

Encounter: Holy Beds

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I first encountered the Metropolitan Museum of Art's beguine cradle in 1960, when I was a junior at the University of Michigan and went to Detroit to see the highly touted exhibition "Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization." Although I had visited the medieval collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this was the first special exhibit devoted to the art of the Middle Ages I had ever seen. Because my trip to Detroit occurred fifty-six years ago, I can be forgiven, I think, for having only a vague memory of this encounter. I remember wondering why a doll's bed, even one for the baby Jesus, figured in such a show, but, like the curators themselves, I was interested primarily in the paintings, especially those of Rogier van der Weyden, Jan van Eyck, and Hieronymus Bosch.

In contrast, when I take students to the Met today, encounter with the beguine cradle is one of the high points of the tour (Fig. 1). The questions it raises now bear almost no relation to what curators and viewers experienced in 1960, when the crib visited Detroit, and it draws me and my students to another, much less-studied crib that is displayed quite close to the beguine cradle. The difference between what I and others thought we saw in 1960 and what we see today provides a window onto changes in the field of art history over the past half century.

The catalogue for the Detroit exhibit was organized, like the exhibit itself, according to medium or some sort of understanding of type, with "paintings" the largest group by far.¹ Next in numerical importance came "sculpture," which seems to have meant carvings in wood, for the categories "metalwork" and "goldsmith's work" included figures we would today call

sculpture. The beguine cradle was located in "furniture." The category of "devotional object," which was put on the art historical map in a way that fired popular imagination by Henk van Os in the exhibit "The Art of Devotion" in Amsterdam in 1994–95, was in no way thought of.² Throughout the Detroit catalogue, material trumps use or form as a principle of organization. But the matter described is not the matter of the recent "material turn" or "thing theory." It is acted upon, not actor, not even a participant in its own shaping.

It is striking to read, from this distance, the description in the Detroit catalogue of the cradle itself. The entry opens by relating it to cribs for actual babies in the fifteenth century and cites a surviving cradle perhaps used by the house of Burgundy. Although the Grand Béguinage in Louvain is mentioned as the provenance, there is no explanation of who the religious women known as beguines were, although we are given details about the musical instruments played by the angels on the bedposts. The only specific reference to women is the note that cribs were "sometimes given to nuns at the time they took their vows."³

Such—to put it a little baldly—were the days before women's history!⁴ But today, the significance for women is the first question my students raise. And pointing them toward answers is easy, however confusing the answers themselves may be. Since the 1980s we have had the work of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Ulrika Rublack, Jeffrey Hamburger, Thomas Lentz, Peter Keller, and Amy Powell, among others, who have explored the lives of religious women through the study of devotional objects, sometimes placing the extraordinary prominence of such objects and the visions they often

1. Detroit Institute of Arts, *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization; Catalogue of the Exhibition, Masterpieces of Flemish Art, Van Eyck to Bosch* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts; Brussels: Centre National de Recherches Primitifs Flamands, 1960).

2. Henk W. van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300–1500*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

3. Detroit Institute of Arts, *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century*, 343–45, at 345.

4. In fairness to the Detroit curators, one must note that the much later discussion of the crib in the Metropolitan Museum's *Bulletin* itself, although it emphasizes that the function of such objects is "to lead to the belief that they [the beguines] were actually taking part in the sacred events," does not underline either the gendered or the experiential aspects of such objects. William D. Wixom, "Late Medieval Sculpture in the Metropolitan, 1400–1530," special issue, *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 64, no. 4 (2007): 3.



Figure 1. *Crib of the infant Jesus from the Grand Béguinage of Louvain, made in Brabant, southern Netherlands, fifteenth century, wood, polychromy, lead, silver-gilt, painted parchment, silk embroidery with seed pearls, gold thread, translucent enamels, 35.4 × 28.9 × 18.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Ruth Blumka in memory of Leopold Blumka, 1974, 1974.121a–d (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art). See the electronic edition of Gesta for a color version of this image.*

induced in the context of deprivation theory, sometimes raising sophisticated questions about piety and performance. Did women have recourse to dolls because of unfulfilled erotic and maternal yearnings? Did handling such things as dolls and cribs bring the holy closer to earth, perhaps in ways that would later evoke Reformation doubts about images? Or, in contrast, did such objects make the holy more mysterious and heavenly, raising the nun or beguine herself toward Mary the virgin mother and the otherness of heaven?

My encounter with the beguine crib, as I have prepared in the past decade to teach it, has also raised questions different from those stimulated by gender history. What has repeatedly struck me is its visual ambiguity and its intense tactility, its own insistence on performance. For almost the first thing one notices, I think, is that the bed is also a church. It has Gothic windows along the sides; ogival arches on each end through which one looks, as if at an altarpiece or through a window; and Gothic towers at the four corners. The musicians are perched on the spires of a roof. On the richly embroidered bedcovering is a Tree of Jesse, and the pillow is embroidered

with the Lamb of God, surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists. In the bed is an opening, which was probably for a relic. Thus, the object was made holy, as an altar is, by the presence of a holy particle within. The bed is both image and reliquary, both representation and presence. It is hard not to think of the pillow and coverlet as altar cloths, given their themes, and surely the Jesus doll that was in former times placed in the bed echoes the coming of Christ into the sacrament at the Eucharistic consecration as well as his birth on Christmas morning. The bells that hang between the bedpost spires evoke both the playthings of a baby and the bells rung at the Eucharist. Hence the materials appeal to several senses, for the bed rings with sound, enriches the sight with red brocade and pearls, and seems, in its multiple textures and surfaces, to ask to be touched. Complexly decorated on all sides, it demands that we move around it, view it from multiple perspectives, even play with it. In addition, it changes form, function, and meaning as we move, almost like an Escher print or a Transformer, the child's toy popular a few years ago that metamorphosed from an action figure to a machine and back again.

Understanding the seductive materiality of the beguine cradle has led me to connect it to another bed in the Metropolitan Museum—a little-studied devotional object that I added to my student tour only a few years ago (Fig. 2). This second bed thematizes both gender and sensuality at least as pointedly as the beguine cradle. A Burgundian limestone carving from about 1450, this crèche displays two beds: an empty, elaborately decorated cradle on the lower level, very much like the beguine cradle, before which Mary prays; and a manger of wattle containing the Christ child, which floats diagonally above the empty cradle, with an angel and the stable animals in attendance. Angels watch from a wall on one side, shepherds from the other. Only Joseph, who airs clothes for the child before a leaping fire, has his back to the baby.

As with the beguine cradle, the little scene, which contrasts a majestic praying Mary with Joseph doing household chores, provides opportunities to raise gender issues with students. Promoted by powerful preachers such as Jean Gerson, the cult of Joseph was a complex response to the increasingly matriarchal themes of the Holy Kinships and Threefold Annas⁵ that proliferated in the fifteenth century. And these matriarchal devotional groups were themselves, among other things, a complex reaction to the increasing patrilinearity of inheritance patterns and the growing efforts of the Observant reform to cloister and limit women. But once again, what I find myself emphasizing with my students is not only gender but

5. The group of St. Anne, the Virgin, and the Christ child, usually known as the *Anna Selbdritt*.



Figure 2. Circle of Antoine Le Moiturier, *Nativity*, made near Burgundy, ca. 1450, limestone with later paint and gilding, 45.1 × 65.7 × 18.4 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1916, 16.32.158 (photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art). See the electronic edition of *Gesta* for a color version of this image.

also sensuality—that is, the way in which the little object explicitly evokes, even depicts, the response it effects in us viewers.⁶ Sight lines make it clear that the Virgin and the angels

6. The sensual aspects of this sculpture have not been noticed before. To my knowledge, the only extended study is William H. Forsyth, “Popular Imagery in a Fifteenth-Century Burgundian Crèche,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 24 (1989): 117–26. For additional bibliography, see

gaze at the baby, a shepherd cups his ear to hear the angelic message, an ass licks (tastes) the Child’s feet, while the baby himself touches (and is touched by) the mouth of the ox for warmth. Thus, four of the five senses are themselves pictured, and if smell is not depicted literally, it seems evoked by the fire and the damp swaddling clothes held before it. It is hard not to think that praying devotees would be reminded of such Eucharistic hymns as “O taste and see” (from Ps. 33:9) and not to imagine that they might understand the empty cradle as their waiting souls into which the baby (or the sacrament) in his manger would descend.

Fifty-six years ago, when I encountered a holy bed in a Detroit museum, I had little expectation of becoming a mediator. Nor did the catalogue I bought direct me toward the questions I ask today. Yet the exhibit exposed the beguine cradle to the questioning eyes of a University of Michigan junior. I can only hope that the object as it stands in its case at the Metropolitan Museum, like the nearby Burgundian crèche, will raise for other viewers, as they do for my students, the new questions about gender, the senses, and materiality that make art history such an exciting field today.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/463755?=&imgno=0&tabname=object-information>.