

ST JEROME AND A CHURCH MODEL: THE ALTARPIECE OF THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION IN BERGAMO

Bram DE KLERCK

In one of the side chapels of the Church of S. Agata nel Carmine in Bergamo's *città alta*, a magnificent, recently restored, early sixteenth-century altarpiece catches the eye (Fig. 1).¹ It is not only the bright colours of the blue background, the golden garments and fleshy faces of the figures depicted that attract attention: something else lends a particular fascination to the work. It is what was, even at the time, a somewhat old-fashioned combination of painting and relief-like sculpture in a kind of showcase measuring more than 250 cm in height, and having gothic gables and pinnacles. It shows a serene-looking Virgin Mary who stands with hands folded in a gesture of prayer. A ginger-haired Christ Child is hovering before her in a rather bold pose, his feet placed on the wings of a cherub. The child is dressed in a loosely-draped tunic which leaves his left shoulder uncovered. With his right hand he makes a gesture of blessing. Mother and Child are surrounded by an aureole of red and golden rays of light. The central group is surrounded by four standing and two seated figures, all easily recognizable not only by their attire and attributes but also by inscriptions bearing their names. At the left stand Mary's parents, Sts Anne and Joachim, at the right Sts Anselm and Jerome, while at the bottom corners of the composition Sts Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux sit on low stools. Beneath the central panel is a predella with, each in his own compartment, busts of seven more figures holding books and scrolls with inscriptions.

Two lateral panels, depicting the Carmelite Sts Elijah and Elisha, have been added in the early twentieth century, after the altarpiece had been transferred to its current place in the Chapel of the Baptist in the church of the Carmelite Order. On the basis of stylistic characteristics, the

older parts have recently been attributed to the somewhat shadowy Bergamasque painter and sculptor Jacopino Scipioni (*fl.* 1492–1528) and dated to the first decade of the sixteenth century.² Originally, the retable adorned the altar of



Fig. 1. Jacopino Scipioni (attributed to), Altarpiece of the Immaculate Conception, central panel: *Immaculate Conception*, c. 1500–10. Bergamo: S. Agata nel Carmine. From: *Ancona dell'Immacolata*.

the Chapel of the Brotherhood of the Immaculate Conception, in the Church of S. Francesco of the Conventual Franciscans in Bergamo. It was removed after the Brotherhood's suppression in 1808.³

The overall iconographical message of the altarpiece as a whole is not very hard to decipher: the position of the Madonna, centrally placed within rays of light, as well as the inscriptions on the scrolls and books that the accompanying saints and angels are holding, all suggest the concept of her Immaculate Conception.⁴ According to theological views expressed by authorities such as the thirteenth-century philosopher John Duns Scotus, and ratified by Pope Sixtus IV in 1476, the Virgin Mary, before becoming the mother of Christ the Son of God, had to be exempt from original sin, which since the Fall of Man has been inherited by every human being. The experts, however, did not all agree on how this sinless state had been arrived at. In particular, theologians belonging to the Dominican Order, following Thomas Aquinas's views, contested the belief that Mary's immaculate state stemmed from the very moment of her conception. They held that it came later, when Mary was already in her mother's womb. The controversy continued and it was only in 1854 that the concept was officially proclaimed a dogma of the Church by Pope Pius IX.

The patrons of the Bergamo altarpiece clearly sided with those in favour of the first possibility. A prominent position is occupied by Anne and Joachim, viz. Mary's mother and father. They are not mentioned in the Bible, but are present in texts such as the early Christian apocryphal Gospels and the famous thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* by Jacopo de Voragine.⁵ According to popular belief, Mary was conceived when her already elderly parents met at Jerusalem's Golden Gate after a prolonged and troublesome period of separation. As an obvious clue to the interpretation of the iconography, on the scroll Joachim is holding is written an Old Testament passage from the Song of Songs ('Tota pulchra es amica mea et macula non est in te': Song of Songs 4. 7) which is generally understood typologically as a pre-figuration of Mary's immaculate state.



Fig. 2. Jacopino Scipioni (attributed to), Altarpiece of the Immaculate Conception, detail: *St Jerome*, front view (detail of Fig. 1).

All other saints included in the central panel, as well as the seven historical figures including Duns Scotus and the already mentioned Pope Sixtus IV depicted in the predella compartments, hold inscriptions derived from writings penned by themselves, or at least attributed to them at the time. Although all passages can be connected to the concept of the Immaculate Conception, not every one of the saints depicted is generally considered a supporter of the doctrine. I will come back to this peculiarity after having discussed a remarkable iconographical feature of the altarpiece, to wit the figure of St Jerome at the far right, the only one in the central panel looking out in the beholder's direction (Fig. 2). He appears in a monk's habit and in his left hand holds a model of a church, which gains remarkable prominence as it protrudes strikingly from the three-dimensional relief characterizing the woodcarving of the altarpiece (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Jacopino Scipioni (attributed to), Altarpiece of the Immaculate Conception, detail: *St Jerome*, side view (detail of Fig. 1).

Depictions of Architectural Models

Depictions of human figures holding a miniature version of one architectural structure or the other, are far from uncommon in the visual arts of Western Europe. For instance, Cesare Ripa's famous book of reference, the *Iconologia* of 1600, contains many examples of allegorical figures that are recognizable from architectural attributes.⁶ For instance, the author recommends that the personification of the element of Earth be depicted with a castle or tower on her head. Symmetry holds an 'artful building', and Audacity throws to the ground 'a column of marble of an edifice'. Religion holds a model of a temple, as do World and the Italian region Umbria. For lovers of the city it may be gratifying to note that for the personification of *Roma*

eterna a mere model does not suffice: according to Ripa, she should be depicted enthroned inside 'a temple with eight or ten columns'.

Ripa's handbook was quite influential in the visual arts of the seventeenth century and later, but the specific allegories mentioned above do not seem to have gained much popularity, nor should they be considered to be some kind of codification of earlier artistic practices. Rather, from the Middle Ages onward, architectural models can be found in the Christian context of saints and donors. In altarpieces, church decorations or other religious images, saints or ecclesiastic authorities, worldly rulers or private individuals can be found holding miniature versions of buildings, presenting them to Christ or the Virgin Mary, either to humbly acknowledge their devotion, to show off their opulence, or both. Randomly chosen among the many examples from early Christian times onward, are the great mosaic over the south-western entrance of Hagia Sophia in the city then called Constantinople (c. 990), in which, to the right of the centrally placed, enthroned Virgin Mary and Child, Emperor Constantine the Great (c. 272–337) offers her a model of the walled city named after him, while at the left his later successor Justinian (c. 482–565) presents her with a model of the magnificent church he himself patronized.

From medieval Milan, a life-sized crucifixion made of wood covered with embossed copper incorporates an interesting image at the bottom of the cross. It depicts the Milanese Archbishop Ariberto (970/80–1045) offering to the crucified Christ a model of the Church of S. Dionigi. The quarrelsome warrior bishop had had this Ambrosian landmark restored and embellished upon his triumphant return to the city after a protracted absence. The square-shaped halo framing his head indicates that the archbishop was alive at that time but also already, at least by some, venerated as a saint. Exemplary of the new naturalism in late medieval Italian painting is the much more life-like scale model of the famous chapel that Enrico degli Scrovegni (d. 1336) had built in Padua appearing in one of the Florentine painter Giotto's frescoes adorning its interior (c. 1310). Scrovegni needs the



Fig. 4. Giotto di Bondone, *Last Judgement*, detail: Enrico degli Scovegni and a canon offering a model of the chapel to the Virgin Mary, c. 1310, fresco, Padua: Scrovegni Chapel.

help of a canon to present the large, apparently weighty, model to the Virgin (Fig. 4).

Donors are frequently seen in paintings presenting the buildings they founded, but also, and far more often, certain saints carry miniature architectonic structures. A well-known example is the early Christian St Barbara of Nicodemia who often appears holding a miniature tower referring to her legend. Her pagan father locked her up in a tower to keep her away from the outside world. After she had secretly converted to Christianity, she convinced construction workers to place three (instead of the intended two) windows in her tower, in praise of the Holy Trinity. Other examples include the Frenchman Eligius of Noyon (588/90–660), himself a goldsmith and patron saint of metalworkers, who is sometimes depicted with a small golden church in his hand. And St Willibrord (c. 658–739), missionary of the Frisians and the first bishop of Utrecht, holds a small version of Utrecht Cathedral in his hand, for example in the well-known engraving of c. 1630 by Cornelis Bloemaert, in which the building appears anachronistically in

its gothic form with its famous tower, the tallest in the Netherlands. Comparable in intention are depictions of Bishop Heribert of Cologne (c. 970–1021) who is often represented holding a model of one of the Romanesque churches of his bishopric. Not only churches but whole cities could serve as the attributes of saints. Thus, the fifth-century Bishop of Bologna St Petronius holds a model of the city of which he is patron saint, and St Gimignano (312–97) carries a miniature version of the Tuscan town with its characteristic walls and towered skyline, named after him.

St Jerome as a Building-bearer

None of these possibilities, however, seem to fit with St Jerome holding a church model, as he does in the *Immacolata* altarpiece in Bergamo. After all, he is not the patron saint of a particular city or town, nor has he ever executed any sort of construction work. True, Jerome is known to have founded a monastery and a nunnery in Bethlehem, but it in the context of the Italian Renaissance, it would not seem to make much sense to refer to these activities in a far-away country in times long gone.

And indeed, the not very familiar motif of a church model in the iconography of St Jerome appears to have remained confined to a fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Italian context. With a few notable exceptions such as a panel from a polyptych painted around 1400 by Gentile da Fabriano for the monastery of Valle Romita near his home town in the Marche (now Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), and a side panel of a triptych originally destined for S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, painted by the Florentine Masaccio in 1428 (now in London, National Gallery), examples of this feature only appear in works by artists originating from the Northern Italian region delimited by the Alps and Apennines. Paintings in Venice offer surprisingly frequent instances of Jerome holding a church, the earliest of which seems to be a panel that belonged to an altarpiece painted by Lorenzo Veneziano around 1370 (formerly Berlin Gemäldegalerie; destroyed in 1945),⁷ and, dating from around the same time period, a panel from an altarpiece by

Jacobello di Bonomo in the small town of Arquà Petrarca near Padua (Oratorio della Santissima Trinità). Both depict Jerome with a book in his left hand – referring to his activity as a translator of the Bible – and in his right hand, the church model. These artists depicted the saint dressed as a cardinal, in a red or purplish robe and with the cardinal’s hat on his head – a way of depicting Jerome which in western art has become as customary as it is apocryphal, for in reality the saint never held this dignity.

In his dissertation on Jerome iconography in early Italian art of 1984, Bernhard Ridderbos argues that in both instances the text in Jerome’s book, ‘DOCTOR ET ECCLESIAE FIRMA COLONA FUIT’ refers to his stature as a ‘firm column of the church’, exemplified physically by the miniature building. Moreover, the words seems to point to the saint’s explicit opposition to heresy.⁸ Interestingly, the thirteenth-century Dominican saint Thomas Aquinas also turns out to have been sometimes depicted holding a book and a model of a church, probably even earlier than became customary for Jerome, for instance in a panel painted after 1336 by the anonymous Master of the Dominican Effigies (now in Florence, S. Maria Novella). It seems fair to suppose that, sometime around the middle of the fourteenth century, Thomas’s attributes, including a shining ornament on his breast, have been transferred to Jerome. As Ridderbos explains, during the 1330s, both Thomas Aquinas and Jerome were considered authorities in the condemnation of Pope John XXII and his heretical views.⁹ The popularity Jerome apparently enjoyed in Venice may be explained by his familiarity with Greek heresies in that city, through extensive commercial contacts with Greece and the presence of an apparently rather suspect Greek Orthodox colony.¹⁰

The ‘Venetian St Jerome’ was to remain a customary type in Venetian art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, notably in paintings by, amongst others, the brothers Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini, Carlo Crivelli, Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini (Fig. 5). In time, however, the number of attributes in these paintings decreased: the shining ornament on Jerome’s breast was the first to disappear, by sometime in the



Fig. 5. Carlo Crivelli, *St Jerome*, outer left panel of an altarpiece for the Church of S. Domenico, Ascoli, late 1470s, panel, 91 × 26 cm, London: National Gallery.

fourteenth century, and the book ceased to be a standard element. What remains in these images is the miniature church, which seems to have retained its meaning as a reference to Jerome as a fighter of heresy. In the maritime Republic of Venice, in particular, with its many contacts and interests overseas, Jerome must have been considered a defender of the Church in the battle against Ottoman influences during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus, his small church not only refers to Jerome's reputation as a 'firm column' of the institution, but also to the correct interpretation of the Scriptures as required by the Church.¹¹

St Jerome in the Bergamo Immacolata Altarpiece

Although Bergamo had been part of the Venetian Republic since 1428, it is hard to believe that in this westernmost, far-off corner of the *Serenissima*, anti-Greek-orthodox or anti-Islamic sentiments existed as strongly as they may have done in the capital city. At the same time, a very determined belief in the concept of the Immaculate Conception is evidenced by the iconographical choices for the altarpiece which the Bergamasque Brotherhood dedicated to her. Apparently, this corporation was going to extremes to justify its devotion, for at least two of the saints depicted in the altarpiece – church father Augustine, and the founder of the Cistercian Order, Bernard of Clairvaux, are known to have been avowed objectors to the doctrine. They turn out to have been fitted with apocryphal texts referring to their alleged later change of opinion on the issue. The other two saints depicted, Anselm of Canterbury and Jerome, are also somewhat intruding in the entourage of the Immaculate Virgin. Anselm, then recently canonized (1494) and never a great propagator of the doctrine, is depicted holding a scroll with a corrupt text once attributed to his namesake and nephew, Anselm of St Saba: the *incipit* of a letter to the bishops of England recommending the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate. The text on St Jerome's book does not even refer explicitly to the Immaculata, as it is a passage taken from one of his letters to his confidantes Paula and Eustochium, in which the author admits the inability of human words

to sufficiently praise the Virgin Mary. As Laura Paola Gnaccolini points out in her recent contribution on the altarpiece, the selection of saints, as well as some of the quite peculiar text fragments, derive from the *Mariale; officium et missa Immaculata Conceptionis BMV* tract published in Milan in 1492, by the influential Franciscan and propagator of the doctrine of the Immaculate, Bernardino de' Busti.¹²

However, there may be yet another explanation for the inclusion of St Jerome and his miniature church in the altarpiece. A few striking features make his figure stand out: among the six saints depicted in the central panel of the altarpiece, he is the only one not looking up at the Virgin, but rather at an undefined point in the beholder's space. Although, like those of the others, his clothes have a golden shine, Jerome is dressed in a relatively humble style, in a monk's habit with a leather belt around his waist and a simple cap on his head. Thus, the depiction of his persona does not adopt the tradition of Jerome dressed as a cardinal, reverting rather to the older type of the saint as a monk. He was more commonly depicted as the penitent hermit in the wilderness, and sometimes as a scholar in his study. The detailed features, the long brown beard, as well as the emotional intensity of his face almost makes one think of a portrait. And the early *cinquecento*, Northern Italian realism of painting in combination with sculpture not only draws the beholder's attention to the strikingly protruding church model, but also to a detail to the left of the entrance of that building, which seems to be a holy water font. Could it be that this St Jerome is holding a miniature version of the – long demolished – Church of S. Francesco in Bergamo, where the Brotherhood of the Immaculate Conception had their chapel and altarpiece?¹³

It is interesting to note that in the years to which the altarpiece should be dated, a Franciscan named Gerolamo Terzi (c. 1460–1541) occupied a central place in both the material and the spiritual life of the Convent of S. Francesco. From 1500 onward, Terzi was a member of the Franciscan community, of which he was supervisor in 1506 and 1508. He had a sound scholarly theological reputation and entertained personal

relations with the General of the Franciscan Order, Francesco Sansone, himself depicted among the champions of the Immaculate Conception in the altarpiece's predella. This made Terzi the perfect candidate to be the one whom the Brotherhood would commission to formulate the retable's iconographical programme. Moreover, Terzi is documented as having been responsible for, and directly involved with, construction work in the Convent of S. Francesco.¹⁴

All things considered, the possibility may not be ruled out that St Jerome as he is depicted in the altarpiece contains a reference to recent developments in S. Francesco in Bergamo. The saint is guardian Gerolamo Terzi's patron saint, and, like him, he is presented as a simple friar.

Notes

- 1 The small, but very useful monographic booklet entitled *L'ancona dell'Immacolata in Sant'Agata nel Carmine* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2015), was published recently on the occasion of the completion of the restoration. In preparing the present contribution, I have made use extensively of both the text and the many precious bibliographical references.
- 2 For the dating, see Laura Paola Gnaccolini, "'Sine originali peccato est concepita". La celebrazione di Maria Immacolata nell'ancona francescana oggi al Carmine', in *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, pp. 15-16; for the attribution: Simone Facchinetti, 'Jacopino Scipioni, pittore e scultore', in *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, pp. 27-33. For the artistic personality of Scipioni, see Franco Mazzini, 'Giacomo detto Jacopino de' Scipioni', in *I pittori bergamaschi dal XIII al XIX secolo: Il Quattrocento* (Bergamo: Bolis, 1994), II, pp. 473-513.
- 3 *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, p. 11.
- 4 For the iconography of the Immaculate Conception, see e.g. Mirella Levi d'Ancona, *The iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (New York: The College Art Association of America, 1957); more recently: *Maria l'Immacolata: La rappresentazione nel Medioevo*, ed. by Emma Simi Varanelli, (Rome: DeLuca, 2008).
- 5 *Jacobus de Voragine: The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, transl. by William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 537-38. For the apocryphal sources, see e.g. Constantin von Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha*, 2nd edn (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966); *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, ed. by James Keith Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 6 Yassu Frossati-Okayama, *The Ripa Index: Personifications and their Attributes in Five Editions of the Iconologia* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1992).
- 7 Bernhard Ridderbos, *Saint and Symbol: Images of Saint Jerome in Early Italian Art* (Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1984), pp. 8-9.
- 8 The most complete of the two is the inscription in the Berlin panel, which reads: 'DOCTOR ET ECCLESIAE FIRMA COLONA FUIT FACILE CONTE'. According to Ridderbos (p. 8), the words 'facile conte' may refer to a letter by Pseudo-Eusebius in which he not only speaks of Jerome as 'golden pillar and foundation of the whole church' but also as one who 'smashes [Latin: *conterere*] the bows of the heretics'.
- 9 Ridderbos, pp. 11-13.
- 10 Ridderbos, pp. 13-14.
- 11 Daniel Russo, *Saint Jérôme en Italie: Étude d'iconographie et de spiritualité (XIII^e-XV^e siècle)* (Paris: Éditions La découverte; Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1987), p. 87.
- 12 *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, pp. 13-15.
- 13 The possibility was raised cautiously in *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, p. 14.
- 14 For Girolamo Terzi and his importance for the Convent of S. Francesco, see *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, p. 14. In 1523 Terzi would be called upon again for an iconographical issue, viz. the selection of subjects for the famous panels of parquetry in Bergamo Cathedral: Francesca Cortesi Bosco, *Il coro intarsiato di Lotto e Capoferri per Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo: Lettere e documenti* (Bergamo: Credito Bergamasco, 1987), pp. 19, 122-25, 140.
- 15 Terzi's birth date is unknown; he is reported to have died in 1541, at age eighty: *Ancona dell'Immacolata*, p. 24, n. 149.

