The Unburnt Offering: Mary as Co-Sacrifice in Early Sixteenth-Century Northern Birth of the Virgin Images

Alexandra Carlile Butterfield
Brigham Young University

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The Unburnt Offering: Mary as Co-Sacrifice in Early Sixteenth-Century Northern Birth of the Virgin Images

Alexandra Carlile Butterfield

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Elliott D. Wise, Chair
Martha M. Peacock
Erik Yingling

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

The Unburnt Offering: Mary as Co-Sacrifice in Early Sixteenth-Century Northern Birth of the Virgin Images

Alexandra Carlile Butterfield
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

With the rising popularity of Mary’s mother, St. Anne, Birth of the Virgin images proliferated at the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, these images have not been analyzed in great depth by any previous art historical scholarship. This thesis indicates the broader significance of these images by considering Birth of the Virgin compositions by Jan de Beer, Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, and Adriaen van Overbeke. First, this thesis considers how these artists derived iconography from Robert Campin to connect Mary’s nativity to the birth of her son. Thus, the artists invite the viewer to witness the significance and purity of both babies. Next, I argue that the sacrificial imagery of these panels cultivates a sacerdotal space, in which midwives become pseudo-priests and everyday objects are conflated with ritual material culture. These panels, which draw upon Old and New Testament covenants, present Mary as co-sacrifice, indicating a sixteenth-century expansion of the Virgin’s co-redemptive role alongside Christ. The paintings emphasize the beginnings of the Virgin’s life to explore the life-giving quality of mankind’s redemption. Finally, I explore the viewership possibilities of these paintings for a lay audience, who could interpret their own experiences with birth through these images. Many of the objects in the artworks bear similarities not only to priestly objects but also to the material culture associated with birth. Overall, this thesis demonstrates the important role that Birth of the Virgin images played in interpreting the role of the Virgin Mary and her mother Anne in increasingly affective piety. The subject matter was a way to explore the doctrinal implications of Mary’s sacrificial, life-giving power even as it invited viewers to frame their own day-to-day experiences with childbirth in more religious terms.

Keywords: Birth of the Virgin, Northern Renaissance, sixteenth century, sacrifice, Old Testament holocaust, fireplaces, New Testament, Eucharist, altarpieces, St. Anne, Holy Kinship, childbirth, gendered viewership.
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This thesis would not have been possible without the encouragement of so many friends and family. I particularly thank my ever-supportive mother and husband, who have both learned more about sixteenth-century childbirth than they ever wanted to know. Many thanks also to Julie Allen and Andrea Kristensen, who make this master’s program possible, as well as to my cohort. Learning with them has been a major highlight of this experience.
DEDICATION

To my mother, for everything. Thanks for birthing me so I could write this thesis about birth.
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1. Introduction

The lush, rich imagery of the Birth of the Virgin was prevalent in religious paintings of the Northern Renaissance, but this iconographical subject has long been neglected in art historical scholarship. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, devotion to Mary’s mother, St. Anne, reached a peak, and altarpiece depictions of the Virgin’s birth proliferated. During this period, these images became increasingly ornate and developed a complex iconography, often with liturgical overtones. No scholarship to date, however, has considered the implications of the Eucharistic and sacrificial imagery that many of these paintings employ. In an effort to better understand the cultural significance of these scenes, this thesis will consider three sixteenth-century altarpiece panels depicting the Birth of the Virgin Mary by Jan de Beer (1510-1515, Fig. 1), Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen (1520-1533, Fig. 2), and Adriaen van Overbeke (1521, Fig. 3), all three of which employ a similar midwife making the same unusual gesture by a fireplace. These works of art emphasize the notion of bringing new life, which the viewer spiritually receives through Christ and his mother. Each of these paintings uses a contemporaneous setting to present the Birth of the Virgin as a sacerdotal event, in which midwives act as priests and the body of the Mary Child becomes both an Old and New Testament sacrifice.

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1 Some of the most valuable analyses of the rise of the cult of St. Anne include Ton Brandenbarg, et al., Heilige Anna, Grote Moeder: De cultus van de Heilige Moder Anna en haar familie in de Nederlanden en aangrenzende streken (Nijmegen, Netherlands: Sun, 1992); Ton Brandenbarg, Heilig Familieleven. Verspreiding en waardering van de Historie van Sint-Anna in de stedelijke cultuur in de Nederlanden en het Rijnland aan het begin van de moderne tijd (15de/16de eeuw) (Nijmegen, Netherlands: Sun, 1990); Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, Die Verehrung der heiligen Anna in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992); Virginia Nixon, Mary’s Mother: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Europe (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

2 Scholars have contended the date of creation for this work of art. The Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, where the panel is held, dates the work to 1520. Jan de Beer scholar Dan Ewing dates the painting to 1510-1515 on the basis of style, iconography, and design. He asserts that Birth of the Virgin and its accompanying Annunciation come from an earlier period of De Beer’s stylistic development than previously believed. Based on his analysis and the work’s influence on Adriaen van Overbeke’s Birth of the Virgin, which can be definitively dated to 1521, the 1510-1515 date seems more reasonable. See Dan Ewing, “’Truly Bright and Memorable’: Jan de Beer Reconsidered,” in “Truly Bright and Memorable”: Jan de Beer’s Renaissance Altarpieces, ed. Dan Ewing, Peter van den Brink, and Robert Wenley (Birmingham: The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2019), 17.
To understand the meaning engendered by Northern images of the Birth of the Virgin Mary in the early sixteenth century, I will first consider the hand gesture employed by the midwife sitting by the fireplace in all three of these Birth of the Virgin panels. This gesture is important to understanding the sacerdotal, Eucharistic, and Incarnational messages of these pieces. Next, I will consider how the employment of sacrificial imagery in these Birth of the Virgin paintings expands the co-redemptive role of Mary, making her a co-sacrifice alongside Christ and inviting the audience to reframe its understanding of the Virgin. Finally, I will consider how these paintings use recognizable birthing practices of the time period to appeal to a more widespread lay audience.

1.1 The Works in Question

Though varying in their specifics, all three of these artworks share the same general composition. Jan de Beer, Adriaen van Overbeke, and Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen all place St. Anne in an elaborate, curtained bed on the right-hand side of their paintings. On the far left of each painting, a well-dressed midwife sits in front of the crackling flames of a fireplace. She holds the baby Mary with one arm and lifts up her other hand toward the hearth as if to touch something. In all three of the Birth of the Virgin scenes, female attendants perform a myriad of small tasks to ensure the comfort of the mother or her child. The groups occupy lavish birthing environments, comparable to those in which sixteenth-century aristocratic women would have given birth. The similarities between these images may be due to Jan de Beer’s influence on the

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two later artworks, but their variation in depiction allows us as scholars to see common themes and better interpret the objective of these images.

Regarding the earliest of these three works of art, Jan de Beer’s *Birth of the Virgin*, scholars know little in terms of provenance, original location, or patronage. However, some research has speculated on the original altarpiece from which this panel came and whether it relates to other extant De Beer works. Given the Annunciation scene originally on the back of this image, scholars generally assume other panels of the now-dismantled altarpiece would have been events from Mary’s life—including the Suitors, the Presentation at the Temple, and the Marriage of the Virgin. The painting’s size suggests that it was made for a large space, likely for a side or main altar in a church.

Arrayed in vibrant green cloth and striding elegantly toward a large bed, a prominently-placed birth attendant is the viewer’s first introduction to Jan de Beer’s *Birth of the Virgin*. This woman pours sparkling fluid from a spoon into a bowl. Intent on her task, she does not even look at the woman in the bed, St. Anne herself, whose pale face and clasped hands are intent on prayer. Another woman adjusts the pillow behind Anne’s head. Barely noticeable behind the elaborate pink bed, a faceless female servant elevates a golden vessel above the head of yet another attendant, who adjusts the curtains of Anne’s bed. The upward motion of the golden

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4 Scholars have previously speculated on Jan de Beer’s influence on Adriaen van Overbeke’s *Birth of the Virgin*. Their arguments are primarily based on the two artists’ inclusion of the woman gesturing toward the fireplace, as well as the eggs placed by the hearth. To my knowledge, no scholarship has suggested that De Beer influenced Van Oostsanen’s work, but this is likely due to the overall lack of research on the latter’s *Birth of the Virgin*. The woman raising her hand toward the fire in Van Oostsanen’s painting suggests that he was inspired by either De Beer’s or Van Overbeke’s version—or possibly some even earlier painting that inspired all three. For the connection between De Beer and Van Overbeke, see Dan Ewing, *Jan de Beer: Gothic Renewal in Renaissance Antwerp* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2016), 133.


6 Cox, "An open and shut case?," 52-60; Dan Ewing, *Jan de Beer*, 130.

7 Cox, “An open and shut case?,” 46.
vessel draws the viewer’s attention up the wall to a shelf holding medicinal objects. More vessels—these ones black and reflective—cluster nearby on a tall, tableclothed buffet. Striding between the bed and this cabinet, a fifth attendant holds a dripping candle, the flame of which she protects with one hand. The brassy color of her garment just matches the pitcher hidden in a niche behind her. This space is protected by a white hanging towel just in front. Light enters the scene from a window in the background—the viewer can see Dutch houses, partially hidden by the window’s shutters, which are held closed by a Jan van Eyck-style mirror. The top right edge of the window bench covers what appears to be a white dove’s wing, oddly visually detached from the rest of the bird’s body. The light from the window falls primarily on the final midwife, clad in light blue and holding a naked infant, the Virgin Mary. One shoe pokes out from her skirt while the other sits in the middle of the floor. Resting on a white cloth in the midwife’s lap, Mary gazes toward her mother. The attendant in blue, even as she closely watches the baby, lifts her hand up toward the fireplace. The glint of flames in the hearth draws the viewer’s attention to the haze of heat, lit just under a black pot but also warming the porridge, egg, fireplace tongs, and ball of yarn sitting by the base of the flames. As a final detail in the foreground, Jan de Beer has included white cloth pouring from a basket. A pair of scissors precariously perches on the edge, threatening to fall toward the newborn baby. Taken as a whole, the elaborate decoration of the painting emphasizes the importance of this child’s birth.

One of the artworks seemingly influenced by Jan de Beer’s composition is Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen’s Birth of the Virgin from the early sixteenth century. The exact date and provenance of this work are unknown, but it was originally the lefthand panel of an altarpiece.8 While some scholars have connected Van Oostsanen’s work stylistically to the late

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8 Angel M. Navarro, Maestros flamencos y holandese (Siglos XVI al XVIII) en El Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes (Buenos Aires: Argentina, 2001), 140-142.
medieval period and his home in Amsterdam, others have tied it to Antwerp Mannerism—which seems plausible, given the way that this painting pulls from Jan de Beer’s work. On the whole, however, little research has been done concerning this work of art beyond formal analysis.

In Van Oostsanen’s painting, the ministrations of various birth attendants to the bedridden St. Anne are nearly overshadowed by the women feasting in the front of the painting. This group of five women—one of whom holds a baby and seems to be a second, anachronistic iteration of St. Anne—drinks out of elaborate goblets and eat the bread laid onto their tidy table. One of the women pours glittering fluid from a pitcher into a cup—the gesture imitates the birth attendant in Jan de Beer’s painting and may reference the emptying that characterizes childbirth. With her back to the feasting group and her feet near a cloth-filled basket, a midwife in light blue holds the Virgin Mary, who faces the hearth with its fire and prominent fireplace tongs. The midwife in blue raises her hand upward to touch a cloth, which another midwife holds just beside the fire. Supervised by worshipping angels, the scene contains nineteen women in total. Many of them whisper together in pairs or bring food to the new mother, and one particularly elderly midwife dozes at the end of Anne’s bed. Similar to Jan de Beer’s painting, a buffet in the back holds a golden chalice and a number of silver and golden plates. Just above it, a triptych depicts only a landscape—imitating the nearby windows’ access to the outside world and perhaps momentarily tricking the viewer’s eye. The vertical orientation of the work emphasizes the high, arched ceilings and numerous entrances from the outside to the warm internal space.

The final major piece of art considered in this thesis is Adriaen van Ovebeke’s Birth of the Virgin panel from the Golden Miracle altarpiece (1521-1525), originally created for the

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9 Navarro, Maestros flamencos y holandese,” 141. For brief analysis of what other scholars have said about Van Oostsanen’s relation to Antwerp Mannerism, see Jane Louise Carroll, “The Paintings of Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen (1472?-1533),” (doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987), 12-15.
Franciscan monastery in Dortmund. Adriaen van Overbeke completed a number of other altarpieces depicting the life of St. Anne, and previous research has identified him as a knowledgeable expert on Anne iconography, so he likely advised the patrons on the composition. Of the three primary artworks discussed in this paper, this painting is the only one for which modern scholars know the original provenance and accompanying panels, making the Dortmund work particularly valuable for this analysis. The altarpiece itself has three openings. Adriaen van Overbeke’s paintings comprise the second opening, which details the life of the Christ Child, the Virgin Mary, her mother Anne, and her mother Emerentia. The Birth of the Virgin panel is the left-most panel on the third row down. It is complemented by a similarly-structured scene depicting the birth of St. Anne, located in the bottom right of the altarpiece. Previous scholarship on this opening has primarily focused on the Incarnational nature of the works and their relation to other artworks of the time, but little has been said about the iconographical meaning of individual scenes. The premier Adriaen van Overbeke scholar, Godehard Hoffman, has speculated that this altarpiece would have been placed either in the choir with the monks or outside the rood screen, where it could face the worshippers.

The Dortmund retable’s Birth of the Virgin is situated below the Presentation of Christ at the Temple and next to the Presentation of the Virgin at the temple. There is some evidence that

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Adriaen van Overbeke saw the *Birth of the Virgin* created by Jan de Beer, but he has obviously also pulled from other sources in creating this image.\(^{14}\) In comparison with the other two Birth of the Virgin paintings, Van Overbeke’s version is a nativity stripped to its barest bones. Only four women attend the new mother, who gazes upward and seems particularly exhausted. She is entirely uninterested in the food that an attendant offers her—unlike the elderly midwife, who consumes a large drink at a table laden with bread. This gourmand is mirrored by a small white cat, which greedily sticks its entire head into a large bowl. Near the cat on the floor are a basket of cloth and an abandoned shoe, both of which Van Overbeke likely derived from Jan de Beer. Ignoring the hearty feasting all around her, the final attendant holds the Virgin Mary and gazes meaningfully at the viewers, drawing them into the scene. Her unoccupied hand is raised in the same gesture toward the fireplace, where a pot nestles among the flames. Fireplace tongs lean toward the midwife, as if to meet her hand mid-reach. Two eggs sit in the coals, and two fish hang from the hearth above. Thus, although distinct in their details, these three depictions of the Birth of the Virgin Mary are similar in their overall composition, and all include a midwife holding the Virgin Mary by the fireplace and making the same gesture.

1.2 Background

The account of Mary’s birth is apocryphal and appears in sources such as the “Protoevangelium of James” and the *Legenda aurea*, as well as a number of vernacular sources that became popular in the sixteenth century. In these accounts, a righteous, older Jewish couple, Anne and Joachim, have never been blessed with children. In attempting to make a sacrifice at the temple, Joachim is driven out; the priest sees Anne’s infertility as a sign of the couple’s unrighteousness. Distraught, Joachim retreats to tend to his flocks, where an angel informs him

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\(^{14}\) See footnote 4 above.
that his wife will bear a child. Anne and Joachim meet each other at the Golden Gate. Some sources indicate that Mary is conceived here via a kiss while others attribute her conception to the usual methods. A few years after Mary’s birth, her parents dedicate her to the temple and present her there.

Scholarship on depictions of the Birth of the Virgin Mary has generally been sparse, particularly for artwork from the Northern Renaissance. More detailed work has been done regarding Birth of the Virgin images in Italian and Byzantine art, which scholars have seen as important origins for the Northern versions. However, the Northern Renaissance greatly expanded the iconography and compositional types of this subject, suggesting that more specific research is needed for this period. Many scholars have been primarily interested in how Birth of the Virgin images reveal contemporary obstetrical practices. Thematically, artworks of this subject are associated with cleansing, the Immaculate Conception, and the Virgin’s body as an Incarnational vessel for Christ. Northern Birth of the Virgin scenes emphasizing the Immaculate Conception often prioritized St. Anne; this was one easy way to distinguish them from visually similar depictions of John the Baptist’s nativity. Bridget Heal’s general analysis

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17 Maureen Park, "Dürer's The Birth of the Virgin: Art and midwifery in 16th-century Nuremberg," *The Lancet* 358, no. 9289 (2001): 1265-1267. One of the few previous sources to address the Birth of the Virgin on a large scale was the 1904 monograph *Die Wochenstube in der Kunst*, the primary interest of which was to demonstrate how Birth of the Virgin images record the birthing practices of the past. See Robert Müllerheim, *Die Wochenstube in der Kunst* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1904), 12-45.


of Marian imagery suggests that Birth of the Virgin artworks may be used to elevate
motherhood, but she also notes that the images were more likely intended to make statements
about the Incarnation and Mary’s unique role in salvation.\textsuperscript{20} Elisabeth L’Estrange, who analyzes
Birth of the Virgin illuminations in late medieval books of hours, insightfully challenges the
traditional way of viewing these artworks as solely female-centric and fully realistic.\textsuperscript{21} She
recommends a nuanced approach, noting how these depictions may have appealed to certain
groups of female viewers and may have included some realistic elements to do so—for
L’Estrange, context and setting are critical for the analysis. Despite these insightful
contributions, a detailed analysis of altarpiece depictions of the Virgin’s birth has not been
undertaken. This thesis addresses a small part of that deficiency by considering three early
Northern Mannerist depictions of Mary’s birth. The analysis of these paintings reveals the
complexity of the religious, gendered, and medical issues involved in Birth of the Virgin
iconography.

Beyond the narrower subject matter of the Virgin’s birth, images of St. Anne were
common in the sixteenth century in the North. Accompanied by a strong interest in the extended
family of Christ, the cult of St. Anne experienced a sharp rise in popularity at the beginning of
the sixteenth century, and scholarly literature has produced significant discussion regarding the
demographics of the saint’s newest devotees.\textsuperscript{22} Given Anne’s miraculous pregnancy, one could
easily assume that women would be her most likely patrons. Indeed, Gail Gibson has found a
strong connection between St. Anne and childbirth rituals, and women in labor would routinely

\textsuperscript{20} Bridget Heal, \textit{The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 265-270.
\textsuperscript{21} Elisabeth L’Estrange, \textit{Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty, and Visual Culture in the Late Middle Ages}
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{22} For scholarship on the cult of St. Anne, see footnote 1.
call upon holy mothers, Anne being one of the foremost.\textsuperscript{23} Certainly, then, Anne images had a particular appeal for female audiences.\textsuperscript{24} However, Anne was of interest to men as well, and scholars have associated her with various professions and social classes. For these groups, the marriages and familial connections of Anne and her kin modeled the righteous fulfillment of their own social roles—including, for example, the desire of a patriarch for inheriting progeny.\textsuperscript{25} Anne was often adopted as a patron saint by aristocratic families since she herself was from a noble and priestly line.\textsuperscript{26} She also became associated with humanism.\textsuperscript{27} Essentially, devotion to Anne was widespread, with the holy mother appealing to a wide variety of social groups.\textsuperscript{28} Artworks depicting her, which included scenes of Anne’s life, the Virgin’s birth, the Holy Kinship, the Anna Selbdritt, and the Education of the Virgin, were meant to appeal to wide-ranging audiences. This thesis will consider both an ideal, educated, male-dominated audience and a more vernacular, female-centric viewer group.


\textsuperscript{26} Michael Alan Anderson, St. Anne in Renaissance Music: Devotion and Politics (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 15-17.


2. The Hand Gesture

These three works of art are all characterized by a woman extending her hand in a strikingly similar gesture toward the fire. In this midwife’s hand motion, the early Mannerists build upon a hand-warming gesture that is based in the work of Robert Campin (c. 1375-1444), but they have altered this gesture to add deeper meaning to the work. By including Campin’s hand-warming gesture, Jan de Beer and his followers introduce a motion connected to Christ’s dual identity as both mortally fragile and immortally divine. Simultaneously, Jan de Beer’s gesture relates to Campin’s Dijon Nativity and the idea of witnessing a holy child. The two hand gestures referenced—the one derived from Campin’s Virgin and Child by the Fireplace and the other from the Dijon Nativity—therefore each add unique meaning to the piece. Together, they create a conflation between the body of the Baby Mary and the Baby Christ, indicating a degree of synonymity between the two.

Art historians may be familiar with the gesture made by the midwife at the fire because of Robert Campin’s Virgin and Child by a Fireplace (Fig. 4, c. 1433), in which the Virgin Mary holds her hand out toward the fire. Her arm is angled downward, so her hand juts out at a strong upward diagonal with her fingers together and her thumb clearly separate. The hand-warming gesture from Campin’s Virgin and Child by a Fireplace was adopted in various other images; this includes many Birth of the Virgin compositions, in which a midwife holding the Virgin Mary makes the gesture with one of her hands. One can see this gesture, for example, in the Birth of the Virgin held in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges (Fig. 5), where a midwife in the back holds her hand toward the flames. Even prior to Campin’s influence, many Birth of the Virgin images already featured fires in fireplaces. Even in scenes without the hand-warming gesture, midwives are often shown warming cloth in front of the fireplace, so the addition of the hand-
warming gesture is not too visually distinct from previous Birth of the Virgin iconography. However, the fact that artists chose to make this addition suggests that this gesture had significance for viewers.

Scholars have interpreted Campin’s gesture in a multitude of ways. Some have seen it as protective—a way for the Virgin to guard the Christ Child from the heat of the flames, from his coming Crucifixion, or even from evil spirits. Other scholars, including Panofsky, have interpreted the gesture as Mary warming her hand to care for the child without chilling him; Panofsky suggests that this gesture may have derived from images of women testing the water temperature before bathing the infant Mary, a common motif in earlier Birth of the Virgin images. The gesture could be a simple instance of the Virgin shielding herself and her child from the heat, an action that Peter Thornton has associated with images that include a fireplace but no firescreen. However, given the important position of the hearth in Campin’s work and his fastidious rendering of its wood, flames, and various accoutrements, the hand motion likely has devotional significance.

Campin’s hand-warming motion may be less about the gesture itself and more about what the hand connotes: heat. The physical sensation of feeling heat is not something that can be easily conveyed in a visual tradition, but the Madonna’s hand, placed between the fire and the

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32 For a more in-depth discussion of the devotional significance versus genre implications of Campin’s Madonna, see Wise, “Robert Campin and Jan van Ruusbroec,” 350-365. Wise notes that the hearth is an image derived from the active life but can be used in art to train the viewer for a spiritual experience.
child, helps fulfill this sensuous function. In an image so closely connected to the Incarnation, the viewer might be reminded of the words of God the Father to Christ, as recorded by St. Birgitta of Sweden: “I came with love to the Virgin and received your true body from her. You are thus in me and I in you. As fire and heat are never separated, so it is impossible to separate your divine from your human nature.” Given the strong impact St. Birgitta had on a number of Northern Renaissance artists, it seems entirely possible that Campin is referencing her writings here. In line with this way of thinking, Mary’s strong gaze focused on Christ at the same time she makes this gesture equates the Christ Child with the heat her hand is experiencing. Just as this heat is inseparable from the visible flames, Campin’s Virgin and Child painting was originally hinged in a diptych with an image of the Trinity, which demonstrates Christ’s divine nature. Christ’s Infancy is therefore inseparable from his future as a sacrifice for mankind—just as Mary’s hand cannot effectively separate the Christ Child from either the heat or the presence of the flames. Thus, the hand-warming gesture could be interpreted as commentary on the dual nature of Christ as having both a mortal and an immortal parent—a reference that would be appropriate in an image of the Birth of the Virgin Mary as well, given her ultimate destiny as mother of this dual-natured child.

While previous scholarship has associated the motion made by the midwives solely with Campin’s hand-warming gesture, I argue that the gesture developed by Jan de Beer and used by Van Overbeke and Van Oostsanen is distinct. In contrast with the low-placed, angled hand of

33 In connection with the Campin Virgin and Child, Wise briefly notes that the hand gesture also serves to draw “attention to the excruciating heat that will scorch the victim.” Wise, “Robert Campin and Jan van Ruusbroec,” 358.
35 La Delfa argues that the writings of Birgitta were fairly widespread in the fifteenth century. Angela Maria La Delfa, "A forceful influence: Saint Bridget’s Revelations, the Limbourg brothers and the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry," Il Capitale Culturale: Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage 22 (2020): 147-171.
the Virgin Mary, Jan de Beer’s midwife’s hand is almost completely vertical. Her entire arm is raised, and her fingers are spread and slightly curved. The sixteenth-century artists indeed reference Campin’s Madonna in this gesture, but their unique treatment adds special significance. In fact, the gesture used by Jan de Beer and his two fellow Mannerists seems to be a combination of Campin’s hand-warming gesture and the gesture made by the believing midwife—Zebel—in Campin’s Dijon Nativity (Fig. 6).37 Like Jan de Beer’s midwife, Zebel has her hand placed nearly vertically with her fingers slightly curled and her thumb and little finger separate from her other fingers. Jan de Beer’s desire to imitate this “archetype” precisely would explain the awkward placement of his midwife’s hand, which would require significant torsion of the wrist to achieve.

The implication that these Mannerist midwives are meant to be performing two gestures at once is indicated by another Birth of the Virgin by the Master of Frankfurt (Fig. 7). This painting includes one midwife making the hand-warming gesture of Campin’s Virgin and Child and another making the gesture from Campin’s Nativity.38 Dated to 1505, this panel acts as a kind of chronological bridge between the Campin images and the Mannerist hand gesture. It

87-90; Ewing, Jan de Beer, 133; Susie Nash, “A Fifteenth-Century French Manuscript and an unknown painting by Robert Campin,” The Burlington Magazine 137, no. 1108 (1995): 433; Felix Thürlemann, Robert Campin: A Monographic Study with Critical Catalogue (New York: Prestel, 2002), 232. Interestingly, Campbell postulates that the Campin and other hand-warming images are all copies of some other, more famous image, which is now lost. In Campbell’s opinion, this would have been a narrative bathing scene; the copies mistakenly removed various aspects that together allude to bathing. While this is an interesting theory, the devotional and meditative overtones of these Madonna and Child images indicate less of a narrative quality, suggesting that any choices were made intentionally, rather than out of ignorance for the prototype’s original argument.
37 The name of the believing midwife varies in different accounts of the Virgin’s birth and in the scholarship—Azel, Zelomi, Zebel, Rachel, and Zahel. She is nameless in the Protoevangelium of James. For the sake of simplicity, Zebel, as she is called in the Legenda aurea, will be used here.
38 A few scholars have connected the Master of Frankfurt’s Birth of the Virgin with the two Campin paintings, but none have connected the Dijon Nativity to the gesture used by the Antwerp Mannerist Birth of the Virgin images. Max Friedländer, Early Netherlandish Painting, vol. 7 (New York: Praeger, 1967), 56; Stephen Hopkins Goddard, “The Master of Frankfurt and His Shop,” vol. I (doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1983), 228; Thürlemann, Robert Campin, 212; Friedrich Winkler, Das Werk des Hugo van der Goes (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1964), 218.
demonstrates that both of Campin’s gestural inventions had begun appearing in Birth of the Virgin scenes, and De Beer seems simply to have combined them in his midwife. Felix Thürlemann has suggested that a lost Campin Birth of the Virgin included a midwife making the hand-warming gesture;39 if this is the case, De Beer and his followers likely drew upon this image in their work. Regardless, the existing Frankfurt altarpiece demonstrates that both the hand-warming and the Nativity gestures were already being used side by side in Birth of the Virgin images—the Mannerists just combined them into one, allowing for greater meaning in the singular figure holding the child rather than relying on a more peripheral midwife for the second gesture. This conflation of two women into one relates to the message of the piece, which correlates Christ’s sacrifice and his gift of new life with Mary’s immaculacy. The dual nature of the hand gesture, derived from two separate paintings, is not unlike the dual nature of Christ, derived from two separate parents.

2.1 Interacting with the Body of Mary

By including the story of the midwives Zebel and Salome, the Dijon Nativity indicates the importance of witnessing the reality of the virgin birth. Campin’s Nativity depicts the moment in which the other midwife, Salome, has just expressed doubt regarding Mary’s purity. Attempting to physically examine the Virgin, Salome’s hand withers away; she is then healed by touching the robes of the Christ Child. Zebel’s gesture is a motion of surprise, either at the withering of Salome’s hand or at the reality of a virginal birth. The banderole held in her lowered left hand reads, “virgo peperit filium,” meaning “a virgin gave birth to a son” and referencing the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14.40 By “visually speaking” these words, Zebel witnesses

39 Thürlemann, Robert Campin, 232.
40 KJV: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”
both Christ’s birth and Mary’s virginity. She therefore fulfills two roles that early modern midwives often performed in the community—witnessing a child’s birth and testifying of a woman’s sexual status.\footnote{Highly trusted members of their communities, midwives of the period often acted as witnesses in legal cases dealing with rape, witchcraft, illegitimate birth, or sexual misconduct. See David Harley, “Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch.” Social History of Medicine 3, no. 1 (1990): 4, 7, 10-11.} In regard to the Mannerist Birth of the Virgin paintings, it is significant that these paintings reference Zebel and her prophetic banderole because it indicates that the Virgin Mary, even at her birth, is “always already” the mother of Christ. This conflation of time is not uncommon in Northern Renaissance art, and it introduces a contemplative aspect to the painting, which transcends chronology in its description of Mary’s roles.\footnote{For a discussion of manipulations of temporality in Northern Renaissance art, see Alfred Acres, “The Columba altarpiece and the time of the world,” The Art Bulletin 80, no. 3 (1998): 422-424.} By including this reference, the early sixteenth-century artists indicate how Mary will form the flesh of Christ, even before the historical moment of the Incarnation.

The comparison between the Dijon Nativity and the early Mannerist Birth of the Virgin images is made even stronger when one considers the flame-like beams of light radiating from Campin’s Christ Child. These mimic the rays around the sun, rising over the stable’s roof in the painting’s upper left. The Birth of the Virgin paintings and Campin’s Nativity therefore both have a midwife approaching a set of flames while witnessing a miraculous child. In fact, the lower hand of Campin’s midwife nears the “flames” emitting from Christ without touching them, just as the Mannerist midwives come close to touching the fireplace without actually doing so. If Zebel were to be rotated around, her position in relation to Christ would be remarkably similar to the Mannerist midwives’ position near the fire. Even Zebel’s banderole finds a repurposing in these scenes, as the three Birth of the Virgin midwives all hold Mary on a cloth in their laps. It is as if the word “virgo” on Zebel’s banderole has been replaced with the actual, physical Virgin
Mary. The midwives near the fireplace therefore bear a strong resemblance to Campin’s Zebel, suggesting that they are fulfilling a similar role in witnessing the bodily relationship between Christ and his mother.

The way the Mannerist midwives interact with the Mary Child and the fireplace further emphasizes the contrast between the believing Zebel and the doubtful Salome. In accounts of Christ’s birth, Salome’s desire to touch the Virgin Mary and affirm her virginity is condemned; when she tries to do so, her hand is withered. In the “Protoevangelium of James,” she calls out, “Woe to me for my sin and faithlessness. For I have put the living God to the test, and see, my hand is burning, falling away from me.”\(^\text{43}\) In direct contrast with this quote, the Mannerist midwives place their hands near the fire but are not burned. They also come close to touching the Virgin Mary, who is often compared with the Burning Bush.\(^\text{44}\) As Isaiah says, “when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the fire kindle upon thee.”\(^\text{45}\) The midwives’ ability to withstand fire and tend the Mary Child designates them as righteous; in the same way, Salome’s burnt hand indicates her lack of faith.

Just as the midwives seem to touch the fireplace without actually doing so, accounts of the believing midwife Zebel are similarly ambiguous as to whether she actually touches the Virgin. The \textit{Legenda aurea} and some of the other Infancy accounts seem to indicate that Zebel touched Mary and therefore experienced her virginity firsthand.\(^\text{46}\) However, other sources,


\(^{44}\) This comparison is discussed in greater depth later. Also see Enriqueta Harris, “Mary in the Burning Bush: Nicolas Froment’s Triptych at Aix-en-Provence,” \textit{Journal of the Warburg Institute} 1, no. 4 (1938): 281-286.

\(^{45}\) Isaiah 43:2.

including the Protoevangelium of James, indicate that she received her witness by sight rather than touch. The righteous intent of her witness is more important than the physical contact itself. A similar ambiguity of touch is employed in the Birth of the Virgin paintings. The Mannerist midwives also seem to touch the body of the Virgin. However, whether or not flesh actually encounters flesh is unclear; in every instance, a cloth separates the baby from the midwife’s lap. The midwives’ hands hover in front of the child, but contact is not assured. This uncertainty of physical connection is similarly emphasized by the way that none of the midwives actually touch the fireplace, only seeming to do so via a “visual slippage.” The uncertainty of touch for both Zebel and baby Mary’s attendants suggests the importance of faith over physicality. By employing the raised-hand gesture from the Dijon Nativity, the early sixteenth-century Mannerists align their midwives with the faithful Zebel, who was a righteous witness independent of her ability to touch. Additionally, all three of the panels very intentionally cover Mary’s genitalia; the baby’s posture or positioning on the cloth block the viewer’s gaze in every instance. In contrast with the reproductive organs of Christ, often displayed to emphasize his humanity, Mary’s body is inaccessible to the viewer. The paintings therefore present the Virgin’s flesh but discourage the physical probing attempted by Salome; simultaneously, they avoid the female nudity so unpalatable to the Northern Renaissance. By looking upon the Virgin Mary and these images, the viewer is meant to witness her virginity for themselves—no touch required.

While the gesture derived from the Dijon Nativity is often associated with surprise and witness, the lifting of the hand also relates to the theme of life that is so prevalent in these

48 This term is defined in greater detail at the start of Part 3.
paintings. The motion of the midwives’ outstretched hands parallels the gesture used by Christ at scenes of Lazarus’ resurrection, emphasizing the theme of new life through death in these artworks. Medieval manuscripts depicting the Raising of Lazarus include Christ making specific hand gestures, which call the dead man forth from his tomb. Examples include two Offices of the Dead from the Hague (Fig. 8, 9). Jesus’ gesture *creates* life, just as the salvific actions of Mary and her son create new life for mankind. Embedded in scenes fixated on birth, the midwives’ gestures demonstrate their Christ-like ability to call forth life—in rare, miraculous cases this even included an ability to bring stillborn babies to life just long enough for them to be baptized and receive spiritual rebirth.50 The visual correlation between Birth of the Virgin scenes and Lazarus’ resurrection is made even stronger when one considers the way that the darkened fireplaces resemble the shadowy grave from which Lazarus emerges—his frail, white body is comparable with the Virgin’s exposed flesh or even her mother’s corpse-like frame. In fact, the midwife closest to Van Overbeke’s St. Anne is also making this resurrecting gesture, suggesting that Anne is being brought back to life by the ministrations of her attendants. The way these hands are *lifted* is comparable with the “lifting up” of the body of Christ in the form of the Eucharist—conflating the midwives with priestly duties—and hands are lifted up repeatedly in these images as the midwives pour water, drink, adjust curtains, and gesture to one another.

By referencing Zebel’s hand gesture in Campin’s *Nativity*, the three sixteenth-century artists therefore turn their own midwives into important witnesses and vehicles within the life-giving miracle. The midwives’ gazes and positions by the fireplace indicate that the child is central to the meaning of the image. De Beer’s midwife looks down at the Virgin, therefore

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ushing the viewer’s gaze to the child. Similarly, Van Overbeke’s midwife looks directly at the audience, engaging them in her action of witness. By referencing Zebel’s role as witness to Mary’s virginity, the artists invite the viewers to behold the Virgin’s purity. Like Zebel, they are meant to believe this life-bringing mystery without having physical evidence—as if they, like Old Testament prophets, must prophetically sense the Mary Child’s ultimate purpose with the farsighted eyes of faith. The viewer’s stance on this issue is, however, uncertain. Unlike Campin’s Nativity, where the believing midwife’s back is placed to the viewer, allowing onlookers to imagine themselves in her place, these believing midwives face the audience. At the same time, the doubting midwife, Salome, is missing. If there is a doubting midwife present at the Virgin’s nativity, she would of necessity be on the viewer’s side of the picture plane. The midwives’ witness of the Virgin therefore challenges the viewer to consider their own belief of Mary’s role in the Incarnation: will they mirror the believing midwife, or will they doubt?

Meanwhile, the hand-warming gesture creates a feeling of “in-process” motion, which relates to the actions of the other figures in the paintings and indicates how Mary’s birth is the beginning of the ongoing story of Christ. Most of the figures in these paintings are caught in the process of performing an action. Some of the midwives move to deliver food to St. Anne but have not reached her yet. Other midwives are depicted as they actively pour or consume fluids. Mouths hang open, caught mid-word in the act of speaking, and hands gesture mid-air. De Beer in particular emphasizes this notion of frozen motion—this is best evinced by the trapped dove behind the wooden screen; its one flapping wing is prevented from moving any farther. In all three paintings, the midwives by the fire are reaching for the fireplace tongs but have not touched them yet. They are in the process of swaddling Mary, but she is not yet clothed. Even the baby Mary is shown actively reaching and moving. Perhaps the only fulfilled action in these works is
the act of birth, and Anne is the only one resting. The sense of action conveyed in all three of these paintings suggests that the labor begun by St. Anne is not yet completed. With all of the Christological and Eucharistic connections in these paintings, the viewer is reminded that for Mary, the salvific work of translating her flesh into the flesh of Christ—with its sacramental reconstitution into the Eucharist—is an ongoing effort.

2.2 The Role of Mary

Numerous aspects in the three Birth of the Virgin paintings allude to the fact that these images articulate the role of the Virgin Mary in terms of life-giving salvation because many objects in the paintings seem to be analogies for her. This is particularly true for De Beer’s and Van Oostsanen’s images since they contain more objects and are more detailed than the smaller Golden Miracle panel. Both of these larger images contain prominently-placed mirrors, possibly references to the Virgin’s title as “Mirror of Salvation” (*Speculum salvationis*). At the same time, these mirrors may indicate how the life of the Virgin Mary “reflects” the life of Christ; viewers are meant to draw connections between the two. The very actions of the midwife, who is preparing to swaddle the child, are reminiscent of Mary’s role of enclosing Christ in flesh. In Jan de Beer’s painting, one of the midwives holds a vessel aloft that looks remarkably like a pyx, the sacramental container used to hold Hosts and generally kept in a tabernacle. The pyx, however, is also archetypically Marian since her body contains the living Christ. The flowing liquid present in all three paintings—but displayed most prominently by Jan de Beer—may reference the Virgin’s titles of “fountain” (*Fons signatus, Fons amoris*, etc.). In her relationship with Christ, she too becomes the “fountain of living waters.”51 The prominent fireplace in these three works, in connection with the midwives’ sandals being removed, compares Mary to the Burning

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51 For Christ’s role as “fountain of living waters,” see Jeremiah 2:13, as well as John 4 and John 7:37-39.
Bush. As it reads in the *Breviariurn Romanum*, “Rubum, quem viderat Móyses incombústum, conservátam agnóvimus tuam laudáblem virginitátem: Dei Génitrix, intercéde pro nobis.”

Like the bush that burns but is not consumed, Mary bears Christ but remains immaculate. Since these paintings are meant to demonstrate the role of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation of Christ and his redemptive act, the priestly and sacrificial imagery employed by the birth scenes also reflects upon the nature of her role.

Another analogy for the Virgin Mary is the basket of cloth present in all three of these images. The prominence of cloth in the panels suggests that the creation of the earthly flesh of Christ—which medieval authors often described as “weaving”—occurs through the formation of the flesh of Mary. While a basket of cloth is not an uncommon inclusion for domestic or birth imagery, the sheer number of Eucharistic vessels in the paintings, which already remind the viewer of Mary’s role as a sacred receptacle for the flesh of Christ, suggest that these baskets analogize the body of the Virgin as the container for Jesus. In the positioning of the drapery, the cloth in the baskets imitates the fabric held beneath the body of baby Mary, again suggesting a correlation. The significance of textile is particularly emphasized in the Van Oostsanen painting, in which an attendant holds a sudarium-like sheet in front of the fire. Interestingly, this painting’s hand-warming midwife is the only one of the three who does not seem to touch the fireplace—she appears to touch the fabric instead, a deviation from the iconography that suggests the presence of cloth is significant. Similarly, in the panels accompanying Adriaen van Overbeke’s *Birth of the Virgin*, baskets of cloth are present in scenes associated with the coming of Christ’s

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52 “In the bush which Moses saw unconsumed, we recognize the preservation of thy glorious virginity: holy Mother of God, intercede for us.” Catholic Church, *Breviariurn romanum ex decreto sacrosancti Concilii tridentini restitutum* (Ratisbone: F. Pustet, 1888), https://divinumofficium.com/cgi-bin/horas/officiurn.pl#. This line is from the “Office of Circumcision” in vespers. For further reading on Mary as the burning bush, see Harris, “Mary in the Burning Bush,” 281-286. Harris notes that the *Speculum humanae salvationis* also presents a compelling argument for this title, as it places an image of the Annunciation next to the Burning Bush.
flesh—the Annunciations and the Nativities, where the birth of Christ or an ancestor is either occurring or being foretold. A basket even shelters Christ’s actual flesh as the Holy Family flees to Egypt. In every scene where these hampers appear prior to the birth of Christ, white cloth hangs out. After Christ’s birth, the containers are always closed, except when the Christ Child himself sits inside. The basket therefore acts as an allusion to Mary’s body, which is even at birth designated as the receptacle and former of the flesh of Christ.

Medieval and Northern Renaissance worshippers understood Mary to be the weaver of the Christ’s flesh. St. Augustine writes that Christ was “clothed with a body of earthly mortality, that He might clothe it with heavenly immortality.”

Mary’s role as the one who clothes Christ is evident in medieval plays and artwork, where she is described or depicted as spinning. She spins thread—in addition to the veil for the temple and Christ’s seamless garment—as she spins Christ into being. Images of the Virgin Mary spinning were associated with devotional practices meditating on the Passion, the Virgin as co-redemptrix, Mary as exemplar of ideal female behavior, and the Eucharistic formation of Christ’s earthly body. While none of Adriaen van Overbeke’s panels show the specific act of spinning, the presence of the baskets of cloth clearly allude to the Virgin’s role in weaving the flesh of Christ.

54 For discussion of the Spinning Virgin, particularly in regard to medieval plays, see Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 155-166.
Recent scholarship on St. Anne has emphasized her role in the Incarnation, specifically the formation of Christ’s mortal flesh.\(^5^9\) Michael Anderson has noted the prevalence of weaving imagery in an early version of the office of St. Anne.\(^6^0\) According to the office, “the line of virginity proceeds from this [Anne’s] loom,” and “Anne wove a muslin cloth of virginity.”\(^6^1\) It continues, “She wove together with purple / Of necessity the mother of Christ, / From which the precious garment / Of the highest king was made.” Anne therefore becomes part of the weaving of Christ’s flesh, albeit removed by one generation—this explains the basket included in Adriaen van Overbeke’s scenes of Anne as well as Mary. While this interpretation of the basket of cloth as the container for the woven flesh of Christ cannot be applied to every basket that occurs in Netherlandish domestic scenes, for images that allude to the sacrificial flesh of Mary and her son, baskets and their concomitant cloth indicate the future coming of Christ. By including extensive references to cloth, the three artists therefore reference the manner in which Mary’s flesh will eventually come to form her son’s.

Within this context of Marian imagery, the combination of Campin’s two hand gestures indicates that the artist wants the viewer to witness something specific regarding the child. The Zebel-based gesture from the *Dijon Nativity* draws attention to the body and future of the child and invites the viewer to act as a witness of Mary’s miraculous state of immaculacy. Meanwhile, as will be discussed in a later section of this paper, the hand-warming gesture relates to notions of Old Testament sacrifice, which again alludes to the body of the Virgin. By indicating the specialness of Mary’s body, these artists emphasize the potency of her co-sacrificial nature. Furthermore, the midwife’s hand serves to highlight the fireplace itself, an object of containment

\(^{5^9}\) Anderson, *St. Anne in Renaissance Music*, 10.


reminiscent of the Virgin’s role in Incarnation and, by extension, in the Eucharist as the mystical recapitulation of God’s “enfleshing.” The remainder of my paper will discuss how this gesture and the other imagery in the paintings help the viewer understand the Virgin Mary’s role in terms of both Old and New Testament sacrifice.

3. Priests and Sacrifices

In order to evoke sacerdotal connotations, all three of the images examined in this study turn St. Anne’s birthing chambers into an ecclesiastical or temple space. One of the primary ways these sacerdotal connections are accomplished is through visual “slippages.”62 I define these “slippages” as places in the image where an object almost appears to be one thing while actually being another, as well as places where people or objects appear to physically touch while actually occupying distinct spaces within the scene. A number of these “slips” cause ordinary objects to appear as ecclesiastical vessels and ornaments for the altar, even if they are typical of a sixteenth-century birthing chamber. Despite these priestly undertones being created in slightly different ways in the three altarpieces, all three share sacerdotal themes, which, in turn, provide a surprising new lens for interpreting the implications of the Virgin’s birth.

In Jan de Beer’s Birth of the Virgin, priestly space is primarily created by the inclusion and use of liturgical-style objects. One of the first indicators that this image moves beyond childbirth into the realm of sacramental celebration is the presence of a church lavabo at the back of the image. Pots filled with water for washing would have been common enough in birthing chambers, but these would have taken the form of simple basins and jugs. However, the pitcher

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62 The use of the term “slippage” is not unique to this paper, as the term is used in similar ways in other scholarship. Its use is indebted to Lacan, who recognized a “slippage” between any signifier and its signified. This discontinuity destabilized the meaning; in the case of these paintings, the visual employment of slippage allows the viewer to read multiple interpretations onto the artworks. For a discussion of Lacan’s “slippages,” see Kirsten Campbell, "The slide in the sign: Lacan's glissement and the registers of meaning," Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities 4, no. 3 (1999): 135-143.
in the back of this painting is in a clear niche with a hanging towel, therefore evoking the sacristy in which the priest would prepare for Mass.\(^{63}\) Simultaneously, visual slippage occurs with the midwife in front of the lavabo. The woman’s hand is positioned just in front of the pitcher as she warms her fingers in front of a candle, but the placement of her hand creates ambiguity. It seems to the viewer as if the midwife is touching the pitcher—as if she is pouring the water onto her other hand and performing priestly ablutions. The women in Jan de Beer’s image are given solemn prominence, as if participating in ritual, and the excesses of fabric that trail from their sleeves bear some resemblance to vestments, particularly the maniple worn by celebrants on their left arms.

Another significant liturgical reference in Jan de Beer’s painting is the vessel held aloft by a birth attendant in the back of the painting. Ostensibly, this woman is bringing a container filled with food or water to offer the new mother. However, when looking at this vessel, immediate ecclesiastical significance becomes clear, as this object closely resembles a standing pyx, the container for the Eucharist. Like the lavabo, the evocation of a pyx transforms the childbirth scene into a church setting, complete with liturgical objects and pseudo-priests fulfilling ritual functions. The midwife elevates the pyx-like vessel, as if she is a priest who has just finished the blessing of the Eucharist and is preparing to distribute the Communion hosts. She carries the container for Christ’s Eucharistic body, just as the midwife by the fire is holding Mary, the actual container for the body of Christ.

\(^{63}\) Some scholarship, such as the analysis of Italian interior scenes by Peter Thornton, considers the lavabo in birth chambers to be a way to make the space seem homey and approachable. However, in the case of Netherlandish altarpieces, common household objects often hold strong significance. The priestly connotations of the lavabo have been discussed by Carla Gottlieb in connection with Robert Campin’s Merode Altarpiece (1427-28). See Carla Gottlieb, "Respiciens per Fenestras: The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," Oud Holland 85, no. 2 (1970): 65-67; Thornton, The Italian Renaissance Interior, 242.
While Jan de Beer’s birth scene uses objects and priestly clothing to reference liturgical celebration, Van Oostsanen’s painting creates an ecclesiastical space using slippages that reference sixteenth-century churches and sacraments. The entire scene takes place in an unnaturally tall room; women enter the chamber through a separate, narthex-like space defined by what appears to be a groin vault. The ceiling of the main room is also arched, as if it were a Romanesque church interior. Another high arch appears to function as a window. In the back, an altarpiece painted with a landscape closely resembles the terrain visible just outside the doors. Consequently, the viewer is initially uncertain if they are looking at windows to the outside or at a retable. A quick glance or a trick of the eye could easily disguise this small altarpiece as an ordinary window and hide its ecclesiastical quality. Likewise, the furniture in front of the altarpiece could pass as a simple buffet, laid with a cloth and dishes for use by the new mother and her attendants. However, the table also resembles an altarpiece set up for Communion, complete with chalice and paten-like vessels. Even while undoubtedly depicting a contemporaneous nativity, Van Oostsanen’s birthing chambers therefore evoke a church space.

Beyond the objects and architecture of the scene, ecclesiastical connections are created by the actions of the midwives and attendants. The organization and groupings of the women are reminiscent of Rogier van der Weyden’s profoundly liturgical Seven Sacraments altarpiece although their actions are less explicitly priestly. The two older women on the upper left of the painting may simply be whispering together, but their postures, combined with the pseudo-ecclesiastical setting, are reminiscent of the confession of sins. Similarly, the woman administering sustenance to St. Anne—this attendant is present in all three Birth of the Virgin scenes—could be reminiscent of the administration of viaticum as part of Extreme Unction for the dying. This visual reference is reinforced by the appearance of St. Anne, whose bedridden
manner resembles Mary in paintings of the Death of the Virgin. Finally, the women eating at the
table consume a Eucharistic feast as they hold chalices and partake of bread. Throughout this
painting, the midwives therefore fulfill pseudo-priestly roles in an evocatively ecclesiastical
space.

Adriaen van Overbeke’s *Golden Miracle of Westphalia* develops a similar liturgical
association by placing the *Birth of the Virgin* in direct contact with other priestly scenes. Of the
thirty-six panels in this altarpiece, nearly all of them involve the ancestors of Christ engaging in
cultic rites, receiving divine administrations, or visiting a temple. A priest appears eight separate
times, and Mary’s birth is situated spatially just below and beside two temple scenes—Christ’s
Circumcision and the Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple, respectively.64 The placement of
the scene in this temple environment seems especially intentional when one considers that the
two other nativity scenes in this altarpiece—the births of Anne and Christ—appear at the end of
an entire row of images, a logical place to put the transition from one generation to the next. By
displacing the *Birth of the Virgin* so that it becomes the *first* panel of a row rather than the last,
Van Overbeke places additional significance on the scene and sets it into the space between two
explicitly priestly panels.

Overall, all three *Birth of the Virgin* scenes create ecclesiastical settings in which both
Old and New Testament sacrifice are evoked; this transforms the women in the scene from
dedicated midwives to faithful priests, participating in quasi-sacramental events. Although the
connection between midwives and priests may seem unlikely, the context of Northern

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64 The panel just below the *Birth of the Virgin* is Anne departing from her parents, a rather clever play on birth as the
action of a child leaving its mother.
Renaissance religion makes this parallel rather intuitive. At births, midwives were given the authority to baptize in emergency situations, therefore literally filling the role of priest. Even when a child was baptized in the church, the midwife often still participated in the ceremony, answering questions during the service or carrying the child in procession to the church. While I have been unable to find explicit evidence linking midwives with the performance of the Last Rites, the high infant and maternal mortality rate in the sixteenth century meant they would often witness death. Their caring for a body at the time of death carries priestly connotations, and midwives would have heard a mother’s confession if no priest was there. Comparatively, priests occasionally attended births in order to perform last rites for dying mothers, and they sometimes acted the part of midwives in religious plays. For example, in the Christmas liturgical play, *Officium Pastorum*, priests played the role of midwives attending the birth of Christ. In some cases, the play would immediately precede Mass, meaning that the congregation would nearly simultaneously see the ministers as faux-midwives and then in their true roles as priests. Like priests, who offered new spiritual life in the form of sacraments, the midwives


68 Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 27; Diana Webb, “Domestic Space and Devotion in the Middle Ages,” in *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 29. Johnson indicates that a priest was expected to perform last rites for laboring women who seemed likely to die, and a failure to do so was considered the priest’s fault. This placement of blame suggests that, unlike birth, the last rites were much more firmly under the jurisdiction of the clergy alone. Rebecca Wynne Johnson, “Praying for Deliverance: Childbirth and the Cult of the Saints in the Late Medieval Mediterranean,” (doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 2015), 310.


offered actual physical life in the context of birth. Both groups entered a mystical, gendered, only partially visible space armed with important vessels and tools and emerged with the flesh of a child.

A number of other Birth of the Virgin images portray midwives acting as priests, so the early Mannerists appear to be drawing on a pre-existing visual tradition. Some Northern Birth of the Virgin images include a midwife pouring cleansing water over Anne’s hands, just as a priest would while using a lavabo (Fig. 10, 11). Other images include midwives in near-priestly garb; for example, artist Jaume Mateu includes a midwife wearing something similar to an alb and stole (Fig. 12). In many Birth of the Virgin panels, midwives sit at altar-like tables holding priestly vessels. This is true of Van Oostsanen’s *Birth of the Virgin*, but another example is the 1520 *Birth of the Virgin* held in the Hague (Fig. 13). In this painting, the sleepy midwife presides over an altar-like table holding candles, bread, small tongs, and pyx-like vessels. Similar “altar-tables” are found in the *Birth of the Virgin* held in Stuttgart (Fig. 14) and Israhel van Meckenem’s version (Fig. 15). Finally, like Van Oostsanen’s panel, a number of Birth of the Virgin scenes occur in church-like spaces. This is true of the carved Antwerp Mannerist Birth of the Virgin held in St. Germain l’Auxerrois in Paris (Fig. 16), which depicts a ribbed vault in the ceiling over Anne’s head. This phenomenon is probably best emphasized, however, by Albrecht Altdorfer’s *Birth of the Virgin* (Fig. 17), which is literally set in a church. By drawing upon these pre-established traditions, Van Oostsanen, De Beer, and Van Overbeke turn Anne’s birthing chambers into ecclesiastical spaces in which the midwives play a liturgical role. They do not literally become priests but are infused with priestly allegory, embodied extensions of the Levitical line of Anne and Mary.
The complex, priestly role that midwives played in sixteenth-century society is demonstrated in the similarity of Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen’s Birth of the Virgin to his Witch of Endor (Fig. 18). Both scenes cluster groups of women performing ritualistic actions in an architectural setting, and, like the midwives, the witches tend fires and consume sustenance around the flames. One of them even reaches for a pair of tongs. As Martha Peacock has indicated, the Witch of Endor occupied a complicated space in sixteenth-century thought. Van Oostsanen’s Witch of Endor displays magical ritual in careful detail and frames it as possible through the power of God, conflating the occult with religiosity.71 The Birth of the Virgin panels similarly mix vernacular ritual with widespread doctrine, and the midwives, like the Witch of Endor, fulfill a role that is powerful and unique, both beloved and dangerous. Indeed, academic writings of the sixteenth-century commonly stereotyped witches as being midwives, despite the fact that modern studies have found low correlations between the career of midwife and the likelihood that a woman would be tried as a witch.72 Midwives were beloved within their communities and were associated with moral order, but they existed in a strange, powerful, and priestly liminal space.73

The connection between priests and the Birth of the Virgin may also be related to the Virgin Mary’s own long-standing connection with priesthood. Mary’s body is frequently compared to the church or to a temple; the Speculum humanae salvationis, for example,

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72 Harley, "Historians as Demonologists," 1-2.

associates her birth with the temple of Solomon.\textsuperscript{74} Much has been said about the way that Mary’s womb acts as a sacristy, in which the Christ Child clothes himself in flesh.\textsuperscript{75} By including priestly midwives and constructing the Birth of the Virgin as an ecclesiastical scene, the early Mannerists reference Mary’s unique participation in her son’s priesthood.

Contemporaneous texts indicate that not only the Virgin Mary but also St. Anne had specific ties with priesthood. Devotional literature about Anne speaks of her priestly lineage through Aaron.\textsuperscript{76} The story of the conception of Mary, with its discussion of Joachim’s rejected offering in the temple, is strongly connected with notions of sacerdotal worthiness, and Anne’s role directly relates to priesthood. In the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, she promises God that if she is given a child, she will offer it to God in his holy temple—suggesting a priestly action.\textsuperscript{77} The Gospel later states specifically that Joachim \textit{and} Anne offer sacrifices at the holy temple when they present Mary there. Similarly, Pamela Sheingorn has interpreted many images of the Holy Kinship as extending patriarchal power to the matriarchs; she compares Anne’s and her daughters’ actions to the rites celebrated at Mass.\textsuperscript{78} Most explicitly, as translated in Michael Anderson’s book \textit{St. Anne in Renaissance Music}, a song dedicated to St. Anne from 1528 reads, “Anne is your priestess, line and daughter of kings.”\textsuperscript{79} In the Birth of the Virgin scenes, Anne has therefore become the “high priest” in a group of midwife-priests. As such, like Aaron and his

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{The Mirour of Man’s Saluacioune: A Middle English Translation of Speculum humanae salvationis: a critical edition of the fifteenth-century manuscript illustrated from} Der Spiegel der Menschen Behaltnis, Speyer: Drach, c. 1475, ed. Avril Henry (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 47.
\textsuperscript{76} Anderson, \textit{St. Anne in Renaissance Music}, 17, 124; de Voragine, \textit{The Golden Legend}, 537.
\textsuperscript{77} “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew,” 42.
\textsuperscript{78} Sheingorn, “The Holy Kinship,” 282.
\textsuperscript{79} Anonymous, \textit{Theodoce matrem/Firma fide fiden}, a motet from the Palatini partbook, c 1528-1534, part of a collection of pieces delivered to the Austrian branch of Habsburgs led by future Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand and his wife Anna (queen of Bohemia and Hungary). In Anderson, \textit{St. Anne in Renaissance Music}, 186.
sons in Leviticus, she partakes of the special sacrificial meal in the temple space in front of the altar.

3.1 Eucharistic Sacrifice

In establishing this priestly environment, the Northern Mannerists compare the Birth of the Virgin Mary to the administration of the Host, indicating Mary’s own relationship with the Eucharist. The overall Eucharistic connotation of the painting creates another kind of visual slippage: one in which the viewer is meant to see the Christ Child by looking at the baby Mary. Christian viewers are accustomed to associating religious images of a woman holding a baby with Mary holding the infant Child. Although these three paintings are obviously images of the birth of the Virgin, since no barnyard animals or manger scene are apparent, the viewer’s momentary tendency to think of the Christ Child when seeing a holy baby acts as a visual cue. This optical connection is only strengthened by the ways in which the three Mannerists draw from Campin’s *Dijon Nativity*. In this interplay, the flesh of Mary and the flesh of Christ become nearly synonymous, and the viewer is reminded that Mary provided Christ with flesh from her own body—the same flesh which is eaten in the Eucharist. In fact, Catherine Lawless has suggested that the reason St. Anne’s cult was so heavily promoted in the sixteenth century was to emphasize her role as provider of the flesh of Mary, who in turn provided the Eucharistic body of Jesus.80 The Virgin’s body therefore becomes a meditative space through which the viewer can contemplate the Christ Child and the fleshy sacrifice that redeemed the world. These connections relate to Mary’s co-redemptive role, in which she assists Christ in bringing about salvation and new life for mankind.

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One of the ways these paintings evoke the celebration of the Eucharist is the pulling back of Anne’s bedcurtains, which imitates pulling back the curtains after the Host consecration. In all three paintings, Anne’s bed is surrounded by heavy curtains, which are being pushed back by a midwife. This is most obvious in Jan de Beer’s painting, where a midwife physically pulls at the drapes, but it is evident in the other two panels as well, where the body of a midwife keeps the curtains from closing around Anne. Given the established priestly connotation of the midwives, the near-liturgical curtains surprisingly conflate Anne’s body with the Eucharist, suggesting that the Eucharistic connections to the flesh of Mary extend to her mother as well. In this way, the Birth of the Virgin becomes synonymous with the consecration of the Eucharist, that moment when everyday substances come to life and are transformed into the flesh and blood of Christ. This is similar to the way that the Eucharist is described in medieval texts, which frame transubstantiation as comparable to Mary’s ability to grow and bear the Son of God in her womb. The curtains are also reminiscent of the Old Testament veil, which divided the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple. The midwives’ opening the curtains divides that veil and therefore alludes to the future Crucifixion of Christ. It therefore indicates that the birth of Mary is the first step in the work of making Christ—the ultimate Holy of Holies—accessible to the general Christian population.

The Real Presence of Christ evoked by the flesh of the Virgin Mary is emphasized by the presence of a sanctus candle in Jan de Beer’s Birth of the Virgin. In the back left of the

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84 I am indebted to Fr. Michael Maher, S.J., for observing the presence of a sanctus candle in this image.
painting, the viewer’s attention is brought to the burning candle near the lavabo because the midwife’s raised hand toward the candle mirrors the gesture of the midwife raising her hand toward the fire. Given the priestly setting and Eucharistic instruments present in the scene, this candle is likely meant to represent a sanctus candle, burned during the Mass from the point at which the Host was consecrated until communion had taken place. The sanctus candle therefore blazed any time the transubstantiated flesh of Christ was on the altar; it acts as a marker for the presence of Christ.85 Simultaneously, this taper may refer to the purification rites necessary for a woman after childbirth. Recorded in the Bible in Leviticus 12 and practiced in Catholicism as Candlemas, postpartum purification usually involved the mother carrying a candle on her way to the church.86 In late medieval thought, this candle represented Christ carried by his mother; it could alternately represent the delivery of a healthy child—both meanings apply here. Jan de Beer’s candle may therefore remind viewers of maternal purification, another liturgical ritual invoking the presence of Christ. Referencing churching may also evoke Mary’s own purification, which was unnecessary due to her virginity but completed anyway because of her obedience; this highlights the Virgin’s virtues, specifically including purity and submissiveness, qualities important for a good sacrifice.87 In this context, the candle could also be associated with transubstantiation since the burning of the taper turned the wax into smoke in a similar manner.88

88 Maurice B. McNamee, Vested Angels: Eucharistic Allusions in Early Netherlandish Paintings (Tilburg: Peeters, 1998), 128
While no candle is included in the other two Birth of the Virgin versions, Jan de Beer’s use of this small but potent detail affirms Christ’s presence through the body of his mother and lauds the Virgin’s righteous purity.

Another Eucharistic inclusion in these paintings is the fireplace tongs and their relation to the burning coals amid the flames. In all three paintings, the unusual gesture of the midwife by the fire involves her hand reaching toward the fireplace tongs; this is particularly evident in the Golden Miracle image, which angles the tool out toward the midwife’s hand. Fireplace tongs are included as well in the Antwerp Mannerist altarpiece in Paris (Fig. 16), and smaller-scale pinchers are placed on the priestly table of the Hague Birth of the Virgin (Fig. 13). The presence of tongs immediately reminds the viewer of Isaiah 6, in which the prophet’s lips are cleansed by a burning coal, brought to him by an angel holding tongs. Eastern liturgical tradition associated this burning coal explicitly with the Host, and St. Germanus of Constantinople, who wrote one of the most impactful Byzantine liturgical texts, indicates that this story “represents the priest who with the tongs (his hands) holds in the holy altar the spiritual coal, Christ, who sanctifies and purifies those who receive and partake.”

The nature of the coal is changed by its interaction with fire, just as the Host is transubstantiated into the body of Christ. With this text in mind, the midwife reaching for the tongs again becomes a priest, engaged in the very heart of the Eucharistic mystery in which the flesh of Christ comes into being in the Host.

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91 A similar interpretation might be applied to Jan Gossaert’s Madonna of the Fireplace, c. 1500, in which Mary holds the Christ Child by the hearth and reaches for the fireplace tongs.
While the priestly connotation of the tongs seems to be primarily based in Eastern tradition, some Western practices also link tongs with priesthood. For example, fourteenth-century inventories in Prague list silver forceps as being used to distribute the Host to worshippers at Mass, and the inventory of the Avignon papal treasury includes forceps among other Eucharistic items. Joseph Braun notes the use of tongs to place the Host into ciboria in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Similarly, St. Birgitta compares an unrighteous priest to forceps. There is also the visual example of the priestly fireplace tongs in the Master of 1499’s Portrait of Abbot Christiann de Hondt (Fig. 19), where the leaning tongs are mirrored by the crosier. This draws a comparison between the fireplace tool and the abbot’s ability to witness the sacred mysteries happening in the next panel. Just as the tongs would allow him to touch the fire without being burned, he can near the untouchable sacredness of the Virgin and Child because of his office. In this instance, the fireplace indicates the danger—or at least the enclosed inaccessibility—of the mystery, which is approachable only through certain conduits, such as priesthood. In addition to artworks, Western scholars also connected fireplace coals to the Eucharist. Medieval commentators generally interpreted the coal as the body of Christ, either in his mortal flesh or in the form of the Eucharist. The Brabantine mystic Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381) also described Christ as a fiery coal. Thus, although the connection between the

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93 Braun, Das Christliche Altargerät, 265.
94 Christ tells her, “The priest for whom you are praying is like a forceps that extracts the gold of my virtue.” Birgitta of Sweden, The Revelations, vol. 3, VI.9.1.
Eucharist and the fireplace tongs or coals was stronger in the East, the use of tongs in the Birth of the Virgin images seems to draw upon this connection as well.

The early Northern Mannerists were not the only artists to compare Mary’s birth with Isaiah 6. Even more explicit is the Birth of the Virgin scene by Vittore Carpaccio (Fig. 20). This Italian composition includes a plaque with the words spoken by the angels in Isaiah’s account—“Holy, holy, holy”—in Hebrew. Although no one reaches for fireplace tongs in this image, a midwife holds a cloth to the fire. With the Isaiah story in mind, one might even consider the other midwife, who brings a spoon toward Anne’s mouth, as the angel bringing the coal to the lips of Isaiah. The burning of the coal could also relate to Mary’s immaculacy. As another example connecting the Virgin’s nativity with Isaiah 6, St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s Sermon on Mary’s birth invites the Virgin to ascend past the angels, all the way to the presence of “Him of Whom they sing with mighty voice from choir to choir, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.’” The Virgin’s birth therefore starts her on a path of holiness and brings her into the presence of God. Furthermore, this song of the angels is not only their dialogue in Isaiah’s vision but also part of every Mass, where it introduces the Canon—making these words inherently Eucharistic. These serve as additional examples of the Birth of the Virgin drawing upon the biblical Isaiah account, with its Eucharistic and temple implications.

The Eucharistic slippage between the body of the baby Virgin and the implicit body of Christ is emphasized by an unusual conflation of time and space in Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen’s painting. In the foreground of this work, an elderly woman holding an infant presides over the table of feasting women. Scholars have assumed in the past that this baby is a

second representation of baby Mary, held by her mother St. Anne.\textsuperscript{99} However, the conflation of time already present in having two St. Annes in one space makes the interpretation of this child ambiguous. Of course, this second child could be the infant Mary, but the child might also be Christ. Visions of the Christ Child appearing over the altar at Mass or in the Host were not uncommon during the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and, for many viewers, a child placed over an altar would immediately evoke Christ.\textsuperscript{100} The case for construing the child as Christ is strengthened by the accompanying presence of St. Anne. Images of Anne rarely show her holding the Virgin Mary as an infant—when she is held by her mother, Mary is a toddler or older and usually has long hair. The only infant regularly pictured in St. Anne’s arms is Christ.\textsuperscript{101} The way that Van Oostsanen’s Anne presents this child to the viewer is more in keeping with images of the infant Christ, in which he is offered, sacrifice-like, to the viewer. In this context, the sacramental nature of the table becomes even more apparent.

Van Oostsanen’s playing with time demonstrates the way that the miraculous birth of Mary transcends normal temporality. This correlates with the slippage between the flesh of Mary and Christ. Another way in which these paintings alter normal chronology is in the inclusion of Campin’s two gestures, as derived from his Dijon Nativity and from the Virgin and Child by a Fireplace. The Mannerists were obviously painting long after Campin, but in the chronological course of Mary’s life, their scenes of her birth come before Campin’s scenes of an adult Mary. If

\textsuperscript{99} Navarro, \textit{Maestros flamencos y holandeses}, 139.
\textsuperscript{101} Usually, these images include Mary as well, but she is obviously older than the Christ Child. Some reference images include the Master of Frankfurt’s Saint Anne with the Virgin and the Christ Child, c. 1511-1515, Hans Baldung’s St. Anne with the Christ Child, the Virgin, and John the Baptist, c. 1511, or any of the Anna Selbdritt sculptures. A nice collection of Anna Selbdritt images—all of which depict Mary as having long, flowing hair and as a slightly older child—can be found in “Anna und Maria – Anna Selbdritt (Abb. 201-223),” in \textit{Die Gottesmutter: Marienbild in Rheinland und in Westfalen}, vol. II, ed. Leonhard Käppers (Recklinghausen: Bongers, 1974), 219-242.
viewed in terms of Mary’s age, Campin’s two paintings would seem to imitate the Birth of the Virgin scenes in gestures, despite those gestures being derived from Campin’s work. Again, this serves to collapse the nature of time, making the conflation of the flesh of Christ and Mary even more possible.

Sixteenth-century viewers of these Birth of the Virgin scenes may have made yet another Eucharistic connection relating to the fireplace: the Miracle of Amsterdam. This story, which was popular in the sixteenth century, tells of a miraculous Host. In fourteenth-century Amsterdam, a dying man received Viaticum but vomited the wafer back up. His faithful female attendant, knowing she had to burn the regurgitated Host, placed it into the fire. When the wafer did not burn but was preserved from the flames, it was taken back to the parish church only to miraculously reappear in the dying man’s hearth, where it performed miracles and became a popular pilgrimage destination. In art, the Miracle was normally depicted with a woman kneeling before a fireplace, from which she pulls the Host without being burned. The connection between the Miracle of Amsterdam and Mary’s midwives by the fire is primarily visual. Beyond both including a woman interacting with a fire, the images normally also contain a sick person lying in a bed and accompanied by attendants—the dying man or St. Anne, respectively. Even without an explicit thematic connection, the “period eye” may have helped viewers make the association between the two similar images. Interestingly, Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen,

\[\text{\footnotesize 102 Some good sources analyzing the history and depictions of the Miracle of Amsterdam include Charles Caspers and Peter Jan Margry, }\text{The Miracle of Amsterdam: Biography of a Contested Devotion (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2019); Suzette van ’t Hof, “Mirakelstad: Het Mirakel en de Heilige Stede in de zestiende eeuw,” in Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen (ca. 1475-1533): de renaissance in Amsterdam en Aikmaar, ed. Yvonne Bleyerveld (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 2014), 29-37.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 104 Michael Baxandall, }\text{Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34-40. Baxandall’s theory of the “period eye” suggests that}\]
who was from Amsterdam, made three known images of the Miracle prior to his Birth of the Virgin (Fig. 21); he, at least, would have certainly made this visual connection. In fact, out of the three Birth of the Virgin images, it is Van Oostsanen’s midwife who holds the Child closest to the flames. In all three panels, the child’s proximity to the fire is strangely threatening, as if she—like the Amsterdam Host—will be thrown into the hearth. However, the viewer can be reassured that contact with the “sacrificial flames” will leave her, like the remarkable wafer, unburned, and miracles will result. With the Miracle of Amsterdam in mind, it becomes even more apparent that the baby Virgin Mary is meant to reference the Christ Child for viewers. As the Amsterdam attendant holds the Real Presence of Christ’s flesh in the blessed wafer, so too do the midwives hold the Marian material from which God’s body will be made.

The New Testament accoutrements included in the scene remind the viewer that Mary’s body will be used to form the Christ Child, the New Testament sacrifice. Combined with the Eucharistic references, the display of Mary’s fragile body reminds the viewer of the tender flesh of Christ, which is nearly synonymous with that of his mother. As succinctly stated by St. Augustine, Christ “received his flesh from the flesh of Mary. He walked here below in that flesh, and even gave us that same flesh to eat for our salvation.”

Mary is, as stated by Jean Gerson (1363-1429), chancellor of Paris, the “mother of the Eucharist.” In a vision to St. Birgitta, the Virgin describes herself as “a filled vessel, for when I was in the world in the downpour of the

viewers from a particular period are naturally prone to make certain visual connections, given the images to which they are regularly exposed.

Van Oostsanen made a painting of this scene c. 1515. Parts of this painting still exist and are held in the Amsterdam Museum. His more widespread versions would have been the two prints he made of the subject, the 1518 pilgrimage print (Fig. 21), which was also printed in 1523 in Alardus Amstelredamus’ Ritus edendi Paschalis agni, and another version in 1518, which acts as a framing device for a larger print image.


Spirit, the Son of God came into my body and received flesh and blood from me.” 108 Just as Jan de Beer’s painting presents the pyx-like vessel as a comparison to the Virgin Mary, the baby Mary’s body is meant to reference the flesh of Christ that she already contains within her—her divine role already beginning to be fulfilled. This conflation of the flesh of Mary and Christ indicates that her co-redemptive role extends in some small degree to the Eucharist as well; Mass is made possible because Mary was born in the flesh, making both Mary and Anne key parts of Christian salvation.

Mary’s life-bringing, co-redemptive role is furthermore indicated by references to the story of Eve. Jan de Beer alludes to the Fall by including an apple resting on the buffet. Similarly, in the upper-left corner of his painting, Van Oostsanen adorns the hearth with a statue of a nude woman reaching upwards—presumably Eve reaching for the apple. Northern Renaissance Christians understood Mary as the New Eve and Christ as the New Adam, working together to redeem mankind from the Fall. Similarly, the sacrificial imagery of these paintings reinforces Mary’s role as co-redemptive cooperator in Christ’s sacrifice. She is again bringing forth new life.

Likely, the priestly and sacrificial imagery of this painting was meant to inform the viewer’s worship of the Eucharist. Since all of the Birth of the Virgin images discussed in this thesis came from fairly large-scale altarpieces, De Beer’s and Van Oostsanen’s paintings likely would have acted as backdrops to the celebration of the Mass, just as the Golden Miracle definitely did. Projecting the Eucharistic actions of the congregation onto the depicted women, the viewers of the altarpieces therefore would have made a strong connection between the midwives consuming bread and wine and the communicants at Mass receiving the Host. Viewers

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could have compared the priests blessing the Host with the midwives caring for the bodies of Mary and Anne. The Virgin’s new life depicted in paint related to the renewal the congregation experienced through the sacraments. With the growing popularity of St. Anne at the time, these images would allow viewers to correlate their Mass attendance and regular devotion with the body of Christ and the early sixteenth-century spiritual trend revering the bodies of Christ’s maternal ancestors. By connecting the sacrificial flesh of Christ to the flesh of Mary, Jan de Beer also draws a connection with St. Anne, indicating her importance as part of the priestly lineage and salvific role of Christ. Anne is important because she provided flesh for the Virgin Mary, who would later provide flesh for Christ.

3.2 Old Testament Sacrifice

Beyond addressing Mary’s co-redemptive role as former of the flesh of Christ, the Mannerist Birth of the Virgin scenes also suggest that her life has a sacrificial quality, almost as if she is co-sacrifice alongside Christ. Scenes and texts about Christ’s childhood often include reference to Christ as a sacrifice.109 Leah Sinanoglou and Theresa Kenney discuss the medieval tradition of perceiving the Eucharist as a child sacrifice, a common aspect of Nativity texts and plays.110 The work of Alfred Acres has emphasized the sacrificial and Passion references included in images of Christ’s Infancy; he argues that these artworks tie the birth and death of Christ together, foretelling the purpose of Christ’s life from the earliest possible point.111 Focusing on the imagery of the thirteenth-century Huntingfield Psalter, Nell Martin has examined the frequent connection between miraculous births and child sacrifice, evident in the

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stories of Christ, Isaac, Samuel, and many others. Similarly, Elina Gertsman has traced sacrificial themes in connection with late medieval images of Christ’s Presentation at the Temple. Thus, by depicting the nativity of the Virgin Mary in connection with sacrifice, Jan de Beer, Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, and Adriaen van Overbeke are drawing on a long-standing religious tradition associated with Christ but adapting it to Marian devotion.

While a few authors have addressed the Virgin Mary’s role as sacrifice in the Northern Renaissance, this topic has been under-considered overall. Kimberly Vrudny traces sacrificial Mariology within medieval Presentation of the Virgin Images. Vrudny writes, “Mary’s sacrifice of her own aspirations made salvation, even the salvation of children, possible in the Middle Ages.” She connects Simeon’s piercing sword, which prophetically anticipated Mary’s co-suffering on Calvary, to the sword of Jephthah, the Old Testament judge who rashly vowed to sacrifice his own daughter. Vrudny also compares Mary’s willingness to sacrifice herself to the behavior of Jephthah’s daughter, who agrees to become a human sacrifice after taking several days in the mountains to mourn her virginity. Vrudny alternately places the beginning of salvation history either at St. Anne’s conception of Mary or at the Virgin’s Presentation at the Temple. While this scholarship embodies well the notion of the Virgin as sacrifice, Vrudny

115 The story of Jephthah and his daughter can be found in Judges 11. In Luke 2:35, Simeon prophecies to Mary in the temple that “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,” foretelling the pain she would experience at the suffering of her son.
seems to overlook the sacrificial connotations of Mary’s birth, another critical salvific event. In fact, early Church fathers like John of Damascus viewed Mary’s birth as the beginning of mankind’s salvation—an idea supported by these three paintings and their thematic interest in new life.117 An analysis of the Old Testament imagery in these panels demonstrates how the Northern Mannerists drew upon the salvific and sacrificial implications of the Virgin’s birth.

Perhaps the most powerful way that these images connect to the notion of priestly sacrifice is the inclusion of a prominent fireplace, which is emphasized not only by the midwife and child positioned next to it but also by the woman’s distinctive gesture. In 1981, Carra O’Meara argued that the inclusion of fireplaces in Netherlandish art references Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifice.118 The fireplace becomes an Old Testament altar, and Christ is the sacrifice consumed in its flames. Scenes with a fireplace therefore take on Passion connotations, becoming a double reference to Christ as both the Old and New Testament sacrifice. The altar can naturally also be correlated with the tomb.119 Toward the end of her paper, O’Meara writes, “The extension of holocaust symbolism to the fireplace in scenes of Mary’s birth and of her death can be explained on the basis of her essential role as vehicle and receptacle of the Incarnation.” My argument attempts to expand O’Meara’s claim, suggesting that not only does the fireplace imagery in the Birth of the Virgin indicate Mary’s role as an Incarnational vehicle, but it also enlarges Mary’s co-redemptive role by depicting her as a co-sacrifice alongside Christ.

118 O’Meara, “’In the Hearth of the Virginal Womb,’” 75-88.
As has been discussed, the midwife by the fire makes a gesture similar to that of Campin’s believing midwife, associating her with the witnesses to the miraculous birth of Christ. At the same time, however, the vertical placement of the midwife’s hand allows the artist to employ a visual slippage in which the midwife appears to rest her hand on the fireplace as she reaches toward the tongs. While this gesture may occur simply to emphasize the hearth, given the other priestly slippages occurring in this painting, it seems that this gesture is priestly as well. Based on O’Meara’s assertion that the fireplace represents an Old Testament altar, the woman’s ability to approach and touch this “holocaustic hearth” indicates priestly status. Furthermore, the way the midwife’s fingertips seem to rest on the altar-like fireplace is reminiscent of the Passover sacrifice, in which a priest would dip his finger in the sacrifice’s blood before rubbing it on the horns of the altar of the temple. This harkens back to the original Passover, during which the Israelites rubbed blood on the side posts and lintels of the doors. The fireplace tongs also have an association with the Old Testament temple—Exodus 25 places golden tongs within the Holy Place of the tabernacle, so the fireplace instruments are associated with ancient sacrifice as well. Although no blood is visible in this painting—it is, like the Eucharist, an “unbloody sacrifice”—a real midwife holding a newborn almost certainly would have blood on her hands. The setting in a birthing chamber thus projects blood onto the midwife’s gesture as she “anoints” the door-like side post of the fireplace. Sanguinary associations with childbirth typically relate to uncleanliness and a need for purification, but the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception and her purity equate her blood more closely with that of a sacrifice or with Christ’s salvific blood than with a sinning daughter of Eve. With this visual slippage, the midwife becomes a priest performing an Old Testament offering.

120 Exodus 12.
Just as Campin’s *Virgin and Child by a Fireplace* creates a comparison between the Christ Child and the fire, the Birth of the Virgin paintings compare Mary to the sacrificial flames. In each painting, the midwife’s gesture also serves to reach toward the tongs, as if she is about to tend the fire. By tending the Mary child in one arm and tending the fire with the other—gaze fixed the entire time on Mary, at least for Van Oostsanen and De Beer—the artists equate Mary with the fire. This association is strengthened by the writings of St. Birgitta of Sweden (1303-1373):

> As when several logs are piled up and a fire is kindled, that log which is most capable and fit for burning is more quickly set aflame and starts burning. It was the same with Mary. When the fire of divine love...begins to kindle and be seen, and the deity wishes to become incarnate, there was no creature more capable and fitter to receive this fire of love than the Virgin Mary, for no creature burned with such divine charity as she.

Similarly, Jan van Ruusbroec (1293-1381), a medieval scholar familiar to Northern Renaissance artists, compares Christ to a loaf of bread, composed of wheat from Mary and oil from God the Father: “And this loaf of bread is baked in the oven, that is, in the body of the pure maid Mary, who was well set aflame with the fire of charity.” These quotes are significant because they indicate a precedent of comparing Mary to fire in terms of the Incarnation. For O’Meara, the connection between the child and the flames associates the scene with Old Testament sacrifice.

Jan de Beer’s painting specifically references another Old Testament account of sacrifice: Elijah’s competition with the priests of Baal. As noted previously, the candle included in De Beer’s image closely resembles a sanctus candle. At the same time, however, the visual slippage surrounding the candle makes it seem as if the midwife is about to pour water onto the flames. In

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121 O’Meara, “In the Hearth of the Virginal Womb,” 83-84.
123 Jan van Ruusbroec, *Van den Geestelijken Tabernakel*, 932-934. For a good literature review of scholarship indicating Van Ruusbroec’s popularity after 1450, see Wise, “Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Ruusbroec,” 388.
1 Kings 18, Elijah proves the reality of the God of Israel by calling fire down upon a water-drenched altar. Likewise, the flame of the midwife’s candle remains bright even as she appears to pour water onto it. In both the biblical account and the painting, the existence of fire in a water-soaked environment demonstrates the “Real Presence” of God. Furthermore, the drenched altar that can still burn references the Immaculate Conception—Mary as defying nature by subverting mankind’s inheritance of Original Sin and eventually conceiving a child herself as a virgin. Mary herself is also associated with Elijah’s competition, specifically in regard to the rain-bearing cloud that appeared shortly thereafter to end the drought. The painting thus evokes the same combination of water, fire, priests, and sacrifice as Elijah’s story. This additional connection to an account of Old Testament sacrifice, while referencing another allegory tied to the Virgin, strengthens the argument that Mary herself is acting as a sacrifice.

This allusion to Elijah and the priests of Baal correlates with another theme that is explored in these paintings: the conflict between righteous and unrighteous priests. The contest between Elijah and the pagan priests is comparable to the contrast between Zebel and Salome, in which miracles only follow those who believe. Similarly, the wiping of blood on the door-like fireplace references the death of the Egyptian firstborns—another event involving sacrificial children and the climax of the conflict between Moses and the Egyptian priests. All three of these referenced stories—Mary’s midwives, Moses in Exodus, and Elijah in 1 Kings—demonstrate the presence of a living God for righteous priests and an ultimate failure of unrighteous priesthood. Comparatively, the birth of Mary is a story of God rewarding a righteous priestly family with new life. Although Anne and Joachim are initially scorned by an injudicious priest for their barrenness, they are rewarded with a miraculous child. These accounts and the paintings all warn the viewers to become faithful witnesses of Mary’s immaculate nature and of
her son while also demonstrating the power of righteous priests to call forth the “Real Presence” of Christ.

In addition to the fireplace and the Elijah reference, other aspects in the three Birth of the Virgin paintings allude to Old Testament sacrifice. All three of these panels include the consumption and distribution of food. The importance of eating in all three paintings cannot be overstated—Adriaen van Overbeke even emphasizes it by including a white cat that imitates the midwife engaged in eating. As it thrusts its head into a bowl on the floor, the curve of the cat’s back mirrors the white, hunched shoulders of the woman drinking thirstily and leaning over a bread-laden table. Of course, feasting strongly evokes Eucharistic consumption of bread and wine, and this reinforces the midwife-priest connection, especially since only priests could consume both the wafer and the wine. At the same time, however, midwives sharing a meal in front of the fire might remind the viewer of Israelite priests consuming the sacrifice in front of the altar. The communal meal is reminiscent of the Passover feast, in which all the Israelite families gathered and ate the sacrificial lamb, “roast[ed] with fire.”

The notion of Old Testament-style sacrifice is also emphasized in the early sixteenth-century Birth of the Virgin images by indications of threat to the Virgin Mary’s flesh. Alfred Acres previously explored a similar notion of threat during childhood but in relation to the vulnerable baby Jesus. In images of Christ’s Infancy, knives and other Passion instruments frequently appear; this draws a connection between childhood and Crucifixion. Similarly, the

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124 Exodus 12: 8.
Mannerist Birth of the Virgin paintings include suggestions of threat directed toward the Virgin Mary. Adriaen van Overbeke includes a knife on the midwife’s table. Foreshortened toward the viewer and dangling precariously off the table, the weapon clearly speaks of violence to come. Even more explicitly, Jan de Beer includes a pair of scissors balanced on the edge of the basket of cloth. The scissors point toward the Virgin Mary, threatening to cut her flesh as easily as they could cut the textiles folded below them. As mentioned earlier, another midwife in Jan de Beer’s painting holds her candle near the lavabo—visual slippage making it seem as if she would drown the wick and extinguish the light—another suggestion of potential coming destruction. Even the closeness of the child’s fragile body to the fire in all three paintings could be interpreted as kind of threat. These violent allusions suggest the coming sacrifice of the Virgin, that sharp sword that would pierce her heart through the life and suffering of her son.

Another possible Old Testament sacrificial reference is Jan de Beer’s unusual, puzzling inclusion of a white wing in the back of his painting. Just to the right of the window, a feathered wing extends upwards from behind the bench. Given the small size of the wing, it appears to belong to a bird rather than an angel. While a reference to the Holy Spirit is plausible, particularly given its presence on the Annunciation panel on the back of the Birth scene, the wing could also indicate two other important theological concepts: the Incarnation and Old Testament sacrifice. First, the figure of the captured bird has frequently been used in both literature and art to indicate the “trapping” of God in earthly flesh. This most commonly takes the form of a

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126 Interestingly enough, another pair of open scissors is portrayed on Jan de Beer’s Annunciation, the panel originally attached to the back of his Birth of the Virgin. In the Annunciation, Jan de Beer includes a number of sewing instruments, including cloth and scissors open to cut it. In this context, the scissors and cloth seem to represent Mary in the process of making the flesh of Christ in her body. This connection between cloth and flesh strengthens the threat presented by the open scissors pointed toward the baby Mary’s flesh in the birth scene. It also suggests a possible necessity of violence in the lives of Christ and the Virgin. Just as scissors are necessary to form the flesh of Christ or cut Mary’s umbilical cord, sacrifice is necessary for them to fulfill their earthly roles.

goldfinch on a leash, such as the one held by the Christ Child in Quentin Massys’ *St. Anne Altarpiece* (1507-1509). Notably, however, only part of Jan de Beer’s bird is visible. The furniture serves to *cut* the bird’s wing from the rest of its body—another example of optical “slippage.” This act of visual violence to a white bird might signify the sacrifice of doves so common in the Old Testament. In fact, the inclusion of a bird on a platter—almost like a sacrifice—is not uncommon to Birth of the Virgin images. While earlier images of the scene include birds being presented to St. Anne for food,128 Israhel van Meckenem’s *Birth of the Virgin* includes a priest-like midwife placing a plated bird onto an altar-like table. Van Meckenem’s image establishes visual similarity between the midwife carrying the bird and the midwife carrying the Virgin Mary, again suggesting a possible sacrificial connotation to Mary’s birth. In regard to the Jan de Beer painting, this bird wing evokes, at least partly, the violence of sacrifice—the way that the Virgin herself will be spiritually torn into pieces by the emotional toll of the events ahead.

The natural morbidity of sacrifice is evoked in these paintings’ heavy undertones of death. Anne’s wan white face is almost corpse-like, and her white head covering resembles a shroud; a viewer could easily imagine that she is moribund. The image of a woman lying in her bed immediately is reminiscent of the Death of the Virgin, which is often depicted with the apostles surrounding Mary’s bed. The attendants rushing around Anne resemble those mournful disciples in their grave manner and tender ministrations. Images of the Dormition, moreover, often include priestly instruments, establishing yet another way in which Birth of the Virgin images evoke the iconography of sacrifice and suffering. The realistic pallor of St. Anne

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128 Good examples of midwives presenting birds to be eaten include the *Birth of the Virgin* from *The Breviary of Martin of Aragon*, c. 1398-1430; Master of the Osservanza, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1428-39; Hans Holbein the Elder, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1493; Workshop of Michael Pacher, *Birth of the Virgin Mary*, 1498.
emphasizes the fragility and mortality of the flesh from which Mary—and therefore Christ—originates. By invoking depictions of death, the artists turn Anne’s mortal fragility into a meditative device that encourages the viewer to ponder Christ’s ultimate sacrifice through the images of his ancestors. Meanwhile, like a sacrificial lamb, the Virgin Mary is presented as a vulnerable, naked baby, exposed to the heat of the flames as she is presented at the altar. The deathly appearance of St. Anne contrasts with and consequently emphasizes the new life represented by Mary.

The sacerdotal and priestly themes in the Birth of the Virgin are particularly apparent when one considers the other images normally associated with this scene. Unfortunately, modern scholars are unsure of the precise scenes that accompanied Jan de Beer’s and Adriaen van Overbeke’s Birth of the Virgin depictions, but the Dortmund *Birth of the Virgin* remains part of its original altarpiece. In the *Golden Miracle*, Mary’s nativity is visually correlated with two ritualized events: the Presentation of Mary at the Temple on the right and the Circumcision of Christ (Fig. 22)—both also set in the temple—just above. The similarities between the birth scene and the circumcision are notable, with the Christ Child like a mirror reflection of the Mary Child in the panel below. The white altar cloth at the circumcision is nearly identical to the cloth on the cabinet in Mary’s birth scene, and the altar is directly above the cabinet, again giving it a priestly connotation. Anne appears to look up at the scene above her, forging an even stronger visual tie and suggesting prophetic foresight. The upper scene indicates Christ’s fulfillment of all Old Testament covenants; the way it echoes the birth scene strengthens the association of Mary with priestly sacrifice.

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129 For some scholarly speculation regarding the scenes that accompanied Jan de Beer’s birth scene, see Cox, "An open and shut case?,” 52-60; Ewing, *Jan de Beer*, 130-131; Ewing, “‘Truly Bright and Memorable,’” 17. The only known accompanying panel is Jan de Beer’s *Annunciation*, which was initially on the back of the *Birth of the Virgin* panel.
Most Birth of the Virgin scenes are immediately followed by an image of Mary’s Presentation at the Temple. While one might say that this is a simple chronological accuracy, the linkage often carries more significance. In the case of the Dortmund altarpiece, both the Presentation (Fig. 23) and the Birth place the Virgin Mary in front of a temple-like space with an altar. Her mother presides over both scenes, and the two panels include ancillary “priests”—midwives for the birth scene and Levites in the temple Presentation. The sequence of images therefore frames the Birth of the Virgin as a precursor to and parallel of the temple events.

Many contemporaneous works of art construe the Virgin Mary as a sacrificial lamb. One example is Albrecht Dürer’s *Presentation at the Temple* (Fig. 24, 1503) from the *Life of the Virgin* woodcut series, in which a lamb is placed closest to the viewer and on the same temple step as Mary. The diagonal of the step prompts the eye to connect the lamb and the girl. The Antwerp Mannerist altarpiece held in the Paris Saint-Germaine l’Auxerrois church (Fig. 16) draws a more explicit comparison. Just above its Birth of the Virgin scene is the Presentation of the Virgin, and the young Mary ascending to the temple is paralleled by a sacrificial lamb at the bottom of the staircase. It is significant that the Paris altarpiece also contains a Birth of the Virgin scene, which places Mary in front of a fireplace that mimics the Old Testament sacrificial altarpiece on the next panel. This directly compares Mary, who is in dangerous proximity to the flames, with the sacrificial lamb placed on the altar for slaughter. A third example is a Flemish St. Anne artwork held at the Logroño Museo Provincial (Fig. 25). The smaller panels running down either side of the main St. Anne image demonstrate direct comparisons between Mary and the sacrificial lamb. In the top left, Joachim holds a lamb; just across, Anne holds the Virgin Mary. In the row beneath, Joachim gestures toward the flock of temple sheep. On the
corresponding panel, Joachim makes a similar gesture toward Mary as she ascends the steps of the temple.

One final example of a sacrificial lamb being correlated with the Virgin Mary comes from Jan de Beer’s *Annunciation* (Fig. 26), the painting originally on the back of his *Birth of the Virgin*. In this image, the Virgin Mary is pictured with a white cat with the rounded head, side eye placement, and floppy ears of a lamb. Dan Ewing, one of the foremost scholars of Jan de Beer, has identified the artist’s white cats as Marian allusions since they only occur in accompaniment with her.130 By placing a lamb’s features on the cat that represents Mary in the *Annunciation*, Jan de Beer is again connecting Mary to sacrifice—a notion made even more powerful because it occurs on the back of the Birth scene. These works of art indicate that the cultural consciousness of the sixteenth century associated the Virgin Mary’s childhood with temple sacrifice; the three Birth of the Virgin paintings are therefore part of a larger tradition in which the immaculate, unblemished, chosen Mary is aptly compared to the sacrificial lamb, which brings new life through its death.

The very story of Anne’s miraculous conception of Mary contains sacrificial connotations. In the accounts, Anne’s husband Joachim moves from an unsuccessful temple sacrifice to tending the temple sheep and, after angelic intervention, presenting his daughter at the temple. The initial thwarted sacrifice is made right by Mary’s presentation at the temple, again suggesting a sacrificial quality to her childhood that is also supported by the texts. In the Protoevangelium of James, Anne promises to “offer” her child “as a gift to the Lord.”131

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131 “Anna replied, ‘As the Lord God lives, whether my child is a boy or a girl, I will offer it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will minister to him its entire life.’” “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 25.
Similarly, in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, Anne promises God that she will “offer the child in your holy temple.” The *Meditations on the Life of Christ* narrates Mary’s Presentation at the Temple thus: “she was offered by her parents in the temple.” Furthermore, when discussing the Presentation of Christ at the temple, the *Meditations* describes Mary performing priestly actions in placing birds on the altar and then says, “You have seen what kind of offerings the mother and son themselves were.” The texts therefore suggest that Mary, just like Christ, is both priest and sacrifice in the temple setting.

Similarly, the *Speculum humanae salvationis* frames Joachim and Anne’s sacrifice of Mary as the righteous version of the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. The Middle English version reads:

> Her father and mother be blessed, which brought her forth in kind, / And offered her for man’s health to God with holy mind…Jephthah his daughter to God offered indiscreetly, / But Joachim and Anne their daughter offered to God perfectly…But offered her unto God, to serve him quite sweetly…Jephthah’s daughter was offered for enemies temporal, / Our Lady for victory of enemies spiritual, / She [Jephtah’s daughter] might serve God no more that in her offering thus served. / But Mary, after she was offered, evermore unto God served.

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134 *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 40.
136 *The Mirour of Man’s Saluacioune*, 58-60. In the original text: “Hire fadire and modire be blissed, whilk broght hire forth in kynde, / And offerid hire for mans hele to God with haly mynde… Jepte his doghter to God offred vndiscretly, / Bot Joachym and Anne thaire doghter offred to God perfity;…Bot offred hire vtnto Godde, to serue hym qwikke swetlye… Jeptes doghter was offerd for enemys temporel, / Oure Lady for victorie of enemys spirituele, / She myght serue God no more pat in hyre offering thus sterevid. / Bot Marie, after she was offerid, euermore vtnto God seruid.”
The text situates Mary as the holier version of a pre-existing Old Testament sacrifice. Mary’s sacrifice is associated with the ability to serve God continually as a virgin, something the daughter of Jephthah was denied. In addition to its textual commentary, this section of the *Speculum humanae salvationis* places together an image of Jephthah’s daughter being sacrificed and the Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple. Kimberly Vrudny argues that the sacrificial themes of the Virgin’s Presentation in the *Speculum* were a meditative prompt for contemporary Christians, who were meant to ponder how Mary’s sacrifice had made Christ’s possible. She writes, “Through Mary’s sacrifice, medieval Christians knew they were justified and could stand before God free of sin.” In framing Mary’s Presentation as a sacrifice, the *Speculum* clearly distinguishes between unrighteous and righteous sacrifices, indicating the Virgin as the latter.

Another phenomenon linking Mary to sacrifice in the early sixteenth century is the rise of the Seven Sorrows devotion, which began in the city of Antwerp. This spiritual movement encouraged meditation and prayer on the seven sorrowful moments in Mary’s life in which she witnessed the pain of Christ. The second edition of Gerard Leuu’s meditative manual on the Seven Sorrows, which acted as a handbook for the associated confraternity, indicates that the goal of Seven Sorrows meditation is that “the suffering of Our dear Lord and the co-suffering of his dear mother [be] contemplated together.” This interest in Mary’s co-suffering relates to the

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140 *Van de seven droefheden ofte weeden O.L.V.*, Liège, University Library, XV.C185, fol. a2r-v, quoted and translated in Dlabačová, “Marian Devotions from a Printer’s Perspective,” 38.
strikingly sacrificial quality of Seven Sorrows imagery, which positions seven threatening swords around the Virgin’s heart. Carol Schuler has noted that Seven Sorrows imagery and its affective interest in Mary’s suffering spread to encompass a wide range of visual images and Passion events.\textsuperscript{141} For Schuler, this devotion emphasized the “poignancy of Mary’s life as a series of heartaches culminating in the sacrificial loss of her Child”—a theme that relates well to the sacrificial elements in Mary’s birth.\textsuperscript{142} In some instances, Seven Sorrows texts and images invoke St. Anne as well, suggesting that the sacrificial suffering of the Virgin encompassed her family too.\textsuperscript{143} In light of the Seven Sorrows devotion, Mary’s birth becomes the initiation of a lifelong vocation of sacrifice.

By including imagery that associates Mary’s Infancy with sacrifice, the sixteenth-century painters describe the Virgin herself as a co-sacrifice with Christ that brings forth new life. This relates to her role as co-redemptrix, in which she helped Christ in his fulfillment of the Passion, and it indicates how the Virgin Mary bridges the Old and New Testaments. The image of the Birth of the Virgin is, perhaps, the ultimate transition between these two divisions of scripture. It is the start of Mary’s earthly life, a key event for the events of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{144} At the same time, as indicated in the \textit{Legenda aurea}, Anne’s miraculous pregnancy at an older age clearly hearkens back to the unexpected pregnancies of barren or elderly Old Testament women—Sarah,

\textsuperscript{142} Schuler, 129-130.
\textsuperscript{143} Dagmar Eichberger, “Visualizing the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin: Early Woodcuts and Engravings in the Context of Netherlandish Confraternities,” in The Seven Sorrows Confraternity of Brussels: Drama, Ceremony, and Art Patronage (16th-17th centuries), ed. Emily S. Thelen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 130, 142.
\textsuperscript{144} In Jan de Beer’s other portrayal of the Birth of the Virgin, which is a small-scale drawing in the Städel Museum, Dan Ewing has noted imagery indicating that Mary’s birth was the transition between the Old and New Testaments. See Dan Ewing, “Jan de Beer: Birth of the Virgin,” in ExtravagAnt!: A Forgotten Chapter of Antwerp Painting, 1500-1530, ed. Peter van den Brink (Antwerp: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen, 2005), 102-103. Another visual indication of transition from the Old Testament into the New is the Old Testament-style shawls used as hand towels in Jan de Beer’s work. The transitional significance of similar shawls in the Ghent Altarpiece is discussed by McNamee, \textit{Vested Angels}, 123, 129.
Hannah, Rachel, and Samson’s mother.\textsuperscript{145} Anne and Mary are therefore transitional figures between the old and new covenants.\textsuperscript{146} As stated in the Mass to St. Anne written for Marguerite de Navarre in 1518, “In her sterility, Anne signified the synagogue; in her fecundity, the universal Church Militant.”\textsuperscript{147} Just as Mary plays an assistive role in the fulfillment of the Passion, here she helps with the fulfillment of Old Testament law by becoming a sacrifice that will bring new life through death.

Overall, the Old and New Testament references in these three paintings, when read in the context of the composite hand gesture derived from Campin, indicate Mary’s important role as co-sacrifice and co-flesh of Christ. By emphasizing the priestly aspect of Mary’s lineage in the Birth of the Virgin, the Northern Mannerists demonstrate how she bridges the gap between New and Old Testament traditions—indeed, read from left to right, each of the paintings begins with the evocation of Old Testament sacrifice and progresses toward increasingly Eucharistic imagery. In a scene fixated on birth and death, Mary is the death of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. By referencing Campin’s images of the Christ Child, the early sixteenth-century artists indicate that, even at birth, Mary had already begun her co-redemptive role as assistant of Christ. Placing Mary by the fire, the artists depict her as a Levitical sacrifice. By surrounding her with Eucharistic imagery, they reference her role as provider of the salvific flesh of Christ; even at Mary’s birth, salvation is already imminent. This, in conjunction with other texts and images of the time, indicates how her personal sacrifice and willingness to bear the Son of God becomes part of his sacrifice as well. For the devout and well-educated, these altarpieces

\textsuperscript{145} De Voragine, \textit{The Golden Legend}, 538.
\textsuperscript{146} For a description of sixteenth-century texts describing Anne as the end of the Old Testament and beginning of the New, see Dörfler-Dierken, \textit{Die Verehrung der Heiligen Anna}, 184.
\textsuperscript{147} “Mass for St. Anne” (Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 1035), 1518-1519, in Anderson, \textit{St. Anne in Renaissance Music}, 265. In the original Latin: “Anna in sterilitate synagogam in fecunditate universalem ecclesiam militate persignavit.”
would have had strong spiritual significance in framing the role of the Virgin Mary and St. Anne as part of the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

4. Lay Audiences

Up to this point, this thesis has primarily considered the well-educated viewers of early Northern Mannerist depictions of the Birth of the Virgin Mary; by discussing the deep symbolism and doctrinal questions behind the iconography, I have been analyzing the paintings’ *ideal* expected audiences, which were masculine, probably clerical, well-educated, literate, and able to interpret works of art with an in-depth knowledge of other religious texts and traditions. This final section will shift in focus and consider how these iconographies may have impacted the different, but no less important *real* audiences of these altarpieces. Although provenance of Jan de Beer’s and Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen’s altarpieces have not been established, both came from large-scale retables and likely had viewers from both genders, including the less-educated and less-informed. Adriaen van Overbeke’s altarpiece was made for a Franciscan monastery, but other scholarship has indicated that the laity may have been able to view it from the public side of the church. The patronage was likely a group effort, involving not only the friars but also lay men and women.\(^{148}\) In order to understand the “lay impact” of these images, we must consider not only ideal viewership but also lay life experiences with birth. By discussing the sensuous appeal of the works, which invites viewers to imagine themselves inside the scenes, this section of the thesis demonstrates the distinctive way that birthing iconographies could allow for a more accessible, affective piety.

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The controversy between considering an ideal versus a lay audience has long been a debate among art historians who study the Northern Renaissance, with scholars often favoring one group over the other. To me, however, it seems likely that artists would have considered the spectrum of possible viewers when creating a work of art. For an altarpiece to have been effective, it would have had to appeal to both the well-educated ideal audiences, who were more likely to act as patrons, and the lay masses, who would also experience the art as part of their day-to-day religious lives. After all, St. Anne was known for being a particularly multivalent saint, appealing to a wide range of groups and signifying a variety of ideas. Examining the theological implications of a scene from the life of St. Anne without also considering the gendered perspective would be a mistake.

When considering potential audiences, the issue of “gendered viewing” of Birth of the Virgin images is particularly complex because the male artists have, somewhat ironically, used imagery commonly associated with a space traditionally closed to men. In the sixteenth century, birth was still an “emphatically closed female space” considered unfit for the male gaze, yet men were strongly involved within it. This was particularly true of the art world because men were the creators and commissioners of birth art and objects. Gail Gibson has described birth material culture as a “liminal negotiator of the outside male world.” Ultimately, childbirth was


151 Ashley and Sheingorn, “Introduction,” 2-5.


154 Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” 13. Gibson’s work deals primarily with birthing trays, but her conclusions about birth culture can be expanded to include other birthing objects.
a space ruled by women but important to men, who were able to visualize and influence the environment as well.\textsuperscript{155} Cultural factors made it almost impossible for women to become artists, and men had a monopoly on depicting a space from which they were normally excluded. They would, of necessity, be familiar with the “props” associated with birth without ever seeing them in use during an actual birth. This observation is essential as we examine the way that the early sixteenth-century Birth of the Virgin images include the objects that would be traditionally present at a birth without depicting their usage in active birthing ritual. While the usage of these objects is predominately priestly, related to the theological messages already discussed, the tools themselves are consistent with a sixteenth-century birthing space, making the paintings equally appealing to female viewers, including those without formal education.

Men’s ability to view images of the birth space gave them some visual access to ritualistic birthing practices previously only available to women in private. This conceptual male intrusion has often been labeled as problematically patriarchal. Some previous scholarship has even interpreted altarpiece depictions of St. Anne as a way for men to prescribe motherhood to women, visually instructing them that their primary social contribution and religious obligation was producing children.\textsuperscript{156} Indeed, this may have been one of the reasons for including childbirth scenes in altarpieces, and, as such, scholars have long debated whether childbirth was an oppressive or empowering event for early modern women.\textsuperscript{157} However, it seems likely that sixteenth-century childbirth was more of a “community effort” involving the entire family than that it was intentionally oppressive—men were interested in depicting it and seeing it shown in altarpieces for dynastic, affectionate, and religious reasons. After all, a religious image that

\textsuperscript{155} Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” 7-14.
\textsuperscript{156} Brandenbarg, “Saint Anne,” 38-39, 44-47.
\textsuperscript{157} A good literature review of this debate is Rebecca Wynne Johnson, "Divisions of Labor: Gender, Power, and Later Medieval Childbirth, c. 1200–1500,” History Compass 14, no. 9 (2016): 383-396.
encourages imitation is just as much devotional as it is prescriptive. Similarly, sixteenth-century people likely did not conceive of childbirth as a proto-feminist event in the way our twenty-first century eyes sometimes construe it.\textsuperscript{158} Even so, female viewership is important to consider in relationship to these particular altarpieces.

While there is the possibility that the visual intrusion of men into a private female space subverted feminine spiritual practices in a way that encouraged patriarchal gender roles, this does not fully account for the lived experience of real female viewers. Obviously, these women’s experiences are impossible to recreate, but the agency of the female gaze leaves room for a possible positive impact of Birth of the Virgin scenes on women.\textsuperscript{159} Previous scholarship provides other instances in which women have historically subverted patriarchal images to better understand themselves and acquire power, both in terms of personal identity and the world at large.\textsuperscript{160} Andrea Pearson coins the term “female viewing communities” to describe the way in which women view images of women together, creating a strong sense of community.\textsuperscript{161} She says, “pictorial representations of women shown operating outside of patriarchal controls and gender stereotypes could help shape and sustain strong notions of womanhood for female spectators.”\textsuperscript{162} Similarly, the scholarship of Pamela Sheingorn has indicated that medieval women could achieve power by access to images of empowered female saints, even if the overall

\textsuperscript{158} A nuanced discussion of gender in the birthing space is provided by Ulinka Rublack, “Pregnancy, Childbirth, and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany,” \textit{Past and Present} 150 (1996): 84-85, 97-100.

\textsuperscript{159} This relates to Adrian Randolph’s concept of a gendered “period eye.” See Adrian Randolph, "Gendering the period eye: deschi da parto and Renaissance visual culture," \textit{Art History} 27, no. 4 (2004): 542-559.

\textsuperscript{160} Anne Clark Bartlett, \textit{Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). In her monograph, Bartlett discusses the potential for women to read empowering messages about femininity through male-authored texts. While her book relies on Middle English devotional literature, her methodology is applicable here.


\textsuperscript{162} Pearson, \textit{Envisioning Gender}, 51.
message might simultaneously be prescriptive or patriarchal.\textsuperscript{163} Even if these three Birth of the Virgin scenes encouraged maternity in a way that benefitted a patriarchal order, it is unlikely that this was their primary function, given the profound theological significance discussed earlier. The act of a community’s women viewing these female-centric images together may have generated powerful meaning and religious identity for the women. By portraying spaces that included the real material culture of birth, the artists make these sacred scenes more relatable to lay viewers—both the women who would have experienced birth rituals and the men who would have provided them with the objects to do so.

4.1 Recreating the Experience

To replicate the complexities of a birth scene and appeal to the lived experiences of viewers, Jan de Beer and his fellow artists incorporate objects and practices that would have been typical at a contemporary birth. This agrees with the illustrative quality of some Birth of the Virgin images, as discussed by Maureen Park.\textsuperscript{164} Consistent with traditional birthing practices, all of the figures in the paintings are women.\textsuperscript{165} All three of the rooms are filled with beautiful objects and ornate furniture; this is consistent with the description of a Burgundian court birthing chamber provided by the fifteenth-century writer Alienor de Poitiers.\textsuperscript{166} The fires are built up to encourage a warm, womb-like environment for the baby to enter.\textsuperscript{167} In Jan de Beer’s painting, the objects on the shelf, including the medicine jars and mortar and pestle, are realistic tools that would have been used for medical proceedings like birth. The scissors so prominently displayed in the foreground of his painting likely reference the cutting of the umbilical cord. Any viewer

\textsuperscript{163} Sheingorn, “The Wise Mother,” 78.
\textsuperscript{164} Park, “Dürer’s The Birth of the Virgin,” 1265-1267.
\textsuperscript{165} Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” 8-10.
\textsuperscript{166} De Poitiers, “Les Honneurs de la Cour, 1484-1491,” 268-271.
familiar with childbirth customs would have been able to associate these paintings and their objects with the actual contemporary practices of birth.

Beyond simply recreating a decorative feminine space, the artists even seem to reference specific childbirth traditions. For example, both Jan de Beer and Adriaen van Overbeke include an egg sitting by the fire. Previous art historians have interpreted this egg simply as a “birth symbol favored by Jan de Beer,” and eggs were sometimes incorporated into other early Birth of the Virgin scenes as allusions to new life. However, the eggs also reference a practical purpose: according to the medieval women’s health manual *Trotula*, eggs were used as lubricant or pain relief during and after labor. Modern analysis of extant birthing girdles has found traces of egg, confirming the *Trotula*’s claim. Thus, De Beer and Van Overbeke have included a specific, identifiable medical practice in their paintings. Similarly, De Beer alludes to the practice of untying knots at childbirth, a practice believed to assist the baby into the world; in his artwork, the attendants’ belts trail on the ground and in the air, as if they have been loosened or untied. These small indicators of birthing superstitions would have been signifiers to the lay viewers—particularly the women—that a birth had occurred. Beyond simply creating a straightforward visual experience, however, the artists also allude to birthing objects not explicitly depicted in the work of art.

As already noted, all three of the paintings emphasize cloth, the theological implications of which have been addressed. This profusion of cloth may also be interpreted as a reference to

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168 Ewing seemingly dismisses the egg as a rote symbol employed by Jan de Beer. See Ewing, *Jan de Beer*, 131.
the birthing girdle, a strip of fabric used as an active part of labor during the Renaissance. Based on the famous birthing girdle worn by the Virgin Mary, these girdles would be laid across or wrapped around the laboring woman’s stomach, but material was also touched, kissed, and moved across the body to touch the eyes, mouth, and head. Given the Northern Renaissance’s tendency to portray one medium through the manipulation of another, it is possible that the profusion of cloth is a cloaked allusion to birthing girdles themselves. For example, in Jan de Beer’s work, the stomach of St. Anne is emphasized by the red folds of cloth stretched out upon it. Although this red cloth is obviously the bedsheets, its prominence could reference a birthing girdle placed around Anne’s waist. Beyond that, the redness of the cloth may allude to blood, which would be present at any birth but would not have been explicitly depicted in an altarpiece panel. Another potential area of girdle allusion is the basket of cloth, present in all three of the artworks. If these paintings were real birth scenes, any piece of cloth pictured there could have served as a birthing girdle, recently folded and put away after the completion of the birth. The Northern Mannerists’ emphasis on cloth in a birthing context would have reminded female viewers of their own childbirth experiences and the critical need for a supply of cloths, rags, and girdles.

In addition to the cloth-based birthing girdles used in all three paintings, Jan de Beer’s panel also includes subtle references to birth amulets and other related objects. Pregnant women often wore amulets on their abdomens since physical contact with the object was believed to reduce pain, but even the very presence of an amulet in the room was efficacious in generating

172 For a scientific analysis of birthing girdles, which found traces of cervicovaginal fluid on the girdles, see Fiddyment, Goodison, Brenner, Signorello, Price, and Collins, “Girding the loins?,” 1-14.
an easier parturition.\textsuperscript{174} Birthing amulets were often hung around the laboring woman’s neck so that they would be in contact with the womb.\textsuperscript{175} St. Anne has a prominently defined edge to her blouse; while this is most likely just the seam, it also looks like something hanging around her neck. Particularly when viewed at a distance, the seam resembles a necklace on which a birth amulet could be strung. Amulets often took the form of jewelry, but paper and parchment amulets gained popularity because they were easily portable.\textsuperscript{176} Don Skemer has analyzed the \textit{Mérode Triptych} in terms of paper amulets, and he interprets the paper scroll of Mary as a medicinal amulet rather than a reference to Old Testament scripture.\textsuperscript{177} Similarly, the scroll included on St. Anne’s medicine shelf is likely a paper birth amulet; its very presence makes the birth easier. Even the apple placed on the buffet, beyond simply alluding to Mary’s redemption of the Fall of Eve, may also act as a birth charm. Midwives often inscribed apples with charms, which laboring mothers of all social classes would eat for additional protection, and some medieval texts recommend that a newborn be fed apple.\textsuperscript{178} This fruit, like the egg, may therefore have both symbolic and practical significance. Overall, small details in these paintings seem to


\textsuperscript{175} Don Skemer, \textit{Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 250.

\textsuperscript{176} Skemer, “Magic Writ,” 146.


have a secondary meaning related to childbirth, triggering remembered experiences for the female viewers.

4.2 Appealing to the Senses

These three Birth of the Virgin paintings’ illustration of birth objects and traditions recreates the visual environment of childbirth. Beyond simply acting as illustrations of birth culture of the time, as some scholars have indicated, this recreation creates a visual devotional space, into which viewers would be able to envision themselves more effectively. For many viewers, particularly women, the small objects and specific allusions in these works would trigger memories that could help them more easily attain a visionary recreation of St. Anne’s childbirth. Sight is not the only sense invoked in this work of art, however. The artists also recreate the auditory, aromatic, physical, and taste experience of visiting sixteenth-century birthing chambers, doubtless assisting female viewers to use the recollection of their own childbirth experiences as devotional tools.

Harnessing the power of sound, the Birth of the Virgin paintings inspire the viewer to contemplate the noises of the birth chamber and therefore bring themselves more fully into the scene. In a real birth, both the mother and the midwife would have recited prayers, words of scripture, or St. Margaret’s vita as protective measures. Similarly, the open lips of St. Anne and her nearest attendant in Jan de Beer’s and Adriaen van Overbeke’s works indicate that the women are busy praying, and Van Oostsanen’s birth attendants whisper together, again creating “visual noise.” The viewer is therefore encouraged to internally recreate the heavenly sounds of

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179 Müllerheim, Die Wochenstube in der Kunst, 12-45; Park, "Dürer's The Birth of the Virgin," 1265-1267. The devotional aspect of these images has been under-explored in these sources. Müllerheim focuses on the furniture of the birthing chamber, and Park primarily discusses the medical usage of objects included.

Anne’s prayer. This inwardness makes the prayer more significant than any earthly prayer uttered by mortal lips. Just as inner sight was used to contemplate spiritual experiences, inner sound would have added to a multi-sensory devotional experience.

As well as auditory experience, Birth of the Virgin panels replicate the physical experience of entering a childbirth space. Nearly all the female attendants in the three works are in active physical motion as they move curtains, carry birth objects, ladle soup, or tend to the baby. Even the draping of the textile implies physical movement. This is most evident in the fabric floating behind Jan de Beer’s midwife in green; her forward motion allows the cloth to temporarily evade the effects of gravity. At the same time, as part of multi-paneled, hinged altarpieces, these panels would have physically moved, their literal openings and closings reinforcing the movement included in the painting. This sense of movement creates a feeling of narrative so that the story of the Virgin’s life physically moves, just as the figures in Birth of the Virgin paintings move; all of this creates a sense of chronology and evolving life essential to a vita narrative. While this sense of movement was consistent with the general style of Antwerp Mannerism, here it also contributes to the holistic experience of walking into a scene of action.

Beyond the sights, sounds, and actions of the birthing chambers, the paintings even allude to the smells and tastes of the space. In the Northern Renaissance, smell was a special kind of divine knowledge to which believers could aspire. The fires in the Birth of the Virgin panels evoke the acrid smoke and pungent incense. Since these works originated in church settings, the

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181 Fluttering cloth is a common feature of Antwerp Mannerism, and previous scholarship has interpreted it as exhibiting the fabrics in the painting or as adding drama or artifice to the work. Here, I argue that it may also act as part of a devotional experience involving the senses. See Yao-Fen You, “Antwerp Mannerism and the Fabricating of Fashion,” *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen* (2004-5): 141-143.
viewers themselves would have been literally smelling candle smoke and incense.\textsuperscript{184} The imagined scent of smoke relates to the long-standing Christian tradition of associating sweet smells with sanctity, and it enforces the parallel between real and imagined spaces, making it easier for viewers to imaginatively inhabit St. Anne’s room.\textsuperscript{185} Similarly, in Jan de Beer’s painting, the attendant in green extends a spoonful of broth that splashes back into the bowl. Beyond the aural component of the visual splashing, this broth is something the viewers could imagine tasting. Partaking of sacred liquid would obviously resonate with the Eucharist taking place in front of this altarpiece, and the scholarship of Kathryn Rudy has indicated that consuming religious objects—spiritually or physically—was the ultimate way to imbibe the divine.\textsuperscript{186} Thus, viewers could imagine smelling or even tasting the proffered broth as a way to engage further with these multisensory scenes. Indeed, spiritually imagined partaking of the broth has resonance with visual consumption of the Eucharist, in which lay people “ate” the Host through their sight rather than their mouths.\textsuperscript{187} Thus, the sensory experience of Anne’s birthing chamber would correlate to the spiritual experiences of a sixteenth-century viewer worshipping in a church.

A final sense activated by these works of art is tactile sensation. The midwives’ upraised hands by the fire invite the viewer to vicariously experience the fire’s heat. The luminosity and warmth of the flames are compelling. Jan de Beer’s midwife holding the candle acts as a similar, albeit smaller-scale, heat indicator. Many of the midwives are engaged in active touching, which

\textsuperscript{184} This seems particularly true since devotees of St. Anne were instructed to light a candle every Tuesday to celebrate Anne’s birth, death, and childbirth. Brandenbarg, “Saint Anne,” 33-34.
\textsuperscript{185} Susan Ashbrook Harvey, \textit{Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination} (Berkeley: University of California Press), 225-228.
again encourages a tactile experience. The viewers might even imagine themselves as the midwife by the fireplace, feeling the warmth of the body of the Virgin Mary—so different from and yet comparable to the heat of the fire. Overall, these objects encourage the viewer to imagine themselves fully in the space so that they are even feeling, smelling, and tasting the same things as the holy women in the composition. The panels recreate the multi-sensory experience of childbirth, making St. Anne’s experience more accessible to all viewers but especially those knowledgeable about birth rituals.

Implications

By referencing realistic birth objects and engaging the physical senses, these depictions of the Virgin Mary’s birth encourage viewers, particularly women, to enter the scene and experience the birth for themselves. In Jan de Beer’s painting, the idea that the viewer is a visitor entering the room of St. Anne is emphasized by the candle that one of the attendants holds. Beyond the sanctus candle connection that I have proposed, previous scholarship suggests that this candle is meant to honor a visitor to St. Anne’s lying-in chamber, as this was a common fifteenth-century birthing practice, and it seems likely that the candle can function in both roles simultaneously. Since no visitor is immediately evident in the scene itself, the viewer is likely the intended visitor, especially since the attendant with the candle is the only person in the scene to look out of the painting. Each viewer therefore becomes a special witness to the Birth of the Virgin. Viewers could consider themselves part of the sorority around St. Anne, thereby building the empowering sense of female community emphasized in this work.\(^{189}\)


\(^{189}\) For a discussion of the empowering effect of images of female communities in art, see Pearson, Envisioning Gender, 51. As noted by Purtle, including recognizable household objects in religious scenes gave lay viewers at least one way of connecting with the image, even if they did not notice the deeper theological message. Carol J.
By including references to real-life birth objects, De Beer, Van Overbeke, and Van Oostsanen elevate the objects’ status from tools stereotypically associated with women and superstition to emblems that helped craft the argument of important, large-scale altarpieces. This use of realistic birth objects likely would have appealed to a female audience in particular, since women were their primary users. Simultaneously, these altarpieces now document and preserve childbirth traditions of the period, which is especially valuable to modern scholars since so little of this rich culture has survived the centuries. Moreover, the artists’ obvious interest in birth material culture may indicate the importance of the objects during the sixteenth century.

With the inclusion of birth practices and allusions, viewers might have considered these paintings themselves as pseudo-birth objects. Women frequently called upon St. Anne and the Virgin to help them through a difficult labor, and birth objects often involved the vitae of particular saints. In a similar manner, the three panels depict part of the vita of St. Anne. Additionally, birth objects often required an aural component; the midwife or assistants would read the charm aloud while the mother labored, or else they would pray. As mentioned earlier, Jan de Beer’s and Adriaen van Overbeke’s works depict St. Anne and her nearest attendant praying with open mouths. Since the intention of their prayer is unclear, the viewer might assume that Anne is praying for all women who undergo labor as she did. Jan de Beer’s baby Virgin looks toward her mother and raises a hand, almost as if she were retroactively blessing the

190 For the association of amulets with women and with superstition, see Skemer, “Amulet Rolls and Female Devotion in the Late Middle Ages,” 199.
191 The tragedy of this loss is perhaps best expressed by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, who writes, “it is a sobering thought that, apart from a few chance remains, an entire world of hagiographic textual practice centred on the important audience constituted by pregnant woman has virtually disappeared, in part because of the very urgency of that audience’s need for transmission of the saint’s life in a particularly perishable form.” Wogan-Browne, “The Apple’s Message,” 53.
193 Skemer, Binding Words, 236-237; Jones and Olsan, “Performative Rituals,” 412.
birthing process and mother that had brought her into the world. That blessing can be easily extrapolated to the viewer, especially if she were an expectant mother. Like a visual communion, the very act of looking at a scene of successful birth projected good luck in birth onto the potential mothers in the audience. At the same time, the altarpieces make accessible to a wider audience the birthing practices of the aristocracy, who had easier access to things like girdles and amulets. Because aristocrats had a greater success rate of healthy births, the lower classes often imitated them in birth culture, and these altarpieces provide free viewing access to the rich, high-quality, desirable birthing objects too expensive for the average viewer. These depictions of the Birth of the Virgin therefore become a kind of visual birth amulet, invoking blessing for good labor from St. Anne and Mary for the female viewing community and creating a visual space in which male and female viewers could meditate and pray for healthy births.

The combination of contemporaneous space and birth practices with sacrificial imagery transforms these paintings into a place where viewers could also contemplate the relationship between life and death. In viewing these images, sixteenth-century viewers could better mentally prepare for the childbirth experiences of themselves, their family members, and neighbors. As Elizabeth L’Estrange has noted, future mothers may have used Birth of the Virgin images to mitigate their fears about childbirth by mentally rehearsing the events to come. Similarly, by including sacrificial imagery related to death and a St. Anne reminiscent of Death of the Virgin iconography, the artists may invite their viewers to also contemplate the potential for death in

197 L’Estrange, Holy Motherhood, 140-141.
childbirth. Viewing these works could help prepare for potential mortality—a visual *Ars moriendi* that invites meditation on the very real possibility that a young mother and her infant could die. In a century of high infant mortality, the theme of life amidst death may have also reminded viewers of the possibility of seeing their baptized, deceased children in heaven. This kind of viewership parallels the contemporaneous practice of parturient women making confession shortly before giving birth, just in case they would die in the process. The sacrifice of the Virgin Mary as depicted in these artworks is a mother’s sacrifice, one that future mothers could hope to imitate in giving their health, energy, and possibly even their lives for the good of their children. Mary’s sacrificial birth becomes a way to ponder the necessity of death alongside life and the hope for life after death.

By including references to realistic birth practices and appealing to the senses of the viewer, the Birth of the Virgin paintings create a spiritual experience that invites viewers of any gender or educational experience. The devout could imagine themselves within the scene of the Virgin’s birth, and the panels encourage women to understand their birth experience in religious contexts. They might compare their own life-giving ability with that of Christ and the saints. Just as using a household item in childbirth changed the status of the object, making it more important and no longer fit for ordinary use, these paintings present birth itself as extra-ordinary. This is similar to Jeanne Neuchterlein’s research on Netherlandish domestic spaces,

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which she sees as a way for devotees to interpret their own home spaces as sacred. By imagining themselves into these works, viewers could imagine caring for the body of Mary; this becomes a way to meditate on tending the body of Christ. The routine work of a sixteenth-century woman’s life—caring for the elderly, bearing children, raising them, assisting in a family member’s childbirth—could all be connected to the life events of holy women like St. Anne, creating an added significance to daily life. Women could meditate upon St. Anne as they performed these rote tasks, and they could imagine their sick neighbor or ailing child as Anne, the Virgin Mary, or Christ—someone holy to whom they could attend.

5. Conclusion

The Birth of the Virgin images of Jan de Beer, Adriaen van Overbeke, and Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen indicate the importance of Mary as an intermediary, salvific figure bringing new life. By choosing this particular subject rather than a more mysterious birth image like Christ’s Nativity, the artists appeal to lay viewers, who experienced normal births more similar to the birth experience of Anne. The employment of the two Campin-based gestures conflates the birth of Mary with the nativity of Christ. By including sacrificial and redemptive imagery, the artists also connect the sacrifice of Mary to the sacrifice of Christ; sixteenth-century viewers who held Mary and Anne in particular regard could use the figure of Mary to better understand Christ’s redemption. Anne, as a grandmother, wife, widow, and mother, is a broadly relatable figure, and the portrayal of Mary as an infant makes her even more approachable as well. Contemplating Christ’s female ancestors therefore allows the viewers to access Jesus in a way directly connected to their own lived experiences.

Mary’s co-redemptive and co-sacrificial role is significant because it brings new spiritual life to believers, a concept that can be easily embodied in these paintings about new life. In John 3, Jesus informs Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again…born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh and that which is born of Spirit is spirit.”\(^{202}\) Christ’s salvation, assisted by Mary, offers a chance for a Christian to be reborn. Viewers might use the birth of the Virgin to meditatively consider their own chance for a new life. They could also imagine the birth of Christ or Mary within their own souls—this idea of “spiritual pregnancy” originated in medieval writings.\(^{203}\) By pondering the real birth tools used in the Northern Mannerist panels, viewers could enact mental parturition, resulting in the birth of Mary within themselves and paralleling the way they are reborn through Christ and his mother Mary.

Beyond indicating her unique role in the work of salvation, the image of Mary as sacrifice reminds the viewer of the Passion of Christ. Her body is a place for the viewer to meditate on the fragility of Christ’s earthly body and thus the depth of his painful sacrifice. Elina Gertsman has asserted that any medieval image of a suffering child is meant to evoke Christ; this seems highly applicable to the image of the sacrificial Mary Child.\(^{204}\) In the context of priestly rituals and the looming threat of the viewer’s own mortality, Mary’s body becomes another place for the audience to consider Christ’s sacrifice for them. As Theresa Kenney has noted in terms of a sacrificial Christ Child, images of the sacrifice connected to birth and infancy are meant to

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\(^{202}\) John 3: 3-6.
\(^{204}\) Gertsman, “Signs of Death,” 83-84.
elicit the redemptive quality of Christ’s death. By expanding sacrificial imagery to include the Birth of the Virgin, the Northern Mannerists evoke Mary’s role as a co-redemptrix alongside Christ and the promise of new life through the sacrifice of these two holy individuals.

Why choose the Birth of the Virgin Mary as a scene to depict such essential qualities of Christ’s mother? The reasons are numerous. For one, as discussed, this is the place where the body of the Virgin Mary is most fragile, and it is the one appropriate place where a completely unclothed Virgin could be contemplated by the audience; the entirety of the Virgin’s fragile flesh is on display, and the viewer is invited to contemplate the physicality of her act of sacrifice. Her innocence and purity are emphasized because she is a baby, emphasizing her Immaculate Conception, and the beginning of her life is a good place to foreshadow the rest of her mortality and her divine role. At the same time, the birth scene is an ideal location to depict complex concepts because sixteenth-century birthing chambers were already filled with ornate objects and traditions that could be infused with a multiplicity of complex theological concepts. Birthing chambers were mystical spaces, in which midwives performed miracles and used specialized charms. Their roles in the community made midwives credible, important witnesses and priest-like figures. Simultaneously, the generative nature of the birthing chambers—the liminal space between life and death, between the womb and the outside world—has a mystical quality that can easily be connected to spiritual revelation.

In discussing both the theological and the gendered interpretations of these paintings, this thesis demonstrates that no single easy answer describes the meaning of these works. Their

205 Kenney, “The Manger as Calvary,” 49.
206 The connection between prophecy and pregnancy has been explored by Penny Howell Jolly in the context of Visitation imagery. See Penny Howell Jolly, "Rogier van der Weyden’s ‘Pregnant’ Magdalene: On the Rhetoric of Dress in the Descent from the Cross,” Studies in Iconography 28 (2007): 252-255.
207 I am indebted to Walter Melion for initially bringing this to my attention.
layers of meaning invite constant contemplation, which complements the way these altarpieces would have been viewed repeatedly, in different liturgical contexts and in connection with other images. Each painting’s visual “slippages” invite viewers to return again to the image and reconsider what they have learned before, in the hope of coming to new, deeper observations. Over time, the life experiences of viewers may shift their perception of the key themes. Like the actions of the midwives, the viewers’ thoughts are still in-process. We might understand these altarpieces best as works that invite a multifaceted process of meaning-making—all with the intent of bringing viewers to a closer, more intimate understanding of Christ and his family.

While the artworks demonstrate a few clear and important themes, this does not close the possibility of other meanings.

The fruitful analysis of these three early sixteenth-century paintings suggests the untapped potential of many other Birth of the Virgin images. Surely, these warrant further study as well. Based on the trends in the iconography, we might expect to find priestly and sacrificial imagery in other, similar scenes. Like these three images, other Birth of the Virgin images may relate to the Nativity and conception of Christ. Just as this analysis has indicated greater significance for the role of St. Anne in forming the flesh of Mary, detailed analysis of other images of Mary’s birth might also reveal more about Anne’s cult during the sixteenth century. We might also expect to find evidence of female-centric material culture, much of which is no longer extant, appropriated for religious meaning in the large-scale altarpieces depicting birth.

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208 Don Denny has noted this regarding Giotto’s *Birth of the Virgin*. He correlates the women bringing bread into the birthing chambers with Christ as the Bread of Life coming into his mother’s womb. Denny, “Some Symbols in the Arena Chapel Frescoes,” 205.

209 As indicated by Michael Anderson, because Anne is a completely apocryphal saint, visual arts are critical in helping modern scholars understand how she was originally understood in the period. Anderson, “Symbols of Saints,” 323.
In conclusion, the Mannerist Birth of the Virgin scenes explored here reference Old and New Testament sacrifice in order to expand the sacrificial role of Christ and the co-sacrificial assistance of his mother. The hand gesture used by Jan de Beer, Adriaen van Overbeke, and Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen is more significant than previous scholarship suggests and combines the iconography of two separate Campin paintings, therefore evoking notions of the Incarnation. Visual slippages make the midwives in these paintings priest-like figures, who participate in events similar to both the New and Old Testament sacrifices of Christ. This makes Mary part of those sacrifices, a concept evident when one examines contemporary literature and art. Mary’s co-sacrificial role allows viewers to understand the sacrifice of Christ in a more affective way, and it connects Christ’s sacrifice to the growing sixteenth-century cults of Mary and Anne. At the same time, the employment of this imagery in the context of contemporaneous birth practice and objects makes the scenes relatable to viewers, who are better able to engage with the sacred via their own life experiences. The dichotomy of birth and death featured in these altarpieces may have also allowed viewers to ponder the sacrifices of life made in childbirth by sixteenth-century women, or it may have acted as a meditative tool, a way for women to contemplate their coming experiences and reconcile themselves with the possibility of death. The combination of feminine imagery and male artistry and context creates a powerful liminal space not only bridging the gap between the Old and New Testaments and between life and death but also between the genders. The examination of these three Birth of the Virgin images indicates the importance that this subject had in sixteenth-century thought and suggests that further research is needed for these meaningful scenes.
Figure 1: Jan de Beer, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1510-1515.
Figure 2: Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1520-1533.
Figure 3: Adriaen van Overbeke, *Birth of the Virgin*, Golden Miracle Altarpiece, 1521-1525.

Figure 4: Robert Campin, *Madonna and Child before a Fireplace*, c. 1430.
Figure 5: Anonymous Western Flemish artist, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1500-1549.

Figure 6: Robert Campin, *Nativity*, 1420.
Figure 7: Master of Frankfurt, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1505.
Figure 8: *Raising of Lazarus*, Office of the Dead, Book of Hours in Latin and Dutch (use of Liège), 1500-1525. The Hague, KB, 133 D 11, fol. 83v.
Figure 9: Raising of Lazarus, Office of the Dead, Bruges Book of Hours, c. 1500. The Hague, KB, 128 G 32, fol. 140v.
Figure 10: Upper Rhenish Master, Nativity of the Virgin, c. 1430.
Figure 11: Anonymous German Artist, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1430.

Figure 12: Jaume Mateu, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1450.
Figure 13: Anonymous, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1520.

Figure 14: Upper Rhenish Master, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1460-1465.
Figure 15: Israhel van Meckenem, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1490-1500.
Figure 16: Antwerp Mannerist altarpiece, c. 16th century, St. Germain l’Auxerrois, Paris, (closeups)
Figure 17: Albrecht Altdorfer, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1520-1525.
Figure 18: Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, 1526.
Figure 19: Master of 1499, *Portrait of Abbot Christiaan de Hondt*, 1499.
Figure 20: Vittore Carpaccio, *Birth of the Virgin*, 1508.

Figure 21: Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen, *Miracle of Amsterdam*, c. 1518.
Figure 22: Adriaen van Overbeke, *Circumcision of Christ*, Golden Miracle Altarpiece, 1521-1525.

Figure 23: Adriaen van Overbeke, *Presentation of the Virgin*, Golden Miracle Altarpiece, 1521-1525.
Figure 24: Albrecht Dürer, *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, 1503.
Figure 25: Flemish School, *Sarga de Santa Anna*, c. 1475-1500.
Figure 26: Jan de Beer, *Annunciation*, 1510-1515.
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