

A RETABLE FROM BRABANT IN THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

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Remotely reminiscent of its function, a sixteenth-century Brabantine retable is presently exhibited not in a place of worship, but in the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Here the retable is dimly lit, not to enshroud the mysteries of the faith, but to preserve the work from chemical damage due to light exposure. Although the identification label simply states it to be a retable, from the Latin *retro tabularium*, or "back panel," Gerard Brett refers to it as a *reredos*, a chiefly British term from the Anglo-Norman *arrere* + *dos*. Lynn Frances Jacobs goes so far as to designate it according to its theme: *The Virgin Altarpiece*.

A retable is usually set at the back of an altar, which explains why the ROM has displayed theirs in a case emulous of how it would have originally been seen. While many such carved altarpieces were elaborately composed, four basic components were almost always used. The area of greatest importance, the *corpus*, contained the most lavishly sculpted figures. Typically, below this would be a raised structure called a *predella*, and above the *corpus* we find the *Aufsatz* topped by pinnacles. Wings or *Flügel* would flank the *corpus*, these commonly showing scenes related to the central area (Baxandall, 66-67).

The ROM retable has been assigned acquisition number 937.8. It is attributed to the Brussels workshop of Jan Borman (or Borremans) the Younger (fig. 1). Carved of oak, and non-polychromed, its dimensions are 223.4 cm x 195.6 cm x 30 cm. The altarpiece is fairly large when compared to others, and may have been the High Altar of a small church or have been placed in a considerable side chapel.

Four scenes pertaining to the life of the Virgin and the Infant Christ compose the narrative cycle. They include, in the *corpus* "The Nativity and the Adoration of the Shepherds," in the *Aufsatz* above "The Coronation of the Virgin" including "The Trinity," in the left wing "The Circumcision" and in the right "The Adoration of the Magi."

This retable was most likely in the Church of St. Anne at Oudergem in Belgium, where it was recorded in a pen sketch by De Wevere in 1832. This sketch presents the altar with painted wings on each side of the *Flügel* and, instead of the present Madonna and Child placed on the central pinnacle, it showed a Crucifixion. In 1844 it was sold to the Russian Prince Alexis Soltykoff (1806-1859) and was probably restored by François Malfait. Later it was listed in the Paris Hôtel Drouot Catalogue of the Soltykoff sale of 8 April - 1 May 1861. Subsequently it was recorded in the Paris collection of Martin Le Roy. In November 1902 the article on the Le Roy collection in *Les Arts* mentions this retable as "perhaps of Antwerp origin, of the school of Pasquier Borman" (Brett, 56). In 1936 it was included in an exhibition entitled *European Art 1450-1500* held at the Brooklyn Museum. Thereafter the retable passed into the possession of the New York art dealer Raphael Stora, from whom the ROM purchased it in 1937.

In tracing the development of Netherlandish carved altarpieces, it must be realized that there are few surviving early Netherlandish objects which can be used to determine artistic influences. With this in mind, Jacobs (83) suggests looking at objects other than in wood, including sculpture on various scales and from different geographical regions. Searching for particular features later also found in wooden altarpieces, Jacobs examined the *Geel Stone Altarpiece* of ca. 1300. Although there the narrative cycle is not as clearly developed as those found in later wood carved retables, the overall composition is similar, the *corpus* being the focal point. As well, Gothic tracery is employed to separate the different units of the retable, a practice which anticipates the abundance of ornament later used.

Jacobs believes that already by the fourteenth century narrative cycles were included in stone altarpieces. Analyzing the stone retable of 1430 by the Dutch sculptor Clause de Werve (1380-1439), the *Bessey-lès-Cîteaux Altarpiece*, Jacobs points out some similarities with the *Geel Stone Altarpiece*, but notes that the former features a full narrative cycle of the Passion (84). De Werve probably followed in the tradition of stone altarpieces, but was apparently also influenced by wooden retables which included narratives.

However, Jacobs refrains from stating that Netherlandish stone altarpieces were the only sources of influence on Netherlandish wood carved retables. Other scholars, such as Wentzel, Hasse, and Keller, believe that German wooden altarpieces from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries explicitly influenced Netherlandish ones (Jacobs, 87-89). According to Wentzel *et al*, winged retables resulted from the progression of relic cupboards to reliquary altarpieces, and subsequently to purely figurative altarpieces (Jacobs, 89-90). Ehresmann proposes that altarpieces with images slowly developed from the liturgical need for illustrations of the various feasts celebrated throughout the year (Jacobs, 90-92).

Another possible source of influence on Netherlandish masters is the French stone retable (Jacobs, 91). The latter were produced in large numbers during the thirteenth century and peaked in the fourteenth. Similarities in composition can be found. Like Netherlandish retables, French altarpieces also favoured the separation of narratives into compartments, such as can be found in *The Stone Passion Retable of St. Denis*, presently in the Musée de Cluny, Paris, and in the *Mensil-sur-Oger Retable*. In addition to French stone altarpieces, Jacobs also cites French wooden altarpieces (of which very few remain) as a source of possible influence. In its architectural setting and narrative sequence, the *Retable of Souppes-sur-Loing* of 1300, for example, resembles some fourteenth-century Netherlandish retables. French ivories, exported throughout Europe, share similar compartments and elaborate narratives as those later produced in the Low Countries in wood. Moreover, through these precious French objects certain themes were popularized.

English alabaster retables, produced from about 1350 onwards, are also considered as a possible influence (Jacobs, 95). Not only were they produced in a manner and style similar to those of the Netherlands, but they also appear to have been produced in large numbers, a fact which anticipates the systematic production we later encounter in the fabrication of Netherlandish retables.

While specific details of its development are indeed open to conjecture, it is certain that by the time Jan Borman the Elder became master, the tradition was fully established (Müller, 156-157). Although Borman's date of birth remains unknown, registry records show that he entered the guild at Brussels in 1479. It is accepted that he was responsible for the *St. George Altar* of 1493 from Ons-Lieve-Vrouw van Ginderbuyten at Louvain, presently in the Musée du Cinquantenaire in Brussels. His work is described as being "firm and strong in style," displaying considerable originality when compared to his contemporaries, with an ability to "maintain greatness" (Von der Osten and Vey, 57).

Borman the Elder was probably active between 1480 and 1500. He was succeeded by two sons, Pasquier and Jan the Younger, neither of whom displays the same artistic prowess as their father. Jan the Younger became master in 1499; in the following year he carved the *Saluces Altar*, now in the Musée Communal in Brussels. We also know that he carved for the Sisters of St. Catherine the retable in the parish church at Güstrow, Mecklenburg, Germany. An inscription on the retable states that it was erected in 1522.

With the above in mind, let us consider the date of the Toronto retable. Since there are distinctive compositional and decorative features found only in retables dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century, Brett believes this retable to be rather late in relation to their production as a whole. As we have mentioned, Borman the Elder was active ca. 1480-1500. He was succeeded by his son Jan Borman the Younger, who was master of the Brussels workshop until ca. 1520. Therefore, on the basis of comparative analysis, Brett dates this piece to ca. 1515, thus placing it in the last phase of the latter's activity (53-54).

By the late fifteenth century retables had already become highly standardized (Jacobs, 1). In both shape and organization, they traditionally consisted of a rectangular *caisse*, with three or five compartments. By the early sixteenth century the application of a reverse curve molding, as seen used on the ROM retable, gave the otherwise rectangular shape a "more flowing silhouette" (Jacobs, 1). In addition, this period saw an increase in elaborate architectural niches in each compartment. Narrative cycles also became standardized. Workshops like that of Jan Borman employed different "assembly-line" methods to increase production, and probably had several apprentices who were trained to become specialized in a specific area. This division of labour allowed for several altarpieces to be produced simultaneously by such groups of specialized carvers.

Under the guidance of a master, a *huchier* made the wooden case, an *imagier* carved the figures and a *doreur* was responsible for the gilding (Jacobs, 12-13). Replicas were made of the various figures, usually with slight modifications. Exact forms were avoided. Similar shapes promoted a continuity and identity of a particular personage. Minor variations were given to stock-in-trade figures, such as bystanders, which were easy to produce. The Borman school is known to have used similar groupings of figures in a variety of retables with different subjects. In addition, stock types were illustrated in notebooks, the majority based on Rogier van der Weyden's (1399/1400-1464) compositions. Entire creations and motifs were included as well. The master would then select a combination of these illustrated stock types, to be carved and later to be installed accordingly. While many scenes were pre-arranged, important areas remained empty and were filled according to the buyer's specification. This practice led to further

standardization. The retables at Lombeek and Saluces, as well as the one at the ROM, for example, all have "strikingly similar Nativities" (Jacobs, 15). Although this method of production created a large number of retables, the workshops nevertheless maintained a relatively high standard of quality.

Iconographically each scene in the Toronto retable illustrates either a passage found in the Bible, or in popular legend of the time.

1. The central scene depicts the Nativity. Of the thirteen figures occupying this scene, five are angels, three of which ponder a scroll at left. The other two, much smaller in size, are dressed in ecclesiastical garments probably signifying the celebration of the first mass. Both the Virgin and Joseph kneel in reverence and adoration of the Christ Child. To their right is a group of shepherds in what seems to be a conversation, each holding a wind instrument. Leaning into the scene from a window, a youthful man plays a bagpipe. The Annunciation to the Shepherds takes place in a separate scene above the stable of the Nativity. We see an angel appearing to the shepherds and their flock, pointing towards heaven.

2. According to Emile Mâle, the feast of the Circumcision took place on the first of January. It was to remind people "that the Son of God who came to bring the New Law, first submitted Himself to the Old Law" (Mâle, 180). If we look now to the Circumcision, the Christ Child naturally provides the focal point. Most of the figures turn their attention to Him. To the left of Christ is Mary, and to her right, leaning on a crutch, is Joseph. Female figures in contemporary fifteenth- and sixteenth-century dress occupy the right side. The female who wears a simple veil and is in rather old fashioned attire is probably the prophetess Anna, who according to the Bible was present at Christ's circumcision. Behind the table is a deacon holding a six-sided cup with a lid, and to his lower right, the High Priest is attending to the Child. Another man to the right of the deacon, wearing headdress similar to that of the High Priest, may be Simeon, to whom God had promised that he would see the Messiah before his death.

3. According to the Gospel of St. Luke, and the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, Christ's birth took place during a census, under the rule of Caesar Augustus. All citizens were required to return to their place of birth, and Joseph being from the House of David, returned from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph took residence in a shed. It had been prophesied that the temple would crumble on the evening when a Virgin would give birth to a child. According to de Voragine, the birth of Christ "was revealed to inanimate creatures, such as stones, but also to living things such as plants and trees" (Ryan and Ripperger, 48). This may explain the presence of a thin tree trunk near the shepherds. This branchless tree trunk may have additional symbolic significance. It may represent the Tree of Jesse, or, being so close to Joseph, an allusion to his trade as carpenter. As well, it recalls the Joseph legend of the Sprouting Rod (Mâle, 242). Or perhaps it is a foreshadowing of the Passion. As a purely visual element, the tree extends into the scene above, essentially connecting the two scenes. In addition, Christ's birth was revealed to animals. Thus we see the ox and ass kneeling before Him in adoration.

4. The right wing depicts the Adoration of the Magi. Again we find the figures of Mary, Joseph, the Christ Child, and angels. Mary sits facing frontally on an elaborate

couch, placed on a dais, which Brett calls a high-back bed (54). Brett points out that this was unique to Jan Borman's work. The pinnacles at the top of the bed probably represent the lions of Solomon, making this bed also a *sedes sapientiae*.

Since their physical types are well known, the three Magi are easily recognized. Emile Mâle identifies them as follows:

Melchior [was] an older man with long white hair and a long beard ... It is he who offered gold, symbol of the Divine Kingdom ... Caspar, young and beardless with a ruddy countenance, honoured Christ in presenting incense, an offering pointing to His divinity ... Balthazar, with a full beard, testified in his offering of myrrh that the Son of Man must die ... (Mâle, 214).

Brett names the kneeling figure Caspar, the figure behind him Melchior, and the right foreground figure Balthasar (54). These identifications appear to be doubtful, however. Since the kneeling figure has a full beard and carries a vessel, he is most likely Melchior. Caspar is the youthful, beardless figure standing in the foreground at right; he carries a round vessel containing incense. Balthasar holds a tall rectangular container with myrrh.

5. The scene above the *corpus* presents the Coronation of the Virgin. In the Christian calendar, August 15th is devoted to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. After the Crucifixion of her Son, Mary lived a pious life, but longed to be reunited with Christ. Hearing this, angels reminded Mary of Christ's promise. Thus the apostles were summoned from their place of teaching in order that they be present at her Dormition. They were responsible for giving Mary a noble burial. After the Assumption, Mary was seated on the Throne of Jesus, where she was crowned Queen of Heaven. According to the *Speculum Beatae Mariae* "Mary is at once Queen of Heaven, where she is enthroned in the midst of the angels, Queen of Earth, where she constantly manifests her power, and Queen of Hell, where she has authority over the demons" (Mâle, 235).

Behind her, God the Father and Christ are visible. With His left hand, the Father makes the sign of blessing. He steadies the Book of Scriptures on His right knee and holds the Orb in his right hand. The Son of Man, seated to the right hand of the Father, is identified by His Crown of Thorns, as he points to the Stigma resulting from the *Coup de lance*. Both wear a cope, a large, usually elaborate semicircular mantle worn by priests. The Holy Trinity is completed by the presence of the Dove of the Holy Spirit, visible on an architectural pennant between them. Surrounding the symmetrically placed figures are four music-making angels, similar to those in the van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* painted between 1425 and 1432. Although the representation of the Virgin in Majesty is most readily found in the tympana of cathedral ports, the present Coronation is "unusual in this form" (Brett, 53). No other known retable of this period features all four music-making angels. Their position is similar only to the Antwerp retable at Lofta, in Sweden, from ca. 1500-1515.

Similar to painted Flemish triptychs of the fifteenth- and early sixteenth centuries, carved altarpieces present figures in a perspectival and illusionistic space. Hence we find each scene divided into vignettes in true triptych style, on sloping planes with walls that narrow towards the back. If we exclude for a moment the Coronation of the Virgin from

the ROM retable, the remaining subject is similar, for example, to Hans Memlinc's (1433-1494) *Jan Floreins Triptych* of 1479, at the St. John's Hospital in Bruges, although Memlinc's painted triptych presents a different sequence: the Nativity is shown on the left wing, the Adoration of the Magi in the *corpus*, and the Circumcision on the right.

Moreover, comparisons can be made with Rogier van der Weyden's *St. Columba Altarpiece* of 1460-62 in Munich, and Hugo van der Goes' (1440-1482) *Portinari Altarpiece* in the Uffizi, Florence, of 1474-1476. The Adoration of the Magi scene, in both the ROM retable and the *St. Columba Altarpiece*, show the Magi wearing nearly identical theatrical costume and, curiously, a hat resting on the floor at center. As well, similarities can be observed in van der Weyden's painted altarpiece and the individual carved figures. Figures who stand with their back to the viewer, for example, do so in an identically awkward way. The Caspar from the *St. Columba Altarpiece* stands in a dance-like pose, similar to the Caspar of the ROM retable. The most obvious likeness between angels in a painted altarpiece and the ROM retable can be found in the *Portinari Altarpiece*. Angels in both works are placed in the lower right corner and are dressed similarly in liturgical costume. The shepherds also appear in basically the same space in both altars.

With over forty figures placed in the *caisse* of the retable, Brett attempts to differentiate between individual *imagiers* (49). It should be noted, however, that some figures are attached individually to the sloping floor on a single base, or are fastened to the framework, while others share their base in pairs. On the basis of style, two distinguishable hands seem to have been at work. The carving of the first sculptor is characterized by predominantly static figures whose dress is not extravagant but simple. As well, this sculptor does not render the body carefully. The features of his figures are more type than individual, with heads and eyes being oval in shape and noses that are noticeably short and flat. Brett attributes to this carver two of the pairs in the Circumcision (these are the two women close together on the left), the Virgin and High Priest with the table, and probably the third pair, the deacon and the priest. The single woman at rear of this scene, the Joseph pair (Joseph and the young man) in the Adoration of the Magi, and the God the Father and God the Son figures in the Coronation are equally attributed to this carver (Brett, 49). Although he is not entirely certain, Brett also considers this worker to have carved the four angels of the Coronation, and the three angels to the right in the Nativity (49).

Brett describes the second *imagier* as "more vigorous" (49). Figures by this carver show distinct personalities, with more finely carved noses, especially on the older male figures. These figures are animated and dressed in costumes which are carefully sculpted and richly designed. To this carver Brett attributes "the single men and Joseph of The Circumcision; the two shepherds in profile and Joseph in The Nativity; all The Adoration of the Magi figures except the Joseph pair (Joseph and the young man) and the two Prophets or Patriarchs below" (49-50). The Madonna of the Nativity, Brett believes, is by neither of these two carvers.

Both Corey Keeble and Brett have inspected the ROM retable and have found "no visible trace — in the form of screw marks — of a lost painted cover, or of a painted predella" (Brett, 52). Furthermore, Brett believes that five figures are modern: the figure in

profile behind Joseph in the Circumcision, which he thinks is a facsimile of the woman standing at the rear and all three pinnacle figures, namely the two censuring angels and the Madonna and Child (50-52). In addition, Brett concludes that the Virgin Mary of the Coronation is modern, on the stylistic basis of being "curiously passionless and expressionless when compared to the originals" (50). Keeble believes this Virgin to be nineteenth-century and in a still unfinished state. Lastly, Brett discovered additional changes: the replacement of all the angels' wings, and the readjustment of figures like the Joseph pair in the Nativity and all the Adoration of the Magi figures, except Joseph and the two Prophets or Patriarchs in the *predella* below (50-52).

It is the remarkable quality of the altarpiece in the Royal Ontario Museum which prompted this discussion. Hopefully, the present investigation will contribute to an increase in curiosity and appreciation of at least one example of this art, easily available in Toronto for study.

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