



# Geertgen tot Sint Jans and the iconography of the *Ecce Agnus Dei*

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The long and complicated restoration of Geertgen tot Sint Jans's much damaged panel of the *Holy Kinship* in the Rijksmuseum was completed at the end of 2000, and the occasion was celebrated by the publication of a handsome booklet followed by a symposium on 30th March 2001. As a reaction to these events, and to information provided in a subsequent publication, it seems worth reconsidering the unique iconography of this large and impressive painting, and consequently its original destination.<sup>1</sup>

At the core of every representation of the *Holy Kinship* are the figures of the Virgin Mary, her mother St Anne, and the Christ Child. These three are most frequently shown as a closely-knit group or as sitting together in the middle of the picture. Any number of variants on these two compositional types are of course possible. Geertgen's *Holy Kinship*, however, is not a further variation on this established theme, but something of his own invention. Not only was this recognised by Erwin Panofsky in his *Early Netherlandish Paintings* of 1951, but it was he who was the first to put forward a satisfactory iconographic analysis. What is most remarkable in Geertgen's picture is the prominent place accorded to the Virgin's cousin, St Elizabeth, in the right foreground,

Fig. 1  
GEERTGEN TOT  
SINT JANS, *The Holy  
Kinship*, circa 1495. Oil  
on panel, 137,2 x 111,6  
cm. Rijksmuseum,  
Amsterdam  
(inv.nr. SK-A-500).  
After restoration.

balancing the figure of St Anne on the left, and the gesture with which Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, draws the viewer's attention to the Christ Child on the Virgin's lap. Panofsky traced this formulation back to a Byzantine-Sienese antependium from the third quarter of the 13th century (fig. 2),<sup>2</sup> but what he failed to point out was that this was not an independent panel, but formed part of a series of small scenes with episodes from the life of the Baptist surrounding a substantial image of that saint (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> For any proper understanding of the Geertgen panel, it is of the greatest importance to realise that the iconographic origins of the representation stem from the repertory of images of the legend of St John the Baptist.

In Geertgen's formulation, the Baptist, still on his mother's lap, is shown playing his most important adult role, pointing out Christ the Messiah. He already knows that the infant opposite is the Redeemer. The words *Ecce Agnus Dei* (Behold the Lamb of God) accompany representations of him as an adult, but in Geertgen's painting it is made clear that he knew that fact while both were still children.<sup>4</sup> In later medieval accounts of the youth of Christ this idea is often made abundantly clear in the narratives.<sup>5</sup>

The unkempt adult prophet John is

Fig. 2  
Siena, circa 1250, *The Virgin and the Christ child and Elisabeth with John the Baptist*, detail of the Antependium devoted to St. John the Baptist with scenes of his life. Panel, 92 x 170 cm. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.



Fig. 3  
Siena, circa 1250, *Antependium devoted to St. John the Baptist with scenes of his life*. Tempera on panel, 92 x 170 cm. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena.



frequently encountered on early altarpieces. In gothic polyptychs he is often shown in a compartment next to the central panel with the Madonna and Child: with his pointing finger, his staff and the *Agnus-Dei* text, the Baptist plays an important role in heralding the drama of Christ's assumption of humanity and sacrificial death that is played out in other scenes on such altarpieces (fig. 4). When the format of such large early polyptychs with

their many discrete compartments became outmoded, and altarpieces took on the form of a single large rectangular pictorial surface, John the Baptist came to be included among the principal actors, Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Much has been written about the new artistic challenges presented by this compositional type, the so-called *sacra conversazione*, but the fact that it must also have entailed a significant conceptual renovation has

received far less attention.<sup>6</sup> In any case, when the Baptist makes his entry into the inner circle of the Holy Family, his age and appearance are adjusted to conform to those of his younger cousin's, and the shaggy prophet with camelskin coat becomes the childhood playmate of Jesus. The Baptist's inclusion also brings a heightened liturgical and theological significance to such groups, for he well knows what the future holds for his little friend: with his cruciform staff and the Agnus Dei text he underlines the eucharistic content of the altarpiece.

In the booklet published by the Rijksmuseum, the authors devote an illuminating chapter to the abundance of eucharistic symbolism in Geertgen's painting, and this serves to alert the iconographer even more pointedly to the fact that the altar in front of the rood scene is placed at the very centre of the composition. Its centrality, both literal and figural, is emphasised by the rows of columns which zoom in on it, and – far from obscuring it – the figures in the foreground are so arranged as to allow a clear view through to it. The men and women in this representation of the Holy Kinship are clearly of no importance without the central defining fact of the mystery of the Eucharist. And to underline the point the reliefs behind the altar show the Fall of Man and the Expulsion from Paradise. On the altar itself there is a sculpture of the sacrifice of Isaac. Their message is clear: through the ritual sacrifice of the Son of God the sinful world is offered redemption. The authors also provide convincing identifications of the reliefs figured on the capitals of the columns, all of which appear to be episodes from the Old Testament connected with sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> And just as in Italian High-Renaissance altarpieces, there are also more allusive references to the Eucharist: the three children on the floor below the altar, for example, are

playing with the chalice and the wine.

But it is certainly the infant Baptist, with his Ecce-Agnus-Dei gesture, who provides the key to the picture, for it is he who points out that Anna's infant grandson is indeed the Lamb of God. Geertgen, it is clear, has composed his version of the Holy Kinship to provide a unique representation with a very specific message. Elizabeth and the Baptist together with Mary and the Christ Child, who form the nucleus of Geertgen's image, are also the subject of independent paintings intended for private devotion. An exceptional example is provided by a small painting by Quentin Massys that is dateable to between 1520 and 1525 (fig. 5). What is fascinating here is the fact that the infant John directs the viewer's attention not by pointing, but through his devotional attitude to the Christ Child, who in turn is playfully practising the gesture of blessing.<sup>8</sup>

In his book on early painting in the

Fig. 4  
Lippo Vanni, *Altarpiece 'al fresco'*, San  
Francesco, Siena.



Northern Netherlands, Albert Châtelet puts forward the suggestion that an altarpiece by the Master of 1473 in Soest (fig. 6) might be the iconographical precursor of Geertgen's painting. This is most unlikely, however, for two reasons. First, the Soest panel's principal departure point is a closely-knit group of the protagonists Anne, Mary and the Christ Child, whereas Geertgen deliberately and unusually places St Anne to one side (fig. 1). Secondly, although the Master of 1473 has indeed placed the figures within a church, it is a church where nothing happens, and no altar is visible. The building is clearly purely symbolic, and the picture seems to have more to do with the contemporary theological notion of the *Maria Ecclesia*.<sup>9</sup> Through their acceptance of Châtelet's proposal, however, the Rijksmuseum authors find themselves faced with what one might term a 'postmodern' pile-up of mutually exclusive iconographical interpretations. Geertgen's altarpiece is unique, because it extends the Holy Kinship tradition to include Elizabeth and the Baptist as well as Anne, Mary and Jesus as Lamb of God. There is thus absolutely no reason, in the context of this image of the Holy Kinship, to adduce an extended discussion of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>10</sup>

Geertgen's unusual representation of this theme must surely have been prompted by some specific circumstance, most likely to do with the dedication of the altar for which the painting was intended. In 1993, Truus van Bueren pointed out that an altar in the Sint Jansgasthuis in Haarlem was dedicated to Sts Mary, John and Elizabeth in 1437, and conjectured that Geertgen's altarpiece might well have been made for that location. It is, indeed, an unusual dedication. When Elizabeth and Mary are the dedicatees of an altar, one would expect the subject of the altarpiece to be the Visitation; and John the Baptist is normally accorded

Fig. 5  
Quenten Massys, *The meeting of The Virgin with the Christ child and Elisabeth with St. John the Baptist*, circa 1520-25. Oil on panel, 63 x 48,2 cm. The Clark Institute of Art, Williamstown (Mass.).



an altar dedicated to himself alone. On the basis of the iconographical analysis put forward here, then, there would seem to be every good reason to accept Van Bueren's suggestion.<sup>11</sup> In fact it provides the best possible explanation for the singular iconography of this unique early Netherlandish altarpiece.

#### NOTES

- 1 During a symposium held in the Rijksmuseum on 30 March 2001 I had the opportunity to deliver a critical reaction to Arie Wallert. Gwen Tauber and Lisa Murphy, *The Holy Kinship. A Medieval Masterpiece*, Amsterdam 2001. At the symposium I voiced my opinion that the authors had relied too uncritically on the iconographic analyses in the older literature, and that their speculation, on the basis of their iconographic readings, as to the panel's original location was flawed. In the meantime, in her review of the book (*Historians of Netherlandish Art Newsletter* 18, no. 2, November 2001), Truus van Bueren has provided a much more convincing interpretation of the document

the author's rely on as proving their proposition. I am grateful to Truus van Bueren for her help in writing this article and to Duncan Bull for translating it into English.

- 2 E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, ed. New York/Evanston/San Francisco/London 1971 (first ed. 1951), p. 498. W. Esser, *Die Heilige Sippe: Studien zu einem spätmittelalterlichen Bildthema in Deutschland und den Niederlanden*, Bonn 1986, no. A1.
- 3 P. Torriti, *La Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena. I dipinti*, ed. Genoa 1990, pp. 20-22. See also H. van Os, 'Geertgen tot St. Jans. The Holy Kinship, c. 1490' in: H. van Os et al., *Netherlandish Art in the Rijksmuseum 1400-1600*, Zwolle 2000, pp. 70-71.
- 4 I. Ragusa/R. Green (ed.), *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Princeton 1961, pp. 23, 64-65, fig. 54.
- 5 Lippo Vanni's Altarpiece 'al fresco' provides a better picture of a 14th-century polyptych than the examples that have come down to us, because there is always either something missing from or something added to (through restoration) those works: H.W. van Os, *Sienese Altarpieces 1215-1460*, Groningen 1990, 2 vol., vol. 2, pp. 35-38, fig. 5. Saint John appears here to the

right of the Virgin and Child.

- 6 For the most recent outline of the development towards the High-Renaissance: D. Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence*, New Haven/London 2001, pp. 5-41.
- 7 Wallert et al., *op.cit.* (note 1), p. 12.
- 8 A. Châtelet, *Les Primitifs hollandais: la Peinture dans les Pays-Bas du Nord au xve Siècle*, Fribourg 1980, pp. 222-224, no. 81.
- 9 S. Urbach, 'Domus Dei Est et Porta Coeli: Megjegyzések Petrus Christus Madonna-Képének Ikonográfiájához', *Építésépítészettudomány*, 3-4 (1974), pp. 341-53. W. Braunfels, 'Maria als Typus der Kirche', *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 3 (1971), col. 194.
- 10 Wallert et al., *op.cit.* (note 1), pp. 7-10. The veneration of St Anne is linked here far too narrowly with the immaculate conception of her daughter Mary. In an earlier publication I laid far too much emphasis – due to lack of experience – on the Mariological aspects of Geertgen's painting of the Holy Kinship: H. van Os 'Coronatio, Glorificatio and Maria in Sole', *Bulletin Museum Boymans Van Beuningen* 15 (1964), pp. 32-34.
- 11 T. van Bueren, *Tot Lof van Haarlem*, Hilversum 1993, p. 185, note 77.

Fig. 6  
Master of 1473, *The Holy Kinship*. Maria-zur Wiese Church, Soest.

