



*St Joseph, St Paul's Cathedral, Birmingham, AL*

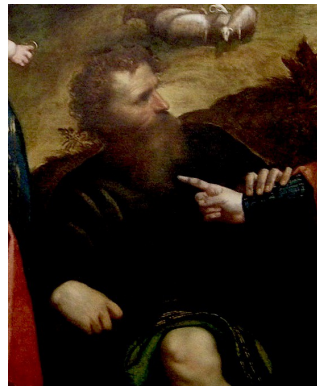
## STUDIA Iconographica

### St Joseph in a Flemish Style

The congregation of St Paul's Cathedral in Birmingham, AL recently commissioned a painting of St Joseph as a votive for his patronage of the church through particularly turbulent times. Though envisioning a smaller painting, they favored the work of the Flemish Renaissance artists whose rich details would repay closer meditation on the painting.

Traditionally St Joseph occupied a secondary role in the iconography of the Holy Family and existed largely without a proper *cultus*. However during the Middle Ages, a renewed devotion to him began to produce images of him alone or with the Christ-child.<sup>1</sup>

Many saints's visual representation became fixed early and have remained stable, *eg* St Paul's short beard and balding scalp. Historically, Joseph had always been depicted as an older man, perhaps a widower. This grew from a twofold movement to explain his early departure from the Gospel accounts and to help protect the Lady's perpetual virginity and the divinity of Christ. However the growing personal devotion to St Joseph and the impact of the Council of Trent on the sacred arts saw the development of a separate tradition of his iconography.



Giotto di Bondone, *The Adoration of the Magi*, detail, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC; Paris Bordone, *The Mystical Marriage of St Catherine*, detail, Museum of Fine Art, Boston, MA; Matthew Conner, *St Joseph*, Birmingham, AL.

Johannes Molanus argued in his *De Historia SS Imaginibus*<sup>2</sup> that a younger depiction of St Joseph was more appropriate. It seemed absurd that the only way to account for his ability to control fleshy desires was through the weakening of age. How could such an enfeebled man physically protect and provide for the Holy Family in Egypt and Nazareth? Rather, a younger, more vigorous man, with the character to control his flesh seemed to resonate with the Gospel's "just man". Given the multiple strains of representing the saint, the younger tradition seemed more fitting for this painting as he provided a role model to men of the parish.

Scripture describes him as a *faber*, a carpenter or mason by trade. St Joseph stands in front of a cathedral under construction. Building on his role as foster father to Christ, St Joseph has long been regarded as protector of the Church<sup>3</sup>. Flemish altarpieces such as Robert Campin's *Espousal of the Virgin*, use architecture as a structure for organizing the space as well as provide symbolic content. Here he is labouring to build up the Church Universal. While Church is one and universal, it is also local and so the small wooden church on the worktable models St Paul's Cathedral, links the part to the whole.

While the finished painting centers on St Joseph, he is not alone; he carries the young Christ. Just as the

*Virgin Hodegetria's* gesturing hand redirects attention to Christ so all saints find their intrinsic worth in Him. The fitting devotion to St Joseph would be incomplete without directing the faithful to the ultimate end, Christ.

Patristic commentary on the Scriptures often sees typological relationships. People and events of the Old Testament prefigure the period of Christ's Incarnation which in turn foreshadow things to come in the Eschaton. Rather than cheapening previous generations for a later, more privileged age, God, the author of history, is able to weave multiple layers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, St Joseph the Patriarch, favored son of Jacob, slave of Potiphar and later vizier of Egypt is a forebear of our Joseph.



In the tympanum over the church portal there are two scenes of St Joseph the Patriarch. On the left Joseph is taking account of the Egyptian grain prudentially and providentially being stored for the forthcoming famine. While on the right, he is seen fleeing from the amorous advances of Potiphar's wife. The industry, strength of character and chastity are all shared with the titular St Joseph.

Between the two reliefs is the seated figure of our lady with the infant Christ. Our Lady, as the *porta cæli* was a common sight over church portals in the Middle Ages. St Joseph's relationship with Mary and young Christ inspire the background events so often used for narrative compression in Medieval painting. On the right, we see the *fuga Ægyptium*, the flight to Egypt, seen here as a 14th century Burgundian town. In the deep left background lies a country farm with an inclosed garden, the *hortus conclusus*<sup>5</sup> which allegorically points to the new creation effected in the Incarnation: the Virgin Mary, the new Eve, the new Garden and the new Adam. *Ecce omnia facio nova.*



Sprouting up along cathedral footing, as it were from Creation made new, are bulbs of wild lilies and irises. Hiding in back with fitting modesty, are a few blue irises. The color is long associated with our Lady and the iris or sword-lily refer to the prophecy of Simeon and her Seven Sorrows. Lilies are polysemic, pointing simultaneously to the resurrection of Christ and all of the faithful, Joseph's rod which buds in the *Protoevangelium of James* and the perpetual virginity of Mary. To echo St Thomas, symbolism can point in multiple directions simultaneously.

Thanks to Fr Bryan Jerabek for his direction without which the work would not have been possible.

*St Joseph, ora pro nobis.*

<sup>1</sup> Stracke, Richard. *Saint Joseph: The Iconography*. 06 Dec 2017, <https://www.christianiconography.info/joseph.html>. Accessed 12 Oct 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Molanus Johannes, *De Historia SS. Imaginum*, 1711, pg 269-73, [https://www.google.com/books/edition/De\\_historia\\_SS\\_imaginum\\_et\\_picturarum\\_pr/gPeitnQesNgC?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/De_historia_SS_imaginum_et_picturarum_pr/gPeitnQesNgC?hl=en&gbpv=0). Accessed 12 Oct 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "ut quem protectorem veneramus in terris, \* intercessorem habere mereamus in caelis", *Antiphonale Monasticum*, 1934, pg 890.

<sup>4</sup> cf St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.1.9. on God's layering the senses in Scripture; "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures, the things that were concerning him." Luke 24:27, 44 on Christ Himself as the hermeneutic key for all of Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> *Canticle of Canticles* 4:12