

# Champoux, Jennifer

## The *Standing Madonna* and *St. Catherine* from the Kunsthistorisches: A Wedding Gift Symbolic of the Ideal Bride

Faculty Mentor: Martha Peacock, Visual Arts

Two small panels by Rogier van der Weyden, *The Virgin and Child Standing in a Niche* and *St. Catherine in a Landscape*, both from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, create an interesting puzzle in terms of authorship, iconography, and purpose. Although largely considered to be matching panels of a diptych by Van der Weyden, the works are not conclusively his and, indeed, they exhibit aspects characteristic of his teachers and contemporaries. Moreover, the two panels are no longer attached to each other (if they ever were) which further complicates the issues of authorship and purpose. St. Catherine typically shows up in groups of virgin saints around the Virgin Mary, but the pairing of a panel of the Madonna and Child with a panel of St. Catherine alone is unusual, if not unprecedented. It is also unusual for one side of the diptych to be set in an architectural niche, as the Virgin and Child are, and the other side to be set in an open landscape, as St. Catherine is.

I began researching these two panels as part of an original research paper for Dr. Martha Peacock's Northern Renaissance Art class. My paper attempted to demonstrate that the two panels were in fact the work of Rogier van der Weyden and that they were originally attached as a diptych to form a personal devotional object. I argued that the pairing of the Madonna with St. Catherine is a complex symbol of the individual woman's relationship with Christ and the Church, and that the work may have been commissioned as a wedding gift for a young Flemish bride. Similarly, another small Van der Weyden diptych which portrays the Virgin and Child with St. George embodies the ideal male relationship with Christ and may have been a gift to the bridegroom.

This topic was so fascinating to me that I decided to expand it into an honors thesis. I argued that the panels were paired because the Virgin and St. Catherine share four estimable virtues: they are literal brides of Christ (signifying their close spiritual relationship with Christ), they are virgins (representing their purity and virtue), they are wise, and they are royal. The small size of the panels and the unusual grouping of the Virgin and St. Catherine without any other saints indicate that it was intended for personal devotion. Moreover, two other small Van der Weyden panels, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned* and *St. George Killing the Dragon*, also formed a diptych. Just as the St. Catherine diptych represents an ideal female bride of Christ, the St. George diptych portrays the ideal male warrior of Christ. Furthermore, handcrafted works of art—especially carved or painted wedding chests, often with religious themes—were typical fifteenth-century wedding gifts. Thus, the symbolism of Mary and Catherine as brides of Christ, pure virgins, and wise, royal women, and the use of the work as a personal devotional object, all point to the possibility that the work was commissioned as a bridal gift for a wealthy, noble, young bride.

My research began in the Harold B. Lee Library, but it has led me across the country to visit museums, libraries, and scholars. I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where I saw a number of paintings by Van der Weyden and also examined several examples of the

carved wedding chests I discuss in my paper. I visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. to look at Van der Weyden's *St. George Killing the Dragon* firsthand. I also spent many days in the large National Gallery library pouring over books, articles, and inventories related to my thesis. I have also spoken with scholars at the Frick Collection in New York and at the Kestner Museum in Hannover.

A particularly rewarding aspect of my research has been the associations I have made with scholars from around the world. Due to the cross-disciplinary nature of my thesis, I have had the opportunity to work with faculty and experts from various disciplines, including art history, English, French, Italian, literature, and history. At BYU, I have worked closely with Dr. Martha Peacock and Dr. Mark Magleby from the art history department. Dr. Joseph Parry, of the Humanities department, Dr. Madison Sowell, of the Italian department, and Dr. Nicolaas Undlandt and Dr. Jesse Hurlbut, of the French department, have also been enormously helpful. At the National Gallery, I was privileged to interview both the curator of Northern Renaissance Painting and the curator of Northern Baroque Painting. Through email, I have conversed with Dr. Katherine Lewis of the University of Huddersfield, England, who wrote an authoritative book on the life of St. Catherine, and with Dr. Karen Winstead of The Ohio State University, who is a prominent scholar of saints in literature.

This project has been an illuminating experience of researching and writing that has been personally and academically fulfilling. An article based on my thesis will be published in *Insight* this winter and I was the only undergraduate selected to present my paper at an annual art history symposium at BYU. While working on this thesis, I found that I not only loved the aesthetics and meaning of art, but I also loved writing about it. It is exciting to find evidence to support my own hypotheses and to discover connections between different ideas, works of art, and cultures. As I began to understand the cultural and historical setting, the religious beliefs and iconography of the time, and the relationship between painter and patron, I was able to understand and discover symbolism and meaning in the works I studied. This experience has significantly contributed to my decision to pursue a master's degree in art history and it has prepared me to conduct further art history research at the graduate and professional level.