







# Four Prophets by Lorenzo Monaco

GUY-PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO

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ONE OF THE most attractive pictures of the late Middle Ages," wrote Bernard Berenson in 1932 about one of the four panels by Lorenzo Monaco (Cover, Frontispiece, Figures 1-2) recently purchased by the Metropolitan. This beautiful series of four enthroned prophets represents one of the most important acquisitions made by the Museum in the area of late Gothic Italian painting since the early years of the century. The paintings are exceptionally fine and unusually well preserved examples of the work of the leading painter in Florence at the turn of the fifteenth century, and the Metropolitan is very fortunate in having been able to acquire them, for outstanding works of this period, especially in good condition, are of the greatest rarity.

These panels can be shown all the more meaningfully since our representation of the school of Florence, relatively weak for a long time, has been markedly improved by other recent acquisitions. In 1950 the first Gothic polyptych, complete in all its parts, entered the Museum; dated 1394 and fully documented, it represents the Coronation of the Virgin with Saints and is stylistically related to the work of Orcagna and Agnolo Gaddi, leading exponents of the late Giottesque tradition in Florence. In 1953 the Museum acquired for The Cloisters the Intercession of Christ and the Virgin, the first known Italian altarpiece on canvas, by an anonymous but very gifted follower of Or-

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David (Cover), Moses (Frontispiece), Abraham (Figure 1), and Noah (Figure 2), by Lorenzo Monaco (about 1370-1425), Florentine. About 1406. Tempera and gold on wood, all about 23 x 17 inches. Purchase, Gwynne M. Andrews Fund, Henry G. Marquand Fund, Bequest of Mabel Choate in memory of her father, Joseph Hodges Choate, Gifts of Mrs. Ralph J. Hines, Paul Peralta Ramos, G. Louise Robinson, 65.14.1-4

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cagna. In 1958 the Museum bought a characteristic early work by Lorenzo di Niccolo Gerini, An Episode from the Life of San Giovanni Gualberto, illustrative of the last stages of the Giottesque tradition at the end of the trecento. Lorenzo Monaco infused with new life what was by then a nearly moribund tradition. For some years the Museum possessed only a single example of his work, an appealing but somewhat worn Madonna and Child with Angels (Figure 14); the recently purchased series of prophets, exquisite in draughtsmanship and brilliant and glowing in color, ranks with the best of his works.

Don Lorenzo Monaco, whose real name was Pietro di Giovanni, was born in Siena about 1370. He must have come to Florence at an early age, for his first known works, dating from 1387-1388, show very close affinities to the style of Agnolo Gaddi, who was in all probability his teacher. In 1391 he entered the Camaldolese monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where he learned the art of miniature painting. The practice of this craft, which requires great precision of technique, marked his style even in altarpieces. From the start, however, he possessed as well a genuine sense of monumentality and grandeur. The culminating point of his career was the great altarpiece of the Coronation of the Virgin of 1414, now in the Uffizi, in which he successfully combined Gothic linearism with Giottesque plasticity. The felicitous blend of these two very different aesthetics is the hallmark of his style.

Lorenzo was the greatest exponent of the International Gothic style in Florence, but unlike Ghiberti, his counterpart in sculpture, he was not an innovator, nor did he possess the creative genius or imaginative power of a Masaccio. Rather, he is to be singled out from among his contemporaries as a particularly sensitive artist, a highly accomplished craftsman with a keen sense of color and elegance of design. His importance lies in having brought to a peak of refinement the traditional character of late trecento painting and in having introduced an element of poetry and fantasy to its worn-out set of conventions. He was not a pacesetter, but his influence on the art of the succeeding generations was real. G. Pudelko expressed it well: Lorenzo "belonged to that revolutionizing new movement, the style of which, though seemingly overcome by Masaccio, has always secretly continued its existence in Tuscan painting. Thus it comes again, recurring in the lyric, sometimes even elegiac linear craftsmanship of Giovanni di Paolo and achieves, first in the late works of Uccello and later on in the paintings of Botticelli, a supreme symbiosis with the modern forms of the Renaissance in Florence."

Our panels, which represent Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, may be dated about 1406, after the Empoli Madonna and Child of 1404, in which Gothic stylization is only starting to appear, and about the time of the Uffizi polyptych of the Madonna and Child with Saints, dated 1406-1410, in which it is more fully assimilated. Our panels, however, must have been completed before 1409, when he executed a choir book now in the Laurenziana (Figure 6), for there the Gothic idiom is more pronounced.

The lyrical and picturesque qualities that are discernible in Lorenzo's early works can be traced to Siena, but the change to a more flamboyant linearism toward 1404 is certainly due to the influence of the International style, then flourishing in most of the leading courts of Europe from Dijon to Prague. It is a highly luxurious, sophisticated, often intensely emotional art, very realistic in details, but always elegant. Although it





4. The Trinity, by Agnolo Gaddi (about 1369-1396), Florentine. About 1390. Tempera and gold on wood, 53½ x 28¾ inches. Gift of George Blumenthal, 41.100.33

was northern Italy that was directly affected by this style – the building of Milan Cathedral attracted many international artists, and masters such as Michelino da Besozzo and Giovannino de' Grassi were steeped in this tradition – Lorenzo could have come in contact with it through illuminated manuscripts, as many must have found their way into Tuscan monasteries. The University of Bologna, which produced many manuscripts in the French manner, was probably an important source of dissemination.

At the turn of the fifteenth century Florence offered a particularly receptive atmosphere for the International style. During the second half of the fourteenth century the city had been torn by economic and social crises: spectacular bankruptcies, drastic swings in leadership—first to the right and then to the left—and devastating epidemics of the plague. With renewed prosperity toward 1400 came the return to power of the upper middle class, and the luxurious, courtly art of the North was ideally suited to the aristocratic aspirations of this new ruling bourgeoisie.

At the same time the plague, which had wiped out entire families and left nearly all others in mourning, made a profound impression on the people. Fear of God and a deep sense of guilt resulted, inspiring men to contrition and moving them to greater piety. The religious orders became stricter, and the so-called Observant movement sprang up—to which the monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli belonged—advocating closer adherence to doctrine and to the institutional authority of the Church.

The works of Lorenzo Monaco, with their happy fusion of the monastic and the courtly, are in perfect accord with the ideological and social climate of the Florence of his day. In the case of our panels, the brilliant and refined color scheme, the nobility of the figures, in which something of the courtly art of the dukes of Burgundy can be felt, must have satisfied Florentine nostalgia for the splendors of a past chivalric age, just as the Florentines' deeply religious spirit is reflected in the mystical intensity of the prophets' severe, brooding faces.

Although cast from the same generic mold as most bearded prophets of the trecento, these are not stereotypes, but show astonishing differences in physiognomy and character. The specific Messianic purpose of each is dramatically conveyed by gesture and still more subtly by bearing and expression – particularly about the eyes. Their vitality is notable when compared with the frozen, hieratically rigid figures of Agnolo Gaddi's Trinity (Figure 4), also in the Museum.

Noah (Figure 2), holding the ark on one knee, looks intently heavenward in the direction of his pointing finger. With this simple gesture, he urges the onlooker to hearken to the word of God, thereby assuring him of salvation just as the ark assured mankind's. Noah appears here as the symbol of obedience, and his features reflect none of the inner conflict and intensity of emotion that knit the brows of the other prophets. His gesture is one of fatherly admonition, his limpid gaze an act of faith.

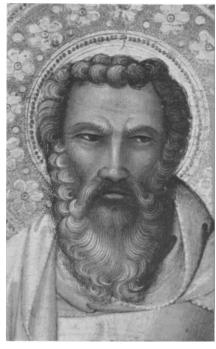
On the other hand, Abraham's heart-rending covenant with God is clearly reflected in the anguished look in his eyes, and in the plaintive expression of his half-parted lips (Figure 1). He has made the dreadful decision to sacrifice to God his long-awaited son, and lays a loving hand upon his head. Isaac's eyes stare at the fearful instruments of his sacrifice, and his untroubled features make more poignant his father's expression of resignation. Abraham, who actually appears more symbolic than threatening, holds the knife and the flame vertically, as though fixed for eternity; indeed, it is as a cult figure, in a "heraldic summation of his life" that the patriarch is shown. Like Noah, he represents a model of obedience, but also of self-denial and of unquestioning trust in the Lord.

In the fiery eyes of Moses (Frontispiece) there is the anger of the prophet breaking the tablets of the law and destroying the golden calf; in his clenched lips there is firmness and determination, and in his bearing, nobility and assurance. As savior of the chosen people, he sits upon his throne holding the heavy stone tablets, his white hair swirling about his swarthy, virile face, just as he might have

appeared upon wind-swept Mount Sinai. The most dynamic of the four, Moses, unlike Noah, almost threatens us to heed God's commandments.

The ecstatic, languorous expression of David (Cover) contrasts markedly with the flamboyance of Moses. Wearing the crown and rich garments of a king, the deep folds cascading to the ground in splendid majesty, David plays the psaltery and sings the words of the psalms. His eyes look dreamily heavenward to the divine source of his inspiration. Like the other three prophets, his seriousness of purpose is conveyed with convincing forcefulness and clarity; like them, he is intense and distinctly alive. It is truly astonishing that Lorenzo was able to impart so much expression and life to cult figures, and yet sacrificed none of the hieratic frontality required of them.

In terms of style and technique, the most telling characteristic of these panels is a seeming contradiction in both the ends desired and the means used to achieve them. This is because Lorenzo, while espousing the graphic mannerisms of the International style and the jewel-like technique of miniaturists, also remained faithful to the Giottesque tradition of grandeur and plasticity. On the one hand, our prophets seem carved upon their thrones, the deep, heavy folds of their garments possessing the solidity of hewn marble. Unlike the figures in many gold-ground paintings of the period, they do not seem to be mere cutouts, pasted against the burnished gold; through Lorenzo's mastery over light-his unerring precision in the placement of highlights and shadows and his faultless gradations into halftones - they are made to exist in a surprisingly real space before the flat ground. On the other hand, however, the bright, refulgent colors work optically against the weight and substance conveyed by modeling, and offer a startling contrast to the gravity of the spiritual message. The bright pinks, the mauves, the metallic blues, the yellows and greens, which sing out with the purity and radiance of a picture book, tend to flatten the figures, in direct contradiction to their plastic treatment. Much of the illusion of reality,



5. Head of Abraham

6. Detail of an illuminated manuscript, by Lorenzo Monaco.
1409. Colors and gold on parchment, dimensions of page 263/8 x 183/4 inches. Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana, Florence, Chorale Book 3, fol. 86v.

convincingly rendered by strong modeling and varied, lively expression, is negated by this fairy-tale quality of the color scheme. The flamboyance and piercing gaze of Moses, for instance, call for a strong emotional response, yet the cool blue and glowing violet of his robe and the light saffron yellow of its lining, toying with the pale gray-green of the bench, transport us into a world of fantasy wholly unrelated to the stern admonition of the patriarch.

The realistic impact, the effect of relief carved into the folds by light and shade,

is further diminished by the subtle but pervasive insistence of the lines, forming abstract and flowing rhythms. Lorenzo has evidently taken great joy in drawing playful arabesques with the hems of David's robe and mantle; the rich, swirling hair and beard of Moses fall rather incongruously upon the neat and gently curving folds of his cape, a gem of calligraphic design. In all four panels the highly developed sculptural sense seems strangely at odds with the two-dimensional decorative approach, the predilection for the stylized and undulating contours that Lorenzo inherited from the Sienese and the International painters. In their works, of course, these qualities are much more pronounced; in a beautiful apostle by the Sienese Lippo Vanni (Figure 7), roughly comparable in subject and size to our prophets, the folds cascade in a series of graceful, shifting curves, which are so important as a pure interplay of lines that their role in suggesting relief appears almost incidental. Yet, for all their elegance and refinement of design, Lorenzo's prophets are basically conceived in the round, and, as Millard Meiss has pointed out, they have a close affinity to the sculpture of Ghiberti.

This curious duality of approach reaches still farther. Just as ornamental and stylized forms coexist here with strong plastic values, so monumentality and grandeur have been achieved, not in a bold and broad manner, but with the care and precision of a miniaturist. (Our prophets nevertheless seem more at ease, sitting majestically in the infinite space of their golden firmament, than do their brothers in the narrow confines of Lorenzo's manuscripts. These, as shown in Figure 6, appear in a state of extreme agitation, and seem ready to burst from the page.) Sitting in frontal, pyramidal dignity, our prophets look as imposing as if they were life-size - yet equally striking are the minuteness of the brushstrokes, the sharpness of detail in the execution, the crisp line. It is easy to see why Lorenzo, considered the most sensitive and brilliant colorist in Florence before Fra Angelico, is also regarded as the most accomplished and exquisite draughtsman of his day.



It is due in large part to Lorenzo's superb craftsmanship that these panels have come down to us in such fine condition. Also, this exceptional state provides a rare opportunity to examine the technique of tempera painting – indeed, the very genesis of an Italian gold-ground panel from the moment the wood was selected to the instant the finished painting left the studio. Since the demands and limitations of the materials used by an artist have such a profound effect upon the formal character of his art, an understanding of the medium enhances considerably our appreciation of the work.

In analyzing the technique used in these panels, we are very fortunate in not having to rely merely on the visual and physical evidence they provide, for we are able to consult a most remarkable and invaluable text, the Libro dell'arte ("The Craftsman's Handbook") by the painter Cennino Cennini. Dating from the first quarter of the fifteenth century, it treats in great detail the various techniques used by painters of the day. Cennino's master was Agnolo Gaddi, the very man with whom Lorenzo probably also studied, and The Craftsman's Handbook describes therefore not just the technique of tempera painting as it was commonly practiced at the turn of the fifteenth century, but specifically as it must have been practiced in Agnolo's workshop. Our four panels correspond so exactly to the teachings of Cennino that we are able to "re-create" them by following the handbook textually.

The complex cookery and chemistry involved in the technique of tempera painting are treated at length in Cennino's book, but it would be superfluous—as well as tedious—to repeat all of his discussion here. Basically, tempera painting differs from oil painting in that egg yolk, rather than oil, is used as a medium. The pigments are mixed in water with the yolk, and the result is an extremely resistant and durable paint that lends itself to the use of pure and brilliant colors. Because of its fast-drying properties and poor blending qualities, smooth gradations are difficult to achieve; the paint must be laid on as thinly as



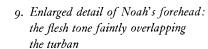
possible, layer upon layer, in numerous small strokes applied side by side. Great care must be exercised in the practice of this technique, and its basic rules must be adhered to closely.

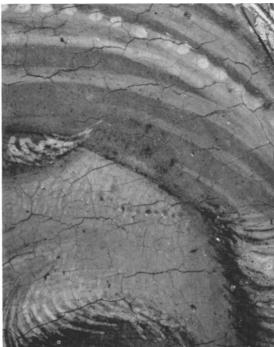
Lorenzo painted his prophets on poplar, and this conforms to what Cennino tells us: panels "should be made of a wood which is known as whitewood or poplar, of good quality, or of linden, or willow." After cautioning that the wood must be thoroughly dry, Cennino calls for a thin linen cloth drenched in size, or glue, to be pasted to the front of the panel; its function is mainly to guard against cracks, and to form a good base for the application of gesso, or plaster of Paris. "Scraped smooth like ivory," this gesso layer becomes

7. St. John the Evangelist, by
Lippo Vanni (active 13411375), Sienese. About 1345.
Tempera and gold on wood,
23% x 16 inches. Gift of George
Blumenthal, 41.100.23



8. X-ray of detail from the Noah panel: the linen cloth beneath the gesso

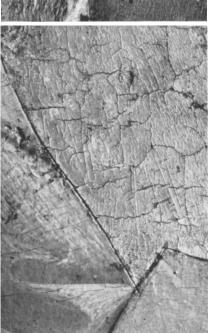




10. Enlarged detail of the left edge of the Moses panel, with its underlying layers (from left to right): wood, gesso with traces of linen fiber, red bole, gold ground



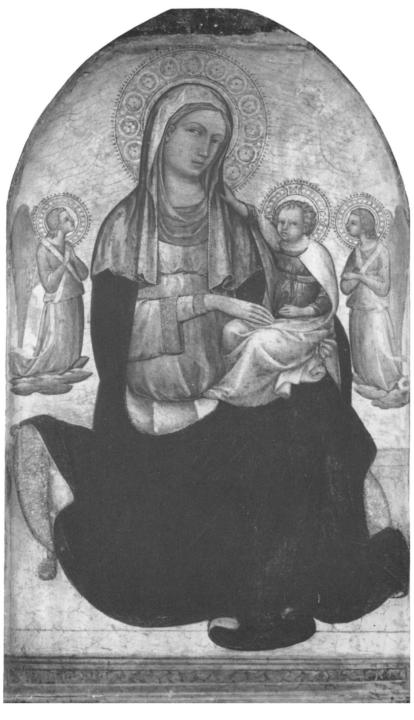
11. Enlarged detail of Noah's robe: the light and dark brushwork that builds up the modeling



12. Enlarged detail of the Noah panel: the incised outlines

13. Enlarged detail of the Abraham panel: the paint of Abraham's fingers and Isaac's robe overlapping the gold background





14. Madonna and Child with Angels, by Lorenzo Monaco. About 1406. Tempera and gold on wood, 35¼ x 22½ inches. Rogers Fund, 09.91

the ground upon which the gold and paint are applied. The fine weave of the linen cloth shows up in X-ray photographs of the panels (Figure 8), and both the linen and the gesso are clearly visible at the edges (Figure 10).

To draw on the gesso, Cennino recommends first using charcoal so mistakes can be corrected easily, thus: "Keep a feather handy; so that, if you are not satisfied with any stroke, you may erase it with the barbs of a feather, and draw it over again." When the charcoal drawing is finished to satisfaction, it is to be brushed with the feather "until the drawing is practically effaced, though not so much but that you may still make out your strokes." The artist is instructed to go over his drawing with pen and ink, and then erase the remaining charcoal to prevent its mixing with the paint. Examination of our panels does not reveal if Lorenzo followed these instructions, but here too he probably did as Cennino directed.

At this stage Cennino instructs the artist to scratch with a needle the outlines of the figures where they meet the gold background, and to cover the areas to be gilded with Armenian bole (gilder's red clay) mixed with egg white and water. Figure 12, taken in raking light, shows that Lorenzo did scratch outlines to separate his figures from the gold ground, and in places where the gilding has worn thin, the red bole is clearly visible.

Gilding, Cennino tells us, should be finished before applying color; the slight overlap of Isaac's orange robe onto the gold background (Figure 13) shows that Lorenzo did paint only after gilding. Similarly, Cennino recommends painting the draperies and accessories before doing the flesh areas, and in a few places, notably at the edge of Noah's turban (Figure 9), a bit of the flesh tone spills over onto the drapery.

Colors must be ground in advance, advises Cennino, each in a separate dish. Basically, three tones are required: a dark tone, usually the pure local color; a medium tone, consisting of the local color with white added; and a light tone, with still more white. Cennino's discussion of the application of the paint – which is the crucial passage – reads much like an actual description of our panels. The somewhat awk-

ward English of D. V. Thompson's translation reflects Cennino's own style; in the translator's words, "I have tried to keep something of the flavor of his writing." The instructions are nonetheless easily understood if one remembers that the quick-drying properties of tempera do not allow for the smooth blending of the colors: "Take a rather blunt miniver brush, and start to apply the dark color, shaping up the folds where the dark part of the figure is to come. And . . . take the middle color and lay in the backs and the reliefs of the dark folds, and begin with this color to shape up the folds of the relief, and around toward the light part of the figure. And shape it up once more in this way. Then take the light color, and lay in the reliefs and the backs of the light part of the figure. And in this way go back once again to the dark folds of the figure with the dark color. And carry on as you began, with these colors, over and over again, first one and then the other, laying them in afresh and blending them skillfully, softening delicately."

Cennino then recommends touching up the highlights in pure white and the darkest shadows with the darkest tone. This systematic construction of the draperies by separate application of preselected tones is quite evident in our panels. For example, on part of Noah's robe (Figure 11), the pattern of the brushstrokes reveals that the artist proceeded from dark to light, and the panel is so well preserved that one can still see the last touches put on by the artist—the pure white on the ridges and the dark mixture in the deep recesses of the folds.

Cennino writes next on the proper way to paint faces: "take a little terre-verte [verdaccio, a greenish brown underpaint] and a little white lead, . . . and lay the coats all over the face, over the hands, over the feet, and over the nudes." Then, as for drapery, "make three values of flesh color [using vermilion and lead white], each lighter than the other; laying each flesh color in its place on the areas of the face; still do not work up so close to the verdaccio shadows as to cover them entirely; but work them out with the darkest flesh color, fusing and softening them like a puff of smoke . . . and have the green which lies under the flesh

colors, always show through a little. . . . When you have got your flesh colors down so that the face is about right, make a flesh color a little bit lighter, and pick out the forms of the face, making it gradually lighter, in a careful way, until you finally come to touch in with pure white lead any little relief more pronounced than the rest, such as there would be over the eyebrow, or on the tip of the nose, etc. Then outline the upper edge of the eyes with an outline of black, with a few lashes as the eye requires, and the nostrils of the nose. Then take a little dark sinoper [sinople, a dark reddish brown] and a trace of black, and outline all the accents of the nose, eyes, brows, the hair, hands, feet, and everything in general."

Figure 3 illustrates how every accent in white, black, and sinople called for by Cennino is present in the faces of our prophets: the dark black line along the upper edge of the eye; the lighter sinople strokes on the nose, brows, and hair; and the white touches on the cheekbones and other salient parts of the face. The verdaccio underpainting also shows up in parts under the flesh tones, particularly in the David panel.

Cennino's directions to painters sometimes go beyond the technical, and, among other things, he gives advice about proportion and about the selection of what he considers the appropriate color for particular subjects. For example, the handbook suggests the following proportions for the faces of men: one unit for the forehead, one for the nose, and one for the nose to the chin; the heads of our prophets conform. The swarthy faces of our worthies recall Cennino's statement that "when you want to do the head of an old man, you should follow the same system as for the youthful one; except that your verdaccio wants to be a little darker, and flesh colors too." Cennino recommends mixing the paint with the eggs of country hens rather than town hens for this purpose, because, he says, the yolks are darker.

It is revealing to examine side by side the superbly preserved panels of the prophets and the somewhat worn Madonna and Child with Angels (Figure 14), of approximately the same



15. Madonna and Child, by
Stefano di Giovanni, called
Sassetta (1392-1450), Sienese.
After 1444. Tempera and
gold on wood, 29 x 151/4
inches. Gift of George
Blumenthal, 41.100.20

date. One is immediately struck by the difference in the surface, the duller glow of the colors, the seemingly broader, softer, and less precise brushwork in the Madonna. Yet close analysis reveals that the technique is similar, the actual "handwriting" precisely the same. The discrepancy in quality is only apparent and it can be attributed to the poor state of preservation of the picture. Its surface is abraded - showing too much verdaccio under the flesh tones - and most of the delicate brushwork has disappeared. The garment of the Virgin has suffered most, probably because it is blue, a particularly delicate color. It appears now as a dark cutout with curious scrolllike contours on which only faint lines remain to suggest the presence of folds. The lighter draperies have survived better, although the remaining highlights now appear blotchy. The folds of the Child's clothing, which make a beautifully balanced and harmonious pattern, appear rather coarse in execution; this is because many of the intermediate tones have been rubbed off, and because an old attempt at restoration tends to blunt the crisp edges. Whereas the prophets' hair and beards are built up with layer after layer of tiny, well defined brush strokes, which in the end give a marvelous impression of fullness, a few strokes of sinople and a rare patch of white lines are all that is left of the hair of the Child and the angels to suggest the former richness of texture.

The Madonna and Child with Angels is closely related in style to the prophets and shows another aspect of Lorenzo Monaco's art. Here he is both elegant and intimate; he conveys a mood of lyrical piety that is tender and delicate like the Sienese, but without the fragile grace of a Sassetta, as, for example, in the Museum's Madonna and Child (Figure 15).

The panels of the prophets are not documented, and unfortunately there is no specific information on where or how they were originally displayed – a problem that Millard Meiss has studied in depth, but the solution of which remains strangely elusive. The panels are clearly related, and are almost certainly the survivors of a larger complex. The precise nature of this complex is hard to determine, since it could

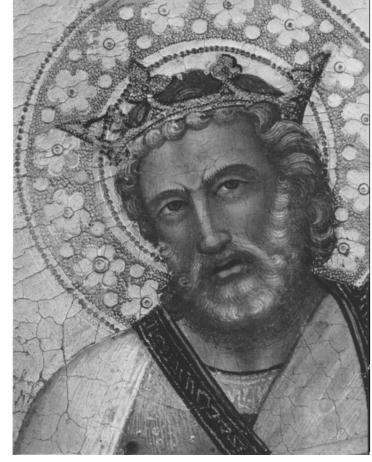
have had any of several shapes and could have been used to adorn either a religious or a secular edifice. The presence of our panels in a church would have been quite natural, especially since Old Testament worthies, as Dr. Meiss points out, "are represented in connection with the Virgin or, more often, Christ, of whom they are, as Augustine said, heralds." Noah is the forerunner of Christ; he was sent upon the floodwaters just as Christ was sent by God the Father into the world. In addition, Noah's ark is likened to the fishing boat of St. Peter, which resisted the storm, and also signifies the Church; in our panel it is actually a church, and not a boat, that Noah holds on his knees. The sacrifice of Isaac finds its parallel in the immolation of Jesus on the cross, as well as in the bloodless sacrifice of the Eucharist. In his role as savior of the Hebrews, Moses heralds Christ as Saviour, and David's victory over Goliath prefigures Christ's over Satan.

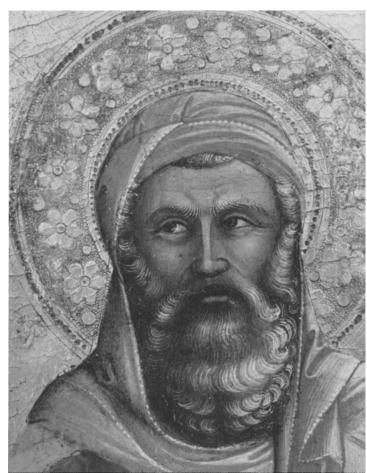
It has also been suggested that the panels might have been intended for use in a courtroom. Indeed, prophets have figured there frequently. For example, the hearing chamber of the palace of the popes at Avignon, decorated in 1352-1353 by Matteo Giovanetti, features twenty prophets painted in fresco on the vault. Our four prophets would have been particularly well suited for such a purpose: Noah and Abraham champion the virtue of obedience; Moses is the legislator of the Hebrews; and David in his role as king is the administrator of justice.

It is interesting to speculate on the nature of the central theme of the complex to which the prophets belonged, especially if it was located in a courtroom. The most likely subjects, certainly, would have been Christ in Glory, the Last Judgment, or the Crucifixion; Matteo Giovanetti's prophets, for example, were combined in the hearing chamber with both a Last Judgment and a Crucifixion. It is with the Crucifixion that Lorenzo's prophets are most closely associated, as all four of them prefigure episodes of the Passion. In the famous medieval inspirational book, the Speculum Humanae Salvationis ("The Mirror of Human Salvation"), Cham's mocking of Noah is

likened to the mocking of Christ; David attacked by Shimei and Michal is interpreted as a foreboding of Christ tormented by the Jews. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is, of course, the most obvious parallel; in the Speculum it is noted that Isaac carrying the wood of his sacrifice prefigures Christ carrying the cross. Finally, Moses delivering the Children of Israel from captivity in Egypt parallels Christ delivering the souls from hell. In another popular book, the Bible Moralisée, events of the Old Testament are illustrated alongside their corresponding parts in the New, and still other parallels are drawn: Moses, for instance, is linked with the Passion through the episode of the brazen serpent, the serpent on the tree symbolizing Christ on the cross. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the central panel of the complex were a Crucifixion-and of course this holds true whether it was destined for a church or for a courtroom. There exist in art a number of examples where the prophets are associated with the Passion. It is much rarer, however, to find these four appearing together in this connection. One rather late example is a pair of enameled plaques of the sixteenth century (recently published by Colin Eisler in L'Oeil), which were possibly designed by the French artist Etienne Delaune. The Crucifixion is depicted on one plaque, with the four evangelists occupying the four corners. On the other the sacrifice of Abraham is in the center, while Moses, David, Noah, and Adam occupy the corners.

How the panels were originally arranged remains an open question. One possibility can perhaps be dismissed: that the panels were conceived as an independent set or series, and not as part of a larger complex. A more elaborate ensemble is suggested by the existence of still another panel of similar size and composition, possibly also by Lorenzo, which represents the Apostle Peter. It seems out of character, furthermore, for Lorenzo to have





16. Head of Noah

executed a work comprised exclusively of Old Testament figures. Admittedly, at the turn of the fifteenth century Old Testament subjects had increased in popularity; they stimulated creative imagination by providing new challenges in composition as well as opportunities for the representation of the nude. Independent Old Testament scenes are nonetheless conspicuously absent from Lorenzo's oeuvre. Furthermore, in his treatment of Isaac, his basic



18. Fresco in San Francesco, Montefalco, by Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-1497), Florentine. 1452. Photograph: Alinari – Art Reference Bureau

monastic conservatism, unaffected by the new classicist tendencies, is revealed: Lorenzo has draped his Isaac like an angel, whereas other artists of his time (such as Ghiberti and Brunelleschi in their famous competition reliefs of 1402) had already exploited this theme for the depiction of the nude.

Our panels, then, belong most likely to a complex built around a central New Testament theme. One solution, which would easily explain the St. Peter panel or any others that might turn up, is that our prophets were placed in a row at either side of the central

panel. But Millard Meiss has noted quite rightly that the thrones of Abraham and Moses are viewed from a lower angle, and that the floors in these panels are green, while they are pink in the other two. There is a strong possibility, therefore, that our panels were placed in at least two rows, with Abraham and Moses on the top and Noah and David on the bottom.

It may be that our panels were once part of a large altarpiece, even though this appears difficult to sustain in view of Meiss' just observation that "there seems to be no precedent in Italian painting of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries for the use of four large enthroned prophets in an altarpiece." For that matter, there are to my knowledge no enthroned or seated secondary figures of any kind in existing altarpieces. Only Christ or the Virgin, and saints, when they are the protagonists, ever appear seated; and then they are almost always in the central panel. There appears to be, however, at least the suggestion of an exception: a fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli in the Capella di San Girolamo in San Francesco, Montefalco, depicting in trompe l'oeil a Gothic polyptych (Figure 18) in which the pinnacles are occupied by four fathers of the Latin Church. All are seated! There seems to be no reason to presume that Old Testament prophets might not have been equally suitable, in another complex. It is also difficult to believe that no actual altarpiece existed to serve as precedent for the trompe l'oeil fresco.

Some day, perhaps, this whole problem will be clarified. In the meantime, the breathtaking beauty of the panels and the enormous impact they create, show how academic the best of our speculations are.

### NOTES

The four paintings by Lorenzo Monaco have been the subject of a penetrating article by Millard Meiss in *The Burlington Magazine* (June 1958), and it remains the primary source. The translation of Cennini's *The Craftsman's Handbook* is by D. V. Thompson, Jr. (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1954).









19. The Museum's four prophets, as they might have been paired on an altarpiece

# The Little Knights of the Living-Room Table

HELMUT NICKEL

Associate Curator, Arms and Armor

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One of the most serious things is the toy. Every child and every parent, especially around Christmas, knows this, and it is unfortunate that some people, who presumably have forgotten that they ever were children, keep calling unnecessary objects "toys," and even toys "unnecessary objects." Indeed, toys - things that are brought to life by imagination - are means for creating a world. They rise from the same imagination that brings forth man's greatest accomplishments: religion, art, civilization itself; and it is, in fact, very often quite impossible to say whether miniature representations of human beings, animals, or objects of daily life that have come to us from ancient times or alien cultures were meant to be votive offerings (i.e. religious objects), or objets d'art, or "simply" toys.

The natural toys for a girl are dolls, with whom she creates a family life reflecting all the joys and calamities of the other, "real" world; the obvious toys for a boy are miniature warriors, with whom he is a leader of men – literally having a whole army in the grasp of his hand – to wage pitched battles in front of the fireplace, and to conduct adventurous quests to the farthest end of the rug.

Of course, as again every parent knows, toys are subject to much use with little chance of survival, and it is therefore not surprising that of these ancient armies very few stragglers have escaped the terrible battleground of the nursery floor. Only relatively recently has the military miniature become an object for systematic collecting by serious connoisseurs (thus saving untold regiments from murderous peashots), but these collectors, of course, frown upon the idea of calling model soldiers toys.

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It is reported that boys in ancient Greece played with little wooden Trojan horses filled with warriors (an ingenious way to solve the storage problem), but no trace is left of them. On the other hand, many clay figurines have come down to us from antiquity (Figure 1), and though most of them seem to have been votive offerings, it is reasonable to assume that the contemporary toy soldiers were of similar appearance.

1 Mounted warrior. Greek (Cyprus), late vII century B.c. Painted terracotta, height 7½ inches. The Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription, 74.51.1778





I hough this unusual equestrian statuette (Figure 2) has lost its horse, and though its right hand, which presumably brandished a spear, is broken off, it is still very dashing, in fine Byzantine armor and draped cloak. On closer examination the figure is seen to be clad in Persian-style pantaloons and to have its hair done in a heavy bun at the nape of the neck; it is, therefore, apparently meant to be an Amazon. A hole pierces the left hand, where the reins of the horse could be threaded through, and another hole is in the seat to fit a peg on the horse's saddle, the same way that many modern lead soldiers are attached to their mounts. The original purpose of this charming little rider, who was found in Istanbul, is not clear. It, too, might have been a votive statuette, but perhaps it was the precious toy of a little prince: its fine execution, the careful casting and chiseling, makes it a rather costly item - a full troop of them must have been a splendid sight indeed.

2 Equestrian figure. Byzantine (Istanbul), rv-v century. Bronze, height 4¾6 inches. Gift of J. J. Klejman, 62.7.2











6

If there is some doubt as to whether the Byzantine Amazon was really a toy, there is none about these two small lead horsemen (Figure 5). They were both cast in the same mold, and therefore enable us to reconstruct their original appearance (Figure 4), though both have missing parts.

The casting was done very skillfully by means of a triple mold: two halves with the figure carved out on either side, and a wedge-shaped piece inserted between them from below in order to cast the body of the horse hollow and to splay its feet apart. There are tiny cast-on loops at the horse's hooves to accommodate axles, so the whole could roll on wheels. Though the figure is rather stiff and stylized, the details are executed with great care: the steed's breast strap is hung with spangles, and the tooling of the leather on harness and saddle, as well as the woven pattern of the rider's dress, is indicated by delicate crosshatching.

In view of the extreme scarcity of medieval toy figures, it is remarkable that the two surviving specimens from this mold are in the same collection. One of them was dredged from the river



Seine, which is, like the Thames, a particularly well suited place for small objects to turn up. Both of these sluggishly moving rivers were crossed by bridges lined with shops and booths, where things were likely to fall from windows or through cracks in floors, to be buried in the mud for centuries. The little horseman from the Seine once was thought to have carried a sword or lance in his broken-off hand, because the incised pattern of his dress was interpreted as a mail shirt; but by comparing him with the other it becomes clear that he too was a nobleman riding forth a-hunting with his falcon on his fist. The second came to the Museum mistakenly identified as Sasanian; being a true knight-errant, he traveled through various departments before he joined his twin brother in the Arms and Armor collection.

- 3 William the Conqueror as a falconer, in a typical pose, similar to Figure 5. Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry, late x1 century. Bishop's Palace, Bayeux. Photograph: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques
- 4 Reconstruction of the falconers in Figure 5
- 5 Falconers. French, XIII century. Lead, heights about 134 inches. Rogers Fund, 12.22.2, and Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, funds from various donors, 29.158.736 c
- 6 The Three Kings, in costumes and on horses very similar to those in Figure 5. Detail of a painted altar frontal from Mosoll. Spanish (Catalonia), about 1200. Museo de Arte de Cataluña, Barcelona. Photograph: Mas
- 7 Falconer, in a costume and pose comparable to those in Figure 5. Ink drawing by Jean Pucelle from the *Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, French, 1325-1328. Actual size. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.2

The ancestor of the true tin soldier is a splendid knight in full armor (Figure 8), who also came from the bottom of the Seine, and is now in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. Fortunately he has suffered only minor damage, and the scrupulously correct details of his armor and the harness of his horse date him about 1360-1370. His shield being emblazoned with a large cross, he looks very much like one of those flat equestrian figures worn as a badge by pilgrims who had visited a shrine of St. George (Figure 9). But he is molded on both sides, and the feet of his battle charger are firmly planted in cast-on quatrefoil bases, proof enough that he was meant to be a toy; perhaps the pewterer who cast him was indeed a maker of pilgrims' tokens.

- 8 Knight. French, about 1360-1370. Pewter, height 23/8 inches. Musée de Cluny, Paris. Plate 23 in *Kinderspielzeug aus alter Zeit* by Karl Gröber (Berlin, 1928)
- 9 Fragments of pilgrims' tokens of a shrine of St. George. Lead and pewter, heights about 1½ inches. Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, funds from various donors, 29.158.736 a, d, e





Their smallness and their often simplified form make these little figures sometimes rather hard to place. A strange-looking, rather battered horseman (Figure 10) of wafer-thin lead, crudely engraved on both sides, could easily pass for a similar toy made by a not overambitious master. After having puzzled medievalists and orientalists, however, it has turned out to be an early Chinese tomb figure from the period of the Six Dynasties.

10 Horseman with sword. Chinese, Six Dynasties (222-589). Lead, height 17/8 inches. Rogers Fund, 14.139.2



10

11



12

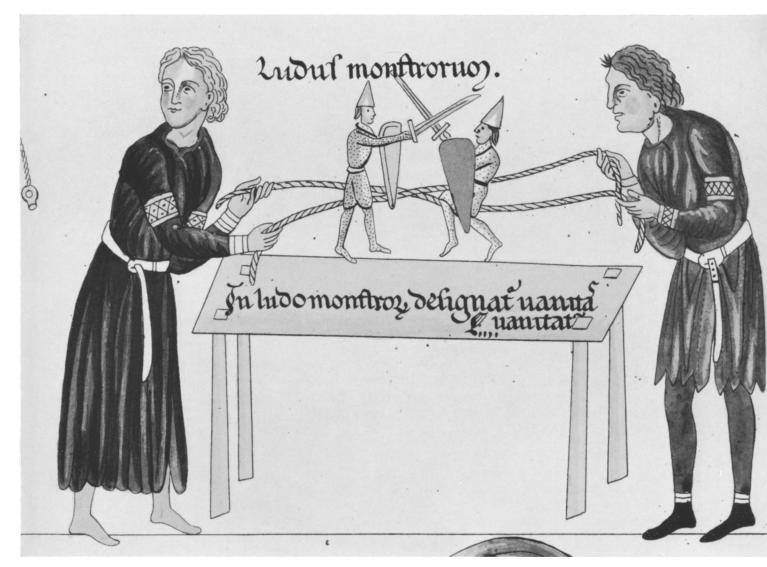


Apparently the cast-tin figures of the Middle Ages could not compete with toys made of wood and clay - perhaps the restrictions and limitations of guild regulations made their production impractical: they disappear again until the eighteenth century. Alas, the worthy knights of wood have fallen into dust, and the chevaliers of clay have crumbled too. Occasionally we find a brass figurine, such as this horseman in Berlin (Figure 11). He too was probably a falconer, as indicated by the raised right arm that presumably once held a hawk. In the same collection is a small horse of the same size and material, bridled and harnessed, but without a saddle (Figure 12). Both figures are sculptured in the round, and they look very much like miniature aquamaniles, those medieval vessels used in pouring water over banqueters' hands. Since medieval miniature crockery does exist, it is even possible that they were toy aquamaniles for a girl's dollhouse.

11, 12 Mounted falconer and horse. Probably German, about 1400. Brass, height of falconer about 2½ inches. Staatliche Museen der Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

The most fascinating kind of toys are those that help along imagination by actions of their own, and figurines with movable arms or legs have been in use since earliest times. Important among these action toys are military ones executing the movements of the greatest spectacle of the days when knights were bold—the tournament. As early as the twelfth century appears a representation of two small sword fighters manipulated by strings (Figure 13).

13 Sword fight with puppets. Colored drawing (now destroyed) from the *Hortus Deliciarum* by the Abbess Herrad of Landsberg, German, late x11 century. After facsimile by C. M. Engelhardt. Metropolitan Museum Library





The most glamorous – and for us the typical – part of the medieval tournament was the encounter of a pair of jousters on horseback. In the Emperor Maximilian's autobiographical romance of chivalry, *Der Weisskunig*, a woodcut by Hans Burgkmair illustrates the games the emperor used to play as a boy (Figure 14). Here he is playing at tournaments with model jousters (the prince's champion is the winner, of course).

14 "How the Old White King gave to his son several noble youths as companions to amuse themselves in merry pastimes," by Hans Burgkmair the Elder (1473-1531), German. Woodcut from *Der Weisskunig* (Vienna edition, reprinting the original blocks, 1775). 811/16 x 711/16 inches. Metropolitan Museum Library

There are six similar toy jousters of brass or bronze still in existence in various European and American collections; most of them have lost their horses, which in some cases may have been made of perishable material. The unique example of a complete, matching pair has been preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Figure 16); here the chargers are of brass too, with the lances made of wood, heightening the naturalistic effect when they splintered at the impact.

In Burgkmair's woodcut the toy horsemen stand without any visible support on a board laid out on the tabletop, and are being pushed against each other by hand. The Vienna jousters are mounted on bases with wheels, and they could be set in motion by a system of cords and pulleys attached to the underside of the carriages; this required considerable skill and made the sport even more competitive and exciting.

Five of these six figurines, including the ones illustrated here (Figures 15, 16), are equipped for the *Rennen*, a course run with sharp lances in light field armor with sallet, while one is armed for the *Gestech*, a course run with blunted lances and in heavy armor with great helm. The stylistic differences in their armor indicate that one must have been made around 1480, one around 1490, and the others around 1500. In spite of these variations, there are enough similarities between them to suggest that they all came from a common workshop in southern Germany; the most likely place would be the famous toy-making center of Nuremberg.

- 15 Jouster. South German, around 1490. Brass, height 27/8 inches. Lent by C. O. Kretzschmar von Kienbusch
- 16 Pair of jousters. South German, about 1500. Brass, heights 51/8 inches. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna







Prince Maximilian's jousters were apparently not made of solid brass. In the woodcut they are represented as if they were more naturalistic, with horse trappings of real fabric, and no doubt with armor of real steel; in fact, we know that in 1516 Maximilian, who was known as "the last of the knights," ordered such a pair of toy jousters to be made by Coloman Helmschmied of Augsburg, head of one of the most renowned armorer's workshops of the time, as a present for the young King Ludwig II of Hungary. In the Bavarian National Museum, Munich, a complete figure of this kind is still preserved (Figure 17).

It is meticulously exact in every detail. Its armor is that for the *deutsche gemeine Gestech* (this "German joust" was run in the open tiltyard without a barrier separating the charging combatants); only lance and shield are missing. The horse's equipment forms an especially valuable document, because not a single complete tournament outfit for a horse has survived. The bulky bolster stuffed with straw in front of its breast is a protection not only for the horse, but also for the rider's legs, in case of collision (only one actual bolster, in

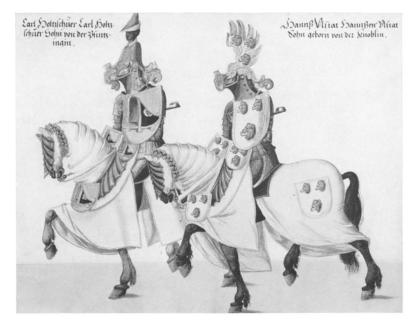


the Waffensammlung in Vienna, is extant). The heavily padded blindfold prevents the horse from shying and spoiling the jouster's aim; and the long streamers dangling from the horse's ears are another characteristic feature of the trappings used in this joust. A second helm, of a different type (shown beside the horse in our illustration), indicates that originally other interchangeable pieces of armor existed, in order that the little jouster might be outfitted for different forms of tournament. In the Musée de l'Armée in Paris, there is an almost identical figure, though without its horse, which seems to have been the partner of the Munich knight.

A toy like this was of course tremendously expensive, and only the very rich, either members of the high nobility or the merchant-princes of wealthy cities, could have afforded it. It is not surprising that the now-tattered silken trappings of the little knight in Munich are emblazoned with the arms of one of Nuremberg's most important patrician families. (An Italian cardinal traveling in the fifteenth century once wryly remarked that the kings of Scotland would certainly be more than happy to live like a moderately well-to-do citizen of Nuremberg.)

- 17 Jouster, his crest and horse trappings displaying the armorial bearings of the Holzschuer family of Nuremberg. South German (probably Nuremberg), first half of the xvi century. Horse and puppet of wood, with fabric trappings and steel armor; height about 12 inches. Bavarian National Museum, Munich
- 18 Jousters armed for the "German joust," showing typical details of equipment. Woodcut by Hans Burgkmair from the Triumph of Maximilian, 1512-1519. From a facsimile edition, reprinting the original blocks (Vienna, 1883-1884). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 32.37 (1)
- 19 A member of the Holzschuer family (left) participating in a tournament at Nuremberg. Colored drawing in a manuscript tournament book, south German (Nuremberg), second half of the xv1 century. 97/8 x 135/8 inches. Metropolitan Museum Library
- 20 Jousting armor for man and horse. German, about 1500. Rogers Fund, 04.3.291





19

18



Miniature suits of armor have occasionally been made, mostly for purposes not clearly known. Some might have been collector's items for Kunstschränke, "curiosity cabinets"; others were perhaps a tour de force to show the master's skill, or an exhibit for an armorer's shop window. Connoisseurs are generally very reluctant to classify them as toys, mainly because of the high quality of their workmanship (although the armor of the Munich knight is just as preciously made as these). In our collection there are two miniature suits of armor (Figures 21, 22), probably manufactured in Italy during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. They were certainly not meant to be used as the equipment of jousting figures, because they represent a type of armor worn not by a noble in a tourney but by the heavy cavalryman in the field, and at a period when the brace of saddle pistols was making the lance obsolete.

There is, however, a woodcut in a series dated 1587 illustrating children's games and toys (Figure 23) that shows a boy leading a small dog harnessed as a battle horse and ridden by a manikin in armor. The saddled dog is good evidence that this little knight was the boy's own toy, and not purloined from Father's collection; at the same time it might explain the scarcity of horses to go with the miniature armor.

- 21, 22 Miniature suits of armor. Italian, second quarter of the xvII century. Steel, brass, and leather; heights 20 inches. Gift of the estate of Jermain S. Duncan, 65.95.1, 2
- 23 Armored puppet riding on a saddled dog. Woodcut from *Trente-six Figures contenant tous les jeux* (Paris, 1587). Figure 10 in *Model Soldiers* by John G. Garratt (Seeley Service & Co. Ltd., London, n.d.)

A traisner le chariot, & autres ieux.



Autres aussi iouent à blanle moyne, Autres au ieu, qui plus leur semble idoine, Qu'il est dehors ou dedans arresté.

Le plus petit d'entr'eux exprès se meine Dedans vn char, qu'vn barbet puissant traine, L'autre à cheual sur vn chien est monté:



23



Lournaments and knights went out of fashion, and toymakers made every effort to keep their products up to date. With the development of standing armies the steadfast tin soldier made his appearance. He was truly the model soldier of the formal-minded eighteenth century: every man exactly like the other, every step frozen in exactly the same motion, every musket set at exactly the same angle a drill sergeant's dream come true. The tin soldier started to beat everything else out of the field in popularity. His stiff uniformity even invaded the design of toy soldiers in other media (paper, for instance), and the traditional wooden toys had to recruit latheturned battalions for their defense.

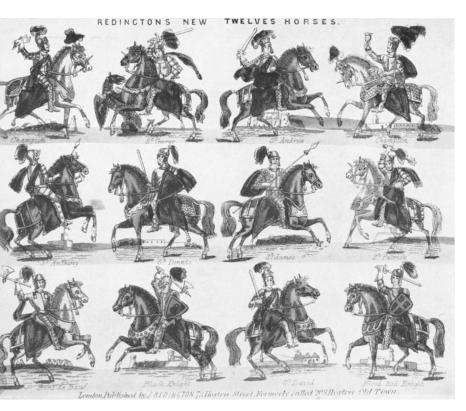
Of course, there were attempts to break the all-too-rigid pattern, as, for example, during the neoclassic period, when Goethe described a toy-soldier battle fought between Greeks and Amazons, but these occasional efforts were of only minor influence until the romantic revival in the early nineteenth century, when the knights came charging back full tilt (Figure 24).

24 Knights in combat, by Carl Ludwig Bezold, German (Nuremberg), about 1830-1840. Painted pewter, with movable arms; heights about 3 inches. Germanic National Museum, Nuremberg

With romantic ruins in Gothic style being erected in parks, historical novels in medieval settings flourishing, and re-creations of the past like the Eglington Tournament (1839) being held, the knight recaptured his place among the favorite toys of children. In a German ballad of 1849 celebrating the toyshop at the Christmas Fair (Figure 25), the knight in shining armor on his fiery steed is mentioned long before the apparently far less exciting hussars, uhlans, and grenadiers.

25 Toyshop at the Christmas Fair, by Ludwig Richter (1803-1884), German. Engraving from Kinderlieder (Leipzig, 1849). 6¼ x 4¼ inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 32.72





27

During the eighteen-thirties and forties, both the tin soldier and the paper soldier had to make a strategic advance to the rear before the onslaught of printed knights eagerly waiting to be colored and cut out. On the sheet illustrated here (Figure 26) the ranks are swelled by knightly saints, as for example St. George and St. Andrew (in tartan plaid and kilt), but all the truly romantic figures appear as well—the Champion with the Gauntlet of Challenge, the Black Knight, and the Blood-red Knight.

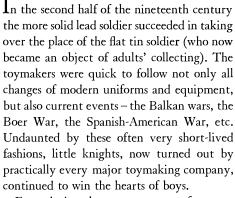
26 Redington's New Twelves Horses. British (London), about 1840-1850. Engraving, partly hand-colored; 7½ x 9 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William B. Liebman, 55.576.27 (6)

Historicism became so fashionable and the demand for medieval objects so great that again miniature suits of armor were made (Figure 27), but this time strictly for collectors – Victorian fathers being what they were, there was not much chance that little boys were allowed to play with these polished worthies, even as a reward for exemplary goodness. Some unscrupulous specialists even went so far as to forge "medieval" toy figurines for the specialists among collectors.

27 Miniature armor for man and horse. Italian, about 1860. Steel, brass, leather, and fabric; height 17<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Gift of William Oothout, 16.29.1-2







Even during the recent process of conversion to plastic materials, when many of the old Victorian soldier types were abandoned, the knights held their ground. Their shining







armor and colorful coats of arms are still attractive against the khaki drabness of modern uniforms. And the numberless technical toys that make modern games interesting – tanks, planes, missiles – can easily be counterbalanced by castles, siege machines, and throwing engines. Therefore even in our space age Prince Valiant and his sword-brothers will be riding forth under the Christmas tree and over the living-room table.

28 Knights and men-at-arms, by Georg Heyde, German (Dresden), after 1870. Painted lead, riders detachable from horses; heights about 2½ inches. Private collection, Dresden





Two Ladies, by Winslow Homer (1836-1910), American. 1880. Pencil and watercolor, 65% x 75% inches. Gift in memory of Florence Baird Meyer, 18.123.3

# Notes

During the month of December the Metropolitan Museum will open two major exhibitions of American watercolors. Two Hundred Years of Watercolor Painting in America, commemorating the centennial of the founding of the American Watercolor Society, will be on view in the Harry Payne Bingham Special Exhibition Galleries from December 8 through January 29. It is comprised of two sections, one a historical survey of American watercolors from 1757 to 1966, the second a selection of 78 watercolors by present members of the American Watercolor Society. Of the 250 watercolors by 107 artists that make up the retrospective part of the exhibition, 166 are from the Museum's permanent collection; the rest are loans from 39 private collectors and artists.

The following week, on December 13, 101 Masterpieces of American Primitive Watercolors and Pastels from the Collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch will open in the American Wing. Selected from the large collection of American primitives assembled by Colonel and Mrs. Garbisch over the past 25 years, the exhibition will show not only the wide range of subjects treated by American folk artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also the great variety of techniques that they used. Following the exhibition here, which will run through February 13, these watercolors will travel to a number of museums throughout the United States.

Illustrated catalogues of both exhibitions will be available.

## New Qualifications for Membership in the Corporation

At the annual meeting of the Corporation on October 17, 1966, Article I of the Constitution was amended to increase the amounts of contributions required to qualify persons for election in the Corporation: from \$50,000

to \$100,000 for Benefactor, from \$5,000 to \$10,000 for Fellow in Perpetuity, and from \$1,000 to \$2,000 for Fellow for Life. These changes become effective March 31, 1967.

D.T.E., JR.

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