Popular Imagery in a Fifteenth-Century Burgundian Crèche

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A SMALL LIMESTONE CRÈCHE (Figure 1)[1] exhibited in the main medieval sculpture hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is an unusual representation of the traditional Christmas theme.[2] Many different elements, all of them vivid and anecdotal and each deriving from a different source, are here interwoven in a manner not found in other depictions of Christ's birth.

The outer sides of the crèche are carefully carved and painted, proving that it was isolated, neither placed in a niche nor part of a series of the life of Christ. The condition of the back face, smoothly chiseled but unfinished, indicates that it was not meant to be seen and that it must have been set directly against a wall, perhaps on a corbel or on a plinth resting on an altar. Small portable crèches are known to have been displayed on or near altars during the Christmas season and packed away in boxes the rest of the year.[3] The Museum's is made of stone and, although not large, was probably too heavy for such temporary display.

The carving is in sound condition except for the mutilation of the Virgin's nose and scratches on several faces. Most of the wings and a scroll are missing from the group of angels in the upper left corner. There has been structural damage in the area of the shepherds on the upper right. The right arm of the middle shepherd is missing, as are the tops of the animals' heads. The Child in the manger originally held a now-unidentifiable object. Two small dowel holes in the smoothly rounded area of rock at the lower left corner may indicate that there was once attached here a coat of arms or a miniature donor figure. There are minor chips on the base. The existence of several layers of paint, inconsistently applied, would seem to indicate that the original surface was poly-chromed, although most of the old paint has disappeared.[4]

Three traditional versions of the scene of the birth of Christ are implied here. The base and the rocky formation of the outer shell indicate a grotto or cave, Christ's birthplace according to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Similar caves still exist beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The back and the right walls of the enclosure are composed of carefully cut stone in allusion to a second tradition, the house of David, Christ's earthly ancestor, who also came from Bethlehem. The uneven height of the wall suggests the house in its traditionally ruined state, and the higher section above Joseph's head may refer to the tower of David. Reference to the Western tradition of the poverty of Christ's birth in a stable among the animals is seen in the wattled matting that patches the walls against the cold and in the crude manger holding the Child.[5]

Within this setting the composition is divided into two sections. In the upper part, adoring angels and the shepherds visit the stable where the Christ Child, attended by another angel, lies on a wattled manger. In the lower section, an elaborately carved cradle (as distinguished from a manger)[6] is being prepared by two more angels, and Joseph sits at its foot. The two scenes are linked by the majestic figure of the Virgin, who looks up at the Child above her.

The Virgin (Figure 2) kneeling in solemn adoration is an iconographic theme that became common in France only during the fifteenth century.[7] The sharp folds of her mantle, beautifully complex, break into soft, puffy clusters, ending in a series of scallops. The simple gown, with its low, curving neckline, contrasts with the mantle. This rich display of drapery is crowded between the wattled left wall and the cradle.

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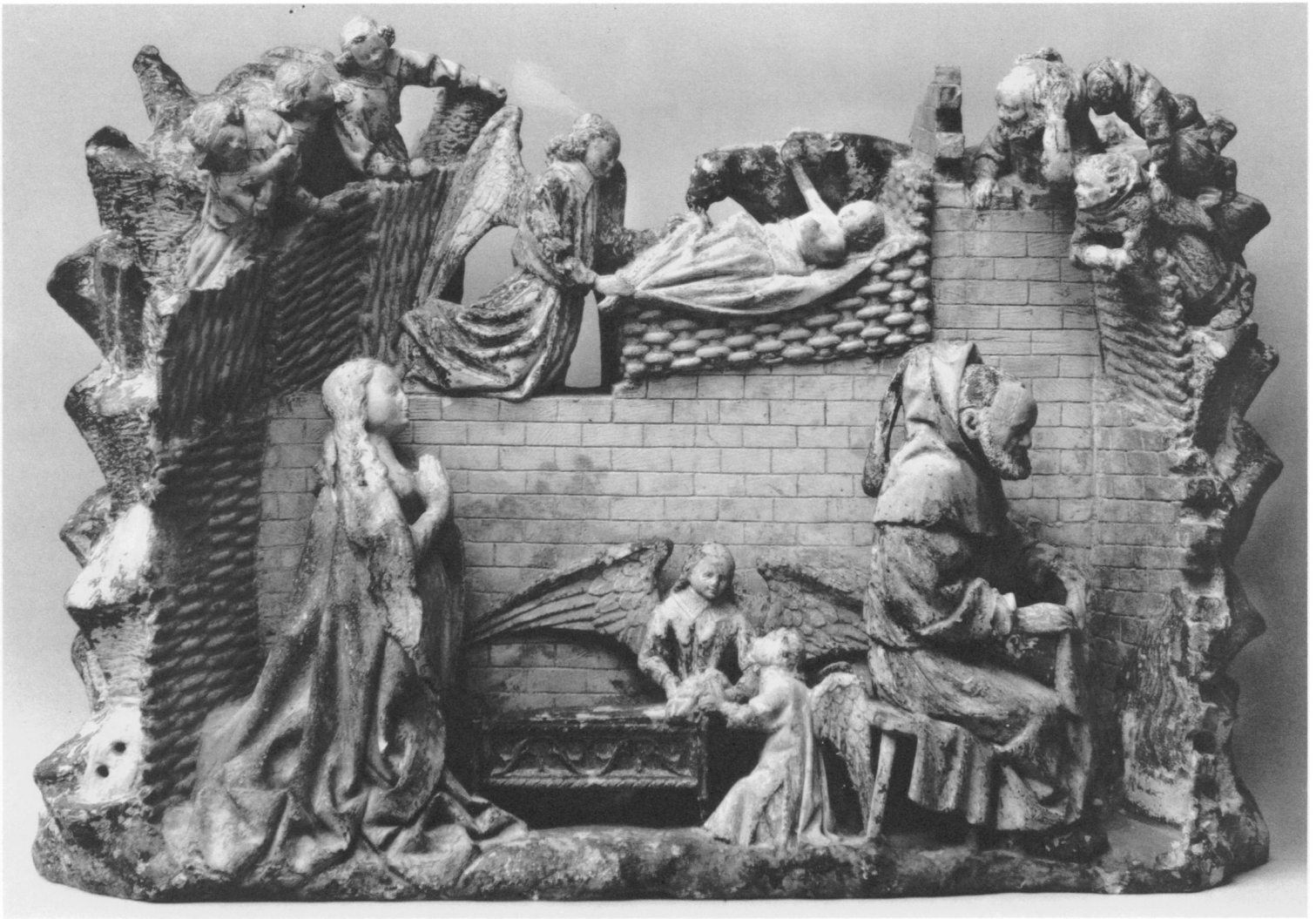
1. Crèche, Burgundian, third quarter of the 15th century. Painted limestone, 17⁹⁄₁₆ x 27½ in. (45 x 70 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916, 16.32.158

The Virgin's hair, delicately carved and engraved in deep waves, falls uncovered over her shoulders as a sign of her maidenhood.

The contrast between the youthful wife kneeling like a donor queen and the burly old husband (Figure 3) is surely intentional. Joseph, the master carpenter and the goodman of the house, sits in simple dignity.[8] Extending down below his shoulders is a heavy cowl, which enlarges his already massive head and ends in an extension of the peak of the hood, known as a liripipe. The forehead is slightly puckered with delicately carved veins across the temple below a lock of curling hair. A short beard frames the gentle face, whose wide nose and sunken cheeks are heavy rather than coarse. In contrast, his finely modeled hands are not those of the average workman. He sits squarely on a low stool, his legs spread and his feet awkwardly pigeon-toed, the stereotype of a rustic. He turns his back on the scene as he warms before the fire a cloth in which to wrap the Child.

Joseph's role grew in importance during the fifteenth century.[9] He was no longer the isolated old man, sunk in gloomy meditation, as in earlier Nativity scenes, but he became the fostering parent, helping with the infant and using his carpenter's skill to construct the wattling.[10] The elaborate cradle (Figure 4) is also Joseph's handiwork. It is carved with moldings in the Flamboyant style of tracery used in fifteenth-century furniture and architectural ornament. Two angels with spreading wings prepare a pillow. They and the cradle serve to connect the figures of Joseph and the Virgin.

In the upper right corner of the composition,

2. Detail of Figure 1, the Virgin

3. Detail of Figure 1, Joseph

4. Detail of Figure 1, the cradle with angels

three cleverly intertwined shepherds (Figure 5) strain toward the Child with engaging eagerness.[11] The eldest, at the top of the group, resembles Joseph in features, beard, and balding pate and is similarly hooded. He leans on the top of the wall and peers around another section of it, which rises at right angles between him and the manger. Next to him a middle-aged shepherd wears the same type of hood, and a youth scrambles up between them to see, stepping on the back of the man below him. This lively group has a rollicking, picturesque air, in marked contrast to the solemnity of the lower scene.

In the opposite corner, three angels have just

5. Detail of Figure 1,
   the three shepherds

alighted (Figure 6). The top angel once held a scroll (now missing),[12] not to be confused with the carving below and behind his hand. The middle angel puts his left hand on the shoulder of his companion, somewhat in the manner of the middle shepherd. The lower angel crosses his arms in adoration and gazes down at the Virgin. Two of the angels have narrow bands around their temples, tightly binding the hair on top of the head but allowing it to curl freely at the sides.

The Christ Child in the wattled manger (Figure 7) is the focus of his mother's attention. He is half-nude, with a cloth covering the lower part of his body.[13] His head rests on the rolled-up pillow. He holds up his right hand to the mouth of the ox for warmth, while the ass licks his feet. Although the manger is placed precariously high in the composition, it is stabilized at the head by the projection of the ruined wall and at the foot, visually and aesthetically, by an attending angel. The manger's illogical

6. Detail of Figure 1,
   the three angels

7. Detail of Figure 1, the manger with attending angel and Christ Child

height may be the result of the exigencies of the crowded composition. In any case, I know of no other crèche with this duplication of cribs.

The elegant silhouette of the attending angel holding the cloth is poised between flying and kneeling. His drapery sweeps in a series of broad curves more dynamic than those of the other, more static figures below him. The change in rhythm between the angel's drapery and the straight creases of the Child's linen, which converge at the angel's hand, points to a sculptor of dexterity and originality who understood the effect of contrast.

Although the scene is essentially in high relief, set in a shallow enclosure only four to five inches in depth, the figures, carved in the round, have a sense of three-dimensionality. The central angel above is out of scale with the other two groups of angels. A similar discrepancy in size appears between Joseph, the Virgin, and the shepherds. The manger is insecurely tilted and the animals float in the air behind it. The eye forgives these inconsistencies in the depiction of a well-loved story. The liveliness of the upper

8. Antoine le Moiturier, Angel supporting a cross, 1463–65. Limestone, H. 38 in. (96.5 cm.). Avignon, St. Pierre (photo: Baudouin)

9.
The Death of the Virgin, Burgundian, third quarter of the 15th century. Limestone, 17 x 21 in. (43.2 x 53.3 cm.). From vicinity of Semur-en-Auxois. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. R. F. 2029 (photo: Musées Nationaux)

figures is a foil to the composure of those below. Thus the composition is divided not only horizontally but also vertically, with the ethereal angels above the Virgin on the one side and the earthy shepherds above Joseph on the other.

The style of the crèche and its date accord generally with the work of Antoine le Moiturier, sculptor to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy after 1462.[14] Specifically, the sharply indented clusters of fabric around the bottom of the Virgin's mantle are found on an angel and a bishop in the Musée Rolin at Autun and on a figure of St. Anthony at Manlay, all attributed to this sculptor.[15] The angel kneeling by the cradle at the base of the Museum's crèche wears the same kind of outer garment, fringed and split at the side, as one of the four life-size angels in Avignon (Figure 8) carved by Moiturier between 1463 and 1465.[16] He consistently used the same broad collars seen on the angels in the Metropolitan's crèche.[17] On several of these angels the hair curls out from under the fillets in the same way as on Moiturier's angel in Avignon.

The bulky proportions and the facial type of the Museum's Joseph and of the eldest shepherd are cur-

10. Entombment of Christ, Burgundian, ca. 1459. Painted limestone, slightly less than life-size. Detail showing Joseph of Arimathea. Dijon, General Hospital (former Chapel of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem) (photo: Courtauld Institute of Art)

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11. Crèche or Nativity, Burgundian, second half of 15th century. Painted limestone, half life-size. Detail showing Joseph. Dijon, Musée Archéologique (photo: Courtauld Institute of Art)

12. Crèche or Nativity, Burgundian, 15th century. Painted limestone, 16 x 16 in. (40.6 x 40 cm.). Prâlon, Église de l'Assomption (photo: Inventaire Général de Bourgogne)

rent in Burgundian sculpture of the second half of the fifteenth century. In a relief of the Death of the Virgin in the Louvre (Figure 9), most of the apostles have the same wide face, high cheekbones, and short beard as the figure of Joseph in the crèche. These features reappear in another relief, the Raising of Lazarus, in the Musée Rolin at Autun.[18] The same type of face, although with a longer beard, appears on Joseph of Arimathea in two Entombment groups, one in the General Hospital at Dijon (Figure 10) dated about 1459, the other in the church of St. Désiré at Lons-le-Saunier (1470s or 1480s).[19]

In a Nativity relief in the Archaeological Museum at Dijon (Figure 11), Joseph has similar features and a cowl with liripipe pushed back off his bald forehead. His feet are more pigeon-toed than in the Museum's crèche, and the rough wattling rising behind him is slightly larger in scale. He sits at the feet of the Virgin, watching as she nurses the Child. At Prâlon (Figure 12),[20] near Dijon, a crèche of approximately

the same size as the Museum's repeats the figure of Joseph seated in the lower right corner warming the cloth before the fire. While fairly close in iconography, these last differ completely from the Museum's sculpture in style and composition.[21]
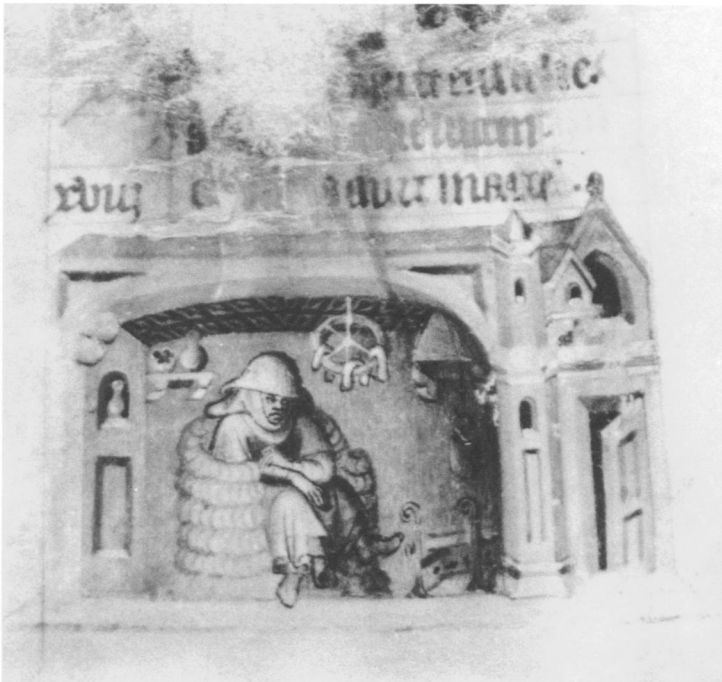
These comparisons indicate the source of the imagery in the Metropolitan's crèche to be Burgundian, but the addition of a carved cradle at the base suggests the influence of other lands controlled by the dukes of Burgundy, namely the southern Netherlands.[22] There devotional cradles were used with or without posts and rockers, and with or without an image of the Christ Child. The Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibits near the limestone crèche such a cradle from a Brabant workshop (Figure 13),[23] and it can in turn be closely compared in shape and ornament to others in Utrecht and Antwerp.[24]

Certain iconographic elements of the limestone crèche are organized in a painterly rather than sculptural manner. The motif of an old peasant warming

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13. Christmas cradle, Brabant (from the Grand Béguinage, Louvain), 15th century. Painted and gilded wood, 12½ x 11 x 7⁹⁄₁₆ in. (31.8 x 27.9 x 18.3 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Ruth Blumka in memory of her husband, 1974, 1974.121

himself before a fire was used to illustrate the month of January or February in the calendars of medieval French illuminated manuscripts (Figure 14).[25] The motif is borrowed in several fifteenth-century versions of the Nativity, in which Joseph warms his hands before the fire,[26] warms the Child's cloth,[27] or holds the cloth ready to cover him.[28] In the last example, Joseph's hood is pushed back from his forehead, and there is the same kind of wattling on walls and manger as in the Museum's crèche. Several manuscripts repeat the theme of the Christ Child sharing the warmth of the animals.[29]

Contemporary Flemish painting reflects the general devotional content and traditional personages of the Metropolitan's crèche but not, significantly, some of the specific iconographic elements in this sculpture. Familiar elements shared by the crèche and by painting of the same period may be seen, for example, in a large panel in the Dijon museum and in the Portinari Altarpiece in Florence.[30] These include the kneeling Virgin, the trios of angels and shepherds of different ages, as well as references to the house of David, the cave, and the stable. The specific motif of Joseph at the fire with his cloth appears in a small painted polyptych by a follower of Melchior Broederlam, in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum in Antwerp.[31]

A likely source for some of the iconography of the crèche is the Christmas liturgy. The angels wear

14. Jean Pucelle, fol. 2v., from *Hours of Jeanne d'Évreux*, Ile-de-France, 1325–28. The Cloisters Collection, 1954, 54.1.2

15. The Nativity, Mosan, 12th century. Champlevé enamel on copper-gilt, 4¼ x 4⅜ in. (10.8 x 11.1 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.417

robes with wide collars of the same sort as those worn by deacons.[32] At some periods, priests officiated in the Christmas Mass clothed as shepherds.[33] The elevated position of the manger possibly harks back to a liturgical interpretation. Examples of similar arrangements include a twelfth-century Mosan plaque in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 15) and two twelfth- and thirteenth-century windows of Chartres Cathedral.[34]

Mystery plays, evolving from the performance of the liturgy during the fifteenth century, brought to life scenes from the Christmas story for the popular mind. Some of the iconographic elements of such plays—the wattled manger and walls, Joseph with the Child's cloth, and the trio of adoring angels—are seen in the Museum's crèche.[35] The angled sides of the sculpture suggest to me the wings of a stage set, opened out for all to see.

The traditional simplicity of the Nativity has been enriched and enlivened here by three sets of adoring angels and two resting places for the Child. The sculpture is an adroit conflation of the traditional cave, stable, and house of David, and the colorful elements introduced from the mystery plays give it a sense of heightened activity. Despite its small size and the complexity of motifs, the crèche is distinctive and creates a successful illusion of monumentality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. The crèche was given to the Metropolitan Museum by J. P. Morgan in 1916, along with other objects from the extensive collection of his father, J. Pierpont Morgan, who had acquired the piece as part of the collection of Georges Hoentschel, a well-known French architect. Hoentschel had in turn acquired it from a curator at the Louvre, Émile Molinier, who was well versed in sculpture. A distinction is to be made between a crèche—an independent scene such as the Metropolitan Museum's—and a Nativity, one of a series of scenes that were common in retables of the period. The term *crèche* originally referred only to a manger. The crèche is known in Italy as a *presepio* and in Germany as a *Krippe*.

2. See André Pérate and Gustave Brière, *Collections Georges Hoentschel* (Paris, 1908) I, p. 8, pl. XVI, and Ramond Louis et al., *La Nativité de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* (Paris, 1911) p. 39.

3. Rudolf Berliner, "The Origins of the Crèche," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6th ser., 30 (1946) pp. 249–278, esp. p. 270. Such a crèche, or "Bethlehem," was set up at Delft near the high altar.

4. Detailed notes on condition and paint, prepared by Elayne Grossbard in 1985, when the piece was cleaned and repaired by the Department of Objects Conservation, are to be found in the Medieval Department files.

5. For the traditional locations of the Nativity, see Paul Guérin et al., *Les Petits Bollandistes Vies des Saints*, 7th ed. (Paris, 1875) XIV, p. 417. For the first tradition, see Gabriel Millet, *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'évangile* (Paris, 1916) figs. 36, 37, 41–43, 51, 52, 78, 86, etc. For the tradition of the house of David, see Amos 9:11, Acts 15:16, and Luke 2:4 and 11. For the third tradition, see Luke 2:7.

6. Guérin, *Petits Bollandistes*, XIV, p. 454, cites two resting places for the Child.

7. According to Erwin Panofsky in *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953) I, pp. 46, 377–379 n.3, this type of adoring Virgin was first described in the *Meditations of the Life of Christ*, an apocryphal work of the 15th century once attributed to St. Bonaventura. See also Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Princeton, 1961) p. 34; Gustave Cohen, *Histoire de la mise-en-scène dans le théâtre religieux français du Moyen-Âge* (Paris, 1905) p. 109; and Émile Mâle, "Le Renouvellement de l'art par les Mystères," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 3d ser., 31 (1904) pp. 220–221.

8. Millard Meiss, *Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Late Fourteenth Century and the Patronage of the Duke* (London/New York, 1967) p. 171.

9. In 1479 Pope Sixtus IV authorized the feast of Joseph as part of the Church's calendar. Joseph's importance was also stressed by Jean Gerson, a leading French theologian of the century. See Francis L. Filas, *Joseph, the Man closest to Jesus* (Boston, 1962) pp. 220–225, 531–532, 537–540; and Mâle, "Le Renouvellement," p. 284.

10. Millet, *Recherches*, figs. 36–39, 41–43, 51; Meiss, *Jean de Berry*, p. 171; Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, I, p. 164–165; Ragusa and Green, *Meditations*, p. 32; and Émile Mâle, *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1925) pp. 51, 52.

11. Margaret Freeman, "Shepherds in the Fields," *MMAB* 11 (1952) pp. 108–115, relates the shepherds to the Nativity. They do not enter Nativity scenes until the 15th century. See Mâle, *L'Art religieux*, p. 53.

12. Undoubtedly the scroll contained in Latin the Christmas hymn "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

13. In earlier Nativities the Virgin lies on a couch and the Child lies in the manger on a bed of straw, tightly swaddled. See Millet, *Recherches*, figs. 36, 37, 39, 42, 43, 45.

14. Pierre Quarré, *Antoine le Moiturier, le dernier des grands imagiers des ducs de Bourgogne*, exh. cat. (Dijon, 1973) pp. 5–16; Jacques Baudoin, "De Jacques Morel à Michel Colombe" (diss., University of Dijon, 1977) pp. 109–154.

15. See Quarré, *Antoine le Moiturier*, no. 46 pl. XVIII, no. 44 pl. XX, no. 59 pl. XXXV; see also Baudoin, "De Jacques Morel," p. 152.

16. Quarré, *Antoine le Moiturier*, p. 10.

17. Ibid., nos. 30–31 pls. VIII–IX, no. 43 pl. XIX; nos. 25–27 pls. XXV–XXVII.

18. For the Louvre relief, see Marcel Aubert and Michèle Beaulieu, *Musée National du Louvre, Description raisonnée des sculptures du Moyen-Âge, de la Renaissance, et des temps modernes: I. Moyen-Âge* (Paris, 1950) no. 339. For the Autun relief, see Pierre Quarré and Georges Vuillemot, *Statuaire autunoise de la fin du Moyen-Âge*, exh. cat. (Autun, 1968) p. 4, no. 30, fig. 8; reprinted in *Mémoires de la Société Eduenne* 51 (1968) pp. 193–212.

19. For the Dijon sculpture, see William H. Forsyth, *The Entombment of Christ. French sculpture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) pp. 70–73, 76, fig. 94; for Lons-le-Saunier, ibid., pp. 75, 179, fig. 99.

20. *Canton de Sombernon, Côte-d'Or: Sculptures, XVe au XVIe siècles*, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts (Dijon, 1968) no. 10, pl. XIV, pp. 30–31, 43; Pierre Quarré, *Sculpture en Bourgogne à la fin du Moyen-âge* (Paris/Fribourg, 1978) nos. 15–17.

21. Other Late Gothic examples of the scene in sculptures at Bellefond, Chambéry Cathedral, and the church of Mouthier-le-Vieillard at Poligny bear even less relationship to the Metropolitan Museum's crèche. Nevertheless, the geological analysis of a small stone sample from the Museum's crèche by Professors Pierre Rat and André Pascal of the University of Dijon indicates a similarity to the fine-grained limestone with rhomboidal calcite crystals quarried during the fifteenth century at Norges, only seven miles from Dijon. This would seem to support a Dijon origin for the crèche.

22. Edmond Niffle-Anciaux, *Le Repos de Jésus et les berceaux reliquaires* (Namur, 1896); Rudolf Berliner, "Origins of the Crèche," esp. pp. 269–270; Hans Wentzel, "Eine Wiener Christkind Wiege in München und das Jesuskind der Margaretha Ebner," *Pantheon* 18 (1960) p. 281; and idem, "Ein Christusbettchen in Glasgow. Addenda aus der Burrell Collection," *Pantheon* 20 (1962) p. 2, fig. 3.

23. Otto von Falke, *Die Sammlung Dr. Albert Figdor, Wien, Erster Teil* (Berlin/Vienna, 1930) IV, p. 161; *Flanders in the 15th Century: Art and Civilization*, exh. cat., Detroit Institute of Art (1960) no. 161; and Wentzel, "Ein Christusbettchen in Glasgow," p. 2.

24. For the cradle in Utrecht in the Archepiscopal Museum, inv. B. 352, see Wentzel, "Eine Wiener Christkind Wiege," pp. 278, 281, fig. 8. For the Antwerp cradle, see Jozef de Coo, *Museum Mayer van der Bergh: Catalogus 2* (Antwerp, 1969) pp. 158–160, no. 2152.

25. See Léopold Delisle, *Les Heures dîtes de Jean Pucelle; manuscrit de M. le Baron Maurice de Rothschild* (Paris, 1910); Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, I, pp. 29–32; James J. Rorimer, *The Cloisters* (New York, 1963) pp. 149–150; and idem, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France, in The Cloisters* (New York, 1957).

26. See Meiss, *Jean de Berry*, p. 18, fig. 329; and idem, *Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry, the Boucicaut Master* (London, 1968) p. 80, fig. 324.

27. Meiss, *Jean de Berry*, pp. 334–337, fig. 131; and Mâle, *L'Art religieux*, pp. 51–52.

28. Meiss, *Jean de Berry*, pp. 321–323, fig. 184.

29. Ibid., fig. 619; and idem, *The Boucicaut Master*, fig. 270, p. 76.

30. For the Dijon sculpture from Champmol, see Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, I, pp. 126, 158–160, pls. 88–89; and Mâle, "Le Renouvellement," p. 285. For the Portinari Altar, see Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting* IV *Hugo van der Goes* (Leiden/Brussels, 1969) pp. 15–19, pls. 14–18; and Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, I, pp. 331–336, pl. 305, fig. 463.

31. Ibid., I, pp. 95–96; II, pl. 56, fig. 111. See also de Coo, *Museum Mayer van den Bergh: Catalogus* 1 (Antwerp, 1968) pp. 120–123, pl. 5. The piece (no. 359) is datable shortly before 1400 and attributed to an anonymous Lower Rhenish painter.

32. See Quarré, *Antoine le Moiturier*, nos. 43, 50, pls. XIX, XXV.

33. Berliner, "The Origins of the Crèche," p. 263.

34. Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of Chartres Cathedral* (Baltimore, 1959) pp. 12–13, n.23. For the Mosan plaque, see Philippe Verdier, "Émaux Mosans et Rheno-Mosans dans les collections des États Unis," *Revue Belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art* (1977) pp. 75–77; *MMAB* n.s. 10 (1952) p. 109, ill. For illustrations of the Chartres windows, see Yves Delaporte, *Les Vitraux de la Cathédrale de Chartres* (Chartres, 1926) I, pl. IV, and III, pl. CCXLV.

35. Cohen, *Histoire de la mise-en-scène*, pp. 109–110; Mâle, "Le Renouvellement," pp. 296–297; and idem, *L'Art religieux*, pp. 51–53.