

# The Sign of the Rose: A Fifteenth-Century Flemish Passion Scene

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A FLEMISH PANEL by an anonymous master depicting the bearing of Christ's body to the sepulcher (Figure 1), now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, evokes the idea of passion and compassion in conceptual and symbolic terms. Rendered in a style between those of Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Frankfurt, this *imago pietatis* of "the rigid kind" belongs, as is well known, to the ascetic realm of the *Devotio Moderna*, with its adamant emphasis on Christ's sufferings and emphatic religious melodrama. Petrus Christus's similarly tragic *Lamentation* in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 2)<sup>1</sup> seeks to evoke a comparable emotional response to this subject, which has always been central to church doctrine and was of particular concern to the piety of the period.

Graphic representations of Christ's sufferings were common in *Devotio Moderna* circles, the pietistic Netherlandish reform movement founded by Geert Groote (1340–84).<sup>2</sup> Groote and his followers, the Brethren of the Common Life, insisted on the necessity of establishing a direct emotional relationship with Christ and his physical sufferings endured during the Passion. Their teachings were codified in the extremely popular treatise by Groote's disciple Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), the *Imitatio Christi*, or *Imitation of Christ*.<sup>3</sup> The *Devotio Moderna* movement promoted not only popular piety in the Netherlands but many developments in devotional art as well, including physical realism in Passion scenes.

The Getty *Bearing of Christ's Body* is one of numerous variants of an earlier, drawn Deposition in the Louvre (Figure 3) or possibly of another, closely related prototype by Rogier van der Weyden or his school, which has not yet been found, though its existence can be inferred.<sup>4</sup> The questions of the attribution, date, prototypes, and influence of the Getty painting have been addressed in detail elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

Here, however, we are concerned with the symbolism of certain elements in the composition whose significance may be less obvious to the modern beholder but which were meant to elicit an immediate response from the fifteenth-century one.<sup>6</sup> Visual clues such as the depiction of the dead Christ and the emotional response of the witnesses are familiar devices of the *Devotio Moderna*, inviting the viewer to complete the emotional process initiated by the painter. However, an additional, and more specific, response was perhaps intended by the deliberate inclusion of the prominent white rose on the belt of the Magdalene, on the right (Figure 4). This unique, possibly heraldic, device is not included in the Louvre drawing, while the Magdalene in the so-called Watervliet Deposition (Figure 5) is wearing a smaller, different type of insignia.<sup>7</sup> In a society very conscious of enigma and symbolism, the inclusion of a heraldic rose in a Passion scene with a traditional iconography could hardly escape attention.

The heraldic rose in its conventional form is a stylized dog rose with five displayed petals. It duplicates exactly the wild rose of the hedgerow. A cluster of five additional petals may form an inner ring around the center, whose anthers are stylized into seedlike dots.<sup>8</sup> As is the case in the Getty picture, the earliest representations of the heraldic rose show the intervening spaces between the petals as they can be observed in the wild rose. Such a wild rose, colored gold, was the badge of Edward I, though his descendants varied its color. Eventually, a white rose was adopted by the House of York as its badge, as shown in a sixteenth-century copy of a portrait of Elizabeth of York (Figure 6), while the House of Lancaster adopted the red rose.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that heraldic roses often contain a cluster of five additional petals around the center, and a triple row of petals is not unusual. Such a rose appears in the pendant badge of the Chancellor of the Order of the Garter, the most ancient English order of chivalry, where the rose is shown with three rows of

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Figure 1. Flemish Master, *The Bearing of Christ's Body to the Sepulcher*. Oak panel, 61 × 99.7 cm; painted surface 59.3 × 97.5 cm. Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum (photo: J. Paul Getty Museum)



Figure 2. Petrus Christus (act. by 1444–d. 1472/73), *The Lamentation*. Tempera and oil on wood, 26.1 × 35.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Marquand Collection, Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1890, 91.26.12



Figure 3. *The Bearing of Christ's Body to the Sepulcher*. Pen and brown ink over lead, 24 × 35.7 cm. Paris, Louvre, Cabinet des Dessins (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux)

six-petaled leaves (Figure 7).<sup>10</sup> If the white heraldic rose depicted here is indeed the famous badge of the House of York, why, then, does it appear in an apparently apolitical Passion scene? And is there evidence to show a connection between *Devotio Moderna* religiosity in the Netherlands and the House of York? And why, of all the sacred personages shown, is it specifically the Magdalene who wears the badge?

The Yorkist presence in the Netherlands became significant when, on July 3, 1468, Margaret of York, sister of the English kings Edward IV (r. 1461–83) and Richard III (r. 1483–85), married Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy.<sup>11</sup> Margaret's brother Edward IV had arranged this marriage to strengthen the commercial and political alliance between England and the Burgundian Netherlands—an alliance directed against France.<sup>12</sup> Edward (and Margaret) could count on such powerful political allies in the Netherlands as Lodewijk Gruuthuuse of Bruges, who was one of only three foreigners dur-



Figure 4. Detail of Figure 1



Figure 5. Watervliet Master, Center panel, triptych with the *Bearing of Christ's Body to the Sepulcher*, ca. 1515. Oil on wood, center panel 238.5 × 235.4 cm. Watervliet (East Flanders), Onze Lieve Vrouwe Kerk (photo: ACL, Brussels)

ing the entire fifteenth century to receive an English peerage for services rendered to the Yorkist cause.<sup>13</sup> The Burgundian chronicler Olivier de la Marche recounts that the extravagant wedding festivities in Damme and Bruges lasted no less than nine days and were among the most splendid seen in fifteenth-century Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Margaret of York spent some time in Lille, Le Crotoy, Arques, Male, Brussels, and Bruges. But for

most of the nine years of her married life she was in the palace Ten Walle in Ghent, where she celebrated the victories of her brother Edward IV at Barnet, then Tewkesbury, in 1471 with a formidable bonfire. After the death of her husband, Charles the Bold, on January 5, 1477, the duchess established her permanent residence in Mechelen, where she purchased an old town house from the bishop of Cambrai and redesigned it and eight adjacent houses



into a single palace.<sup>15</sup> Margaret's political authority in the Burgundian Netherlands increased with the years: in 1480 she was the chief mediator in the Netherlands alliance with England against France, and from 1482 to 1497 she was instrumental in consolidating the Burgundian Netherlands.<sup>16</sup>

Her hostility toward Henry VII, the Lancastrian king, reached unprecedented heights after the Yorkist defeat by Henry VII in the final engagement of the Wars of the Roses in 1485. (The conflict derives its name from the badges of the rival dynasties: the white rose of the Yorkists, the red of the Lancastrians.<sup>17</sup>) Shortly after his accession to the throne, Henry VII married Edward IV's daughter, Elizabeth of York. This calculated move resulted in the union of the roses into a single badge (the Tudor rose) after 1487. But the dowager duchess refused to give up the dynastic struggle. From 1486 onward the war was fought by diplomatic rather than military means. Margaret of York still wielded great authority in the Burgundian Netherlands and used it effectively against Henry VII. She could also count on the support of James IV of Scotland, who distrusted English power, and of the Scottish community in the Netherlands.<sup>18</sup> In fact, many Scottish families had settled in Bruges, where there were more Scots than representatives of any other foreign nation.<sup>19</sup>

The duchess had a wealth of personal resources, which she spent lavishly, part on personal luxuries and part in the cultivation of her influence in religious and political matters. In her private patronage Margaret reveals a preference for serious subjects combined with discriminating artistic taste. The manuscripts in her library—Hughes has identified at least twenty-six that were once in her Mechelen collection<sup>20</sup>—dealt primarily with moral and religious subjects.<sup>21</sup> But they were of high artistic quality and were illuminated by such leading artists as Willem Vrelant, Simon Marmion, Dreux Jean, Lieven van Lathem, Loyset Liédet, and the Master of Margaret of York. The library contained illuminated breviaries, books of hours, and various sermons and moral discourses, such as *Traité de morale* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, MS 9272–76), *Benois sont les miséricordieux* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, MS 9296), Jean Gerson's *Le Miroir de l'humilité* (Valenciennes, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 240), and Gerson's *Oeuvres* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, MS 9305–06). Between 1474 and 1476 the duchess commissioned from the translator and scribe David Aubert and his workshop in Ghent a number of co-

dices, including Guy de Thurno's *La Vision de l'âme* (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, MS 31), *Traité moral et religieux* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 365), Laurent du Bois's *Somme le Roi* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, MS 9106), and Boethius's ever-popular *De la consolation de philosophie* (Jena, Universitätsbibliothek, MS Gall. F.85). The duchess also owned a version of William Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, printed in late 1474 or early 1475 in Bruges, and a French translation of Quintus Curtius Rufus's *Historia Alexandri Magni*, done by the Portuguese scholar Vasco de Lucena, who was in the service of Margaret of York until 1477 (London, British Library, MS Royal 15 D IV). This representative selection of titles indicates that many of the duchess's manuscripts were devotional and further suggests that she had little interest in broader humanistic topics.

The public side of Margaret of York's patronage expresses a predilection for reformed Catholic devotion. This is recognized and well documented by such prominent contemporaries as the chronicler Wielant, who wrote in his *Antiquités de Flandre* that "Madame Marguerite d'York, veuve de Monseigneur Charles, avoit sa dévotion de practiquer la réforme des cloîtres jacobins, frères mineurs, et aultres, et fust cause qu'il en eust beaucoup réformés."<sup>22</sup> Wielant's statement refers to Margaret's active involvement in, among other things, the reform of the Black Sisters of Saint Augustine (Leuven), the Premonstratensians in their rich abbey of Bonne Espérance, the Cistercians of L'Olive-sur-l'Hermitage (both near Binche), the Augustinian convent of Bethany (Mechelen), the Recollets (Mechelen), and the Victorines (Mechelen).

The duchess became a close ally of the reformed branch of the Franciscans, the Friars of the Observance (*Recollets*) and the affiliated sisters, the Coletine branch of the Poor Clares. In 1503 she was buried in the gray Franciscan robe in the convent of the Friars of the Observance in Mechelen.<sup>23</sup> Ascetic Franciscan reform, also known as "Observance," was propagated in the Netherlands by influential preachers such as St. Bernardino of Siena and St. John Capistrano, who was in Bruges in 1443. Margaret of York helped to finance the building of the convent and the church of the Observant Friars outside the Ezelpoort in Bruges, on land donated by Tommaso Portinari.<sup>24</sup> She also financed the reconstruction of the library of the Friars Minor in Mechelen in 1497.<sup>25</sup> Her patronage was not without political motives and included the donation of a wide variety of art objects, frequently marked with her

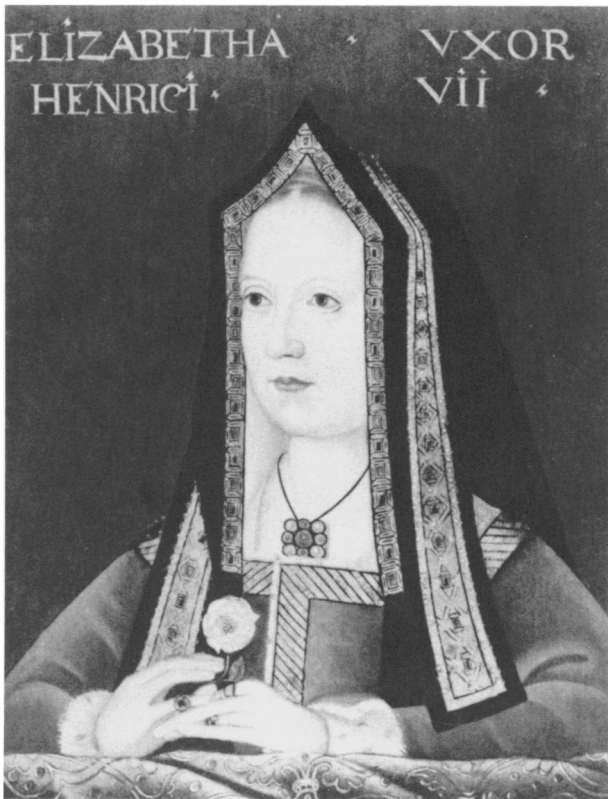


Figure 6. Sixteenth-century copy based on a contemporary portrait of Queen Elizabeth of York holding the white rose of York. London, National Portrait Gallery, Kings and Queens Series (photo: ACL, Brussels)



Figure 7. Pendant badge of the Chancellor of the Order of the Garter. London, British Museum (photo: British Museum)

insignia emblems or motto or both. She presented, for instance, a *Vie de Sainte Colette* (Nicolette Boylet, 1381–1447, foundress of the Colettines), illuminated with twenty-five miniatures, to the Franciscan convent of the Poor Clares in Ghent (Ghent, Convent of Clarisses, MS 8). At the end of the volume she wrote the inscription “Votre loyale Margarete dangleterre, Prayez pour elle & pour son salut.” One leaf (London, British Library, MS Arundel, fol. g) is all that remains of a Gradual Margaret presented to the Grey Friars of Greenwich, who founded a religious house there in 1482.<sup>26</sup> A note on the verso reads “This book was the book called the Graile given unto the Graie Observant friars of Greenwich by Margaret Duchesse of Bourgoigne, sister of K. Edward 4. This book was made beyond the seas.”

Although Margaret’s artistic patronage was distinctly in the realm of austere devotionism, it was not exclusively limited to the Franciscan order. In 1494 she had built in Binche a convent of the Augustinian Black Sisters, the so-called Soeurettes, and was instrumental in the building of a Carthusian convent in Leuven. She also gave money and a variety of works of art, including manuscripts, reliquaries, stained-glass windows, and paintings to the churches of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw in Bruges, St. Rombauts and the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw van Hanswijck in Mechelen, the Onze-Lieve-Vrouw in Dendermonde, St. Maarten in Aalst, and St. Ursmer in Binche. It is not difficult to imagine that the Getty Deposition could have been commissioned and donated in similar circumstances. That the duchess may have commissioned an austere devotional painting such as the Getty Deposition accords with her religious patronage and biography. The same preference is expressed in her own manuscripts, such as Nicolas Finet’s *Le Dyalogue de la Duchesse de Bourgoigne à Iesu Christ* (London, British Library, MS Add. 7970), illuminated by the Master of Girart de Roussillon, in which Christ engages in a discussion with the duchess concerning true spirituality, or in the *Traité de morale* (Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, MS 9272–76), where Margaret is even shown in front of the dead Christ in the forthright style of the *Imitatio Christi*.

There is one instance where the Devotio Moderna Passion theme can be linked to both Margaret of York’s white rose, and specifically to the Magdalene wearing the Yorkist badge. In 1485, the year of the final Yorkist defeat of Bosworth, Margaret of York founded in Mons (Hainaut) a religious community called the Filles des Madeleine, the Daughters of the Magdalene.<sup>27</sup> She took great personal interest in this

newly constituted community, which was exclusively devoted to rescuing young women from prostitution. The duchess not only made her personal property and money available, but she also endowed the convent with annual revenues and had Bishop Henri van Berghen draft the rules of observance. Whether the duchess or another Yorkist benefactor actually donated the Getty Deposition to these Daughters of the Magdalene in Mons is not documented. But the depiction of Mary Magdalene wearing a Yorkist badge in a Deposition scene must have evoked a particular response in the reformist milieu of the Daughters of the Magdalene or in any comparable setting.

Thus the image may be considered designed to evoke the spectator's reaction by being both evocative and informative, by offering both general and specific clues. The emotional climate surrounding the death of Christ involves less information than understanding. It involves a capacity to generalize and empathize, and is, as such, accessible to most spectators, past and present. But the Magdalene with the Yorkist white rose imparts very specific information, relating to a very particular political-religious context, and requires specific prior knowledge from the spectator, past and present, to be intelligible. To such a knowledgeable audience the sign of the rose constitutes a subtle, yet perpetual, reminder of Margaret of York's protection of a community devoted to the Magdalene. Other references, insignia, and inscriptions may have been found on the original frame, but it is now lost. In any event, the internal structure of the image and its assumed contextual response make the proposed scenario, or a comparable one, quite plausible. This further underscores the importance of Yorkist patronage and its response, both of which need further interdisciplinary study as part of a greater effort to negotiate the historical context of early Netherlandish art.

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## NOTES

1. For the most recent summary discussion, see Joel Upton, *Petrus Christus: His Place in Fifteenth-Century Flemish Painting* (London, 1990) pp. 44–47, esp. n. 55 on the older literature.
2. T. P. van Zijl, *Gerard Groote, Ascetic and Reformer* (Washington, D.C., 1963); R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion* (Leiden, 1968); and J. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (New York, 1988).
3. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Leo Shirley-Price, trans. (New York, 1952; repr. 1986); see also H. Kloster, *Imitatio: Concordance in Latin to the Imitation of Christ* (Vienna, 1978).
4. See Frits Lugt, *Inventaire général des écoles du nord: Maîtres des anciens Pays-Bas nés avant 1550* (Paris, 1968) pp. 9–10, no. 16; and Micheline Sonkes, *Dessins du XVe siècle: Groupe Van der Weyden in The Flemish Primitives, III: Contributions à l'étude des primitifs flamands* (Brussels, 1969) pp. 134–139, no. C. 23, pl. xxix.
5. For the most complete discussion of the pedigree, copies, and attribution of the painting, see Burton B. Fredricksen, "A Flemish Deposition of ca. 1500 and Its Relation to Rogier's Lost Composition," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 9 (1981) pp. 133–156; Stephen H. Goddard, "The Master of Frankfurt and His Shop," Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1983; idem, "The Master of Frankfurt and His Shop," in *Verhandelingen van de koninklijke Academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België, Klasse der schone kunsten* 46, 38 (Brussels, 1984) pp. 91–94, no. G107. See also Christine Weightmon, *Margaret of York: Duchess of Burgundy 1446–1503* (New York, 1989) p. 186; and Hans J. Van Miegroet, *Museums in California: The Flemish Primitives, I, Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle XVII* (Brussels, 1993) no. 182.
6. Similar ideas are expressed by Michael Bockemühl, *Die Wirklichkeit des Bildes—Bildrezeption als Bildproduktion: Rothko, Newman, Rembrandt, Raphael* (Stuttgart, 1983); Wolfgang Kemp, ed., *Der Betrachter ist im Bild: Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik* (Cologne, 1985).
7. This work is attributed to the Watervliet Painter, ca. 1515, and shows a somewhat simplified composition, without the angels, but with landscape and elevated cross. See also Paul Vanaise, "De Meester van Watervliet en zijn Nood Gods," *Bulletin van het koninklijk Instituut voor het kunstpatrimonium* 9 (1966) pp. 9–39; Fredricksen, "Flemish Deposition," pp. 139–141, fig. 9; Goddard, "The Master of Frankfurt," 1984, p. 158, no. 104, fig. 10; and Van Miegroet, *The Flemish Primitives*, no. 182, F. (3).
8. *Boutell's Heraldry*, rev. by J. P. Brooke-Little (London/New York, 1970) pp. 87–88.
9. R. Strong, *National Portrait Gallery Kings and Queens Series, 1485–1603: The Tudor House* (London, 1967) p. 3; and Ralph A. Griffiths and Roger S. Thomas, *The Making of the Tudor Dynasty* (New York, 1985) p. 104. For the York and Lancaster badges, see A. C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry* (London, 1985) pp. 202–203.
10. Richard Marks and Ann Payne, eds., *British Heraldry from Its Origin to c. 1800* (London, 1978) pp. 121–122, 127, no. 245.
11. Luc Hommel, *Marguerite d'York ou la duchesse Junon* (Paris, 1959); Muriel J. Hughes, "Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy: Diplomat, Patroness, Bibliophile, and Benefactress," in *The Private Library*, 3rd ser., 7/1 (1984) pp. 2–17.

12. Kervyn de Lettenhove, "Relations du mariage de duc Charles de Bourgogne et de Marguerite d'York," *Bulletin de la Commission royale d'histoire*, 3rd ser., 10 (1867–69) pp. 245–266; J. Calmette, "Le Mariage de Charles le Téméraire avec Marguerite de York," *Annales de Bourgogne* 1 (1929) pp. 193–214.
13. Charles Ross, *The Wars of the Roses: A Concise History* (London, 1976) p. 86; J. A. Van Houtte, *De geschiedenis van Brugge* (Tielt, 1982) p. 158.
14. Ross, *Wars of the Roses*, p. 73.
15. Hughes, "Margaret of York," p. 9.
16. Léon Gadeslout, "Marguerite d'York, duchesse douairière de Bourgogne (1468–1503)," *Annales de la Société d'émulation pour l'étude de l'histoire à des antiquités de la Flandre*, 4th ser., III (1879); Ross, *Wars of the Roses*, pp. 104–105. For a concise biography of the duchess, see Anne Crawford, "Margaret of York," in *The Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women* (London, 1983) p. 276.
17. John Gillingham, *The War of the Roses* (Baton Rouge, 1984).
18. Roger Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain 1471–1714* (New York, 1985) p. 2.
19. Reinhard Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (Oxford, 1983) p. 65.
20. L.-M.-J. Delaissé, "Marguerite d'York et ses livres," in *Marguerite d'York et son temps*, exh. cat. (Brussels, 1967) pp. 13–14; Georges Dogaer, "Margaretha van York, bibliotheek," *Handelingen van de koninklijke kring voor oudheidkunde, letteren en kunst van Mechelen* 79 (1975) pp. 99–111.
21. Quoted in Hommel, *La duchesse Junon*, p. 314.
22. Muriel J. Hughes, "The Library of Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy," *The Private Library*, 3rd ser., 7/2 (1984) pp. 53–78.
23. Hughes, "Margaret of York," p. 16.
24. V. Duclos, *Bruges: histoire et souvenirs* (Bruges, 1910) p. 542.
25. R. Tambuyser, "Margareta van York and Mechelen," *Handelingen van de koninklijke kring voor oudheidkunde: Letteren en kunst van Mechelen* 56 (1952) p. 216.
26. Dogaer, "Margaretha bibliotheek," pp. 107, 110.
27. Hommel, *La duchesse Junon*, p. 323.