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The *Exeter Madonna* by Petrus Christus

Devotional Portrait and Spiritual Ascent in Early Netherlandish Painting

The image of the soul's ascent to God is a commonplace of late medieval spiritual literature. While in the early Middle Ages, the spiritual concerns inherent in the ascent of the soul circulated only among monastic communities, these interests were much more widespread in the later period. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the theme of the spiritual ascent appears in many texts intended not only for clerics but also for lay people, and in particular in the writings of the major representatives of the *Devotio moderna*, such as Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen. At this time, the image of the soul ascending to God was also common in the visual arts, mostly in the form of the celestial ladder.[1] Serving as true means of visualization, texts and images using this metaphor helped the devotee to fix in his or her memory the several steps of the ascent to God and to put them into practice by the acquisition of certain virtues. By focusing on Petrus Christus' *Exeter Madonna,* this article aims to show that this motif is also alluded to in early Netherlandish painting, and that late medieval devotional painting and literature shared a community of discourse.

The *Exeter Madonna*, the devotional portrait tradition and the structuring of the pictorial space

Dated to around 1450 and housed today in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, the *Exeter Madonna* shows a Carthusian monk in prayer, accompanied by St Barbara, in front of the Virgin and Child (Fig. 1).[2] The scene takes place inside a quadrangular porch, which the devotee and his patron saint have just entered from the left. Kneeling in prayer with St Barbara behind him, the Carthusian monk is welcomed by Mary and her Son, who is blessing him.

[1] On the literary and iconographical theme of the celestial ladder, see Christian Heck, *L'échelle céleste. Une histoire de la quête du ciel* (Paris: 1999) and Walter Cahn, "Ascending and Descending from Heaven: Ladder Themes in Early Medieval Art", in *Santo e Demoni nell alto medievo occidentale. Secoli V-XI* (Spoleto: 1989), 697-724.

[2] On this painting, see Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting. 1. The van Eycks-Petrus Christus* (Leiden and Brussels: 1967), 61; Peter H. Schabacker, *Petrus Christus* (Utrecht: 1974), cat. 8; Joel M. Upton, *Petrus Christus. His Place in Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting* (London and University Park: 1990), 14-18 and 72-73; Maryan W. Ainsworth and Maximiliaan P. Martens (eds), *Petrus Christus. Renaissance Master of Bruges* (New York: 1994), n° 7; Klaus Niehr, "Konservierte Erinnerung: Uber einen Raum bei Petrus Christus", *Von Kunst und Temperament: Festschrift für Eberhard Konig*, ed. Caroline Zöhl and Mara Hofmann (Turnhout: 2007), 195–206.

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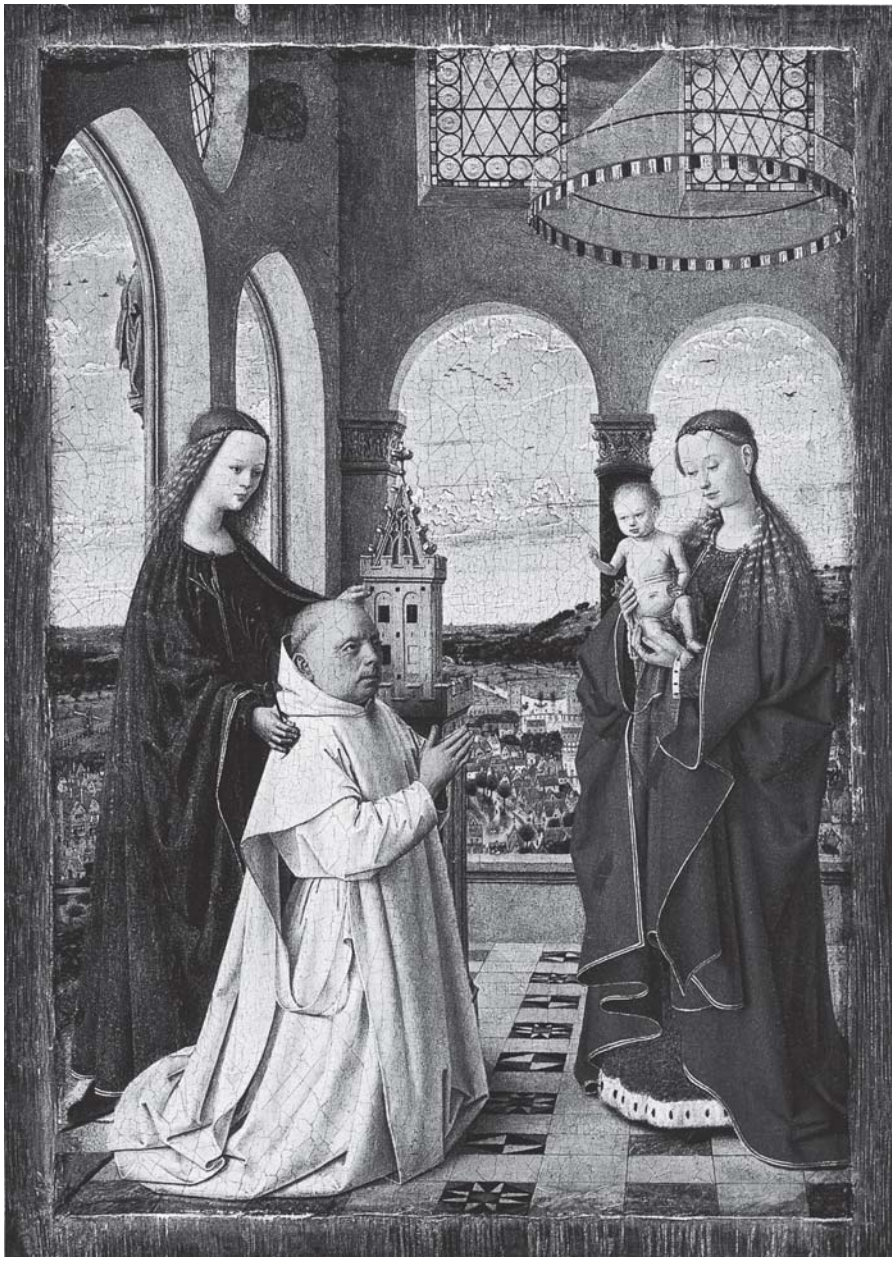

Figure 1. Petrus Christus, *The Exeter Madonna*, c. 1450, oil on panel, 19.5 x 14 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, n° inv. 523B (artwork in the public domain)

A canopy hanging above the Virgin underlines her majesty. The position of the monk and St Barbara at the entrance to the loggia – with the saint positioned on the threshold between the exterior and interior – emphasizes their arrival into this holy space. The path taken by the monk to arrive at this moment is visible through the small section of landscape depicted behind the saint. The three other openings set in the walls of the porch give a wide view onto a large landscape depicted below. This landscape represents a busy city with a river crossed by a bridge, together with a windmill, a square and many houses surrounded by green fields and hills.[3] Petrus Christus' painting thus shows the meeting between a devotee and the Virgin, in a setting that can be understood as sacred and belonging to the realm of the Virgin. In this respect, the *Exeter Madonna* is a traditional Flemish painting that includes a devotional portrait.[4]

The portrait integrated into a religious image came into existence at the beginning of the Middle Ages and remained popular until at least the seventeenth century. However, it was during the fifteenth century that it really became popular as a genre, especially in the Low Countries, with the formula of the devotional portrait. Before the end of the fourteenth century, this kind of image was mostly the preserve of kings and princes. Later, however, it became popular amongst the lower echelons of society: noble men and women, the wealthy bourgeoisie, clerics and members of religious communities wanted to leave a trace not only of their piety but also of their presence on earth.[5] In order to do this, they commissioned religious paintings that included their own effigy. By being portrayed in the image, these people were able to express their devotion, to ask for the protection of a saint and, above all, to ensure their own

[3] Joel Upton has suggested that this urban landscape was a view of Bruges seen from the belfry (Upton, *Petrus Christus*, 18), but because of the small dimensions of the painting and the lack of any recognizable monument, this cannot be verified.

[4] This kind of effigy is generally called a "donor portrait" but the expression is erroneous, or at least improper in some cases. Actually and strictly speaking, a donor is defined as the person portrayed in a painting that s/he commissioned for a specific altar or a chapel funded by him/her. In the special case of the *Exeter Madonna*, a work which is not an altarpiece, it is difficult to speak of a "donor portrait" and it is thus more correct to use the term "devotional portrait", which refers to the pious nature of the figure. See Ingrid Falque, "*Mise en mots* et *mise en image* de la progression spirituelle. Vers une nouvelle approche du portrait dévotionnel dans la peinture flamande de la fin du Moyen Âge", in *Fiction sacrée. Spiritualité et esthétique durant le premier âge moderne*, eds. Ralph Dekoninck, Agnès Guiderdoni and Emilie Granjon (Leuven: 2013), 301.

[5] In the course of my research on early Netherlandish devotional portraits, I have been able to discover 732 paintings produced between 1400 and 1550 in the Low Countries that include one or more portraits of people in prayer. Among these one can find single panels such as the *Exeter Madonna*, but also triptychs, polyptychs and diptychs. Of these 732 paintings, twenty-three works depict Carthusian monks or nuns and among these, nine individuals have been identified. See Ingrid Falque, *Portrait de dévot, pratiques religieuses et expérience spirituelle dans la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas*, PhD. Diss. (Université de Liège: 2009); Ingrid Falque, *Devotional Portraiture and Spiritual Experience in Early Netherlandish Painting*, to be published by Brill in the series "Brill's Studies on Art, Art History, and Intellectual History" in 2017 with an online catalogue.

salvation (not only through the portrait itself but also through the prayers that it would incite). In general, the motives of the portrait commissioners were complex, oscillating between a true piety and a desire to express their wealth and their prestige. It is for these reasons that there is such a profusion and variety of early Netherlandish paintings that include devotional portraits.[6]

Since they combine both sacred and secular motifs, paintings that integrate devotional portraits are singular works that require special attention. The inclusion of portraits within a religious composition modifies the iconographical content of the work according to the degree of intrusion of the devotee. For example, in the *Exeter Madonna*, a "simple" depiction of the Virgin and Child is turned into a meeting between the devotee and the Mother of God within the sacred realm. However, if the attitude of the people portrayed in these paintings is often the same – they kneel, hands clasped in prayer or holding a book or a rosary – their place in the work can vary greatly in significance. Indeed, in the case of triptychs and polyptychs, the portraits sometimes appear on the reverse of the wings (the devotees are then physically and visually separated from the object of their devotion depicted on the central panel). More frequently the portraits appear on the inner wings, from where the devotees are able to see the religious scene but are still physically separated from it by the frame. In several cases, the devotees are depicted on the same panel as the sacred personae – as in the *Exeter Madonna* – and, more rarely, in devotional diptychs.[7] Moreover,

[6] As an introduction to the phenomenon of devotional portrait in early Netherlandish painting, see: Barbara G. Lane, *The Development of Medieval Devotional Figures*, PhD Diss. (University of Pennsylvania: 1970); Elisabeth Heller, *Das altniederländische Stifterbild* (Munich: 1976). On the social and funerary functions of these images, see Corine Schleif, "Hands that Appoint, Anoint and Ally: Late Medieval Donor Strategies for Appropriating Approbation Through Painting", *Art History* 16 (1993), 1-32; Laura D. Gelfand, *Fifteenth-Century Netherlandish Devotional Portrait Diptychs: Origins and Functions*, PhD. Diss. (Case Western Reserve University: 1994); Truus van Bueren (ed.), *Leven na de dood. Gedenken in de late Middeleeuwen* (Turnhout: 1999-2000); Hugo van der Velden, *The Donor's Image. Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold* (Turnhout: 2000). The spiritual dimension and devotional functions of these paintings are at the core of recent scholarship: Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting", *Simiolus* 15 (1985), 87-118; Reindert L. Falkenburg, "The Household of the Soul: Conformity in the *Merode Triptych*", in *Early Netherlandish Painting at the Crossroads. A Critical Look at Current Methodologies*, ed. Maryan W. Ainsworth (New Haven and London: 2001), 2-17; Bret Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: 2005); Reindert L. Falkenburg, "Hans Memling's Van Nieuwenhove Diptych: the Place of Prayer in Early Netherlandish Devotional Painting", in *Essays in Context. Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, eds. John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk (Cambridge, London and New Haven: 2006), 92-109; Falque, "*Mise en mots* et *mise en image*"; Ingrid Falque, "*See, the Bridegroom Cometh; Go out to Meet Him*. On Spiritual Progress and Mystical Union in Early Netherlandish Painting", in *Imago Exegetica: Visual Images as Exegetical Instruments, 1400-1700*, eds. Walter S. Melion, Michel Weemans and James Clifton (Leiden: 2014), 361-385.

[7] Based on the high number of triptychs (250) and polyptychs (19) surviving in their entirety, as well as the large number of extant wings containing devotional portraits (169), it would appear that the most frequent way of placing portraits in a religious painting was

the structuring of the pictorial space generally leads to a complex interplay of differentiation, gradation or fusion between the sacred and secular zones of the composition, between the sacred personae and the devotees.[8] In order to understand fully the meaning of these images, it is important to take into consideration the nature of the space(s) in which the protagonists are depicted and how they are represented. Indeed, as Jean-Claude Schmitt states: "la construction de l'espace de l'image et l'agencement des figures entre elles ne sont jamais neutres : ils expriment et produisent tout à la fois une classification des valeurs, des hiérarchies, des choix idéologiques".[9]

Netherlandish painters thus developed a range of – often subtle – pictorial devices intended to integrate the devotees into the religious scene and to organize the sacred and secular spheres of the image in a meaningful way. More precisely, in many paintings, the artists have recourse to several motifs, such as a path linking the background to the foreground, or an open door or a fence, which indicate the movement made by the people portrayed within the image.[10] Such devices imply a dynamic dimension to the work and suggest the physical and mental contribution of the devotees located in the space otherwise reserved for the holy figure to which they are praying. The *Diptych of the Virgin and Child with St Anne and a Monk in Prayer with St Barbara* attributed to the anonymous Master of the Brunswick Diptych shows particularly well how the devotee's movement inside the image is expressed through pictorial devices

on the inner wings of triptychs or polyptychs. These numbers come from my personal database to be published in Ingrid Falque, *Devotional Portraiture*.

[8] The issue of the structuring of pictorial space (in relation to the inclusion of devotional portraits) and its meanings is at the core of current scholarship. See for instance Alfred Acres, "The Columba Altarpiece and the Time of the World", *Art Bulletin* 80 (1998), 422-451; Falque, "*Mise en mots* et *mise en image*" and Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted* (University Park: 2012), which focuses on triptychs, that she defines as "paintings with doors", according to fifteenth-century terminology found in the archives.

[9] Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge* (Paris: 2002), 43.

[10] Matthew Botvinick has stressed the importance of the path and of the organization of the pictorial space in his study of the *Seilern Triptych* by the Master of Flemalle. In that study, Botvinick interprets the work as a visual pilgrimage, by drawing parallels with the meditative pilgrimages in spiritual literature of the time. See Matthew Botvinick, "The Painting as Pilgrimage: Traces of a Subtext in the Work of Campin and Contemporaries", *Art History* 15:1 (March 1992), 1-18. If the hypothesis of a visual pilgrimage can easily be followed in the case of paintings illustrating the life of Christ (especially the Passion), it is more difficult to apply to paintings showing a devotee in prayer in front of the Virgin and Child or a saint depicted outside a narrative context. Indeed, when the devotee appears in front of a hieratic scene of this kind, the lack of contextual elements make it harder for the devotee to imagine himself living the life of Christ as is described in the Holy Scriptures, any more than he can imagine himself on a pilgrimage to a holy place. More generally, on mental pilgrimages, see Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent. Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: 2011).

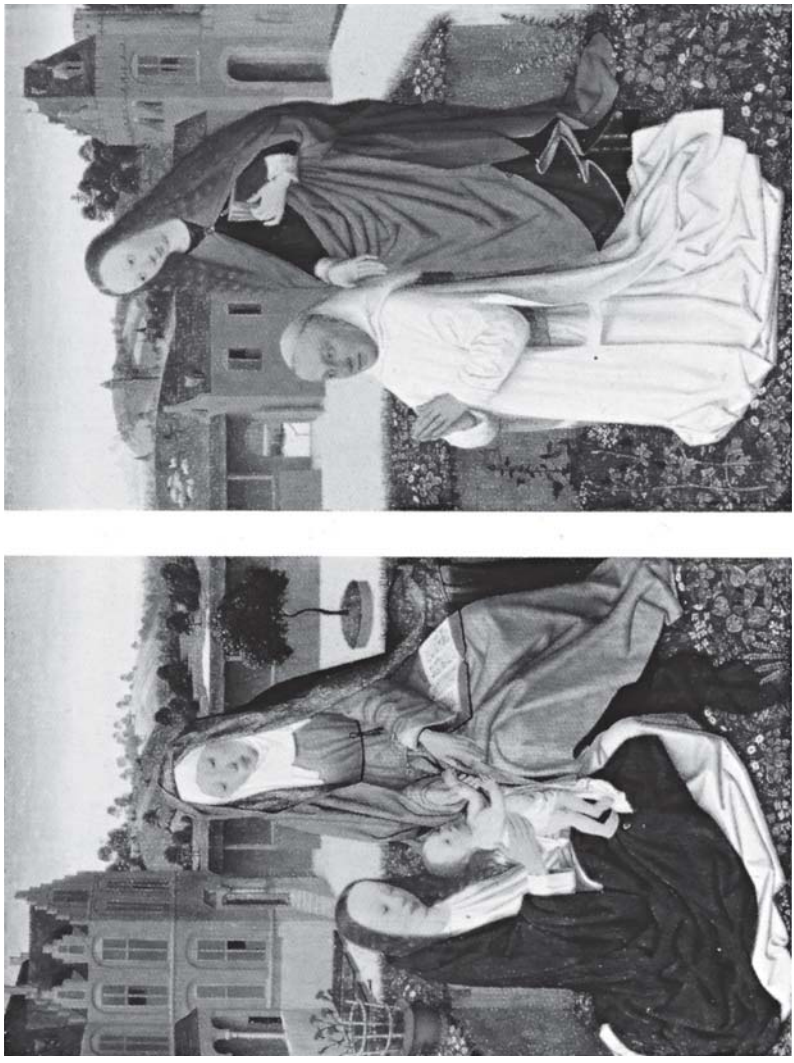

Figure 2. Master of the Brunswick Diptych, *Diptych of the Virgin and Child with St Anne and a Monk in Prayer with St Barbara*, last quarter of the fifteenth century, oil on panel, 35 x 23 cm (each wing), Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, n° inv. 13 (artwork in the public domain)

(Fig. 2).[11] The work depicts the meeting between St Anne, the Virgin and Child and a Carthusian monk in an enclosed garden located in the courtyard of an imposing house or monastery. Introduced by St Barbara, the devotee seems to have just entered the small garden through the opening on the right. He is kneeling on the floor, hands clasped in prayer. He is looking at the Virgin, who is seated on the ground with her mother next to her. She holds her naked son in her hands. The infant is looking at the monk and leans his arms towards him, as if to testify to the intimacy between the sacred personae and the supplicant. St Anne is seated on the low brick wall covered with grass and plants, which encloses the garden. The space in which the protagonists of the scene are depicted is thus the *hortus conclusus*, the sacred place *par excellence*, into which the devotee has had the privilege of entering.

Deriving from the *Song of Songs*, the symbol of the enclosed garden is an allegorical image that encountered huge success in medieval exegesis, where the bridegroom of the *Song* was usually identified with Christ and the bride with the Virgin. During the thirteenth century, thanks to the influence of Richard of Saint-Victor and Honorius Augustodunensis,[12] the enclosed garden also begins to be perceived as a metaphor of the human soul spiritually united with God. From this period onwards, in spiritual literature and then in the visual arts, the soul is portrayed as a garden, in which the devotee must cultivate the virtues symbolized by the different flowers and plants that s/he has to sow if s/he wants to be able to meet the bridegroom and unite him/herself with Him.[13] In late medieval painting, the enclosed garden takes on a particular importance when a devotee is depicted inside it, in prayer in front of the Virgin and Child: it becomes the intimate place in which union with Christ takes place. This is precisely the case in the Brunswick diptych: the garden is not only the space of the Virgin, but also the symbol of the devotee's soul in which union occurs. The intimacy of the setting where the meeting between the young man and Christ takes place is further reinforced by the situation of the garden in a courtyard surrounded by an outer wall in which a door is set. Beyond the wall, one

[11] Taking into account the presence of St Bavo (patron saint of Haarlem) and the Virgin of the Visitation (the patron saint of the Charterhouse of Geertruidenberg), the Carthusian monk depicted on this diptych might be Hendrik van Haarlem. Hendrik was prior of the Charterhouse of Amsterdam from 1484 to 1490 and of the Charterhouse of Geertruidenberg from 1490 to 1499. He died on 16 April 1506. On this painting see Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting, V. Geertgen tot Sint Jans and Jerome Bosch* (Leiden: 1969), 16 and *Het geheim van de stilte. De besloten wereld van de Roermondse Kartuizers. Verschenen ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling in het voormalige kartuizerklooster 'O.L. Vrouw van Bethlehem' te Roermond, Maart – Juni 2009*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Zwolle: 2009), 53-55.

[12] Reindert L. Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion. Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child, 1450-1550* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: 1994), 19-20.

[13] See Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion*, 8-11 and 16-37; Falkenburg, "The Household of the Soul", 7-9. On this kind of metaphor in the visual arts, see also Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists. The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: 1997).

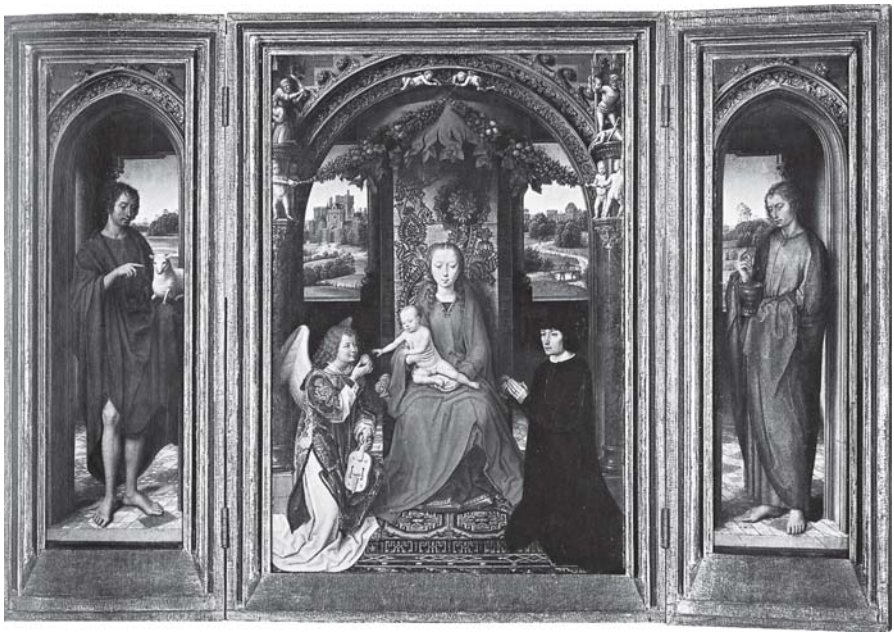

Figure 3. Hans Memling, *Triptych of the Virgin and Child with a Man in Prayer*, 1480-1488, oil on panel, 69 x 47 cm (central panel), 63.5 x 18.8 cm (inner wings) and 69.9 x 17.3 cm (outer wings), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, n° inv. 939-943-994 (artwork in the public domain)

can guess a staircase leading down to a path and to the countryside to a typical small Netherlandish village with church and houses depicted in the background – that is the secular world.

The work of the Master of the Brunswick Diptych thus contains several motifs that "energize" the composition: the image juxtaposes the sacred sphere of the enclosed garden and the earthly world of the background. Furthermore, the place of the meeting between St Anne, the Virgin and the monk is doubly sacred, because of the enclosed garden *and* the protection offered by the outer wall. The distance between the town and the *hortus conclusus* is marked out by the path, the open door granting access to the sacred realm and the opening in the lower brick wall of the garden. This device underscores the route that must be taken to access this sacred place, in which the devotee is already arrived, immersed in a profound meditation in front of St Anne and the Virgin and Child.

The Brunswick diptych is not an exception within the corpus of early Netherlandish paintings containing devotional portraits. Very often, the composition of the image brings together the sacred space in the foreground and the secular world in the background and places an emphasis on the progression of the people portrayed and their entrance into the sacred realm by a path or an open

Figure 4. Hans Memling, *The Virgin of Jacob Floreins*, c. 1490, oil on panel, 130.3 x 160 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris, n° inv. RF 215 (artwork in the public domain)

door. In some paintings, this progression is expressed quite discreetly, as is the case in a *Triptych of the Virgin and Child with a Man in Prayer* by Hans Memling now held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Fig. 3).[14] Here, the devotee and the Virgin appear together in a richly-decorated loggia, which, due to the throne, the cloth of honour and the sculpted capitals is identifiable as the Virgin's sacred space. Mary is seated in the centre of the composition and the man is kneeling in prayer at her right, with an angel, St John the Evangelist and St John the Baptist as the witnesses to this event. In the background, the loggia opens onto a large landscape in which one can see a town on the left and a man crossing a bridge in the countryside on the right. The attention of the viewer is focused on the sacred place of the Virgin, which the devout man has the honour to be within, while the landscape representing the earthly world relegated to the background reminds us where the devotee comes from.

[14] On this painting, see Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VI, n° 9; Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling. L'œuvre complet* (Antwerp: 1994), n° 53 and Barbara Lane, *Hans Memling: Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges* (Turnhout: 2009), n° 70.

If in Memling's triptych, the progression of the devotee is implicit and expressed in terms of opposition between the sacred foreground and the secular background, some other works express this progression in a more explicit way in other works. The *Virgin of Jacob Floreins*, again by Hans Memling, is a fine example of this phenomenon (Fig. 4).[15] The Virgin is enthroned in the middle of the composition, with her Child on her knees. St James and St Dominic are standing at her side and are presenting a family kneeling before her in prayer.[16] Following the heraldic tradition, the men take their place on the viewer's left (the Virgin's right, which is the place of honour) and the women on the right.[17] The scene takes place in an atypical architectural setting, namely the nave of a church open at the sides, through which the family have entered the church. The back of the nave resembles a choir separated from it by a stone rood screen. This imaginary architecture and the throne on which the Virgin is seated underline the sacred character of the place, while the lateral openings allow us to catch sight of an earthly landscape. A seigniorial castle appears on the left and a farm on the right. As in the work by the Master of the Brunswick Diptych, the secular zone of the background, in which the earthly activity prevails, is linked to the sacred sphere by two paths behind the groups of devotees. These paths underscore the fact that the family has left its secular, everyday world and has taken the path leading to the sacred realm. The progress of the devotees and their goal – meeting Christ – are at the heart of the image's meaning.

From these examples, we can easily see that the organization of sacred and secular spaces plays a crucial role in images with devotional portraits. Indeed, the devices analysed here allow the artists to offer a kind of spiritual topography, in which the devotees are depicted as moving towards union with God, thereby showing their spiritual progress. This phenomenon can also be observed in other paintings produced by Petrus Christus, as the spatial construction of the *Triptych of the Virgin and Child with a Couple in Prayer* now divided between the National Gallery of Washington and the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt testifies (fig. 5).[18] In this work, the couple and the sacred personae are located in a domestic interior. On the background,

[15] On this painting, see Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VI, n° 66; Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling,* n° 86; Micheline Comblen-Sonkes and Philippe Lorentz, *Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux et de la Principauté de Liège au quinzième siècle, 17. Musée du Louvre, Paris, II* (Brussels: 1995), 238-262.

[16] Thanks to a possible trademark painted on the rug, the father has been identified by James Weale, *Hans Memlinc* (London: 1901), 50-52 (who unfortunately does not cite his sources) as Jacob Floreins, a spice merchant trading in Bruges, who married a Spanish woman from the Quintanadueña family. Due to the lack of evidence, this identification has been contested by Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 310. Taking into account the usual rigour of Weale's archivistic research, Comblen-Sonkes and Lorentz, *Corpus*, 250-252 agree with his identification and provide more information about the Quintanadueña family.

[17] On this traditional position of the portraits, see Hugo van der Velden, "Diptych Altarpiece and the Principle of Dextrality", in *Essays in Context. Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, Cambridge, eds. John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk (Cambridge, London and New Haven: 2006), 124-155.

[18] Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus*, n° 12.

Figure 5. Petrus Christus, *Triptych of the Virgin and Child with a Couple in Prayer*, c. 1450, oil on panel, 46.7 x 44.6 cm (centre panel), 42 x 21.2 cm (left wing) and 41.8 x 21.6 cm (right wing), Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, inv. nr. 920 (centre panel) and Washington, National Gallery, inv. nr. 1961.9.10-11 (wings)

Figure 6. Detail of Fig. 1

one can see a landscape and courtyard with a door. Petrus Christus' *Exeter Madonna* is composed with a similar spatial construction, which brings together the sacred and earthly spheres: the monk and his patron saint are located within the space of the Virgin in the foreground, while the background depicts an urban landscape. As stated previously, the path taken by the Carthusian monk to reach this loggia is underscored by the section of landscape visible behind St Barbara, showing the monk's progression (fig. 6). This small strip of the composition shows a vertical alignment of different motifs: the heart of the city depicted in the background with many houses and a fountain (that is the secular world and its activity), a road, a small circular path in a garden and finally the entrance to the loggia where the monk is kneeling. We can detect a difference between Christus' painting and the other examples mentioned above. The compositional strategy used by Christus confers to the image and the monk's progression a strong sense of upward movement. Indeed, the contrast between the secular and the sacred worlds is reinforced by the fact that the overhanging porch in which the protagonists are located is clearly depicted above the secular landscape from which the Carthusian monk has come. Furthermore, the small strip of the composition on the left and the position of the monk at the entrance of the porch indicate the place where he came from; this also underlines his upward movement from the secular up to the celestial world. This upward movement between these two

spheres serves to evoke the theme of the ascension to God, a key theme in devotional literature dedicated to spiritual progression. Taking into account the importance of this theme within Carthusian spirituality, this comes as no surprise.

The image of the ascent in the spiritual literature of the Middle Ages

The theme of the spiritual ascent found its way into some of the most famous Carthusian texts of the Middle Ages. This is notably the case with Guigo de Ponte's *De contemplatione* († 1297) and with the *Scala claustralium* by Guigo II (prior of the Grande Chartreuse from 1174 to 1180), with the latter having been preserved in more than hundred manuscripts and considered as a "classic of spirituality".[19] Writing on spiritual progress, Guigo II uses the image of a ladder with four rungs – namely those of *lectio*, *meditation*, *oratio* and *contemplatio* – that must be climbed in order to attain union with God. The image of the ladder comes from a tradition established by Origen and which flourished during the whole Middle Ages.[20]

Indeed, the vast production of late medieval religious literature (both in Latin and in the vernacular) dedicated to the inner life and spiritual evolution, comprises many texts that make frequent use of the notion of ascension to offer a stimulating and structured description of the quest for the union with God.[21] Numerous authors have thus drawn on the image of the ladder – deriving from the biblical passage of Jacob's dream at Bethel (Genesis 28: 10-22) – in which each rung symbolizes a virtue to be acquired or a behaviour to adopt for anyone hoping to attain perfection and thus to return to his pre-sinful state. Interestingly for the topic at hand here, several authors have also used the image of the ascents that the devotee must accomplish in his/her heart in order to express this spiritual evolution.

The literary history of the ascent theme begins in the first centuries of the Christian era. Origen († 254), in particular, paves the way for the long-lasting

[19] On the theme of spiritual ascent in Guigo de Ponte's *De contemplatione*, see Philippe Dupont, "L'ascension mystique chez Guigues du Pont", in *Kartäusermystik und -mystiker. Dritter internationaler Kongress über die Kartäusergeschichte und -spiritualität*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: 1981), 47-80. On Guigo II and his works, see Guigues II le Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative (l'échelle des moines). Douze meditations. Introduction et texte critique par Edmund Colledge et James Walsh, traduction par un chartreux* (Paris: 2001).

[20] Guigues II le Chartreux, *Lettre sur la vie contemplative*, 33.

[21] By way of introduction to medieval notions of spiritual and meditative processes, see the following articles of the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique. Doctrine et histoire* (hereafter abbreviated as *DS*): Pierre Pourrat, "commençants", in *DS* t. 2, vol. 1 (1953), col. 1143-1156; Hein Blommestijn, "Progrès-progressants", in *DS* t. 12, vol. 2 (1986), col. 2383-2405; André Solignac, "Voies", in *DS* t. 16 (1994), col. 1200-1215. See also Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 102-127.

institution of a medieval theory on the spiritual ascent of the soul in his *Homily XXVII on Numbers*, as this passage shows:

> After this, let us now strive to go forward and to ascend one by one each of the steps of faith and the virtues. If we dwell in them for such a long time until we come to perfection, we will be said to have made a stage at each of the steps of the virtues until when we reach the height of our instruction and the summit of our progress, the promised inheritance is fulfilled.[22]

Among medieval theologians who envisage the spiritual progress as a gradual and structured evolution, St Bonaventura († 1274) occupies perhaps the most important and influential position.[23] In the Franciscan doctor's oeuvre, the gradual organization of the inner life finds its most accomplished expression in the *De triplici via*, and in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*. This latter work deals with how the human soul can leave behind the perceptible world, move towards contemplation and experience union with God. Here, Bonaventura's discourse is decidedly mystical: it is not so much a matter of describing the acquisition of virtues as one of describing the soul's journey towards God. Bonaventura describes three stages of the soul's journey, with each stage being a twin step; the construction of the work is thus based on six ascending levels.[24] For its part, the *De triplici via* introduces the central notion of the "triple (or threefold) way" (purgation, illumination and union), which gives structure to the soul's activities and builds it according to God's image.[25] Bonaventura intimates how this goal may be achieved:

> In order to obtain peace, truth and charity it is therefore necessary to elevate oneself through three degrees, using the threefold way: first the purgative way which consists of staying away from sin; second, the illumination way which consists of the imitation of Christ; and the unitive way in which the bridegroom is received.[26]

Still in the thirteenth century, David of Augsburg († 1272) uses the metaphor of the ascent for more ascetic purposes in his *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*. The last book of this impressive work offers a description of

[22] Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck and Christopher A. Hall (Wesmont: 2009), 171.
[23] On this subject, see Jacques Guy Bougerol, *Introduction à saint Bonaventure* (Paris: 1988).
[24] The *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* has been translated into English in Saint Bonaventura, *The Mind's Road to God*, trans Georges Boas (New York: 1953). On the theme of ascension in the *Itinerarium*, see among others Bernard McGinn, "Ascension and Introversion in the *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*", in *S. Bonaventura. 1274-1974. Volumen commemorativum anni septies centenarii a morte S. Bonaventura Doctoris Seraphici cura et studio Commissionis Internationalis Bonaventurianae*, ed. Jacques Guy Bougerol, vol. 3 (Rome : 1973), 535-552.
[25] Ephrem Longpré, "Bonaventure", in *DS*, t. 1 (1937), col. 1792.
[26] *De triplici via*, c. 3, n. 1 (VIII, 12). Cited after Bougerol, *Introduction à Saint Bonaventure*, 245 (my translation).

man's progress to Wisdom by means of seven stages. The theologian explains the different temptations that man can encounter and the means of combating them. He also offers a presentation of the virtues that need to be acquired and a series of spiritual exercises that the devotee can practise.[27] This work exerted a decisive influence on the writers of the *Devotio moderna*, with whom the Carthusians cultivated links.[28]

The late fourteenth century is a decisive turning point in the literary history of the theme of the spiritual ascent, and more precisely in its circulation outside monastic circles. Treatises written in the vernacular by authors such as Jean Gerson (1363-1429) attest particularly well to this phenomenon. Gerson notably employs the image of the mountain that one must climb to reach God in his *Montaigne de contemplation*.[29] This image is also employed by the author of the *Neunfelsenbuch* ("Book of the Nine Cliffs"), a text written in Strasbourg in the second half of the fourteenth century and generally attributed to Rulman Merswin.[30] Furthermore, at this time, the theme of the spiritual ascent was spreading amongst the lay elite. For example, it was particularly appreciated by Bonne of Luxembourg and her son, Duke Jean de Berry.[31] Both possessed a manuscript containing a brief spiritual treatise written in French that, as Christian Heck has shown, is a paraphrase of an extract from Bonaventura's *De triplici via*.[32] The late fourteenth century is also the high point of the *Devotio moderna* movement. Amongst the founders of this religious movement recommending a renewal of spiritual life, Florent Radewijns (ca. 1350-1400)[33] and

[27] See André Rayez, "David d'Augsbourg", *DS*, t. 3 (1957), col. 43-44. See also Heck, *L'échelle céleste*, 126-127.

[28] On the relationship between the Carthusians and the *Devotio moderna*, see for instance Willem Lourdaux, "Enkele beschouwingen over de betrekkingen tussen Kartuizers en Moderne devotie", in *Handelingen van het XXV^e Vlaams filologen-congres* (Antwerp: 1963), 416-423 and Otto Gründler, "*Devotio Moderna Atque Antiqua*. The Modern Devotion and Carthusian Spirituality", in *The Spirituality of Western Christendom, vol. 2: The Roots of the Modern Christian Tradition*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo: 1984), 27-45.

[29] For an introduction to Jean Gerson, see Palémon Glorieux, *Jean Gerson, Œuvres complètes, 1, Introduction générale* (Paris: 1960) and Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park : 2005).

[30] On this text, see Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500). Vol. IV of the Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: 2005), 423-426.

[31] See Christian Heck, "L'iconographie de l'ascension spirituelle et la dévotion des laïcs: le Trône de charité dans le *Psautier de Bonne de Luxembourg* et les *Petites Heures du duc de Berry*", *Revue de l'art* 110 (1995), 9-22 and Heck, *L'échelle céleste*, 134-136.

[32] These manuscripts are the *Psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, inv. n° 69.88) and the *Petites Heures du duc de Berry* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms latin 18014). In both cases, the Bonaventurian text is accompanied by an illumination depicting Salomon's throne with the six stages of charity leading to God.

[33] In his *Tractatulus devotus*, Florent Radewijns offers a practical introduction to spiritual life strongly influenced by Bonaventura's *De triplici via*. Primarily destined for the Brothers of the Common Life, Radewijns's text presents a gradual progression in which the upward dynamic is implicit. For a recent edition of this text, see Florent Radewijns, *Petit manuel*

Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-1398), in particular, take a specific interest in the theme of the spiritual ascent.

Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen wrote two influential works dedicated to spiritual progress: the *Tractatus devotus de reformacione virium animae* (which circulated especially among houses of the *Devotio moderna*) and the *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (which enjoyed a wider circulation).[34] Both of these texts were read by Carthusians, as we will see later on. Although they deal with the same subject, the two texts adopt distinctly different structures: whereas, in *De reformacione*, Gerard Zerbolt opts for a systematic conception based on the reformation of the three powers of the soul (namely the will, the memory and the intellect)[35], in *De ascensionibus*, he uses a "processo-performative"[36] structure, which is constituted by a succession of steps leading to spiritual perfection and to love and vision of God. The personal and psychological approach adopted by Zerbolt in these books makes them treatises suitable not only for a religious or intellectual elite, but also for a larger audience interested in the spiritual life. Indeed, the wide circulation of *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* suggests that its colourful language was much appreciated by an educated lay audience.[37]

The *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* is particularly important here, for the structure of the text is not founded on the image of the rungs of a ladder (as it

pour le dévot moderne. Tractatulus devotus, trans. Sr Francis Joseph Legrand (Turnhout: 1999).

[34] Forty manuscripts of *De reformacione* have been preserved. Most of them were written in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, that is during the same period as the production of Christus' painting. The manuscripts mostly come from houses of the *Devotio moderna* or have a Carthusian, Benedictine or Cistercian origin. See Gérard Zerbolt, *Manuel de la réforme intérieure. Tractatus devotus de reformacione virium anime*, trans. Sr Francis Joseph Legrand (Turnhout: 2001), 43-59. A hundred and twenty-five manuscripts (complete or partial versions) of *De spiritualibus* are known (including nineteen Middle Dutch or Middle German translations). Many of these manuscripts come from charterhouses. See Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur. De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, trans. Sr Francis Joseph Legrand (Turnhout: 2006), 41-56.

[35] Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur*, 20.

[36] Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur*, 22.

[37] Gérard Zerbolt, *Manuel de la réforme intérieure*, 38-39. It is often stated that *De reformacione* was written prior to *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* because the second work is better constructed and because it includes a reference to an earlier text generally identified as *De reformacione*. See Joannes van Rooij, *Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen: leven en geschriften* (Nijmegen, Utrecht and Antwerp: 1936), 95. This hypothesis has been taken up by G. H. Gerrits, Inter timorem and spem. *A Study of the Theological Thought of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen (1367-1398)* (Leiden: 1986), 17 and more recently by José van Aelst in Gérard Zerbolt, *Manuel de la réforme intérieure*, 38. These authors claim that an extract of chapter 27 of *De spiritualibus* is referred to in a previous tract, which they identify as *De reformacione*. Nonetheless, according to Nikolaus Staubach in Legrand, *Gérard Zerbolt. La montée du Cœur*, 18, this mention is more likely an allusion to the content of the book itself rather than to another text. Consequently it is not possible to say which of the books was written first. Furthermore, it seems that Zerbolt deliberately conceived his books as two versions of the same theme, by taking inspiration from David of Augsburg's *De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione*. See Staubach in Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du Cœur*, 22.

is most often the case) but on that of the ascent, and visualization plays an important role in the process. Zerbolt's colourful language is thus available to the reader's imagination, who must realize his sinful state and "prepare ascents in his heart" (*igitur debes in corde disponere ascensiones*). This means practising meditation and spiritual exercises in order to attain everlasting beatitude. From the very first pages, the author asserts the didactic function of his work and tries to show his readers a way to ascend towards God:

> Here are proposed to you, as you set yourself for your ascent, five points found in these prophetic words, brief and in reverse order but full of meaning. First, where you ought to ascend, that is, the place which the Lord has appointed. This we should rightly understand as the state of natural rectitude in which the Lord once created and placed you. Set your heart, then, to ascend to that place from which you earlier willed to descend. Second, the place whence you ought to begin your ascent, a place called the "valley of tears". That "valley" should be construed as the overthrowing and impoverishment of your natural dignity. At the bottom now, you ought to return and ascend the mount from which you fell.[38]

As a true statement on devout life, the *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* appears as a guide, punctuated according to a scheme of three ascents that are a response to three descents, which have plunged mankind into its current state. The aim of this visual structure, based on ascents that the reader has to perform, is to help him/her to attain spiritual perfection.[39] It is important to stress that scholars usually insist on the purely ascetic nature of this book, as is the case for most of the major texts produced by the *Devotio moderna*.[40] Accordingly, the goal of the contemplative process (and more precisely the

[38] "Hec tibi quinque disponenti ascendere, ordine quamvis retrogrado, in verbis propheticis brevibus verbis sed plenitudine sensus, proponuntur. Primum enim, tibi proponitur quod debes ascendere in locum videlicet quem dominus posuit, quem non incongrue possumus intelligere statum naturalis tue rectudinis, in quo te idem Dominus quondam posuit and creavit, ut videlicet in illum locum ascensiones in corde disponas, unde prius descensiones disposuisti. Secundo, tibi proponitur locus a quo egredi debeas per ascensum cum dicitur in valle lacrimarum. Que quidem vallis congrue accipitur, deiectio and destitucio tue naturalis dignitatis, in qua velut in basso constitutus, rursum ad montem unde cecidisti debes ascendendo redire". Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur*, 98-101. English translation by John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna. Basic Writings* (New York: 1988), 245-246.

[39] The three descents are Adam's Fall, the impurity of the heart caused by worldly temptations, and deadly sin, all of which plunged mankind into the region of dissimilarity. The three ascents – designed to counter these falls – are penance, purity of the heart, and the struggle against vices. The chapters dedicated to the third ascent comprise a booklet on the meditation of the Passion of our Lord. See José van Aelst, "Bitter as Myrrh. Gerard Zerbolt's Meditation on the Passion of Christ", in *Kirchenreform von unten. Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen und die Brüder vom gemeinsamen Leben. Tradition – Reform – Innovation*, ed. Nikolaus Staubach (Frankfurt and Berlin: 2004), 306-323.

[40] Gerrits, Inter timorem and spem, 251; Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 26; and more generally Regnerus R. Post, *The Modern Devotion. Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden: 1968).

union with God) would be of little significance for Gerard Zerbolt. Admittedly, this text is teeming with moral considerations, but it does not prevent the author from clearly evoking union with God, notably by using a vocabulary that is reminiscent of the mysticism of Jan van Ruusbroec.[41] Thus, when he deals with the effects of the third ascent, Zerbolt writes: "through such gazing, clinging, and transforming of the mind, a man begins to become in a certain sense one spirit with God, to go beyond himself, to gaze upon the very truth, and thus to grow accustomed to union and adherence".[42] It would thus be wrong to consider the *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* as an exclusively moralizing work. In fact, it offers its audience the possibility of understanding and acquiring spiritual perfection in this world and thus of attaining union with God.[43] Seen from this angle, this treatise is a true basis for meditative practices leading to mystical union. The logic structuring Zerbolt's discourse is clearly that of ascending, evident in the three steps describing spiritual evolution. Thus, passages expressing spiritual progress in terms of ascent and elevation are extremely numerous, even in the booklet on the Meditations on the Passion inserted into the chapters dedicated to the third ascent. There, Gerard Zerbolt uses the imagery of the mountain of myrrh (symbol of bitterness) that the devout must climb.[44] It is also important to note that in this treatise, Zerbolt is firmly positive, as one of the very first sentence testifies: "I know, O man, that you wish to make your ascent and ardently desire to reach the heights. For you are a noble and rational creature endowed with a capacious soul, and you have therefore a natural desire for ascent and the heights".[45] Zerbolt's book thus appears as a support, a spiritual guide intended to help the reader attain purity of heart and a vision of God. As we will see below, texts are not the only tools that help the devotee to progress spiritually speaking. Images such as the *Exeter Madonna* also play a crucial role, even in a Carthusian context.

[41] The books produced by the *Devotio moderna* are mainly understood as examples of edification literature. However, they clearly possess a mystical dimension according to which they must be studied. On this, see Rudolf Th. M. van Dijk, "*Ascensiones in corde disponere*. Spirituelle Umformung bei Gerhard Zerbolt von Zutphen", in Staubach, *Kirchenreform von unten*, 302. On the links between the *Devotio moderna* and the mystical tradition, see Guido de Baere, "De Middelnederlandse mystieke literatuur en de Moderne Devotie", *Trajecta* 6 (1997), 3-18.

[42] "Et per huiusmodi mentis intuitum and adhesionem and transformacionem, incipit quodammodo homo unus spiritus cum Deo fieri and extra seipsum transgredi, and ipsam veritatem intueri, and ad unionem and adhesionem habilitari". Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur*, 208-209. English translation by Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 275.

[43] See van Dijk, "*Ascensiones in corde disponere*", 292.

[44] See van Aelst, "Bitter as Myrrh".

[45] "Novi, homo, quod ascensionum sis cupidus quodque exaltacionem vehementer concupiscis. Racionalis enim ac nobilis creatura es, and magni cuiusdam animi, ideoque altitudinem and ascensum naturali appandis desiderio". Gérard Zerbolt, *La montée du cœur*, 98-100. English translation by Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 245.

The *Exeter Madonna*, a "mise en image" of the spiritual ascent in a Carthusian context

As we have seen, the metaphor of the spiritual ascent was very popular in late medieval religious literature. More specifically, it enjoyed great success in texts written and/or read by Carthusians, as was notably the case with Zerbolt's treatises.[46] Taking this into account, the pictorial devices of the *Exeter Madonna* emphasized previously merit further investigation. The composition of the picture – with the earthly world below and the sacred realm above linked by an opening in the wall – strongly suggests that the monk had to climb, to *ascend*, in order to reach the entrance of the sacred place and thus to meet the Virgin and the Child. In order to appreciate the underlying meaning of the painting, it is necessary to focus on the identity of the monk portrayed, as well as on the visual and intellectual context he was living in.

The Carthusian monk depicted in the *Exeter Madonna* has been identified as Jan Vos, who also appears kneeling in prayer in Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with St Barbara, St Elisabeth and Jan Vos* (Fig. 7). Now held in the Frick Collection in New York, this painting is usually dated to around 1441 and is considered as a work begun by Jan van Eyck and finished by members of his workshop after his death.[47] In 1938, H. J. J. Scholtens discovered several archival documents that reveal the monk's identity and the circumstances of the commission: on 3 September 1443, the bishop of Bruges, Martinus de Mayo consecrated three altarpieces – one of them being the aforementioned Eyckian painting – offered to the Charterhouse of Bruges (also known as Genadedal or Val-de-Grâce) by Jan Vos, who was at this time the prior of the monastery.[48] During his visit, the bishop attached indulgences to these paintings, on the condition that they stay within the Order.[49]

[46] See note 34.

[47] See Frank Biebel, "The Virgin and Child with Saints and a Carthusian Donor by Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus", *Art Quarterly* 17 (1954), 423-425; Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting. I,* 61-62; Schabacker, *Petrus Christus*, n° 23; Upton, *Petrus Christus*, 11-18 and Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus*, n° 2.

[48] H. J. J. Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd met den Kartuizer* en de *Exeter Madonna* te Berlijn", *Oud Holland* 55 (1938), 49-62. These archival documents were first published in L. van Hasselt, "Het necrologium van het karthuizerklooster Nieuwlicht of Bloemendaal buiten Utrecht", *Bijdragen en Mededeelingen van het Historisch Genootschap gevestigd te Utrecht* 9 (1886), 126-392. They describe the two other paintings: the first depicted the Virgin and Child and the second the risen Christ and the Virgin and Child.

[49] Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd*", 53. See also H. J. J. Scholtens, "De priors van het kartuizerklooster Nieuwlicht bij Utrecht", *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het aartsbisdom Utrecht* 53 (1929), 330. On the Charterhouse of Nieuwlicht, see James Hogg and Gerhard Schlegel (eds), *Monasticon cartusiense*, vol. 3 (Salzburg: 2005), 191-194 and Johan P. Gumbert, *Die Utrechter Kartäuser und ihre Bücher im frühen fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (Leiden: 1974), 23-41.

Figure 7. Jan van Eyck (and workshop), *The Virgin of Jan Vos*, ca. 1441, oil on panel, 47.4 x 61.3 cm, The Frick Collection, New York, n° inv. 54.1.161 (artwork in the public domain).

At first a member of the Teutonic order, Jan Vos spent the most of his life in the order of St Bruno.[50] On 19 August 1431, he is mentioned as *procurator* of the Utrecht house of the Teutonic order. He then entered the Charterhouse of Nieuwlicht, in the neighbourhood of Utrecht, where he lived for a few years as a brother before being appointed prior of the Charterhouse of Genadedal in Bruges, replacing the former prior Gerard van Hamone in 1441.[51] At the very beginning of his stay in the Flemish city, Jan Vos commissioned from Van Eyck the painting now held in the Frick Collection for the church of the charterhouse. In 1450, Jan Vos returned to Nieuwlicht, where he also became prior. Leaving Bruges, he took the Eyckian painting with him and placed it in the church of his new monastery, on the altar dedicated to St Barbara, which was

[50] Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd*", 52. See also Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus*, 72.
[51] On the Charterhouse of Genadedal, see Jean-Pierre Esther, Jan De Grauwe and Vivian Desmet, *Het karthuizerklooster binnen Brugge. Verleden en toekomst* (Bruges: 1980); Jan de Grauwe, "Chartreuse du Val-de-Grâce à Bruges", in *Monasticon belge*, 4. Province de la Flandre occidentale (Liège: 1978), 1191-1230 and Hogg and Schlegel, *Monasticon cartusiense*, 108-116.

founded in 1446.[52] Jan Vos held the title of prior of Nieuwlicht until 1458, and he died in 1462.[53]

While in Bruges, Jan Vos thus commissioned not one, but two paintings that included a portrait of himself in prayer. The two works share the same patron, a similar iconography and the same type of composition: as in Christus' work, the Eyckian painting shows the prior kneeling in prayer in front of the Virgin and Child, this time with St Barbara and St Elizabeth. The scene takes place in a loggia located above an urban landscape displayed in the background. Nevertheless, in this case, no entrance or passage between the secular world and the sacred sphere is depicted. The fact that Jan Vos commissioned both paintings in Bruges has led some scholars to assert that Petrus Christus's work, which is dated to around 1450, was intended to replace the Eyckian altarpiece in the church of Genadedal after the departure of Jan Vos for Nieuwlicht.[54] This hypothesis seems, however, unlikely considering the very small size of the *Exeter Madonna* (20 x 14 cm). Altarpieces were generally bigger, even for small private chapels.[55] The size of Petrus Christus' picture makes it more likely that it was a painting intended for private devotion, which could be easily transported and used in different circumstances. Given that Jan Vos would have been unlikely to leave a private, devotional painting containing his own portrait in Bruges, we can reasonably assume that he took the two paintings with him to Nieuwlicht, one being destined for the St Barbara altar and the other for his personal use in his cell.

A fifteenth-century patron commissioning two paintings with a portrait of himself in prayer is not that common. We know of only a few of these, including those of Nicolas Rolin, Willem Moreel, Tommaso Portinari and two abbots of the Cistercian abbey of Ter Duinen in Koksijde.[56] It is thus even more curious

[52] Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd*", 51.
[53] See Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd*", 53; H.J.J. Scholtens, "De priors van het kartuizerklooster Nieuwlicht", 302.
[54] Scholtens, "Jan van Eycks *H. Maagd*", 61-62.
[55] Following Upton, *Petrus Christus*, 16 and Ainsworth, *Petrus Christus*, 104.
[56] Jan Crabbe and Tommaso Portinari are depicted in three paintings: the first appears in the *Triptych of Jan Crabbe* by Hans Memling (Vicence, Museo Civico, n° inv. A.297 for the central panel; New York, Pierpont Morgan Library for the inner wings and Bruges, Groeningemuseum, n° inv. 01254-1255 for the outer wings). He is also depicted in the first panel of the series of the genealogy of the dukes of Burgundy and the abbots of Ter Duinen, in which he appears in the company of Mary of Burgundy and the Pieter Vaillant (Bruges, Groot Seminarie) and in a *Triptych of the Virgin and Child*, in which his portrait has been overpainted (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, n° inv. 939-943-994). Portinari appears in the famous *Portinari Triptych* of Hugo van der Goes (Firenze, Galleria degli Uffizi, n° inv. 1525), in a double portrait with his wife by Hans Memling, which must be the wings of a triptych (New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, n° inv. 14.40.626-627) and in Memling's *Panorama of the Passion* (Turin, Galleria Sabauda, n° inv. 8). Nicolas Rolin commissioned the famous *Virgin of the Chancelor Rolin* by Jan van Eyck (Paris, Musée du Louvre, n° inv. 1271) and Rogier van der Weyden's *Beaune Altarpiece* (Beaune, Hôtel-Dieu). Willem Moreel appears in Memling's double portrait of him and his wife (Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, n° inv. 1451-52) and in the *Triptych Moreel* (Bruges,

that Jan Vos, a Carthusian monk, commissioned not one, but two religious paintings that included his own image. Indeed, the Carthusians are well known for their strict way of life and their negative appraisal of images. Founded in 1084 by St Bruno, the Carthusian order extols solitude, silence and simplicity as the only ways to cultivate a perfect contemplative life.[57] The monks lived a life of seclusion, spending most of the time alone in their cells, praying reading and copying books. Decorations in the church were supposed to be avoided, as were any other curious or luxurious objects in the monastery. As Guigo I, the fifth prior of the Grande Chartreuse (1109-1136) states in his *Consuetudines* – a text that can be considered as the "rule" of the order – "we do not have any ornaments of gold or silver in the church, with the exception of the chalice and the reed by which the blood of the Savior is taken, nor do we have hangings or carpets".[58] Despite such assertions (regularly repeated in further statutes of the order), charterhouses readily displayed images and works of art, especially during the late Middle Ages. As Yvette Carbonell-Lamothe states, "les chartreuses ont été du 14ème au 17ème siècle des lieux d'élection pour des formes artistiques de toute sorte, créations architecturales, picturales et même sculpturales, avec des raffinements de qualité".[59] So, what did the visual environment of Jan Vos in Bruges and Utrecht look like?

Although we do not have much information about the works of art and ornaments held in the Charterhouse of Genadedal in the fifteenth century, the situation in Utrecht is better known.[60] Many donations of stained-glass windows, liturgical objects, church ornaments and works of art to the Utrecht

Groeningemuseum, n° inv. O.91.I), while Christiaan de Hondt, appears in a diptych of the Master of 1499 (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, n° inv. 255-256) and in a copy of a *Virgin and Child* by Memling (Paris, Petit Palais).

[57] For an introduction to the Carthusian order and its history, see Peter Nissen, "De kartuizerorde: een eenwenoud getuigenis van stille concentratie", in *Het geheim van de stilte. De besloten wereld van de Roermondse Kartuizers. Verschenen ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling in het voormalige kartuizerklooster 'O.L. Vrouw van Bethlehem' te Roermond, Maart – Juni 2009*, ed. Krijn Pansters (Zwolle: 2009), 12-21. On the relationship of the order to art in the late Middle Ages, see Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness. Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago and London: 2007), 27-77; Sherry Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol* (Aldershot: 2008), Liesbeth Zuidema, "De functie van kunst in de Nederlandse kartuizerskloosters", in Pansters, *Het geheim van de stilte*, 48-61 and Liesbeth Zuidema, *Verbeelding en ontbeelding. Een onderzoek naar de functie van kunst in Nederlandse kartuizerkloosters (1450-1550)*, PhD Diss. (Leiden: 2010).

[58] "Ornamenta aurea vel argentea, preter calicem et calamum quo sanguis domini sumitur, in ecclesia non habemus, pallia tapetiaque reliquimus". Guigo I, *Consuetudines*, 40.I. Quoted and translated by Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 59.

[59] Yvette Carbonell-Lamothe, "Conclusions", in *Les chartreux et l'art. XIVe-XVIIIe siècle. Actes du Xe colloque international d'histoire et de spiritualité cartusiennes (Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, 15-18 septembre 1988)*, eds. Alain Girard and Daniel Le Blévec (Paris: 1989), 395.

[60] Research on Carthusian patronage in the Low Countries still needs to be undertaken. Regarding Genadedal, unpublished and unstudied archives mentioned in Jan de Grauwe, "Chartreuse du Val-de-Grâce", 1192-1194 should reveal some interesting information. Hogg and Schlegel, *Monasticon cartusiense*, 111-112 mentions the existence of several tomb

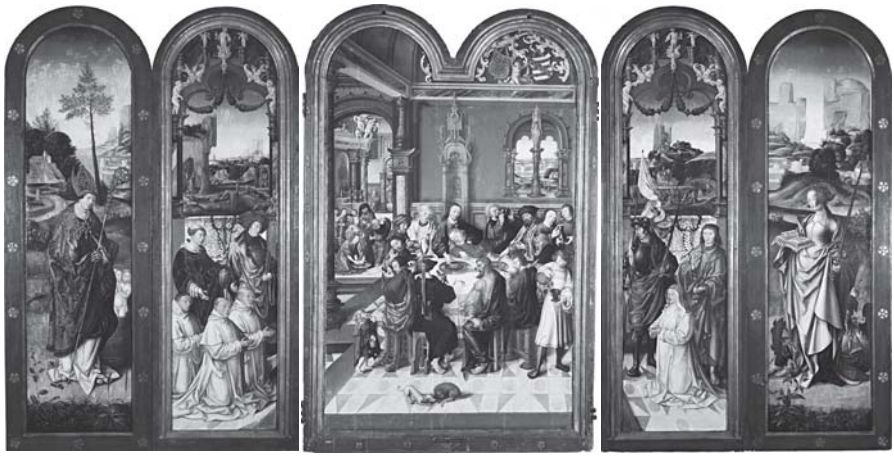

Figure 8. Anonymous master from Utrecht, *Triptych of the Last Supper*, 1520-1521, oil on panel, 149.5 cm x 96.5 cm (central panel) and 149.5 cm x 39 cm (wings), Centraal Museum, Utrecht, n° inv. 31199 (artwork in the public domain).

charterhouses are recorded for this period.[61] Alongside the paintings brought by Jan Vos, another work from the monastery has been preserved. Dated between February 1520 and February 1521 and attributed to an anonymous master active in Utrecht, this *Triptych of the Last Supper* depicts on its wings three Carthusian monks and a nun kneeling in prayer (Fig. 8). Although of a later date, this work is interesting, as it gives us an idea of the kind of works of art that were located in charterhouses. Furthermore, the historical context surrounding the commissioning of this triptych is well known: the three monks have been identified as Jacob and Vincent Pauw and Pieter Sas; the woman on the right is Digna Sas, their aunt.[62] Ghijsbert Pauw, the father of Jacob and Vincent, was a rich benefactor of the charterhouse. He notably donated a large

monuments and floor slabs dating from the fourteenth century, as well as some early modern paintings, but without offering further information.

[61] See Rolf de Weijert, "Gift-Giving Practices in the Utrecht Charterhouse. Donating to be Remembered?", in *Living Memoria. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Memorial Culture in Honour of Truus van Bueren*, eds. Rolf de Weijert, Kim Ragetli, Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld and Jeannette van Arenthals (Hilversum: 2011), 160-162.

[62] The monks are all nephews of Digna: Pieter was prior of Nieuwlicht between 1525 and 1540; Vincent had first been a monk in Nieuwlicht before moving to the Charterhouse of Zonnenberg; Jacob is recorded in the Utrecht Charterhouse as a novice in February 1520, before being professed in February 1521. Since he is depicted as a novice, the triptych can be dated between 1520 and 1521. See Raymond van Luttervelt, "Twee utrechtse primitieven (Johannes van Huemen?)", *Oud Holland* 62 (1947), 107-122; H.J.J. Scholtens, "Kunstwerken in het Utrechtse kartuizerklooster. Nogmaals: De kloosterkerk van Nieuwlicht en het drieluik van de H. H. Martelaren (1521)", *Oud Holland* 67 (1952), 157-166 and Henri Defoer, "The Triptych of the Pauw-Sas Family from the Utrecht Charterhouse", in *Living Memoria*, 321-332.

amount of money to the monastery when his son Jacob was professed. Ghijsbert Pauw died in 1521 and was buried in the church of Nieuwlicht, near the Holy martyrs' altar. Funded by the persons portrayed on the wings, the triptych was most surely destined for this altar, where it functioned as a memorial piece. The presence on the triptych of Digna Sas – who came from outside the monastery – and the historical information collected highlight a common phenomenon of late medieval charterhouses: the aristocratic patronage of these "princely charterhouses", with the Charterhouse of Champmol (founded in 1383 by the duke and duchess of Burgundy Philip the Bold and Margaret of Flanders) being one of the most famous examples.[63] Indeed, in the late Middle Ages, charterhouses were frequently built in the neighbourhood of big cities and depended largely on the donations of wealthy benefactors. In exchange for this financial support, these benefactors expected the Carthusians – who were then considered as a spiritual elite – to pray for the salvation of their souls. As Sherry Lindquist states:

> The Carthusians' conservatism and solitary vocation argued for a spiritual advantage for the wealthiest patrons able to subsidize the greatest numbers of Carthusian prayers. If the mendicants held a special attraction for the urban middle classes, the Carthusians distinctly appealed to the highest nobility by their elitism and exclusivity.[64]

Departing from the Carthusian ideal of solitude, these practices implied interactions between the monks and the outside world and are generally considered as the main cause of the presence of works of art within charterhouses. First, the introduction of donated works of art was mainly restricted to the conventual parts of the monastery, but they rapidly reached the monks' cells, as patrons regularly donated books and small images as gifts.[65] For a long time, scholars assumed that the presence of images in Carthusian monasteries could first and foremost be explained by the influence of benefactors. However, a few years

[63] I borrow this expression ("chartreuses princières") from Alain Girard, "Le décor en chartreuse : la place de la Chartreuse de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon dans le développement de l'image", in *Le décor des églises en France méridionale (XIIIe-mi XVe siècle)*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 28 (Toulouse: 1993), 372. Among the early examples of this phenomenon, one can think of the Charterhouses of Paris (founded in 1257 by Louis, king of France) and of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon (founded by Pope Innocent VI in 1353).

[64] Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 190. For the specific case of Utrecht, see de Weijert, "Gift-Giving Practices". The Carthusians were known as an order "never reformed because never deformed", as stated by their motto.

[65] See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 64 and 350 (n. 156). The most famous examples of such images donated for monks' cells are the twenty-six paintings commissioned by Philip the Bold for the cells of Champmol. Jean de Beaumetz and his workshop produced the images between 1389 and 1395. Only two of them – featuring a Carthusian praying before the Christ on the cross – have survived (Paris, Musée du Louvre, n° inv. R.F.1967-3 and Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, n° inv. 1964.454). See Charles Sterling, "Œuvres retrouvées de Jean de Beaumetz, peintre de Philippe le Hardi", *Bulletin des Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 4 (1955), 57-81 and Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 53.

ago, this assumption was revised and the involvement of the monks in the visual programme of their charterhouses is now increasingly being taken into consideration.[66]

Depicting Carthusians in prayer, the *Triptych of the Last Supper* and the *Exeter Madonna* are witnesses of the active role played by the monks when it comes to the commissioning and use of visual images within the charterhouse. For that matter, the different statutes of the order written during the Middle Ages and other Carthusian texts sometimes present ambivalent remarks about art in the charterhouses.[67] In his *De origine et veritate perfectae religionis* (c. 1313), Guillaume d'Ivrée (also known as Guillelmus de Yporegia) delivers crucial information on the private visual environment of the monks. According to d'Ivrée, Carthusians were allowed to have one crucifix and one image of the Virgin (or of another saint) in the oratory of their cell. He also states that:

> The Carthusians in their cells do not refuse nor reject devotional pictures, but accept and seek them freely and eagerly because they excite devotion and imagination, and augment devotional ideas.[68]

Here we find an obvious and crucial justification of the use of devotional imagery by Carthusian monks: such images can be used by the monks within the privacy of their own cell, because of their affective and meditative power. As its small dimensions indicate, the *Exeter Madonna* was most certainly an image of this type, conceived as a support for Jan Vos' private meditation, performed in his cell or his oratory.

[66] In this regard, Lindquist's work on the Charterhouse of Champmol is exemplary. She showed that the complex and luxurious art produced for Champmol conveys not only the wishes and expectations of the duke of Burgundy, but that it also represented a way for the Carthusians to establish their ideology, their reputation and their identity. She also demonstrated that the monks directly intervened in the development of the artistic programme of the charterhouse. See Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*. See also Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 65. Some case studies have also been published, especially regarding the works of art created by Rogier van der Weyden for the Charterhouse of Scheut: Penny Jolly, "Rogier Van Der Weyden's Escorial and Philadelphia Crucifixions and their Relation to Fra Angelico at San Marco", *Oud Holland* 95 (1981), 113-26; Anne D. Hedeman, "Roger Van Der Weyden's Escorial *Crucifixion* and Carthusian Devotional Practices", in *The Sacred Image East and West*, eds. Leslie Brubaker and Robert Ousterhouse (Urbana: 1995), 191-203 and Elliott D. Wise, "Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Ruusbroec: Reading, Rending, and Re-Fashioning the 'Twice-dyed' Veil of Blood in the Escorial Crucifixion", in *Imago Exegetica: Visual Images as Exegetical Instruments, 1400-1700*, eds. Walter S. Melion, Michel Weemans and James Clifton (Leiden: 2014), 886-907.

[67] See Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 59 for some examples.

[68] "Cartusienses in cellis suis, sicut praedictum est, devotas picturas non renuunt nec recusant, sed ad excitationem devotionis et imaginationis, et augmentum devotae conceptionis, easdem libenter et affetuose recipiunt et requirunt". Quoted and translated by Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 69 and 352 n. 177. On this treatise, see James Hogg, "Guillelmus de Yporegia: *De origine et veritate perfecte religionis*", *Analecta cartusiana* 82:2 (1980), 84-118.

Devotional imagery was not the only tool used by the monks in their contemplative practices; books also played a fundamental role. Following Guigo's *Consuetudines*, each monk was allowed to keep two books in his cell, which were presented as "food for the soul".[69] As Jessica Brantley states, "Carthusian books serve as instruments of the spiritual imagination for Carthusian hermits; they structure the experiences of individual contemplation that are the aim and purpose of the order".[70] It thus appears that late medieval Carthusians had recourse to both texts and images through which to enrich their spiritual life. This fact is significant for the understanding of how books and paintings functioned in a Carthusian context. In this respect, the Charterhouse of Nieuwlicht – where Jan Vos spent several years before moving to Bruges where he commissioned the *Exeter Madonna* and then returned – is particularly interesting since the most important part of its library has been preserved (now at the Utrecht University Library) and is well known: in 1974, J. P. Gumbert published an in-depth study on the content of the library in the fifteenth century.[71] This research revealed that during the first half of the fifteenth century, the Carthusians of Nieuwlicht copied and acquired a large number of manuscripts containing treatises dedicated to prayer and contemplation. As far as mystical works are concerned, this charterhouse is known to have owned a manuscript comprising the Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical theology* and its glosses by Thomas Gallus (Utrecht, University Library, ms. 79), Hugh of Balma's *De triplici via* (also known as *Via Sion lugent*, Utrecht, UL, ms. 343), several texts of Bernard of Clairvaux (Utrecht, UL, mss. B155, B158, B159, B160, B162) and a copy of Geert Grote's Latin translation of Jan van Ruusbroec's *Geestelijk brulocht* (Utrecht, UL, ms. 282). The Carthusians of Nieuwlicht also owned an interesting volume comprising an incomplete version of Bonaventura's *De Triplici Via* (discussed above) and several texts issued from the *Devotio moderna*: Florent Radewijns' *Libellus "Omnes inquit artes"*, Geert Grote's *Epistula scripta cuidam novicio in ord. Cartus.*, and a letter from Jan van Schoonhoven entitled *Epistula missa in Eemstein prima* (Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Ms. 68.15 Aug. 8°). This manuscript reminds us of the interest the Carthusians had in the texts produced by the *Devotio moderna*, and the library of Nieuwlicht also housed several other texts written by authors of the movement. Especially interesting are the mss 313 and 314 of the Utrecht University Library, for they contain *De reformacione virium animae* and *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen.[72]

[69] For an introduction to the relationship of Carthusians to books, see Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 46-57.
[70] Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 54.
[71] Gumbert, *Die Utrechter Kartäuser*. On Carthusian libraries and the production of books, see also Erik Kwakkel, Die dietsche boeke die ons toebehoeren*: de kartuizers van Herne en de productie van Middelnederlandse handschriften in de regio Brussel (1350 - 1400)* (Leuven: 2002) and more generally, on late medieval monastic libraries in the Low Countries, see Karl Stooker and Theo Verbeij, *Collecties op orde: middelnederlandse handschriften uit kloosters en semi-religieuze gemeenschappen in de Nederlanden* (Leuven: 1997).
[72] On these manuscripts, see Gumbert, *Die Utrechter Kartäuser*, 319-343.

Together with the works of Bonaventura and Hugh of Balma, Gerard Zerbolt's treatises indicate that the Nieuwlicht monks were particularly concerned with the progress of the inner life and with the theme of the spiritual ascent. During the years he spent as a brother in Nieuwlicht in the 1430s and then later after his return from Bruges, Jan Vos had direct and regular access to these books available in the library. He was able to take them to his cell in order to "feed his soul". It thus comes as no surprise that once in Bruges, Jan Vos commissioned a devotional painting that presents a clear emphasis on the ascent, thanks to the pictorial devices described above. These visual strategies indeed take on a particular dimension hen confronted to the readings of the Carthusian monks of Nieuwlicht: in the light of the numerous devotional tracts dealing with the theme of the spiritual ascent kept in the library of the charterhouse, the pictorial devices of the *Exeter Madonna* become particularly resonant. It is indeed tempting to draw parallels between these texts and the painting, both of them being instruments for Jan Vos' meditative practices in his cell, and thus to understand Petrus Christus' painting as a visual expression of the idea of the soul's ascent to God which was so cherished by Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen and many other spiritual writers whose works were available in the library of Jan Vos' charterhouse. The scene can truly be understood as an image of the spiritual ascent of the Carthusian. As a religious man, Jan Vos would have received an education that would explain the spiritual content of the painting he commissioned, but there is more at stake here: he was living in an environment specifically open to interest in such ideas; this environment no doubt aroused his spiritual concerns, which find a visual expression in the *Exeter Madonna* he commissioned to Petrus Christus. As Falkenburg has already underlined, in late medieval meditative practices, text and image complement each other in their ability to encourage prayer and meditation.[73] Together with the books Jan Vos was able to take to his cell, this devotional painting was a tool for his meditative practices as a Carthusian monk.

Petrus Christus's work visually represents the spiritual progress of Jan Vos and thus can be considered, in the same way as Zerbolt of Zutphen's tracts, as a support and a visualization of the spiritual perfection that Jan Vos was willing to strive to attain. More specifically, the painting gives a concrete expression to this will; it even materializes it: do the Virgin and her Son not welcome the prior into the celestial palace? Thanks to the biographical and contextual information linked to the *Exeter Madonna*, it clearly appears that this image bore special devotional meanings in the eyes of its patron. On a more general level, this image also attests that paintings including devotional portraits were closely linked to the spiritual interests of their owners and were able to play an active role in their devotional life, as a tool and a "mise en image" of their spiritual progression toward God.

[73] See Falkenburg, "The Household of the Soul".

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Summary

Depicting the Carthusian monk Jan Vos (successively prior of the Charterhouses of Bruges and Utrecht) kneeling in prayer in front of the Virgin and Child, Petrus Christus' *Exeter Madonna* is a small painting probably destined to private devotional practices of its owner. This work is particularly interesting for it perfectly illustrates how the structuring of the pictorial space endows paintings that include devotional portraits with a dynamic dimension and how this dimension plays an essential role in the spiritual meaning and function of such images. The aim of this article is to show that by bringing together the worldly sphere below in the background and the sacred space in the foreground, where the Virgin welcomes the devotee, the *Exeter Madonna* can be understood as a visualization of the spiritual ascent of Jan Vos. To this end, the visual structure of the painting is closely analysed, before being compared with devotional texts dealing with the theme of the spiritual ascent (such as *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen), which Jan Vos knew well. Secondly, this devotional painting is re-placed within its context, namely the Charterhouses of Utrecht and Bruges and Carthusian spirituality in order to demonstrate that together with books, such images played a crucial role in the meditative practices of Carthusian monks.

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