



The Communion of Saints

The Master of the *Virgo inter Virgines*' *Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine, Cecilia, Barbara and Ursula*

• PAULA L. PUMPLIN •

This late medieval painting (fig. 1) is part of the original core of the Rijksmuseum's collection.¹ At the beginning of the 19th century, when it was attributed to Jan and Hubert van Eyck, it belonged to the museum's immediate forerunner, the Nationale Konst-Gallerij in Huis ten Bosch, The Hague.² It is the name painting of the anonymous North Netherlandish artist (active c. 1470-1510), who was identified by Max J. Friedländer in 1903,³ and represents the *Virgin and Child* surrounded by female saints seated in a sunken area set off by a railing in a paved courtyard. The saints, recognizable by the pendants of their necklaces, are, clockwise from lower left, St Catherine of Alexandria (wheel and sword), St Cecilia (organ), St Barbara (tower) and St Ursula (heart pierced by an arrow). On the right, standing next to the railing, are St Margaret (dragon) and St Dorothy (flower basket). Corresponding to these two female figures are two men on the left, possibly St John the Evangelist and St Joseph. The door of the courtyard opens on to an idealized landscape.⁴

The Virgo Master and artistic activity in Delft, 1450-1500

The Virgo Master has a distinctive pictorial idiom and artistic personality. The traits most commonly mentioned

Fig. 1
MASTER OF
THE VIRGO
INTER VIRGINES,
*The Virgin and Child
with Sts Catherine,
Cecilia, Barbara and
Ursula*, c. 1495-c. 1500.
Oil on panel,
123.1 x 101.1 cm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam
(inv. no. SK-A-501).

when describing his style are the distinctive physiognomy of his figures and the high level of emotional expressiveness that pervades his paintings. The *Lamentation* (fig. 2) is often used as an example when discussing the essence of the Virgo Master's style. The figures have high foreheads with the skin stretched tightly over the skull, wispy hair, long necks, prominent cheekbones, sharp noses, small chins and mouths with a thin, straight upper lip and fuller lower lip. The outpouring of grief is almost palpable, yet at the same time restrained; it creates a field of energy that bridges the gap between the figures on the left and the pitiful figure of Christ on the right. It all takes place in a barren landscape, which focuses the viewer's attention on the scene in the foreground. A poignant detail is the juxtaposition of the graceful foot of John on the left with the bloody, mutilated foot of Christ on the right. Also noteworthy is the Virgo Master's interest in costume and texture, especially evident in the headdress of Mary Magdalene on the right and in the contrast between the gauzy sleeve and the rich brocade in Joseph of Arimathea's garments.

Another work regarded as a quintessential example of the Virgo Master's style is the *Annunciation* (fig. 3). Many of the features in the *Lamentation* are



Fig. 2
 MASTER OF
 THE VIRGO
 INTER VIRGINES,
Lamentation, c. 1487.
 Oil on panel,
 55 x 56 cm.
 Walker Art Gallery,
 Liverpool, © National
 Museums Liverpool
 (inv. no. 1014).

also seen here: the facial types, wispy hair, the restrained, yet profound emotion which resonates between the two figures and the careful depiction of costume and texture. In contrast to the Liverpool painting (fig. 2), however, much more attention is given to the setting: the dark bedclothes with tassels on the canopy, the finely carved stone pillar separating the Virgin and Gabriel, the tiled floor, the mullioned window and the cloister garden visible through the doorway, a precursor of

the courtyard in the painting in the Rijksmuseum.

It is generally accepted that the Virgo Master worked in Delft, but there are no documents that can be associated with him.⁵ One might be tempted to link him with Dirc Jansz (active 1474-95), one of the few Delft artists mentioned in the surviving archives, but, since there are no works which can be related to the documents, it is not possible to make such a connection.⁶ Van Luttrevelt did research into



Fig. 3
 MASTER OF
 THE VIRGO
 INTER VIRGINES,
Annunciation,
 c. 1487.
 Oil on panel,
 57 x 48 cm.
 Museum Boijmans
 Van Beuningen,
 Rotterdam
 (inv. no. 1568).

the origins of the Virgo Master, using the coat of arms in the *Annunciation* in Rotterdam (fig. 3) to link him with the Van den Bergh family of Delft.⁷ This theory has since been challenged, but his argument that the Rijksmuseum painting comes from the Premonstratensian convent of Koningsveld near Delft has been accepted in recent literature.⁸

Delft, along with Haarlem and Leiden, was one of the largest cities in Holland in the 15th century.⁹ Its

economic and political prominence created favourable conditions for patronage of the arts, which resulted in commissions for the city's two large churches and numerous religious foundations, and for private patrons; there was also a demand for illuminated manuscripts for personal use. Delft also played an important role in the history of printing in the Netherlands. The first printed book in Dutch, the *Delftse Bijbel*, was produced there in 1477.



Fig. 4
Crucifixion from the
Missale Trajectense
published by Snellaert
in 1495 (c.A. 1262).
Woodcut, 2°.
Koninklijke
Bibliotheek,
The Hague
(signature 170 E II).

Fig. 5
MASTER OF
THE VIRGO
INTER VIRGINES,
Crucifixion, c. 1485.
Oil on panel,
57 x 47 cm.
Galleria degli
Uffizi, Florence
(inv. no. 1237).

The connection between the Virgo Master and woodcuts used as illustrations in books was first recognized by Friedländer in 1910.¹⁰ Although he originally thought that these woodcuts could have been produced in either Delft or Gouda, he was later persuaded by Schretlen's evidence that the Virgo Master was active in Delft.¹¹

Perhaps the most accomplished woodcut associated with the Virgo Master is the *Crucifixion* in the *Missale Trajectense* printed by Snellaert in 1495 (fig. 4).¹² The figure of Christ, the intense expression on the faces of the Virgin and St John, and the folds of the drapery are reminiscent of painted versions of the subject by the Virgo

Master, for example the *Crucifixion* in the Uffizi, Florence (fig. 5). There are also comparable similarities in the Virgo Master's *Lamentation* in Liverpool (fig. 2) and a woodcut of the *Entombment* (fig. 6) in *Ons Heeren Passie* printed by Van der Meer in 1487.¹³

Although Utrecht has long been considered the main centre for the production of illuminated manuscripts in the Northern Netherlands, recent scholarship has established that a number of important illuminators were active in Delft.¹⁴ One of the earliest of these is the Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle (active c. 1415-20) who, because he is considered the main precursor of the Master of Catherine



Fig. 6
Entombment
from *Ons Heeren
Passie* printed by
Van der Meer in
1487 (c.A. 1160).
Woodcut, 4°.
Koninklijke
Bibliotheek,
The Hague.

of Cleves, was assumed to have been active in Utrecht until research by James Marrow uncovered enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that Delft was the probable location of this workshop.¹⁵ The techniques and compositional traditions of the Morgan Infancy Master are similar to those of the later Delft grisaille miniaturists (active c. 1440-50). These grisailles were mostly made on separate leaves so that they could easily be inserted into Books of Hours. They were produced on a large scale using techniques such as tracing and pouncing. The majority of manuscripts made in Delft can be recognized by their distinctive penwork.¹⁶

Two important manuscripts produced in Delft in the second half of the 15th century are the Fagel Missal, 1459-60, and the Breviary of Beatrijs van Assendelft, c. 1485.¹⁷ A Book of Hours, Delft, c. 1480, contains a miniature by the Assumption Master of the *Virgo inter Virgines* (fig. 7) which accompanies a prayer to the Virgin, 'Onser Vrouwen Mantel'.¹⁸ The position of the Christ Child, who reaches out to the left with both arms, is similar to that in the painting by the Virgo Master in the Rijksmuseum. It is unclear, however, exactly what he is reaching for. This manuscript also contains two miniatures in which a tower with a sloping roof is depicted (fig. 8).¹⁹

on page 312-13

Fig. 7
ASSUMPTION MASTER
Virgo inter Virgines,
c. 1480. Vellum,
104 x 58 mm.
Koninklijke
Bibliotheek,
The Hague
(Ms. 135 K 40, f. 175v).

Fig. 8
ASSUMPTION MASTER
Crucifixion, c. 1480.
Vellum, 101 x 58 mm.
Koninklijke
Bibliotheek,
The Hague
(Ms. 135 K 40, f. 51v).





Although manuscript illumination and decoration were well established in Delft, there is less evidence for a comparable level of activity in the area of panel painting. Van Mander's *Schilderboeck* has nothing to say about a local school of painting in Delft. In any event, it is possible that, in addition to the Virgo Master, two other painters were also active in Delft at the end of the 15th century: the Master of *Spes Nostra* (active c. 1500) and the Master of Delft (active c. 1490-1520). A comparison of two works by these Masters (figs. 9 and 10) with the painting in the Rijksmuseum shows that they share a number of compositional elements: all are set in an enclosed space depicted in central

perspective and the main focus is a group of women who sit in a separate enclosure, an allusion to the *hortus conclusus*, a symbol of Mary's virginity.

The only known work by the Master of *Spes Nostra* is a panel in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 9).²⁰ The painting consists of three parallel zones: in the foreground four canons kneel by an open grave with Saints Jerome and Augustine on either side; the middle ground depicts the Visitation with the Virgin and St Elizabeth seated on the edge of a sunken enclosure, and in the background there is an idyllic garden with an open door in a gateway that leads out into the countryside. This last detail also occurs in the painting by the Virgo Master. The portraits of the

Fig. 9
MASTER OF SPES
NOSTRA, *Four Canons
with Sts Augustine
and Jerome by an
Open Grave, with
the Visitation, c. 1500*.
Oil on panel,
88.7 x 104.3 cm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam
(purchased with
the support of the
Rembrandt Society,
inv. no. SK-A-2312).





canons in the foreground indicate that the painting served as a memorial to the individuals depicted.²¹ There is no interaction between the figures in the different zones.

The centre panel of a triptych by the Master of Delft (fig. 10) depicts the Holy Family with two female figures and music-making angels in a courtyard in an urban setting.²² Like the *Virgo Master's* painting in the Rijksmuseum, the main focus of the painting is the interaction between the female figures and the Virgin and Child. Also similar are the elaborate costumes and headdresses of the main female figures, which contrast with the Virgin's relatively simple clothing. The facial types of the female figures of both masters, although different, are so distinctive that they border on the idiosyncratic.

Although the paintings have several elements in common, they make a very different impression. The *Virgo Master* creates a serene, almost austere atmosphere. There are no distractions from the central scene; the only

significant movement is the gesture of the Christ Child in the direction of St Catherine. The flower offered by St Barbara is the only one in sight. Outside the courtyard, there are some orderly trees; there is no sign of human activity except for a single building on a hill in the distance. The small figures on either side react to the central scene in a subtle, unobtrusive manner.

The Master of Delft, on the other hand, presents a scene full of movement and lively details. The main figures are seated on a small lawn filled with different sorts of flowers and plants. There is interaction not only between the female figure on the left and the Christ Child, but also between the Virgin and the female figure on the right who offers her a flower. Angels provide a musical accompaniment. A charming detail is the Christ Child holding on to his mother's hair to keep his balance. The town in the background is within easy reach; ships are sailing into the harbour. In the wings of the triptych, there are people going about their daily business in the

Fig. 10
MASTER OF DELFT,
*Triptych with the
Virgin and Child
and Saints* (centre
panel), *the Donor
with St Martin*
(inner left wing),
*the Donor's Wife
with St Cunera*
(inner right wing)
and *the Annunciation*
(outer wings),
c. 1500-10.
Oil on panel,
central panel
87.1 x 69.2 cm,
side panels
86.5 x 31.5 cm.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam
(acquired through
the intermediary
of the Rembrandt
Society, inv. no.
SK-A-3141).

background. The donor portraits in the wings indicate that the painting was a memorial, like the panel by the Master of *Spes Nostra*.²³

The identity of the two female figures in the painting by the Master of Delft is open to discussion. Sixten Ringbom has argued that they are sibyls.²⁴ The figure on the left shows the Christ Child the prophecy in her book, and points to a vision in which God the Father sits next to a tent/tabernacle where the *Arma Christi* are displayed.²⁵ In this way the Christ Child receives foreknowledge of his suffering and death. Even if one does not accept Ringbom's theory,²⁶ the fact remains that the iconography is highly original. From these examples, it is possible to conclude that, although the artists working in Delft at the end of the 15th century were not especially innovative in terms of style, they were very inventive in their subject matter. The Virgo Master was also an iconographical innovator. It is, however, his emotional expressiveness and intensity that set him apart from his contemporaries in Delft.

The majority of the works by the Virgo Master are relatively small.²⁷ Many of them depict scenes relating to the passion of Christ. Others depict scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin, such as the Adoration of the Magi, the Annunciation and the Nativity. There are, however, two large scale altarpieces by the Virgo Master which have survived: a polyptych (five panels) in the Museum Carolino Augusteum, Salzburg, and a triptych in the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle.²⁸ These would have been major commissions and, as such, they reflect the high regard in which the Virgo Master must have been held.

The painting in the Rijksmuseum is considered to be one of the later works (c. 1500) by the Virgo Master. Although it is stylistically similar, it differs from the majority of the Master's oeuvre in that it is relatively

large and has no real narrative content. In these respects, it is similar to another late work, the *Mercy Seat* (c. 1505-10) in Zagreb (fig. 11), a highly unusual, if not unique, depiction of the subject. It combines three themes: the standard representation of the Trinity, with God the Father seated on an elaborate throne, holding the crucified Christ on his lap with the dove of the Holy Spirit between their heads; two groups of three mourners each on either side of the throne, which recall the witnesses that are usually present at the Crucifixion, and the angels displaying the *Arma Christi* behind the mourners.²⁹ The painting is typical of the Master's oeuvre in that it depicts a scene focusing on Christ's suffering. The level of emotional intensity is considerably lower in the Rijksmuseum painting, where stillness and contemplation are dominant. In the discussion that follows, we shall see that the Virgo Master has also given the subject of the *Virgo inter Virgines* his own interpretation.

The theme of the *Virgo inter Virgines*

The theme of the *Virgo inter Virgines* is a sub-genre of the *sacra conversazione*, a unified representation of the Virgin and Child with saints that has its origins in Italian art of the 14th century. Although the term was rarely used in connection with works of art until the 19th century, it has a long tradition, appearing in Biblical texts, the Missal, in the sacraments and patristic writings.³⁰ In these sources, it means 'pious conduct' or 'holy community'. A painted *sacra conversazione* is a depiction of a gathering of models of piety who together form a holy community, and not a conversation in the English sense of the word. The silent figures are united visually and psychologically; they interact by means of gesture and glance.

Fig. 11

MASTER OF THE VIRGO
INTER VIRGINES,
Mercy Seat, c. 1505-10.
Oil on panel,
146 x 128 cm.
Strossmayerova
Galerija Starih
Majstora, Zagreb
(inv. no. SG-71).

Depictions of the *Virgo inter Virgines* were produced in Northern Europe in the 15th century, primarily in the Low Countries and Germany. In his dissertation, Weed convincingly argues that the subject has its roots in the cult of the *Virgines Capiales* (the virgin martyrs Saints Barbara, Catherine,

Margaret and Dorothy), and that the first depictions of the theme originated in Germany in the first half of the 15th century.³¹ Winkler has argued that the theme of the *Virgo inter Virgines* was introduced to the Low Countries by Hugo van der Goes.³² He further demonstrated that a number of related



paintings are based on a now lost painting of the *Virgo inter Virgines* by Van der Goes, for example the work by the Master of the St Lucy Legend in the Detroit Institute of Arts (fig. 12).³³ Weed's thesis that the theme was introduced to the Low Countries by Hans Memling is less persuasive because, unlike Winkler, he cannot point to a group of paintings that are related to a common source.³⁴

The core elements of the subject are the Virgin and Child, and Saints Catherine and Barbara, who are almost always positioned nearest to Mary and Jesus. This basic group is augmented by the addition of two or more virgin

martyrs.³⁵ The choice of the additional saints provided an opportunity for a certain degree of customization. The scene is frequently set in an enclosed garden or *hortus conclusus*.

There are two sub-themes which commonly occur: the Mystic Marriage of St Catherine (or, more generally, becoming the Bride of Christ) and allusions to the Eucharist. The former can be seen in the painting by the Lucy Master (fig. 12) mentioned above. The Christ Child reaches out towards St Catherine to put a ring on her finger. In the same work, St Barbara offers the Christ Child a flower as a token of betrothal. A good example

Fig. 12
MASTER OF THE
ST LUCY LEGEND,
*Virgin of the Rose
Garden*, c. 1475-80.
Oil on panel,
79 x 60 cm.
Detroit Institute
of Arts, Detroit
(Founders Society
purchase, General
Membership Fund /
The Bridgeman
Art Library, inv. no.
26.387).





Fig. 13
GERARD DAVID,
Virgo inter Virgines,
1509.
Oil on panel,
118 x 212 cm.
Musée des Beaux-Arts,
Rouen, Musées
de la Ville de Rouen,
photo C. Lancien,
C. Loisel (inv. no.
803.4).

of the Eucharistic sub-theme is the *Virgo inter Virgines* by Gerard David (fig. 13), where the Christ Child holds a bunch of grapes, an allusion to the sacramental wine, which becomes the blood of Christ during the Mass.³⁶ In 1509 this painting was donated by David to the Carmelite convent of Sion, Bruges, where it was installed on the high altar.³⁷

How does the Virgo Master's painting fit into this tradition? One of the unusual aspects is the setting. This is not an enclosed garden or a landscape, but a paved courtyard, which reminds one of the setting for *The prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl* by the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl, Städel Museum, Frankfurt of c. 1476.³⁸ In that painting, however, the artist, like the Master of Delft, has included a number of details (a dog, a sleeping bear, people coming and going, swans in a river, etc.) which have no direct bearing on the subject.

A prominent detail in the painting in the Rijksmuseum is the open gateway, in the middle of the composition, directly above the Virgin's head. This is not typical of *Virgo inter Virgines* imagery, and would seem to negate the

symbolism of the *hortus conclusus*. The open door/gateway in a courtyard or enclosed space does occur, however, with some frequency in the art of the Northern Netherlands; for example in the name painting (*Anna selbdritt* (left), Carthusian monk with saint (Barbara?) (right) of the Master of the Brunswick Diptych, Herzog Anton-Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig; in the *Tree of Jesse* attributed to Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; in the painting by the Master of *Spes Nostra* (fig. 9) and in another painting by the Virgo Master, the *Annunciation*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (fig. 3). In the Rotterdam *Annunciation* the garden includes railings and a gate that are also present in the Rijksmuseum painting. Another prominent gate, with a portcullis that appears to be partially raised, is found in the Virgo Master's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Although the *hortus conclusus* allusion is well known, there are alternative medieval sources of Marian symbolism. The Marian antiphon, *Alma redemptoris mater*, for example,

contains imagery which seems to relate quite closely to the open doorways mentioned above.³⁹ The antiphon, in which Mary is referred to as the open gate of heaven, has been sung or recited at the close of Compline from the first Sunday in Advent until the day before the Feast of the Purification (2 February) since 1350.⁴⁰ This antiphon, which celebrates Mary's role as the virgin mother of the saviour of the world, would seem to be especially relevant to the painting by the Master of *Spes Nostra*, where Mary is pregnant, as she is during Advent. It could also be alluded to in the *Annunciation* by the Virgo Master which depicts Mary as she receives Gabriel's greeting, and in which the door in the garden stands open.

One of the most significant departures from tradition in the Rijksmuseum painting is the prominent place of St Ursula. She sits where one would normally expect to find St Barbara, who here has been relegated to the second row. The cult of St Ursula was centred in Cologne, but she was also highly honoured in Delft.⁴¹ In 1404 she became one of the patron saints of the Nieuwe Kerk; there was also a convent dedicated to St Ursula in Delft.⁴²

Also unusual is the subtle way the saints are identified: their attributes hang as pendants from their necklaces. According to Winkler, it was Hugo van der Goes who first used this device, which can be seen in a work related to one of his lost *Virgo inter Virgines* paintings (Master of the St Lucy Legend, Musée des beaux-arts, Brussels).⁴³ It is also noteworthy that in the same painting the attributes of Saints Catherine (wheel) and Barbara (tower) are woven into the pattern of the brocade of their garments. Even though the Virgo Master was not the first artist to use a pendant as a means of identifying a female saint, what seems to be unique in the Rijksmuseum painting is that *all* the female saints depicted are identified in this way.

Another anomaly is the presence of the two male figures on the left; in most representations of the *Virgo inter Virgines* theme only women are depicted. Unlike the female figures, the two men are not easy to identify.⁴⁴ The manner in which the younger man is depicted, beardless, with long hair and a red mantle, certainly brings to mind the standard representation of St John the Evangelist.⁴⁵ There are no specific characteristics to help with the identification of the older man. The inclusion of the two men in the scene is a clear indication that they have a special relationship to the Virgin and Christ Child. If we accept that the younger man is St John, which is certainly not implausible, there is a passage from his gospel that could explain his presence. In John 19:26-27, Jesus speaks to those who are standing at the foot of the cross: 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son". Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother". And from that hour the disciple took her into his own house.'⁴⁶ John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was the man who looked after Mary like a son following the death of Christ. Could it be that the older man is Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, who protected Mary and her son during the first years of his life?

The eagerness with which the Christ Child reaches for St Catherine and her gesture of acceptance are the emotional focus of the painting. Instead of a ring, she receives the Child himself. This can be interpreted as an allusion to the Eucharist; Catherine literally receives the body of Christ, which in the Mass is the host. The flower held by St Barbara in the second row is a traditional token of betrothal. In the Rijksmuseum painting, the Virgo Master thus includes both of the sub-themes mentioned above, becoming the Bride of Christ and Eucharistic allusions.

It seems possible to conclude that, while the Virgo Master's version of the *Virgo inter Virgines* theme includes all the standard elements of the theme, his interpretation adds several new dimensions to the depiction of the subject. Might these pictorial innovations have been influenced by the original setting in which the painting was viewed?

The painting in its original setting

There is nearly unanimous agreement that the panel in the Rijksmuseum was made for a convent.⁴⁷ One notable dissenter is Jeroen Giltaij in his entry for the painting in the catalogue of the exhibition in Rotterdam in 2008.⁴⁸ He cites two depictions of the *Virgo inter Virgines* which were not made for convents, Gerard David's painting in the National Gallery, London (inv. no. NG1432), and the painting by the Master of the St Lucy Legend in the Musée des beaux-arts, Brussels (inv. no. 2576), and concludes on this basis that the painting in the Rijksmuseum was also not made for a convent.⁴⁹ I am not convinced by this argument.⁵⁰ The altarpiece by David now in Rouen is known to have been donated by the artist to the Carmelite convent of Sion, Bruges, where it was installed on the high altar in 1509. Just as it is not logical to conclude solely on the basis of this single example that the Rijksmuseum's *Virgo inter Virgines* was intended for a convent, it is equally illogical to state that the painting was not made for a convent on the basis of the two examples given by Giltaij. In any event, the absence of donor portraits in the Rijksmuseum painting is a fairly strong indication that the work was commissioned by a group and not by an individual. Furthermore, the female-centric imagery of the subject matter would certainly be appropriate for a group of religious women. I find no reason to disagree with the prevailing consensus that the painting in the Rijksmuseum was made for a convent.

The generally accepted premise that the Virgo Master was active in Delft, and the prominence in the composition of St Ursula, a saint highly honoured in that city, would suggest that the convent was located there.⁵¹ To establish precisely which convent this was is more problematic. It has been argued that the painting comes from the Premonstratensian convent, Koningsveld, which was situated outside Delft. The convent was demolished in 1573, and there are no depictions of the convent buildings in their original state.⁵² It is impossible to determine, therefore, whether the courtyard in the Rijksmuseum painting is a representation of the building complex as it once existed. The nuns in this convent were exclusively daughters of noble families. This could possibly explain the richness of the garments of the female saints, which, according to Van Lutternvelt, is exceptional in paintings from the Northern Netherlands. The convent was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, St John the Evangelist and 'all God's saints'.⁵³ If we accept that the young man depicted on the left is St John the Evangelist, this would support the theory that the painting comes from Koningsveld.

A good deal has been written about how images (or in the case of Books of Hours, images and texts) were used as aids in private devotion.⁵⁴ By meditating on an image, perhaps while reciting a prayer, the viewer could imagine himself or herself taking part in the scene depicted, like the well-known example of the miniatures by the Master of Mary of Burgundy.⁵⁵ The image of the *Virgo inters Virgines* which accompanies the prayer 'Onser Vrouwen Mantel' (fig. 7) was probably used in this way. Given the size of the painting in the Rijksmuseum and its Eucharistic symbolism, it is more likely that this served as an altarpiece, like Gerard David's painting for the Carmelite convent in Bruges, and, as such, would have functioned within a context of collective devotion.

Paradoxically, the fact that the painting was probably an altarpiece in a convent might also explain the presence of the male figures. Could it be that these men, who are allowed into what normally is the exclusive preserve of women, allude to the priests who heard the nuns' confessions, gave them penance and absolution, celebrated Mass and, at the end of their lives, performed Extreme Unction? Like Joseph and St John vis-à-vis the Virgin, they would have been trusted figures, and, most importantly, it was through them that the nuns had access to the sacraments. It has been suggested that the painting by the Master of *Spes Nostra* (fig. 9), with portraits of four Augustinian canons, came from the convent of Mariënpoel, near Leiden.⁵⁶ Although not completely analogous to the male figures in the Rijksmuseum painting, this could serve as an example of the esteem and respect that nuns had for the priests attached to their convents.

Although it is possible that the open gateway could be an allusion to liturgical chants such as the *Alma redemptoris mater* antiphon mentioned above, the Gospel of John may offer a more direct clue to its meaning in this painting. This Gospel contains a number of familiar 'I am' sayings: I am the bread of life (John 6:35); I am the light of the world (John 8:12); I am the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In one of these sayings (John 10:9), Jesus refers to himself as a door: I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. Later in the same chapter (John 10:14-16), Jesus says, 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.'

The nuns, who had entered the gateway of the convent to become the Brides of Christ, thought of themselves as sheep of the Good

Shepherd. During the celebration of the Mass, they could reflect on the meaning of the death of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who gave up his life so that humanity could be reconciled to God. This sacrifice was re-enacted every time the Mass was celebrated. As they looked at the painting, the nuns could imagine themselves among the virgin martyrs, close to the Virgin and the Christ Child like the small figures standing on either side of the central group in the painting. During the Mass, they too would receive the body of Christ. The painting would have fostered a sense of communal identity, and would also have reinforced the nuns' belief that they were part of the communion of saints, the *sacra conversazione*. The Virgo Master provided the nuns with an image to which they could readily relate. It underlined their special relationship to Christ and to his mother, and the bonds that they had with each other. It is within the context of collective devotion and the celebration of the Eucharist that the painting in the Rijksmuseum can best be understood.



NOTES

- 1 The article is based on a paper written for the seminar 'De laatmiddeleeuwse kunst van de Noordelijke Nederlanden', University of Amsterdam, spring 2007. I am grateful to my teachers, Professor C. Chavannes-Mazel and Professor J.P. Filedt Kok, for encouraging me to publish this essay. I am especially indebted to J.P. Filedt Kok for his advice concerning the revision of the paper for publication. Thanks also to Marijn Schapelhoeman, Rijksmuseum, for his help with the final revision and to Ellen Slob for her efforts in obtaining the reproductions.
- 2 J.P. Filedt Kok, 'De vroege Nederlandse schilderkunst in het Rijksmuseum', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 46 (1998), p. 127 (fig. 4), pp. 129, 173 (note 5).
- 3 Max J. Friedländer, *Die Brügger Leihausstellung von 1902*, Berlin 1903. Also appeared in *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 26 (1903), pp. 66-91, 147-75.
- 4 For additional information see R. van Luttervelt (ed.), *Middeleeuwse kunst van de Noordelijke Nederlanden*, cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1958, p. 68, no. 54; P.J.J. van Thiel et al., *All the paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam: a completely illustrated catalogue*, Amsterdam/Maarsen 1979, p. 637 (cat. no. A 501); H. van Os et al., *Nederlandse kunst in het Rijksmuseum 1400-1600*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 76-77 (cat. no. 16); C. Unger, *Die Tafelgemälde des Meisters der Virgo inter Virgines*, Berlin 2004 (diss.), pp. 163-67 (no. 4.1.12); F. Lammertse et al., *Vroege Hollanders: Schilderkunst van de late Middeleeuwen*, cat. Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) 2008, pp. 278-80 (no. 50) and *Early Netherlandish paintings in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Volume 1 – Artists born before 1500*, J.P. Filedt Kok (ed.), <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/early-netherlandish-paintings> (Accessed 2 August 2010). The painting was cleaned and restored in 2006-07 by W. de Ridder in the Rijksmuseum's restoration workshop. For further technical information, see *Early Netherlandish paintings in the Rijksmuseum*.
- 5 A common lament in the literature is the large-scale destruction of archival material in the fire of 1536 which caused massive damage to the city.
- 6 A. Châtelet, *Les primitifs hollandais*, Paris 1980, p. 145.
- 7 R. van Luttervelt, 'De herkomst van de Meester van de Virgo inter Virgines', *Bulletin Museum Boijmans* 3 (1952), pp. 57-71.
- 8 J. Giltaij et al., *Van Eyck to Bruegel 1400-1550: Dutch and Flemish Painting in the Collection of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen*, Rotterdam 1994, pp. 81-83. (cat. no. 14). For example, S.E. Weed, *The Virgo inter Virgines: Art and the Devotion to Virgin Saints in the Low Countries and Germany 1400-1530*, Philadelphia 2002 (diss.), p. 259 and Unger, op. cit. (note 4), p. 163.
- 9 Information in this section is derived from G.T.M. Lemmens, 'Schilderkunst in Delft tot 1572', in I.V.T. Spaander and R.A. Leeuw (eds.), *De stad Delft: cultuur en maatschappij tot 1572*, cat. Delft (Prinsenhof) 1979, pp. 143-49; Châtelet, op. cit. (note 6), pp. 145-46; H.L.M. Defoer et al., *The Golden Age Of Dutch Manuscript Painting*, cat. New York (Pierpont Morgan Library) 1990, pp. 57, 185-97, 265-84; cat. Rotterdam, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 253-54.
- 10 K.G. Boon, 'De Meester van de Virgo inter Virgines', *Oud Delft* 2 (1963), pp. 5-35.
- 11 M.J. Schretlen, *Dutch and Flemish Woodcuts of the Fifteenth Century*, London 1925; M.J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Leiden 1967-76, vol. 5 (1969), p. 43. See Boon, op. cit. (note 10), pp. 29-30, for a list of books with illustrations in the style of the Virgo Master.
- 12 For the importance of the Virgo Master as a graphic artist, see P. Valkema Blouw, 'Drukkers en uitgevers te Delft: de eerste eeuw', in cat. Delft, op. cit. (note 9), p. 140. According to Schretlen, op. cit. (note 11), p. 41, the woodcut probably dates c. 1485, and was used in an earlier edition that has not survived. The only known copy of the print is in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague.
- 13 A tower with a sloping roof can be seen in a woodcut (fragment?) from *Ons Heeren Passie* (reproduced in Schretlen, op. cit. (note 11), pl. 58b). A similar tower can be seen in a number of paintings by the Virgo Master. See, for example, *Crucifixion*, Uffizi (fig. 5), *Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine, Cecilia, Barbara and Ursula*, Rijksmuseum (fig. 1), *Annunciation*, Fundacion Casa de Alba, Palacio de Liria, Madrid, reproduced cat. Amsterdam, op. cit. (note 4), fig. 27 (no. 56) and the *Entombment*, St Louis Art Museum, reproduced cat. Rotterdam, op. cit. (note 4), p. 270 (no. 47).
- 14 Cat. New York, op. cit. (note 9), p. 265.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 16 See *ibid.*, pp. 186-87, for a description of

- Delft border decoration.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 192-93 (no. 56, Trinity College, Dublin, Ms. 81) and pp. 273-77 (no. 94, Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, ms. OKM 3) respectively.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 277-78 (no. 95, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, ms. 135 K 40). In this depiction, the Virgin and Child are surrounded by, clockwise from lower left, St Catherine of Alexandria, St Agnes, St Lucy and St Barbara.
- 19 The other miniature is by the Monkey Master, *David at Prayer*, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, ms. 135 K 40, f. 78v, reproduced *ibid.*, p. 278, fig. 149.
- 20 See cat. Rotterdam, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 287-90 (no. 53).
- 21 Truus van Bueren et al., *Leven na de dood: gedenken in de late Middeleeuwen*, cat. Utrecht (Museum Catharijneconvent) 1999, pp. 205-07 (no. 70).
- 22 See cat. Rotterdam, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 292-96 (no. 54).
- 23 Cat. Utrecht, *op. cit.* (note 21), pp. 235-36 (no. 88).
- 24 Sixten Ringbom, 'Vision and conversation in early Netherlandish painting: the Delft Master's "Holy Family"', *Simiolus* 19 (1989), pp. 181-90.
- 25 The small figure in the porch on the left is the only one outside the main group who is aware of the vision. For a discussion of the meaning of the vision, see cat. Utrecht, *op. cit.* (note 21), p. 236.
- 26 See, for example, H.L.M. Defoer et al., *Goddelijk geschilderd: honderd meesterwerken van Museum Catharijneconvent*, cat. Utrecht (Museum Catharijneconvent) 2003, pp. 62-65 (no. 12).
- 27 The most recent overview of the Virgo Master's oeuvre is in Unger, *op. cit.* (note 4).
- 28 Ibid., p. 181, notes that these are comparable in size ('*vergleichbaren Formats*') to the Ghent altarpiece by Jan and Hubert van Eyck, the Beaune altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden and the Portinari altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes.
- 29 See cat. Rotterdam, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 275-77 (no. 49). See Unger, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 169-72 for a detailed discussion of the iconography.
- 30 R. Goffen, 'Nostra Conversatio in Caelis Est: Observations on the *Sacra Conversazione* in the Trecento', *Art Bulletin* 61 (1979), pp. 198-201. She goes on to argue that the pictorial development of the *sacra conversazione* can be related to the rise of the Franciscan and Dominican orders in Italy.
- 31 Weed, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 11-59. With Saints Margaret and Dorothy at the side, all of the *Virgines Capitales* are present in the Rijksmuseum painting.
- 32 F. Winkler, *Das Werk des Hugo van der Goes*, Berlin 1964, pp. 155-80.
- 33 Winkler based his argument on a drawing of a seated female saint, formerly attributed to Hugo van der Goes, in the Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London. For a discussion of the attribution of the drawing, see S. Buck, 'The impact of Hugo van der Goes as a draftsman', *Master Drawings* 41 (2003), pp. 228-39. The drawing is reproduced in Thomas Kren and Scot McKendrick, *Illuminating the Renaissance*, cat. Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum) 2003, p. 164 (no. 30). See L. Campbell, *The Early Flemish Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, Cambridge 1985, pp. 49-51 (cat. no. 32) for a summary of the versions and variants of the lost painting.
- 34 Weed, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 100-55. There are at least two statements which Weed makes concerning the Rijksmuseum *Virgo inter Virgines* that are incorrect. On p. 189 he writes, citing Van Luttermvelt, *op. cit.* (note 7), that the Koningsveld convent was dedicated to St Ursula, when Van Luttermvelt states in fact that the convent was 'gewijd aan de Heilige Moeder en Maagd Maria' ('dedicated to the Holy Mother and Virgin Mary') (p. 59). Châtelet, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 233, makes the same error; perhaps this is the source of Weed's misstatement. On pp. 295-96, Weed writes that the Virgin holds the Christ Child out to St Catherine so that she can receive a ring from him, when there is no ring depicted.
- 35 Among others, Agatha, Agnes, Apollonia, Cecilia, Lucy and Ursula.
- 36 For a discussion of Eucharistic themes in Netherlandish painting (mainly Flemish) see B.G. Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting*, New York 1984.
- 37 Weed, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 1.
- 38 For the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl, see J.E. Snyder, 'The early Haarlem school of painting: I. Ouwater and the Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl', *Art Bulletin* 42 (1960), pp. 49-55, and D.G. Scillia, 'The Master of the Tiburtine Sibyl at Leuven c. 1475-1478', in Bert Cardon (ed.), *Bouts studies*, Louvain 2001, pp. 245-58.
- 39 Alma Redemptoris Mater, quae pervia coeli/ Porta manes et stella maris, succurre cadenti/ Surgere qui curat populo; tu quae genuisti/ Natura mirante, tuum sanctum Genitorem;/ Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrielis ab ore/

- Sumens illud Ave, peccatorum miserere. (Text as given in R.J. Hesbert, *Corpus antiphonalium officii; vol.3, Invitatoria et antiphonae*, Rome 1968, p. 43 (1356).) I would like to thank Ulrike Hascher-Burger, moderator of Musica devota (Centrum für Musik der Devotio moderna), for her opinion concerning the possible relationship between the paintings and the *Alma redemptoris mater*.
- 40 According to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. 2001, the traditional attribution of the words and music of the *Alma redemptoris mater* to Hermannus Contractus (1013-1054) is no longer tenable. However, it seems to be the oldest of the four great Marian antiphons, the others being *Ave regina caelorum*, *Regina caeli* and *Salve regina*. See 'Alma Redemptoris mater', *Grove Music Online*, accessed 15 November 2007, <http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.00640>, and Michel Huglo, Joan Halmo, 'Antiphon, §5(v): Marian antiphons', *Grove Music Online*, accessed 15 November 2007, <http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.01023.5.5>
- 41 Van Luttermvelt, op. cit. (note 7), p. 59; Lemmens, op. cit. (note 9), p. 144.
- 42 Cat. Delft, op. cit. (note 9), p. 107: 'Het Sint Ursulaklooster was gelegen aan de Gasthuislaan. Het behoorde ook tot de zg. "Grouwzusters". De kapel werd gewijd in 1454.'
- 43 Winkler, op. cit. (note 32), p.156, '... der hl. Barbara mit der Halskette aus Türmchen, an denen ein "b" hängt ...', reproduced fig. 113. I have not included an illustration of this painting because it is not possible to see this detail in the reproductions.
- 44 Van Luttermvelt, op. cit. (note 7), p. 62, identifies them as St John the Evangelist and his older brother, St James.
- 45 Like the St John in the Liverpool *Lamentation* (fig. 2), he is barefoot.
- 46 All biblical quotations come from the Revised Standard Version.
- 47 See, for example, Van Luttermvelt, op. cit. (note 7), pp. 59-62; Van Os et al., op. cit. (note 4), p. 76; Weed, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 189, 259; Unger, op. cit. (note 4), p. 163; Mark L. Evans in Hans M. Schmidt et al., 'Masters, anonymous, and monogrammists', in *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T055065pg401>, accessed 18 November 2009.
- 48 Cat. Rotterdam 2008, op. cit. (note 4), p. 278-80 (no. 50).
- 49 The painting by David was commissioned by Richard de Visch van der Capelle, most likely for an altar dedicated to St Catherine in the church of St Donatian, Bruges. In 1489 the painting in Brussels was placed on the altar of the chapel of the *rederijkerskamer* of the *Drie Sanctinnen* in the *Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk* in Bruges. See Weed, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 177 and 174 respectively.
- 50 Giltaij also makes an unsubstantiated statement regarding the book held by St Cecilia. According to him it is undoubtedly the Bible, when it is equally possible that it could be a Book of Hours or a prayer book.
- 51 Van Luttermvelt, op. cit. (note 7), p. 59.
- 52 The location of the convent can be seen in a map of Delft (c. 1560) by Jacob van Deventer, Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, Ms. Res. 207, nr. 28, fol. 33r (reproduced cat. Rotterdam, op. cit. (note 4), p. 252), but this only gives a very general idea of the arrangement of the buildings.
- 53 'al Gods Heiligen'. Van Luttermvelt, op. cit. (note 7), p. 62.
- 54 See, for example H. van Os et al., *Gebed in schoonheid: schatten van privé-devotie in Europa, 1300-1500*, cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1994; R.S. Wieck, *Time sanctified: the Book of Hours in Medieval art and life*, 2nd ed. New York 2001; J.O. Hand et al., *Prayer and portraits: unfolding the Netherlandish diptych*, cat. Washington D.C. (National Gallery of Art) 2006 / Antwerp (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunst) 2007.
- 55 Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, ms. 1857, f. 14v and f. 24v. See Weed, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 268-69.
- 56 J.D. Bangs, *Cornelis Engelbrechtsz.'s Leiden*, Assen 1979, pp. 23-24. J.P. Filedt Kok in his catalogue entry for the painting by the Master of *Spes Nostra*, cat. Rotterdam, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 287-90, rejects Bangs's thesis primarily on the grounds that Jerome was not a patron saint (*beschermheilige*) of Mariënpool. As Bangs notes, however, the high altar of Mariënpool was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, ss Jerome and Augustine, ss Catherine and Ursula (and her companions) and All Saints, which could explain the prominence of those two male saints in a painting in that setting. Jerome and Augustine were very important to the monks of the *regulierenkloosters*, see cat. Utrecht, op. cit. (note 21), p. 206. As Filedt Kok notes (*ibid.*, pp. 229-30), Mariënpool belonged to the *kapittel van Sion*, and the rector of the convent always came from a monastery affiliated with this *kapittel*.

