



A Christmas Crib as a Meek Heart of the Late Mediaeval Christian*

• IRIS IPPEL •

In the summer of 2013 the Rijksmuseum acquired a rare Late Gothic Christmas crib (fig. 1). Not many of these medieval votive objects have survived, and those that have are usually simple. Only eight Christmas cribs possess the monumentality and artistic refinement of this acquisition, which can be considered to be of the type known as *Gestelhängewiege*.¹ In this type the little bed or crib hangs in an open porch-like structure, so that it actually can be rocked.

The oak crib consists of a rectangular, box-shaped base with scalloped corners which rests on four reclining lions.² This base is embellished all round with *metselrie*, open Gothic tracery. On it stand two triangular uprights, which meet at the top in a Gothic arch with pinnacles from which hangs a crib that can be moved to and fro. In it lay a Jesus doll.³ The bed itself is also decorated on the long sides with fine Gothic tracery, while the headboard and footboard are crowned by an arch with pinnacles. Originally tiny silver bells attached to the underside of the bed tinkled when the crib was rocked. The Rijksmuseum's example's bells have been lost, but a number of similar cribs still have them.⁴ Their sound represented the angels' singing heard at Christ's nativity.⁵ Little figures of angels may even have been placed in the tiny holes in the pinnacles of the

Fig. 1
CIRCLE OF JAN II
BORMAN, *Christmas
Crib*, c. 1510.
Oak and bone,
62.5 × 34.5 × 17.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
BK-2013-14-1; purchased
with the support of
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Verhaaff Fonds/
Rijksmuseum Fonds
and the Ebus Fonds/
Rijksmuseum Fonds.

crib, like those found in the corner posts of a somewhat larger crib from the Great Beguinage in Louvain (fig. 2).⁶ It also served to ward off evil: according to an old superstition, bells should be hung on children's beds to frustrate evil spirits and demons.⁷

The complicated *metselrie* work, with elegant, interwoven arches carved in the hard and quite coarse oak with great skill, calls for further research into its design and execution. The geometrical structure of the Gothic tracery contributed to the mediaeval user's pleasure in contemplating the piece, as a recent study has shown.⁸ The geometry of the design may moreover have pointed to a higher order, accentuating the holiness of the object.⁹ The actual act of devotion – rocking the crib – and the design vocabulary serve a single objective: a 'divine' or 'heavenly' experience.

Made in Brussels

It can be assumed from the specific shape of the arch and the high quality of the tracery that the crib stems from the workshop or circle of Jan II Borman.¹⁰ Borman, also known as Borreman or Borremans, came from a prominent line of sculptors. He is documented between 1479 and 1520 and was known as the best carver (*beste beeltsnyder*) in Brussels.¹¹ His most important work is the large



unpolychromed St George Altarpiece, which was ordered for the chapel of the Louvain Crossbow Guild in the church of Onze-Lieve-Vrouwe-van-Ginderbuyten in 1493, and is now in the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (fig. 3).¹²

One persuasive argument for assuming that the Amsterdam crib is a product of Borman's artistic environment is the presence of a specific bell-shaped motif in combination with perfect semi-circular arches that can also be seen in the tracery of the St George Altar (figs. 4, 5). In both cases we find a vertical division of the arches into three sections, separated by pinnacles, where the arches within each segment describe an almost complete semi-circle; these segments are crowned by the bell motif, from which spring Gothic fleurons. The same motif is present on the crib, in what appears to be a more advanced and even more slender form. Here the Gothic fleurons have become tiny scrolls. The bell-shaped crownpiece on the head and foot ends of the crib is repeated in a more elementary and

Fig. 2

ANONYMOUS,
*Repos de Jésus du
grand béguinage de
Louvain*, 15th century.
Wood, polychrome,
lead, silver gilt, vellum,
embroidered silk
with pearls, gold
thread and enamel,
35.5 x 28.9 x 18.4 cm.
New York, The
Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
inv. no. 1974.121a-d.

Fig. 3

JAN II BORMAN,
St George Altar, 1493.
Wood, 163 x 248 x 30 cm.
Brussels, Royal
Museums of Art and
History, inv. no. 362.
Photo: © IRPA-KIK,
Brussels.

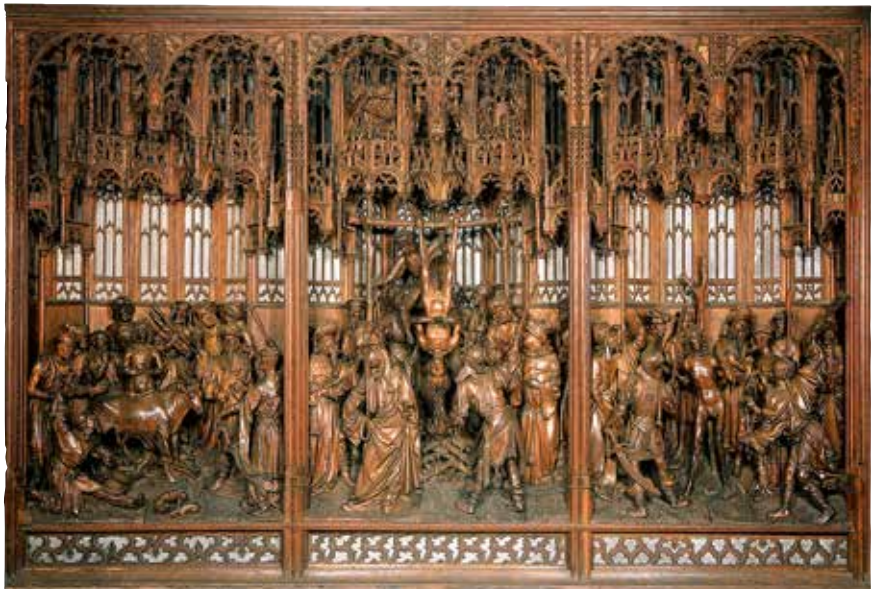




Fig. 4
Detail of the arch
and bell shape of
the St George Altar
(fig. 3).
Photo: Frits Scholten.



Fig. 5
Detail of the head
and foot ends of the
Rijksmuseum crib
(fig. 1).

compact form. There is also a clear affinity with the St George Altarpiece in the shape and division of the pilasters and pinnacles, and in the fact that both the crib and the large altarpiece were never polychromed.¹³

The connection between the *metzelrie* patterns of the crib and those in a number of notable Brussels altars, like the 'Vermeersch-retabel' in the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (c. 1490-1500; fig. 6),¹⁴ the altar in Boussu-lez-Mons (c. 1515-20),¹⁵ the Mary and Joseph altarpiece from Saluzzo,¹⁶ and the altar in the church of St Renelde in Saintes (1490-1500)¹⁷ support the Brussels origin of the crib. In the 'Vermeer' altar we also find the bell-shaped top in the tracery, a motif that otherwise occurs, with some variations, exclusively in a small number of Brussels altars from the last decade of the fifteenth century, but does not appear to have been used anywhere outside Brussels in that period.¹⁸ A stylistically similar *metzelrie* carver



worked on the tracery of the unpoly-chromed Nativity Altarpiece from Gestel-Meerhout, which likewise may have been made in Brussels around 1500 (fig. 7).¹⁹ Although this altarpiece has suffered greatly and various parts are missing or were added in the nineteenth century, the original shape and the *metzelrie* work display remarkable parallels to the carving in the Amsterdam crib. The tracery of the choir stalls in the church at Brou, built on the orders of Margaret of Austria, also has the bell and teardrop motifs. The stalls date from the second decade of the sixteenth century. They are said to have been designed by Jan van Roome of Brussels and executed by local woodcarvers.²⁰

Although these similarities – particularly to the St George Altarpiece – are indeed strong, the attribution of the crib to Borman's workshop still remains uncertain. A characteristic of these kinds of altarpieces is that they

Fig. 6
ANONYMOUS, *Passion Altar* ('*Vermeersch-retabel*'), c. 1490-1500. Oak, gilded and polychromed, 108 x 94 x 19 cm. Brussels, Royal Museums of Art and History, inv. no. v 198. Photo: © IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

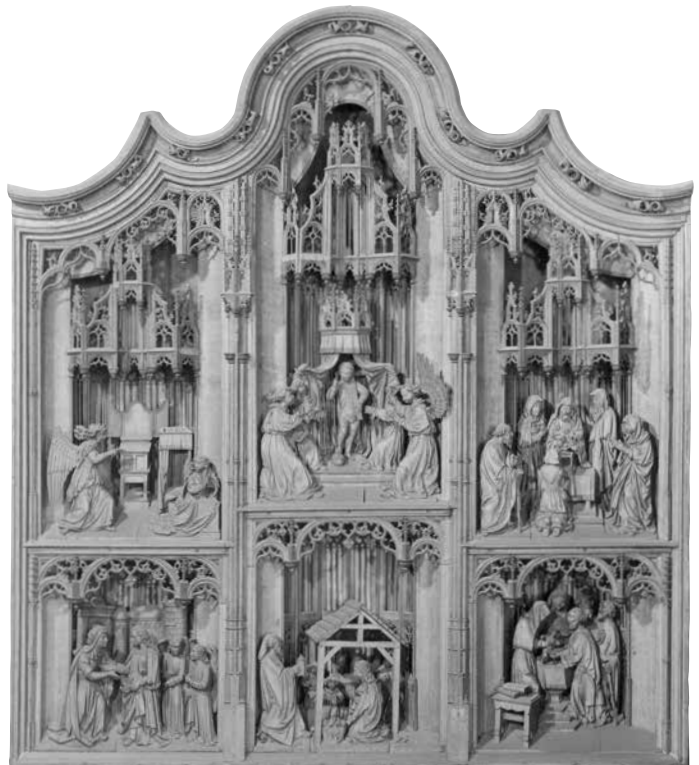


Fig. 7
ANONYMOUS, *Nativity Altar* ('*Gestel-Meerhout-retabel*'), c. 1501-10. Oak, 190 x 171 cm. Brussels, Royal Museums of Art and History, inv. no. 426. Photo: © IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

are the work of various artists and craftsmen: cabinetmakers made the altar frames and carvers carved the wooden figures for them. The *metselrie* carver took on the architectural decorations and the painter, lastly, painted the figures' clothes and the shutters (if they were part of the commission).²¹ Borman was only responsible for the figures on the St George Altarpiece – there is a sword on it signed with his name – the *metselrie* work was probably sub-contracted. As there is no surviving contract for this commission, we cannot be certain who undertook the *metselrie* work. However, the *metselrie* carver had a very important part to play in the case of the crib, where there is no figurative carving.

We know that Jan Borman regularly collaborated with the *scrijverker* or cabinetmaker Jan Petercels, who was also responsible for the architectural elements and the altar frame. A contract between the Louvain brewers' guild and Petercels, dated 7 February 1507, for the making of a St Arnold altarpiece for St Peter's church, for example, reveals that he was responsible for the case, the predella and the *metselrie* work on the shutters. Jan Borman was to carve the figures. The two Jans had to follow precisely the drawing supplied by the town architect Matthijs II Keldermans.²² Although this contract and two others reveal that Borman and Petercels worked together, none of the altarpieces that were commissioned have survived.²³ We know of no existing altarpieces by Petercels at all, so we cannot judge whether or not Petercels carried out the *metselrie* work for the St George Altarpiece and for the Amsterdam crib. It is also possible that Borman collaborated with other specialists besides Petercels. We have no information to go on, however, since only a small proportion of the altarpieces and contracts have survived and it is unclear which particular altarpiece is referred to in the surviving

contracts. Nevertheless the fine carving of the crib with its pinnacles, trefoils, pillars and tracery suggests that an eminent master carver of the calibre of Jan Petercels was involved.

The fact that Borman and Petercels worked from a design by the Louvain architect Matthijs Keldermans in 1507 may mean that an architectural object like the Christmas crib was also based on a design by an architect. Stylistically the crib could indeed be related to *beworpen* and *patroonen* (designs and patterns) that are linked to the family of architects to which Matthijs II Keldermans belonged. The characteristic bell-shaped pattern in the middle of the crib's arch was often used – although wider – in designs by the Keldermans. Among other things it can be seen in details of the Oude Kerk in Delft from the plans by Anthonis I (died 1512), Middelburg town hall by Anthonis I and Rombout II (died 1531), the drawings after the design by Rombout II of the Lievensmonstertoren in Zierikzee and the town hall in Ghent designed by Rombout II.²⁴

We cannot definitely identify the maker or makers of the Amsterdam crib, but it may be inferred from the foregoing that the crib must have originated in Brussels and been made in Jan Borman's immediate circle. The extent to which other artists such as Petercels or Keldermans were involved remains an open question. Joint ventures of this kind could vary and designs that had been executed were easily adapted to objects in different materials or to a different scale.²⁵ This could also explain the differences in proportions in the 'bell motif'.

The Amsterdam crib does not bear the Brussels marks that guaranteed the buyer that the quality of the work had been checked by the guild.²⁶ The mark on woodcarvings from Brussels was a carver's hammer branded or struck into the piece. Although such guarantee stamps are also absent from other pieces, such as the Gestel-Meerhout

Fig. 8
CIRCLE OF
JAN II BORMAN,
*Berceau: repos de
Jésus*, c. 1500-10.
Oak, 63 x 35 x 16.5 cm.
Paris, Musée de Cluny,
inv. no. Cl. 23 607.
Photo: © RMN –
Grand Palais (Musée
de Cluny – Musée
national du Moyen
Âge)/Frank Raux.

altarpiece, one possible explanation is that small objects without figurative carving – like the Christmas crib – might have been outside the guild's control. Cribs may have been bought direct from a *mettselrie* carver. In that case a stamp was not necessary as the relationship between buyer and seller was based on trust. We also know of free craftsmen, not bound by a guild, who sold their wares at open weekly and annual markets. Obviously these products were not checked by the guilds.²⁷



Another reason to locate the Christmas crib in Brussels is the existence of an almost identical version in the collection of Musée de Cluny in Paris (fig. 8).²⁸ This still has the original casket in which the crib was stored for most of the year, which bears the painted arms of two families from Brussels, the Cockaerts and the Van Cattenbroecks (fig. 9). The arms are most probably those of the Brussels silk merchant Gérard Cockaert (died 1546) and his second wife, the apothecary's daughter Marguerite-Madeleine van Cattenbroeck (died 1540). The couple married shortly after Gérard's first wife died in 1509.²⁹ It is likely that the crib in Musée de Cluny was either given to the young couple or was purchased while they were married (c. 1509-40). As this period, at least until 1520, overlaps with Jan Borman's career, a possible attribution to his workshop of both the crib in Paris as well as that in the Rijksmuseum is not out of the question. In any case the existence of two almost identical Christmas cribs suggests that both originate from a single workshop that made this type of smaller work in series, with small variations, and had them in stock.

A date for the two cribs prior to 1520 – in other words before Renaissance design idiom caught on and the more pointed tracery gave way to rounder shapes or was even entirely replaced by *antyckse* frames – chimes with other documented owners of cribs like these. Cribs turn up in inventories among other devotional objects as far back as the fifteenth century.³⁰ In 1451 Margherite Parée's crib, for example, was described as 'ung repos de Jhésus', with 'quatre anges et les aournemens servans audit repos', and in the inventory of Jacques Journet (1506) there is mention of 'ung repos et cassich'. In this case it is obvious that this refers to a Christmas crib because of the presence of an accompanying casket ('cassich').³¹



Fig. 9
Casket belonging to the crib in the Musée de Cluny in Paris (fig. 8).
Oak?, 69 x 41 x 21.5 cm.
Photo: © RMN – Grand Palais (Musée de Cluny – Musée national du Moyen Âge)/Frank Raux.

Cribs in Practice

The origin of these kinds of devotional objects and the forms of piety related to them are often linked to religious plays from the thirteenth century. In 1223 Francis of Assisi is said to have spent a very unusual Christmas in a cave in order to give the Mass the same setting as the Nativity. He introduced a live ox and donkey and placed the altar on a manger. The Christmas play itself was not performed: Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the angels were not present.³²

The theology of Bernard van Clairvaux (1090-1131) and the teachings of St Francis (1181-1226) were probably

the spiritual basis for the more personal approach to God and were inextricably linked to making the divine more tangible. In the second quarter of the fifteenth century, Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471) pursued this idea, urging believers to imagine the sounds, smells and images from the Bible stories.³³ In his influential *De Imitatione Christi* he concentrated on the imitation of and immersion in Christ's Passion. Thomas à Kempis was one of the leading figures of the *Devotio Moderna*, a spiritual movement that had considerable influence on religious life and thinking in the Low Countries and Northwest Germany. As the name indicates, the Modern Devotion movement sought a modernization of the Roman Catholic faith, based on the old *devotio* of the early church.³⁴ The premise was that everyone was responsible for their own spiritual welfare and could seek spiritual contact with God themselves, without the intervention of a cleric. The movement preached a method of profound personal belief by imitating the life of Christ and meditating on it.

In this regard, another prominent member of the movement, the Augustinian monk Johannes Mauburnus (1460-1501), argued that novices (future monks – and above all nuns!) should use tangible aids – devotionalia – to support their meditation, to accomplish as it were a link between God and the soul of the believer. Cribs were able to fulfil such a function, more specifically in the devotion addressed to the infant Jesus.³⁵ There were even printed devotional manuals, like the late fifteenth-century booklet *Vander gheesteliker kintscheyt ihesu*. The book explained 'how one should swaddle the infant Jesus, lay him in his crib, bathe and wash him, play with him, rock him, lull him to sleep and sing to him'.³⁶

The earliest crib devotion, however, precedes the spiritual reforms of the Modern Devotion: as long ago as 1300 the Jesus crib regularly occurs in

Christmas songs and legends, nuns' lives and in sermons. There are various reports of nuns praying and caring for these little figures of the Christ Child. The *Offenbarungen* of Margaretha Ebner, a fourteenth-century nun from Mödingen in Germany, were clearly inspired by the religious ritual with just such a wooden Jesus doll: 'I have an image of the child, our Lord, in a cradle. I was so powerfully compelled by my Lord with great sweetness, longing and desire; and also by his request, because it was said to me by the Lord: "If you don't give me to suckle, then I will take myself away at the moment you love me most". So I took the image out of the cradle and laid it on my bare breast, with great longing and sweetness; and felt then the strongest possible grace in the presence of the Lord.'³⁷ Sister Margaretha evidently felt a deep desire to put the Christ Child to her breast, so that she would be purified by his unsullied humanity and be placed in fire and flames through his love. 'But my longing and my desire is to nurse the Christ child so that through his pure humanity, I might be purified and set afire by him, with his burning love, and his presence and sweet grace would pour through me, so that I would be motivated by the true enjoyment of his divine essence, together with all the loving souls who have lived in truth.'³⁸ Through Jesus's presence his love would flow through Margaretha and allow her to sense the divine essence.³⁹

Cribs, like images of Jesus, were used by nuns to prepare them to welcome Christ into their hearts – an aspect often depicted in drawings and prints. A drawing made by a nun from a Benedictine convent is a superb depiction of this mystic union (fig. 10). The nun and the baby Jesus are in the heart of the crucified Christ. She has achieved her objective by climbing the ladder of the virtues, by showing faith, hope, charity, patience, humility, tenderness, poverty, obedience, purity and detachment.

From a volume of sermons dated 1565, which was owned by Sister Weyncken, a nun from the Poor Clares convent in Amsterdam, we learn something about the symbolism of these kinds of virtues and devotional objects. The sermons, which are mainly about the Nativity, were written by Father Bartholomew of Middelburg, Sister Weyncken's father confessor, who gave her and her sisters a Christmas crib that must have looked something like the Rijksmuseum crib.⁴⁰ Father Bartholomew explained to the nun that the crib was not only a children's game, but a means of devotion for adult sisters, symbolic of the spiritual motherhood of their souls. The bed had to be seen as a symbol of the meek heart into which they should receive and care for Jesus. The two posts the bed hung from stood for the Old and New Testament, the pillow for love and the white bedclothes for innocence and purity. The base symbolized unshakeable faith.

Fig. 10
ANONYMOUS, *The Heart on the Cross, St Walburg, Eichstätt*. From J. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, Berkely et al. 1997, plate 10.



This comparison of the Christmas crib with the heart of a believer and as a symbolic structure with a base, pilasters and a portal, as explained by Father Bartholomew of Middelburg, is also found elsewhere. In other mystic literature the heart is likewise arranged as a temple or a room.⁴¹ The bricks of the crib can literally be seen in the luxurious example from the abbey in Marche-les-Dames (fig. 11), and the Rijksmuseum crib is also reminiscent of a Gothic church.

The crib described by Father Bartholomew was, moreover, adorned with pearls and tiny flowers, very much like the decoration of the crib from the Great Beguinage in Louvain (see fig. 2). This tallies with something Thomas à Kempis said in one of his Christmas sermons, when he exhorted the faithful to decorate Jesus's crib with flowers and herbs. This was probably a reference to an old custom of placing flowers in the beds of newborn babies to accustom them to everyday things.⁴² At the same time his appeal should be seen in the light of the religious symbolism and love metaphors, which played a huge role in late mediaeval spirituality and were derived from the Song of Songs: flowers and fruit that people could collect as symbols of spiritual love, of virtue and of the suffering of Christ.⁴³ Decorating the crib with such 'lasting flowers' made it more and more agreeable for Jesus to live in the believer's heart. This custom finds a parallel in the 'enclosed garden' – small altarpieces in which a collage of carved figurines, pearls, dried flowers and devotional objects was placed, like a miniature garden or a *hortus conclusus*. These gardens were often made by nuns, in Mechelen in particular.⁴⁴

Strikingly, the oldest surviving 'Christmas cribs' contain not only images of the Nativity, the Adoration or the forebears of Christ, but also the Crucifixion. This indicates that the devotional objects were, despite their obvious use during Christmas



celebrations, not used exclusively in that season.⁴⁵ At Christmas people not only commemorated the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the birth of Christ in the soul of believers was celebrated too.⁴⁶ This symbolism is also closely linked with the Eucharist, in which the spiritual union of the soul with Christ was likewise celebrated, by consuming the 'spiritual food' – the host, the body of Christ. This connection between the Nativity and the Eucharist can be seen clearly in the large number of Eucharistic visions during the *elevatio*, the raising of the host during the consecration. As this occurs the host transmutes into the infant Jesus.⁴⁷

Although the symbolism of the meek heart in which Christ can be received is exactly applicable to the two almost identical cribs in the Rijksmuseum and in Musée de Cluny the question is whether laymen, like Gérard Cockaert and Marguerite-Madeleine van Cattenbroeck, also

Fig. 11
ANONYMOUS,
Repos de Jésus de
l'abbaye de Marche-
les-Dames, early
fifteenth century.
Silver and silver gilt,
12.5 x 11.5 x 8 cm.
Namur, Musée
provincial des Arts
anciens du Namurois,
inv. no. B0054.
Photo: © IRPA-KIK,
Brussels.



Fig. 12
ANONYMOUS,
*Crib with Christ
Child*, c. 1400-1600.
Pipe clay,
4.6 x 2.3 x 2.1 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-NM-11289.

associated their cribs with metaphors like these and used them in this way. A profound spirituality like this was probably confined chiefly to convents and beguines. In her book, the anonymous author of the *Evangelische Peerle* describes 'How God in three ways is born in man from these three unions... likewise this Holy trinity is threefold in people, but in essence one'.⁴⁸ The first way is the 'godlijcke geboorte inden gheest' (spiritual birth in the soul), which people experience during Christmas night. It is above all a visual event, where believers are witnesses to the physical, outward birth of the Christ Child in Bethlehem. During 'Die tweede gheboorte inder sielen' (the second birth in the soul) the endeav-

our to imitate Jesus, as the Modern Devotion required, is the prime objective. In 'die derde gheboorte inden lichaem' (the third birth in the body) the first two births also take place, but in addition the soul becomes the 'ioncfrou' or the 'wife' of Christ. In this phase the objective is to unite the soul with Jesus, the *unio mystica*, borrowed from the mystic marriage in the Song of Solomon.⁴⁹ This final step was primarily something to which nuns and beguines applied themselves, whereas most laymen probably only experienced the 'first birth' phase in their Christmas devotions.

In his *Roomsche mysterien* of 1604 – a review of old Roman Catholic customs – Walich Sieuwertsz, a staunchly Calvinist elder of the Reformed Church of Amsterdam, wrote an account full of loathing of these laymen's devotions with Christmas cribs.⁵⁰ On Christmas Day, wrote Sieuwertsz, a crib holding a reclining Jesus doll in swaddling clothes was placed on the high altar. Children took their own little cribs with them to the Mass. At the moment when the priest started rocking the crib on the altar and the singing started, the parishioners followed suit and the church was filled with Christmas carols and the tinkling of the bells on all the cribs.⁵¹ In his opinion this 'Poppenwerck' was most definitely 'not a good practice in the Christian religion, celebrating the birth of our Saviour in such a childish and laughable way'.⁵² It would have cut Sieuwertsz to the quick had he known that the practice of 'rocking the baby' continued in use publicly in Amsterdam until 1645.⁵³

We have already seen that Father Bartholomew not only considered 'rocking the baby' as a children's pastime but also thought it important to adult nuns. The memoirs of the Cologne merchant and city councillor Hermann von Weinsberg reveal, moreover, that in the second half of the

sixteenth century men also became involved with this Christmas devotion in the home. In 1560, for example, Von Weinsberg spent all of Christmas Day with rocking the crib, 'Am Christtage haben Hermann und Frau das Kindtgin zemlich die hillige tag geweget, dan wir sint alle abent bei einander gewest, dann hie, dann dar, und haben gesongen.'⁵⁴

Domestic crib play and devotion should be seen as a repetition of the ceremonies in church described by Sieuwertzsz. In private homes a crib like this with the Christ Child stood on a dresser, like a kind of altar, for forty days, from Christmas Day until Candlemas. Afterwards it was stored in a casket until the next Christmas celebration. Beautiful cribs like those in the Rijksmuseum and Musée de Cluny were probably only found in the households of the upper classes in large towns and cities, like those of Hermann von Weinsberg or the Cockaert-Van Cattenbroeck family, or they were given to nuns from good families. Less well-off families had to make do with simple Christmas cribs made of cheap materials, like the small pipe clay examples of individual figures of the infant Jesus, which are often encountered in the soil of old Dutch towns (fig. 12). The pipe clay figurines were popular Christmas gifts and were probably only displayed in homes during the Christmas period.

Provenance

Surprisingly, the almost identical cribs in the Rijksmuseum and the Musée de Cluny appear to have a common provenance: a hospital in Tienen (Belgium). This can be inferred from a 1914 sale catalogue in which the hospital is named. On 25 May of that year in Paris the collection of the art dealer Arthur Sambon (1867-1947) was auctioned;⁵⁵ it contained the Christmas crib and the accompanying casket now in Musée de Cluny.⁵⁶ Although the hospital in Tienen was not named, St John's

Hospital and St Laurence's Hospital seem the most likely candidates.

After careful study of the crib in the sale catalogue it was found that that it was not exactly the same as the example in Musée de Cluny (fig. 13). In the 1914 photograph it is clear that the moving part – the crib – is that of the Amsterdam cradle: the tracery consists of serried, teardrop-shaped trefoils topped with fleurons, whereas the tracery of the crib in Musée de Cluny has teardrop-shaped quatrefoils, which include little roses, protruding alternately from the top to the bottom (figs. 14, 15). The base and the portal

Fig. 13
Photograph of the Christmas crib from Arthur Sambon's collection, from the *Catalogue des objets d'art ...*, sale cat. Paris (Galerie Georges Petit), 25-28 May 1914, no. 389.



Fig. 14
Detail of the tracery
of the crib in the
Musée de Cluny in
Paris (fig. 8).



Fig. 15
Detail of the tracery
of the crib in the
Rijksmuseum (fig. 1).



in which the crib hangs, however, are identical to those of the crib in Paris. This is evident from the outermost pinnacles, which stand out more in the old photograph (and still do now). What is more, the manes of the lions that support the base are less curly than in the example in the Rijksmuseum.

This means that the Christmas cribs crossed paths in or after 1914 and that the then owner – Arthur Sambon? – swapped them after the photograph had been taken for the sale catalogue and also transferred the tiny bells, which were still hanging below the Amsterdam crib in the 1914 photo-

graph, to the crib that is now in Musée de Cluny. His reason for doing so can only be guessed at, but be that as it may, in that light it is likely that both cribs have the same provenance of the hospital in Tienen, where Sambon must have acquired them before 1914. Unfortunately from that point on there is no further definite information about the later provenances of either crib.

From an annotated copy of the sale catalogue containing the crib that was sold in 1914 we know that the buyer was a certain 'de Tinan', and that it was acquired for the 'Musée de Jumièges' for 3,000 French francs.⁵⁷ 'De Tinan' must have been a member of the Le Barbier de Tinan family, who lived near Jumièges in Normandy.⁵⁸ The 'Musée de Jumièges' was the private collection of the Lepel-Cointet family, the owners of the imposing ruins of the Benedictine abbey of Jumièges near Rouen.⁵⁹ The Parisian stockbroker Aimé Honoré Lepel-Cointet (1796-1872) had bought these ruins in 1853 to preserve them from further deterioration. He also had a neo-Gothic house built on the site, where he housed his 'Musée', which mainly consisted of fragments of sculptures from the abbey. In 1946 the Lepel-Cointet family sold the ruin to the French State, but their private collection – the Musée Jumièges or Musée Lepel-Cointet – probably remained (at least in part) outside this transaction.⁶⁰ Ultimately the Christmas

crib and its casket were sold again in Paris in 1998, when they were acquired by Musée de Cluny.⁶¹

The provenance of the Amsterdam crib can be traced back to the collection of the well-known Antwerp art dealer Charles van Herck (1884-1955) and his heirs. Since then it had always been in Antwerp-based collections until the Rijksmuseum acquired it.⁶²

Only when the full provenance of both cribs comes to light will it be perhaps clear when the cribs were exchanged and whether the cribs were once made as a pair and at some time found their way to the hospital in Tienen. Unfortunately this is the point at which matters become obscure, because many of the archives from Tienen were lost, either during the capture of the town in 1635 by a Franco-Dutch army or at the time of the French annexation of the Low Countries (1794-1815). Because the town was plundered and burned during the siege of 1635, it can be assumed that Arthur Sambon's crib (or cribs) was not in the hospital before that time.

NOTES

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1 P. Keller, *Die Wiege des Christuskindes. Ein Haushaltsgerät in Kunst und Kult*, Worms 1998. In his book Keller refers to only eight other examples of this type of 'Gestellhängewiege': Museum Schnütgen, Cologne (no. 1); Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht (no. 16); St Godelieve Abbey, Bruges (no. 29); Old St John's Hospital, Bruges (no. 5); Great Beguinage, Louvain (no. 18); St Nicholas Church, Enghien (no. 12); Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp (no. 8); and Musée

- national du Moyen Âge – Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, Paris (no. 15). See also E. Niffle-Anciaux, *Le repos de Jésus et les berceaux reliquaires. Annales de la Société archéologique de Namur* 18 (1890), passim.
- 2 One lion is a recent replacement based on one of the remaining original lions.
 - 3 The crib contained an eighteenth-century Neapolitan figure of Jesus (inv. no. BK-2013-14-2), which was added by the last owner.
 - 4 Keller, op. cit. (note 1), nos. 3, 4, 7, 15.
 - 5 Ingmar Reesing drew my attention to similar bells that can be seen in *The Glorification of the Virgin* (1490-95, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam) by Geertgen tot Sint Jans. In the painting Christ and the angels hold 'claw bells'. Annemarieke Willemsen maintains that the fact that the Christ Child contributes to the music, or heavenly harmony, is entirely appropriate: A. Willemsen, *Kinder delijt. Middeleeuws speelgoed in de Nederlanden*, Nijmegen 1998, p. 98.
 - 6 Keller, op. cit. (note 1), no. 7 (now in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 1974.121a-d; gift of Ruth Blumka in memory of Leopold Blumka). As in the painting by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, the Christ Child was lauded by angels making music during his birth, so the bells support the hypothesis that little figures of angels may have stood on the corner posts.
 - 7 F.M. Kammel, 'Das Christkind in der eigenen Stube. Private Bilder zum Weihnachtsfest im Spätmittelalter und heute', in *ibid.*, *Im Zeichen des Christkinds. Privated Bild und Frömmigkeit im Spätmittelalter*, Nuremberg 2003, p. 37; Willemsen, op. cit. (note 5), p. 101.
 - 8 E.M. Kavalier, *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe*, New Haven 2012, p. 51.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
 - 10 Suggested by Frits Scholten and confirmed by Matt Kavalier (in an email of 24 August 2013, in the object file): 'Brussels, c. 1510-1520' on the basis of the tracery.
 - 11 C. van Engelen, *Zoutleeuw. Jan Mertens en de laatgotiek, confrontatie met Jan Borremans: essay tot inzicht en overzicht van de laatgotiek*, Louvain 1993, p. 262.
 - 12 See Graaf J. de Borchgrave d'Altena, *Het St-Joris-retabel van Jan Borman*, Amsterdam/Antwerp 1947; *Beeldhouwkunst van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en het Prinsbisdom Luik, 15de en 16de eeuw*, cat. Brussels (Royal Museums of Art and History) 1999, p. 47.
 - 13 B. D'Hainaut-Zveny (ed.), *Miroirs du sacré. Les retables sculptés à Bruxelles xve-xviiè siècles. Production, formes et usages*, Brussels 2005, p. 170 (no. A 11).
 - 14 *Ibid.*, p. 169, no. A 10 (the 'Vermeersch-retabel', inv. no. v 198).
 - 15 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
 - 16 Ordered around 1500 in Brussels by the Pensi di Mondovi e Marsaglia family from Saluzzo for their family chapel in the church of Mondovi (Piemonte), now in the Museum of the City of Brussels (inv. no. 1.5.1-1.5.2). On stylistic grounds it has been attributed to Jan II Borman or his brother Passchier, see D'Hainaut-Zveny, op. cit. (note 13), p. 165 (no. A 7).
 - 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 184-85. With thanks to Matt Kavalier for this suggestion.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 169, no. A10 (the 'Vermeersch-retabel', inv. no. V 198). The only exception to the rule appears to be the crowning of the St Dimpna Altarpiece in Geel, which was ordered in Mechelen in 1515 to hold Dimpna's reliquary. See R. de Boodt and U. Schäfer, *Vlaamse retabels, een internationale reis langs laatmiddeleeuws beeldsnijwerk*, Louvain 2007, pp. 191-93.
 - 19 With thanks to Dr Emile van Binnebeke, Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, who drew my attention to this altar and gave me the opportunity to study it. It came from the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw Chapel in Gestel-Meerhout and is now in the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (inv. no. 426); see also De Boodt and Schäfer, op. cit. (note 18), p. 282.
 - 20 E. Dhanens, 'Jan van Roome alias van Brussel, schilder', *Gentse Bijdragen tot de Kunstgeschiedenis* 11 (1945-48), p. 100. As well as the elaborately ornamented tombs for Margaret of Austria, her husband Philip II of Savoy and her mother-in-law Margaret of Bourbon, the interior contains a carved altarpiece of the Seven Joys of the Virgin. Several art historians have pointed to the stylistic kinship between the altar and Jan Borman's workshop. Although these likenesses are seen primarily in the figures, it nonetheless indicates that there was close collaboration between Brussels artists in the court circles around Margaret of Austria. W. Vöge, 'Konrad Meit und die Grabdenkmäler in Brou', *Jahrbuch der königlich Preuzischen Kunstsammlungen* 29 (1908), pp. 89-90; V. Nodet, 'Le retable des Sept Joies de la chapelle de Marguerite à Brou', *Annales de la Société d'Emulation de l'Ain* (1912), pp. 353-54; S. Guillot de Suduiraut, 'Le retable des Sept Joies de la Vierge dans la chapelle de Marguerite d'Autriche à Brou', *Brou, un monument européen à l'aube de la Renaissance*, pp. 75, 77, see <http://www.monuments-nationaux.fr/>

- fichier/editions_livre/711/livre_pdf_fr_brou_complet.pdf.
- 21 *Beeldhouwkunst van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en het Prinsbisdom Luik, 15de en 16de eeuw*, cat. Brussels (Royal Museums of Art and History) 1999, p. 28. J. Crab, *Het laatgotische beeldsnijcentrum Leuven*, Louvain 1979, pp. 372-81.
 - 22 'Jan Petercels sal sculdich zijn te makene de voirscreven tafele ende backe met zynen gesierten doeren goet ende wercllyck om vast te blyvene op datmen dairop goede vaste poetenture maken sal moegen als den ambachte dat believen sal, ende alsoe opgaene met zynen tabernaculen ende metselrien en de welsel gelyc den patroen dat uutwyst ende gelyck Matthijs Keldermans deser stadt meester metsere den gront vandenselven patroen getrocken heeft en niet minderen maer beteren ... Ende dese beelden ende alle die veelden die totten wercke behoiren selen onder ende boven dat die gemaict selen syn vander hant meester Jans Borreman, wonende te Bruessel...', see J. Crab, *Het Brabantse beeldsnijcentrum Leuven*, Louvain 1977, pp. 323-24, no. 21.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, nos. 21-24.
 - 24 J.H. van Mosselveld et al. (eds.), *Keldermans, een architectonisch netwerk in de Nederlanden*, The Hague 1987, nos. 47-48, 91, 20, 71.
 - 25 Kavalier, op. cit. (note 8), p. 57.
 - 26 *Beeldhouwkunst van de Zuidelijke Nederlanden en het Prinsbisdom Luik, 15de en 16de eeuw*, cat. Brussels (Royal Museums of Art and History) 1999, p. 30; T. Keulemans, *Het gildewezen, opkomst, bloei en verval*, The Hague 1941, pp. 59-65.
 - 27 Keulemans, op. cit. (note 26), pp. 60, 64.
 - 28 Paris, Musée national du Moyen Âge – Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, inv. no. Cl. 23 607; see *Revue du Louvre* (1999), no. 3, p. 87 (text by Élisabeth Antoine); É. Taburet-Delahaye (ed.), *Thermes et Hôtel de Cluny, Musée national du Moyen Âge: œuvres nouvelles, 1995-2005*, Paris 2006, p. 92.
 - 29 M. Fortuné Koller, *Annuaire des familles patriciennes de Belgique*, vol. 3, Brussels 1942, pp. 81-82.
 - 30 Niffle-Anciaux, op. cit. (note 1), p. 16.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
 - 32 R. Berliner, 'The Origins of the Crèche', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 30 (1946), p. 250.
 - 33 For more information about sensory perception in the Late Gothic see P. Bertrand, 'Zintuigen in de Middeleeuwen', *Madoc* 20 (2006), no. 4, pp. 195-280; M. Mostert, *Communicatie in de Middeleeuwen: studies over de verschriftelijking van de Middeleeuwse cultuur*, Hilversum 1995.
 - 34 J. van Aelst, 'Het gebruik van beelden bij Suso's lijdensmeditatie', in K. Veelenturf (ed.), *Geen povere schoonheid. Laat-middeleeuwse kunst in verband met de Moderne Devotie*, Nijmegen 2000, pp. 86-110, esp. p. 87.
 - 35 Berliner, op. cit. (note 32), pp. 252-53. Johannes Mombaer (Mauburnus) is mainly known for his *Rosetum exercitiorum spiritualium et sacrarum meditationum* (Rose Garden of Spiritual Exercises, 1496). W. Scheepsmas, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The 'Modern Devotion'*, Woodbridge 2004, pp. 107-08.
 - 36 '... hoe men het kindekijn ihesus sal zwachtelen, in sijn crebbeken legghen, baden ende wasschen, er mee spelen, wieghen ende wackelen, besuysen ende besinghen', C.G.N. De Vooys, *Middelnederlandsche legenden en exempelen*, The Hague 1900, p. 142.
 - 37 P. Strauch, *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Mystik*, Freiburg 1882, p. 87; translation in R. Hale, 'Imitatio Mariae: Motherhood Motifs in Devotional Memoirs', *Mystics Quarterly* 16 (1990), no. 4, p. 196: 'Nun han ich denne ain bilde der kinthait unsers herren un ainer wiegen. So ich denne von minem herren so creftiklichen gezwungen wırde mit grosser süesseket und mit lust und begirden und auch von siner güetigen bet und saz mir auch von minem herren zuo gesprochen wirt: "saugest du mich nit, so wil ich dir mich underziehen, so du mich aller gernost hast," so num ich saz bilde uzze der wiegen und leg ez an min bloezes herze mit grossem lust und süessiket und enphinde denne der aller creftigosten genade mit der gegenwertkeit gotz.'
 - 38 Strauch, op. cit. (note 37), p. 87; translation Hale, op. cit. (note 37), p. 196: 'Aber min begırde und min lust ist in dem säugen, daz ich uz siner lutern meschet gerainiget werde und mit siner inbrünstiger minne uz im enzündet werde in daz war niezzen sines götlichen wesens mit allen minneden selen, die in der warhet gelebt hant.'
 - 39 After hearing about Margaretha's vision a member of the Weense Gottesfreunde movement is also said to have sent her a crib and a wooden doll of a Christ Child. In the inventory (*Klosterschatz*) of the Maria Mödingen convent there is still a fourteenth-century wooden figure known as *Das Jesus-kindlein der Margaretha Ebner*. Hale, op. cit. (note 37), p. 197.
 - 40 A. Ampe, 'Uit de kerstvroomheid der 16de eeuw. Onbekend werk van Bartholomaeus van Middelburg', *Ons Geestelijk erf* 41 (1967),

- pp. 121-90, esp. p. 171; see also M.L. Caron, 'Pijpaarden beeldjes, individuele devotie en massacultuur', in R.P. Zijp et al., *Vroomheid per dozijn*, cat. Utrecht (Rijksmuseum het Catharijneconvent) 1982, pp. 17-21, esp. pp. 19, 20. '... omdat wij hebben ghesien hoe die kinderen in dese werdigen tijt van kerstmis, een wieghe ghebruycken, daer zij Jhesum, dat lieve kindeken in wieghen met soete lofsanghen ende met groeter blyschap, en daerdoer bin ic verwect gheweest, om de kinderken te soecken ende te krijghen een wieghe, opdat wy al te samen als cleyne oetmoedighe kinderen Jesum alsoe moechten wieghen, ende bewaeren in onser herten, dat hij in ons, ende met ons altijts begheerden te blijven.'
- 41 There are numerous examples of them with the same allegorical tradition, but I will not go into this in any further detail here. The context can be found in A. Ampe, *Den Tempel onser Sielen*, Antwerp 1968, a pious dissertation in which Christian mysticism is propagated. The author's main idea: 'Hoe God die siele tot sinen tempel gemaect heeft ende met menigherley gracie ende gaven verciert heeft' (p. 225). The account was written by the writer of the *Evangelische Peerle* in the first half of the sixteenth century. The architectural allegory forms an important stylistic device in medieval poetry. J. Mann, 'Allegorical Buildings in Medieval Literature', *Medium Aevum* 53 (1994), pp. 191-201.
- 42 Kammel, op. cit. (note 7), p. 37.
- 43 R.L. Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion: Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child, 1450-1550*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1994, pp. 1-55.
- 44 A. Jansen and R. De Roo, *Tentoonstelling oude Mechelse kunstnijverheden*, exh. cat. Brussels (Royal Museums of Art and History) 1954; P. Vandenbroeck, *Hooglied. De beeldwereld van religieuze vrouwen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, vanaf de 13e eeuw*, Brussels 1994, pp. 91-104.
- 45 Berliner, op. cit. (note 32), p. 269.
- 46 Various dissertations have been written about the spiritual birth of Christ. In his publication Charles Caspers discusses the entire process of this spiritual birth based on the treatise by Bonaventura. The most significant points are 'the five celebrations of the infant Jesus'. First of all the soul is received by Jesus Christ, after the example of the joyful annunciation to the Virgin Mary (25 March). By showing remorse, good intentions and the like, the spiritual birth of the Son of God takes place in the soul, after the example of Christmas (25 December). From that moment Christ is nourished in the bosom of the soul and has to be given a name, after the example of the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus (1 January). After the example of Epiphany (6 January) the soul has to come into action and must worship Christ and give gifts: gold (love), frankincense (consideration) and myrrh (repentance). Finally the Son, after the example of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (2 February), is carried up to God the Father by the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. See C. Caspers, 'De kerst-kribbe van zuster Katheryna van Arkel', in Vealenturf, op. cit. (note 34), pp. 74-75.
- 47 Ibid.; Hale, op. cit. (note 37), pp. 193-203, esp. p. 195.
- 48 'Hoe God in drie manieren inden mensche gheboren wort nae die drie eenigheden... ghelijckerwijs die heylighe Drievuldicheyt is inden personen drievuldiche, mer weselic één', Ampe, op. cit. (note 41), p. 309.
- 49 Ibid., pp. 315-22.
- 50 W. Syvaertz, *Roomsche mysterien: ondeckt in een cleyne tractaetgen: alwaer bewesen wert, dat over de leere vande transsubstantiatie, by vele doctoren ende gheleerden der Roomsche kercke, seer wonderbaerlijc gedisputeert: ende van sommige wederghesproocken, ende by andere in twijfel ghetrocken is gheweest ...*, Amsterdam 1604, in the unpaginated introduction (consulted online by way of Google Books, 26 September 2013).
- 51 'Sy weten hoemen op Kerstdach een wieghsken met een Beeldecen daerinne, nae een cleyne kindeken liggende in de luyers gefatoneert, opt hooch Autaer plachten te setten; ende dat d'Ouders hare kinderen met een wieghsken ende schelle in de kercke leyden; ende als de Priester onder de Misse het kindeke opt Autaer staemden begoste te wieghen ende singhen Eia, Eia, Eia, &c. soo vinghen de kinderen voort mede aen elck zijne kindeken te wieghen ende Eia te singhen, maeckende daer benevens een groot gheluyt ende gheclanck met haere schellen, dat de geheele kercke onder de Orghel op eene sonderlinghe wyse was spelende, die het spel hielp verciere. En is dit niet eene fraeye oeffeninghe in de Christelike Religie, om op soodanighe kindische ende belachelijcke wijze gheheughenisse te houden van de gheboorte onses Salichmakers? ende dit wert noch onder hunluyden voor costelijck dingh ghehouden, ende planten hare kinderen op die tijt binnen huys dit Poppewerck noch inne, ghelijck oock mede doen op Derthienden avent, als sy Coningsken spelen...'

- 52 'niet eene fraeye oeffeninghe in de Christelijke Religie, om op soodanighe kindische ende belachelijke wijze gheueghenisse te houden van de gheboorte onses Salichmakers.'
- 53 W.H.T. Knippenberg, *Devotionalia: religieuze voorwerpen uit het katholieke leven*, vol. 2, Eindhoven 1985, p. 83.
- 54 W. Schmid, *Kölner Renaissancekultur im Spiegel der Aufzeichnungen des Hermann Weinsberg (1518-1597)*, Cologne 1991, pp. 70-80, quoted in Kammel, op. cit. (note 7), p. 40.
- 55 Arthur Sambon (1867-1947) was a Parisian art dealer, numismatist and historian, and the son of the art dealer Jules Sambon. He was a specialist in Classical Antiquity, particularly in Etruscan art, and was chairman of the *Chambre des experts d'art de Paris*. Sambon published *Les Monnaies antiques de l'Italie ... Étrurie, Ombrie, Picenum, Samnium, Campanie (Cumes et Naples)*, *Les monnaies antiques de l'Italie ... Etrurie, Ombrie, Picenum, Samnium, Campanie (Cumes et Naples)*, Paris 1903 (repr. Bologna 1967), and *Images populaires de l'Avesta en Perse aux XI^e et XIII^e siècles, « Description d'une collection de faïences persanes à sujets nationalistes et d'une série orviétane de style sassanide »*, Paris 1928.
- 56 Lugt 74436. *Catalogue des objets d'art et de haute curiosité de l'antiquité et du Moyen Âge, de la Renaissance et autres ... formant la collection de M. Arthur Sambon*, sale cat. Paris (Galerie Georges Petit), 25-28 May 1914, no. 389: 'Berceau reliquaire, dit repos de Jésus, en bois ajouré et sculpté, composé de pinacles, motifs et fenestragés gothiques. Il est contenu dans une boîte peinte aux armes des Cockaert et van Cattenbroeck, de Bruxelles. Travail flamand, xve siècle. Haut., 70 cent.; larg., 41 cent. Provenant de l'hôpital de Tirlemont.'
- 57 According to the annotated sale catalogue in the RKD, The Hague, with thanks to Eric Löffler.
- 58 In the exchange of letters between Georges Sand and Gustave Flaubert there is the following passage: 'Dear old fellow, I am worried at not having news of you since that illness of which you spoke. Are you well again? Yes, we shall go to see the rollers and the beaches next month if you like, if your heart prompts you. ... I go definitely to Paris, the 16th; the 17th at one o'clock, I leave for Rouen and Jumièges, where my friend Madame Lebarbier de Tinan awaits me at the house of M. Lepel-Cointet, the landowner; I shall stay there the 18th so as to return to Paris the 19th. Will it be inconvenient if I come to see you?' See A.L. McKensie (transl.), *The George Sand-Gustave Flaubert Letters* (letter no. LXV, Sand to Flaubert, from Nohant, 10 September 1867), see <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5115/pg5115.html> (consulted 19 September 2013). Madame Lebarbier de Tinan, whom Sand mentions here, was probably Mercédès Lebarbier de Tinan, née Merlin, the wife of Alfred Lebarbier de Tinan (1808-1876). She was also the grandmother of the writer Jean de Tinan (1874-1898), who died young, for him see J.-P. Goujon, *Jean de Tinan*, Paris 1990. With thanks to Erik Löffler (RKD, The Hague) for checking this note and his help in tracing 'de Tinan'. There is also a link between the Lepel-Cointets and the Lebarbier de Tinan family: the widow of Eric Lepel-Cointet (1830-1866) was an aunt of the writer Jean de Tinan. See A. Gide and E. Rouart, *Correspondance*, vol. 1, Lyon 2006, p. 241, note 4.
- 59 I am very grateful to Nicolas Hatot, curator of the Musée départemental des Antiquités de Seine-Maritime in Rouen, for researching the history of the museum in Jumièges.
- 60 The writer Paul Léautaud described De Tinan as follows: 'M. de Tinan, a great collector of the tools of art, is characterized by a distinguished roughness and a great deal of knowledge, on all sorts of objects. Mme de Tinan, a thorough bourgeoisie ...' See P. Léautaud, *Journal of a Man of Letters 1898-1907*, vol. 3, London 1960, p. 45.
- 61 Sale Paris (Hôtel Drouot), 16 November 1998 (étude Tajan), no. 25.
- 62 Verbal communication from the last owner, Mr A. Van Strydonck in Antwerp (19 August 2013). The crib was in an unknown private collection in Antwerp, then with the antique dealer Lucas J. Kumps until 1998, also in Antwerp, who sold it to the last owner in 1998.