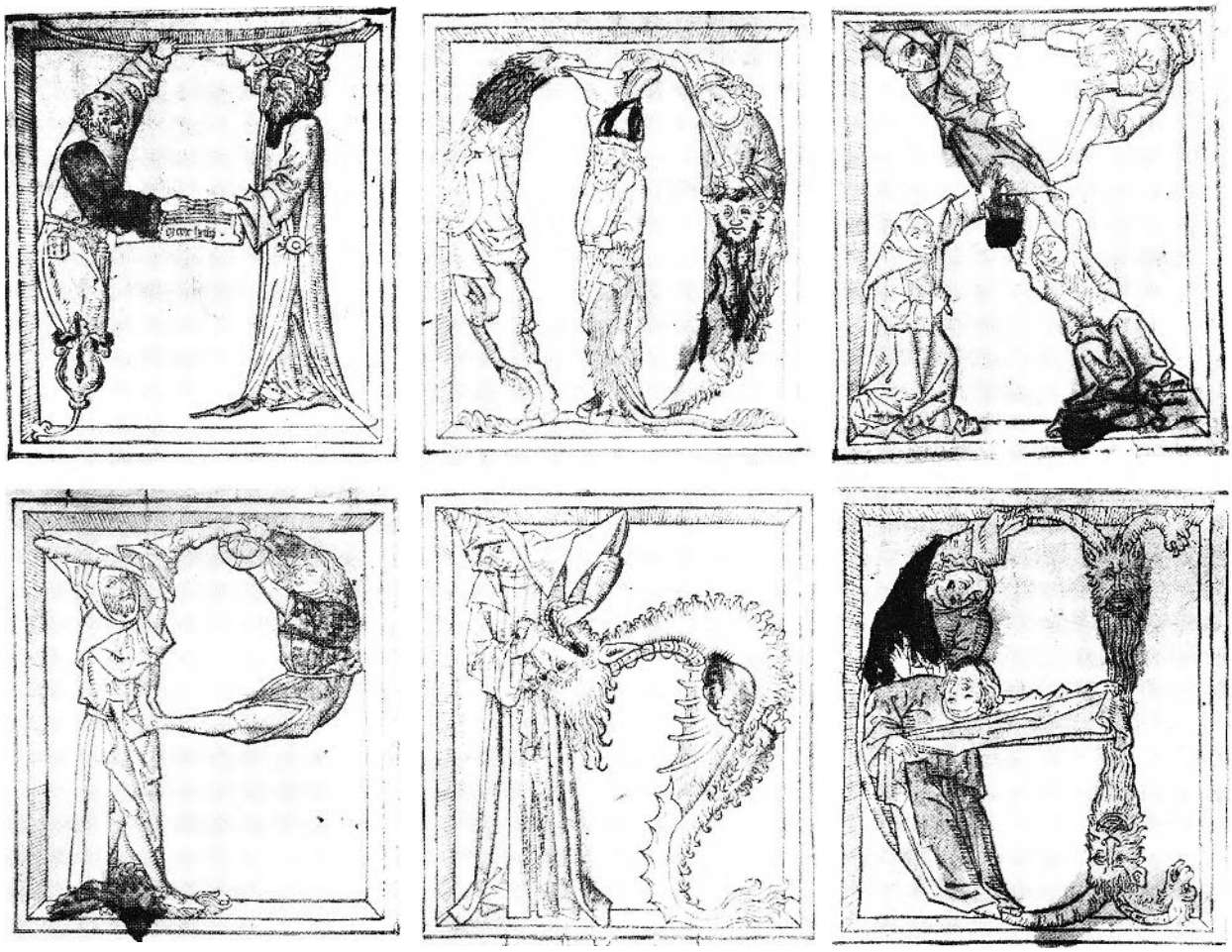

FIGURE 8. Details from Fig. 7. Letters A, M, X, P, H and E.

well as the group of letters in the centre panel, stands for Christ Himself, and represents a different aspect of His nature. From the time of Constantine the Chi-Rho monogram, like the Cross, was often substituted for the human image of the Saviour, and both were associated with the *alpha* and *omega* of Christ's apocalyptic utterance, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end' (Revelation I: 8; XXI: 6; XXII: 13). The *alpha-omega*, then, refers to His divinity; the *chi-rho* to His rôle as the Christ, the long-expected Messiah. In either case these could appropriately be applied to the Old Testament antetypes. On the other hand the *iota-eta-upsilon*, which spells His personal name, refers to His humanity in the Incarnation; it could only be applied to the Last Supper itself. Invisible to the eyes of the uninitiated, all three would have been recognized by members of the confraternity as symbolic of the *hidden presence* of Christ in the Holy Sacrament and, by extension, its Old Testament antetypes. Once again the voice is that of St. Thomas Aquinas:

Adoro te devoto, latens Deitas,
Quæ sub his figuris vere latitas.[16]

Naturally one is tempted to look for cryptograms in other works by Bouts. For instance, the composition of *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*, the central panel of another altarpiece painted for the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament in Louvain (Fig. 9), appears to have a similar basis.[17] Here the saint is shown lying stoically under a windlass onto which his entrails are being wound. A richly dressed figure, perhaps the Emperor Diocletian, stands immediately behind him, accompanied by three courtiers. The figures of Erasmus and his tormentors describe a continuous arc which, together with the central vertical of Diocletian, forms a supine uncial E, such as the one in the woodcut alphabet, presumably standing for Erasmus.

16 'I adore Thee faithfully, hidden Godhead, who truly hidest beneath these (visible) forms.'
17 Friedländer, III, 20, 60, pl. 14-16; Blum, 71-76.

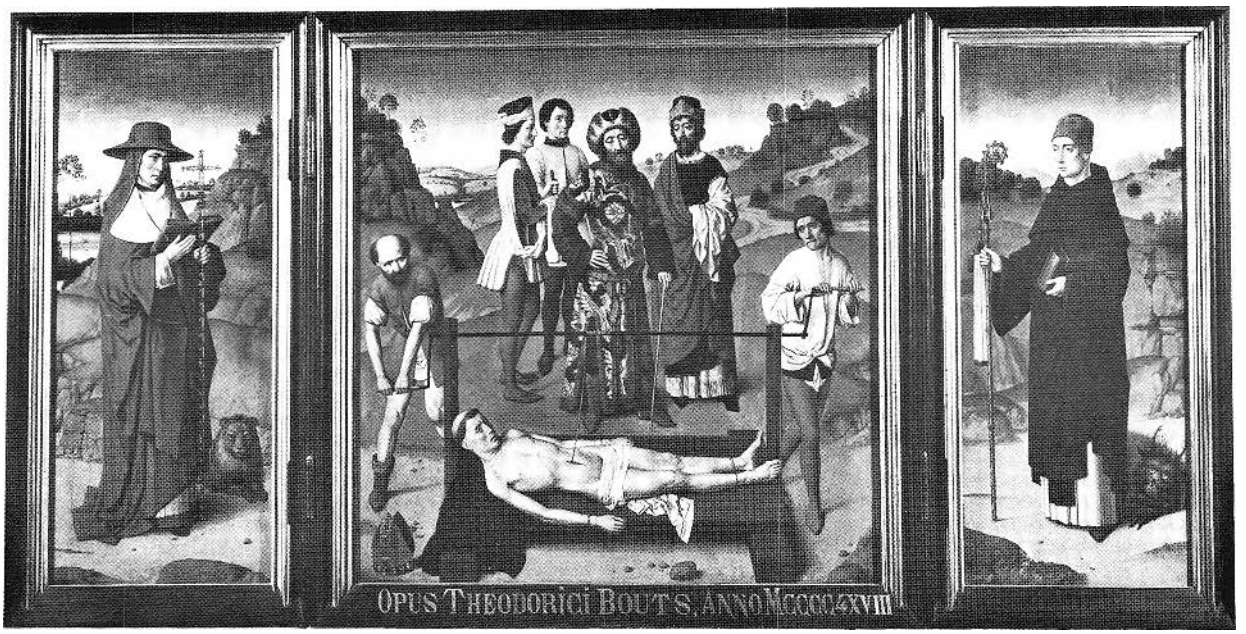

FIGURE 9. Dieric Bouts, *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*, St. Erasmus Altarpiece, ca. 1466. Oil on panel, 81.5 × 80.6 cm. Louvain, Saint-Pierre. (Photo: A.C.L., Brussels)

Among Bouts' successors very few seem to have made use of this device. One of them is the anonymous Master of the *Virgo inter Virgines*, active in Delft in the 1480s. His key work is *The Virgin among Virgins* in the Rijksmuseum,[18] in which the principal figures form a Gothic M, again like one in the woodcut alphabet, apparently in reference to Maria. Also from the 1480s is an engraving of *The Nativity* by Martin Schongauer,[19] in which the diagonal struts of the shed are prolonged by the silhouette of the Virgin's dress to form a *chi*, echoed in the position of her arms. In this context the cryptogram may relate to the *chi-rho-iota* which in early mediaeval manuscripts frequently introduces the phrase *Christi autem generatio sic erat* in the first chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, an appropriate text for the subject of the engraving. These are particularly interesting cases, since both are stylistically related to Bouts.

Surprisingly enough, the artist's son Albert was completely unaware of the monograms hidden in the elder Bouts' altarpiece, to judge by his copies of the *Abraham and Melchizedek* and *Last Supper* panels.[20] More understandably, in a woodcut of the late fifteenth century based on *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* the underlying letter is also missing.[21] In most cases there will always be a question as to whether or not the presence of letters in the design is deliberate. In the Holy Sacrament Altarpiece at least the conjunction of cryptograms in five separate panels leaves little room to doubt that they are all intentional, and that their meaning is inseparable from that of the pictorial imagery.

18 Cuttler, fig. 205.
19 Idem., fig. 393.
20 Friedländer, III, pl. 59, 64.
21 M.J. Schretlen, *Dutch and Flemish Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925; reprinted New York: Hacker Art Books, 1969), pl. 59A.

RÉSUMÉ

À travers les grandes lignes de composition des cinq panneaux du Retable du Saint-Sacrement de Dierck Bouts, on peut découvrir les formes cachées de lettres grecques révélant les monogrammes sacrés *Alpha-Omega* et *Chi-Ro*, et le nom médiéval contracté de *Jesu*. L'auteur relie le dessin de ces lettres aux alphabets fantastiques de l'époque, mais il conclut que leur emploi cryptographique est l'invention de Bouts, qui a voulu ainsi exprimer dans son retable la «présence cachée» du Christ dans le Saint-Sacrement et dans les sources de l'Ancien Testament. Le thème du retable et son illustration semblent d'autre part avoir été inspirés par les textes de la Messe et des Offices de la Fête du Saint-Sacrement de Thomas d'Aquin.