

# Petrus Christus: How the Florentine Renaissance crossed the Alps

by Warren A.J. Hamerman

The first exhibition ever devoted to the works of the Flemish Renaissance artist Petrus Christus (born in the early 1420s—active by 1444—died 1475/76) opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on April 14 and continues through July 31.

The Metropolitan exhibition, “Petrus Christus: Renaissance Master of Bruges” featuring 21 paintings, five drawings, and an illuminated manuscript of Petrus Christus demonstrates that he was one of the pivotal artists in the city which was at the center of transmitting the Florentine Renaissance into the North.

He began his painting career in 1444 in the Bruges studio of Jan van Eyck, the artist once thought of as the inventor of oil painting itself, three years after the master’s death, and the very same year as the closing session of the Council of Florence. Later in the century the German artist Hans Memling (1465) and the Dutch artist Gerard David (1485) also left their native lands for Bruges. During the 15th century, Bruges, the site of the Florentine Medici bank’s most important foreign branch between 1439 and 1490, was one of the Renaissance’s principle cross-fertilization commercial centers of northern Europe filled with immigrant trading families from Italy and Spain.

Petrus Christus is the pivotal figure of Northern Renaissance painting first and foremost because he was the first Flemish artist to utilize the Florentine perspective system of Brunelleschi and Alberti. He was probably born in Baerle, a small town on the present Dutch-Belgian border, sometime in the early 15th century and acquired citizenship in Bruges in 1444, where he lived and worked until his death in 1475-76. What is unique about the art of Petrus Christus is that he combined the jewel-like colors and light interplay achieved through the Flemish breakthroughs in the use of oil paints and glazing technique associated with Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, with the Florentine revolution in perspective. Christus’s early training in manuscript illumination is demonstrated in his masterful small panels and miniatures.

## Mastering Florentine perspective

He developed his mastery of Florentine perspective gradually over nearly two decades. In his Berlin *Annunciation* of

1452, he demonstrated the ability to render convincing depth through a single-point perspective on one plane, and on all planes in the 1457 *Madonna Enthroned with Saints Jerome and Francis*. The exhibition has an entire fascinating display of X-radiographs which show that Christus followed the precise Florentine method of inserting a stylus in the ground preparation to set the focal point(s) of the composition at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical axes. He then incised and ruled brush lines on the floor tiles and architectural features so that all the orthogonals would converge.

His late works, such as the *Virgin and Child Enthroned on a Porch*, the *Death of the Virgin*, and the *Holy Family in a Domestic Interior*, present complex spaces which establish the Florentine Renaissance’s metaphoric concept of the interaction between heavenly space and visible space through the subtleties of the interplay of light, space, form, and poetic idea in one coherent composition.

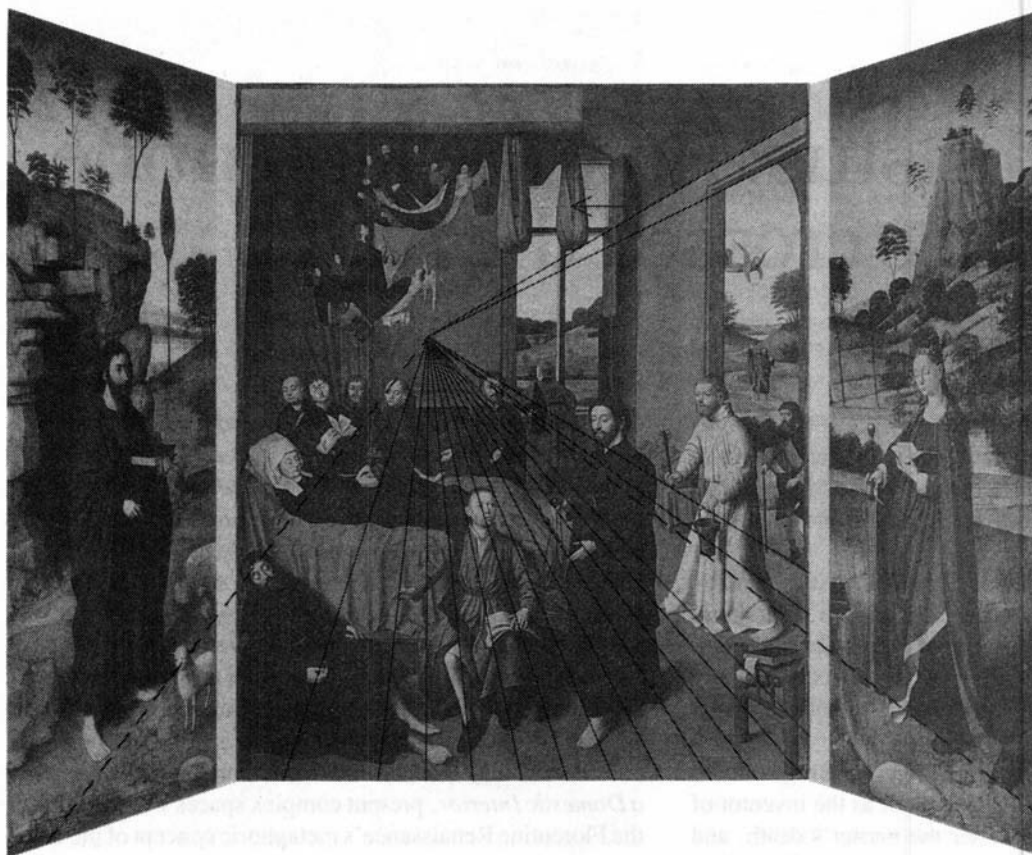
Although it is unlikely that Christus traveled to Italy, Italian artists were constantly in Bruges and almost half of his paintings were commissioned by Italian or Spanish patrons. His later works, such as the *Madonna Enthroned*, display a beautiful mastery of the typical Florentine format of the “sacred conversation.”

## Radiating the Council of Florence

Petrus Christus matured as an artist just as the refreshing and inspiring ideas of the Council of Florence (1439) radiated throughout Christendom. The key concepts of the Council of Florence were the secret for the incomparable beautiful artistic images which were created.

In addition to its emphasis upon the importance of the fact that, in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit flowed both from the Father “and from the Son,” or *Filioque* in Latin, the Council of Florence focused attention upon the role of the Virgin Mary in history.

A direct result of the Council of Florence, and the secret poetic beauty of Renaissance art, was the immediate proliferation of images of the Virgin Mary and particularly scenes of the Annunciation, the moment when the Angel Gabriel hails her and announces that she will mother the Christ baby without being touched by a man. Mary’s unique role in history is



*Diagram of the altarpiece, The Death of the Virgin, about 1460-65, made by Petrus Christus for an Italian patron. Central panel: Timken Art Gallery, Putnam foundation, San Diego. Wings: formerly Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich Museum (destroyed). As in the Devotio Moderna, Christus maintains the direct devotional experience associated with reading a prayer book. All three panels are coordinated along a one-point perspective, the only known instance in his work.*

that she chose to say “yes” to God with her own free will. In the Renaissance, this was the poetic image for all divinely inspired art, scientific discovery, and philosophic truth, because all creative achievement involves the collaboration of man and God.

The artists who painted in Florence in the first years after the Council of Florence—such as Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi, Domenico Veneziano, Piero della Francesca, and the great French painter Jean Fouquet who was in Italy at that time—returned again and again to these themes in their masterpieces. Later, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci developed this tradition to new heights in their famous Madonnas and Annunciation scenes.

Petrus Christus, who came to artistic maturity in the immediate aftermath of the Council of Florence, was the conduit of this poetic image into the North. Thus, it is by no means a coincidence that the subject of his first true perspective painting was the *Annunciation* nor that he adopted the Florentine depiction of Mary whilst reading to emphasize that she was fully using the intellectual capacity of reason when she said “yes” to God.

### **Mary and Bruges**

In fact, both Christus and his wife were members of a Franciscan confraternity dedicated to the Virgin Mary which

emphasized that because of this special role in history she was destined to play, she was conceived without sin, or the Immaculate Conception, which is often mistakenly believed to be related to Christ’s birth and not Mary’s. Along with Christus and his wife, all the leading artists, musicians, and political leaders of Bruges were members of the same confraternity, “Our Lady of the Dry Tree.” Also, members of this confraternity were a high percentage of the foreign merchants in Bruges, especially the Florentines—the Portinari, Tani, Altoviti, Ricasoli, Villani, and Cavalcanti families were included along with merchant families from other Italian cities as well as from Spain.

The confraternity had its chapel in the north side of the choir in the church of the Bruges Franciscan monastery. It was founded before 1400 in support of the Immaculate Conception, adopting a name referring to the infertility of Saint Anne, Mary’s mother, before the Virgin was conceived: a doctrine propounded and defended by the Franciscan Order during the period of the Italian Renaissance for theological, artistic, and philosophic reasons.

The international city of Bruges in which Petrus Christus lived was a thriving commercial center which had pledged allegiance in 1440 to the Duke of Burgundy. The general standard of living from 1440 to 1470 was said to be the highest of any town north of the Alps, with large sections of

the population able to afford meat, dairy products, and grain on a regular basis. The developing economy between 1440-70, well-developed shipping and banking contacts with Mediterranean markets, strong currency, and low taxation in a cultural climate of intense international cross-currents created the conditions favorable for the production of fine cloth and tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, art, and metalwork.

Bruges was one of the four headquarters of the Hanseatic League which imported mainly organic products such as grain, charcoal, wood, tar, and fur, and shipped luxury textiles to Prussia, the Baltics, and the western part of Russia. The commercial contacts with the Mediterranean markets, especially of Spain and Italy, were also extensive. The Florentine Medici bank had its most important foreign branch in Bruges between 1439 and 1490.

Like Brunelleschi in Florence, Petrus Christus became famous throughout the city for his large-scale public artworks for festive occasions. In 1463, Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy and his sister Agnes, the wife of Charles, duke of Bourbon, made a triumphal entry into the city by boat, complete with sets and adorned scaffolds floating in the river. Two weeks later Christus built and painted two additional gigantic props which were installed in the streets of Bruges—one scene representing a *Tree of Jesse* and another of *Jerusalem*.

From 1467 onward, Christus, along with Hans Memling, became dues-paying members of an additional religious association dedicated to the Virgin Mary known as the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Snow, which was founded in 1450. Its name referred to the miraculous snowfall prior to the founding of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

### Kempis, Cusa, and Christus

Christus flourished in the culture shaped by Thomas à Kempis. One of the most remarkable paintings by Christus in the exhibit is an early small devotional painting of the head of Christ *Ecce Homo* painted about 1445 in oil on parchment on oak; 5¾×4½ inches (14.6×10.4 cm). During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Low Countries were the site of an upsurge in devotional piety and literature on the Passion. This broad religious upsurge was catalyzed in part by the growth of movements such as the *Devotio Moderna*, which was propounded by the famous Thomas à Kempis.

Kempis was born in Kempen in the Rhineland, very close to the border between the Low Countries and Germany. In his 1425 book *Imitation of Christ*, Kempis described a devotional life based on imitating Christ's life and passion through daily prayer and meditation. A demand was created immediately for small private devotional paintings of the faithful in this movement.

Christus, as many of the Renaissance masters, composed his *Head of Christ* in a way to demonstrate a form which was the most beautiful and perfect of heads, a higher species of "head" which bounds the many human heads whose form



*Head of Christ (Ecce Homo)*, about 1445, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "Christus's emphasis on a face-to-face confrontation between the suffering Christ and man compels the viewer to acknowledge or witness Christ's perpetual sacrifice for man's redemption," writes curator Maryan Ainsworth.

approaches but never reaches this perfect form.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 232-page handsome catalogue (by Maryan Ainsworth; hardbound \$60, paperback \$45) of the exhibition comments:

"The composition of the head is based on the harmonious intersection of the circle and the square. The distance between the eyes established the base measurement, which is used to divide the entire head, including the neck, into six equal parts vertically and two equal parts horizontally. Infrared reflectography of the Metropolitan *Head of Christ* reveals a ruled underdrawn line down the exact center of the head, made to ensure that the features of each side of the face would be aligned accurately in order to mirror each other. Reflecting Nicolaus of Cusa's discussion of the nature of devotional images in his 1453 *De visione Dei sive de icon liber*, van Eyck and Christus painted the head of Christ in such a way as to achieve direct eye contact between the portrait and the viewer. When the viewer moves, the eyes of the painted Christ follow him. The idea was to 'see through' the depiction to the actual physical presence of the figure represented. With a particular purpose in mind, Christus appears to have



*Virgin and Child in an Archway (detail), about 1450-55, Budapest, Szepmuveszeti Muzeum.*

developed an entirely new type, fusing the Holy Face and the Ecce Homo. The subtle ways in which the *Head of Christ* differs from the Holy Face may suggest its specific meaning and liturgical use. Instead of the red robe and regal demeanor characteristic of the Holy Face paintings, this Christ wears a crown of thorns and a purple robe and, with deeply furrowed brow, shows us his state of suffering. The tripartite floriated nimbus reinforces the mocking tone of the label 'King of the Jews!'. The related text may be either Mark 15:17-18 or John 19:1-5, the only passages in which Christ's tormentors dress him in a purple robe."

The ideas, writings, and personal influence of Nicolaus of Cusa were at the center of the Council of Florence which had ended the year before this painting was made.

The exhibition also features numerous examples of Christ's devotional images including a tender small panel of the *Virgin and Child in an Archway*, oil on oak about 1450-55 and others extolling Christ's true presence in the Eucharist, a theme later brought to the highest artistic level in various masterful works of Raphael.

The exhibition catalogue notes that the demand for devotional images of the Virgin Mary increased significantly in the Netherlands in the second half of the 15th century because, at the Council of Florence, devotion to Mary was viewed as an area of fundamental common ground between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Christus's work, measuring only  $21\frac{7}{8} \times 12\frac{1}{8}$  inches ( $55.5 \times 31.5$  cm), depicts the idea that Redemption is made possible through Christ's Incarnation. The Virgin supports the wobbly Christ child who holds a light-reflecting orb, symbol of the Salvator Mundi. This orb is exactly at the intersection of the orthogonal lines of the perspective construction, the so-called vanishing point of the composition.

After Christus died, his reputation endured in Italy, where there are continual references to him during the 16th century including a reference to one of his portraits listed in the 1492 inventory of the collection of Lorenzo de' Medici. He is referred to as "the famous painter in Flanders" in a 1524 letter citing his painting of *Christ in Majesty* then in Naples. Giorgio Vasari talks of him in his famous *Lives* of 1568.

## Conrad Black's sins of omission

by Joseph Brewda

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### Conrad Black: A Life in Progress

by Conrad Black

Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1993

522 pages, hardbound, Can \$32.95

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Conrad Black, the 50-year-old chairman of Hollinger Corp., has written a tedious and uninformative autobiography: Left unsaid in his account is that far from being the maverick world-class businessmen that he claims he is, Black is merely a third-generation British intelligence agent. Except for his posting, he would be of little interest.

Although largely unknown to the general public, Hollinger, nominally a Canadian-based newspaper holding company, is one of the most powerful British intelligence agencies operating today. The firm, for example, is directing the "Whitewatergate" scandal targeting the U.S. presidency—certainly one of British intelligence's most important strategic operations. Hollinger had been originally established following World War II to oversee British intelligence operations aimed against the United States, and, over the years, it has fulfilled that purpose all too well. More recently, it has also been deployed to extend its reach globally. For example, Hollinger is central to ongoing British efforts to plunge China, Turkey, Israel, and South Africa into civil war.

### Who formed Hollinger

Hollinger, originally known as Argus, was formed in 1945 by a network of Canadians grouped around Edward Plunkett Taylor, Winston Churchill's personal representative in wartime Washington, and also a longtime side-kick of George Montagu Black, Conrad's father. Taylor had been detailed to the United States from Canada in 1940 to obtain war supplies for Britain at a time when such purchases were still illegal under the U.S. Neutrality Act. To facilitate this purchase, Taylor formed the nominally private War Supplies Ltd. and staffed it and its affiliates with several Canadian-bred British operatives, including George Montagu Black.

As crucial as the purchase of war supplies was, the group's primary function was to infiltrate U.S. intelligence