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## Follower of Jan Gossaert, Flemish, C. 1478-1532

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# Follower of Jan Gossaert

FLEMISH, C. 1478–1532

- 12 *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Agnes*, c. 1520  
oil on panels  
central panel: 41 × 30½ in.  
each wing: 41 × 12½ in.

GIFT OF MRS. CHARLES V. HICKOX, 1958.361.A–C

*Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Agnes* exhibits many features of the sixteenth-century Netherlandish artist Jan Gossaert's distinctive style, though it was more likely executed by a follower. The minutely rendered details of the garments and architecture follow the conventions of fifteenth-century Northern European painting, which Gossaert and the artist of this triptych adopted. In placing the figures in elaborate architectural frameworks, the artist laid claim to a distinctive Gossaert trademark. It is also evident that the painter was familiar with specific examples of Gossaert's work. The extravagant throne behind the Virgin and Child, with its gilded linear ornament and dangling pendants, replicates the architecture in the panel of *Saint Peter* from Gossaert's so-called Salamanca Triptych (fig. 12). The background of Gossaert's *Saint Luke Portraying the Virgin* (c. 1520; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) provided the model for the barrel-vaulted spaces of Saints Catherine and Agnes in the wings.

Despite the artist's fidelity to Gossaert's observational skills and architectural models, he did not imitate the realism of his figural style. Contemporaries widely admired Gossaert for his ability to impart a sense of individuality to his figures. In contrast, the smooth, enamel-like faces of the holy figures in *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Agnes* radiate an otherworldly glow equal to their majestic settings. Instead of representing each figure with distinctive characteristics, perhaps suggesting different hands at work, the artist has focused on two facial types. The Virgin and Child, Saint Catherine (left wing), and the harp-playing angel share a small, oval face with a sharp nose and pointed chin. The figures on the right side of the altarpiece, including the lute-playing angel and Saint Agnes, have pronounced foreheads, full cheeks, and soft, round features. Though rejecting Gossaert's individualized facial types for an otherworldly

idealism, the artist successfully imitated his sculptural approach to form. Similar to Gossaert, he shaded the pale flesh tones of the infant Christ with blue gray and applied peach highlights to the cheeks, hands, knees, and feet. Other similarities include the Christ child's pose and glistening curls, and the crumpled treatment of the angels' drapery.

Despite the numerous Gossaert borrowings, it is unlikely that the triptych was produced in Gossaert's workshop or that the artist worked directly with him on it. As a court artist, Gossaert did not establish a traditional workshop with apprentices and assistants. Instead, knowledgeable about the high demand for Gossaert's style, the artist intentionally incorporated elements of it. In contrast to numerous other artists, who directly copied entire Gossaert compositions, this painter took a more creative route by producing a derivative copy or variant. Combining Gossaert motifs from different paintings with his own distinctive figural style, the artist produced a final product of his own invention.

The rise of open art markets in prominent Flemish cities, such as Bruges and Antwerp, contributed to the increased adoption of copying among artists and changes in artistic production, making it difficult to determine if the triptych was a market piece or a commission. The triptych displays several traits generally associated with a group of artists who sold their paintings on the open market known as the Antwerp Mannerists. The opulent setting, elegant figures, extravagant poses and drapery, and strident colors are hallmarks of the group's style. Mannerist traits were not exclusive to the Antwerp Mannerists, however, but appeared earlier in paintings by Gossaert and were widespread when this triptych was created. The Mannerist flourishes found in *Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine and Agnes* display the artist's knowledge of a popular painting trend rather than identifying it as a



**Fig. 12** Jan Gossaert, *Right Wing from the So-Called Salamanca Triptych: Saint Peter*, 1521, oil on panel. Toledo Museum of Art, Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1952.85A





market product. The painting's format, a moderately sized triptych, which possibly functioned as an altarpiece for a private chapel or domestic setting, does not answer the question of patronage. Artists sold altarpieces of this scale from their workshops as well as at markets.

The triptych exhibits another strategy employed on the open market, namely, customization. By the early sixteenth century, it was standard for artists to treat the space of the individual panels of a triptych as a unified visual field. This work, however, does not employ a consistent perspectival scheme among the panels, and the floors of the wings are fashioned of different materials and are not at the same level as the middle panel. The reverse of the triptych reveals additional inconsistencies between the center panel and wings. The greater thickness of the center panel in comparison to the wings required the addition of battens to the top and bottom of each. The presence of hinge marks on the center panel indicate that it was originally intended to be fastened to wings of the same thickness. A likely explanation for the incongruencies between the center panel and the wings is that the images were not conceived as an ensemble but were framed together as an attempt to customize the work for the patron. For the market, artists produced images with wide popular appeal, such as the Virgin and Child, subsequently joining them to images with personal meaning, such as a patron saint.

The specific patron of this triptych is not known, yet important details of the imagery suggest that it was a female member of a religious community. When this was painted, female membership in lay religious communities, such as the Beguines or Sisters of the Common Life, was high. Women of means or noble status more frequently became nuns, joining a specific order.

The ensemble of the Virgin Mary and saints Catherine and Agnes evoked themes that had special significance for religious women. The most revered virgin saints and brides of Christ, they served as models for religious women to emulate. During the Renaissance, Mary's role as a perpetual virgin—that is, before, during, and after Christ's death—was stressed over her other ones. According to their legends, Catherine and Agnes chose chastity over marriage, even in the face of death (in the case of Agnes). Viewing these saints would have reminded religious women to remain steadfast to their vow of chastity.

The saints portrayed in the triptych also served as models for lay religious women and nuns, who sought mystical union with Christ and viewed their relationship to him as a lover or spouse. In the Agnes panel, her mystic marriage with Christ is enacted as she extends a ring to a lamb, symbolic of Christ, rearing up on its legs. Both Catherine and Agnes identified themselves as brides of Christ in their legends, and the Virgin Mary was associated with the bride in the Song of Songs. With Christ as the bridegroom, their union symbolized Christ's relationship to the church. Frequently portrayed as the bride of Christ, instead, Catherine gazes into a book, recalling her legendary victory debating Maxentius's fifty scholars. Religious women viewed Catherine as the model for intellect, wisdom, and contemplation. Exclusive to Northern Europe, the representation of Agnes as Christ's bride reflected her importance in nun's initiation rites. Moreover, the known patrons of Agnes-as-bride imagery were all nuns. In the sixteenth century, religious groups remained strong art patrons and contributed to the success of the open markets, a fact that reinforces the possibility that this painting was customized for a religious institution or a member of one. **AMM**