The Significance of Cloth in the Narrative of the Life of Christ as Represented in Dieric Bouts' "Life of Christ Altarpiece"

Mary-Margaret McLeod Pilling

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Honours Thesis

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTH IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE
LIFE OF CHRIST: AS REPRESENTED IN DIERIC BOUTS’

THE LIFE OF CHRIST ALTARPIECE

by
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Comparative Arts and Letters Department
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ABSTRACT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTH IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF CHRIST: AS REPRESENTED IN DIERIC BOUTS’ THE LIFE OF CHRIST ALTARPIECE

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Comparative Arts and Letters Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis explores the materialistic importance of cloth in the life of Jesus Christ and relates it to the disassembled Life of Christ Altarpiece painted by the Renaissance artist Dieric Bouts. References to cloth in the scriptural accounts of Christ’s life support the claim that there is deep theological significance to fabric. The medium of each of the paintings that comprised the altarpiece is a flax linen canvas, which, combined with the references to cloth throughout the compositions, parallels these references to cloth in the scriptures. The entire artwork serves as a metaphor for the Eucharist resting on linen on the altar and aids viewers in deepening their worship of Christ.
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I. Introduction

The Life of Christ Altarpiece by the Netherlandish artist Dieric Bouts is a work of art shrouded in mystery (Fig. 1). Originally, this polyptych consisted of five panels: one large centre panel flanked by two sets of stacked side panels, each half the height of the main panel in the centre. The paintings on each panel depict scenes from the life of Christ, namely the Annunciation, Adoration of the Magi, Crucifixion, Entombment, and Resurrection (Fig. 2-6). The general agreement among scholars is that Bouts painted each of these panels in the Low Countries and then sent them to Italy, likely Milan, where they were assembled into a great altarpiece.¹ At some point before the mid-nineteenth century, the polyptych was taken apart, and each panel was sold separately. In 1853, Charles Lock Eastlake saw all four side panels of the altarpiece while visiting Milan in his capacity as the Keeper of the National Gallery of London.² Beyond this record in Eastlake’s notebook, there is little known about the origins of The Life of Christ Altarpiece. While previous scholars have addressed individual panels, there has yet to be research done on the significance of their function together as an altarpiece. This paper will explore the significance of cloth, specifically linen, in the narrative of The Life of Christ Altarpiece and will demonstrate that each of the individual paintings in The Life of Christ Altarpiece, as well as the entire polyptych, are a metaphor for the Eucharistic Host on the altar of a church.

II. Provenance

During his assignment in northern Italy, Eastlake purchased the Entombment panel from the Guicciardi family in Milan for the National Gallery. Eastlake noted that

¹ David Bomford, Ashok Roy, and Alistair Smith, “The Techniques of Dieric Bouts: Two Paintings
the eminent Venetian Foscari family previously owned all four side panels, however this has been disputed among historians. While Lorne Campbell considers this provenance “probable” other scholars assert that the Foscari connection was made up by the Guicciardis in order to sell the paintings at a higher price.\(^3\) Beyond the claim that the paintings were acquired from this wealthy Venetian family, there are no other suggestions as to how the Guicciardis came to own these works in the beginning of the nineteenth century.\(^4\)

When Eastlake purchased the *Entombment* panel, the other paintings were not up for sale. Eventually, as the panels became available for purchase, each was acquired by a different museum. The *Annunciation* and *Resurrection* panels crossed the ocean and made it into the collections of the Getty and the Norton Simon Museums in the United States. The assumed centre panel of the *Crucifixion* is in the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and the *Adoration of the Magi* panel is in a private collection, perhaps in Germany.

### III. Material

Aside from its mysterious past, another curious aspect of this altarpiece is the material on which each of the panels is painted. Northern European paintings were normally comprised of aged planks of wood, usually oak, glued together to form a panel. A preparatory ground was applied to the wood to smooth it out before it was painted on. In the northern tradition the ground most often consisted of a chalk paste. Pigments were

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ground into linseed oil to create oil paint that was applied onto the prepared panel.\(^5\)

Bouts himself often painted in this tradition as is evidenced in his diptych, *Justice of Otto III: Beheading of the Innocent Count and Ordeal by Fire* (Fig. 7). Canvas painting in the fifteenth century was less popular than wooden panel painting and was likely intended to be less permanent.\(^6\) Today, only ninety-four Netherlandish canvases painted before 1530 exist.\(^7\) In the fifteenth century a panel painting could be anywhere from one-twentieth to one-thirteenth of the cost of a panel painting.\(^8\)

*The Life of Christ Altarpiece* is painted on linen cloth made from woven flax that was presumably glued to wooden panels when arranged into an altarpiece. On each canvas, Bouts used a paint that is similar to tempera, known as distemper. Distemper consists of colour pigments that are ground into water and then bound with glue.\(^9\) The paints Bouts used in these canvases are bound with rabbit skin glue. This particular technique of painting, with glue bound pigment onto an unprimed cloth is known as *Tüchlein*.\(^10\) One of distemper’s main advantages over oil paints is that it is significantly less expensive. As opposed to being suspended in oil, the pigments in distemper paint are ground into water, and then the glue binder is added while the paint is applied to the canvas. The absorbent nature of the linen canvas, and the *Tüchlein* painting technique produce a flat opaque colour that is much different from the complex, rich colour of oil paint.

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\(^6\) Dunkerton, *Giotto to Dürer*, 161.


\(^8\) Craig Harbison, *The Mirror of the Artist: Northern Renaissance Art in its Historical Context* (New York: Calmann and King Ltd., 1995), 65.


paint. The disadvantage of this fragile material is that distemper fades at a much quicker rate than oil paint.\textsuperscript{11} Perhaps the choice of distemper was to afford the artist a higher profit margin with the use of less expensive materials.

In the case of The Life of Christ Altarpiece, Bouts’ choice to paint on linen canvas may have been motivated by the fact that it is lightweight and could easily be transported from his studio in the Netherlands to the commissioning institution in Italy.\textsuperscript{12} While this pragmatic use of linen for travel purposes cannot be overlooked, linen also seems to have thematic significance to the altarpiece’s subject matter. In fact, the five panels repeatedly emphasize cloth in their compositions, often in ways that expound on the theological potential of the depicted event. By analyzing the symbolism in each of the panels of this altarpiece, the Biblical accounts of the events depicts, and the use of linen in worship, this paper demonstrates how the cloth material of this altarpiece may aid in deepening the devotion of viewers.

IV. Annunciation

When the Getty purchased the Annunciation in 1985, it created controversy because the art dealer and advisor Alain Tarica believed it was not an original Dieric Bouts work.\textsuperscript{13} The basis for Tarica’s claim that the painting was a fraud stemmed from stylistic elements that are uncharacteristic of fifteenth-century Annunciation scenes.\textsuperscript{14} In the northern Renaissance, this subject is usually rich with allegory, overflowing with elements that allude to various aspects of the lives of Mary and Christ. Consider the Mérode Altarpiece, by Robert Campin (Fig. 8.), this Annunciation contains symbols such

\textsuperscript{11} Dunkerton, \textit{Giotto to Dürer}, 187.
\textsuperscript{12} Bomford, “The Techniques of Dieric Bouts,” 41.
\textsuperscript{14} Bauman, \textit{Flemish Painting in America}, 65.
as lilies for purity, light passing through an unbroken window for Mary’s miraculous conception of Christ, a candle extinguished for the end of the Old Law and beginning of the Christian era, and even a little Christ figure entering the world on rays of light. In contrast, Bouts’ Annunciation is strikingly minimalistic, with a plain room, few windows, the Angel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary, and a simple red bench. Although it appeared to Tarica that this Annunciation is missing many fundamental symbolic elements, a consideration of the role of cloth in this painting reveals that there is, in fact, deep theological meaning in this work.

One of the few scholars to seriously address Bouts’s Annunciation is Susan Koslow. Her research focuses on the meaning of the red fabric that is suspended from the corner canopy of the bench. “Curtain-sack” is the name Koslow gave to this knotted cloth featured not only in this Annunciation but in many other interior paintings by various artists. An example of this curtain-sack is in the Arnolfini Portrait by Jan van Eyck, painted in 1434 (Fig. 9). The frequency of the curtain-sack in northern Renaissance painting suggests that this was a common element of bed linens. Koslow’s original research was on the significance of the curtain-sack in Rogier van der Weyden’s Columba Annunciation (Fig. 10). In a later version of her publication, Koslow expands on her theories and discusses the curtain-sack in the Bouts Annunciation. Through a thorough analysis of the tradition of the curtain-sack and its shape Koslow concludes that “the curtain-sack symbolizes no less than the most fundamental of Christian beliefs, the

Incarnation, by alluding to the embryogenic process whereby the World became flesh.”

The nature of this device means that Bouts’s symbolic allusion to the Incarnation of Christ has a certain literalness. The red colour of the curtain is like Mary’s blood that wraps around the embryo of the Christ Child.

Further research on the Annunciation led Koslow to believe that the Angel Gabriel’s odd hand gesture is part of the process in “knotting” the curtain-sack. The Angel Gabriel’s hands actively forming the curtain-sack bring an even greater focus to the material of the bedding fabric in this painting. This hand gesture is perhaps the most curious element of the composition. The strangeness of the cloth from the bed hanging over and veiling the angel’s hand was a major reason that Tarica doubted the authenticity of this work. In an ARTnews article shortly after the Getty purchased the Annunciation, Tarica calls the curtain over the Angel Gabriel’s arm “an oddity.” In reaction to this claim the Getty responded that, “The gesture probably had some symbolic meaning that further research will reveal.” After performing various tests on the painting, including a pigment analysis and comparing the fabric canvas to the other panel paintings from the Life of Christ Altarpiece, the Getty concluded that as lead-tin yellow went out of use by the 1600s, and the fabric matched each of the other canvases in both weave and date, the Annunciation indeed was an original Bouts work.

The cloth “oddity” in the Annunciation is not nearly as odd as it first looks. There is a long tradition in Christian art of covering one’s hands in the presence of a holy figure. The Angel Gabriel shielding his hand from Mary is an indicator that, as the

17 Ibid, 10.
18 Ibid, 12.
21 Ibid, 19.
mother of the Saviour and “Queen of Angels,” she is even more holy than the angel himself, and he is unworthy of being in her presence. 22 Gabriel’s respect for Mary may be an indicator that she has already conceived the Christ Child, and He is already growing into his “robe of flesh” inside the womb of Mary. The respect that Gabriel has for Mary prompts even greater respect from the viewers who are, as the Psalms say, “made…a little lower than the angels.” 23 The viewers, in fact, join the Angel Gabriel in addressing the Virgin Mary; as Gabriel says, “Hail thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee,” the viewer recites in the Ave Maria prayer, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.” 24

In his thirteenth-century treatise, Rationale divinorum officiorum, William Durandus discusses the significance of a church sacristy in a way that may resonate with the covered hand of Bouts’s angel. 25 The sacristy is a small room in which the priestly vestments are kept, and where the priest dresses before each mass. The priest enters the sacristy, dressing in sacred robes while inside, and then exits the room to celebrate mass. As Christ came down to earth and entered the womb of his mother, the Virgin Mary, he put on robes of flesh that were woven for him inside of her. He was then was born as a mortal man to perform the great and everlasting sacrifice, dying on the cross, for all mankind dressed in that “cloak” of mortality. Christ is the ultimate priest, who all priests are emulating when they perform religious services and when they provide direction and

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22 Regina Angelorum. From the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
23 Psalm 8:5.
counsel to his lambs. Durandus considered dressing in robes while in the sacristy as
imitative of Christ dressing in flesh while in the womb.\footnote{26}

Durandus’s symbolism of the sacristy in the \textit{Annunciation} applies poignantly to
the veiling of Gabriel’s arm. The angel is dressed in what appears to be an alb, one of the
first vestments donned by a priest preparing for mass.\footnote{27} In this way, he steps into the role
of a priest as a representation of Christ. When visited by this Angel and told that she
would be the mother of Christ Mary said: “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”
Gabriel responds, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest
shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be
called the Son of God.”\footnote{28} Gabriel’s gesture of knotting the curtain-sack mirrors the
conception of Christ, as the angel veils his hand in cloth. Wearing his alb he underscores
the idea of donning blood-red flesh in the sacristy of the Virgin’s womb.

The white colour of the alb resembles the body of Christ, and the bed curtain that
Gabriel appears to be putting on is the colour of the blood that was woven into Christ’s
cloak of humanity. The scarlet-red colour of the fabric behind Mary is the boldest most
dominating colour in this composition. That deep red appears only one other place in this
panel: on the cuffs of Mary’s robe. The gesture that Mary is making with her hands,
places her sleeve cuffs in the centre of her abdomen, right over her womb. The red
colour of the curtain-sack imitating the womb of Mary presents the Incarnation as the
focus of this panel. Robert Koch argues that the bed, swathed in red fabric in the
\textit{Annunciation}, foreshadows Christ’s Passion.\footnote{29} The importance of the Incarnation stems

\footnote{26} \textit{Ibid.}
\footnote{27} Bauman, \textit{Flemish Painting in America}, 65.
\footnote{28} Luke 1: 31-32.
\footnote{29} Koch, "The Getty 'Annunciation' by Dieric Bouts," 16.
from Mary’s creation of Christ’s body in the blood of her womb, setting in motion the 
events that would lead to Christ’s sacrifice of blood.

V. Adoration of the Magi

Of all the panels that make up The Life of Christ Altarpiece, there is the least 
information available on the Adoration of the Magi. The painting currently resides in a 
private collection in Germany; however the Uffizi Gallery in Florence has a sketch of the 
painting by an unknown artist. Even from this black and white sketch, it is clear that 
texture and richness of cloth has special emphasis in the robes of each figure. The elderly 
looking Joseph is dressed in a heavy hooded cloak. Like the Angel Gabriel in the 
Annunciation, Joseph’s hand is covered to show his respect for Christ and perhaps also as 
a mark of humility before the three kings who have come to visit. Bouts has particularly 
emphasized the folds in the cloak around Joseph’s neck and elbows. Each of the wise 
men wear a tunic and a robe covered in tassels and folds with multiple layers of fabric. 
Although the magi are clothed in expensive, luxurious textiles, the most dramatic drapery 
in the panel belongs to Mary. She sits in the right half under an archway with the Christ 
Child on her lap. His little body is cushioned by her dress that is folded in a way to 
cradle Him as He rests on her legs.

The cloth surrounding the Christ Child may allude to the bands of clothes that He 
was wrapped in at birth: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in 
swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the 
inn.” In the narrative of Christ’s life, the act of wrapping His body in bands serves as 
foreshadowing of the entombment process after His Crucifixion. Luke uses almost

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identical language when he describes Christ being laid in the tomb. “And he took [him] down, and wrapped [him] in linen, and laid [him] in a sepulchre that was hewn in stone, wherein never man before was laid.” The consonance between these two events was not lost on medieval and Renaissance theologians. Theresa Kenney discusses the idea of sacramental time in relation to this connection. She asserts that with an eternal perception of time, the separate events of birth and death in Christ’s life are perceived as happening simultaneously. In her writings, she discusses how Medieval artists and lyricists deliberately manipulated time to depict Christ crucified as an infant and the Magi seeing Christ as the Eucharist on an altar. Wrapping the Christ Child in swaddling bands and laying Him in a manger parallels entombing the deceased Christ in linen clothes and placing Him in a tomb, and both events mirror the Host resting on an altar cloth in a church.

VI. Crucifixion

Continuing onto the Crucifixion panel, Bouts’s handling of the paint for the cloth is very delicate and precise. This panel is in the poorest condition of the three, as a previous owner covered it in a varnish before it came into the possession of the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts. Upon arrival in Brussels, the linen of the Crucifixion was split into two pieces and had many holes. The panel underwent extensive restorative measures, including sewing the cloth back together and lining the holes with new

34 Ibid, 32.
Since the nature of Tüchlein paintings is to absorb any liquid placed on them, the varnish had significantly distorted the colours of the painting. The Musées Royaux began removing the varnish as well as applying restorative over-painting, but this was only partially completed, as the restorer, Albert Philpot, died mid-production. A technical review of the condition of the work reported that due to varnish damage, only the more translucent and dark pigments have kept their original intensity, and all of the other tones have been darkened.

Despite the panel’s poor condition, the viewer can still discern each of the figures and their carefully rendered drapery. Christ, hanging naked on the cross, has a thin translucent garment wrapped around his waist, as do the two thieves. Abundant references to cloth during the Crucifixion of Christ are found in the scriptural accounts of this event. In Matthew’s description of the Passion there is particular emphasis placed on the garments of Christ. In chapter 27, Jesus appears before Pilate, and the people chose to release Barnabus rather than him. Matthew writes that “they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe” with a crown of thorns on His head, mocking Him as the “King of the Jews.”

And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him… And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, they parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

The repeated action of removing and placing different cloths on the Saviour seems to indicate that it was important, both for the proceedings of the historical trial and

36 Ibid,10.
37 Ibid.
38 Matthew 27: 28-29.
39 Matthew 27: 31, 35.
crucifixion, but also important to the thematics of Matthew’s argument. In the gospel of John it is written:

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: not the coast was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be…

40

The story of the Crucifixion ultimately contains examples of cloth being treated in paradoxical ways. The scarlet robe that should be the highest honour is given to Christ in mockery, and the precious vestment of Christ, woven without seam, becomes the subject of a low gambling game.

The emphasis on His clothes being taking off and then being put back on resonates with the ideas of the Incarnation in the Annunciation panel. In the sacristy the act of sacred vestments being put on and then removed is treated with deep reverence. In a theological sense, Christ “puts on” the garment of his Humanity in His mother’s womb and then gives it up, or “takes it off,” in His Crucifixion in which He allows that precious garment of His body to be torn and destroyed. Although entirely by coincidence, it is appropriate that this particular panel was torn and damaged, precisely like the body of Christ it depicts.

VII. Entombment

In the Entombment, the body of Christ is being placed in a stone sepulcher by Nicodemus, one of the three Marys, and Joseph of Arimathæa. 41 John watches with a somber expression while the two other Marys weep. Mary the mother of Christ tenderly cradles his limp arm in her hands with closed eyes and a face full of sorrow, as if to hold

him just one more time. She is the only figure in this painting that touches Christ
directly, as Nicodemus, Mary, and Joseph of Arimathæa only do so through the medium
of cloth. This detail once again reminds the viewer of the holiness of Christ. Just as in
the *Annunciation* and *Adoration of the Magi*, in which the Angel Gabriel and Joseph
cover their hands in respect, all of the figures in the *Entombment*, except for mother
Mary, have their hands veiled by the burial shroud. Mary being able to touch Christ’s
body emphasizes her special holiness above that of the other participants. In a more
literal sense, she is worthy to touch Christ’s body because He is made from her body –
they are of the same “fabric” of flesh. John rests his hand on the arm of Mary to comfort
her and hides his hand in her overcoat, while the weeping Marys cover their hands with
their head cloths while drying tears. John’s gesture of covering his hand in the coat of the
Virgin Mary is similar to the gesture of the Angel Gabriel covering his hand in the curtain
in the *Annunciation*. This repeated motif serves to once again demonstrate the
connection between the birth and death of Christ. After contemplating the ridicule that
Christ endured during the Passion, the simple gesture of covering one’s hand in respect in
the *Entombment* feels particularly reverent.

Each of the four gospels mentions that after the Crucifixion, the body of Christ
was wrapped in linen. Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 19 explain that after
Joseph of Arimathæa plead to Pilate for the body of Christ, Pilate granted his wish, and
Joseph of Arimathæa wrapped the body in linen and spices, as was the tradition. One of
the spices used in the entombment was myrrh, which draws a beautiful parallel to the
birth of Christ. When He was born, Mary wrapped Christ in linen bands, and the wise
men brought him myrrh. Those materials again appear together when He died and was wrapped in linen after his body was treated with myrrh.

In the Entombment, Bouts has painted the body of Christ with a stream of blood flowing from the wound in His side staining his body. Implicitly, the viewer anticipates that that blood will also stain the burial linens. The red blood staining white cloth after Christ’s death is once again a reminder of the curtain veiling the hand of the white-robed Gabriel in Bouts’s Annunciation. A viewer might further imagine the blood that accompanies childbirth staining the swaddling clothes of baby Jesus or the red wine of the Eucharist staining the corporal.

In Netherlandish Renaissance art, Dieric Bouts is especially known for his integration of figures within a landscape. Evidence of this is can be seen in his Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament (Fig. 11). In the upper panels which depict the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizadek and the Gathering of the Manna, Bouts paints the figures walking around the roads naturally existing within their surroundings. On the lower right panel, the angel’s wings jut toward the sky becoming one with the cliffs in the background.

Such is the thematic importance of cloth that the landscape in the Entombment echoes the careful attention paid to Christ’s burial shroud. At His tomb the ground is in small mounds, which create a wave-like shape that appears flexible, like a cloth. This wave motif is repeated through the hills in the background and the winding road leading to the tomb. Finally, the cliff in the upper left corner of the canvas is composed of jagged rocks that form a similar pattern to the folds in the drapery of Mary as she kneels at the front of the tomb. The upper right rock corresponds to the fold of cloth across her back,
jutting to the right before coming down at a steep angle, and the leftmost rock conforms with the cloth bent at her knee. At the top of the *Entombment* and the *Resurrection* there is a strip of sky that was hidden under the original frame and protected from fading. The vibrant colour gives the viewer a hint of the attention that Bout’s paid to the landscape. This careful attention and choice to relate many of the details of the composition back to the cloth indicates that this medium is especially significant. Resonances of cloth in the landscape moves beyond the literal instances of cloth in the painting and resonates with the cloth canvas on which the distemper is painted. All of this relates back to the corporal cloth on the altar of a church, which is the “liturgical tomb” of Christ that holds the Body and Precious Blood in the Eucharist.

VIII. Resurrection

In the *Resurrection* panel of this polyptych, the resurrected Christ triumphantly steps out of his tomb. He carries a staff topped with a cross and waving flag, his other hand in a traditional gesture of blessing. Perched on the stone that once covered his tomb is an angel clothed in a white robe with a cape flowing behind. Two of the guards set to watch the tomb are asleep – one resting his back against the top stone, the other lying in front of the tomb at the foreground of the composition. The third guard appears to have awakened from the commotion. Astonished, he raises his hand above his head, as if to shield his eyes from the brilliance of the resurrected Lord before him. In the landscape behind Christ, the three Marys are walking the winding road to His tomb, where they will find it empty.
This landscape is very similar to that of the \textit{Entombment} with a winding path and rolling hills that echo the fluidity of cloth, in this case specifically echoing the rippling cloak of the angel and the heavy red folds of Christ’s cape. An interesting detail in this panel is that the staff Christ is holding is semi-translucent in segment that overlaps the front of His robe. While this may be due to issues in conservation or the nature of the paint application, it certainly draws further attention to the preeminence of cloth, as if Bouts were loath to disrupt the continuum of cloth painted under the staff.

Christ is stepping forth out of the tomb clothed in a red robe, which is different than the white shroud in which He was buried in the previous panel. In Luke we learn that after the Marys find the tomb empty, Peter and John go to investigate, and they discover that Christ’s linens remain, even though He is not there.\footnote{Luke 24:12.} John, in particular, notes that the napkin, which was placed over the deceased’s head, was lying separately from the other wrappings.\footnote{John 20:7.} This simple detail, included only in John’s gospel, indicates that Christ took special care to fold His clothes. The respect for fabric throughout the altarpiece becomes an imitation of Christ’s own esteem for the sanctity of holy cloth.

It is particularly powerful that as Christ steps out of His tomb in the \textit{Resurrection} panel, He is wearing red. Having conquered death, He is once again the King of the Jews and is dressed in the regal attire of that position. The image of a resurrected Saviour in red is not unique to Bouts. The New Testament describes Jesus coming in glory at the end of time “clothed with a vesture dipped in blood” with angels following him “upon white linen, clothed in fine linen.”\footnote{Revelation 19:13-14.} In the Old Testament Isaiah also prophesies that Christ will be in red when He comes again, his garments “red in apparel” from treading
in the winefat. This regal red cloak of the Saviour is as if He is wearing the very material which the curtains in the *Annunciation* are made from. This is a fulfillment of the Incarnation of Christ “putting on” the garment of His body once again as a resurrected man. Just as He is clothed in flesh and blood – white and red – in the womb, he exits his tomb triumphantly dressed again in red and white.

The colour red, of course, relates easily to the Eucharistic wine and the blood of Christ. For that reason, red is a primary colour of the Incarnation and death of Christ. Paired with white, it alludes to blood and flesh. These are the colours that dominate *The Life of Christ Altarpiece*, both in Bouts’s choice of pigment and as the linen canvas itself is white. In the beginning Mary weaves a robe of mortality – flesh and blood, white and red – for Christ. Then his “robe” is pierced on Calvary, and He spills His blood for the world, only to rise again in an immortal body. Importantly, these are the very colours of the bread and wine of the Eucharistic gifts, which, through the miracle of transubstantiation, become Christ’s literal flesh and blood.

On the altar, the Eucharist is laid on a small linen cloth called the *corporal*. The imagery of placing the sacramental body and blood of Christ on linen resonates closely with the painted depiction of Christ lying on the linens in the *Entombment*. This is also alluded to when the baby Jesus sits surrounded by His mother’s clothes in the *Adoration of the Magi*. The little Christ Child sitting on that cloth is a thoughtful foreshadowing of when He will later lie on cloth while lowered into His tomb.

In conclusion, the materiality of this altarpiece contributes deeper meaning to its function as an altarpiece, framing the celebration of mass. The significance of cloth

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would not have been lost of viewers of this altarpiece. During the fifteenth century, textiles were the largest industry in the Low Countries. As their greatest export, there were frequent exchanges of cloth between the Low Countries and Northern Italy. The significance of cloth to the everyday lives of people viewing this altarpiece enhances the potential for the materiality of the work to enhance their devotion.

The colours of Christ’s body and blood are painted in distemper on linen, while the Eucharist sits before the panels, also lying on linen. In that sense, the fabric ground of the paintings itself becomes a kind of corporal. Each painting of Christ in this altarpiece is a “body” made flesh from pigment and rabbit skin glue, just as His body and blood are present on the linen altar cloth beneath the bread and wine. Just as the placement of the body of Christ on linen connects the birth of Christ to His death, it also provides a connection between the narrative of His life, and the worship of Him as the Saviour.
Figure 1. Dieric Bouts, *the Life of Christ Altarpiece* (reconstruction)
Figure 2. Dieric Bouts, *Annunciation*, 1450-1455, The Getty
Figure 3. Artist unknown, *Adoration of the Magi*, Ufizzi (pen and ink copy of Dieric Bouts’s *Adoration of the Magi* in a private collection.)
Figure 4. Dieric Bouts, *Crucifixion*, 1450-1460, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
Figure 5. Dieric Bouts, *Entombment*, 1440-1455, The National Gallery
Figure 6. Dieric Bouts, *Resurrection*, 1450-1455, Norton Simon Museum
Figure 7. Dieric Bouts, *Justice of Otto III: Beheading of the Innocent Count and Ordeal by Fire*, 1471-1475, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts
Figure 8. Robert Campin, Mérode Altarpiece (central panel), 1427, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Figure 9. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434, National Gallery
Figure 10. Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint Columba Altarpiece* (left panel), c. 1455, Alte Pinakothek
Figure 11. Dieric Bouts, *Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament*, 1464-1468, St. Peter’s Church, Leuven
WORKS CITED


