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CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AND IMAGERY

ALTARS, SAINTS AND RELICS



Christian worship centred upon the Mass, in which the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross was re-enacted: through the Crucifixion alone would mankind, fallen from grace, be redeemed. The Mass was celebrated by a priest at the altar, which was a table, usually of solid and durable material, securely fixed, and approached by steps. Each altar was furnished with a cross or crucifix (that is, a cross with Christ hanging upon it). During the Mass, Christ's body and blood were received by the faithful in the form of bread and wine – the sacraments of the Eucharist – which had been consecrated by the priest. Until about 1100 the laity (those confirmed in the Christian Faith but not in Holy Orders) received both of these sacraments, but the practice of receiving the bread only came to prevail. It was enjoined by the council of the Church held at Constance between 1414 and 1418, and has remained the traditional practice in the Church of Rome ever since.

The laity did not receive the eucharistic bread frequently, but it was important that it was available not only in the church for them to worship but also for administration by a priest to anyone on his or her deathbed. For this reason the sacraments were 'reserved' in a tabernacle – a locked ornamental cupboard generally, in this period, set into the wall of the church or its sacristy. Most tabernacles which have survived in Italy are of marble with gilded metal doors engraved with Christ offering his Body and Blood to the faithful (Figs. 4 and 5), but some were made of wood, painted and gilded. Giovanni Bellini's little panel, the *Blood of the Redeemer* (Fig. 6), probably originally served as a tabernacle door.

Altars were found in every church or chapel. A chapel could be

a separate building, or an independent architectural unit, but also no more than a side altar in the aisle of a church. The high altar, which was at the east end, was not designed to be seen by the multitudes assembled in the church: its architectural canopy and rich furnishing were more to do honour to the mystery of the sacrament than to make it visible to a lay congregation. In most churches the entire east end was separated from the nave by a screen, often surmounted by a cross (or rood, hence rood screen). These screens frequently obscured the altar. In private chapels, including some large ones, access might be available only to the clergy which served in them and to the family which built them. These families owned the chapel (and the burial space below), although the church retained control over them. Church burial was an expensive privilege accorded only to the rich, who were often buried in vaults below the family chapel: an endowment would provide for the clergy to say Masses for the souls of those buried there and believed to be suffering in Purgatory preparatory to their reception in Heaven. The demand for such chapels led to a great increase in religious imagery and altarpieces in particular.

Chapels with altars were also found in hospitals erected for the care of the sick and dying and for the shelter of pilgrims or the destitute. The wards were made contiguous with the chapels, with the altar often designed to be visible from the beds. In such hospitals the reception of the sacraments was of far greater importance than any medical treatment. Palaces and great houses also frequently had their own chapel, with altars where a priest might say Mass, and there were usually chapels attached to town halls, where Mass was said before town council meetings.

In churches the altar might also serve as the tomb where the body of a saint was placed, sometimes in a state of miraculous

Fig. 4. Andrea Ferrucci, *Sacrament Tabernacle*, c. 1490. Marble with traces of gilding. The arms of the Rucellai family are held by the eagle in the corbel. The Latin inscription reads: 'This is the Bread and Wine come down to us from Heaven.' London, Victoria and Albert Museum.



Fig. 5. Detail of Fig. 4, showing the engraved gilt copper door.



preservation. In some cases the body was placed in a crypt below the altar, in others it could be seen within the altar. More often the altar merely contained a relic – generally a part of the saint's body. The general council of the Church held at Nicaea in 787 not only sanctioned the veneration of relics (which had in fact long been established) but ordained that every altar should contain one.

The importance of relics originated with the veneration of those saints whose martyrdom had done so much to inspire and support the early Church. Gradually the number of saints expanded as they were adopted as patrons of kingdoms, cities, professions, crafts, institutions, and as protectors against diseases and disasters. The expansion was not fully controlled by the Church, which nevertheless did institute very strict procedures for canonisation (the process whereby someone is officially ack-

nnowledged to be a saint). Saints were not to be worshipped but venerated: contemplated as inspiring examples and prayed to as intercessors between the faithful and God, like the Virgin Mary. Yet touching, or merely seeing, the body of a saint, or any relic of one, was thought to cure or save an individual and to protect a family or a city.

As an example of the way in which the veneration of relics evolved we can cite the case of Saint Hubert who was buried in 727 beneath the high altar of the church of St Peter in Liège in the Netherlands. He had been a dissolute courtier and had not scrupled to hunt during Holy Week in the Forest of the Ardennes. There he saw a stag with a crucifix between its antlers (Fig. 7). Moved to repent of his sins, he lived in the forest as a hermit. Eventually he was made Bishop of Liège, founding the church of St Peter where he was buried. In 743 his body was exhumed and



Fig. 6. Giovanni Bellini, *The Blood of the Redeemer*, c. 1460–5. Poplar, 47×34.3cm (NG 1233).

discovered to be perfectly preserved. It was re-exhumed again in 825 in the presence of Louis the Debonair, son of Charlemagne, and Walandus, Bishop of Liège, and removed to the Benedictine Abbey of Angadium. Thereafter known as Saint-Hubert-Les-Ardenne, the abbey became a centre of pilgrimage for victims of rabies, who took as a cure bread blessed at his shrine. The shrine also became the focus for the devotions of the military Order of Saint Hubert instituted in 1444 by Gerard, Duke of Jülich-Berg, after a battle won on Saint Hubert's Day. The episode of Saint Hubert's second exhumation was painted at about this date for the altar of a new chapel dedicated to the saint in the church of Ste Gudule in Brussels (Fig. 8).

Upon the altar in this painting there is a reliquary *châsse*, a casket of architectural character made of gold and studded with jewels. Such a container for relics would have been portable and need not always have been placed on the altar. The largest and central embossed figure represents Saint Hubert (although what relic of him the casket contained is not clear). Many reliquaries of a similarly sumptuous kind survive – an especially large and remarkable one, made by Nicolas of Verdun in the late twelfth century for the bones of the Three Kings or Magi, is to be found in the cathedral of Cologne. The possession of relics could confer great wealth on a church by attracting offerings from those whose prayers were answered there. And a whole city could prosper from the business generated by pilgrims, as Cologne did, and as did Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain, from the shrine of Saint James (Iago), Padua in North West Italy, from the shrine of Saint Anthony, and Canterbury from the shrine of Thomas Becket.

IMAGES AND ALTARPIECES



Images had been used in Christian worship and to adorn Christian churches over a very long period, often not without controversy. There was of course a distinction between worship and veneration, but whether this distinction was always clear to the laity may be doubted. In the eyes of the Church worshipping images of saints was tantamount to idolatry, which was specifically forbidden by the Bible. At various times the ecclesiastical authorities became particularly aware of the dangers of using images, and occasionally their use was proscribed and images were even destroyed.

During the period with which this book is concerned, however, religious images of all kinds flourished. They were used



Fig. 7. Master of the Life of the Virgin, *The Conversion of Saint Hubert*, c. 1485–90. Oak, 123.8×83cm (NG 252).

both to adorn churches and in other contexts. In churches there were not only images integral to the architecture and related to tabernacles and to altars (discussed below), but also various types of portable images. Paintings were hung from pillars by those whose prayers had been answered (*ex-votos*), or put up in support of a prayer (No. 39) and, especially in churches in Germany, there were also epitaph paintings representing the dead whose souls were to be prayed for. People also had small devotional images in their homes or places of work, particularly paintings or sculpted images of the Virgin and Child. The same subjects might be represented in ivory, in enamel work or in paintings, or in combination, as when painted shutters were used to protect images of precious metal, or indeed any sculpted image: the function of the image as an aid to devotion was all-important.

The National Gallery includes both small devotional paintings, which were almost certainly used in a domestic context, and large altarpieces, some of which are known to have come



Fig. 8 Workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, *The Exhumation of Saint Hubert*, c. 1437.
Oak, painted surface 88×80.5cm (NG 783).

from specific chapels and churches. In addition, there are a number of paintings which may have been used as small altarpieces or may equally well have served as devotional paintings.

The churches of Western Europe during this period were full of images. These had proliferated first as mural paintings and, in parts of Italy, also as mosaics. The great mural narrative cycles developed in Italy and filling whole chapels are particularly associated with Giotto and his followers. North of the Alps, however, the new fashion for light Gothic architecture left much less wall space available for the painter. Accordingly stained glass, although found all over Europe, acquired an importance there analogous to that of murals in Italy. The churches were full of sculpture as well, especially the great cathedral portals where there were tier upon tier of statues of saints, prophets and angels

in niches, pinnacles, gables, and even in crockets and finials. As the altarpiece evolved it began to rival, although it never replaced, the murals, the stained glass and the portal as a place where sacred images and stories could be concentrated. Both in its form and in its subject matter the altarpiece was determined by earlier ecclesiastical imagery.

The history of the altarpiece begins with the increasing importance accorded to saints, their relics and their images, and the practice of placing relics on the altar, rather than within the altar. To Bernard of Angers visiting Auvergne in 1013 it came as a terrible shock to find upon the altar in place of the crucifix a reliquary image of Saint Gerald of Aurillac plated with gold and studded with precious stones. Saints' relics, not confined only to altars, multiplied. The Church (at the Synod of Trier) ordained

in 1310 that every altar should be labelled with an indication of which saint it was dedicated to, which suggests not only that more and more saints were requiring more and more altars but also that many altars had more and more relics associated with them. The labelling could be by a conspicuous image – a statue or painting – as well as by a text.

Altarpieces are images made to be placed upon an altar, or to rise behind it. They had to be visible, at least in part, behind the priest who officiated in front of the altar. The painting of the exhumation of Saint Hubert (Figs. 8 and 17) depicts a rectangular altarpiece painted with saints flanking a taller representation of Christ on the Cross between Mary and John. Above this there rises a tabernacle which encloses a statue of Saint Peter, a reminder that the episode takes place in the church of St Peter in Liège. The doors of this tabernacle are decorated with numerous small narrative paintings, presumably of the saint's life.

The altar in this painting is arranged in a manner which is perfectly possible in a church of the fourteenth or fifteenth century but quite impossible in the period when the events depicted are supposed to have taken place. It was only in the thirteenth century that the Mass began to be celebrated by the priest with his back to the congregation and on the congregation's side of the altar – in the position, that is, of Saint Hubert in a painting which shows an angel descending to bestow his bishop's stole upon him (Fig. 9). The development of European painting has perhaps been more stimulated by this liturgical alteration than by any other single event. Some of the richness of the decoration on the front face of the altar (the frontal or antependium), which was now partially obscured by the priest, was transferred to the altarpiece to form a backdrop against which the host – the bread of the Eucharist – was elevated. Frontals remained important and were lavishly decorated, often with luxury textiles or with paintings which simulated these, but imagery came chiefly to be found in the altarpiece.

In the painting the *Mass of Saint Giles* (Fig. 10), the saintly bishop elevates the host before the altar. Upon it is an altarpiece of gold, studded with gems, and embossed with saints and angels flanking a central arch filled by the larger figure of God the Father. The painting shows King Charles Martel kneeling in the Abbey of St-Denis, near Paris. The sins which the King could not bring himself to confess are delivered, written on paper, by an angel to Saint Giles. Unusually, the artist has documented the interior with great accuracy. The gold altarpiece was presented to the Abbey of St-Denis by King Charles the Bald (823–877). Originally it had served as an altar frontal but after the liturgical



Fig. 9 Workshop of the Master of the Life of the Virgin, *The Mass of Saint Hubert*. c. 1485–90. Wood transferred to canvas, 123.2×83cm (NG 253).

change it was placed upon the altar as shown here. Above the altarpiece is a cross at the foot of which is a small reliquary marked in abbreviated Latin 'from the Cross of Our Lord'. Behind we can glimpse the gilt brass coffin of Saint Louis supported on tall columns, a gift of King Charles VI in 1398, while the mid-thirteenth-century tomb of King Dagobert I (died 639) is visible to the right. The painting reminds us of the veneration of relics at altars and the proximity of shrines and tombs to altars. It also demonstrates the superimposition, to near congestion, of competing cult objects characteristic of the Church in this period.

Most of the earliest surviving painted altarpieces are of horizontal rectangular format and are known as *retables* (meaning behind the table) or *dossals* (meaning the back of the table). The example signed by Margarito d'Arezzo, probably of the 1260s, depicting the Virgin and Child in a *mandorla* (the almond-shaped frame) with narratives in compartments to either side, is typical



ABOVE Fig. 10. Master of Saint Giles, *The Mass of Saint Giles*, c. 1500. Oak, painted surface 61.5×45.5 (NG 4681).

of Italian retables (Fig. 11 and No. 1). The ornamental borders imitate the patterns and even the colours of enamel work. This reminds us that the most highly valued retables were of gold or silver gilt, set with precious stones and enamels.

The more sumptuous Westminster Retable (Fig. 12), probably made for the high altar of Westminster Abbey in the 1270s under royal patronage, resembles the finest embossed and engraved metalwork and is studded with paste jewels and simulated enamel plaques. Christ holding a globe and raising his hand in blessing occupies the central position, with the Virgin and Saint John beside him; Saints Peter and Paul (the latter barely visible now) are represented in niches at either end; narratives are concentrated in between. The niches have painted arches on slender columns, steep crocketed gables, spires and finials, but these



ABOVE Fig. 11. Margarito of Arezzo, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned, with Scenes of the Nativity and the Lives of Saints*, 1260s. Wood, 92.5×183cm, including frame (NG 564).

BELOW Fig. 12. *The Westminster Retable*, 1270s. Oak, 95.8×333.5cm. London, Westminster Abbey.



Gothic architectural compartments, like the Romanesque arches in the retable in St-Denis (Fig. 9), are contained within the frame.

The painting retains the rectangular shape of an altar frontal. But artists were not necessarily restricted by this format. The retable of the Crucifixion on the altar in the painting of Saint Hubert's exhumation (Fig. 8) also projects upwards in the centre. The arched centre of the gilt sculptural altarpiece before which Saint Hubert celebrates Mass (Fig. 9) does so too. Such retables remained popular throughout Europe. Although simple, they were capable of great elaboration. The frame around the late fourteenth-century retable of the Virgin and Child, with narratives connected with the Immaculate Conception (Fig. 13), is not

original. It must have had a higher arched centre and is likely to have been of a Gothic character. Yet in essence the scheme is little different from the Margarito.

Some of the earliest images placed on altars were statues, and in Italy an alternative to the low horizontal retable was a vertical one with small-scale narratives flanking a large single full-length standing saint (Fig. 14) – a painted version of a standing statue. In

Fig. 13. Dalmatian School, *Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary*. c. 1400. Poplar, centre panel 73.5×45.5cm, painted surfaces of side panels, approximately 30×26.5cm (NG 4250). The narratives concern miracles associated with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and the story of the Virgin's conception and birth.





Fig. 14. Follower of Guido da Siena, *Saint Francis and Scenes from his Life*, c. 1280–90. Wood, 237×113cm. Siena, Pinacoteca.

Tuscany in the late thirteenth century very large vertical gabled altarpieces became popular, the subject was almost always a *Maesta* – that is, an image of the Virgin and Child enthroned in majesty. Famous examples were painted by Duccio, Giotto, Cimabue and their followers (Figs. 15 and 173).

Images were often protected by curtains. These were sometimes sumptuously decorated. So too were shutters which, north of the Alps, were usual on both large and small altarpieces. In Italy shutters seem to have been common only on small paintings (see No. 4 and Figs. 47 and 143). They not only protected an image but made its display a special event. In addition, they multiplied the opportunities for the representation of imagery, especially when the shutters were double and were decorated back and front. The original form of such altarpieces is seldom apparent today, but the marks of hinges may be seen, for example, on the frame of the early fifteenth-century Austrian *Trinity* (Fig. 16). Paintings made up of three distinct parts, like this *Trinity*, are



Fig. 15. Master of the Casole Fresco, *The Virgin and Child with Six Angels*, c. 1317. Transferred from wood, 188×165cm (NG 565).

known as triptychs. Sometimes the more elaborate altarpieces were furnished with shutters which could not in fact be moved, as seems to have been the case with the high altarpiece of the Abbey of Liesborn (No. 43). An alternative arrangement to the triptych which was popular for small images was the diptych – a painting consisting of two hinged parts which could open like a book – of which the Wilton Diptych (No. 10) is an example. There is evidence that these sometimes served as altarpieces.

The development of a more complex form – the polyptych, a painting of more than three distinct parts – seems in the North to have been greatly stimulated by the invention of elaborate architectural tabernacles for sculpture, such as that encasing the statue of Saint Peter above the altar in the painting of the Exhumation of

Fig. 16. Austrian School, *The Trinity with Christ Crucified*, c. 1410. Silver fir, painted surface 118.1×114.9cm (NG 3662). The top and sides of the frame are original; the bottom is a modern replacement.





LEFT Fig. 17. Detail of *The Exhumation of Saint Hubert* (Fig. 8). Damage caused by a split in the panel means that part of the figure of Christ is a modern reconstruction.



RIGHT Fig. 18. Angelo del Maino and Gaudenzio Ferrari, High Altarpiece, the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, Morbegno, 1516–26. Polychrome wood carving surrounding fresco.

Saint Hubert, a design which can be matched in surviving works (Fig. 17). Such combinations of sculpture and painting were not unusual, and in fifteenth-century Germany especially, massive altarpieces were erected which combined painting and sculpture into architectural structures which were triumphs of engineering.

Sculptured altarpieces, although very costly, were also popular: some in North Italy were made of marble, some in France of limestone. In England alabaster ones, framed in oak, were made (and exported), whereas in much of Germany and the Netherlands, in the Tyrol and Lombardy, large carved wooden altarpieces were favoured. Painting was involved not only because the carvings were gilded and coloured but because such altarpieces also had painted compartments, most commonly as shutters, but also sometimes as the central image (Fig. 18). The most expensive altarpieces would often involve work in gold. The fragments of paintings by the Netherlandish painter Simon Marmion, decorated with spires on one side and celestial scenes on the other (Figs. 19–23), were originally the highest parts of the pair of shutters for a precious metalwork sculpture on the high altar of the Abbey Church of St Bertin at St-Omer. Even when Netherlandish or other Northern European altarpieces were entirely painted, we are reminded of their relationship with sculpture by the simulated marble, alabaster or ivory images on the sides of the shutters visible when they are closed (No. 42).

In Italy the fashion for Gothic architectural forms, often transmitted by ornamental metalwork, must have stimulated the popularity of the polyptych with arches, wings, gables and pinnacles. The polyptych form, moreover, was well adapted to the cult of saints, each of which could be given a separate compartment, as in the great polyptychs painted by Ugolino and Sassetta (Nos. 5 and 19). The one by Sassetta is also double sided, a rare but important arrangement found in Italy. An altarpiece might be double sided because the clergy sat behind it in the choir. In Spain, however, the high altar was set against the east



TOP LEFT Fig. 19. Simon Marmion, *A Choir of Angels*, c. 1459. Oak, painted surface 57.5×20.5cm (NG 1303).

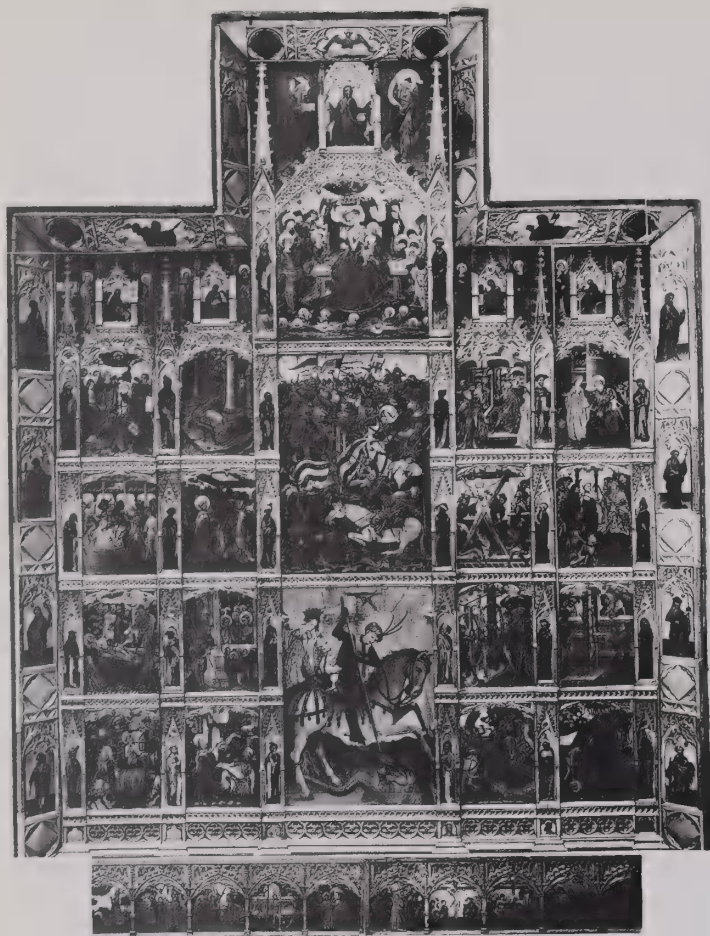
TOP RIGHT Fig. 20. Simon Marmion, *The Soul of Saint Bertin carried up to God*, c. 1459. Oak, painted surface 57.5×20.5cm (NG 1302).

BOTTOM LEFT Fig. 21. Reverse of Fig. 19.

BOTTOM RIGHT Fig. 22. Reverse of Fig. 20.



Fig. 23. TOP Simon Marmion, *The Life of Saint Bertin*, reconstruction of the St-Omer Altarpiece with shutters open, including panels at the Staatliche Museen, Berlin, painted surface each 56×147cm, and fragments in Figs. 19–22.
 BOTTOM Reconstruction with shutters closed.



ABOVE Fig. 24. Ascribed to Marzal de Sas, *Altarpiece of Saint George*, c. 1410–20. Pine, 660×550cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

BELOW Fig. 25. Filippino Lippi, *Man of Sorrows*, detail of centre of predella of altarpiece with the *Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Dominic* (NG 293). See also No. 48.



wall and so the altarpiece, which no longer had to be self-supporting, could spread out with a multiplicity of parts unequalled anywhere else in Europe (Fig. 24).

Altarpieces were generally supported by a plinth, or *predella* as it was known in Italy. The predella could be painted with saints (Fig. 13), or with an image of the dead Christ (Fig. 25) or some emblem of the Passion appropriate for the eucharistic sacraments placed on the altar immediately in front of it, although this does not seem to have been the practice in the Netherlands. In Germany the plinth of sculptural altarpieces, known as the *Sarg*, was often protected with shutters painted with eucharistic imagery. In Spain the part of the predella (or *banco* as it was known there) which was decorated in this way often incorporated a tabernacle for reserving the sacrament. This arrangement is also sometimes found in Italy (Fig. 26). In Italy, however, the predella came to be the chief place for narrative scenes during the fifteenth century. These scenes related to the figures immediately above in the main tier – episodes from the lives either of the Virgin and Child, or of the saints (as in Figs. 54 and 56 and Nos. 5, 15 and 65).

A factor which helped to modify the shape, if not the fundamental nature, of many altarpieces in Italy towards the mid-fifteenth century was the new taste for the antique. The fascination with reviving the forms and ornaments of ancient Roman buildings – the proportional system and harmonic schemes of Classical architecture as recorded both in ancient literature and in Roman remains – was first particularly evident in Florence. Altarpieces consisting chiefly of a single compartment known as

the *pala* had long existed in Italy, but in Florence these gradually became popular for types of altarpiece which had previously been compartmentalised. The taste for the antique encouraged the use of large rectangular or segmentally arched panels, with the frame surrounding the altarpiece rather than interpenetrating it as in the Gothic polyptych.

A painting such as Pesellino's altarpiece of the Trinity (Fig. 57) would have had just such a tabernacle frame – with columns or pilasters supporting a cornice in the style of Roman architecture, not unlike the imitation Renaissance frame it has today. Within this sort of scheme, however, some compartmentalisation could be retained (in this case, not unusually, the predella remained), and although the polyptych went out of fashion in Florence it remained popular elsewhere in Italy, with antique ornament easily substituted for Gothic.



Fig. 26. Ercole de' Roberti, *The Last Supper*, c. 1485. Wood, painted surface 30×21cm (NG 1127). The painting is likely to have served as the door of a sacrament tabernacle set in the centre of a predella.

CHRIST, THE VIRGIN MARY AND THE HEAVENLY HIERARCHY



By 1260 the two most popular religious images were the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ and the Crucified Christ, reflecting the two most significant aspects of Christian doctrine: Christ's Incarnation – in which God became man, at first in the form of a child; and Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. As has been pointed out, altars had to be furnished with a cross or crucifix. In addition, representations of the Crucified Christ and of the Virgin and Child often served as images for altarpieces. Both subjects were also frequently used as private devotional images.

Through much of this period, religious imagery remained constant with relatively little variation, whether a painting originated in Italy, Spain, Germany or the Netherlands. This began to change towards the end of the fifteenth century, as we shall see, when painters' preoccupations with the depiction of space and action introduced new pictorial possibilities which impinged on the meaning of the subjects they were portraying. At the very end of this century, licence in interpretation was accorded to a few great artists.

Narrative representations of Christ's Incarnation, or of his sacrifice, in depictions of the Nativity and the Crucifixion were common. However, these narrative religious images were not intended to be regarded merely as illustrations of a story; rather they were to act as reminders and embodiments of the most basic Christian doctrines. Other images in which narrative was subordinated to a direct evocation of, for example, the sufferings of Christ or the nature of the Virgin's perfections were also used to inspire the devotions of the worshipper.

Representations of the Crucifixion were generally of two distinct types, both of which included Christ on the cross with the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist (identified with John, Christ's 'beloved disciple' of the Gospels) standing beside it. In narrative treatments of this subject, incident and detail proliferated. Frequently Golgotha (the hill where Christ was crucified), the thieves who were crucified with him, the soldiers dicing for his clothes, Longinus with his lance, and other incidents from the Biblical narrative, and devotional literature, were included (Figs. 27 and 28). But the Crucifixion could also be represented with no other indication of the setting or narrative, and with Mary and John often flanked by saints who play no part in the Gospels but were included because of their importance to the patrons commissioning the image (Nos. 43 and 61). Many crucifixes were



painted panels in the shape of a cross and these often incorporated Mary and John together with other figures and symbols in subordinate areas (Fig. 29). Sometimes the Crucified Christ was represented with God the Father and the Holy Ghost, or Spirit (in the form of a Dove), as in the type of image known as the Throne of Mercy (*Gnadenstuhl*) (Fig. 16) which occurred both in large painted altarpieces and in small devotional images north of the Alps. Similar symbolic representations of the Trinity (the Father, Son and Holy Ghost) are also found in Italian altarpieces, both as the main subject (Fig. 57) and in the crowning panels of polyptychs (No. 9).

Other episodes from the Crucifixion narrative came to be given prominence, sometimes even to be the main subjects of altarpieces, in particular the Descent from the Cross (No. 62), the Lamentation over Christ's Body, and the Dead Christ supported in the Tomb (No. 44a and Fig. 30). The subject known as the *Pietà*, in which the Virgin holds the body of Christ on her lap, was one which translated particularly well to small devotional images (see Fig. 83), and was common in Northern Europe. All these subjects were frequently included in altarpieces made in north-east Italy in the fifteenth century, where they formed a separate rectangular or lunette-shaped compartment at the top.

ABOVE Fig. 27. Master of Delft, *Scenes from the Passion*, c. 1500. Oak, painted surfaces, centre panel 98×105.5cm, shutters 102.5×49.5cm (NG 2922). The frame is modern.

RIGHT Fig. 28. Jacopo di Cione (and Workshop), *The Crucifixion*, c. 1368. Poplar, 154×138.5cm (NG 1468).

There was evidently also a great demand for images of Christ which did not show him suffering on the cross, but recalled his sufferings and sacrifice by other, symbolic means: thus Christ was represented as the Man of Sorrows, usually at half-length, with the wounds received on the cross prominently displayed and wearing the crown of thorns; some or all of the 'instruments of the Passion', the nails, the lance and so on, might also be included. In one painting in the National Gallery the Virgin places her finger upon the wound in his side: some of the instruments of the Passion are on the reverse (Figs. 31 and 32).

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, paintings depicting only the head of Christ crowned with thorns were popular, often forming a diptych in combination with a depiction of the suffering Virgin Mary (Figs. 33 and 34). These images (see No. 12) were in part inspired by the image of Christ which had miraculously appeared on the handkerchief of Saint Veronica (the *sudarium*) after she had used it to wipe the sweat from Christ's face





ABOVE LEFT Fig. 29. Master of Saint Francis, *Crucifix*, c. 1280. Poplar, 92.1×71cm (NG 6361).

ABOVE RIGHT Fig. 30. Carlo Crivelli, *The Dead Christ*, c. 1475. Poplar, painted surface 72.5×55.5cm (NG 602).

RIGHT Fig. 31. Florentine School, *The Dead Christ and the Virgin*, second half of the fourteenth century. Wood, painted surface 58.5×38.5cm (NG 3895).

FAR RIGHT Fig. 32. *Instruments of the Passion*. Reverse of Fig. 31.

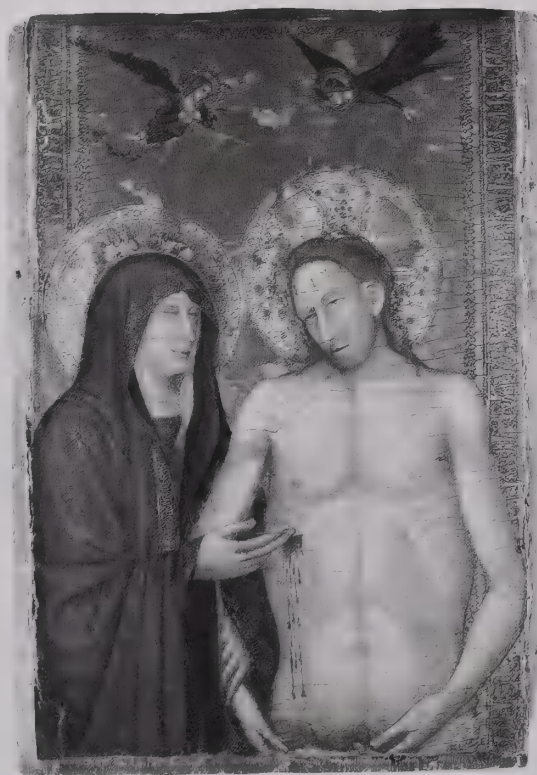




Fig. 33. Workshop of Dieric Bouts, 'Mater Dolorosa', last quarter of the fifteenth century(?). Oak, painted surface 36.5×27.5cm (NG 711).

when she saw him carrying the cross on the way to Calvary. This handkerchief was preserved as a relic in a church in Rome. These paintings also drew on the imagery of the Man of Sorrows, which derived from the miracle of the Mass of Saint Gregory, when the figure of the Redeemer appeared to Pope Gregory (compiler of the liturgy of the Mass; died 604) while he was celebrating Mass (Fig. 35). The image of the bleeding Christ which appeared to him was believed to be recorded in a painting in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, and many versions of it were therefore made, among them Fig. 36. Popular religious texts exhorted the pious to share Christ's sufferings. Such images were particularly suitable for private devotions. They were also found on tabernacles and on the predellas of large altarpieces.

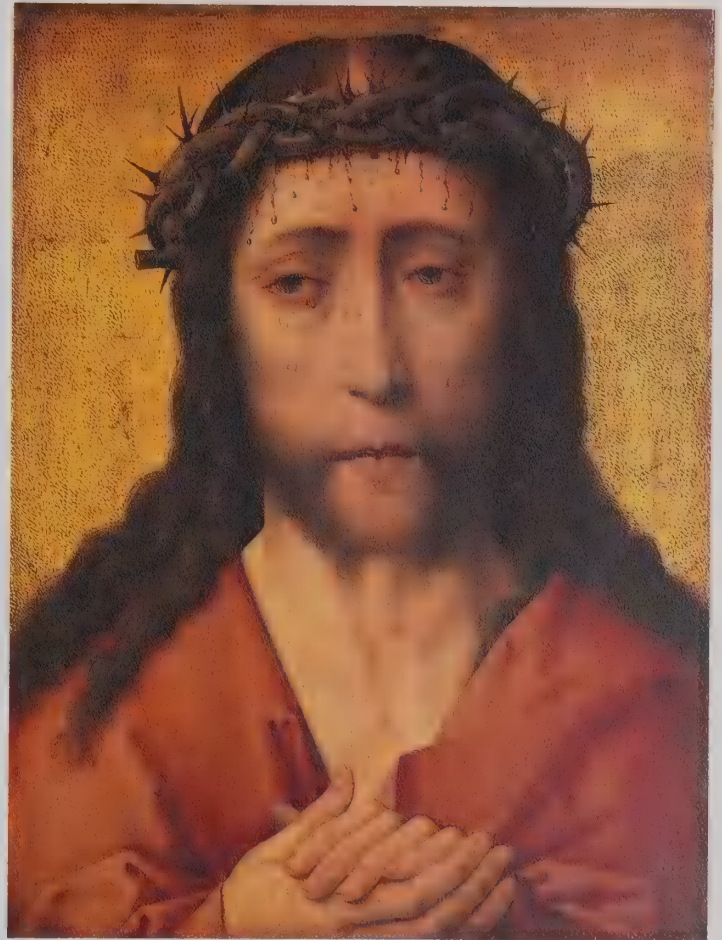


Fig. 34. Workshop of Dieric Bouts, *Christ crowned with Thorns*, last quarter of the fifteenth century(?). Oak, painted surface 36.5×27.5cm (NG 712).

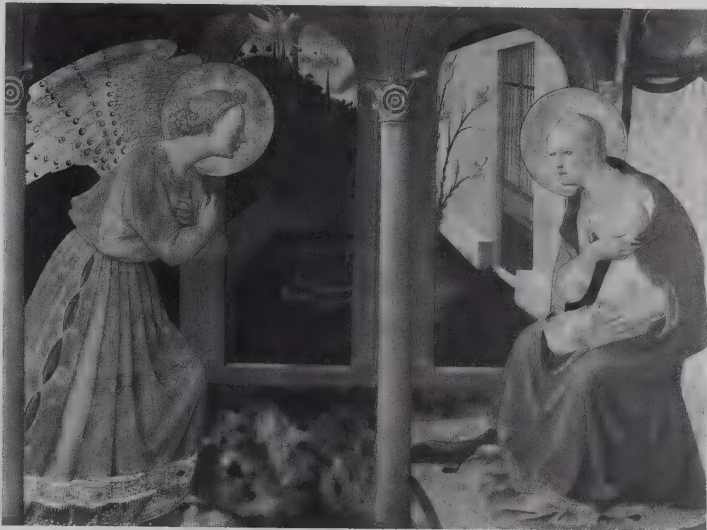
Throughout the period surveyed here the cult of the Virgin Mary flourished: churches were dedicated to her and devotions made to her all over Europe. She was depicted at half-length holding the infant Christ in the manner popularised in icons (images) from Constantinople (Byzantium) or painted in the Byzantine style, many of which were still venerated in Western European churches, as well as in narratives of particular episodes in her life. Sometimes altarpieces with compartments for narrative scenes were devoted to the Life of the Virgin (No. 3) as others were to the Life or Passion of Christ.

One of the most significant episodes from the Virgin's life was the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive the Son of God. It was often the principal



ABOVE Fig. 36. Venetian School, *The Dead Christ*, second half of the fourteenth century. Poplar, painted surface 52.5×30cm (NG 3893).

LEFT Fig. 35. Master of the Aachen Altarpiece, *Mass of Saint Gregory* (left-hand outside shutter of the Aachen Altarpiece), c. 1500. Wood, 109.1×54.2cm. Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery.



ABOVE Fig. 37. Follower of Fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, c. 1450. Wood, 103.5×142cm (NG 1406).

RIGHT Fig. 38. Giovanni del Ponte, *The Angel Gabriel*, early fifteenth century. Pinnacle panel from an altarpiece, painted surface 42.5×24cm, with the frame (original but regilded) 68×34cm (NG 580A).



FAR RIGHT Fig. 39. Giovanni del Ponte, *Virgin Annunciate*, early fifteenth century. Pinnacle panel from an altarpiece, painted surface 42.5×24cm, with the frame (original but regilded) 68×34cm (NG 580A).



subject of an altarpiece (Fig. 37), tabernacle or small devotional picture. But more frequently it was found on subordinate parts of altarpieces. Since the subject involved two figures, it was not inappropriate to divide it in two, and as the representation of the very moment of the Incarnation, it formed a suitable prelude to the major religious image of the altarpiece which it covered or framed. Thus the Annunciation was often depicted on the outside of the shutters of altarpieces in Northern Europe, and in the spandrels of arches or in separate pinnacle panels (Figs. 38 and 39), as well as in the predellas, of Italian ones.

A subject frequently favoured for the main part of an altarpiece was the Nativity, in which the Virgin was often shown kneeling in adoration before her new-born child in front of the stable where he was born, with Joseph, the ox and ass and sometimes the shepherds looking on (No. 36). This subject is close to and often confused with the Adoration of the Shepherds – also a



Fig. 40. Robert Campin, *Virgin and Child in an Interior*, first quarter of the fifteenth century(?). Oak, painted surface 18.7x11.6cm (NG 6514). The frame is original.

popular theme, although less so than the Adoration of the Kings, which is found in many domestic devotional paintings (No. 38 and Figs. 75, 89, 236) as well as in altarpieces (Fig. 96).

In the Netherlands in the early fifteenth century some images of the Virgin associated with Robert Campin (Fig. 40 and No. 13) showed her with her Child in domestic settings, as though an episode from the early life of Christ. These images emphasise both the humble and the extraordinarily exalted task of the Virgin as the mother of Christ. She is sometimes represented seated on the ground (Nos. 7 and 57), a type of painting known as the Virgin of Humility and first found in the early fourteenth century. In a painting of this type by Lippo di Dalmasio (Fig. 41) the Virgin is shown according to the description in the Book of Revelations of a woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet and her head surrounded with twelve stars.

The Virgin could also be represented in Heaven enthroned in majesty and crowned, as in Italian altarpieces of the *Maestà*, to

which reference has already been made (see p. 30). Her throne in these works is surrounded by angels. She could be shown in the act of ascending bodily to Heaven (the Assumption) or in the act of being crowned.

Her exalted position was commonly conveyed by seating her on a sumptuous throne made of precious marble, with some sort of canopy or arch above and behind it – either architectural or consisting of textiles or both. The cloth of gold and the oriental rug exactly described in paintings by Dieric Bouts and Gentile Bellini (Figs. 42 and 43) were commodities available relatively recently on the luxury market, with a value well known to those who prayed before these images. Costly textiles acquired for secular display were bequeathed for use on or at the altar as frontals or as priestly robes. In Bellini's painting, though not in that by Bouts, the Virgin is shown crowned. A number of small devo-



Fig. 41. Lippo di Dalmasio, *The Madonna of Humility*, end of the fourteenth century. Canvas, 110x87cm (NG 752).



Fig. 42. Dieric Bouts, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Peter and Paul*, c. 1460. Oak, painted surface 68.5×51.5cm (NG 774).

tional images of the Virgin enthroned from the fifteenth century, particularly those painted in the Netherlands influenced by Jan van Eyck, show angels hovering over her head with a crown (No. 52); this motif is also found in the small painting of the Virgin and Child perhaps by Antonello da Messina (Fig. 44).

The Assumption of the Virgin was frequently represented in altarpieces – sometimes in association with the Coronation. Some representations of this event include the Virgin's girdle being lowered to Saint Thomas (Fig. 45), who doubted that she had really gone to Heaven, just as he had earlier doubted that Christ had risen from the dead. This incident was especially popular in Tuscany for the girdle was preserved in the cathedral of Prato.

Unlike the Annunciation, the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin are not mentioned in any Gospel, but in the Apocryphal lives of the Virgin. The Coronation, which first became a prominent subject on carved cathedral portals in thirteenth-century France, was widespread in art throughout Christian Europe, well in advance of any theological consensus on the fact of the Virgin Mary's bodily assumption into Heaven which it presupposes. There was considerable variation in the manner in which the Coronation was represented (Figs. 46, 47, 172 and Nos. 9, 11). The Trinity could preside, and it was usual in



Fig. 43. Gentile Bellini *The Virgin and Child Enthroned*, c. 1470. Signed. Wood, painted surface 122×82.5cm (NG 3911).

paintings of this subject made north of the Alps for God the Father to hold the crown together with Christ. Sometimes Mary kneels to be crowned, and sometimes, although enthroned, she is seated at a slightly lower level than Christ.

It is clear that zeal to promote the status of the Virgin Mary was accompanied by some anxieties as to the theological implications of this. Such anxieties were more marked over the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which held that the Virgin was entirely untainted by Original Sin. This doctrine was fervently advocated



ABOVE Fig. 44. Antonello da Messina, *The Virgin and Child*, c. 1470–80. Wood, painted surface 43×34.5cm (NG 2618).



RIGHT Fig. 45. Matteo di Giovanni, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1474. Wood, 331×173cm (NG 1155).

FAR RIGHT Fig. 46. Master of Capenberg (Jan Baegert), *The Coronation of the Virgin*, first quarter of the sixteenth century. Oak, painted surface 97.2×70.5cm (NG 263).





by the Franciscans, who commissioned altarpieces in support of it, but contested by the Dominicans. At the end of the fifteenth century these altarpieces generally included Old Testament prophets holding inscriptions which were thought to allude to the doctrine. Earlier, they merely included, beside the Virgin, narratives of associated miracles (Fig. 13).

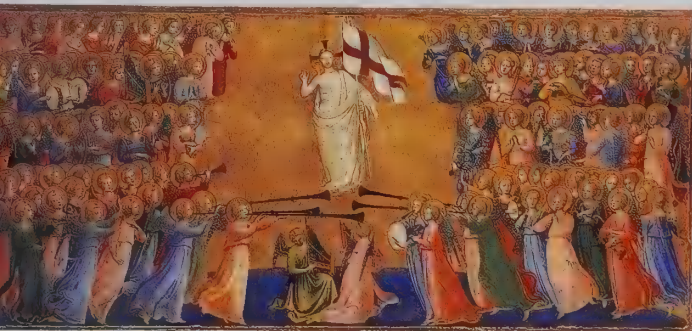
In many paintings of the Coronation of the Virgin, particularly large ones, and in some paintings of the Assumption, Heaven is shown populated by throngs of saints, prophets and angels, frequently arranged in a hierarchy reflecting their importance. Occasionally other subjects also called for the representation of the Court of Heaven, such as Fra Angelico's predella of Christ in Glory (Figs. 48 and 49). Here the Virgin Mary and Saints Peter and Paul are placed in the top row nearest to the angels on Christ's right-hand side. The other Apostles follow, with Popes who had been made saints singled out for inclusion in the highest placed ranks, along with the Fathers of the Church such as Saints Jerome and Augustine. On Christ's left-hand side, beyond the rows of angels nearest him, are ranked the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ, including Saint John the



TOP LEFT Fig. 47. Giusto de' Menabuoi, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, with the *Annunciation*, *Nativity* and *Crucifixion* in the shutters. Signed and dated 1367. Poplar, central panel 48×25cm (NG 701). The frame is modern.

ABOVE Fig. 48. Fra Angelico, *Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven*, before 1435. Wood, centre panel 32×73cm, inner left and right panels 32×63.5cm, outer panels 32×22cm (NG 663).

TOP Fig. 49. Panels from Fig. 48.



Baptist and King David, and the martyr saints holding the palms symbolic of their martyred status, male martyrs ranked neatly above female ones.

Angels were divided into three hierarchies, each further subdivided into three, forming a total of nine choirs, following the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite, who was believed to have been instructed by Saint Paul. While Fra Angelico did not follow the convention of the three hierarchies, he still divided his angels

into two groups of four to either side of God, with a ninth in front. Not all paintings had room for such a complete depiction of the heavenly hierarchy: that shown by Matteo di Giovanni (Fig. 45) is much abbreviated. The fuller representations of Heaven are generally found only in large mural paintings, but in Botticini's *Assumption of the Virgin* (Figs. 50 and 99), a painting of unusual size (and especially unusual width), the nine choirs are clearly grouped into three hierarchies. Moreover, each one forms



a circle – as in *Il Paradiso*, the third part of Dante's great fourteenth-century poem the *Divina Commedia* – a remarkable feat of perspective hard to imagine in a painting before the fifteenth century.

The three choirs nearest to God consist of the angelic councilors – Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones. These are often represented as heads or busts only, but with four, six or eight wings. The next three choirs consist of the angelic governors – Dominions, Virtues and Powers. Then follow the angelic ministers – Principalities, Archangels and Angels. Botticini has distinguished each choir by colour and by attributes (sceptres, jars, arrows, candles and so on).

What is unorthodox about Botticini's painting is the way that the angels are interspersed with saints and ancestors of Christ, who had been kept distinct by Fra Angelico and Matteo di Giovanni. One of the two donors in the painting, Matteo Palmieri, who kneels on the left, wrote a poem in imitation of Dante in

Fig. 50. Ascribed to Francesco Botticini, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, c. 1475. Wood, 228.5×377cm (NG 1126).

which he developed the heretical theory that the souls of mortals were in origin angels who had remained neutral at the time of Lucifer's rebellion. This theory may be reflected in the painting, if the saints and ancestors are not just taking up their places in Heaven but are returning to their position among the angels with whom they had once been numbered.

The heads of the Cherubim, Seraphim and Thrones could be red or blue, or an attempt was made to render them as transparent and as part of the celestial light around God, as in the painting by Marmion (Fig. 20). Such an attempt to make angels embodiments of light suggests the metaphorical way in which heavenly beings were described in devotional literature.

In Italian paintings the Cherubim were generally infantile and child angels also became popular (No. 30), sometimes nude or



Fig. 51. Ambrogio Bergognone, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Siena*, c. 1490. Poplar, 187.5×129.5cm (NG 298). The haloes are inscribed with the names of Catherine of Alexandria and Catherine of Siena and with a prayer to the Virgin.

nearly nude and obviously of the male sex. They appeared first in Italy and were partially inspired by the cupids and genii of ancient art. They were not suggested by theologians, but seem not to have excited their censure. The dress of Italian angels in the fifteenth century could also be influenced by the draperies of female personifications – Victories especially – and nymphs in antique sculpture (Nos. 27, 36, 56), whereas throughout the century angels in paintings north of the Alps wore long gowns covering their feet (Figs. 19, 21 and No. 52). The similarities are, however, as remarkable as the differences. Wherever they were painted, angels tended to be equipped with musical instruments of the most modern kind.

The saints, whether represented in Heaven or on earth, are distinguished by haloes – round discs or glories (radiant gold lines) presumably indicators of heavenly light emanating from their heads – which were also given to all persons of the Trinity, to the prophets and to angels. In the early part of our period the halo was invariably represented parallel with the plane of the picture as a gilded disc behind the head. During the fifteenth century they were sometimes represented (especially in Italy) as if they were flat discs of metal above rather than behind the head, foreshortened and occasionally reflecting the top of the head, and sometimes only by an inconspicuous single gold line. In the Netherlands they were frequently omitted. Christ's halo is often distinguished by having a cross within it. That of the Virgin Mary sometimes includes a few words of prayer to her, taking up the words with which she was greeted by the Archangel Gabriel, 'Ave Maria Gratia(e) Plena', 'Hail Mary, full of Grace' (as in No. 15). The names of saints are sometimes inscribed in their haloes as in an altarpiece by Bergognone (Fig. 51) and in that by the Master of Liesborn, although this is no longer clear (No. 43). Names are also found written on a frieze below, especially when, as in Botticini's altarpiece, the saints are somewhat obscure (Fig. 56).

In Italy, the beatified (blessed) men and women who were recognised as of exceptional holiness, but who had not, or not yet, been canonised, were distinguished from saints by having glories as distinct from haloes. Artists often promoted the cause of the beatified by showing them in the company of saints, sometimes even giving them haloes. In the far left and right compartments of his predella (Fig. 48) Fra Angelico included groups of his fellow Dominicans who had been beatified. Not all of them were easily identified by their attributes and their names were neatly written on, probably after Fra Angelico's death.

SAINTS, PROTECTORS AND PATRONS



For the most part, saints in religious paintings are recognisable by their attributes. These are usually the instrument by which they were martyred or an object which played a significant role in their legend. In addition, a martyr was frequently represented holding a palm. Thus Saint Paul is shown with the sword with which he was executed, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria with the wheel on which she was tortured. Saint Peter is shown with the keys to Heaven and Hell, Saint Mary Magdalene with the pot of ointment with which she anointed the feet of Christ, and Saint Jerome with the lion which in legendary accounts of his life



Fig. 52. Workshop of Gerard David, *Saint Jerome in a Landscape*, c. 1480–1500. Oak, painted surface 35×23cm (NG 2596).

became his faithful companion after he had removed a thorn from its foot. The four Evangelists have their own particular attributes: Saint Mark a lion, Saint Luke an ox, Saint Matthew an angel, and Saint John an eagle. Saint John is also very frequently shown with a serpent in a chalice, referring to his feat of drinking from a poisoned cup without harm; and Saint Luke, the patron saint of painters, is sometimes shown painting a picture of the Virgin (Figs. 178 and 179), who appears to him for the purpose.

Some saints were represented with more than one attribute and the same saint may, in addition, take on a different aspect, according to the context. Saint Jerome is shown either dressed as a cardinal or as a hermit (although his lion accompanies him in the former case and in the latter a cardinal's hat will often be seen by his side). He never was a cardinal (the office did not exist in his time and he refused all rank), but he was retrospectively



Fig. 53. Cima da Conegliano, *Saint Jerome in a Landscape*, c. 1500–10. Wood painted surface 32×25.5cm (NG 1120).

honoured because of his authority as one of the four Latin 'Fathers' or 'Doctors' of his Church – the others (Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory) were all bishops, and one (Gregory) also a pope. These men through their writings supported the Church and illuminated its doctrines – hence the emblematical church with light shining from it that Jerome, like the other Fathers, sometimes holds. In some small devotional paintings he is shown in his study as the translator of the Bible into Latin (No. 41), an inspiration to scholars; in others he is depicted as a penitent in the wilderness, beating his bared breast with a stone as he contemplates the Crucifixion (Figs. 52 and 53). Some saints are shown dressed in a special manner or in colours particular to them: Saint John the Baptist, for example, is usually easily recognisable from the animal skin he wears, as well as from his long, unkempt hair; in Italian paintings Saint Peter wears yellow

and blue and, in Netherlandish paintings, Saint John the Evangelist wears red.

Saints Peter and Paul, chief among the Apostles, are found on altarpieces all over Europe: flanking Christ in the Westminster Retable (Fig. 12), beside the Baptism of Christ in the altarpiece ascribed to Niccolò di Pietro Gerini (Fig. 54), flanking the Virgin and Child in the painting by Bouts (Fig. 42), in a gilded triptych represented in one of the panels of the Life of Saint Francis by Sas-

setta (No. 19 and Fig. 55), and on either side of God the Father in a gilt triptych represented in the *Mass of Saint Hubert* (Fig. 9).

Some lesser saints enjoyed still greater popularity – Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Roch (or Rocco) and Saint Sebastian, for instance, were venerated as protectors against the plague, and Saint Christopher then as now was widely prayed to by travellers. But many saints were venerated only in one area, or perhaps venerated there in a special way. Saint Hubert (Fig. 7) is not a

Fig. 54. Ascribed to Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, *The Baptism of Christ, with Saints Peter and Paul*, 1387. Wood, 237.5×200cm (NG 579).





Fig. 55. Sassetta, *The Funeral of Saint Francis and the Verification of the Stigmata*, completed 1444. Wood, 88×53cm (NG 4763). See No. 19.

saint commonly met with in Italian altarpieces, but he was much venerated in the Netherlands where, as we have seen, his body was preserved. Likewise Saint Donatian, a fourth-century Bishop of Reims, was chiefly venerated at Bruges where his relics were transferred in the ninth century (Fig. 58).

Saints were most commonly represented in altarpieces standing beside the crucified Christ or beside the Virgin and Child enthroned. A saint could also, however, be the central subject of an altarpiece, either in isolation or as part of a narrative. Veneration for Saint John the Baptist might occasion an altarpiece of the Baptism of Christ (Fig. 54), and in a chapel dedicated to Saint Thomas one might find an altarpiece painted with him placing his hand on the wound in the side of the risen Christ (Fig. 72).

The presence of a relic in a church would often of course deter-

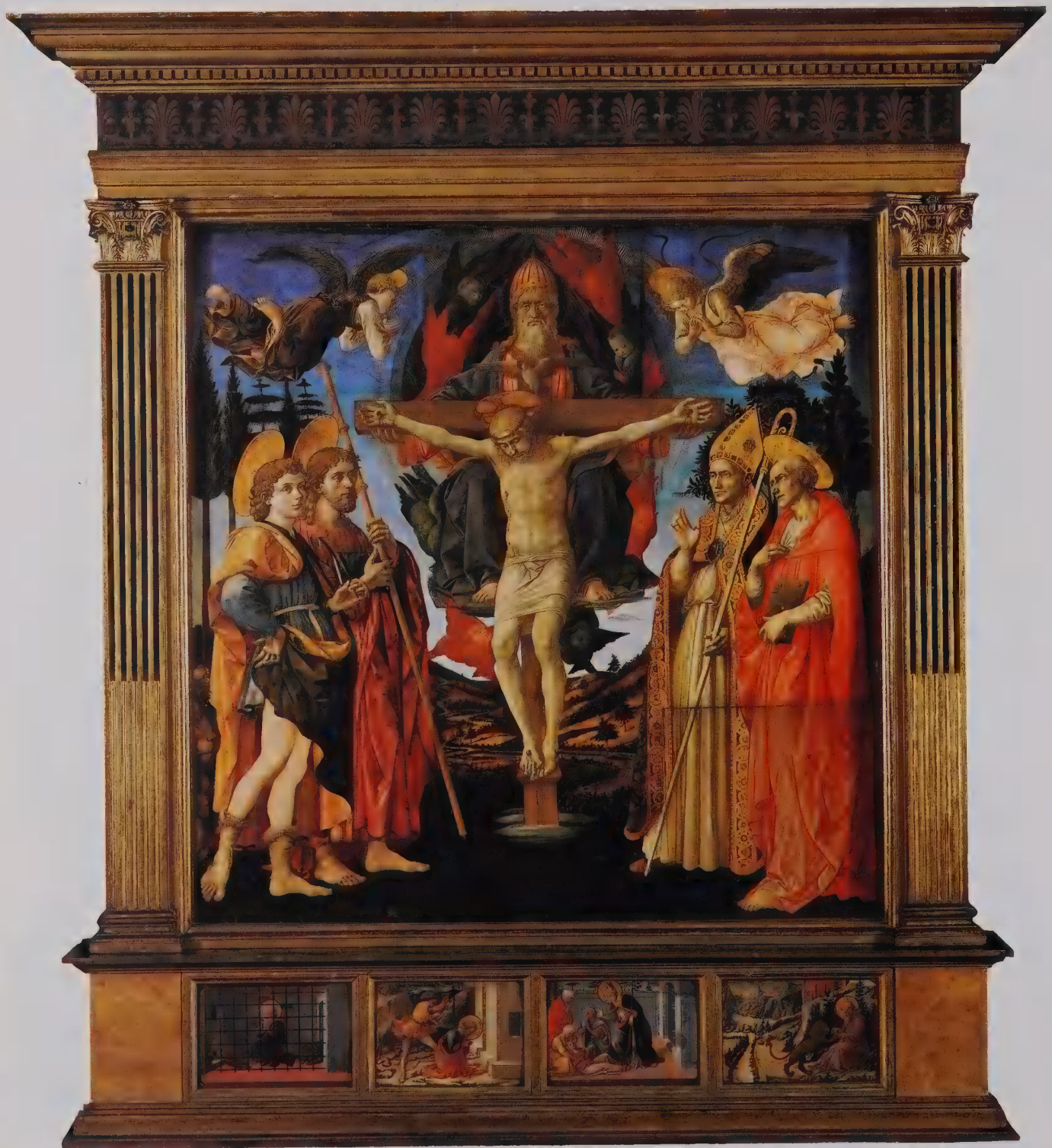
mine the presence of the saint in the altarpiece. Thus the fact that Saint Matthias's remains were preserved in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome explains the presence of this saint in the altarpiece there by Masaccio and Masolino (No. 16). A relic could also suggest the subject of the altarpiece. The arm bone of Saint Sebastian was preserved in the oratory of that saint in the church of the SS Annunziata in Florence, and a reliquary for it was commissioned from Benedetto da Maiano shortly after the great altarpiece was commissioned from the Pollaiuoli (No. 40).

If the popularity of Saint Sebastian was largely owing to his powers as a protector against the plague, that of Saint Jerome was chiefly because he was the exemplar of all penitents. His popularity was reflected in the prevalence of the name of Jerome – Girolamo in Italian. Girolamo di Piero di Cardinale Rucellai, a member of the powerful Florentine family, chose to be buried in the church of the Hieronymites, the Hermits of Saint Jerome of Fiesole, near the original location of the altarpiece by Botticini (Fig. 56). His decision must have been connected with his name. He is likely to have commissioned the painting when he acquired the burial rights in the church – well in advance of his death perhaps, as would not have been unusual. He probably also paid for the tabernacle in the church (Fig. 4). The Hermits had adopted a grey habit with a leather belt in 1460, and this is worn by the saints in the altarpiece flanking the central image of the penitent Jerome, whose life was the inspiration of the Order: Saint Damasus was the Pope who instructed Jerome to translate the Bible; Saint Eusebius of Cremona was a friend and fellow polemicist; Saint Paola was the abbess of a nunnery which Jerome founded in Bethlehem; and Saint Eustochium was her daughter and successor, and also a pupil of Jerome.

In this case we can conclude that Jerome was the subject of Botticini's altarpiece both because he was the patron saint of the religious Order in whose church it was placed and because he was the name saint of the patron. It is exceedingly rare for us to know how decisions were reached concerning which saints were to be included in an altarpiece. However, the records of the deliberations of the company of the Priests of the Trinity at Pistoia when they commissioned an altarpiece from Pesellino (Fig. 57) on 10 September 1455 happen to have survived. They wanted the painting to represent the Trinity which they honoured; they wanted it to include Saint Zeno, who was patron of the clergy of Pistoia, and Saint James the Great, who was patron of Pistoia, and Saint Jerome. They agreed also to include the juvenile martyr Saint Mamas, who stands to the extreme left of the painting with a pack of lions behind him. (In the predella below we see the lions



Fig. 56. Francesco Botticini, *Saint Jerome in Penitence with Saints and Donors*, c. 1490. Wood, 235×258cm, including the original frame (NG 227).



LEFT Fig. 57. Pesellino, *The Trinity with Saints*, commissioned 1455; completed 1460 in the studio of Fra Filippo Lippi after Pesellino's death in 1457. Wood, main panel 184×181.5cm (NG 727, 3162, 3230, 4428, 4868A-D; one fragment on loan from Her Majesty The Queen). The frame and the part of the painting to bottom right are modern reconstructions.

RIGHT Fig. 58. Gerard David, *Canon Bernardinus de Salviatis and Three Saints*, c. 1501. Oak, painted surface 103×94.5cm (NG 1045). Saint Donatian is the saint to the right.



released into his cell but amiably licking him instead of devouring him.) Without the documents it would be hard to identify this very obscure saint. He was included at the special request of the company's treasurer Piero ser Landi, the driving force behind the commission and, it seems, the major contributor to its cost. But when the painting was nearly completed, it became clear that the treasurer was in fact guilty of fraud, and he was disgraced. The presence of his personal saint in the altarpiece must have been a cause of considerable irritation to the rest of the company.

Personal saints were most commonly name saints, and that presumably is why both Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist appear in the shutters of the altarpiece by Memlinc, the former pointing towards Sir John Donne, who kneels before the Virgin and Child in the central panel (No. 42). Canon Bernardino Salviati (Bernardinus de Salviatis), who kneels in one

shutter of an altarpiece by Gerard David, has three saints standing behind him, Martin, Bernardino and Donatian – all seem solicitous for his welfare but it is his name saint whose hand hovers above his shoulder (Fig. 58). The Canon's father, who belonged to one of the leading Florentine mercantile families, may well have attended open-air sermons given by Saint Bernardino, a Franciscan preacher from Siena who became Vicar General of his Order. He was known as the Apostle of Italy and encouraged devotion to the Holy Name (the letters IHS, an abbreviation of the Greek for Jesus, appear on the book he holds in the painting). He died in 1444 and was canonised in 1450, about the date that Bernardino Salviati was born.

Sir John Donne and Canon Bernardino are the same size as the saints in these altarpieces. This was usual in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century and by then common in Italy as well,



Fig. 59. Carlo Crivelli, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Francis and Sebastian*. Signed and dated 1491. Poplar, painted surface 175×151cm (NG 807).



Fig. 60. Detail of Fig. 59 showing the donatrix Oradea, widow of Giovanni Becchetti.

although the older convention of diminutive portraiture did persist there. Oradea, widow of Giovanni Becchetti, for instance, appears as a small figure by the feet of Saint Francis in one of Crivelli's altarpieces (Figs. 59 and 60). In Germany these portrait figures remain smaller in scale throughout the fifteenth century (Fig. 67). Such portraits are generally called donor portraits. However, altarpieces were not always given to the Church (although this does seem to have been the case with Canon Bernardino's) and it was as common for them to be erected in private burial chapels, perpetuating the memory of an individual for whose soul in Purgatory prayers should be offered and Masses said. Monumental effigies of the deceased were often placed in the same chapels. Like the painted portraits, they were generally commissioned in the lifetime of the person represented, and generally showed him or her in an attitude of prayer.

ORDERS, CONFRATERNITIES AND THEIR SAINTS



The founders of the great religious Orders were of course their patron saints, who were usually included in altarpieces erected in the churches and chapels of their Orders. As has been mentioned, the oldest monastic Order was the Benedictine. The central panel of the high altar of the Benedictine monastery church at Liesborn (No. 43) shows Christ upon the cross. On either side of the cross stand the Virgin Mary and Saint John; beside the former are Saints Cosmas and Damian, to whom the monastery was dedicated, and beside the latter Saint Benedict, founder of the Order, and his sister Saint Scholastica, both of whom wear the black Benedictine habit (Fig. 61).

Among the Orders of the tenth and eleventh century which revived the ideal of the hermit's solitary meditation and penance were the Camaldolites in Italy. The painter Lorenzo Monaco (literally Lorenzo the Monk) took his vows (and his name) in 1391 at the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence. His large altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin (No. 11) was probably made for the Camaldolese monastery of San Benedetto fuori della Porta a Pinti, just outside Florence; it closely resembles one which he made for his own monastery, Santa Maria degli Angeli itself (Fig. 62). The most prominent figure among the saints in the right-hand side of the altarpiece is Saint Romuald, the founder of the Order (died 1027), wearing a white habit, but in an equivalent position on the other side of the altarpiece is Saint Benedict. The Camaldolites, as reformed



ABOVE Fig. 61. Master of Liesborn, *Saints John the Evangelist, Scholastica and Benedict*, c. 1465–1490. A fragment transferred from oak, 55.9×70.8cm (NG 260). See No. 43.

Benedictines, regarded Benedict as the real founder of their Order and in their imagery gave him their white habit rather than his usual black one. The same pair of saints flank the predella of the altarpiece of the Baptism of Christ by Niccolò di Pietro Gerini (Fig. 54).

Chief among the mendicant Orders (see p. 20) were the Franciscans and Dominicans. A Franciscan altarpiece of course usually includes Saint Francis himself, as for instance the altarpiece by Crivelli (Fig. 59) from San Francesco, the Franciscan church of Fabriano, and the triptych of the Crucifixion by Niccolò di Liberatore (Fig. 63), probably made for the Franciscan nuns of Santa Chiara (Saint Clare) at L'Aquila, in which Saint Francis fervently embraces the foot of the cross. A Dominican altarpiece will usually include Saint Dominic. A small dossal, probably associated with Santa Maria Novella, Florence, also includes the two major Dominican saints, the great theologian Thomas Aquinas and Peter Martyr (Fig. 64).



RIGHT Fig. 62. Lorenzo Monaco, *The Coronation of the Virgin*. Signed and dated 1414. Wood, 512×450cm. Florence, Uffizi.



LEFT Fig. 63. Niccolò di Liberatore, *Christ on the Cross and Other Scenes*. Signed and dated 1487. Wood, painted surface, central panel, 92.1×57.8cm (NG 1107). The frame is original.

BELOW Fig. 64. Ascribed to Andrea di Bonaiuto da Firenze, *The Virgin and Child with Ten Saints*, c. 1367. Wood, 28×106cm (NG 5115).



The Orders of Friars came to be rivals and were bitterly divided over some matters, above all the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, Saint Francis is included with Saint Dominic in some Dominican altarpieces (Fig. 71 and No. 46a). He is also conspicuous among the hosts of saints in the predella which the Dominican artist Fra Angelico painted for his own convent of San Domenico at Fiesole (Fig. 49). Nor, in the early 1470s, did Francesco Sassetti, who owned the rights of patronage in the Cappella Maggiore of the chief Dominican church in Florence, Santa Maria Novella, regard it as absurd to propose that it be decorated with murals of the life of his name saint, Saint Francis. But unsurprisingly perhaps the Dominicans refused.

Sometimes Saint Francis himself was the main subject of an altarpiece (Fig. 14). He might be shown displaying or receiving the stigmata (see No. 19) – the five wounds which Christ received on the cross from the nails in his hands and feet and from the spear wound in his side. These were miraculously impressed upon Saint Francis's body as he prayed, and indicated how closely identified he was with Christ. Saint Dominic and other Dominican saints, such as Saint Peter Martyr, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Vincent Ferrer, could also be the subjects of altarpieces. Vincent Ferrer, who died in 1418, had been one of the greatest preachers in Europe, converting Jews, Moors and heretics in France and Spain, and preparing Christians all over Europe for the Second Coming. He was canonised on 29 June 1455 and again – with more publicity – in 1458. Cossa's altarpiece, made for a new chapel in Bologna, depicting him in full authority with his halo, is an early response to this (No. 35). Some of those who prayed before this painting may have remembered what Saint Vincent looked like. The Franciscans were even prompter in promoting Saint Bernardino, who was canonised a mere twelve years after his death; many representations of him correspond with his death mask and may be considered as portraits (Fig. 58).

Painters could play a part in the promotion of the beatified to the status of saints, and of venerated holy men to the status of the beatified. The Blessed Raniero was a lay brother of the Franciscan Order, and when he died in 1304 his body was embalmed and placed beneath the high altar of San Francesco in Sansepolcro. Over a century later Sassetta was commissioned to paint a large altarpiece (No. 19) for this high altar. The principal panels on the back depicted Saint Francis, that on the front the Virgin and Child. Raniero featured prominently in the altarpiece and is given a glory (although he was not beatified until 1802); episodes of his life were depicted in the predella.



Fig. 65. Carlo Crivelli, *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele*, c. 1489. Signed. Poplar, painted surface 141×87cm (NG 668).

A similar promotion is associated with Crivelli's painting of the Franciscan friar, the Blessed Gabriele (Fig. 65), superior of the Convent of San Francesco ad Alto, Ancona, who died in 1456. Pope Innocent VIII permitted the transfer of his body from its humble friar's grave to a marble tomb in the convent church in 1489 and this tomb was treated as a shrine, with Crivelli's painting, which was made in the same year, hanging above it.



Fig. 66. Master of Delft, *Scenes from the Passion*, c. 1500 (Fig. 27). Detail from the *Crucifixion* showing the donor.

Gabriele is shown with a glory, although he was not beatified until 1753, praying before a vision of the Virgin and Child in a mandorla in the wood beside his convent.

To join a religious Order of monks or friars was to reject personal wealth and earthly ties, and often indeed one's name, so it may seem surprising that portraits of monks and friars do sometimes occur in devotional paintings. In practice, however, the original rules of the Orders were often relaxed. Moreover the giving of works of art was one way in which the richer members of the monastic community could appropriately dispose of their wealth and both commemorate themselves and benefit the com-

munity as they did so. Abbots and other senior monks may also have felt that they were representing the whole of their community when they appeared as 'donors'.

An example of such a monastic donor is the kneeling figure to the left of the Crucifixion painted by the Master of Delft (Fig. 66). He has a tonsure and wears a white habit, perhaps that of a Carthusian monk, perhaps that of a Premonstratensian Augustinian canon. Canons were priests who lived a semi-monastic life adapted from the Rule of Saint Benedict, but whereas Augustinian canons renounced all personal wealth and held property in common with their community, the canons attached to cathedrals or collegiate churches seldom practised the 'poverty of the Apostles'. Bernardino Salviati (Fig. 58) and Richard de Visch de la Chapelle (No. 69), the former a canon and the latter a cantor of the Collegiate Church of Saint Donatian in Bruges, evidently possessed great wealth.

The religious Orders often had attached to them lay Orders, men and women observing many of the same rules but not bound by the same vows. The Franciscan Order was divided into three: the second order consisting of nuns, the third – the Tertiaries – of the laity. Lay associations were also involved in managing hospitals and other religious institutions.

The most eminent of lay Orders were the military Orders. The Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem (properly the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem) were founded in the First Crusade in the late eleventh century to protect a hospital for pilgrims to the Holy Land. Later they moved their base to Rhodes and subsequently to Malta – to continue to protect Christian interests in the Mediterranean. They accumulated vast wealth and privileges and property all over Europe. In Cologne they were associated with the church of Sts John and Cordula, and we find one of the knights represented kneeling in an altarpiece by Lochner perhaps for that church (Fig. 67 and No. 20).

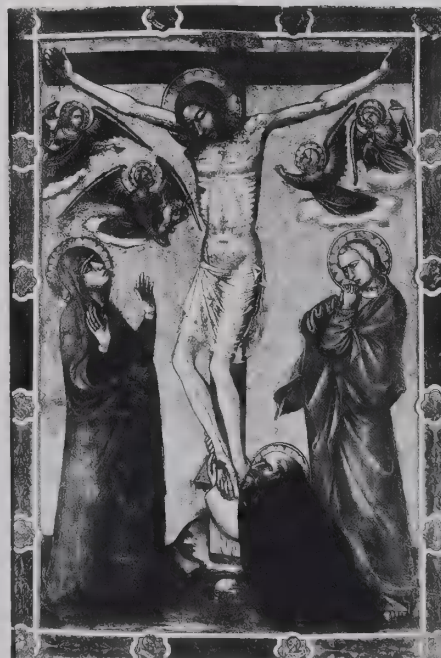
Throughout Europe associations of the laity who devoted themselves to some special cult or to some special penitential service or act of charity – public flagellation, tending the sick, burying the dead – were known as confraternities. Some of them were powerful and influential groups of citizens. This was certainly the case with the Confraternity of the Centenar de la Ploma in Valencia in Spain which originated in a company of one hundred archers founded in 1365. By the end of the fourteenth century it comprised five hundred men and six hundred women. Its status is suggested by the fact that it had custody of the banner of Valencia and, in addition to its chapel in the church of St George, had an oratory nearby for which the massive altarpiece of Saint



ABOVE Fig. 67. Stephan Lochner, *Saints Ambrose, Cecilia and Augustine with the Donor Heinrich Zeuweglyn*, c. 1445. Oak, painted surface 86×58cm. Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

George (Fig. 24) was painted in about 1420. The central panels show Saint George fighting the dragon, Saint George helping James I of Aragon defeat the Moors, and the Virgin and Child enthroned, while the numerous legends of the saint are represented in the smaller compartments.

The confraternities often reflected the most topical forms of religious fervour. The *Disciplinati*, confraternities of flagellants who did penance, whipping themselves in public procession, developed in the thirteenth century. A large canvas banner painted on both sides by Barnaba da Modena in about 1370 is one of the few processional banners belonging to one such confraternity to have survived from the fourteenth century (Figs. 68 and 69). On one side Christ is depicted crucified with the Virgin and Saint John standing on either side of him. Saint Anthony Abbot is shown embracing the foot of the cross. Banners of the fifteenth century often follow very similar patterns. On the other side of the banner are Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Eligius, with kneeling worshippers below them wearing the white habit and hood, with a circle cut out of the back, adopted by penitential confraternities (the hole enabled them to lacerate the skin on their backs). It has been plausibly conjectured that this banner belonged to the Genoese confraternity dedicated to Saint Anthony. Saint Eligius, patron of goldsmiths, was probably represented here because he was associated with the burial of the



RIGHT Fig. 68. Barnaba da Modena, *The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John and Saint Anthony Abbot*, c. 1370. Canvas, 197×128cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.



FAR RIGHT Fig. 69. *Saint Anthony Abbot and Saint Eligius*. Reverse of Fig. 68.



Fig. 70. Giovanni di Paolo, *Saint Fabian and Saint Sebastian*, c. 1465. Wood, painted surface 84.5×54.5cm (NG 3402).

dead, which was one of the confraternity's duties. The Crucifixion may be explained by the fact that the most important of the public processions in which the confraternity participated was that of the Invention (that is, the discovery) of the Holy Cross. The same format, with two saints to whom miniature hooded members of a confraternity kneel, is found in panel paintings (Fig. 70).

Confraternities were generally fostered by a religious Order and had a meeting place and chapel within the church of that Order or its conventual buildings. They were particularly en-

couraged by the Dominicans and Franciscans, with their important missions to the towns. The Confraternity of Saint Anthony in Genoa was attached to the church of San Domenico, a Dominican church.

The Compagnia di Santa Maria della Purificazione e di San Zanobi (a boys' confraternity, also known as the Compagnia dei Fanciulli, which often performed plays and was closely associated with the Medici), having built a new oratory attached to the Dominican church of San Marco in Florence, commissioned for it the altarpiece of the Madonna and Child enthroned by Benozzo Gozzoli in 1461 (Fig. 71). The saints depicted here are the confraternity's patron, Saint Zenobius, Bishop of Florence, an important local saint, Saint John the Baptist, patron of Florence, Saint Dominic, patron of the Order, and Saints Peter, Jerome and Francis. Each one is boldly named on a halo for the benefit of the children. The contract specified that the panels flanking the predella (which is no longer attached to the altarpiece) were to depict boys holding the confraternity's emblem.

The penitential confraternity (or Scuola, as Venetian confraternities were commonly called) of San Tommaso dei Battuti attached to San Francesco in Portogruaro commissioned the altarpiece of the Incredulity of Saint Thomas, their patron saint, from Cima da Conegliano probably in 1497 (Fig. 72). Although this was a Franciscan confraternity, the nature of its devotions was not as obviously coloured by Franciscan ideas as were those of the confraternities of the Immaculate Conception. One of these was established in 1475 in Milan under Franciscan sponsorship and in response to the fervent preaching of Fra Stefano di Oleggio, at a moment when the Pope (Sixtus IV, himself a Franciscan) was giving his approval to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, to the dismay of the Dominicans. Such was the success of the confraternity that it was able three years later to build and decorate sumptuously a new chapel attached to the church of San Francesco, and then in 1480 to commission an elaborate wooden altarpiece for which Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* was painted (No. 68).

To obtain the necessary funds this confraternity must have enjoyed the support of very wealthy citizens. Fragments of a banner painted by a Milanese artist at about this date show groups of citizens (perhaps portraits), sexually segregated, probably the members of such a confraternity and some of them apparently of great wealth (Figs. 73 and 74).

In Florence the confraternity which enjoyed the most conspicuous support from the prominent and wealthy during the fifteenth century was the Compagnia de' Magi. They staged



Fig. 71. Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned among Angels and Saints*, commissioned 1461. Wood, painted surface 162×170cm (NG 283). See also Figs. 165 and 175.



LEFT Fig. 72. Cima da Conegliano, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. Signed and dated 1504. Transferred from wood to synthetic panel, painted surface 294×199.5cm (NG 816).

CENTRE Fig. 73. Ascribed to Ambrogio Bergognone, *Male Members of a Confraternity(?)*, c. 1500. Fragment. Silk or linen, mounted on wood, painted surface 64.5×42cm (NG 779).

RIGHT Fig. 74. Ascribed to Ambrogio Bergognone, *Female Members of a Confraternity(?)*, c. 1500. Fragment. Silk or linen, mounted on wood, painted surface 64.5×42cm (NG 780).

BELOW RIGHT Fig. 75. Sandro Botticelli, *The Adoration of the Kings*, 1470. Wood, painted surface 50×136cm (NG 592). The frame is possibly original.



magnificent public processions and theatricals on the Feast of the Epiphany, especially during the 1440s, 1450s and 1460s, during which they dressed up as the Three Kings and their retinue. This may explain the great popularity of paintings of the Adoration of the Magi in Florence (Fig. 75; also Fig. 89 and No. 38), some of which are known to have contained portraits, and many of which may include recollections of the spectacular costumes and lively cavalcades which were a feature of these celebrations.

COMMERCE, CONVENTION AND INNOVATION



Not all religious paintings were destined for churches. Many individuals, including those of relatively modest means, had small religious paintings at home. Francesco Datini, for instance, the so-called Merchant of Prato, who died in 1410, had sacred pictures in his bedroom, guest rooms and office. Such paintings would often have been bought either on the open market or ready-made from a painter's workshop, rather than being specifically commissioned from an artist, as was the case with altarpieces and tabernacle paintings. Datini and his contemporaries traded in religious paintings in this way, and there was also a market in such paintings in Northern Europe (see p. 107). The most popular subjects were, it seems, the Crucifixion and the Virgin and Child. Datini when in Avignon asked a friend in Italy to supply him with a triptych: 'Let there be in the centre Our Lord on the Cross, or Our Lady, whichever you find – I do not care, so long as the figures are handsome and large, the best and finest you can buy, and the cost no more than 5½ or 6½ florins.'

Tradition and authority, central to the idea of the Church, encouraged the imitation of form as well as content. Religious images for the home obviously tended to be smaller in size than those in churches, but they were very similar in other respects and indeed were sometimes miniature replicas of a larger and famous image. One fourteenth-century painting of the *Maestà* (Fig. 76) belongs to this category. Such repetitions were obviously convenient for the artist, but they might also have reflected a patron's desire to possess a version of an image which had answered prayers or which had special associations. Saint Bernardino was so devoted to the lost fresco, probably by Simone Martini, of the Assumption of the Virgin above one of the gates of his native Siena upon which he had loved to gaze as a child, that he commissioned a copy of it; others imitated him, for his sermons had made the painting still more famous. The com-



Fig. 76. Follower of Duccio, *The Virgin and Child with Four Angels*, c. 1315. Wood, 41×28cm (NG 6386). The composition reflects that found in monumental paintings of the *Maestà*.

position of the Virgin and Child devised by Giovanni Bellini for his great altarpiece of 1505 in the church of San Zaccaria was adopted by Francesco Bissolo for a smaller work (Fig. 77). Nor was Bellini himself above recycling his own ideas in this way. His *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 78) would seem to be a truncated version of a larger group, doubtless made for a large altarpiece. The Virgin's knees would never have been given such positions by Bellini had he invented the composition for the reduced format, but they are admirably suited to a full-length enthroned group recorded in a copy by a painter working in Venice (Fig. 79).



Fig. 77. Francesco Bissolo, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Paul and a Female Martyr*, c. 1505-15. Wood, painted surface 78x117.5cm (NG 3915).

Most people who bought images would not have expected them to vary from a traditional pattern any more than they expected the words of the Mass to vary, but they must often have wanted to make the imagery more personal, even if only in a marginal way. We know that in Northern Europe small religious triptychs were often produced with the shutters blank so that the purchaser could add personal saints, coats of arms and even portraits of himself and his wife at prayer. Looking at Bartolomeo Vivarini's *Virgin and Child with Saints Paul and Jerome* (Fig. 80) we cannot fail to be struck by the way that the saints are



Fig. 78. Giovanni Bellini, *The Virgin and Child*, c. 1490. Signed. Poplar, 91x65cm (NG 280). Adapted from a larger composition reflected in Fig. 79.



Fig. 79. Francesco Tacconi, *The Virgin and Child*. Signed and dated 1489. Lime, painted surface 100x53cm (NG 286).



ABOVE Fig. 80. Bartolomeo Vivarini, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Paul and Jerome*, c. 1460–5. Signed. Wood, painted surface 95×63.5cm (NG 284).



RIGHT Fig. 81. Workshop of Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel*, c. 1490. Wood, painted surface, diameter 84.5cm (NG 275).

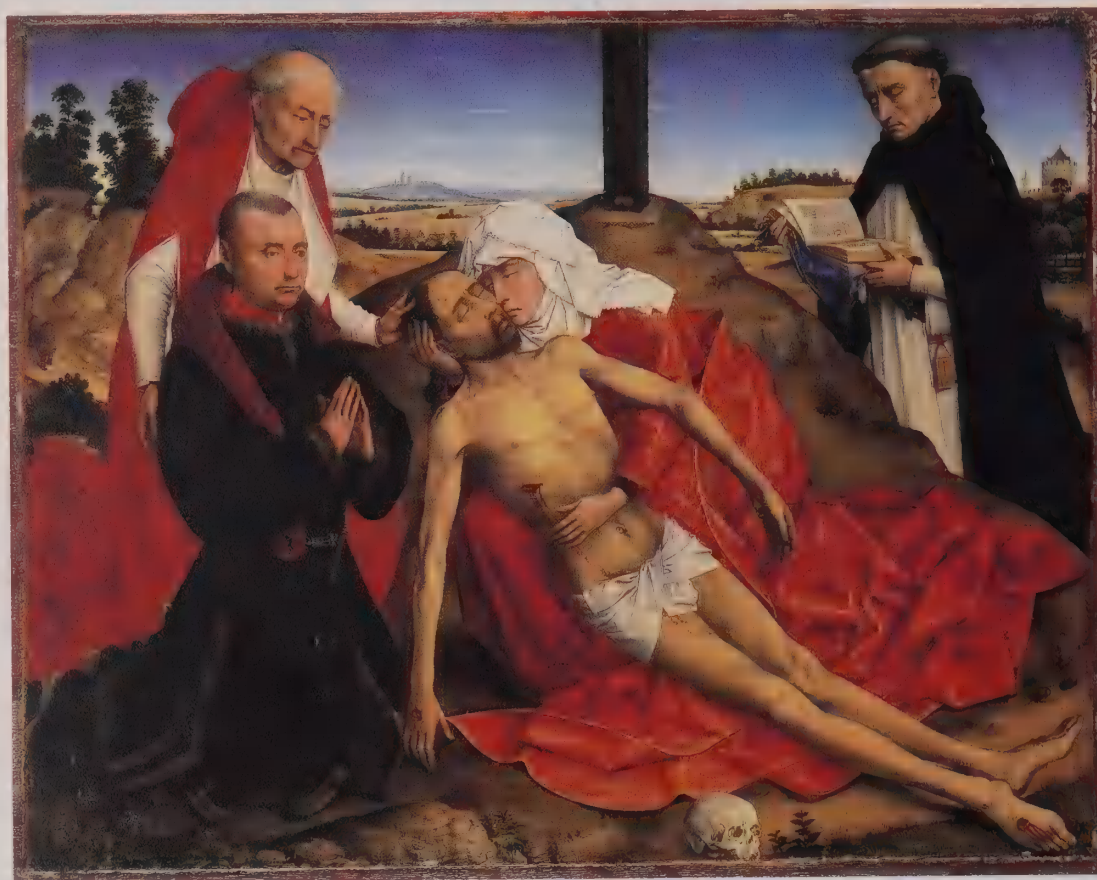
squeezed in. This is best explained by a customer ordering a standard Virgin and Child and then asking for these extras to be added.

Something similar may well have happened with the round picture (*tondo*) of the Virgin and Child with Saint John and an Angel from the workshop of Botticelli (Fig. 81). There are other versions of this composition (which must be based on a design by Botticelli) in which there are two angels. It seems unlikely that Botticelli himself, if commissioned to paint this subject, would have made Saint John symmetrical with, and hence equivalent to, an angelic attendant, for John is an important saint and, moreover, related to the Holy Family. But it is easy to imagine a customer requesting that a Saint John be inserted into such a painting at no – or little – extra cost, and the workshop devising this solution.

Similarly, one of the customers of the Memlinc workshop whose portrait as a donor occurs in the painting of the Virgin and Child with Saint George (Fig. 82) may have chosen the image of the Virgin and Child from a range of images there. The painting would then have been made up to incorporate his portrait, which may even have been copied from another picture which he supplied. The Christ Child's pose and gesture recur in other works from Memlinc's workshop, such as the *Donne Triptych* (No. 42) and *The Virgin of Jacques Floreins* in the Louvre. There, however, they make perfect sense, whereas in this inferior work they look odd and unbalance the composition. A customer such as Sir John Donne would presumably have paid more to obtain the personal attention of the master and a work in which the central motif, even though not unique, was properly integrated into the composition.



Fig. 82. Workshop of Hans Memlinc, *The Virgin and Child with an Angel, Saint George and a Donor*. c. 1465–80. Oak, painted surface 54×37.5cm (NG 686).



LEFT Fig. 83. Workshop of Rogier van der Weyden, *Pietà*, c. 1450–60. Oak, painted surface 35.5×45cm (NG 6265).

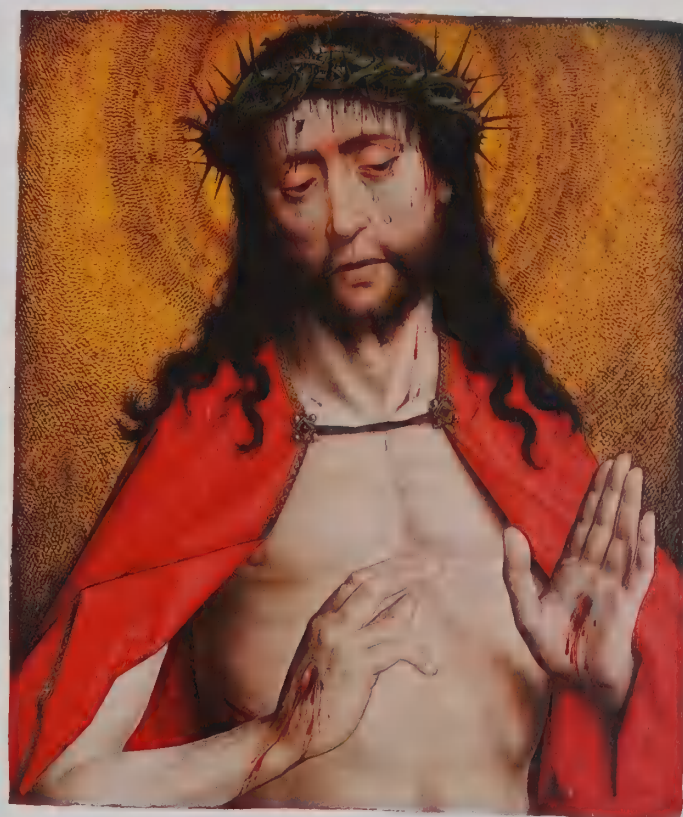
RIGHT Fig. 84. Rogier van der Weyden, *Pietà*, central panel of the Miraflores Altarpiece, c. 1445. Oak, painted surface 71×43cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

The *Pietà* from van der Weyden's workshop (Fig. 83) is based on the central panel of one of his finest works, the triptych of scenes from the Life of the Virgin (Fig. 84), and appears to have been adapted as a small devotional picture for the unidentified donor. In the National Gallery's picture the figures of the Virgin and Christ are reversed and varied slightly. Joseph of Arimathea and Saint John have been banished, to be replaced by the kneeling donor, thus slightly lessening the drama of the original grouping. Saint Jerome and another saint, perhaps Dominic, are presumably included because they reflect the names or the affiliations of the donor. The spatial relationship between the two groups in the adapted composition is awkward and the linking role played by Saint Jerome, whose right hand just touches the donor's sleeve, appears a little forced. This does, however, make a more satisfactory composition than another later version (Berlin, Staatliche Museen) in which the donor appears in the position of the second saint, just behind the central mound.

This repetition with variations of an established composition is

typical of the manner in which Netherlandish painters' workshops would adapt a pattern from one picture to another scale more suited to individual devotions. The survival of numerous religious images of the same type, and clearly from the same workshop, suggests that some workshops operated what amounted to a production line, and that the resulting images were often sold directly to the public. Devotional images of different types of the suffering Christ originating in the workshop of Dieric Bouts, which continued under his sons (Fig. 85), were evidently constantly reproduced according to patterns kept in the workshop and probably handed on from father to son (see p. 143). Often smaller, domestic images were made from parts of images which had appeared in larger compositions, as in the Memlinc workshop's *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 86), which follows very closely the pattern of the Virgin in the Donne Triptych. Exactly the same process can be observed in some Florentine workshops.

In the cases we have been considering, the requirements of the pious and the convenience of the busy workshop can be seen to



ABOVE Fig. 85. Style of Aelbrecht Bouts, *Christ crowned with Thorns*, late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. Wood, transferred to canvas, 43.5×36.8cm (NG 1083).

have conditioned minor modifications to standard images. But these factors cannot explain a major change to the nature of the image itself.

As we have seen, certain religious images enjoyed particular popularity for devotional purposes during the fifteenth century – heads or half-lengths of the suffering Christ and the *Pietà*, for instance. In some cases this popularity may have derived from devotional texts in wide circulation, or even from the sermons of particularly forceful preachers. The subject of the Adoration – the Virgin kneeling before the infant Christ – which seems rapidly to have replaced the older depiction of the Nativity (see No. 1) in which the Virgin reclines, as is normal after labour, seems to have been inspired by Franciscan devotional texts. Rays of light emanating from the Child may indicate the influence of the fourteenth-century mystic Saint Bridget of Sweden. In her account of her vision of the birth of Christ, the Virgin knelt immediately after her painless and rapid delivery to adore the newly

born child, from whom radiated a light of such brilliance that it outshone the candle held by Joseph.

It was not until the late fifteenth century, however, that the coincidence of Saint Bridget's subject matter and a painter, almost certainly the great Netherlandish artist Hugo van der Goes, who was strongly interested in the depiction of contrasts of light and darkness, produced paintings in which the outshining of the candle became central rather than a subordinate detail. No such painting by Hugo van der Goes survives, but a number of pictures which appear to be derived from one are known (Fig. 87; see also No. 49).

In this instance it is the interests and abilities of the painter which have determined the new presentation of the image. But there are other examples of the ways in which religious subject matter in the fifteenth century was given new emphases by the preoccupations of the painter. Fifteenth-century devotional paintings generally reflect a novel interest in the representation of



Fig. 86. Hans Memling and Workshop, *The Virgin and Child*, c. 1465–80. Oak, painted surface 37.5×28cm (NG 709).

space: to look at a painting was like looking through a window. The depiction of landscape distance, with aerial perspective, and the sense of peeping into a room – these were achievements especially associated with the great artists of the Netherlands. Then in the early fifteenth century artists in Florence discovered the principle of single-point perspective, of foreshortening forms with a system based on a single vanishing point – the fulfilment of a long tradition of experiments with linear perspective in Tuscan art. Simultaneously the representation of naturalistic light, which had also interested artists in the fourteenth century, became one of the great achievements of European painting.

All the figures in a painting could now be shown in a naturalistic relation to each other and in a naturalistic setting. Dieric



Fig. 87. After Hugo van der Goes, *The Nativity at Night*, c. 1500 or later. Oak, original painted surface (corners cut) 62×46cm (NG 2159).

Bouts does not merely paint Saints Peter and Paul beside the throne of the Virgin, he places them within the same room, in a space which we feel that we can measure (Fig. 42). The four saints in Pesellino's altarpiece of the Trinity (Fig. 57) do not merely flank the cross upon which Christ hangs but are arranged around it, overlapping but not obscuring each other, within the same landscape. Saints are now free to relate to the Madonna and Child, holding her book or giving him a flower, and free to debate the nature of the theological mystery of the Trinity before them. New forms of narrative were also made possible by the interest in depicting space.

In small paintings the saints who previously would have occupied the foreground begin to be found in the distance. The little

painting of the Virgin and Child (Fig. 88), probably half a diptych, by Paolo da San Leocadio, an Italian-born artist working in Spain, depicts, behind the Virgin, a delightful walled garden in which the saints have gone for a walk. In a painting by Filippino



Fig. 88. Paolo da San Leocadio, *The Virgin and Child with Saints*, c. 1490–1500. Signed. Oak, painted surface 43.5×23.3cm (NG 4786).

Lippi of the Adoration of the Kings (Fig. 89), the extensive landscape is not only occupied by the retinue of the Kings but by miniature representations of the saints and their miracles (Fig. 90), among them Saint Francis, Saint Jerome, Mary Magdalene and Tobias and the Angel. In these examples the new skills of the painter enhance the religious content. Nevertheless, it is possible that the beautiful garden and architecture in the Paolo da San Leocadio and the fanciful landscape in the Filippino Lippi were enjoyed and admired for their own sake.

By the end of the fifteenth century some patrons certainly valued the skills of the artist above the nature of the imagery upon which such skills were lavished. Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, was disappointed in the winter of 1502 to find that Giovanni Bellini was dithering over painting an *istoria* (narrative) for her, so she said she would be content to have a *presepio* (Nativity) by him which should include a Saint John and the animals near 'Our Lady, Our Lord God and Saint Joseph'. Bellini wanted to know whether he should make this Nativity as large as the projected *istoria*, but Isabella thought not since it was her intention to place it in her bedroom. She added that if he wanted to do some other of his 'new inventions of the Madonna' she would be quite content, but she would be more content with a Nativity. Bellini did not consider it fitting to insert a Saint John into a Nativity so he proposed to paint a Madonna and Child with Saint John and with landscape distances (*luntani*) and other *fantasie* which would be suitable. Isabella agreed but wanted a Saint Jerome to be included as well. Then she changed her mind again and asked for the Nativity but without Saint John. The painting finally arrived (after threats to withdraw the commission) in the summer of 1504. Bellini had at one point (January 1504) used the new excuse available for workers in oil paint: the picture would not dry in the winter. In telling Isabella that it was at last ready, her agent pointed out that if she did not want it Bellini had another buyer for it. Bellini also offered to have a beautiful frame made for it – the implication here being that Isabella might have wanted to have this done herself and also that the price (50 ducats) did not include the cost of a frame.

It is rather extraordinary to find Bellini instructing the Marchioness of Mantua in what was or was not proper in a devotional painting. He may well have felt that anachronism – which was quite normal in a Madonna and Child with saints – was wrong in a true narrative painting, but many other artists would have been happy to comply, and Bellini's objection may have arisen from his desire to use, or to adapt with only minor alterations, a pattern he had already worked out. However, his disinclination to



Fig. 89. Filippino Lippi, *The Adoration of the Kings*, c. 1480. Wood, 57×86cm (NG 1124).

depart from convention is less striking than the licence he was permitted. Throughout the negotiations, his patron's chief concern was to obtain a work characteristic of Bellini's genius. Indeed Isabella had at first thought of a devotional subject because it was something which Bellini painted well and in a new way.

Leonardo da Vinci was even more noted for his 'new inventions' and was, it seems, permitted even greater licence. He painted for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in Milan an altarpiece (No. 68) with a subject which seems to have perplexed them (another artist added attributes which clarified which figure was intended for Saint John). The paintings which he planned to make of the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne – one large finished drawing for which survives in the National Gallery (No. 66) – replace the conventional frontal composition of the Virgin holding Christ on her lap as she sits in Saint Anne's lap, with a complex active group engaged in an intense if unspoken dialogue such as had never previously been seen in art.



Fig. 90. Detail of Fig. 89.