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European Paintings and Sculpture from Joslyn Art Museum Hardcover

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Joslyn Art Museum

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European Paintings and Sculpture

from Joslyn Art Museum

Taylor J. Acosta

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German, Rhenish Artist

- 9 *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1500
polychromed wood
30¾ × 12½ × 7¾ in.

GIVEN IN MEMORY OF JULIA C. MORSMAN BY
HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS, 1974.2

Images of saints adorned a wide range of objects in the late medieval period, including stained glass windows, church architecture, altarpieces, and ecclesiastical vestments. For the viewer, these saints served as role models, intercessors, and protectors. A depiction of one of the most significant saints in Christendom, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* emphasizes her role as spiritual authority and preacher. Especially popular in the Rhine region of Germany, polychromed wood was an ideal medium for sculpture, and here it lends Saint Catherine a lifelike presence.

From the Middle Ages onward saints were portrayed with the attributes that related to a specific episode in their legendary life or martyrdom, often based on stories in the *Golden Legend*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century. In this sculpture, Catherine is shown glancing down at her open book and trampling a small male figure. He is the Roman emperor Maxentius, whom she bested in a legendary debate on Christianity. Unable to defeat her, Maxentius summoned philosophers from all corners of his empire, but her skills were such that she simultaneously converted them all, as well as the emperor's soldiers and his wife, to Christianity. Catherine became a role model for powerful religious institutions that promoted teaching

and preaching. She also held great appeal for religious and aristocratic women, and became the patron saint of students. She may once have held a sword, the weapon of her martyrdom, in her right hand.

Several features of *Saint Catherine* identify it as a product of Northern Europe and the lower Rhine. Described as the daughter of a king, Catherine appears as a princess wearing a crown. Her sumptuous gown and mantle reflect contemporary dress, not that of her time, making her more approachable to beholders. Although Catherine appears with a book in Italian art, the inclusion of Maxentius as an attribute only occurs in Northern European art. Stylistically, *Saint Catherine* resembles sculptures produced in the Rhine region. The S pose and angular drapery folds, and her heavy-lidded eyes, full cheeks, and small mouth, are typical of Rhenish sculpture.

The original context for the artwork is unknown, but its unfinished back indicates that it was not meant to be seen from all sides. It may have been intended for a shrine altar, which could house several standing saints attached to a back wall; such shrines were popular in Germany. Shrine statues were frequently polychromed to enhance visibility of the sculptures from a distance and to make the figures appear more lifelike. **AMM**



Northern European Artist

- 10 *Mass of Saint Gregory*, early 16th century
oil on panel
27 × 20½ in.

GIFT OF MR. HIMAN BROWN, 1961.570

A widely circulated image in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Northern Europe records a vision that occurred during a Mass performed by Pope Gregory the Great. According to one version of the legend, Christ appeared on the altar in response to a spectator who doubted his true presence in the Eucharist. In the *Mass of Saint Gregory*, Christ is portrayed as the Man of Sorrows. He is alive but bears the wounds of the Crucifixion, with blood streaming from his side into a chalice on the altar. Gregory kneels before it, a Crucifixion-imprinted Eucharistic wafer in his hands. He is accompanied by an entourage of assistants and church leaders. Dressed in copes similar to those of Saint Gregory, a deacon and subdeacon assist in the celebration of the Mass. At the end of the altar, two blond altar boys hold candles. The cardinal at lower left wears a red robe, his hat hanging down his back. Directly behind Gregory, a man in a red fur-lined robe holds his papal tiara, while to his right a bishop holds his crosier.

Several theories have been advanced to explain the great popularity of this subject at this time in history. Concurrent with this image's meteoric rise in prints and paintings, in the years leading up to the Protestant Reformation various groups challenged the claim that the bread and wine of the Mass became the actual body and blood of Christ. The illustration of this miraculous event, therefore, served as visual proof of this Catholic belief. The image also spoke to changing devotional practices and needs. A consistent feature of Saint Gregory's Mass imagery, the Arma Christi, or weapons of Christ, have a prominent place. Frequently appearing behind Christ, here they are scattered across the painting. In close proximity to the Man of Sorrows are the dice and nails, which rest on the edge of the altar table.

The other objects, including the ladder, whip, column, rooster, reed bundle, sponge, basin and pitcher, and lance appear at upper right. Onlookers, some in the gallery, represent Christ's tormentors. Together with Christ's wounded body, the Arma Christi, as representations of individual moments in his Passion, served as devotional aids. Theologians encouraged the faithful to vividly contemplate each episode of Christ's suffering as a path to salvation.

While Gregory Mass images upheld Eucharistic doctrine and permitted devotional contemplation of Christ's body and his human suffering, their soaring popularity should mainly be attributed to their connection to indulgences, which reduced the amount of time spent in Purgatory. By saying such prayers as the Paternoster and Ave Maria, penitents could have a specified amount of time deducted from their confinement in Purgatory, which was perceived as a place of torture and torment. Not present in all Gregory Mass images, two donors, presented by their patron saints, kneel in the lower right corner of the painting, their hands pressed together in prayer. A popular image for tomb monuments, the indulgence function was especially important to the donors. In this context, the image encouraged visitors to pray for them, thereby reducing their time in Purgatory.

The crowded composition and microscopic attention to detail identify this painting as Northern European. Strong illusionistic passages, such as the embroidered copes of the celebrants, coexist with spatial incongruencies. The artist tilted the space and employed oblique angles to give visual attention to all the components. The diminutive scale of the donors and Christ reflect their human and visionary status, respectively.

AMM



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**

Peter Wtewael

DUTCH, 1596–1660

- 19 *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1625–27
oil on panel
20³/₁₆ × 14³/₈ in.

MUSEUM PURCHASE WITH FUNDS FROM THE
JOSLYN ART MUSEUM ASSOCIATION AND COLLEC-
TORS' CHOICE VIII, 1999, 1999.15

Painted in Utrecht in the 1620s, *The Repentant Magdalene* is a testament to the biblical figure's enduring appeal and to the city's Catholic sympathies. Of the Dutch provinces, Utrecht retained strong ties to the Catholic Church. Although Catholic worship was prohibited, several clandestine churches were located in the city. Too small to be an altarpiece, this work was likely intended for private devotion.

Peter Wtewael was the son of a leading Mannerist painter in Utrecht, Joachim Wtewael. One of several artists who contributed to Utrecht's development as a prominent artistic center, Joachim was likely responsible for his son's artistic training. Despite Peter's great artistic promise and innovative style, he remained active as an artist for a relatively short period. Painting primarily in the 1620s, he focused his attention on his family's flax business after 1630 and eventually pursued political office.

Peter Wtewael's integration of the dominant stylistic trends in Utrecht, Mannerism and Caravaggism, is reflected in his innovative approach to *The Repentant Magdalene*. Mannerist tendencies include the strong twisting pose, opalescent flesh, and the artist's favorite color combination of dusky blue green and plum red. His paintings display a familiarity with the Utrecht Caravaggisti, a group of artists who, having worked in Rome, brought the style of Caravaggio north to their native city. Here his positioning of the Magdalene and still-life elements in the immediate foreground are reminiscent of Caravaggio and his followers. The strong contrast between the dark background and the brightly lit three-

quarter-length figure also harken back to Caravaggio. Versions of the theme by Caravaggisti in Utrecht inspired the details of the representation, but Venetian artists such as Titian first popularized images of the tearful yet erotic Magdalene. Wtewael's style, which is more dramatically expressive than that of his Utrecht counterparts, includes robust form, large hands with spread fingers, and broad paint application.

A significant saint since the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene is portrayed here in her role as a hermetic penitent. Identified as Luke's anonymous sinner and beloved disciple of Christ, she spent the final years of her life in contemplation in a grotto at Sainte-Baume in Provence, according to legend. Her most significant attribute, the ointment jar, rests prominently in the foreground. The saint's sumptuous attire and costly jewelry recall her noble birth and her sinful life as a courtesan before converting to Christianity. The skull, which symbolizes mortality and the fleeting quality of life, rests on a spiritual text.

The depiction of the Magdalene as a penitent had broad appeal. In the religious sphere, it supported the Counter-Reformation emphasis on conversion and the sacrament of Penance. The popularity of images of weeping women, the Magdalene included, reflects Dutch mores about public displays of emotion, which were not acceptable for men. Simultaneously enforcing stereotypes of women as weak and vulnerable, the combination of erotic overtones and pious content allowed male viewers to transcend their base emotions and feel compassion. **AMM**

