

On the Cityscape of the Mérode Altarpiece¹

JACQUES DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN

Liège University

THE MÉRODE ALTARPIECE, with its abundant symbolism, has often been studied, even before its acquisition by the Metropolitan Museum. This note concerns the interpretation of the right-hand panel (Figure 1), which shows Joseph in his workshop. The decisive step in its interpretation was made some time ago by Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University.² The interpretation put forward by Schapiro seems to me unsailable, and I shall not try to change it, but I think I have something to add.

The mousetraps on the windowsill and the table allude, Schapiro has shown, to the idea, found first in St. Augustine, that the holy cross was a mousetrap set by God for Satan—in Augustine's words, *muscupula diaboli, crux domini*, "the cross of the Lord was a mousetrap for the Devil." Augustine also wrote that *esca qua caperetur mors domini*, "the death of the Lord was the bait by means of which the Devil would be taken in." Gregory of Nyssa wrote that "the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, so that as is done by greedy fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of the flesh."

This notion of baiting the Devil is illustrated in another object in the panel: the board into which Joseph is boring holes. Several interpretations of it had been offered before Schapiro intervened. Schapiro cites E. Panofsky and C. de Tolnay, who argued that the board was the perforated cover of a foot warmer. Margaret Freeman suggested that it was a spike-block that hangs from Christ's waist in certain images of the Via Crucis.³ Schapiro more convincingly adduced for comparison an illuminated manuscript, the property of a New

York collector. The text deals with the Mystery of the Incarnation, and in the margin of one page a fishing scene is represented with, amongst the fishing tackle, a boat-shaped box for bait. Such a box, rectangular in form, is common in our day, "and we may assume," writes Schapiro,

that it was known in the 15th century. The context of the miniature and the other connections between the two works lead us to believe that in the Mérode picture too, the board on which Joseph is at work belongs to the same complex of trapping and bait associated with the Redemption. That mousetrap and fishing could be cited together as metaphors in an account of the Redemption is shown in a sermon in a breviary of the 14th century on Monte Cassino.⁴

Now, the two churches in the background of the right-hand panel (Figure 2) are not, as we shall see, part of an insignificant landscape, a mere backdrop to the scene of Joseph in his workshop. But it needed an inhabitant of my native town, Liège, such as my wife, to identify the churches, one of which is no longer extant. Documents have survived, however, that make the

1. Based on a lecture delivered at the Metropolitan Museum on 20 June 1975.

2. Meyer Schapiro, "'Muscupula Diaboli,' The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin* 27 (September, 1945) pp. 182–187; Meyer Schapiro, "A Note on the Mérode Altarpiece," *Art Bulletin* 41 (December, 1959) pp. 327–328.

3. Margaret Freeman, "The Iconography of the Mérode Altarpiece," *MMA Bulletin* 16, p. 138.

4. Schapiro, "A Note," p. 327.

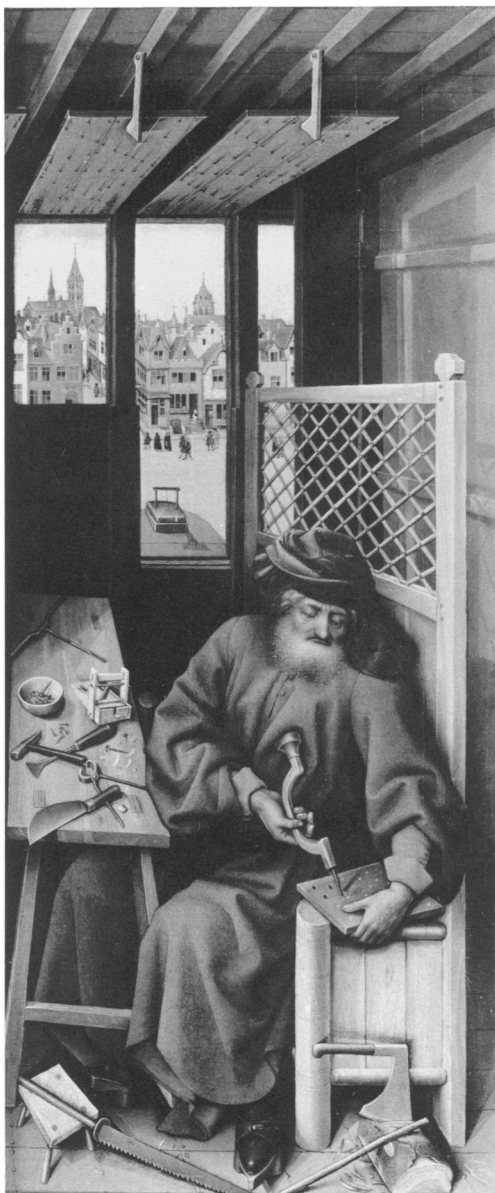


FIGURE 1
Right-hand panel of the Mérode altarpiece.
The Cloisters Collection

identification possible. A model of the city in past centuries is on display at the University of Liège. A photograph of part of this model (Figure 3) shows the two churches with their characteristic features and in the same relative position as in the painting; the one to the right with a polygonal tower and a low roof, the other with a square tower and a tall, tapering steeple. I may add that the two churches appear in the photograph exactly as they would if seen from a hill across the creek Legia, after which Liège is named.

One might ask what interest is there, except for the local people, in identifying the churches. Can this identification enhance our appreciation of the picture? Well, it does, and on two counts.

For one thing, it may help to answer the question of who painted the Mérode altarpiece. There is an enduring controversy on this point. Many scholars attribute the painting to Roger van der Weyden, who worked in Brussels, some to Robert Campin, who was active in Tournai,⁵ a town in western Belgium, and yet others to the Master of Flémalle, a pupil of Jan van Eyck. I shall not attempt to answer a question manifestly beyond my competence, but I think it is not irrelevant to note that the panel must have been painted by an artist to whom the Liège landscape was familiar, and to remember that Flémalle was, and is, a suburb of Liège.

However, this is not my chief concern. The important point is the significance of the two churches, their part in the symbolism of the panel—in other words, their essential connection with Joseph's workshop. Remember that Joseph is making mousetraps, an allusion to the cross of the Lord, and a cover for a bait box, a part of fishing tackle. Now, to whom were the churches dedicated? The one still extant, to la Sainte Croix, the Holy Cross. The other, no longer extant, to St. Pierre, St. Peter, the fisherman.

5. Hence the suggestion by Theodore Rousseau, Jr., in "The Mérode Altarpiece," *MMA Bulletin* 16, p. 128, that the town in the background of the right panel was "perhaps Tournai."



FIGURE 2
Detail of the right-hand
panel

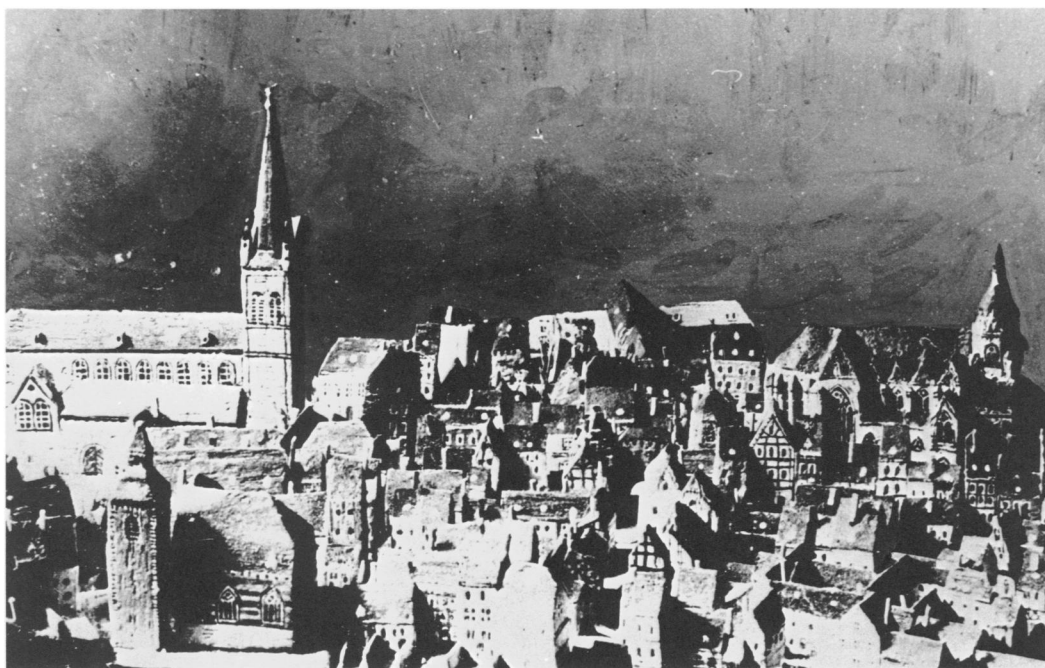


FIGURE 3
Detail of the model of the
city of Liège, showing the
church of St. Pierre at left
and that of Sainte Croix at
right