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## Gerard David's Nativity Triptych: Landscape as a Genre and a Tool for Spiritual Pilgrimage

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**GERARD DAVID'S NATIVITY TRIPTYCH:  
LANDSCAPE AS A GENRE AND A TOOL FOR SPIRITUAL  
PILGRIMAGE\***

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**Abstract:**

*This work by Gerard David, painted around 1510 to 1515, represents a style built predominantly upon the foundation of his predecessors, while hinting in certain ways to the tastes and styles of the near future. Specific details of style show influence of artists before David such as Jan Van Eyck, Rogier Van der Weyden, Geertgen tot sin Jans, Hugo Van der Goes, and Hans Memlinc. His innovation is exemplified on the exterior panels, which introduce landscape as a genre and incorporate the spiritual theme of pilgrimage between the exterior and interior panels.*

*Stylistically, the Nativity shows a look toward the future and upcoming contemporary styles by exhibiting a hint of Italian Renaissance influence in the monumentality of the figures. The holy figures depicted seem to fill their space with a more structural quality than those of previous Northern paintings, which tend to lay figures on a surface with a more doll-like quality.*

*The unique and most revolutionary part of David's Nativity occurs in the style and especially the iconography of the exterior panels. The exterior side panels, which are now separated from the central panel, show a full landscape completely void of figures, making this a first in the history of Netherlandish painting. Artists such as Geertgen tot sin Jans had begun to develop landscapes further by using isolated trees of relevant species to the scene, but most landscapes served only the purpose of a backdrop. Now David has indulged in the richness of full, green foliage, creating an intimate forest space. A small donkey and ox can be seen in the forest scene, making the only real connection to the interior where the ox and donkey are worshipping Christ with the others.*

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\*Editor's note: This paper received the University's award for outstanding undergraduate research in the arts and humanities in 2002. The time necessary to secure permission to publish the paper's illustrations made the paper's publication in Volume 3 impossible, however.

This work by Gerard David (see figures 1, 2), painted around 1510 to 1515, represents a style built predominantly upon the foundation of his predecessors, while hinting in certain ways to the tastes and styles of the near future. The wings of the work are separated from the central panel (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and held by the Mauritshuis, The Hague on long-term loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. One who is familiar with early Netherlandish painting would never mistake this triptych for a category other than early Netherlandish. It contains all the elements of the Netherlandish style that had been in the process of creation for the century prior to the production of this work. However, David now at the end of a long line of masters and a master of the tradition himself, was in a position to appeal to growing tastes outside the established, setting up a unique dialogue between tradition and innovation.<sup>3</sup> This element of innovation is most evident in the exterior panels of his triptych, which introduce landscape as a genre while integrating the spiritual value of pilgrimage with the other panels. Pilgrimage was an important and popular form of worship during this time, in the physical sense as well as a more individual, mental form of worship. David has uniquely utilized and capitalized on pilgrimage using a pure landscape to represent this notion of spiritual travel.

Stylistically, this painting fits into Gerard David's later period (post-1511), when he had begun to gain freedom from extremely static compositions. In 1515, while still living in Bruges, David had become a member of the Guild of St. Luke in Antwerp, which had by then become an even more active and dynamic city than Bruges. The market here may have provided him with the opportunity to try to break new ground in style and message of paintings. Nevertheless, the

*Nativity* was done at the beginning of this period and is still characterized by relatively stiff forms and a duller palette<sup>5</sup> than his very latest work.

David is undoubtedly indebted to Jan van Eyck (Van Schoute, 546), as are most painters after him, for his treatment of space and light, and his acute attention to detail, which became a trademark of early Netherlandish painting. In this

*Nativity Triptych* specifically, the brocades and pattern of fabrics and the detailed background viewed through an open window are reminiscent of Van Eyck. Several other works by David include clear references to Van Eyck as well. In his *Cervara Altarpiece*, Musee du Louvre, Paris, he includes over a scene of Christ's crucifixion, a depiction of God the Father very much like the one in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In looking at the details of the *Nativity Triptych*, I think there is slight evidence of Rogierian influence as well, as seen in the fluttering drapery of the angels' garments. They float weightlessly like those found in many of Rogier van der Weyden's Crucifixions (figure 3) and other works.

Other obvious influences were those from his native city Haarlem, including Dirk Bouts for his structured and well-defined spaces and Geertgen tot Sin Jans for his work in developing landscapes, (of which David became a great innovator). Specifically, Geertgen was probably key in influencing David's hand at landscape, since he commonly went beyond the normal notion of landscape as consisting of standard shapes and textures in the distance making up the backdrop of a scene, and included landscapes with the motif of the isolated tree (figure 4). Some of David's early faces also resemble those of Geertgen.

Hugo van der Goes can also take some credit for several of David's compositional arrangements.<sup>2</sup> An *Adoration of the Magi* done by David echoes clearly a composition of the same subject by Hugo, with its sharply receding wall and similar clumsy shepherds. In the *Nativity*, the very naturalistically rendered straw and basket in the foreground resemble the objects composed in Hugo's *Portinari Altarpiece*, and especially of Hugo's own *Nativity* in Berlin. David's iconic representation of holy figures, very still and expressionless for the most part may be due in part to his direct predecessor in Bruges, Hans Memlinc. Memlinc is known for his soft, quiet representations that one might say give his work a certain "Hallmark card" quality by modern standards.

In addition to these qualities of rich tradition in David's *Nativity*, there are hints of innovation in the interior panels and a rather revolutionary exhibition of landscape on the exterior wings. On the interior, and especially the central panel, the figures are rendered in a monumental style, occupying real space instead of appearing flat on a plane. The faces and bodies are more modeled, as if they might be able to be viewed in the round, and are not quite so crisply handled, giving the scene a softer, more atmospheric quality. David has also created a real space for the birth of Christ with the crumbling, but still sturdy and well-defined structure in which the birth has taken place. These characteristics point to an attempt to assimilate some Italian values into the work, since the Italians at this time were studying

anatomy and proportion to achieve a more real depiction of space and the human figure.

While the interior factors are subtle evidence of David's transition away from the traditional, the most obvious and revolutionary element of innovation is found on the exterior side panels (figure 2). These panels of the triptych display a rich landscape void of any figures, making this a first in Netherlandish painting. David creates a deep, intimate, and quiet forest scene by covering most of the surface with naturalistic foliage, and leading the eye of the viewer between the trunks on the forest floor. Stylistically, we see a break from the traditional Eyckian execution. Instead of painstakingly executing the details of each leaf, he uses a slightly more painterly hand and creates the overall effect of full green foliage. Infrared reflectology and X-radiographs show underdrawings that laid out the basic composition of these panels on the ground layer with a light brush sketch. The trunks, foliage, and sky space were blocked out - apparently somewhat differently than the finished painting exhibits (Ainsworth, 243). Somewhere in mid-painting, David eliminated some trunks and closed in more foliage over the sky, creating the intimate and inviting forest space that now exists. David demonstrates a great knowledge of color in creating the naturalism he has in his forest. He uses a dark green for the background foliage, a middle mixed green for the closer branches, and a sunny yellow for the closest branches in full light (Ainsworth, 244), creating the realistic and inviting piece of forest.

Though the exciting change of style exhibited on the exterior of David's *Nativity* was a step away from tradition, the real revolution occurred within the subject matter itself. This innovative approach to landscape - one that was more than just a backdrop - became a precursor to a genre that would become increasingly popular in later sixteenth and seventeenth century Flemish art. Up to this point however, landscape had been limited to playing second fiddle. It served the purpose of creating a location for a figure or set of figures, but was never appreciated for its own beauty. Before David, as mentioned before, Geertgen tot sin Jans specialized minimally on the landscape by including individual trees instead of distant forests or mountains. It appears that he sometimes represented localized, recognizable species of trees relevant to the subject of the painting, indicating that he probably worked directly from nature at times. (For example, his *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* (figure 4) uses isolated trees of varieties thought to be common in a Middle Eastern climate.) (Ainsworth, 217) David was surely influenced by this technique; however, with this *Nativity* he became the first to paint a landscape without any trace of a human figure, making it a significant turning point in Flemish art.

Not only is this landscape a statement in itself, but it also seems to have another meaning as it is combined with the rest of the painting. At this time the issue of travel and religious pilgrimage had become a popular theme in religion as a result of

the writings of a Carthusian monk of the twelfth century, Ludolph of Saxony, who wrote

*La Vita Christi* (Life of Christ). This and many other popular religious writings described the life of Christ as a series of events – joys and sorrows, and encouraged the reader to participate in these events of the life of Christ personally. Many people were reading these types of writings and even taking pilgrimages themselves. However, most commonly, people used these books and accompanying images of pilgrimage to perform a spiritual pilgrimage in their own mind. They were encouraged to picture mentally Mary holding the baby Christ, crying in her arms on the road to Egypt, or to see the drops of sweat and blood that dripped from Christ's brow as he carried his cross, and to walk this path with him.

It seems that David has utilized his revolutionary landscape to serve as a conduit for a mental and spiritual pilgrimage. Within the forest scene, he has created a path that winds intimately between the tree trunks (Ainsworth/Christiansen, 290). As a viewer, the naturalistic landscape draws you in to a space where you can actually exist, and feel the serenity of the meditative mood created. As you wander through and around the trunks of the tall trees, you come to a house or inn, just as Mary and Joseph did as they sought a suitable place for the birth of the Son of God. Perhaps this is where they were refused a room. Barely recognizable, an ox and donkey lie and graze peacefully, while silently alluding to the stable scene inside. The forest scene is serene and quiet. It asks for thought and invites meditation. So they - the Holy Family, and you - the viewer, continue on until you reach the interior, where the manger is found, according to prophecy, and the joyous birth happens.

The triptych format was extremely popular (and practical) at this time because it allowed for several different scenes to be presented – using both interior and exterior space. In David's *Nativity* Triptych, the format lends itself effectively to the idea of pilgrimage because it allows you to "travel" logically from exterior to interior on a consistent path. The exterior here plays a traditional role in the dialogue of the triptych as a whole (Ainsworth/Christiansen, 279) - it introduces the scene inside. Instead of the usual Annunciation scene to introduce the Nativity however, the landscape is allowed to lead us there. Although it is disputable, most recognize that the existence of the ox and donkey in the forest scene on the exterior panels are used as a connecting device to the interior panels. Maryan Ainsworth claims that contemporary viewers would have easily recognized the ox and donkey as a reference to the Nativity scene. (Ainsworth, 211)

In light of this emphasis on the journey of life (Christ's), there are several references to travel on the interior panels as well. Joseph is unusually depicted as a young man in traveling clothes, which includes a short robe, soft shoes, a cloak, and a walking stick. The basket in the foreground may be a traveling

basket since it is depicted in many paintings on the subject of the Flight to Egypt. David himself did at least two versions of the *Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, which was another theme elaborated upon in the *Vita Christi* with an emphasis on landscape and travel. These common symbols of travel would have also have been easily recognized by the viewers of the sixteenth century. (Ainsworth, 211) Other symbols in the central panel emphasize the importance of Christ's purpose and allude to his ultimate crucifixion, another step in the journey of Christ's life, and part of the pilgrimage of the faithful. The dilapidated building is a common symbol of the life and passion of Christ, symbolizing the passing of the Old Law into the New Covenant. A dandelion grows out of a crack in the crumbling building. Since the dandelion blooms at Easter time, it is a symbol of grief in reference to Christ's sacrifice. (Ainsworth/Christiansen, 283) The sheaf of wheat placed prominently in the foreground of the painting, and the basket of cloths next to it both point to the sacrifice of Christ's crucifixion by referring to the wheat as "the body of Christ" in relation to the Eucharist, and the cloths as burial wraps. All of these symbols would have been used to focus the mind of the viewer on the image of Christ.

The donors of the *Nativity* would have been familiar with the traditional symbols for Christ and may have been particularly interested in the ideas of pilgrimage and travel, since those symbols are less common. They may have expressed a desire for David to convey these interests accurately, since he is known for his ability to understand and cater to the requests of his clients, even outside his key subjects and styles (Metropolitan Museum of Art). The donors are probably meant to serve as examples of the faithful to those who would view the triptych. They are presented here in the garb of saints Catherine and Anthony (characterized by their wheel and pig, respectively), although their exact identity is yet to be determined. Saints Jerome and Leonard, who may have been personal patron saints or those of a church or chapel of the donors, accompany the two donors to the holy scene. The implication is that they have completed the pilgrimage and are now partaking in the joy of Christ's birth, hopefully encouraging others to do the same. In addition to a didactic role, the portrayed donors have a rather self-serving purpose: to establish not only their own piety, but also their status and wealth. They are slightly larger than the Holy figures of the central panel, and are depicted in a space closer to the viewer. Many times the donor, not the artist, would determine many of the specifics of a commissioned painting, which offers rationale for their prominence in many Northern Renaissance paintings.

Despite the personal and social ambitions evident on the interior wings, this triptych is ideal for displaying the message of the call to follow the journey of Christ. The relationship of the iconography of the exterior and the interior makes David's *Nativity* most intriguing - the exterior is used to present a mood and introduce a story, and the interior is the satisfaction and joy of coming to the destination of a journey. David has invited the

viewer to join the pilgrimage in a whole new way. His delicate, but satisfying landscape calls to enchant the viewer's mind, intending to lead the way to spiritual meditation.

While some have called Gerard David a "tardy phenomenon"<sup>4</sup> for his continuation of tradition in a changing artistic world (as well as economic, social, and religious), he is to be commended for his innovative approaches to incorporating his style with contemporary iconography and novel subject matter into effective and appealing paintings. He has received the honor of painting the first pure landscape, which obviously became a noteworthy claim soon after his career when landscape became a popular genre. But perhaps most interesting is the way he has used this innovation as a medium for taking the viewer on a spiritual pilgrimage to the birth of Christ. Whether the viewer was looking on the painting as a fresh creation or is seeing it now as a piece of history, this triptych is remarkable in its attempt to lead the viewer on the path of worship using the beauty of fresh landscape and the inspiration of traditional religious imagery.

#### End notes:

<sup>1</sup> Maryan Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen (edited by), From Van Eyck to Bruegel: *Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York, 1998), 276-330.

<sup>2</sup> Maryan Ainsworth, *Gerard David: Purity of Vision in an Age of Transition*, (New York, 1998), 207-244.

<sup>3</sup> R. Van Schoute and H. Verougstraete, "Gerard David: Purity of Vision in an Age of Transition by Maryan Ainsworth", *Burlington Magazine* 141 (1999): 546.

<sup>4</sup> Mark L. Evans, "Early Netherlandish Painting from Rogier van der Weyden to Gerard David by Otto Pacht," *Burlington Magazine*, 142 (2000): 179.

<sup>5</sup> Grove Art. [www.groveart.com/data/articles/art](http://www.groveart.com/data/articles/art) Gerard David, Life and Work (Bridgeman Art Library source)

<sup>6</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art. [www.metmuseum.org/explore](http://www.metmuseum.org/explore) Gerard David. *Nativity*

<sup>7</sup> James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects & Symbols in Art* (Boulder, Colorado, 1979)

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Metropolitan Museum of Art. [www.metmuseum.org/explore](http://www.metmuseum.org/explore) Gerard David. *Nativity*



Figure 1: Gerard David, "The Nativity with Donors and Saints Jerome and Leonard." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jules Bache Collection, 1949. (49.7.20 a-c)*



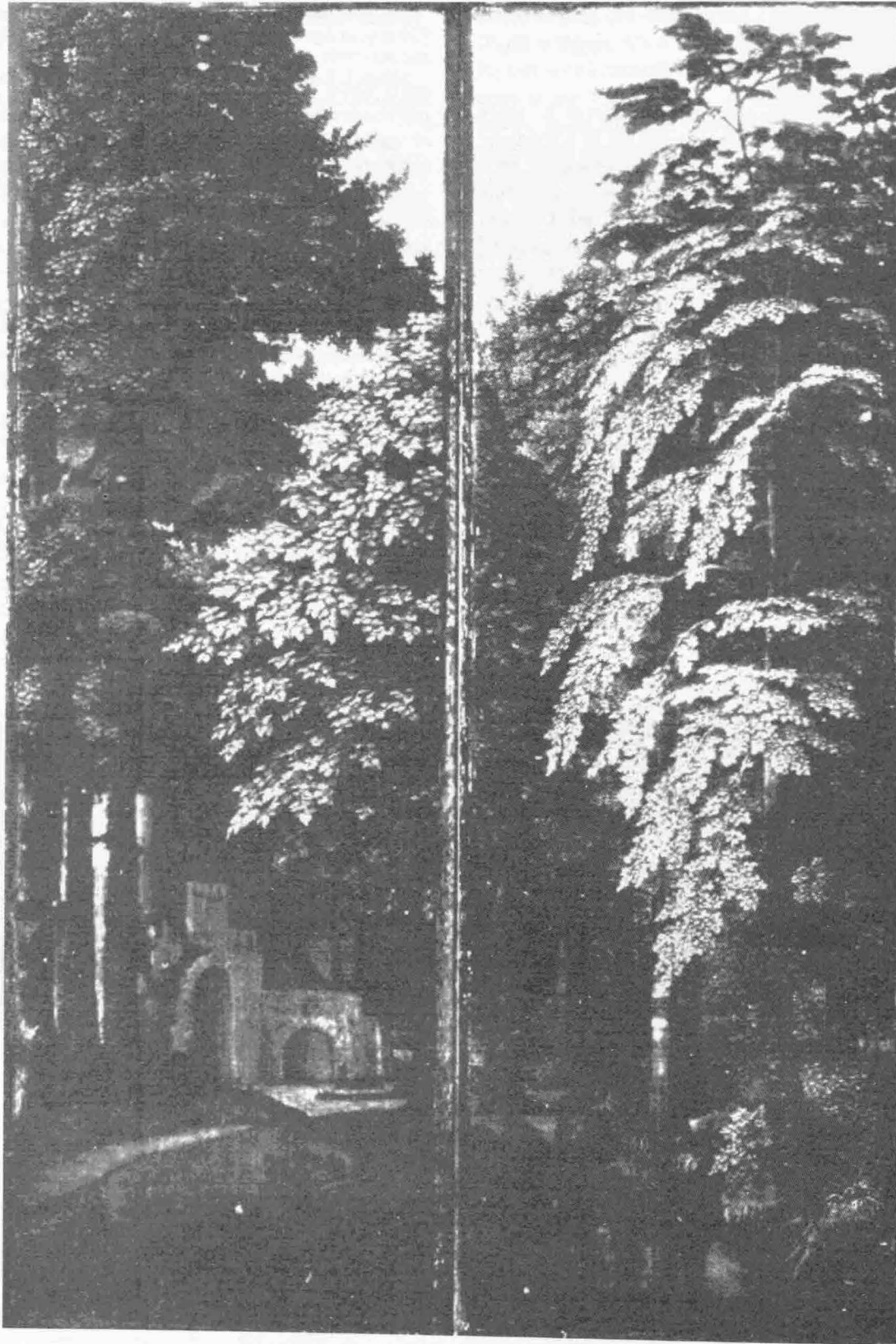


Figure 2: Gerard David. "Two Forest Scenes." Royal Cabinet of Paintings. Mauritshuis, the Hague.



Figure 3: Roger van der Weyden, "Crucifixion." Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum



Figure 4: Geertgen . "John the Baptist in the Wilderness." Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Preussischer Kulturbesitz Gemaldegalerie.