

FLORAL SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS OF JAN VAN EYCK

FLORAL SYMBOLISM IN THE WORKS
OF JAN VAN EYCK,
PARTICULARLY IN THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the floral program of the Ghent Altarpiece. The Paradise garden of its central panel, which contains thirty-seven identifiable plants, several of which were previously undiscovered, is shown to symbolically support the iconography of the retable. This investigation is the first to develop a consistent interpretation of the floral symbolism on two levels: religious and medicinal, which significantly supports the main theme of the Altarpiece, namely the redemption of man.

The commentaries of Rupert of Deutz provide many passages which have visual counterparts in the Altarpiece's program. For the first time one of these, his commentary on the Song of Solomon, has been isolated and can be shown to be a vital link between the floral program and the general iconography. A hitherto neglected herbal, discovered in the inventory of the St. Jerome scriptorium, Ghent, contains several unusual herbs that are likewise depicted in the Altarpiece.

Abstrait

Cette thèse traite du programme floral de l'Agneau Mystique à Gand. Le Paradis terrestre du panneau central où l'on peut identifier trente-sept plantes dont plusieurs n'ont pas été découvertes auparavant, se montre à l'appui symbolique de l'iconographie du retable. Cette recherche est la première à développer d'une manière consistante une interprétation du symbolisme floral à deux niveaux: l'un religieux, l'autre médicinal, ce qui appuie le thème principal du Retable, c'est-à-dire, la redemption du genre humain.

Les commentaires de Rupert de Deutz fournissent plusieurs passages qui ont des contreparties chez le programme du Retable. C'est la première fois que l'un de ces commentaires, notamment celui sur le Cantique des Cantiques, a été distingué des autres. De plus, ce commentaire se manifeste comme bien essentiel entre le programme floral et l'iconographie générale. Un herbier qui était jusqu'ici méconnu que l'on a découvert dans une inventaire du scriptorium de St. Jérôme, à Gand, contient des herbes rares qui sont également peints dans le Retable.

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CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	iii
Abbreviations - Bibliography	v
List of Illustrations	x
Introduction	1
Part I	
1. A Reinterpretation of the Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece	8
2. Rupert of Deutz - A Twelfth Century Source ...	27
Part II	
3. The Flowers of the Ghent Altarpiece	41
4. The Missing Links: Jan van Impe and Ludolphus Nicholas of Zwolle	72
Appendix I	
A List of the Vegetation in the Adoration Panel	81
Illustrations	
Plates I - XV	83

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ILLUSTRATIONS

plate

- I. Ghent Altarpiece. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (floral identification). The Complete Paintings of the van Eycks, Plates XXIV-XXV.
- II. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. (details diagram). The Complete Paintings of the van Eycks, Plates XXIV-XXV.
- III. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Apostles (lower right). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- IV. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Apostles (lower right). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- V. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Prophets (lower left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- VI. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Patriarchs (lower left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- VII. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Prophets (lower left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- VIII. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Beneath Fountain (lower centre). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- IX. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Fountain and Altar (centre). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- X. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Virgins (upper right). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- XI. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Confessors (upper left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- XII. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Confessors (upper left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.

- XIII. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Detail. Confessors (upper left). Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- XIV. Ghent Altarpiece. Detail. Right Interior wing panel. Holy Hermits. Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.
- XV. Ghent Altarpiece. Detail. Right Interior Wing Panel. Holy Pilgrims. Photo - courtesy of l'Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Bruxelles.

Introduction

I am the flower of the field and the
lily of the valley; as the lily among
thorns so is my love among daughters.

(Song of Songs ii, 1-2)

Flowers are frequently found in Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century. Undoubtedly symbolical significance was not always intended. However, certain masters were interested in enhancing the spiritual content of their pictures by a complementary floral accompaniment: Jan van Eyck was one such artist.¹ Used in this manner flowers become more than simple aesthetic adornments and, in these instances, are forms of "disguised symbolism". To illustrate with an example the terminology he coined Erwin Panofsky compared an illumination of c. 1275 that alluded to the fulfilment of Simeon's prophecy by depicting the Mater Dolorosa (her heart pierced by a sword) with a rendition by Dürer of the same prophecy. Here the radiant young Madonna is depicted with a disproportionately large iris, the ancient name of which was gladiolus or sword-lily.² The flower subtly becomes the symbol of the Virgin's future grief, thereby embellishing the meaning of the depiction in a "disguised" way.

In early Flemish painting this disguised symbolism was applied to every object, and, in fact, was employed, along with naturalism, as a general rule. Indeed, Panofsky believed that the more the artist revelled in the reproduction of the visible world, the more he strove to impregnate it with meaning.³

Disguised symbolism has been the subject of much investigation, but specific studies of floral symbolism are rare. In his very excellent article on the Portinari Altarpiece c. 1474 (Florence, Uffizi) Robert Koch defines the problem that an analytical study of flowers entails.⁴ He notes that it is virtually impossible to establish, with certainty and definitively, what the intentions of the artist were concerning the plant symbolism. Furthermore, in some cases Koch believes that numerous meanings may be implied for one species.⁵ This naturally leads one to wonder where the artist received the knowledge necessary to compose the intricate floral interrelationships. Koch enumerates various archetypical sources available: herbals such as Hildegard of Bingen's twelfth century Physica, the Hortus Sanitatis of 1485 (Mainz), theological texts such as the Revelations of St. Bridget or the devotional Meditations of the Pseudo-Bonaventura, and encyclopedic works such as the Legenda Aurea by Jacobus de Voragine, to mention but a few. The fundamental problem with a study of this nature is the isolation of the most likely sources referred to by the artist. Art historians, including Koch, have traditionally interpreted floral meaning on a multitude of levels and by a myriad of sources. Although this approach is enlightening, it is improbable when applied to a single work or artist. Despite his reliance on too many sources, Koch's methodology is beyond reproach. By establishing his interpretation of the Altarpiece's iconography, he proceeds to develop a supportive meaning through the flowers. To substantiate his definition of the plants Koch proves that the individual flowers have similar meaning in the artist's other paintings.

Increasingly one is aware of the potential number and kind of

sources in the search for the ultimate meaning of floral symbolism within a given painting. In her study ⁶ Elizabeth Wolffhardt analyzes the symbolism of the numerous prominently displayed flowers of the delightful Paradiesgärtlein c. 1420 (Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt) and places them into two categories - religious and medicinal. She establishes the uniform use of the flowers in the artist's work, as did Koch, thereby giving justification for her interpretation. As the other authors, however, she rests her arguments on a large number of sources, some of which are of later date than her Paradise garden.

In her book ⁷ Lottlisa Behling devotes one chapter to the plant symbolism of the Ghent Altarpiece c. 1432 (St. Bavo's Church, Ghent). She lists the categories of plants in the Adoration panel identified for the first time in 1903 by F. Rosen ⁸, and later more carefully categorized by Hauman. ⁹ Behling focuses her discussion on the solitary appearance of certain flowers. ¹⁰ She finds meaning for three herbs from several herbals. Not only are the descriptive passages long and somewhat circumstantial, but two of her sources even postdate the Altarpiece. ¹¹ Her explanation of other plants through church hymns and an eleventh century Hortulus is illuminating but fails because the author does not link their meaning to the Altar's iconography. Her argument is weakened further by the use of too many sources to support the plant interpretation.

This brief review of the recent investigations done on floral symbolism in fifteenth century northern painting indicates that a new examination of the floral program of the Ghent Altarpiece is overdue, especially as there have been no systematic studies of its interrelationship with the retable's iconography.

The general purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to establish the floral program's dependence upon and enhancement of the iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece. Having outlined the major recent studies in this field and the methods of investigation, it becomes clear that more precise limitations should be put on the sources used by one artist.

It is undeniable that a problem exists - the mammoth volume of sources available - and that traditional methods are not entirely suited to it. However, for better or for worse, correctly interpreted or not, the thoughts and ideas of the above authors have led to the approach of this thesis. Despite the practical problem of dealing with a considerable and immensely varied documentation, the present study attempts to convince the reader of the validity of the major literary sources for the overall program, with the help of the plant interpretation.

The approach taken in this investigation is twofold. The plants will first be looked at individually in order to reveal intimate relationships among them. The floral program, however, must then be considered in a broader sense, in order to illustrate its unity with the meaning of the retable. In each case the results are enlightening.

The study is divided into two parts. From each will evolve one of the major sources of the floral program. Following Robert Koch's methodology Part I will develop the iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece. This controversial retable has been the subject of numerous investigations and interpretations.¹² Therefore, it is crucial to delineate the personal view of this writer. The iconography of the Ghent Altar-

piece is the sole interest of this part of the paper. It must be clear from the outset that the question of style or the problem of two artists falls outside the scope of the present undertaking.

In the discussion of the retable's iconographic program it will be established that, although there may have been subsidiary sources, Rupert of Deutz, a twelfth century theologian, provided the crucial texts. Of these, his commentary on the Song of Solomon furnishes the essential link between the iconographic program and the flora depicted.

Part II will interpret the plants and herbs not mentioned by Rupert. Heeding the methodology of Wolffhardt, a systematic analysis of the vegetation will be made and categorized. In this way it will be simpler to see the various levels on which interpretation may be established. At this point comparisons with van Eyck's other works will prove fruitful. Having once shown the incredible number of possible sources available to van Eyck, the field of investigation will be narrowed to a hitherto overlooked source. Thus, in the final count a new purpose in the understanding of floral symbolism emerges: to suggest stricter limitations in the number of literary sources for the Altarpiece. In the following investigation it will be put forward that, it seems almost certain, that van Eyck was guided in his choice of available texts by the commentaries of Rupert of Deutz and a fourteenth century local herbal.

NOTES

1. Koch, 71.
2. Panofsky, I, 141.
3. Panofsky, I, 142.
4. R. Koch's article "Flower Symbolism in the Portinari Altar" analyzes the flowers located beneath the Virgin in the Adoration panel.
5. Koch, 73.
6. Wolffhardt, see bibliography for details.
7. For full citation see Behling, Tafelmalerei. Behling's other in depth study investigates the plant forms found in cathedral decoration. See Behling, Kathedralen.
8. See Behling, Tafelmalerei, 44.
9. Hauman's succinct vegetational description is accompanied by excellent diagrammatic photographs. For full details see Coremans, 123-125, Plates LII, LIII and LIV.
10. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 47f.
11. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 50.
12. The literature about the Ghent Altarpiece is enormous. With the brilliant research work of Dr. Paul Coremans and his associates at the Laboratoire Central des Musées Royaux de Belgique, who in 1953 cleaned, x-rayed, restored and analyzed the Altarpiece and documented their findings (see bibliography), the studies prior to this undertaking lost some validity. For a comprehensive bibliography of material predating Coremans' study, see Panofsky, I, 443, n.7. More recently three excellent studies have been conducted, the major points of which are summarized below.
Panofsky's main source is based on the "new style" All Saints pictures which developed from the basic text of the Book of Revelation as well as from the Augustinian De Civitate Dei. However, several deviations occur which make this interpretation unacceptable. The addition of the various groups on the inner wings, the Dove and Lamb, and the introduction of the Fountain of Life in the lower panels are iconographically inconsistent with the All Saints theme. In the upper panels the appearance of St. John the Baptist, the wingless angels and the First Parents likewise pose problems to the overall meaning as seen by Panofsky. He develops an argument, by means of restoration studies

that the Dove in the main Adoration panel may have been a "glory", with or without a God figure. In this way the panel would become a consistent All Saints theme. He also sees the "upper Triptych" as originally an independent work. See Panofsky, I, 212-221.

Philip, on the other hand, adheres to the Biblical texts using them to establish various interrelated levels of meaning. This system is more complementary to the Altarpiece's complex iconography. Believing the iconography to be the unified work of one artist, she pinpoints the locale of the interior as the Heavenly Jerusalem and convincingly counters Panofsky's argument that the upper register is too ponderous for the lower one. Her other themes, the Eternal Mass, the Holy Wedding and the Last Judgement are developed in an equally persuasive way. However, John the Baptist's role in the Last Judgement, a major figure for her argument, is not sufficiently substantiated. In sum, from her numerous interwoven themes she draws a comprehensive and credible conclusion. Her most original contribution is the theory on the framework of the Altar. However, she relies too heavily on it. For example, when she has to establish the first person of the Trinity, she suggests His existence outside the panels in the framework. See Philip, ch.3.

Dhanens, in general, agrees with Philip's basic themes. She believes the retable is a coherent entity and, in simpler terms than Philip, develops the Altarpiece's themes of the Eternal Mass and the Holy Wedding. Her studies on the history of St. Bavo unearth new facts about the Vids' chapel and the history of the church's clergy, from which she draws important conclusions about the nature of the Altarpiece and its function. Her most important contribution to the Altarpiece's iconographic interpretation is the suggestion that Rupert of Deutz was the literary inspiration for the retable. See Dhanens, Altarpiece, ch.5.

Part I

Chapter I

A Reinterpretation of the Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece.

To comprehend the painting's meaning in the Altarpiece requires more than an explanation of the central, or Adoration, panel where they are concentrated. The entire program of the Ghent Altarpiece which is intricately interwoven between the outer and inner panels as well as the upper and lower levels, reveals a unifying theme of redemption that is clearly understood when its function is considered.

The Altarpiece was erected for the daily celebration of mass. On May 13, 1435 Ghent city authorities registered the deed instituting the chapel of Jodocus Vid and his wife Elizabeth Borluut who

to the glory of God, His Blessed Mother and all His saints, establish in perpetuity the office of a daily mass for the salvation of their souls and those of their forebears, in the chapel and at the altar that they have caused to be erected at their cost on the south side of the church.¹

Salvation is the major theme of the Altarpiece. For the Vids it takes on a special significance. Jodocus' father, Nikolaas, had been found guilty of embezzlement and subsequently stripped of all his offices. Seen under these circumstances the Altarpiece, with its dogmatic representation of the redemption of man through Christ's sacrifice, takes on a personal and deeply human significance. The central panel from which the Altarpiece receives its name, The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb,

is the focus of the program, around which all other themes revolve.

Dhanens clarified this point:

The paintings of which it [the Altarpiece] is composed express the whole complex, abstract, dogmatic theme of the Redemption of Man in remarkably concrete terms and with striking unity.²

The redemption of man, made possible by Christ's sacrifice, depicted in the central scene, is celebrated in the Eucharist, a fitting subject for an altar which was in daily use. It is even more appropriate, given the family's personal requirements.

The clarity and brilliance with which this theme is carried out and its unity of thought will substantiate the theory of one artist - Jan van Eyck.

Une fois que nous avons accepté que le sujet du polyptique est l'admission du genre humain à l'union avec Dieu, grâce à la redemption, tout devient d'une simplicité si limpide que nous nous étonnons du nombre des études savantes publiées sur le sujet et ses sources, et que nous ne comprenons pas le besoin qu'on a éprouvé d'en chercher la signification au moyen de textes.³

The central object of the Adoration scene is the Lamb which stands on the altar table, blood gushing into a chalice from a wound in its breast. The upper border of the altar's red velvet antependium bears the words ECCE AGNUS DEI QUI TOLLIT PECCATA MUNDI, "Behold the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world" (John i,29). On the two penduli are written the words IHESUS VIA and VERITAS VITA, "Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John xiv,6). Above the Lamb's head the Dove of the Holy Spirit radiates an aureole of divine light.

Around the altar an inner circle is formed by fourteen angels; the two in front of the altar sprinkle incense on the Lamb just as the sacrament may be censed during the mass. Four angels at the back carry the instruments of Christ's passion; the left one holds the cross and crown of thorns, the other the lance and lance tips. To the right, counterbalancing the cross, one angel holds up the column of flagellation as well as whips while the other carries the sponge and another flogging device.

Directly below the Dove and Lamb is the Well of Living Water, the Fons Vitae. The words HIC EST FONS AQVE VITE PROCEEDENS DE SEDE DEI AGNI; "This is the fountain of the water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb" (Revelation vii,17, xxi,6, xxii,1 and 17) are inscribed around the edge. Water flows from the base of the fountain towards the lower edge of the painting, thus in the direction of the Vids' altar table placed directly below the retable.

A great multitude of witnesses to Christ's sacrifice surrounds the fountain. In the left foreground twelve minor prophets carrying books are accompanied by patriarchs clustered behind them. The figure at the front of the patriarchs, dressed in blue, is Isaiah who prophesied "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse" (Isaiah xi,1). Virgil stands behind him, conspicuously garbed in white and holding a laurel sprig.

These prophets and patriarchs represent those who believed in the future Christ. They are balanced on the right side of the fountain by those who had faith in the living and resurrected Christ: the apostles and church members. Three apostles can be recognized as

Peter, Paul and John.⁴ Peter, who is closest to the altar draws the viewer's attention to the central theme of the sacrificial Lamb both by means of his gaze and the position of the uplifted hand. Sumptuously garbed in flowing red robes, members of the clergy stand behind. Three popes are identified by their papal tiaras.⁵

Two groups approach the altar from the middle distance. On the left the palm bearing confessors wend their way forward, all but one dressed in deep blue. Their counterparts are the holy virgins, some of whom are identifiable by their attributes: St. Agnes carries her lamb, St. Barbara her tower, St. Dorothy her basket of flowers and St. Ursula holds an arrow and is followed by her companions. Two members of the group are abbesses, as they carry croziers.⁶

On both sides of the Adoration panel the groups of figures in the wing panels move in the direction of the Lamb on the altar. These are identified by inscriptions on the frames. On the left wings a group of horsemen, some splendidly dressed in rich materials and furs, is led by riders in glistening armour. These are the CHRISTI MILITES; the IUSTI IUDICES are found in the companion panel.

On the opposite wing panels the hermits and pilgrims proceed on foot toward the Adoration over rocky terrain. St. Anthony, the central figure of the HEREMITE SANCTI, wears the blue cross of his order on his simple black robe.⁷ The panel at the extreme right, subscribed PEREGRINI SANCTI, is dominated by the towering figure of St. Christopher wrapped in a flowing red robe. He is followed, piper style, by a group of pilgrims of all ages.

The role of all the groups was to participate in the Adoration of

the Lamb, in other words in the mass. It is worth repeating here that the Vids commissioned the retable for the specific reason of assisting them in the celebration of their daily mass. The salvation they sought was granted through the intervention of the Lamb of God. The words "Behold the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world" written on the altar's antependium were spoken by Ghent's patron, St. John the Baptist and recorded by St. John the Evangelist.⁸ It is beside these saints that the donors kneel on the lower exterior panels of the closed Altarpiece at the point, where, when the wings are opened, the Adoration of the Lamb is revealed. The union of the Lord with mankind, burdened with original sin became possible only through the mercy of God, who sacrificed His Son in expiation of this sin. It is the sacrifice of Christ, the means of mankind's redemption, which is depicted in this vision.

The concept of the mass, which is so prominently illustrated in the Adoration panel, actually pervades the entire Altarpiece, a fact that will become clear in the context of this chapter. According to Jean Daniélou two essential themes run through the whole Eucharistic liturgy: the mass is a sacramental representation of the sacrifice on the cross and it constitutes a sacramental participation in the heavenly liturgy.⁹ Both points are clearly established in the context of the Altarpiece.

Christ's death is openly displayed in the sacrificial Lamb. However, His death is subtly reinforced by the symbolism of the altar as it is developed by the Pseudo-Dionysius in connection with the consecration of the altar by the holy oils in the mass.

The most holy prescriptions for the sacraments command, for the consecration of the altar of the divine sacrifices, due outpourings of holy oil. Since, in fact, it is upon Jesus Himself, as upon the perfectly divine altar of our sacrifices, that the hierarchic consecration of the divine intelligences is accomplished, let us look with a gaze that is not of this world at this altar of the divine sacrifices. It is, in fact, Jesus the Most Holy Who offers Himself for us and Who dispenses to us the fullness of His Own consecration.¹⁰

As the altar is the figure of Christ perpetually offering Himself to the Father in the heavenly sanctuary, so the deacons, who arrange the offerings on the altar, represent the angels who surround this heavenly liturgy. From this it is clear that the Eucharistic sacrifice is the sacrament of the heavenly liturgy.

In the Canon of the Mass, in the very climax of the sacred action, the Third Person of the Trinity is invoked as the witness to the Sacrifice.¹² The Dove's role is explained by St. Cyril of Jerusalem:

Do not consider the bread and wine as being ordinary things, they are the Body and the Blood of Christ, according to His word.¹³

After we have sanctified ourselves by the Trisagion, we pray to God to send His Holy Spirit down on the offerings, so that He may make the bread His Body and the wine His Blood. And that which the Holy Spirit has touched becomes entirely consecrated and transformed.¹⁴

While the Dove is the holy witness of the sacrifice of Christ who "offered Himself through the Holy Spirit unblemished unto God" (Hebrews ix, 14), the groups surrounding the altar are the human witnesses: the prophets and patriarchs foretold the sacrifice, the apostles and martyrs died upholding the importance of Christ's death, and others, by means of their actions and deeds, testified to the event.

Some of the groups of the congregation use books. Philip suggests that possibly the prophets were meant to recite the texts of their prophecies which were widely used in the readings of the earthly mass.¹⁵ They might have been song books on the other hand; songs such as those in the Apocalypse (Revelation xv, 3-4 or v, 9-10) "and hast made us unto our God kings and priests, and we shall reign on the earth". Such songs were used in the liturgy of the early church. In fact, there is a strong likelihood that the books were hymnals, for even the modern Agnus Dei of the communion cycle of the Roman Mass is a hymn which is sung by the congregation.¹⁶

Mankind's redemption, depicted in the lower central panel becomes the indispensable foundation and explanation of the figures depicted above. The elements of the mass discussed to this point are further enhanced by the upper level of the retable. The two levels together represent the complete idea of the New Covenant. Through redemption the believer attains the Kingdom of God. Here he is confronted with God his Maker. He is represented as the Trinitarian Lord, placed directly above the Lamb.

The inscription on the three semi-circles over the Godhead leaves little doubt that the three natures of God are being stressed.

HIC EST DEUS POTENTISSIMUS PROPTER DIVINAM
MAIESTATEM.+ SUMMUS OMNIUM OPTIMUS PROPTER
DULCEDINIS BONITATEM.+ REMUNERATOR LIBERA-
LISSIMUS PROPTER INMENSAM LARGITATEM.

("This is God, the 'Almighty, by reason of His divine majesty; the Highest, the Best, by reason of His sweet goodness; the Most Liberal Remunerator by reason of His boundless generosity".) The description of the deity is continued in words written on the edge of the dias on which His seat

is placed.

VITA SINE MORTE IN CAPITE. IOVENTUS SINE
SENECTUTE IN FRONTE.
GAUDIUM SINE MERORE A DEXTRIS. SECURITAS SINE
TIMORE A SINISTRIS.

("Eternal life shines forth from His head. Eternal youth sits on His brow."

"Untroubled joy at His right hand. Fearless security at his left hand.") In further symbolical depictions one or another of the tripartite natures of the figure is stressed. The words REX REGUM ET DOMINUS DOMINANTIUM, embroidered as a repeating theme on the hem of the garment, give emphasis to the Father figure as does the SABAOth written on His stole.¹⁷ The brocade behind His head, however, bears the inscription IHESUS XPS and two traditional symbols of Christ, the pelican who feeds her offspring with her own blood and the vine. Small details point to the unity of the three persons in the figure: the pearl decoration on the border of the hem of His mantle is composed of clusters of threes, three tassels extend below the edge of the tiara ribbons, and the tiara itself is composed of three levels.

To the right of the Trinitarian Lord sits Mary, open book in hand, resplendently robed in a rich blue mantle and dress, the borders of each being heavily encrusted with jewels. Her head is encircled by one of the most unusual crowns. Surmounted by stars, it is composed not only of jewels and gold, but is adorned with fresh flowers: lilies, roses, lilies-of-the-valley, and columbines. Above her an inscription on the gold moulding reads:

HEC EST SPECIOSIOR SOLE ET SUPER OMNEM STELLARUM
DISPOSITIONEM LUCI COMPARATA INVENITUR PRIOR.
CANDOR EST ENIM LUCIS ETERNE ET SPECULUM SINE
MACULA DEI.

("She is more beautiful than the sun and all the other stars; being compared with the light she is found the greater. She is in truth the reflection of the everlasting light; and a spotless mirror of God." Wisdom vii, 29 and 26)..

At the deity's left hand the bearded figure of St. John the Baptist is enthroned. Over his camel-hair shirt he wears a green mantle with a rich border. He too has a book which is turned to the opening words of Isaiah's prophecy CONSOLAMINI "Comfort ye" (Isaiah xi, I). The moulding behind him bears the words:

HIC EST BAPTISTA IOHANNES, MAIOR HOMINE, PAR
ANGELIS, LEGIS SUMMA, EWANGELII SACIO, APOSTOLORUM
VOX, SILENCIUM PROPHETARUM, LUCERNA MUNDI, DOMINI
IESUS.

("This is John the Baptist, greater than man, like unto the angels, the summation of the law, the propagator of the Gospels, the voice of the Apostles, the silence of the prophets, the lamp of the world, the witness of the Lord.")

On either side of the central panels are what have been called the "Musical Angels" by Panofsky. To the left are the singers and to the right the instrumentalists. Dressed in rich brocades and wearing jeweled circlets on their heads, the singers stand grouped around a lectern while the instrumentalists are dominated by an organist with a harpist and viola da gamba player behind. A richly tiled floor and a background of natural sky complete the depiction. The painted inscription below the singers reads:

MELOS DEO LAUS PERHENNIS GRATIARUM ACTIO

("Songs of supplication, songs of praise, songs of thanksgiving.")

and below the players:

LAUDATE EUM IN CORDIS ET ORGANO

("Praise him with stringed instruments and organs." Psalm cl, 4).

The upper level of the retable is completed by the figures of Adam and Eve shown standing in narrow niches at either end of the panels. Eve, holding a fruit symbolizing the Fall of Man, has inscribed below her feet: EVA OCCIDENDO OBFUIT ("Eve has afflicted us with death") and Adam's inscription is ADAM NOS IN MORTEM PRAECIPITAT ("Adam thrusts us into death.") .

The mass is a ritual dedicated to the memory of Christ. According to the apostle "For as often as you shall eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes." (I Corinthians ii, 25). The Lord's sacrifice has been represented by van Eyck in the lower panel. The earthly celebration is reinforced by the heavenly communion as Christ Himself officiates. Wearing the papal tiara, the Trinitarian figure in the upper panel personifies the High Priest in his capacity as celebrant of the mass and, as such, completes the theme of the Sacrificial Lamb, who here becomes the Sacrificing Priest. This is the very idea of the Eucharist as celebrated by the Church and the Lord's Supper.

The sacrament itself is constituted by the prayer of consecration introduced by the ancient formula that the liturgy still retains today. The priest cries Sursum corda, at which moment the believer turns away from earthly things and with an expression of holy fear, devotes himself to God. Fear also fills the angels in the heavenly liturgy. "They

adore, they glorify, with fear they sing continually mysterious hymns of praise".¹⁸ Van Eyck's musical angels surely contain more than "an allusion to the liturgical choir which sings both in the mass of the Church and in the Eternal Mass of Christ."¹⁹ With the "songs of supplication, songs of praise, songs of thanksgiving", the inscription reflects the most sacred part of the mass.

The Sursum corda is followed in the mass by the Trisagion.²⁰

Both express the idea that the Eucharist is a participation in the heavenly liturgy. The Trisagion is the hymn of the Seraphim who eternally surround the Trinity.²¹ "Man is as it were transported into heaven itself", writes St. John Chrysostom. "He stands near the throne of glory. He flies with the Seraphim. He sings the most holy hymn."²² Man is no longer on earth, but is transferred to heaven. Man is admitted to the official worship of creation, of which the angels are the representatives.²³ And the centre of this worship is the priestly action of Christ in His Passion and Resurrection,

It is this priestly action which, abstracted from time and place, constitutes the heart of the heavenly liturgy and which is rendered present sacramentally by the Eucharist.²⁴

That van Eyck represented the mass in the inner panels of the retable is beyond question. However, it is not inconceivable that he depicted a specific moment such as that of the most sacred prayers of the mass, when the heavenly and the earthly realms are briefly united.

At this point a word must be said about the locations depicted by van Eyck. A two-leveled image of Paradise is seen here, which is based on Revelation xxi, 1, the classical description of the celestial vision

in which the author tells us he saw a New Heaven and a New Earth. The New Earth is the abode of the blessed, "especially when they are assembled for the celebration of the New Covenant, which is the Eucharistic rite."²⁵ It is from this location that man is spiritually uplifted, during the mass, to the realms of the New Heaven.

Philip succinctly summed up the interconnection between the upper and lower panels.

Without doubt, the interior of the Ghent retable presents the Eternal Mass in the Heavenly Jerusalem, of which the earthly celebration of the New Covenant, the Eucharist, as performed by the Church, is but the temporal reflection.²⁶

She interpreted Christ's regalia as those of the High Priest, the tiara and cross decorated stole of the officiating Priest, the books of St. John and Mary as those used in the recitation of the liturgy of the Eternal Mass, and the music making angels as those who form the celestial choir.²⁷

If the Trinitarian figure is the priest in the Eternal Mass, then Mary and St. John are the obvious co-celebrants. Mary's significance, however, exceeds her role in the mass; in addition she has been interpreted as the Bride of Christ. In the first quarter of the twelfth century Rupert of Deutz, a theologian and liturgist, was instrumental in initiating an interpretation of Solomon's Song of Songs in terms of the Virgin Mary. The Bride in the Song was equated with the Virgin. Solomon's Sponsa had already been interpreted by the early Christian Church as the Church; but only in the twelfth century was the role of Ecclesia-Sponsa taken over by Mary.²⁸ In the Ghent Altarpiece both Mary's inscription and her crown of jewels and flowers are appropriate for a bride.²⁹

Although the apocryphal books described Mary's Death and Assumption, none mentioned her enthronement in Heaven as the Bride of Christ. Rupert of Deutz found justification for this belief in the allegorical interpretation of Solomon's Song of Songs. In seeing Mary as the Queen and Bride of Solomon, medieval theology identified Mary allegorically with the Church and emphasized the close and loving relationship between Christ and the Church. The universality of Salvation is brought to fulfillment by Christ's marriage to the Church. As such Mary's personal intercessory power acts on behalf of mankind. Her role in the mass is heightened by her identification with the Church. In the mystery of the Eucharist, not only Christ, but also the Church offers herself to the Almighty.³⁰ The idea is an integral part of the body of thought underlying the sacramental rite.

As one of the co-celebrants of the mass, St. John the Baptist must be considered primarily as the precursor. The book in his lap attests to this role since the opening word of the text is CONSOLAMINI or "comfort ye", which continues, "prepare ye the way of the Lord." This is one of the key texts in the Book of Isaiah (xl, 1-3). Looking toward the deity he points to Him. His finger is actually on the cross in the inscription on the moulding above his head, a symbolic reminder of Christ's future death.³¹

The upper panels, if seen in the context of the mass, pose no problems. The placement of Adam and Eve, on the other hand, has produced difficulties. There is no precedent for their position "of undeserved sublimity".³² This fact is used as supposed proof that the upper panels were not planned in the original altar program. Thinking

of the mass once again, it is recalled that at the most sacred point man is admitted or transferred to heaven. This is only a brief transportation. Adam and Eve, however, act as mankind's eternal representatives or intercessors. Their position secures the sacred union of God with man as promised in the Old Covenant and fulfilled in the New.³³ The originators of sin express the eternal hope for redemption of all humanity.

The lunettes above Adam and Eve continue the theme of the mass. In imitation reliefs adorning the framing architecture the murder of Abel by the hand of Cain is depicted on the right of the open Altarpiece; the motif for the murder, the sacrifice of Cain and Abel, is shown on the left. The murder is likened to the crucifixion of Christ by the Jews and the sacrifice of the Lamb is a time-honoured prefiguration of Christ's death on the cross and, therefore, by extension of the Eucharist, in which the Church celebrates this sacrifice.

Once the entire Altarpiece is reviewed its logic seems irrefutable. Any remaining doubts about the consistency of the interior program of the Ghent Retable should be dispelled by the symbolism of one object, the crown located at the feet of the Trinitarian Lord. The mass and its implications of redemption are summed up by it. The complex symbolism of the crown ties together the threads of meaning discussed. While the enthroned Deity wears the papal tiara on His head, the crown at His feet is the symbol of His eternal kingship. The symbol is flanked by inscriptions on the throne base which explain its meaning. According to the Biblical texts (Revelation xi, 10, and I Corinthians ix, 25) the crown of

eternal life is the reward of the martyr. To be united with the Lord in eternal life is the hope of every Christian. Therefore, the crown is the gift of this life to a redeemed mankind. The gift is imparted to the believer through the sacrament of the mass. Seen as the uppermost of the four objects that appear in the central vertical axis of the work, the diadem epitomizes the meaning of the mass and simultaneously represents the figure of the Godhead. It is also the culmination point of the ideas expressed in the horizontal sequence of the upper level. The crown is the symbol of eternal life newly bestowed on mankind in the persons of Adam and Eve. Lastly, the position of the crown, which is the intersecting point of an imaginary giant cross, visually draws together the upper and lower sections of the retable and successfully binds together the iconographic ideas of the entire inner retable.

The outer panels of the retable cannot be overlooked as they are closely connected to the interior scenes. As Dhanens indicated: "The Annunciation represents the beginning of the Redemption, itself the general theme of the work when open."³⁴ Furthermore, the Annunciation, which almost invariably opened the series of miniatures illustrating the Hours of the Virgin, also found its usual position on the exterior of the wings in a folding altarpiece. Above the heads of Gabriel and the Virgin are prophets and sibyls whose presence is justified by the inscriptions on their scrolls which prophesy the glory of the Virgin and Christ's Incarnation.

In the lower register St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist are seen between the patron and his wife. They kneel before these

saints in devotion. St. John the Baptist's presence has been quite simply explained by the fact that he is the patron saint of Ghent and also the original titular saint of the Church until its dedication to St. Bavo in 1540. St. John the Evangelist's exalted position may stem from the fact that the altar was dedicated on May 6, the feast of his martyrdom.³⁵ This lends support to the conjecture that he was the titular saint of Jodocus Vid's family chapel.³⁶ These two saints are further linked by the words on the antependium of the altar in the central interior panel - "Behold the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world" - which were spoken by Ghent's patron St. John the Baptist and recorded by St. John the Evangelist.³⁷ The words are a constant reminder of the Altarpiece's theme.

The Altarpiece's unique scheme must have been drawn up with an intimate knowledge of the literary heritage of the Middle Ages. However, of the very large number of possible sources, two provide the basis for the program: the Book of Revelation and the writings of Rupert of Deutz.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for
the first heaven and the first earth were
passed away.

This quotation from the Book of Revelation (xxii, 1) points to the origin of the altar's symbolism. Unquestionably in this Altarpiece the upper architecture depicted the "new heaven" and the landscape below the "new earth" of the Eternal Jerusalem.³⁸ To justify further this locality as the New Jerusalem, the buildings of the background are classified in Revelation, iii, 12 and xxi, 2.

The main iconographic source for the Adoration panel is likewise from Revelation, vii, 9-17.

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.

Several references to the Lamb are made: Revelation v, 6-12, vii, 14-17 and xiv, 1. The Fountain of the Water of Life is likewise mentioned in Revelation several times, (vii, 17, xxi, 1, xxi, 6 and 17, xii, 1) but the most directly followed reference from Revelation is found in xxii, 1, the words of which are paraphrased on the fountain itself.

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

HIC EST FONS AQVE VITE PROCEDENS DE SEDE DEI + AGNI.

Clearly all the figures and scenes cannot be fully explained by referring solely to the Book of Revelation. The overwhelming intent of the iconography is to establish the theme of redemption. The Apocalypse with its message of judgment provides one of the sources which was masterfully interwoven by the artist in consultation with his theological advisors. Another thread of equal, if not greater importance are the writings of Rupert of Deutz.

NOTES

1. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 24.
2. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 16
3. Puyvelde, 66.
4. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 61.

5. In these popes Dhanens indicated that "allusions can be traced" to Martin V, seen in profile, Alexander V and Gregory XII, Pope and Antipope, both standing in the Paradise garden together. See Altarpiece, 61.
6. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 62.
7. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 70.
8. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 89.
9. Daniélou, 128.
10. Daniélou, 130, translated from P.G., I, 588A.
11. Daniélou, 131.
12. Philip, 64.
13. Daniélou, 136, translated from P.G., XXXIII, 1108A.
14. Daniélou, 136, translated from P.G., XXXIII, 1113C - 1116A.
15. Philip, 65.
16. Philip, 65.
17. Roosen-Runge discovered a similar phenomenon in The Rolin Madonna. The hem of Mary's robe is embroidered with liturgical hymns.
18. Daniélou, 134, translated from P.G., XLVIII, 7079.
19. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 84.
20. Daniélou, 135.
21. Daniélou, 135.
22. Daniélou, 135, translated from P.G., XLVIII, 734C.
23. For a complete explanation of the angels' role in the mass, see Hammerstein, 17-31.
24. Daniélou, 136.
25. Philip, 56.
26. Philip, 61.
27. Philip, 61.
28. Schiller, I, 24.

29. Mary's crown of fresh flowers, all traditionally associated with the Virgin, roses, lilies-of-the-valley, columbines and lilies, led Panofsky to suggest that this unusual image was prompted by a passage in St. Bridget's Revelations. The fresh flowers in the crown leave little doubt that it was a bridal crown. See Panofsky, I, 220, no.2.

30. Philip, 81.

31. The subtle reinforcement of Christ's sacrifice has heretofore gone unnoticed.

32. Panofsky, I, 221.

33. Philip, 60.

34. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 52.

35. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 47-48.

36. Panofsky, I, 208.

37. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 89.

38. The duality of heavens that Panofsky observed but could not explain is, in fact, quite simple to understand. Further, whereas Panofsky saw the upper level as aesthetically ponderous and unsuitable for the very ethereal lower section, Philip explained that the

highest heaven is traditionally represented in architectural form, while the celestial abode of the elect is often depicted as a parklike garden similar to the terrestrial Eden.

See Philip, 58.

Chapter II

Rupert of Deutz - A Twelfth Century Source.

Rupert of Deutz is not the best known of the German twelfth century theologians.¹ Attention was recently brought to focus on Rupert and his relation to the Ghent Altarpiece by Elizabeth Dhanens.² To this day, however, most historians of Medieval theology are unaware of Rupert's importance.³ His date and place of birth are unknown, although he was educated in the Benedictine monastery of St. Laurentius at Liège and was ordained in 1101 or 1102. In 1120 he was elected abbot of Deutz (Rhine), a post he retained until his death in 1129 or 1130. His life statistics reveal none of the fiery characteristics that made Rupert of Deutz a highly colourful, and, at the same time, controversial clergyman.

Not one to back away from the challenge of controversy, he showed himself to be extraordinarily "bold" for the times and consequently merited the praise Silvestre bestowed on him by labelling Rupert a "true innovator".⁴ In his attack of the teachings of Anselm of Laon and William of Champeaux he was accused of having heretical views concerning the relationship of the omnipotence of God and the existence of evil. Although he defended himself brilliantly in De Voluntate Dei French theological circles were so incensed that he was eventually forced to leave St. Laurentius for the safety of the monastery at Siegburg. This episode, however, did not stop him from proclaiming his liberal doctrine and, in the final analysis, Rupert is hailed as an independent thinker, who was even unafraid to criticize an authority of the stature of St. Augustine.⁵

Throughout his career he remained his own best promoter. For ten years he travelled extensively in eastern Belgium and northern France.⁶ As a result there was a broad diffusion of his work that filtered throughout Europe from Flanders to Austria.⁷ The major carriers of his thought were the great Benedictine monasteries of the north.⁸ Dissemination of his texts is confirmed by the 215 Rupertian manuscripts still extant.⁹ It is important for the argument of this study that Rupert's commentary on the Song of Songs had the second largest distribution and his De Victoria Verbi Dei enjoyed the third largest.¹⁰

Rupert's writings were instrumental in establishing new patterns of thought, firstly in theological, then in artistic circles. Because his treatises were innovative, thought-provoking, and visually oriented, it is not surprising to find that his iconographic ideas stimulated interpretations in the visual arts. Of these the celebrated reliquary of St. Alexander (early twelfth century), attributed with almost absolute certainty to Godefroid de Huy, has been the subject of much research. The iconographic theme of the twelve enamelled plaquettes has, however, until recently, been overlooked. Eight of the twelve enamels represent allegorical figures of women which are labelled underneath.¹¹ Jean Squilbeck recently explained their presence by drawing parallels between the reliquary and the writings of Rupert.¹² The figures, hitherto misunderstood, were clarified through Rupert's commentary on the Gospel of St. John.¹³

A contemporary baptismal font by Reiner von Huy, a native of the same city, is based on the writer's commentary on the Book of Kings.¹⁴ In a

very specific text Rupert described the twelve oxen which carry the sea to the four corners of the world where they announce the Trinity. This unusual description was the basis of the font's imagery in which oxen heads emerge from the sides of the base.¹⁵

Some art historians believe that the creation of the Gnadenstuhl, a particular representation of the Trinity in which God the Father supports the cross of His crucified son, is based upon texts of Rupert. Egid Beitz adamantly insists that Rupert is the inventor of the Gnadenstuhl.¹⁶ The author cites a passage from Rupert's commentary on Job (xxxi, 6) in which he names the cross statera Patris, the scale of God. The form of the balance is, in Beitz' opinion, that which the Gnadenstuhl takes in art. A manuscript miniature from the monastery at Deutz, attributed to Theodorichus,¹⁷ accompanies the title of the Rupertian work from which it was taken. De Trinitate et de operibus ejus shows the form of the Gnadenstuhl. Considering its juxtaposition, it is highly likely that the miniature was directly inspired by the text.

An important example of a visual translation of one of his texts is found in the St. Pérégrin chapel of St. Denis. One of the stained glass windows represents a typical Gnadenstuhl except for the absence of the dove. Grodecki, in his article, stated that the comparison between the window in the chapel and Rupert's text is "vraisemblable".¹⁸ Rupert's influence in the chapel does not end here. Another of the allegorical windows shows God appearing to Moses in the burning bush. Since the time of the Speculum Ecclesiae of Honorius of Autun, the burning bush - the fire that burns but does not consume - had been, above all, the symbol for Christ's immaculate conception. This Marian symbolism eclipsed all other significance. However, in De Trinitate et de

operibus ejus¹⁹ Rupert saw in the bush the sign of the Almighty God. In the context of the Moses window the Christian significance of the bush was that of the fire of faith and grace as described by Rupert.²⁰ It is significant to emphasize that Rupert's writings must have been highly influential: they were, after all, the literary stimulus for works of art in the Royal Church of St. Denis, the mastermind of which was Abbot Suger.²¹

This brief account of works based on Rupert's writings leaves no doubt that he was a great inspiration for new themes in the visual arts. Examples could easily be multiplied to show that a tradition had been established. This living tradition did not fail to influence the theological advisor of the Ghent Altarpiece. Although it is clear that the Bible is the main literary source of the iconography of the Agneau Mystique, one could, nevertheless, take away the Biblical references and be left with a body of religious thought that closely relates to the theological and artistic statement of the retable. The theory that its iconography was inspired by Rupertian thought is strengthened, if one compares the text of his treatise De Victoria Verbi Dei with the Altarpiece.

A closer look at the allegorical system conceived by Rupert concerning the redemption reveals many resemblances to the Altarpiece. In the preface to his work he describes the enemy of the Kingdom of God as the "seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse which the Archangel Michael defeated."²² This dragon, frequently named as the AntiChrist, is shown losing the battle with Michael in a carving on the side of the angels' lectern in the upper interior panels of the retable. Rupert further explains "that the Archangel Michael's struggle with the dragon centres on

Man in the person of Adam."²³ Because of Michael's victory "the angels, wearing golden bands ornamented with precious stones, sang praises and rejoiced."²⁴ This description is mirrored in the panels of the Musical Angels. In addition, Rupert's commentary explains the presence of Cain and Abel, seen in the Altarpiece above the figures of Adam and Eve. He names Abel "principium electorum generationis" - the progenitor of the elect.²⁵ Man, in the guise of Adam and Eve, created in God's image, sinned out of pride, yet again and again God promised redemption "per crucem et sanguinem suum"²⁶ - by the cross and by His blood. Indeed, in the New Paradise of the enclosed garden, Mary was interpreted by Rupert as the second Eve and Christ as the second Adam.²⁷ What more fitting place for Adam and Eve than beside Christ and Mary in the New Heaven as described in the Book of Revelation.

If the redemption is necessitated by the Fall of Man, its starting point is the Annunciation and imminent conception of Christ. In the light of Rupert's commentaries on the prophets Zechariah and Micah²⁸ and that on the Annunciation²⁹, the paintings of the upper and middle zones of the closed Altarpiece (where Zechariah and Micah are prominently displayed with their books in the lunettes directly above the Annunciation) take on a new significance and relevance to the main theme.

The upper Deesis group of the opened retable also finds parallels in Rupert's writings. In De Victoria Verbi Dei the Virgin Mary is equated with the woman crowned with the twelve stars of the Apocalypse,³⁰ and with the Bride of Christ, a role which will be developed in detail later. The words with which the Baptist announced Christ on earth as the Redeemer, "Ecce Agnus Dei qui tollit peccata mundi", are written on the

antependium of the altar in the Adoration panel and pronounced during the mass; these words are referred to in the same work.³¹

In subsequent passages Rupert of Deutz discusses the groups of participants in the Adoration panel. Among them he lists the judges and warriors of the Old Testament as well as the more familiar apostles, evangelists, patriarchs, and prophets. The various categories of saints, which Honorius of Autun was later to incorporate in his Sermon of All Saints, are listed more than once in Rupert's works.³²

Near the end of De Victoria Verbi Dei Rupert exclaims "Qualis triumphator, Deus Verbum, Deus et homo Jesus Christus in majestate sua sedebit" - What a triumpher, God the Word, Jesus Christ, God and Man; so shall He be seated in His majesty. He then cites Christ's invitation: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."³³ Thus it is seen in the open Altarpiece: the Godhead, enthroned, bids the worshippers in the Adoration panel to partake of the riches of His kingdom.

Of equal importance to van Eyck was Rupert's commentary on the Song of Songs: indeed, Jan's interpretation of Mary is based upon it. Rupert's most original contribution to church literature was made in this commentary by equating Mary with Christ's Bride. Prior to 1100 Solomon's Sponsa had been interpreted as the Church. However, from the tenth century, increasing faith in the Virgin's powers of intercession caused many German churches to be dedicated in Her honour and the legends of Mary were widely circulated here before the cult became popular in other countries.³⁴ Hence it was natural that the thrust of the new thinking should be found in Germany. Rupert was the first to interpret the Can-

ticle of Canticles as Christ's love for the Virgin.³⁵

His commentary must have done much to generate the thought-association change.³⁶ This new understanding of the feminine role in the Song had an immediate response in art. Three definitive examples, based on Rupert's writings, are found in sculptures of the Virgin: the Madonna of Siegburg, the Madonna of Liège and the Madonna of the Church of St. Mary in the Capitol, Cologne.³⁷ In the statue from Siegburg, beneath Mary's feet, are leaflike ornaments which are a reference to Paradise, the enclosed garden of the Canticle. In this New Paradise Mary is the second Eve and Christ the second Adam. This representation of Mary is clearly explained by Rupert.

Hortus conclusus, soror mea, sponsa, es,
 "Dei Genitrix" hortus conclusus, fons
 signatus. Emissiones tuae paradisi
 malorum Punicorum cum pomorum fructibus.
 Cyprus cum nardo, nardus et crocus, fistula
 et cinnamomum, cum universis lignis Libani,
 myrrha et aloes, cum omnibus unguentis.
 Fons hortorum, puteus aquarum viventium,
 quae fluunt impetu de Libano ... "Ecce novus
 paradisi, novae plantationes, quas plantavit
 unus idemque antiqui paradisi plantator
 Dominus Deus. "Plantaverat autem Dominus
 Deus, ait Scriptura, paradisi voluptatis
 a principio, in quo posuit hominem quem
 formaverat."³⁸

(" A closed garden thou art, my sister, my wife, "O Mother of God",
 A closed garden, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are
 an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphor, with spikenard.
 Spikenard with saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of
 frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices; a fountain
 of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon. "Behold
 the new garden, the new orchards, which the one and same Lord God had

planted", says the Scripture, "From the very beginning a garden of delight, in which He placed the man He had made.")

Rupert not only calls Christ's Bride the Mother of God (Dei Genitrix) but refers to the new garden that the Lord, the originator of the old garden, has planted. This direct reference to Mary as the Bride and the second Eve is pictorialized in the upper interior register of the Ghent Altarpiece. Surely here is further justification for the placement of Eve and Mary - the new Eve - on the same exalted level.

The introduction of Mary as the Bride of Christ immediately transposes the imagery of the Song of Solomon from the Church to the Mother of God. Hence

ii, 1-2 I am the flower of the fields and the lily
of the valleys. As the lily among thorns,
so is thy love among the daughters.

iv, 12 My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed,
a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.

refers to the Virgin. The lily which is an accompaniment to the virgins in the Ghent Altarpiece, is prominently displayed in Mary's bridal crown.³⁹ Rupert comments further on its qualities:

Lilium quippe lactei floris est herba,
conius dum candor sit in foliis, auri lamen
species intus effulget. Ita "flos campi"
sive "lilium" ego sum, flos lacteus, id
est, puer mundissimus. Flos, inquam, et
castitatis lilium cujus dum caro sive
humanitas exterius satis munda sit, Div-
initatis lamen species intus incomparabilis est.⁴⁰

("For the lily is a flower of milky whiteness, the whiteness being in its petals, but within is yet the glistening radiance of gold. So, then,

I am "the flower of the field" or the "lily", a flower of milky whiteness, which is to say a comely youth. The flower, I say, is the lily of chastity, the flesh of human nature of which is outwardly comely enough, yet the countenance of the Divine that is within is incomparably beautiful.)

The imagery of Mary as the enclosed garden is constantly emphasized by Rupert. One example has been mentioned (Migne CLXVIII, 893), suffice it to quote one more.

"... Operatur, inquam hoc ipsum quod hortus conclusus es quod emissiones tuae paradisus talis et tam pulcher, sicut ex istis aromatum septem speciebus anim adverti potest, inter quas principalis est nardiso, unde et bis praedicari vel numerari meretur, cum dico "cyprus cum nardo, nardus et crocus."⁴¹

("He [the Holy Spirit] it is who does this, I say, Himself, because you are a closed garden, because you are such a beautiful garden, a garden of your flowers and trees, just as one can see from these your seven kinds of spices, among which the chief is spikenard, and as such deserves to be twice named and twice praised, when I say, "camphor with spikenard, spikenard with saffron.")

The Adoration panel of the Ghent Altarpiece has often been referred to as a Paradise landscape. As the new Paradise garden named by Rupert⁴² it is, by extension, the hortus conclusus. In this enclosed garden there are some striking parallels between the commentary and the Adoration panel.

iv, 13 Thy plants are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard. Cypress with spikenard ...

Of the pomegranate Rupert says

Tot enim jam comedis fragmina malorum Punicorum,
 quot beatas animas martyrum confessorumque tuorum
 hinc assumis, et transfers in illud vitae sempiternae secretum.⁴³

("As many as are the bits of pomegranates that you eat, so many is the number of the blessed souls of your martyrs and confessors that you take from here and have them share in the mystery of life eternal".)

Prominently placed beside the holy confessors van Eyck has painted a large number of pomegranates. Significantly they are not associated with any of the other holy groups found in the Altarpiece. This concordance is continued in Rupert's remarks about cypress.

Nam sicut cedrus imputribile lignum atque odoriferum, et cypressus lignum cedro pene proximum, virtutis eximiae sunt, templorum quoque trabibus apta, impenetrabili soliditate nunquam oneri cedunt, sed ea, qua in principio fuerint, firmitate perseverant, ita domestici nostri apostoli atque apostolici viri, doctores Ecclesiarum atque praelati, perpetuae virtutis atque firmitudinis indeficientes erunt, et domus quoque manufactae nostrae stabunt, quandiu durabit saeculum, titulum habentes.⁴⁴

("For just as cedar is both an imperishable and odiferous wood, and cypress wood just about as good as cedar, so then are these two woods particularly apt for church beams; being so strong as to never give way or yield to any weight and they will forever retain their strength, so too, then are our native-born apostles and those who assist and guide them, the doctors and prelates of the church, of enduring strength, and they shall be recognized and stand forever as pillars of the church.")

Just as the cypress, which pierce the horizon above them give strength to the church, so the doctores Ecclesiarum are its pillars. Van Eyck's cypress are clustered behind the holy confessors and Church doctors indicating their importance to Christ's work on earth.

It even seems that the Altarpiece complies with Rupert's writings about the significance of floral colour. Van Eyck has limited the blossoms to three colours: red, purple and white. The reds of the roses, pomegranates, stock flowers beside the holy confessors on the left and the peonies flanking the holy virgins on the right not only serve to frame these participants but also underscores their martyrdom. Likewise the fore- and centre-ground are liberally sprinkled with the whites of the lilies-of-the-valley, and numerous unidentifiable flowers which are simply flecks of white paint. The lilies that flank the virgins are gleaming white. As numerous as the white flecks are the purple violets carpeting the foreground in front of the precursors of Christ, the apostles and church fathers. Purple iris stand in a stately manner beside the lily in the right middle ground. Indeed one might ask if any importance can be attached to the sole use of these three colours. Again, to hark back to our source, Rupert supplies an answer.

Tunc apparuerunt, id est certissime apparebunt
flores multi, flores sancti ac diversi,
alii videlicet martyrio rubicundi sive purpurei
alii confessione sive ad imitationem nostri,
virginitatis incorruptione candidi.⁴⁵

("Then there appeared, that is to say that there most certainly will appear, many flowers both holy flowers and others, that have turned away, some will be of the red or purple of martyrs, others white, an incorruptible white, acknowledging, as we do virginity.")

Thus Rupert of Deutz' innovative commentary produced a new type of Madonna in the field of art - as the Bride of Christ. And by so doing, the garden imagery, so plentiful in the Canticle of Canticles, becomes associated with the Virgin. Nevertheless, Rupert does not provide the

observer with the ultimate source for the floral symbolism of the Ghent Altarpiece. By enumerating the various plants and trees mentioned in his commentary that are also found in the Ghent Altarpiece (cypress, pomegranate, sword lily, lily of the field, and red, white, and purple flowers) it is evident that many plants have been left unexplained. The search for additional sources, therefore, must continue.

NOTES

1. For the most up-to-date bibliography on Rupert of Deutz see R. Haacke, "Rupert von Deutz: De Victoria Verbi Dei", Die Deutschen Geschichtsquellen des Mittelalters 500-1500 Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters, V. Weimar, 1970, and Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche, IX, 1964, 104-106.
2. See Dhanens, Altarpiece, ch. 5.
3. Silvestre, Review, 517.
4. Silvestre, Review, 519.
5. Silvestre, Tradition, 346.
6. Silvestre, Tradition, 340.
7. Beitz, 32.
8. 59 Rupertian manuscripts originate in Benedictine monasteries, 23 come from Cisterian monasteries and 11 from various other chapters.
9. Among them 99 date to the twelfth century, 58 to the thirteenth century, 18 to the fourteenth century, 22 to the fifteenth century, and 5 to the sixteenth century.
10. Silvestre, Tradition, 343.
11. The eight names reflect certain qualities: Humilitas, Pietas, Scientia, Fortitudo, Conselium, Intelligentia, Sapientia, Perfectio.
12. Squilbeck, 19-20.
13. Squilbeck, 20-21.

14. Beitz, 123.
15. For the full description, see Migne, P.L., CLXVII, 1169.
16. Beitz, 67.
17. Grodecki, 30.
18. Grodecki, 30.
19. Migne, P.L., CLXVII, 578-579.
20. Grodecki, 36.
21. Further impetus from Rupert's treatises created the magnificent title page from the Floreffe Bible as well as wall paintings in the lower Church at Schwarze Rheindorff, Bonn. W. Neuss established parallels between the paintings and the Rupertian themes from his Ezechial commentary. Details are found in Beitz, 71.
22. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1217.
23. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 92.
24. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1233, 1240-1244.
25. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1258 and 1260.
26. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1244.
27. Beitz, 93.
28. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 700-814 and 441-526 respectively.
29. Migne, P.L., CLXVII, 1425.
30. The Book of Revelation, xii, 1 and Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1277-1279.
31. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1280.
32. Migne, P.L., CLXX, 166 and 607.
33. Migne, P.L., CLXIX, 1500 and 1501.
34. Sanford, 407.
35. Although instrumental he was not alone: Honorius Augustodunensis also wrote an interpretation of the Song in terms of the Virgin, composing part of a work Sigillum sanctae Mariae. See Sanford, 421.

36. More than twenty manuscripts show that it was read in southern Germany, Austria and Bohemia through the fifteenth century. It may be recalled that it had the second largest circulation of all his commentaries.
37. Beitz, 84.
38. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 893.
39. The lily mentioned in ii,2 was undoubtedly the Madonna lily, according to Shewell-Cooper, 7.
40. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 859.
41. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 897.
42. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 893.
43. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 902.
44. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 858.
45. Migne, P.L., CLXVIII, 868.

Part II
Chapter III

The Flowers of the Ghent Altarpiece

In his study of 1903 F. Rosen for the first time precisely labelled the trees, bushes and plants of van Eyck's masterpiece.¹ This provided the basis for a detailed examination undertaken in 1950 by L. Hauman.² However, no interpretation of the vegetation was attempted. The classification system devised by him has been adopted in the present study. (Appendix I) With Hauman's initial thirty-two species and the additional five discovered by this writer, it is apparent that Rupert of Deutz's commentaries do not supply us with the only source material.

As outlined in the introduction this part of the study will analyze the vegetation with the help of a number of sources, which fall in two categories: religious and medicinal. From these it will then be proposed that one of them, a herbal, was the most likely single manuscript employed by the artist. However, a general survey of the varieties and location of the plants and trees is a prerequisite to a discussion of their symbolism. The garden flora conveniently clusters around the participants of the Adoration panel. It will be described and analyzed group by group. (Plate I)

In the foreground the vegetation spreads like a carpet under the prophets and patriarchs on the left, the fountain in the centre and the apostles and church members on the right. Dandelions (*taraxacum vulgare*, no.25), violets (*viola odorata*, no.32), strawberries (*fragaria*

vesca, no.19), and daisies (*bellis perennis*, no.23) are common to both sides. Great plantain (*plantago major*, no.27) and tansy (*tanacetum vulgare*, no.30) are found under the right group but not the left. Yarrow (*achillea millefolium*, no.33) and sorrel (*rumex acetosella*, no.34), two herbs previously unidentified, are located beneath the apostles. Several plants found on both the left and right side of the panel are undoubtedly periwinkle (*vinca minor*, no.35) although they are depicted without their characteristic blue flowers.³ Under the fountain a great cluster of white clover (*trifolium repens*, no.31) intermingles with the everpresent strawberries and lilies-of-the-valley. Woodruff (*asperula odorata*, no.16) occupies a place to the left of centre. Another periwinkle sprouts up under the right hand corner of the fountain.

Some of the plants below the altar duplicate several of the foreground types. Two lilies-of-the-valley, some strawberry leaves, several violets and white clover are noticeably present. There also appears to be another sorrel plant, unnoticed by Hauman, beside the right censing angel. Beneath the same angel is a solitary pilewort (*ranunculus ficaria*, no.24) otherwise known as lesser celandine. Isolated from the main vegetation under the altar, it stands out prominently, its dark green, heart-shaped leaves accompanying a single white flower with nine narrow petals.

The two small gardens, symmetrically placed at mid-height of the central panel, on either side, beside the confessors on the left and the female martyrs on the right, contain a wealth of plant species. In a very limited space van Eyck has portrayed a great variety of flowering

plants to complement the virgins. The ensemble is dominated by gooseberry bushes (*ribes vulgare*, no.10), underneath which are two Madonna lilies (*lilium candidum*, no.21), several long iris stalks (*iris florentina*, no.20), columbine (*aquilegia vulgaris*, no.15), red peony bushes (*paëonia* sp., no.26), and greater celandine (*chelidonium majus*, no.17). The standard strawberries, lilies-of-the-valley, dandelions and woodruff are again present in the grass. On the left side of the Adoration panel, opposite the virgins' garden, another equally diverse botanical ensemble accompanies the confessors. Against the left frame white grapevines (*Vitis vinifera*, no.13) are intertwined and ramble over a low fence, their large succulent bunches of grapes hanging on the laden vines. To their right the pomegranate (*punica granatum*, no.4) displays its red flowers and fruit. A rosebush (*rosa* sp., no.12) standing beside the pomegranate is overshadowed by a large fig (*ficus carica*, no.3). The smaller herbaceous plants spread below this backdrop of large bushes. Solomon's seal (*polygonatum multiflorum allioni*, no.29) branches out beneath the rosebush, its elliptical leaves turned one way, while its small clusters of drooping flowers fall in the opposite direction. In front of it greater celandine (*chelidonium majus*, no.17) delicately nods its leaves in the breeze. The habitual lilies-of-the-valley, dandelions, in seed and flower, and a few strawberry leaves are liberally scattered throughout. Great plantain (*plantago major*, no.27) and tansy (*tanacetum vulgare*, no.30) are tucked back in against the higher foliage. Heretofore unobserved by botanists is a solitary herb robert (*geranium robertianum*, no.36), the tiny flowers of which are recognizable. A type of stock (*matthiola* spec., no.28), the positive identification of which cannot be made by

Hauman, stands at the bottom left hand corner of the group. Just above it is an unidentified plant with clusters of white flowerettes. Unquestionably a member of the umbelliferae, it very likely is Burnet's saxifrage (*pimpinella saxifraga*, no.37). The diversified group of bushes and plants is completed by the rose campion (*lychnis coronaria*, no.18) that blooms beneath the pomegranate.

Cyprus (*cypressus sempervirens*, no.1), date palm (*phoenix dactylifera*, no.2), orange (*citrus aurantium*, no.5) and pine (*pinus pinea*, no.6) are among the trees that spread over the five bottom panels. Beeches (*fagus silvatica*, no.11), wild cherry (*prunus avium*, no.7), possible maple (*acer* sp., no.9) and fir (*picea excelsa*, no.8) are spotted throughout the landscape. As with the plants there are trees which cannot be recognized, despite their delicate treatment. One of them is described by Hauman as a viburnum (*viburnum opulus* or *viburnum thymus*, no.14), a bush which is strewn with white blotches. (Plates I, XIV and XV)

The foreground vegetation already described is bounded by the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and clergy. It is generously sprinkled with violets, strawberries, daisies and dandelions. The lowly violet (*viola odorata*) is a most familiar plant in the Altarpiece. It occurs nine times in front of the holy men. Significantly, the purple colour of its blossoms is representative of martyrs. These small flowers, modestly hanging their heads, have, from the time of Greek mythology, stood for humility. St. Bernard described the Virgin in such terms: "Maria est viola humilitatis".⁴ Because of their humble character, violets are familiar in countless Flemish and German pictures of the Madonna in a garden, as in the Frankfurt Paradise Garden c. 1420 (Frankfurt, Stadel-

(
 sches Kunstinstitut) where violets are found at Mary's feet. In fact van Eyck depicted the innocent flowers in another garden setting, surrounding Mary in the Madonna at the Fountain c. 1439 (Antwerp, Musée Royal).

The violet's symbolic presence in the Adoration panel is strengthened by the myth that it was one of the flowers on which the shadow of the cross fell on the day of the crucifixion and, like others in that shadow, it drooped in sorrow.⁵ Growing like a carpet in the foreground of the Altarpiece, these seemingly insignificant plants have been identified with the specific qualities of humility and sorrow, two prerequisites for members of the elect at the sacrifice of the Lord.

Most of the plants painted in the Altarpiece had medicinal purposes, many of which were given religious overtones by the church authorities:

Bei Rose, Lilie und Veilchen wird von den kirchlichen Autoren eigens hervorgehoben, dass sie auch wegen ihrer Heilkraft mit Maria verglichen werden können.⁶

Although it is foreign to the modern reader to discuss the herbs in terms of their healing powers and their effect on the interpretation of a painting, the very nature of herbs was studied and understood by artists and lay people alike. It must have been an accepted practice of the late Middle Ages. It is also important to note that not only herbs but also showy flowering garden plants were cultivated for medicinal use. Many of the ones present in the Ghent Altarpiece garden, including the violets (as mentioned in the quotation above) were put to medicinal use in van Eyck's day.⁷

As a medicinal flower, the Violet was identified in a herbal of 1351, Liber Magistri Avicenne en de Herbarijs, (Brussels ms.15624-15641).

It was used for the easing of pain and the curing of sickness, especially hot sicknesses like cholera. As a palliative against such evils as headaches, it appears that the violet, in its various forms, (i.e. oil, pounded leaves, sugared) is a general painkiller and, as such, relates in a larger way to those who have suffered on behalf of Christ.⁸

Another popular garden plant is the strawberry (*fragaria vesca*). Indeed, it is frequently found in a Paradise garden as for instance in the Frankfurt Paradise Garden panel, around Mary's feet and in the same anonymous artist's Mary in Strawberries c. 1410-1420 (Solothurn, State Museum). In Roger van der Weyden's Madonna and Saints c. 1450 (Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut), also known as the Medici Madonna, a strawberry plant is portrayed beneath the feet of St. Peter, a direct reference to its being a Paradise garden plant. It also has a medicinal function in this panel. Growing near Saints Cosmos and Damian, who are interpreted as patrons of a medical faculty⁹, it acts as an extension of their healing powers. Strawberry plants intermingle among the foreground plants in the Altarpiece. The very recognizable serrated leaves spring up throughout the garden, but appear most often near violets. (Plate I) This is not purely a coincidence: strawberries, as a symbol of perfect righteousness, are often companions to the violets from which we may gather that the truly fruitful soul is always humble. As a fruit, the berry is considered to be food for the blessed.¹⁰

The strawberry, oddly enough, was scarcely mentioned by the ancients in their medicinal lore.¹¹ Its healing benefits must have been discovered later. According to the Liber Magistri Avicenne it has a

specific use.

Ende coelt op alle heete steden
geplaestert met garsten mele.¹²

("And it cools all hot [feverish] areas when applied to them with barley flour as a plaster.")

Used as a plaster for inflamed areas the strawberry's curative powers relate (as did the violet's) to the physical suffering of the apostles and prophets.

The little daisy (*bellis perennis*) is sprinkled throughout the foreground, sometimes merging imperceptibly with the white flecks of paint. It is, as one might expect, a flower of innocence and modesty, most specifically Mary's.¹³ For obvious reasons it is teamed with the other plants heretofore mentioned - violets and strawberries. A similar combination is magnificently displayed in Stefan Lochner's Madonna in the Rose Bower, c. 1438-1440 (Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum). However, the daisy's relationship to the crucifixion as a symbol of eternal life and redemption¹⁴ is more important to the retable's overriding theme. The numerous dots of white painted daisies underscore the Altarpiece's major message. Further proof of the flower's symbolic use is provided by Roger van der Weyden's Medici Madonna, where the daisy (along with the strawberry already mentioned) grows beneath St. Peter's feet. Surely this symbol of eternal life is most appropriate for Peter who holds the keys to Heaven.¹⁵ Coincidentally, Gerarde's Herball of 1597 suggests that the juice "put into the eyes cleareth them, and taketh away the water of them"¹⁶ - a subtle indication that, with the promise of eternal life, comes the expectation that one's spiritual vision

will be cleared.

The dandelion (*taraxacum vulgare*), spotted here and there in the Paradise landscape, but particularly near the foreground groups, is, like all milky plants, a symbol for the death of Christ, and for martyrs.¹⁷ Previously, in the Englandfahrer Altarpiece, 1425, (Hamburg, Kunsthalle) Master Francke placed a dandelion in front of the sorrowing group at the base of the cross. Further substantiation of the weed's connection to Christ's death is found in the panel of St. Veronica with the Sudarium c. 1430-1434 (Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) by the Master of Flémalle, where it grows at the saint's feet.¹⁸ The 1351 Liber Magistri Avicenne indicates its general healing powers against hot or inflamed spots, as well as for irritated liver, bladder, uterus and kidney:

Ende es goet geplaestert op hete
hoeftswere. hete levere hete mage.
hete hiere. hete blase. hete moeder.
hete ericipila & de op hete apostemen.
& de op alle hete steden.¹⁹

("And it is good when applied to feverish head sores, livers, stomachs, kidneys, bladders, wombs, infected skin diseases, skin ulcers and all feverish areas.")

The arrangement of plants under the apostles' feet in the right foreground seems randomly painted. This, however, cannot be the case. The dandelion, yarrow (*achillea millefolium*) and great plantain (*plantago major*) found below the robe of the apostle closest to the fountain (Plate III) are three herbs with strikingly similar medicinal uses. Great plantain, an age old medicinal herb, is known from the writings of Dioscorides as an antidote for the flow of blood.²⁰ A more contempor-

any source, the Liber Magistri Avicenna deemed great plantain particularly efficacious in healing - especially in the treating of wounds.

Ende wegebrede es goet verscen wonden
met le doene dragene. ende suvert haer
vulheit.²¹

("And waybread is good for wounds with puss and cleanses them of their impurities.")

Pictorially it was pioneered by the Master of Flémalle in his St.

Veronica panel mentioned above, where it had direct connections with the saint who wiped the bloody face of Christ.²²

Yarrow, pictured just above the great plantain, is used for similar ailments. As the Liber Magistri Avicenne indicates:

Mille folium. es heet ende droge in den
.2. graet. ende heilt wonden. ende es
goet in wonden dranke.²³

("Yarrow is hot and dry in the second degree and heals wounds and makes a good beverage [to be taken] in the presence of wounds.")

This was seconded by the later Herball of Gerarde:

The leaves of Yarrow do close vp wounds,
and keepe them from inflammation, or fiery
swelling, it stancheth bloud in any part of
the body ...²⁴

The symbolism of yarrow and great plantain takes on a new dimension because of their proximity to a dandelion. The dandelion found at the crucifixion and as a symbol of martyrs is combined with plants that stop the flow of blood, in this case referring to the blood both of Christ and the martyred apostles.

A tansy plant (tancetum vulgare) grows slightly to the right, under

the same apostle's foot (Plate IV, lower left hand corner). In her discussion of the vegetation in the Ghent Altarpiece, Behling singles out tansy for special emphasis, explaining that, because of its powers to fend off demons, it is usually placed next to holy martyrs.²⁵ As such it is well positioned beside the God-fearing apostles. Although Behling discusses the medicinal qualities of the herb, she seems unaware of one of its specific healing aspects. According to the by now familiar Liber Magistri Avicenne, tansy is excellent as a drink for wounds.²⁶ Thus a very close medicinal relationship is established among great plantain, yarrow and tansy.

A sizeable clump of sorrel (*rumex acetosella*) nestles in under the bare foot of the second kneeling apostle (Plate IV). Previously unnoticed, its significance cannot be ignored. It is not accidental that sorrel's imagery also relies on medicinal application, which the Liber Magistri Avicenne provides. Sorrel treats a multitude of afflictions, not least of which is swollen eyes, caused by being burned.²⁷ Considering the persecutions of the apostles, repercussions from burning are possible.²⁸

All the above herbs found growing near the apostles have medicinal application: great plantain, yarrow and tansy are all efficacious in the stopping of blood and healing of wounds, while sorrel is used as a treatment for sore eyes. Surely there is a direct relationship between the plants' healing powers and those followers of Christ who were physically maligned for the glory of the Lord.

The medicinal symbolism understandably does not carry over to the left foreground groups. These figures, after all, were the forerunners

of Christ, and as such were not persecuted, a fact that is reinforced by the presence of two delicate lilies-of-the-valley (*convallaria majalis*). The plants act as indicators of the two distinct groups: one is located beneath the hem of the first prophet and one beneath the foot of the first patriarch. (Plates I, V and VI) As one of the first flowers to announce the return of spring, the plant became a symbol of the Advent of Christ.²⁹ Thus they reinforce the significance of these participants in the Adoration scene. In the way of extended symbolism the little flowers are regarded as representatives of redemption.³⁰ As such, they act, on a secondary level, to emphasize the main theme of the Mystic Lamb panel. The interpretation of the lilies-of-the-valley in the Ghent Altarpiece is confirmed in van Eyck's Madonna at the Fountain. In this panel the most prominent of several lilies-of-the-valley stands directly beneath the Virgin, where it gloriously announces the birth of Christ.

Halfway between the lilies-of-the-valley some periwinkle (*vinca minor*), unobserved by either Behling or Hauman, fans out across the grass (Plate VII). Unlike its previous portrayal in the Frankfurt Paradise Garden the Ghent Altarpiece plant reveals none of its characteristic blue flowers. In the Frankfurt Paradise Garden it is no accident that the devil dragon of St. George rests on a bed of periwinkle. According to the 1485 Gart/der Gesundheit, the plant has a reputation for warding off evil spirits.³¹ Here, in the garden of the Ghent Altarpiece, the periwinkle serves to protect the onlookers from the power of the devil. For these prophets, this protection has already taken effect, otherwise they could not have been the forerunners of Christ.

From the symbolic interpretations of the foreground flowers, it seems clear that they re-emphasize the groups' meaning and position. On the left the prophets and patriarchs extol the virtues of the future Christ, the lily-of-the-valley marking the advent. The apostles and church members on the other side have suffered, and in some cases, died for Christ and the medicinal qualities of yarrow, great plantain, tansy and sorrel attest to their afflictions.

The lush thick growth of vegetation under the fountain contrasts with that found on either side. However, it is not unexpected in such a moist area. (Plate VIII) Visually it provides a caesura for the plants that otherwise carpet the foreground. White clover (*trifolium repens*) is the most prominent ground cover, accenting the vertical axis of the fountain. Viewing the open Altarpiece as a whole the fountain is the lowest element on the main central vertical axis of the upper and lower panels. Descending from the upper level of the retable the Trinitarian Lord figure is followed by the crown of the Father, the Dove of the Holy Ghost and the Lamb of Christ. This obvious visual affirmation of the Trinitarian nature of the Lord is complemented and subtly underscored by the profusion of white clover at the fountain's base. Because of its very obvious tripartite leaves it is a symbol of the Trinity and the Church.³²

Prior to van Eyck's use of the plant the Master of Flémalle painted clover in his Virgin and Child panel c. 1430 (Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut), but without such obvious connections. However, van Eyck employed clover's medicinal benefits to his advantage in his Annunciation c. 1433-1434 (Washington, National Gallery of Art). In a highly

stylized manner he painted a border of clover leaves framing the floor tile scene of the "Samson" square. This is especially appropriate for the blinded Samson since, as Gerarde indicated in his Herball, it is used as a medicine to alleviate "pin and Web", an eye disease.³³ The border of clover encompasses only this scene in the floor decoration, thereby reinforcing its symbolic purpose. The same principle of decoration (which will be clarified later) applies to the scene below, framed by columbine.

The clump of woodruff (*asperula odorata*) found to the left of the fountain in the extreme foreground grows in abundance in damp soil. Roger van der Weyden portrayed woodruff in his Entombment c. 1450 (Florence, Uffizi) which suggests that the plant is related to the events surrounding Christ's death. Medicinally, however, it seems to relate to the plants found beneath the apostles. Gerarde's Herball reported that woodruff, like great plantain, yarrow and tansy, was useful when applied to wounds and, like the dandelion, "it is good for all sicknesses that come from heat."³⁴ The more familiar strawberry, lily-of-the-valley and periwinkle found here serve to heighten the symbolism of the foreground groups: the promise of redemption (lily-of-the-valley) and protection from evil (periwinkle) for the spiritually humble (strawberry).

The carpet of vegetation continues to spread in a seemingly naturalistic manner under the altar. (Plate IX) The strawberries, lilies-of-the valley and violets do not need further interpretation. However, it should be noted in passing that the white clover, so profuse beneath the fountain, is found here on the same vertical axis, again emphasizing

the alignment of the triune elements.

A certain visual prominence is given to the solitary lesser celandine, more commonly called pilewort (*ranunculus ficaria*), whose white flower bears itself proudly to the viewer from below the gown of the right censing angel. Placed under the Pascal Lamb Whose blood flows into a chalice, it is not surprising to find that medicinally the plant is effective in staunching blood.³⁵ Although it is infrequently represented in painting, the Master of Flémalle had previously adorned his Madonna and Child c. 1430 (Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut) with a pilewort undoubtedly referring to the future suffering of Christ.

The medicinal aspect of lesser celandine is reinforced by the two clumps of tansy found on the left side of the altar. Previously discussed, tansy's main application is for cleaning wounds. Because, symbolically, tansy also fends off evil, its placement near the angels is similarly significant. Close at hand is another great plantain, which, it will be remembered, is a remedy for stopping up wounds. In the vicinity of the same angel a sorrel plant reinforces the predominant medicinal imagery. It is a remedy for a variety of ailments.³⁶

Amassed at either side of the middleground are garden-like groups of plants and bushes that are so organized as to make the foreground areas seem haphazardly natural. Many of the plants in these clusters have only one representative, in contrast to the numerous strawberry plants, dandelions and lilies-of-the-valley cited above. The gardens flank the virgins on one side and the confessors on the other, acting, both visually and symbolically, as counterparts to the members.

Prominently displayed in the foreground of the virgins' garden

are two bunches of Madonna lilies (*lilium candidum*), one of which is pictured in Plate X. They are an obvious attribute of the Virgin Mary and, by extension, all virgin saints and martyrs.³⁷ Their simple but noble form and the immaculateness of the white flower petals are the embodiment of purity itself. The flower's quality has been likened to the Virgin on numerous occasions, as has been observed in the Song of Solomon. Indeed, Rupert of Deutz comments on the flower's whiteness, calling it the lily of chastity.³⁸

The Madonna lily, which receives its name from the Virgin, has been represented in the Ghent Altarpiece in two clumps. The reference to the Virgin is strengthened by the left plant, the stalk of which carries four open flowers and three closed ones. The number seven was given specific symbolic significance by St. Bridget, the very influential Swedish mystic of the fourteenth century. In her Revelations she referred to the seven joys and sorrows of Mary.³⁹

If the lily is a symbol of all virgin saints, by extension from the Virgin, so then is the iris (*iris florentina*). Its physical qualities have determined its symbolism. From ancient times through to the sixteenth century Herball of Gerarde the iris' leaves have been compared to "the blade of a sword with two edges".⁴⁰ Thus in religious terms it came to symbolize "the sword that Simeon prophesied would pierce the heart of the Mater Dolorosa".⁴¹ St. Bridget likewise compared Mary to the sword-lily, reporting that the bladelike leaf which splits in two should remind us of the Blessed Virgin who was also split "with pain in her heart for the sorrows of her Son and her determination to fight off the Devil."⁴² Because of its resemblance to a sword the

iris could also refer to the death of a female martyr saint by decapitation with a sword.⁴³ St. Catherine, found in the ranks of the virgins of the Ghent Altarpiece, is justifiably accompanied by this flower.

The religious symbolism of the iris is enhanced greatly by its pharmaceutical attributes; its roots are used to cauterize wounds; it is particularly efficacious when boiled with oil of roses, and applied as a plaster.⁴⁴

The peony (*paeonia* sp.), a third plant from this garden, is specifically related to Mary as she is known as the peony without any thorns.⁴⁵ However, it also relates closely to the virgins as Dioscorides explains:

The root is given to women who after childbirth are not clensed. It moves also ye menstruation. Being sodden in wine, and being drank doe stop ye belly.

He continued that peonies are excellent for "the suffocations of ye womb, and griefs of ye mother."⁴⁶ It is cited, along with iris, as an antidote against wounds.

The hortus conclusus of the Madonna with Chancellor Rolin, c. 1433 (Paris, Louvre) offers a fruitful comparison to the three flowers discussed thus far in the virgins' garden. In the Madonna's garden the white lilies form the largest motif. They occupy, along with the roses, the centre of the picture on the horizontal and vertical axis. Portrayed in a garden enclosed by a crenellated wall, they are symbolic of the Virgin and the hortus conclusus of the Song of Songs. In the left area of the garden, pictorially between the left arch and the figure of the Chancellor, one finds a stalk of iris. The iris or sword,

lily alludes, as in the Ghent Altarpiece to the sorrow of the Virgin at the Passion. The peony's meaning, however, is not as clear in the Chancellor Rolin panel, as in the retable. It could very easily relate to the Virgin, especially because it is within her realm of influence in the painting. However, the peony has also been used to drive out the devil.⁴⁷ The consequence of this symbolic aspect may relate the spice flower to Rolin who is in need of spiritual healing.

Greater celandine (*chelidonium majus*) nestles in to the left of the lily clumps. Its curative powers are similar to the iris as revealed by the Liber Magistri Avicenne.⁴⁸ This was reconfirmed by Gerarde: "the juice of the great celandine dropped into small green wounds of what sort soever, wonderfully cures them."⁴⁹ The healing powers of this plant are not restricted to wounds; it is also used in the cure of cataracts.⁵⁰ The implications are, therefore, twofold: the healing of the martyr virgins' wounds and the curing of spiritual blindness.

The medicinal symbolism is continued by the columbine (*aquilegia vulgaris*). Its blossom, known in folklore as a symbol of fruitfulness and used in the making of love potions, was applied to wounds and consumed for stomach pains and female disorders.⁵¹ However, by the fifteenth century the religious connotations had secured the flower's placement beside Christ or the Virgin.⁵² The Ghent Altarpiece is no exception, where it grows near the Marian plants of iris and lily. Because of its name in French, ancolie, and its purple colour, it is held to be the flower of melancholy and sorrow and as such is the accepted

symbol of the sorrows of the Virgin.⁵³

A more stylized version of the columbine and its leaves is found in two floor tile patterns done by van Eyck. The first example is in the upper level of the retable where columbines are found in both Musical Angel panels as an attribute of Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁴ Here the stylized arrangement of columbine leaves and blossoms is interspersed with squares containing the letters IHS, the lamb and the cabbalistic name of God, AGLA, which has been equated with columbine (aglei).⁵⁵ The shape of the columbine's petals, which resembles a cluster of five doves, gives the flower its English name (derived from the Latin columba). The connection with the dove, together with its frequent depiction displaying seven blossoms, accounts for its association with the Holy Spirit and his Seven Gifts.⁵⁶ Dhanens notes that the other word repeated in the tiles is IEVUC (Jesus),⁵⁷ so that the whole floor celebrates the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

It should be remembered that the Seven Gifts were also imputed to Mary.⁵⁸ Undoubtedly the columbine reflects this meaning in its prominent placement in Mary's bridal crown in the retable's upper register. The Virgin's joys and sorrows are also remembered in the Ince Hall Madonna c. 1433 (Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria) where columbine motifs are sewn into the gold embossed tapestry placed behind the Virgin.

Jan's Washington Annunciation provides the second floor tile pattern in which a stylized columbine is portrayed. It runs as a border joining zodiac signs and framing Old Testament scenes. (This one is

found directly below the Samson scene, framed by clover.) The flower's significance here is described by John Ward. He refers to Gerarde's Herball which calls columbine the Herba Leonis or "the herbe wherein the Lion doth delight".⁵⁹ The columbine pattern suggestively encompasses a representation of Leo at one corner of the pattern.

The plants enumerated thus far stand flanking the virgins, all being of an equal height with the women. Given their symbolical significance, coupled with their prominent position, they are visual confirmation of the group's characteristics. Indeed, van Eyck's selection is so specific that all but the greater celandine are found solely in this garden. Spread beneath the feet of the women, strawberries, dandelions and lilies-of-the-valley dot the terrain. As these are all flowers of innocence, they emphasize the purity and chastity of this group as they did with the precursors and followers of Christ in the foreground.

The confessors' bower to the left likewise flanks the holy men. The grapevine, pomegranate, fig and rose bushes provide a backdrop for the smaller garden varieties in front. Of these large bushes the grapevine (*vitis vinifera*) furnishes the most specific Biblical connotation. (Plate XI) As an extension of Christ who said "I am the vine, Ye are the branches" (John xv, 1), its symbolism relates directly to the blood of Christ as signified by the Eucharistic wine. Bearing in mind the theme of the Altarpiece, with its emphasis on the mass, both earthly and eternal, the vine is a necessary element of the ritual. The confessors, by partaking of the Eucharist, represent the viewer in his

participation in the everlasting mass.

Rupert's remarks about the pomegranate in his commentary on the Song of Songs supply an explanation for the fruit's proximity to the holy confessors. Although his interpretation is more than adequate⁶⁰, ancient legend further indicates that the "tree of life" in the garden of Eden was believed to be the pomegranate, and as such, it became the symbol of hope of eternal life.⁶¹ This symbolic intent heightens the theme of salvation attained through the Eternal Mass. The pomegranate bush displayed here is dotted with red flowers, which are excellent for the healing of bloody wounds⁶², especially when put into "restraining powders".⁶³

The fig (*ficus carica*) and the rose bushes (*rosa* sp.) stand closest to the confessors. From the Old Testament the fig was known as a tree of peace (Micah iv, 3-4.) Micah described the fig as a symbol of peace that will come from the Kingdom of the Messiah.⁶⁴ The rose, on the other hand, is a time-honoured symbol of the Lord's Passion, the colour of its flowers being reminiscent of the blood of Christ,⁶⁵ and the thorns reminiscent of the crown of thorns. However, symbolically it can be linked very conclusively with the confessors themselves. In his Hortulus Strabo wrote

Haec duo namque probabilium genera incluta florum
Ecclesiae summas signant per saecula palmas,
Sanguine martyrii carpit quae dona rosarum
Liliaque in fidei gestat candore nitentis.⁶⁶

("These two flowers, so loved and widely honoured, / Have throughout the ages stood as symbols / Of the Church's greatest treasures; for it plucks the rose / In token of blood shed by the Blessed Martyrs, / The lily it wears as a shining sign of faith.")

The rose's comparison to martyrs is reiterated in a fourth century hymn to the saints by Aurelius Prudentius Clemens.

Salvete, flores Martyrum,
Quos lucis ipso in lumine
Christi insecutor sustulit
Ceu turbo nascentes rosas.⁶⁷

("You martyr blossoms be greeted / As you are already in the first glimpse of light / Christ's pursuers mowed down like rosebuds.")

As important as the religious symbolism is the rose's medicinal application is spelled out in great detail in the Liber Magistri Avicenne. Pounded rose petals are helpful against the pain of the holy fire,⁶⁸ which is also known as the fire of St. Anthony. Although St. Anthony and the other two plague saints, Sebastian and Roch, are not specifically identified in the Ghent Altarpiece, the presence of the rose acts as a reminder of the saints' affiliation with the dreaded disease. It will come as no surprise to find that among the flower's usages is one for the cleansing of wounds.⁶⁹

Throughout the discussion of the vegetation's medicinal application the overwhelming employ has been in the stopping of blood and the cleaning of wounds. Not accidentally the majority of plants in front of the bushes perpetuate the established theme (Plate XII).

Solomon's seal (*polygonatum multiflorum allioni*) has a long history of wound healing. It was described by Dioscorides as follows:

That the roots are excellent good for to seale or close up greene wounds, being stamped and laid thereon whereupon it was called sigillum Solomonis of the singular vertue that it hath in sealing or healing up wounds, broken bones, and such like.⁷⁰

This remedy persisted throughout the centuries and was still an

accepted medication in the 1485 Gart der Gesundheit, in which it was recommended as a plaster for wounds.⁷¹ The placement of the single great plantain in the proximity of Solomon's seal reinforces the singleminded purpose of the symbolism. Its location is equally significant to the confessors as it was to the apostles where it was found near dandelion and yarrow. As indicated before, great plantain is successful in its administration to wounds. Likewise, tansy and greater celandine, located on either side of the great plantain (Plate XII) are excellent in their application to cuts and abrasions.⁷² Because tansy is also used to ward off a demonic life, it is, therefore, placed near the confessors, who have overcome their temptations.

With the introduction of herb robert (*geranium robertianum*), a delicate little flowering plant, near the tansy and great plantain, another medicinal plant is added. Again relying on the information of the fourteenth century herbal, Liber Magistri Avicenne, this herb was beneficial in the treatment of wounds.⁷³ Thus it seems clear that van Eyck had specific medicinal qualities in mind when he portrayed Solomon's seal, great plantain, tansy, greater celandine and herb robert in close proximity to each other, and to the confessors. Similar to the plants near the apostles, the healing power of these four should be figuratively applied to the wounds of the holy men.

Burnet's saxifrage (*pimpinella saxifraga*), previously overlooked, is found by the fence under the grapevine. (Plate XIII) The Liber Magistri Avicenne notes that when mixed with wine, it is good for almost any pain.⁷⁴ Gerarde explains further uses by indicating that it

"cleareth the sight, and taketh away all obscuritie and darknesse of the same."⁷⁵ Van Eyck, no doubt, had the clarity of the spiritual sight in mind. Several plants that grow in this garden are present elsewhere in the Altarpiece. The strawberry of righteousness, the lily-of-the-valley, a flower of purity and innocence, are found with the dandelions, which represent martyrs. The overwhelming message of this garden, therefore, is one of earthly suffering by the confessors, who will reap their just rewards in heaven.

Turning to the trees one is immediately struck by the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) which is prominently placed in an opening among the shrubs and bushes. (Plate I) Looming above the holy confessors who carry some of its branches, the palm must be a symbolic extension of the venerable men. Angels were said to bring palm branches to the ancient and medieval Christian martyrs in order "to convey their souls from the torture of rack, cross and flame to heaven, and so the palm became the symbol of martyrdom."⁷⁶ The tree, situated in an open space, pierces the sky and acts as a spiritual indicator for the group below it. Medicinally it complements the herbs surrounding the confessors, as it also "glues wounds together being anointed on."⁷⁷

Many other species of trees serve as a backdrop for the floral development. Some of them, especially those composing the little thicket between the confessors and virgins, are difficult to recognize. Most trees are Mediterranean and as such seem out of character with the herbaceous and indigenous plants. The extensive Mediterranean travel by van Eyck must have provided the inspiration. L. Hauman, in his com-

prehensive listing of vegetation in the Altarpiece, divided it into three types: Mediterranean, indigenous and herbaceous. In the first category he enumerates cyprus, date palm, fig, pomegranate, orange and umbrella pine, (see Plates XIV and XV) concluding "on peut y voir uniquement la main de Jean après son retour de la peninsule ibérique (décembre 1429)"⁷⁸.

In 1428-1429 Jan van Eyck was a member of an elite embassy sent by Philip the Good to the King of Portugal. There van Eyck painted a portrait of the Princess Isabella, prospective bride of the Duke.⁷⁹

This was not his only opportunity for travel. He also made a pilgrimage with other Burgundians to Santiago de Compostela. On this occasion he travelled through Castile and down to Andalusia where he was received by nobility, including Mohammed, the King of Granada.⁸⁰

The panels with the hermits and pilgrims where St. James the Great appears behind the giant St. Christopher, display a Mediterranean landscape in contrast to the two panels on the lower left. An abundance of dark piercing cyprus are complemented by date palms, an umbrella pine and orange trees. (See Plates XIV and XV) These trees of the hermit and pilgrim panels were not in the original landscape.⁸¹ Paul Coremans hypothesizes that the changes were done by Jan after his return from the 1429 trip.

One additional fruit must be mentioned in connection with the Mediterranean trips; this is the so-called "apple" that Eve holds in the upper right hand interior panel. One would naturally assume that the forbidden fruit is the traditional apple just as it appears in the vast majority of Medieval and Renaissance representations of the

Fall. Clearly, however, it is not an apple, being instead a smallish, very rough-textured fruit of a predominantly yellowish colour. James Snyder concluded that the fruit is unique in representations of the Fall of Adam and Eve. He identified it as a no longer familiar species of citrus fruit, the so-called "Adam's apple", which was well known in the fifteenth century.⁸² Jan van Eyck undoubtedly discovered it on his travels, for this exotic variety of apple grows in Spain, Portugal and Italy and was long associated with the fruit given by Eve to Adam.⁸³ It seems beyond question that van Eyck has placed this highly symbolic fruit in the hand of Eve. Earliest descriptions and illustrations of the Pomum Adami are found in sixteenth century herbals. In Gerarde's Herball, for example, he relates that the name was thought

to be the same apple, of which Adam did
eate in Paradise where he transgressed God's
commandment, whereupon also the prints of the
bitting appeere therein as they said ...⁸⁴

Flowers appear elsewhere in the Ghent Altarpiece (for example, in the Annunciation scene) but in no place more beautifully than in the crown the Madonna wears in the upper interior panel. Her crown, composed of Madonna lilies, roses, columbines, lilies-of-the-valley⁸⁵ and rich jewels, is an appropriate attribute for the Queen of Heaven and the Bride of Christ. Comparisons between Mary and various flowers are commonplace. Of these the rose is the "Marian flower suprême".⁸⁶ It is a symbol of the Virgin's caritas and love for man⁸⁷, and thus this quality of human compassion relates to her role as intercessor. Indeed, her concern for man was described in an Ave Maria by Hugo of Strassbourg, c. 1280.

Pulchritudo virginum,
Florens rosa martyrum,
O dulcedo pauperum.⁸⁸

("All virgins most beautiful glory / Rose in the martyr's crown /
You are the sweetest of the poor.")

The rose is particularly well suited for the Bride's crown. Here the necessary link is furnished by the author of the Song of Songs in which Solomon's bride is compared to a rose: "I am the rose of Sharon." (ii,1)

Van Eyck often portrays the rose in connection with the Virgin.

A forest of red roses embank the wall of the hortus conclusus in the Madonna at the Fountain. The Marian symbolism is self-evident here as it is in the Madonna with Chancellor Rolin where a large rose bush is placed beside a clump of Madonna lilies in the garden located behind the Virgin. They serve to remind us of essential qualities of her character - compassion and purity.

The Song of Solomon likewise refers to the Bride in other floral terminology, as "the lily of the valleys" (ii,1). Its sweet scent and purity of colour make it an obvious choice of symbol for the Virgin.⁸⁹ Her purity is likewise emphasized by the lily's colour and the Song indirectly serves as the source for the flower's interpretation. The qualities of the lily which are reflected in Mary's character were admirably stated by Rupert of Deutz in his commentary on the Song.⁹⁰

In contrast to the other flowers in the crown the columbine is an "accepted symbol of the Sorrows of the Virgin".⁹¹ Her sadness for the anticipated death of her Son is similarly described by van Eyck in the Ince Hall Madonna. Here the embroidered columbine leaves hint at her foreknowledge of Christ's crucifixion.⁹²

From the analysis of the sources of symbolism in the Altarpiece, it

is apparent that more than one source was used. Already Rupert's commentary has been cited and, in this chapter, a good deal of stress was placed on the herbal, and its important role in understanding the medicinal symbolism. Which herbal was of primary importance is impossible to confirm, but a case can be made for the extensive use of one, the Liber Magistri Avicenne en de Herbarijs.

NOTES

1. F. Rosen, Die Natur in der Kunst, Leipzig, 1903.
2. The results of this study are published in L'Aneau Mystique au Laboratoire, 123-125.
3. My thanks to Dr. Robert Koch for identifying yarrow, sorrel and periwinkle.
4. Hirn, 306.
5. Skinner, 281.
6. Wolffhardt, 183.
7. For further medicinal uses of violets see Behling, Tafelmalerei, 36, 49-51.
8. For a detailed description of the violet's uses see Vandewiele, 326-327, lines 1739-1779.
9. Panofsky, I, 274.
10. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 19.
11. Neither Theophrastus nor Dioscorides give it any space. Pliny says only that strawberries are eaten in Italy and Ovid and Vergil speak of gathering strawberries. For more details see Marzell, 65-67.

12. Vandewiele, 311, lines 1625-1626.
13. Hirn, 306.
14. Lipffert, 67.
15. My thanks again to Dr. Robert Koch for providing this interpretation.
16. Gerarde, Leaves, 15.
17. Lipffert, 65. The flow of a liquidy substance from this plant relates to the blood of Christ.
18. St. Veronica was the one responsible for wiping Christ's face with a veil (sudarium) as he toiled under the burden of the cross on his way to Calvary. His features remained impressed on the sudarium.
19. Vandewiele, 435, lines 2763-2767.
20. Marzell, 181-188.
21. Vandewiele, 183, lines 98-100.
22. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 165.
23. Vandewiele, 366, lines 2089-2091.
24. Gerarde, Herball, 1073.
25. Behling gleans her knowledge from Hildegard von Bingen's herbal as well as from the 1485 Gart der Gesundheit. See Tafelmalerei, 50-51.
26. Ende es goet in worden dranke Ende
 suvert wonden

 ("And it is a good beverage in the presence of wounds and it
 purifies wounds.")
 See Vandewiele, 477-478, lines 3171-3172.
27. Vandewiele, 209-210, lines 464-466.
28. Although none of the apostles died by being burnt to death, they were undoubtedly tortured by fire. Indeed, there is a history of saints who were burnt for their convictions (St. Lucy, St. Thecla and St. Lawrence to name but a few). In an extended way, the symbolism of the plant encompasses all believers who were tortured by fire.
29. Ferguson, 42.

30. Lipffert, 65-66.
31. According to Behling, in the 1485 Gart der Gesundheit, ch.79, periwinkle is described as having protective powers, so that anyone carrying it is guarded from the devil. See 29-30.
32. Lipffert, 64.
33. Ward, 205, and fig. 3.
34. Gerarde, Herball, 1126.
35. Vandewiele, 265, lines 1100-1103.
36. Vandewiele, 209-210, lines 455-471.
37. Ferguson, 41, and Haig, 51.
38. Migne, P.L. CLXVIII, 859.
39. Koch, 74.
40. Gerarde, Leaves, 64.
41. Panofsky, I, 111.
42. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 38, and Panofsky, I, 141.
43. Koch, 75.
44. Vandewiele, 338, lines 1843-1848.
45. Wolffhardt, 180, reports that Konrad von Würzburg (thirteenth century) makes this comparison in Die Goldene Schmiede, verse 422.
46. Dioscorides, 382-383.
47. Dioscorides, 3822.
48. Vandewiele, 265, lines 1100-1103.
49. Gerarde, Herball, 1070.
50. Gerarde, Leaves, 41.
51. Koch, 76, and Gerarde, Herball, 1095.
52. Fritz, 99.
53. Panofsky, 146.
54. Koch, 74, and Fritz, 100-102. In Fritz' article one can find many examples that clearly show the columbine as an attribute of Christ and/or the Holy Spirit.

55. In Middle High German and Middle High Netherlandish, the term for columbine is AGLEI. Fritz believes it is possible that this term was equated with the cabbalistic word AGLA. In Hebrew Atha Gibbor Leolam Adonai are words of praise. Translated into Latin they mean Benedictus Dominus in aeternum fiat, fiat; these are the words with which the saints, donors and angels give glory to Christ in the Ghent Altarpiece. See Fritz 101-102.
56. Koch, 74.
57. Dhanens, 84.
58. See 55.
59. Gerarde, Herball, 1096.
60. See 36.
61. Moldenke, 191.
62. Dioscorides, 81.
63. Gerarde, Herball, 1451.
64. For a detailed description of the fig's symbolic role see O. Götz, Der Feigenbaum in der Religiösen Kunst des Abendlandes, Berlin, 1965.
65. Shewell-Cooper, 18.
66. Strabo, 63, xxvi, lines 415-418.
67. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 47.
68. Vandewiele, 425, lines 2611-2612.
69. Vandewiele, 425, lines 2620-2622.
70. Dioscorides' excerpt is found in Gerarde, Leaves, 89.
71. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 49-50.
72. Vandewiele, 477-478, lines 3169-3174, and 265, lines 1100-1103.
73. Vandewiele, 328, lines 1751-1752.
74. Vandewiele, 446, lines 2871-2872.
75. Gerarde, Herball, 1045.
76. Moldenke, 132.

77. Dioscorides, 79, and Vandewiele, 211, lines 472-474.
78. Coremans, 116.
79. Snyder, 513.
80. Weale, iv-xxii.
81. Coremans, 118.
82. Snyder, 513.
83. Snyder, 513-514.
84. Gerarde, Herball, 1278.
85. Behling says that there is also tansy present, although I could not see any. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 51.
86. Koch, 72.
87. Koch, 72.
88. Behling, Tafelmalerei, 48.
89. Ferguson, 42.
90. See 34.
91. Panofsky, I, 146.
92. See 58. Medieval visionaries, such as St. Bridget of Sweden, emphasize Mary's foreknowledge of Her Son's death.
See Panofsky I, 469, no. 277/3.

Chapter IV

The Missing Links: Jan van Impe and Ludolphus Nicholas of Zwolle.

It is not coincidental that the most original, the most controversial and iconographically complicated Netherlandish retable of the fifteenth century was painted in Ghent and under the auspices of St. John's Church. Throughout the Middle Ages Ghent was renowned as a centre of learning. Its convents and libraries possessed a large number of manuscripts of varying value. In fact, the interest of the bourgeoisie in studying and acquiring manuscripts is well documented.¹ The city's intellectual bent is reinforced in the Altarpiece where eighteen books are portrayed.²

This academic centre enjoyed an even more enriched period between 1421-1440, the dates during which Jan van Impe was priest of the parish of St. John.³ His dedication to the Church of St. John (renamed St. Bavo's Abbey in 1540) is witnessed by the intense building program that took place under his direction. Not only was the ambulatory of the choir completed but the construction of radiating chapels and the sacristy were also concluded.⁴ The city authorities made a special grant toward the building project in 1430-1431 and Jodocus Vid, an alderman at the time, undertook to pay for one of the chapels himself. The Vid-Borluut family was not only closely linked financially to the church but physically also: they lived in the "Hoge Scheldestraat" close to the parish priests. These facts must have helped forge the friendship between Jodocus Vid and Jan van Impe. In fact their relationship was so tightly linked

with the development of the retable for the Vid chapel that it was
 Jan van Impe who first witnessed the registration of the Vid found-
 ation on May 13, 1435.⁵ This was the deed previously cited that
 established the chapel for the daily celebration of mass.

Concurrent with the church's construction campaign was the
 foundation of the House (and scriptorium) of St. Jerome, near St.
 John's c. 1429. The house was founded by the Brethren of the Common
 Life,

pour qu'y habitent des prêtres dévots et
 y vivent dans l'imitation de la sainte vie des
 saints apôtres de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ,
 comme on le fait dans les maisons destinées à
 cela à Deventer, Zwolle, Bois-le-Duc et Louvain.⁶

The date of the founding of the scriptorium is crucial to the Ghent
 Altarpiece.

La fondation de la maison Saint-Jérôme vers
 1429 et la création du retable de l'Agneau
 Mystique achevé en 1432 sont deux faits qui semblent
 coïncider de manière frappante, aussi bien en ce qui
 concerne le temps que le lieu où ils se sont
 produits. L'un et l'autre sont issus d'un même climat
 intellectuel chrétien, imprégné d'érudition sacrée
 et animé de zèle pour propager ce savoir. Ceci
 ne pouvait se faire sans de nombreux livres, et
 il est donc bien naturel qu'on ait jugé nécessaire
 dans ce milieu d'en produire en assez grand nombre.⁷

The house of the brethren was in constant contact with the clergy of
 St. John. Indeed, van Impe had a good deal of authority in the house
 and, in some cases, he supervised the work of the brothers.⁸ Thus, if
 one can draw conclusions from these facts, it would seem that van Impe,
 because of his friendship with the Vids and his knowledge of the liter-
 ature of the scriptorium, may well have been van Eyck's theological ad-
 visor for the Altarpiece's program. Is it so unlikely that, as the

artist's counsellor, he found the sources for the iconography in the nearby scriptorium?

A good case can be made for a particular herbal. In 1472 a descendant of Jodocus Vid, Jan, gave a donation to the Town Hall of Beveren-Waas, founded by his father: the gift was a book, a type of herbal. Owing to the close ties of the family to the church which contained their chapel and the scriptorium, there is a good possibility that the book, given in 1472, originated from the scriptorium of St. Jerome and that it came from the legacy of the Vid-Borluut family.

Comme on aurait aimé pouvoir comparer
l'Hérbier, qui, vu sa grande valeur était
très probablement enluminé, à la flore de
l'Agneau Mystique, en particulier dans le
panneau de l'Adoration!⁹

The herbal is lost; only a description of it remains to assure us of its authenticity.¹⁰ Dhānens, in her article "Le Scriptorium des Hiéronymites à Gand"¹¹, speculates on the origin of this "book", which was, of course, a manuscript. The text was, in all likelihood, a copy of a herbal of Jean Yperman, known as the Brussels ms., Bibl. Roy. 15624-41 of 1351. The introduction to this manuscript, De Liber Magistri Avicenne en de Herbarijs begins with the words "Desen boec ... die gheheten es herbarijs" which bear a remarkable similarity to the description of the Vid herbal, "een boec gheheeten Herbaris." Dhānens believes, that because of its great value, the manuscript was probably illuminated and compares it to two Italian manuscripts of the early fifteenth century.¹²

The lost herbal could very conceivably be based on the Brussels one of 1351, and would have had many of the varieties of herbs, found in the

Ghent Altarpiece. Indeed eighteen of the thirty-nine specimens of the Altarpiece are contained in the Brussels manuscript. Of the five new discoveries unearthed by this study, four are reported in the 1351 herbal, two of which are rarely depicted (*rumex acetosella* and *pimpinella saxifraga*). This fact further justifies the connection between the 1351 herbal and the manuscript in the St. Jerome Scriptorium.

Van Impe must be one of the vital "missing links". It seems likely that, without him, the Vid-van Eyck enterprise would not have materialized. As indicated before, he also must have been instrumental in guiding van Eyck in his choice of subject matter and source material for the Altarpiece. The Liber Magistri Avicenne was one such suggestion. The herbal, however, was only part of the answer to the question of the floral program's sources. What about Rupert of Deutz? In the introduction it was stated that Rupert's writings were a strong influence. In the following two chapters a case was developed to substantiate the hypothesis. His writings were all the more credible because they provided a source not only for certain plants and flowers, but also for the iconography of the Altarpiece.

Although three hundred years separate the German theologian from the Netherlandish artist, a connection between them is not entirely impossible. A resurgence of interest in his writings occurred during the fifteenth century¹³, which was activated by the spiritual climate created by the Devotio Moderna movement.

During van Eyck's lifetime there was an immense cross-fertilization of ideas among several theological centres of the north. The house of

St. Jerome (Ghent) belonged to the Brotherhood of the Common Life¹⁴ which was founded by Gerard Groote (1340-1384) in Deventer. During Groote's life a community was started in Zwolle and together these two houses became important centres of the Devotio Moderna and a base for new foundations in the neighbourhood.¹⁵ One such house was founded in Ghent c. 1429. The interchange of ideas among these "houses" must have been lively for transfers from one community to another were not the exception but the rule.¹⁶

During this period of theological activity a tradition for Rupert's works can be traced to the area, especially Zwolle. A particular example for the use of his writings is a treatise "Dye declaratie van der misse" by Ludolphus Nicholas of Zwolle. No life dates for the writer have been found¹⁷, and, while a printed edition dates to 1529, from the character of his texts, one can safely assume that he lived and wrote in the previous century. His description of the mass, in very allegorical terms, corresponds with the Altarpiece's iconography, as an excerpt from it will make clear.

The mass was instituted ... for the redemption of human nature which in Adam had gone astray ... All the masses that the priests now celebrate have the same significance as that unique mass offered by Christ, the Supreme Priest ... (The mass) is a fountain that gushed forth, from which forever and without ceasing flow streams of living waters ... a fountain into which are poured, and from which stream out before the eyes of men, the manifold benefits of Christ ... The mass was instituted as the one everlasting sacrifice of the New Testament to replace the many sacrifices of the Old Testament ... God promised Adam, Abraham and other prophets and kings that he would become man ... (He did this) not immediately ... but after many thousands of years and ... not before the Blessed Virgin Mary answered the Angel Gabriel saying "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according thy word" ... Christ is the

Way, the Truth and the Life ... The altar, composed of many stones, signifies the Holy Church, which consists of many people of different nations, both Jews and heathens, gathered together. The epistle signifies the preaching of St. John the Baptist ... who pointed with his finger, saying "Behold the Lamb of God" ... He who shall come there under the hands of the priest (i.e. in the Sacrament) is God Almighty, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Every soul will then be commended (to God) so that His grace may be apportioned to each: each according to his estate. The Agnus Dei (of the mass) signifies the Atonement, and the Pax the way in which men are united with God in everlasting peace.¹⁸

Whether or not Ludolphus Nicholas is the "missing link" between Rupert and Jan cannot be conclusively determined. What is certain, though, is that Rupert's writings were revived during van Eyck's lifetime and were widely studied in the centres of the Brotherhood.

In some communities of the Brethren of the Common Life the main source of income came from the copying of manuscripts of various sorts: lives of saints, theological works, liturgical books. The house of St. Jerome, with its scriptorium, was one such centre. The missing link, the Rupertian texts, therefore could have easily issued from Ghent. Thus, one can assume that van Impe could have studied Rupertian thought at Ghent. Through his understanding of the texts van Eyck, in turn, was counselled.

The thrust of the argument for the establishment of the floral program has been in two directions. In the introduction it was pointed out that all studies to date were diffuse in the number of sources and variety of texts cited to bring relevance to the symbolic content of a particular painting. It is not humanly possible for one artist, or his advisors for that matter, to be familiar with all Marian poetry,

theological texts and commentaries of the period. Where other studies have developed floral interpretation from numerous texts this study has systematically attempted to narrow the field to a reasoned and reasonable number.

The interpretation of Mary as the Bride of Christ, a dominant theme of the retable, was initiated by Rupert of Deutz in his commentary on the Song of Solomon. Although his De Victoria Verbi Dei inspired much of the concrete imagery of the retable, this commentary, or more probably its fifteenth century reinterpretation, provided the common denominator between the iconography of the entire Altarpiece and the floral program. Apart from the flowers that act as attributes of the Virgin, the majority of the remaining plants and trees have one quality in common: they emphasize the suffering of the participants in the Adoration panel. The dogmatic theme of the redemption of man, made possible by Christ's sacrifice, which is depicted in the central scene, is underscored by the plants, many of which actively heal wounds, a symbolic reference to the pain and suffering that the martyrs, church fathers and apostles underwent in order to partake of the Eternal Mass and receive salvation. Of the various sources entertained in Part II, the herbal, now lost, given to the Town Hall in 1472 is the most contemporary and, at the same time, the most elusive source. Its origin cannot be confirmed, but if it was produced in the local scriptorium it was readily available to van Eyck.

It seems fitting to close this investigation as it started, by referring to the words of Erwin Panofsky.

In Jan van Eyck, then, all meaning has assumed the shape of reality; or, to put it the other way, all reality is saturated with meaning ...¹⁹

The reality of the flowers in the Ghent Altarpiece Paradise garden has, indeed, been shown to be "saturated with meaning".

NOTES

1. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 362.
2. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 21.
3. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 361.
4. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 362.
5. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 363.
6. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 365-366.
7. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 362.
8. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 366.
9. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 363.
10. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 363, footnote 6.
11. See bibliography for full citation.
12. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 363, footnote 6.
13. Beitz, 144.
14. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 362.
15. Further literature on the brethren can be found in R.R. Post, "Studien over de Broeders van het Gemeene Leven", Nederlandsche Historiebladen 1 (1938) 304-335; 2 (1939) 136-162, and A. Hyma, The Brethren of the Common Life, Grand Rapids (Mich.), 1950.

16. Dhanens, Scriptorium, 366.

17. According to a letter from J.F. Fuggles, Head of the Information Service of the British Library, 14 October, 1977, the life dates of Ludolphus Nicholas of Zwolle have not been found. Indeed, as de Troeyer (an expert in the field) has done considerable research into both printed and manuscript sources and was unable to find the dates, Fuggles concludes that it seems likely that they cannot be found.

18. Dhanens, Altarpiece, 99-100.

19. Panofsky, I, 144.

APPENDIX I

LIST OF THE VEGETATION IN THE ADORATION PANEL

Mediterranean Trees and Bushes

1. Cyprus (*Cupressus sempervirens* L.)
2. Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.)
3. Fig (*Ficus Carica* L.)
4. Pomegranate (*Punica Granatum* L.)
5. Orange (*Citrus Aurantium* L.)
6. Pine (*Pinus Pinea* L.)

Indigenous Trees and Bushes

7. Wild Cherry (*Prunus avium* L.)
8. Fir (*Picea excelsa* Link)
9. Maple? (*Acer* sp.)
10. Gooseberry (*Ribes vulgare* Lam.)
11. Beech? (*Fagus silvatica* L.)
12. Rose (*Rosa* sp.)
13. White Grape (*Vitis vinifera* L.)
14. Viburnum (*Viburnum Opulus* L.? *Viburnum Thymus*?)

Plants and Herbs

15. Columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris* L.)
16. Woodruff (*Asperula odorata* L.)
17. Greater Celandine (*Chelidonium majus* L.)
18. Rose Campion (*Lychnis Coronaria* L.)
19. Wild Strawberry (*Fragaria vesca* L.)
20. Iris (*Iris florentina* L.)

21. Madonna Lily (*Lilium candidum* L.)
22. Lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis* L.)
23. Daisy (*Bellis perennis* L.)
24. Lesser Celandine (*Ranunculus ficaria* L.),
25. Dandelion (*Taraxacum vulgare*).
26. Peony (*Paeonia* sp.)
27. Great Plantain (*Plantago major* L.)
28. Stock (*Matthiola* spec.)
29. Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum* Allioni)
30. Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare* L.)
31. White Clover (*Trifolium repens* L.)
32. Violet (*Viola odorata* L.)

Previously Unidentified Plants

33. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*)
34. Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*)
35. Periwinkle (*Vinca minor*)
36. Herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*)
37. Burnet's Saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*)



PLATE I
THE GREAT POLYPTICH. GLEN CAMPBELL. 1915. 215 cm.
The American Art Museum, New York



IV

II

III

I

VI

V

Plate II



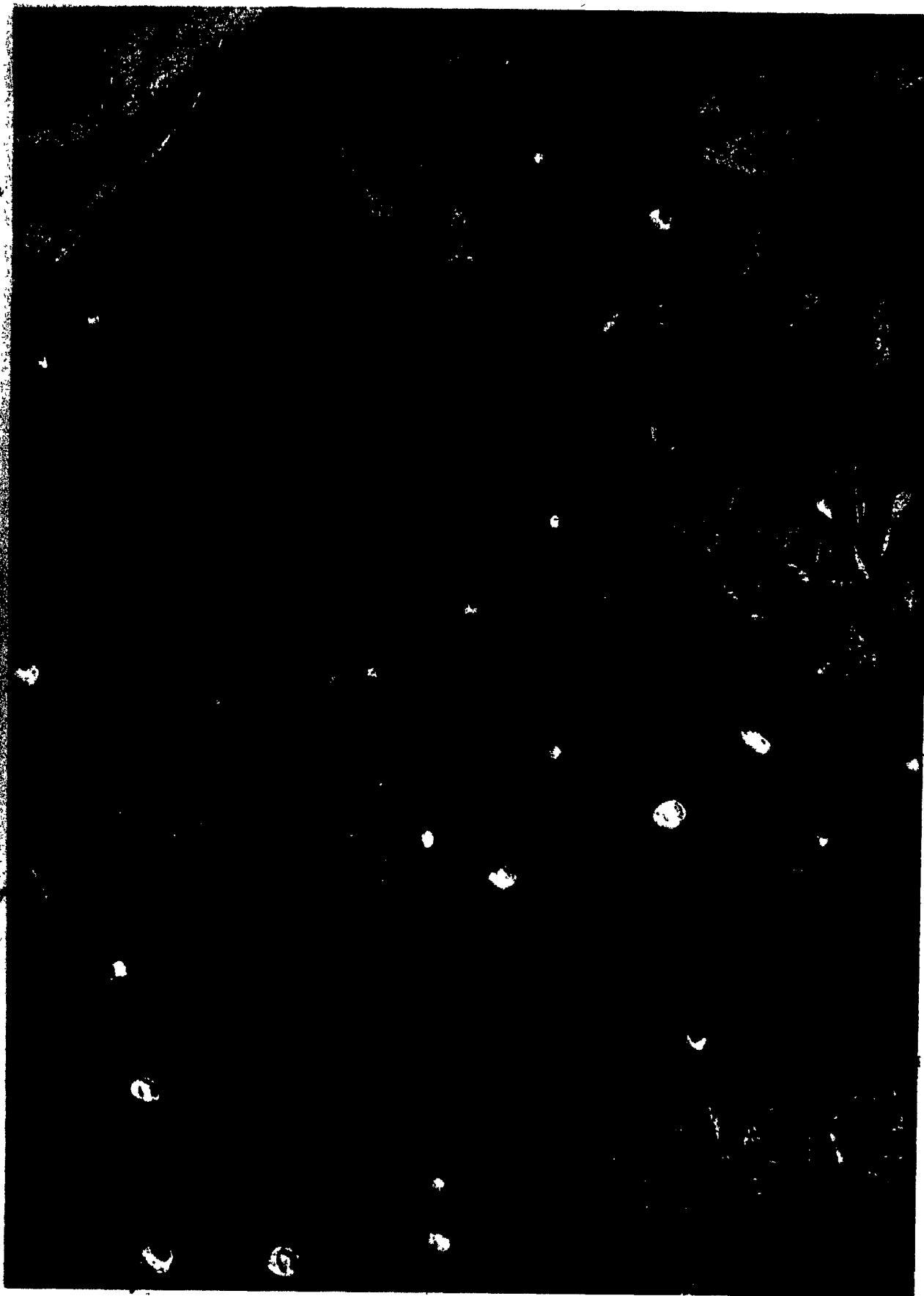


Plate IV



Plate V



Plate VI



Plate VII



Plate VIII



Plate IX



Plate X



Plate XI

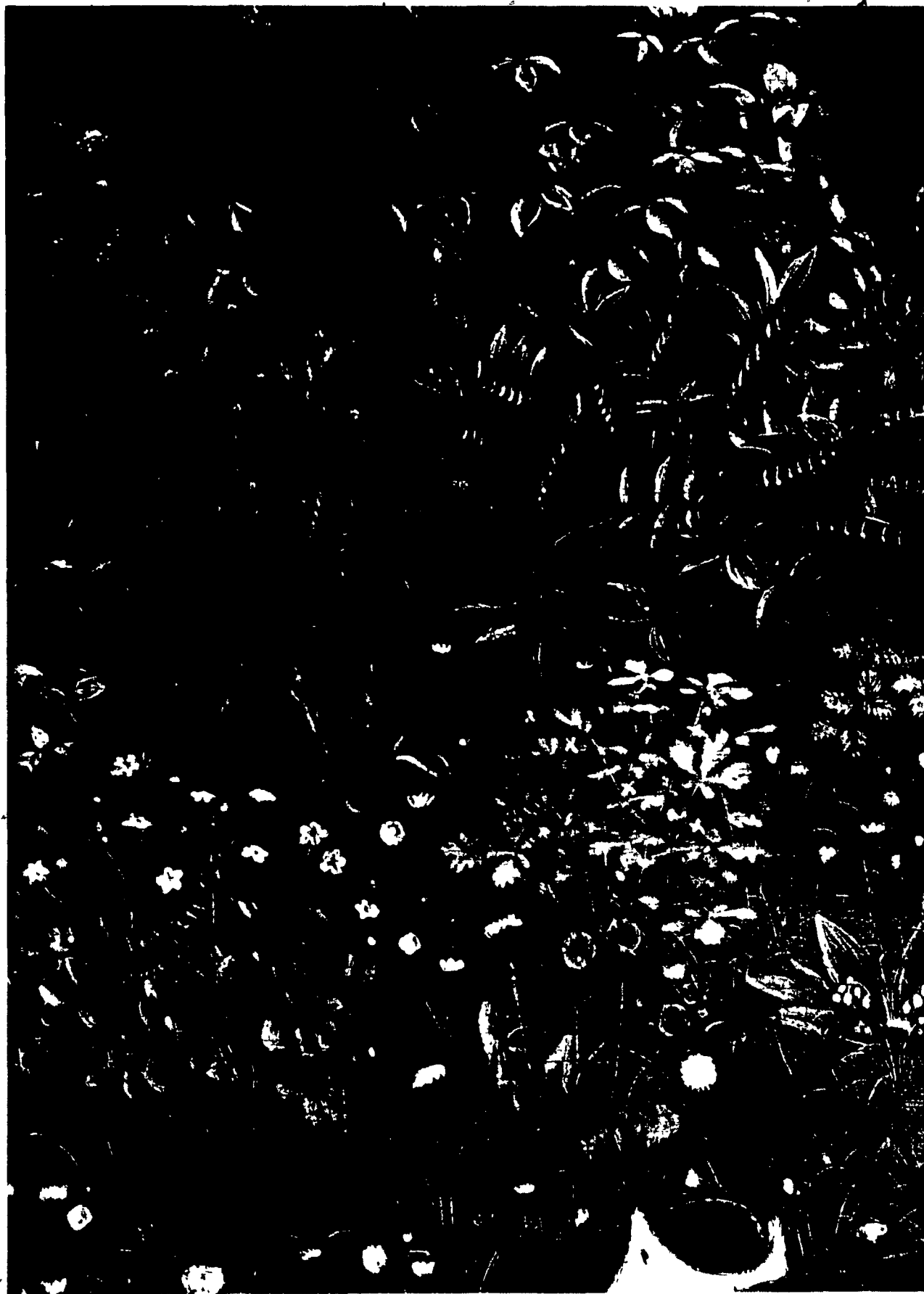




Plate XIII



Plate XIV

