

Notes on the *Ottawa Madonna with the Flowering Pea*

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Article abstract

Le buste de la *Madone au pois en fleur* d'Ottawa constitue l'un des exemples les plus charmants d'un genre commun d'images pieuses de Cologne remontant au début du quinzième siècle. Pour des raisons stylistiques, on attribue ici cette oeuvre au jeune Stefan Lochner; on a dernièrement découvert une copie du buste en Autriche.

D'après la façon dont elle berce tendrement son fils, la Madone entre dans la catégorie de Eleousa. Elle tient dans la main droite une gerbe de pois cultivés ou des champs qui ont évidemment une signification symbolique. En littérature, de par leur forme, les fleurs de pois sont associées à la fertilité, mais dans le contexte des images pieuses de la Vierge, cette signification semble marginale pour ne pas dire inappropriée.

Toutefois, dans l'Évangile, les légumineuses sont toujours des denrées de base dont on se sert pour faire le pain. Ainsi donc le pois, tout comme la violette et autres fleurettes comme par exemple dans le *rétable de Strozzi* de Gentile da Fabriano, peut exprimer l'humilité de Marie et de son fils. Qui plus est, les écrits des théologiens, de St-Jérôme à St-Thomas d'Aquin, associent Marie au pain pour avoir enfanté le Christ, *panis vivus*. Le thème est popularisé dans la poésie et les hymnes médiévaux. Il n'est pas rare de retrouver les pois associés à des scènes de la vie de Marie et du Christ dans les *horae* des Pays-Bas où ils figurent dans les bordures, non pas comme simples motifs décoratifs mais comme symboles.

Les cosses fermées du buste d'Ottawa peuvent symboliser l'Immaculée Conception, alors que celles qui sont ouvertes doivent faire allusion au « fruit de vos entrailles », verset souvent repris dans le rosaire. Par l'allusion au pain de vie, le pois symbolise aussi le sacrifice du Christ auquel sa mère est liée à tout jamais.



FIGURE 34. Anonymous, *Madonna with the Flowering Pea*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada (Photo: National Gallery of Canada).



FIGURE 35. Anonymous, *Glaubendorf Madonna*, Vienna, Erzbischoefliches Dom- und Diocesanmuseum (Photo: Erzbischoefliches Dom- und Diocesanmuseum).



FIGURE 37. S. Lochner, *Adoration of the Magi*, centre panel, Cologne, Cathedral (Photo: Photo Marburg).



FIGURE 36. Master of St. Veronica, *Madonna with the Sweet Pea*, centre panel, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum (Photo: Photo Marburg).

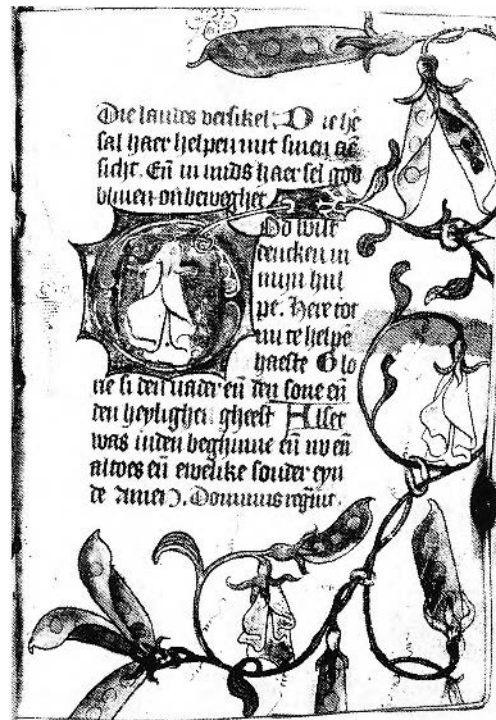


FIGURE 38. *Book of Hours*, London, British Library, Add. MS. 50005, f. 23 (Photo: Courtauld Institute of Art).

Notes on the Ottawa Madonna with the Flowering Pea

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RÉSUMÉ

Le buste de la *Madone au pois en fleur* d'Ottawa constitue l'un des exemples les plus charmants d'un genre commun d'images pieuses de Cologne remontant au début du quinzième siècle. Pour des raisons stylistiques, on attribue ici cette oeuvre au jeune Stefan Lochner; on a dernièrement découvert une copie du buste en Autriche.

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Les cosses fermées du buste d'Ottawa peuvent symboliser l'Immaculée Conception, alors que celles qui sont ouvertes doivent faire allusion au « fruit de vos entrailles », verset souvent repris dans le rosaire. Par l'allusion au pain de vie, le pois symbolise aussi le sacrifice du Christ auquel sa mère est liée à tout jamais.

With the exception of the Madonna of Humility no other Marian representation enjoyed as much popularity in the fifteenth century as the half-figure Virgin with her child. Indeed, as an object of private devotion this later type outnumbers the former. The close-up image of mother and infant has a long ancestry in Byzantine icons of the Galaktotrophusa, Glykophilousa, and Eleousa types and is favoured in Northern Italy because of its intimate character. All the prevalent concepts of Mariology seem contained in its expression of mutual love and it therefore lends itself ideally for private meditation and prayer, as written down in the *Little Office of the Virgin Mary*, the *Legenda Aurea*, the *Mediations on the Life of Christ*. It is Rogier van der Weyden who finds a new form for this intimate devotion in a number of small diptychs where such half-figure Madonnas and praying donors are turned toward each other in quiet communication.

The Ottawa panel of a *Madonna with the Flowering Pea* is a perfect representative of the Eleousa category (Fig. 34). While the goldground and silver frame still recall the Greek prototype, the sumptuously clad and crowned virgin and her tenderly held baby seem almost oblivious of the accompanying four musician angels. The small size of the panel (70.3 × 49.8 cm.) vouches for its use as a private devotional image.¹ A close, seemingly contemporary copy of the *Ottawa Madonna* has recently come to light in the village church of Glaubendorf, Lower Austria, now on loan at the Erzbischoefliches Dom- und Diözesanmuseum in Vienna.² At present, heavy overpainting makes

1 R. H. Hubbard, *European Paintings in Canadian Collections. Earlier Schools* (Toronto, 1956), 68; J. S. Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (London, 1971), 72.

2 For an assessment of it see A. Saliger, "Maria mit der Erbsenbluete: zur Problematik der altkoelnischen Malerei um 1400," *Akten des XXV. internationalen Kongresses fuer*

a proper evaluation of the panel impossible (Fig. 35).

Acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1952, our picture, painted in tempera on oak, has lost much of its original surface lustre. The gold-ground is worn down to the preparatory gesso and bole, the silver of the original frame and the crown has lost its reflectory properties because of oxidation, and the drapery of the virgin is rubbed to such a degree that its sculptural rendering can no longer be perceived adequately. A nineteenth-century overpainting by Philip Veit, a member of the Nazarene Brotherhood, had been removed in about 1950.

Despite these flaws there is no doubt that the Ottawa panel is a product of the developed international Gothic, more specifically of the Lower Rhineland where in the beginning of the fifteenth century the soft style centred in Cologne rules supreme. All its criteria are present in our Madonna: bright primary colours, delicately curved lines, gentle demeanour, blond hair, playful little angels, and an overall lyrical quality. Especially large halos are also a hallmark of Rhenish art.³

The most gifted representative of this style in Cologne is the Master of Saint Veronica whose name-giving work in Munich dates to about 1400. The saint's face and the singing angels, when compared to our Madonna, seem somewhat less rigorously modelled and have a slight stiffness about them that may also be detected in his contemporary *Man of Sorrows* in Antwerp. Generally attributed to this master or his school are two half-figure Madonnas of ca. 1415, one in Nuremberg's Germanisches Nationalmuseum and the other on the middle panel of a very small triptych in Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz Museum (Fig. 36).⁴ Both these images show the Madonna holding a pea sprig and they embody the essence of Cologne lyricism. Their poetic charm captured the imagination of Stefan George and Guillaume Apollinaire.⁵ It is obvious that the *Ottawa Madonna* is very close to the Cologne one in type, posture, and style and its derivation from the same milieu is likely.

Kunstgeschichte, Wien, 4-10 September 1983, ed. H. Fillitz and M. Pippal, ix (Vienna, 1986). The author believes the Glaubendorf as well as the Ottawa Madonna to be Westphalian.

3 R. Fritz, "Das Halbfigurenbild in der westdeutschen Tafelmalerei um 1400," *Zeitschrift fuer Kunstwissenschaft*, LV (1951), 161-78.

4 R. Wallrath, "Die Madonna mit der Wickenbluete," *Festschrift K. H. Clasen, Aspekte zur Kunstgeschichte von Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Weimar, 1971), 299-323, Figs. 1, 4; F. G. Zehnder, *Der Meister der Heiligen Veronika* (Sankt Augustin, 1981), 47-58.

5 Wallrath, "Die Madonna mit der Wickenbluete," 320, n. 16, with the quotation of their poems; Zehnder, *Der Meister der Heiligen Veronika*, 58-85.

Yet there is something much more tangible: a greater physical reality about her that is lacking in the other works.

The *Ottawa Madonna* has also been attributed to Conrad von Soest (d. 1422).⁶ But although there is a sense of genre realism in his *Wildungen altarpiece*, the physical presence of the figures is drowned in the melodic play of decorative lines that is informed by the elegance of the French International Gothic. Clearly, our Madonna can hardly be accommodated within the parameters of Conrad's style, even in its late phase, represented by the *Dortmund Nativity* fragment. Already during the famous comprehensive show of Cologne painting at Duesseldorf in 1904 several art historians had associated the Ottawa panel with the young Lochner.⁷ In the 1974 exhibition of Cologne works before Lochner, the *Ottawa Madonna* looked thoroughly at home, yet more progressive than anything that surrounded her and at the concurrent colloquium the attribution to Lochner found new support which is confirmed by subsequent assessments.⁸

Stefan Lochner (d. 1451) comes from Meersburg on Lake Constance, the Upper Rhenish region that produced such uninhibited, joyous devotional paintings as the *Frankfurt Paradise Garden* and the *Solothurn Madonna* in the beginning of the fifteenth century. Lochner retains some of this curious mingling of the secular and the mystical which is reinforced through the probability of some early training in the Franco-Flemish environment. On his apprentice's journey north he must have crossed the path of Robert Campin to gain the facility of rendering plastic form and material detail convincingly. Once in Cologne—perhaps around 1430 although he is documented there only from 1442—he quickly rose to become the outstanding painter with valued commissions from church and secular authorities. He never signed any of his paintings, and if it had not been for Dürer who noted in his Netherlandish diary that he paid dearly to see Master Stefan's *Adoration triptych* with the city patron saints in the Council chapel (Fig. 37), he might have remained Co-

6 O. H. Foerster, "Koelner Kunstsammler vom Mittelalter bis zum Ende des buergerlichen Zeitalters" (Berlin, 1931), 118-21; A. Stange, *Deutsche Malerie der Gotik*, III (Berlin, 1938), 34, and Hubbard, *European Paintings in Canadian Collections*, 68, 151.

7 F. Foulkes, "Early Art at the Duesseldorf Exhibition," *Athenaeum* (24 September 1904), 420-21; L. Scheibler, "Die kunsthistorische Ausstellung in Duesseldorf," *Repertorium fuer Kunstwissenschaft*, xxii (1904), 556.

8 Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Exhibition Catalogue, *Vor Stefan Lochner* (1974), 109, 177 (colour plate). For expertises by F. Heinemann (1974) and K. Oberhuber (1976) see Ottawa, National Gallery, Curatorial file; see also Zehnder, 55-56.

logne's most important anonymous for a long time. This impressive mature work, traditionally dated to about 1440, synthesizes Lochner's Rhenish heritage, the Flemish influences and the local lyrical idiom. Comparing the *Ottawa Madonna* with this altarpiece and allowing for a decade of artistic development under the assumption that she was painted shortly after his arrival in Cologne, many features of the personal handwriting are discernible: the shape of the virgin's head (high forehead, flat-bridged, long nose, large and forward-bent ears), the arrangement of her blond hair, the soft flesh of the child, its loosely fashioned curls, the lively faces of the unforgettable Lochner angels, the communicating glances of large dark eyes, and an interest in plants and flowers. But beyond these Morellian features the essentials of Lochner's style are already present in the early work. Even on this small scale there is balance and consistency of composition. He creates a sense of plasticity by carefully modelling in the round and using light and shadow judiciously. All this and his attention to minute detail distinguishes this early work of Lochner from that of the Veronica Master and Conrad of Soest. The added Cologne-inspired interplay of fluid lines results in a blending of the humbly human and the supernatural and in an intensity of expression that goes beyond the International Gothic.

The half-figure type of the Virgin with child had come to the North via Italo-Byzantine images of the dugento and trecento and had found favour especially in Bohemia, Burgundy, and the Rhenish region. Lochner must have been aware of paintings like the *Beistigui Madonna* in the Louvre when he created the *Ottawa Madonna*. Obviously, the tenderness inherent in such an Eleousa-derived devotional image appealed strongly to women and it is not surprising to find that the majority of these mostly small-size paintings can be traced to convents of nuns and to female donors in the archepiscopal city where the Marian cult was particularly prominent.⁹

Although the Veronica Master's Madonnas are said to hold a sweet pea, she, her twin in Nuremberg, the Glaubendorf and the Ottawa one as well unequivocally display sprays of garden or field peas (*pisum sativum*). This is a pink or white blooming species cultivated throughout Europe since antiquity, while the scented sweet pea

9 The Nuremberg Madonna was found in the cell of a nun in the Cologne monastery Mariengarten, cf. Wallrath, "Die Madonna mit der Wickenbluete," 304. Cologne had a particularly high population of Beguines, according to F. M. Stein, "The Religious Women of Cologne: 1120-1320" (Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1977), 2; in the year 1300, for instance, more than 1,300 were recorded. They must have been major patrons of such devotional images.

(*lathyrus odoratus*) was introduced in the north from Sicily only in the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ But the exact botanical identification is of little import for the interpretation of the plant's symbolic nature, for the few scriptural passages either mention a variety of *pisum*-related edible plants together or leave them unspecified as legumes.

Of the five occurrences of these plants in the Old Testament, only three can possibly be relevant to the pea as symbol. First, the simplest of staple food, beans and lentils and fried pulse, are brought to David and his men, believed faint with hunger.¹¹ Second, God bids Ezekiel to take beans and lentils and fitches for making bread to eat during the siege of Jerusalem.¹² Third, Daniel (1:12-15) declines the meat offered him and his companions at Nebuchadnezzar's court and instead demands legumes for 10 days, which would make them fatter than the meat-eating youths. This passage is commented on by Rhabanus Maurus as follows:

Mystically, however, legumes signify the restraint of luxury and the mortification of the body; hence in the book of Daniel (Dan. 1) Daniel and the three young men with him, despising the food of the king, ate legumes instead, obliterating their bodily desires, they can be truly called men of spiritual desires.¹³

In these sparse biblical passages leguminosa are clearly considered simple food, used for making bread, suggesting modesty and humbleness.

The Virgin Mary is connected with bread. Already in St. Jerome's writings she is considered the mother of bread and many medieval theologians, foremost among them Thomas Aquinas, elaborate this notion. It is then popularized in medieval poetry and hymns. A German Marian song contains the following appellation:

You golden vessel that contains
the bread which flows to us from heaven.¹⁴

10 Cf. Harold N. Moldenke and Alma L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (Waltham, 1952), entry "pisum." For help with the fine points of identification I am indebted to Renate Jenge, Jena and Maija Vilcins, Ottawa.

11 2 Kings 17:28, *fabam et lenem et frixum cicer*.

12 Ezekiel 4:9, *fabam et lentem . . . et viciam*.

13 De universo, PL CXXI, 506: *Leguminum plurima genera ex quibus faba, lenticula, pisum, faselum, cicer, lupinum, gratiora in usu hominum videntur. Mystice autem legumina continentiam luxuriae, et mortificationem corporis significare possunt: Unde in Daniele propheta (Dan 1), ipse Daniel et res pueri cumeo, contemptis deliciis regalibus, appetunt esum leguminum: contritis carnalibus desideriis, merito viri desideriorum spiritualium possunt nuncupari.*

14 "Du gueldens gschirr so in sich schleust Das brod so uns vom Himmel fleust," from J. Kehrein, comp., *Katholische Kirchenlieder, Hymnen, Psalmen* (Hildesheim, 1965), repr. II, 40.

In the *Nuremberg Madonna* Jesus too holds a pea spray and it is not impossible that it stands for the *panis vivus* Jesus Christus as the other in the hand of Mary signifies her as the bearer of the living bread.

The pea as sign of spiritual desires in the Rhabanus commentary connotes purity in a broader sense and thereby qualifies as one of the so-called Madonna flowers. Of the leguminosa mentioned there, the broad bean (*vicia faber* L), the pea (*pisum sativum*) and the chick pea (*cicer arietinum*) are painted among 36 varieties of flowers on the left post of Gentile da Fabriano's *Strozzi altarpiece*, which is often overlooked by art historians.¹⁵ The invention of this framing device appears less original in the light of Gentile's obvious knowledge of Limbourgian manuscripts, where some of the first naturalistic flower borders are found. What is remarkable in this floral ensemble is the fact that, with the exception of the ubiquitous roses and lilies, our legumes are in the good company of small, modest flowers which in late medieval art and poetry are so frequently associated with the humbleness of Mary and her son, whose own humility is perceived in the humiliations he endured during the Passion.

A major source for the representation of simple plants and flowers in conjunction with scenes from the life of Christ and his mother are the elaborately painted borders of late medieval Books of Hours. Some of the most splendid are depicted in the fifteenth-century Dutch *Horae of Catherine of Cleves* in the Pierpont Morgan Library.¹⁶ Here again a pea spray makes its appearance in the margin of a Passion scene (f. 52v.), Christ before Caiaphas, associated with the stylized pod of the columbine, a familiar Passion symbol. The meaning of the six pea pods in the miniature with angels singing the *Te Deum* (11) at *Lauds* of the Hours of the Virgin is not immediately clear,¹⁷ but the golden peas contained therein must allude to a very special "fruit of thy womb": either to Mary, who is announced to Anna in the now missing facing page, or to the incarnate Christ, who is so addressed in the preceding text of the "Hail Mary." The gold colour of these peas is thus exceedingly appropriate. In a provincial manuscript, like the *Cleve Hours* from the Guelders area and dating to

the early fifteenth century, a crudely designed pea-flower and pod border surrounds and forms the initial of the text of the *Lauds* versicle (London, B.L. Ms. 50005, fol. 23).¹⁸ This page (Fig. 38) faces the Nativity miniature and readily confirms the association between peas and Mary, the bearer of Christ.

The Little Office is, of course, full of *Ave Maria* citations and it abounds in references to the "humble Virgin's womb" in which Christ "enclosed himself"; Matins alone contains six such mentions. In these and other devotions Mary is always mother and maid, *Mater Dei Virgo*, as the halo in the *Pea Flower Madonna* triptych is inscribed, and the virginal aspect is well served too by the pea, especially the closed pod, often accompanying the flower, as in the *Ottawa Madonna*. Saint Cecilia, sitting humbly in the Rhenish *Frankfurt Paradise Garden* and holding a psaltery for the Christ child to play with, is also wearing a wreath of pea blossoms.¹⁹ In a work replete with "symbolic" flowers they certainly allude to her chastity and, by inference, to her disdain of the bodily desires of which Rhabanus speaks.

Returning to our Madonna after this excursion into the iconography of the pea, which has hitherto received little attention, we notice that her spray features ostensibly small, white blossoms, undoubtedly referring to her humility and purity. The closed pods signify the Immaculate Conception, the open one the fruit of her womb, thus a symbol for both mother and son. Given the preoccupation with numerology in mystic thought, four may stand for either the cardinal virtues, often connected with Mary, or for Christ's garments, divided in four parts at his crucifixion; three is a Trinitarian reference, while the combined numbers may remind one of the seven joys and sorrows, marking the stations of her life as mother of the Lord.²⁰ The *compassio Mariae*, after which the devout was held to model his own compassion with the suffering of the Lord, is unmistakably reflected in the pearl and gold crosses of Mary's crown as well as in the sorrowful glance upon her child. This and the crossed hands of both as common gestures of sorrow were readily understood in the climate of German mysticism and the *Devotio moderna*. Reminding ourselves of the allusion

15 See L. Behling, "Das italienische Pflanzenbild um 1400— zum Wesen des pflanzlichen Dekors auf dem Epiphaniabild des Gentile da Fabriano in den Uffizien," *Pantheon*, xxiv (1966), 347-58.

16 J. Plummer, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (New York, 1966); F. Gorissen, *Das Stundenbuch der Katherina von Kleveland* (Berlin, 1973).

17 Lilian M. C. Randall, "Pea-pods and Molluscs from the Master of Catherine of Cleves Workshop," *Apollo*, xciii (1974), 375, Fig. 4. Randall reads the pea pods as references to fertility in the context of the cycle of Mary's birth.

18 James H. Marrow, "Dutch Manuscript Illumination before the Master of Catherine of Cleves: the Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, xix (1968), 51-113, specifically 88-89.

19 E. Wolfhardt, "Beitraege zur Pflanzensymbolik," *Zeitschrift fuer Kunstwissenschaft*, viii (1954), 177-96.

20 V. Hopper, *Mediaeval Number Symbolism* (New York, 1938, reprint Leyden, 1976), 70-71, 94-95, 107; H. Meyer, *Die Zahlenallegorese im Mittelalter, Methode und Gebrauch* (Muenchen, 1975).

of the pea to the living bread, it functions too as a symbol for Christ's sacrifice to which his mother is forever connected. In the *Madonna with the Flowering Pea* the devout saw what he praised each day with the final prayer of the Little Office of the

Virgin: "the most holy and undivided Trinity, the humanity of our crucified Lord Jesus Christ, the fruitful purity of the most blessed and glorious Mary, ever Virgin."