Embedded Portraits: Appending a New Myth to an Old Myth

BY CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD

Religious art of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance in Europe was marked by the craving presence of the prosaic, the concrete, the familiar, the everyday. Vivid descriptions of furniture and clothes, local flora and landscapes, hometown buildings and skylines, vignettes of laboring and sporting peasants threatened to distract the devout beholder from the sacred narrative. The purpose of the painting, after all, was to train the mind on the episodes of the lives of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. A dramatic instance of this profana- nation of the cult image was the embedded portrait, the topic of my research at the IAS in fall 2011.

The embedded portrait is the image of a real, modern person, usually the donor or person who paid for the painting, introduced into the narrative. The donor has himself or herself depicted in an attitude of pious attentiveness. A good example is the Nativity of Christ by the Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden, painted in the middle years of the fifteenth century—the exact date is unknown—and today in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin. This is the central section of a three-panel altarpiece, of which, perhaps once mounted on an altar in a chapel, perhaps displayed in an altar-like space in a home. Mary and Joseph, sharing quarters with an ox and an ass, contemplate the naked body of the Child. The stall is pictured as an ancient building in ruins, a symbol of the Jewish and pagan belief systems that Christianity was meant to supplant. The stall in the background resembles neither Bethlehem nor Jerusalem but rather, with its spires, gables, and tiled roofs, a modern northern European town. The gentleness of the figures, the richly expressive-looking fur-lined coat and wooden clogs to protect his fine pointed shoes. He presses his hands together in reverence. This is the donor. He is not identified by an inscription or a coat of arms. But there is good reason to believe, on the basis of the painting’s whereabouts in the seventeenth century, that he is Pieter Bladelin, a man of respectable origins who rose through political acumen to a high station in the court of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, in Bruges.

The embedded portrait is not a diminutive supplement, an accessory to the sacred painting, pressed into a margin or a corner. He appears in full scale alongside the holy personages. He is not disguised as a historical figure; as one of the crypto-portrait, was a favored tactic of some of sacred painting, pressed into a margin or a corner. He is not identified by an inscription or a coat of arms. But there is good reason to believe, on the basis of the painting’s whereabouts in the seventeenth century, that he is Pieter Bladelin, a man of respectable origins who rose through political acumen to a high station in the court of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, in Bruges.

The painting features Bladelin’s incomplete participation in the scene. The portrait is set like a gem in the midst of the painting. The dense description of the bowled head is radiant. Bladelin’s physiognomy is more memorable than the generic heads of Mary and Joseph. The artificial worlds that the religious imagination builds are unlike the world experienced every day as fact. The painting acknowledges that dissimilarity by staging a clash between two different modes of pictorial signification. On the one hand, there is the Holy Family, the birth-stall, the ox and the ass, and the angels. The picture summons these elements of the myth by quoting other pictures. The painter’s own picture cannot stray too far from established pictorial conventions or its subject will not be recognizable. The beholder must believe that the pictorial tradition supporting this painting is rooted in antiquity and transmits reliable knowledge about the historical Nativity. On the other hand, there is the portrait of Bladelin. That portrait does nothing other than point to something real in the world. Rogier van der Weyden has passively transcribed a patch of reality. Bladelin’s presence is a singular fact that almost surely had never before been depicted. The significance of that fact—Bladelin’s is not disguised as a historical figure; as one of the crypto-portrait, was a favored tactic of some of sacred painting, pressed into a margin or a corner. He is not identified by an inscription or a coat of arms. But there is good reason to believe, on the basis of the painting’s whereabouts in the seventeenth century, that he is Pieter Bladelin, a man of respectable origins who rose through political acumen to a high station in the court of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, in Bruges.

The portrait of Bladelin does nothing other than anchor the painting, and the altar and chapel it adorns, to Bladelin the man. But the portrait has another significance that emerges only when the way it is linked to the factual world is compared to the way the rest of the picture is linked to reality. The portrait’s strong referential link to the world is achieved by the painter’s dazzling technical skill. The portrait convinces us of its own fidelity to its model even though we don’t have the model to compare it to. Before the fifteenth century in Europe, painting did not have this weapon in its arsenal. Now suddenly the portrait makes the factual world reappear inside paintings. The embedded portrait casts doubt on the factuality of the persons and events described by the rest of the picture. The portrait lands inside the religious painting, the depicted myth, as a foreign body. It is a hard fragment of the real that suggests that everything around it is a mere fiction, a product of a weaker form of signification.

By introducing irreducible fragments of real life, in the form of portraits and other individuated descriptions like the cityscape in the background, the painted image opened its borders to lived experience. For experience, the world is emergent. It is always unfolding in time. Painting has difficulty representing this kind of time. The portrait tries to do that, paradoxically, by representing the individual fixed in historical time. For that individual, and we know this from our own experience of being exposed in every way to the passage of time. The portrait with its hidden reserve of life reveals the characters surrounding it to be mere characters. The real subject of Rogier van der Weyden’s painting is the tension between emergent time and mythic time.

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