AN *ANDACHTSBILD* BY BERNAERT VAN ORLEY IN TORONTO

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Bernaert van Orley — Brussels, circa 1488-1541. *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, ca. 1518. Oil on panel 86.9 x 73.9 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Acquisition no. 2456.

IN THIS CHARMING PAINTING VAN ORLEY DEPICTS his interpretation of the biblical account of the Holy Family's flight from Bethlehem into neighbouring Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-18) in order to escape the wrath of King Herod. Having heard from the Magi that a new-born infant was destined to one day become king of the Jews, Herod, in a jealous rage, ordered that all male children in or near Bethlehem who were two years old and under be put to death. Joseph, forewarned by an angel, took Mary and Jesus to Egypt and thus escaped the massacre. As the painting's title suggests, the little Family has paused on its journey. The principal figures of Mary and her nursing Child are featured in the foreground while Joseph stands guard in the background. Beyond him, the peaceful rural scene of farmers working the land contrasts with the unfolding drama of Herod's pursuing soldiers rounding the road in the distance.

When viewed from a few feet away, the painting appears to be in fine condition since its colours are still brilliant and fresh in appearance. However, when viewed up close, once can see that a large area of the composition is marred by crack lines in the paint which attest to the painting's age. These small fissures are especially noticeable on the face of the Virgin and in the light colours of the background landscape, but are more difficult to discern in the lower red drapery of her robe, where the light is dimmer. A closer examination also reveals in the upper left section of the sky, near the castle, two faint shadowy traces of vertical streaking a few inches long, that appear to be abrasions of some kind. The streak nearest the castle could almost be mistaken for a wisp of smoke. The other streak is more pronounced and differs in texture from the surrounding paint, which might indicate that because of the painting's large surface, three wood panels were used and the seam where one of them is joined is "bleeding" through. Fortunately, these flaws are in the sky area, so that they don't detract from the Virgin's face.

We are initially impressed by the splendour of the painting's colours, which are outstanding for their richness and variety. The strong glowing red of the Virgin's clothing is the first feature that engages the viewer's eye. The gold embroidered border of her mantel is complemented by the pearl and jewel encrusted hem of her matching robe which flows and spreads gracefully into a soft pool of fabric. This decorative attire has an almost courtly elegance not in keeping with the rugged circumstances of the flight, but is indicative of the Virgin's special status. From the figure of the Virgin our eyes shift to the green fertile landscape which sweeps back deeply into the picture and is quite astonishing in its

detail of drifting clouds, rocky formations, sprawling hills, trees, people, animals and flocks of birds.

The architectural gold frame of the painting is large and heavy and its worn appearance suggests it could be the original frame. The decorative vertical fluting of its sides gives the appearance of pilasters — a formation that serves as a classical motif to "house" the painting as well as lending grandeur to the scene it contains.

In the publication *Art Gallery of Ontario — Selected Works 1990*, which features all the paintings of the AGO, the comment on van Orley's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* is that its "brilliant colour and acute detail ... epitomize the oil technique perfected by Flemish artists." The brief sketch goes on to say that van Orley was a leading member of the Brussels school and that his works reveal "the influence of Italian Renaissance art." The painting has been part of the AGO's collection since 1938, when it was purchased by the Gallery through donations by its patrons, so its acquisition is designated as "Gift by Subscription."

Further information on van Orley was obtained from *The Oxford Companion to Art* (1970). During the first half of the sixteenth century van Orley was, in fact, the principal painter and decorator in Brussels, and was considered one of the leading "Romanists" of his day. In 1518 he was employed by the Governess of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, and her successor, Mary of Hungary, as a court painter of portraits and altarpieces. In addition to his paintings, he was also a designer of tapestries and stained-glass windows. A fuller account of his life and works is given by Max J. Friedländer in volume 8 of his series entitled *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1972, plate 112, ill. 128a).

Van Orley was a member of a Brussels family of painters who were originally from Luxembourg. His father, Valentin, and several of his brothers were painters, and Friedländer states that it is likely that Bernaert completed his apprenticeship in his father's shop around 1512. Friedländer informs us that van Orley considered himself a disciple of Raphael, a view shared by his contemporaries "and the connoisseurs of ensuing generations [who] regarded him as Raphael's Netherlandish successor" (83). It was thought that van Orley had actually studied in Raphael's workshop and a report of the Brussels magistrates of December 27, 1777, states that van Orley visited Rome twice and studied under Raphael. This unsubstantiated testimony is considered suspect by Friedländer, who feels that, had van Orley actually studied in Raphael's studio, he would have acquired particular skills with such things as pigments and brushwork which, Friedländer observes, the artist "did not learn at all" (83). The *Oxford Companion* mentions only that van Orley may have visited Italy and lists his painting *The Trials of Job* (Brussels, 1521) as evidence that van Orley was familiar with Raphael's *Expulsion of Heliodorus* fresco (1510-1511) in the Vatican, and that in all probability he saw Raphael's cartoons which were received in Pieter Coecke van Aelst's workshop ca. 1515, to be woven into tapestries.

In Friedländer's opinion, van Orley's early paintings manifest a kind of "awkwardness and lack of knowledge" (84), but his "entrepreneurial streak" equipped him with a sure sense of what the public wanted and quickly settled down "to a certain bluntness or narrative to emphasis on the handsome and the sensational" (84).

Furthermore, Friedländer states that van Orley was "predisposed toward the creation of stereotypes" (85); in Raphael's paintings he found the rules and schemes that gave him a sense of direction and he was more successful than any of his contemporaries in appropriating the Italian methods.

Friedländer attributes to van Orley the talent of an "entertaining storyteller [and] a resourceful improvisor" (85), whose works, he writes, were not profound, since van Orley was not motivated by any personal vision but rather the desire to serve the art patrons of his time. Van Orley created many Madonna panels and in discussing a dispute over the authorship of the *Virgin and Child Seated within a Throne Structure*, which was presented in 1588 to Philip II by the city of Louvain as the work of Jan Gossaert, Friedländer concludes that "there can be no doubt of his [van Orley's] authorship, despite the confusing inscription. The Virgin's features are pervaded by that mild and dreamlike sweetness, that inoffensive vacuity peculiar to van Orley's Madonnas" (61). Friedländer does not specifically mention the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, but there is a black and white illustration, *Virgin and Child* (plate 112, ill. 128a, private ownership, Paris) — a good contemporary replica, somewhat inferior to the specimen in the Schloss collection (Paris), but in a better state of preservation. This is identical with the work now in the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Although Friedländer maintains that van Orley "was eminently successful in creating pleasing images of the Madonna" (86), and that in measuring and evaluating his achievements as a whole "the balance begins to tip in his favour" (82), we are mildly haunted by his earlier criticism. Friedländer was a great connoisseur of Netherlandish painting and his criticism of the features of van Orley's Madonnas as being "mild and dreamlike" is acceptable and, to a degree, accurate, but the term "vacuity" is a harsh criticism, made even harsher, somehow, by the word "inoffensive." It seems to suggest that the expression of the Virgin is an unimportant element of her characterization. If we are unduly influenced by Friedländer's assessment, then van Orley's Madonna in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* loses her individuality and becomes a type rather than a mother of warmth and humanity. The spirit of what the artist was attempting to portray is diminished because the substance and meaning of the painting have been trivialized.

One supposes that any criticism levelled by Friedländer at a painter's method and style ought to be taken seriously, since his great knowledge enabled him to assess with tremendous scope a wide range of art. Yet, like any critic, he might have a personal bias. Contrary to Friedländer's opinion, if we examine the Madonna with a spiritual as well as a critical eye it is possible to experience an emotional transition to her inner character that lies beneath the surface of her formal, outward beauty. By focussing on her role as the mother of God we can become sensitive to the qualities of goodness and holiness that animate her expression and radiate a quiet charm. True, she is demure and grave, but this should not be mistaken for a "cloying" sweetness. It would seem the the Madonna is portrayed as well as or better than many of the Madonnas of van Orley's contemporaries, who often isolated her from the natural world.

As mentioned, Friedländer does not specifically discuss the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, but whatever criticism he or other art historians might level against the painting, it

must be said in van Orley's favour that he added a human touch to the biblical story. Matthew does not embellish his narrative with details, so one tends to think of the Holy Family as continuously in flight. Other northern artists have also limited their imagination in this respect, for Mary is traditionally shown protectively holding her Child and sitting on a donkey being led by Joseph through a barren landscape. The right wing of Melchior Broederlam's altarpiece (1392-1399), for example, depicts the event in this way, as does the Master of the Gold Scrolls, who painted the *Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1430) in his *Book of Hours.* A similar version of the "Flight" can be found in *Les très belles heures du Duc Jean de Berry* (ca. 1400, Brussels), which is attributed to the Jacquemart shop. In all of these paintings the stylized rocks give a hard, unyielding shape to the landscape, which carries the conviction that the lonely journey was fraught with danger.

Yet van Orley's idea of the Virgin resting in a warm summer landscape, seemingly oblivious to danger, is not as novel as it appears to the layman unfamiliar with works of the period. Flemish artist Gerard David painted a version of *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1510, Washington, D.C.), as did Lucas Cranach the Elder (1504, Berlin), Joos van Cleve and Joachim Patinir (c. 1515-1524, Brussels) and Hans Baldung Grien (ca. 1513, Vienna), to name just a few. Charles D. Cuttler, in chapter twelve of *Northern Painting* (1968) discusses Gerard David's version and points out that in all the versions of this theme the Virgin is seated on a rocky ledge and a picnic or clothes basket is often part of the scene, making it, as Cuttler observes, "almost a genre piece" (196). The fact that it is marked by a distinctive iconography indicates that *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* was a popular theme, and though each composition differs in detail, it does reveal that the artists of the day borrowed ideas from each other.

Like David's version, van Orley's Virgin dominates the scene, since she fills the whole frontal plane of the painting, and her seated position, which forms the conventional pyramid, lends a dramatic monumental quality to the composition. This aspect leaves little doubt that she and her nursing Child were meant to be the main focus of the painting, rather than the activity behind her. The Christ Child has his back to the viewer, although we see his face in profile, and appears to be about one year old. His sturdy, plump little body is in proportion to the adult size body of his mother, and he actually looks like a child rather than a miniature adult, as is so often the case in early Flemish paintings. The painting that presently hangs next to van Orley's in the AGO, for example — the less accomplished *Madonna and Child* by Aelbert Bouts — portrays a masculine looking Virgin and a Child who looks like a little man.

The Virgin's correct anatomy lends a naturalistic quality to the painting which is further enhanced by the moving evocation of tenderness on her face as she gazes lovingly down at her nursing Son. Van Orley achieves the illusion of three-dimensional reality of both mother and child and is successful in illustrating the contour of her limbs beneath the drapery of her gown. However, she is seated in a somewhat awkward position, although this is not immediately apparent. Her left leg is lost under the heavy robe and is bent, uncomfortably it would seem, under her, while the right leg is fully extended. The Child has his left foot, which is protected by the fold of his mother's gown, on the ground, and with his right foot placed on her outstretched leg has stepped up for nourishment. His

mouth is just off the exposed nipple, and his dimpled hands are spread-fingered across her chest. The stepping action of the Child in his eagerness to nurse lends a strong air of vitality and a sense of movement to the scene which is offset by the composed, stable body of his mother.

There is nothing remote in the Virgin's countenance that would remove her from the earthly realm she inhabits. In other words, her spiritual dignity and exquisite grace is not gained from a decorative halo or the austere setting of a sheltered niche, but from a mood of tender serenity which emanates from the scene of domestic intimacy. By witnessing the visual exchange of sacred love between mother and Child, the observer can relate the Virgin's plight to the trials of his or her own world, which are also made less harsh by moments of loving harmony.

Other than the sculptured quality of the Virgin's gown, the pictorial realism of her figure is far removed from the courtly late Gothic style with its usual slender figures. Van Orley, like Robert Campin (ca. 1375-1444), Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441) and Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400-1464), gives to his Virgin the more precise appearance of a flesh-and-blood figure. The Virgin is a heavy type whose firmly modelled features are reminiscent of Campin's full-length Frankfurt *Virgin and Child* (ca. 1430-1434). Her face, oval and full, almost to the point of plumpness, conveys the softness of her flesh. Her nose is long and straight, her mouth small but full-lipped, and her heavy lids are lowered in maternal tenderness. Hands and feet of both subjects are defined with shadings between the digits, suggesting that they were delicately sketched in before the oil was applied.

Van Orley's painting manifests the dramatic effect of light which is apparent in the luminosity of the Virgin's face, whose pink-tinged cheeks add a luster of life to her countenance. She is bathed in an almost spiritual illumination which falls from the upper left, almost like a spotlight; but because her face is in the three-quarter position, part of her left cheek is in shadow. The light adds luster to her long, crimped hair, accentuating its texture and highlighting the reddish-brown tones of its colour. This light also shades and defines the hair and garment of the Child, as well as the multiple folds of the Virgin's lavishly draped clothes, in places turning the gilded edge of her mantle into a golden shimmer. The garment seems to fall into a natural arrangement near her body, but has too ordered an appearance where it is spread out. One gets the impression that, were she to stand up, the Madonna would be dragging a large mass of material behind her. Not only does the garment seem impractical for travelling, but it strikes the viewer as incongruous that one who is fleeing a troop of menacing soldiers would take the time to tidily arrange her dress before nursing a hungry child. Yet what has to be kept in mind is that van Orley, in the tradition of the Flemish masters, was not so much concerned with naturalism as with an ability to inspire faith in the sacred figures of his paintings. By placing his Virgin in a setting that characterizes everyday life, he endows her with a vivid and determining reality which seems to lessen the mystery of the Virgin's motherhood and makes her more accessible.

Although the Virgin herself may be somewhat un-Flemish in conception, the thatch-roofed farmhouses, grassy hills and distant fields of the background are expressed in Northern terms and tie in with the early Netherlandish love of both urban and natural

landscapes. In this Northern tradition, van Orley fuses the physical world with the spiritual world and shows in his sweeping vista a sensitivity and love for the natural environment by weaving into the theme of his religious subject representations of the people who make their living from the land.

Van Orley has co-ordinated his design into carefully balanced diagonal, vertical and horizontal planes which bind the composition together. The white-bordered book placed in the foreground draws our eye diagonally up and along the Virgin's outstretched leg to the curious protruding rock formation in the extreme upper left. Even though the figures are stationary, this ascending diagonal scheme creates a forward flow of movement. The Child is a strong vertical figure whose upwardly thrust hands frame the Virgin's breast which forms the focal point of the picture. His erect position parallels the tall trees which stabilize the extreme right as well as the slender palm tree which, etched in isolation against the sky, is a prominent vertical feature of the landscape. The white stretch of the lower sky, the horizontal lines of the towering clouds, and the rhythmic ridge lines of the hills render a symmetrical arrangement to the design which terminates in the diagonal rocky platform of the foreground over which the Virgin's robe is draped.

The unobscured landscape is well executed, for there is a natural sense of recession, aided in part by the river and winding path which leads the eye gently inward. Yet despite the carefully orchestrated scene, the background does not weld convincingly with the foreground, perhaps because it is, essentially, a stage for the main figures. Although the expansive sky and distant mountain impart a vast extension of space they are, nonetheless, eclipsed by the sheer force of the Virgin's dominating presence. Joseph may be essential to the theme, but he is not soundly conceived, since he seems too small for his position in the middle distance, and his placement so close to the Virgin's shoulder affects the perspective. Even if he may have the correct scale when compared to the other figures in the landscape, who diminish in size according to their position, he appears to be out pf proportion in relation to the Virgin, whose figure is disproportionately large in relation to her surroundings. This feature reinforces her dominance by focusing our attention on her, rather than on the setting in which she exists. At any rate, Joseph is portrayed as a diminutive, isolated, two-dimensional figure who seems stilted and frozen. His stiffly modelled body does not convey the impression of spatial movement, and this creates a tension of stillness behind the Virgin whose nursing action exudes energy. This visual impression seems to imply that van Orley, in featuring only the Virgin at rest, has painted Joseph as a less interesting figure in order to enhance his Virgin. Yet Joseph, and for that matter the donkey, are indispensable elements in the painting, since their pictorial effect sets the mood for the biblical event we are witnessing.

In contrast to the warm colours of the Virgin's clothing and the natural flesh tones of her skin, the verdant background and vast blue sky are decidedly cool. This colour scheme is further accentuated by the cool grey of the tree trunks and the grazing donkey whose coat is the same shade. Furthermore, there is no gradation of colour or subtle shading in the green landscape which is too evenly toned, but the transparency of the river does reflect the cloud-streaked sky and the play of light mirrors differing shades of blue. Although it is not a strong connection, the Virgin is united to her surroundings are the small linkages of

colour placed in calculated areas. The paler red of Joseph's cape, for instance, binds him subtly with the Virgin, just as the deep blue velvety cloth on which the book rests in the extreme right corner is repeated in her undersleeves.

In most Netherlandish paintings of the period the fall of light is the unifying factor which lends a reality to all the objects and figures, but van Orley fails to achieve this. In contrast to the subtly manipulated light which bathes the principal subjects, the background landscape has only the natural light source of the sky, which creates a patchwork of light and show in the clouds but not on the land itself. In fact, the only full shadow cast is that of the donkey. Joseph has a small shadow, derived from his feet, but there, for example, no shadow of the man working the field with his horse. The folds of drapery in the Virgin's robe and the objects in the foreground receive their form from intensified shadowing, but Herod's soldiers in the distant upper left are too well defined. One would think that as the figures recede from the foreground they should be less distinct. With the exception of the fragile palm tree, the same might be said about the leaves on the trees, which are impenetrably dense and too sharply patterned and similar in shape to be realistic. The only atmospheric softness is the shimmering blue haze surrounding the mountain in the far horizon, which creates the impression that the countryside stretches for miles.

There are many details in the picture which carry symbolic messages so characteristic of northern art. Cuttler's description of Broederlam's *Flight into Egypt* describes the circular building, which is similar to the castle in van Orley's painting, as symbolizing "Jerusalem and the old dispensation" (23). The background column in van Orley's painting is also illustrated in Broederlam, and Cuttler informs us that this "derives from the Apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and illustrates the popular belief that pagan idols toppled during the Flight into Egypt." In the AGO information card, the picture in the open book near Mary's foot is mentioned as "a symbolic image of the Synagogue — a blindfolded woman — meant to remind Christian viewers of the triumph of the new faith over the old." There exist many legends associated with the flight of the Holy Family. We are told, for example, that "the troops abandoned their chase when farmers said they were planting their crops when the Holy Family passed." Apparently, the fields "miraculously ripened overnight" and the soldiers concluded that since so much time had passed it would be impossible to catch up and overtake their prey. The legend linked with the palm tree explains that it "miraculously bent down to provide dates for Mary." If we look carefully we can find other details of "disguised symbolism" such as the band of pearls in Mary's hair, which denotes her purity. Symbolism seems apparent in the motif of the rocky ground where she rests, and could imply the hard road of suffering that lies ahead for her and her offspring. The water gushing from the nearby rock is perhaps a tribute to Mary as a "vessel most clean" and the "well of living waters."

In conclusion, one could say that *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* still holds a rich source of meaning for contemporary viewers because of its subject matter. An indulgent mother responding to the needs of her hungry child, and a concerned father looking out for their safety — these are things that have a general appeal, since the natural parental actions are not bound by a particular time or place. The space behind the Virgin expands serenely, creating a poetic setting for the interrupted journey, and establishes an atmosphere that

matches the loving exchange between mother and child. If we are of a romantic turn of mind, we might imagine a vague sadness, a slight touch of melancholy in the Virgin's face.Perhaps a poignant reminder of the sword of sorrow that will one day pierce her heart.

The emotional force of van Orley's painting stems from the masterful handling of his principal figure. The precision and clarity of expression in the Virgin's gentle face communicates the qualities of motherhood, beauty and grace; a visual representation one tends to equate with her goodness. In a creative spirit, the artist has effectively infused his subject with life and feeling, capturing a sense of her personality and imposing a realism far removed from the iconic remoteness of earlier Gothic images. Her solemn dignity and the soft line of her figure beautifully convey the spirit of humanism so characteristic of Italian Renaissance painting. As she calmly sits against the countryside, clasping her Child, the nurturing qualities inherent in her motherhood seem to envelop the viewer as well. By emphasizing her humanity, van Orley has made his Virgin a credible figure and it is this compelling feature that makes the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* an accomplished work of art.

REFERENCES

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