= Nativity (Christus) =

The Nativity is a devotional mid @-@ 1450s oil @-@ on @-@ wood panel painting by the Early Netherlandish painter Petrus Christus . It shows a nativity scene with grisaille archways and trompe @-@ l '?il sculptured reliefs . Christus was influenced by the first generation of Netherlandish artists , especially Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden , and the panel is characteristic of the simplicity and naturalism of art of that period . Placing archways as a framing device is a typical van der Weyden device , and here likely borrowed from that artist 's Altar of Saint John and Miraflores Altarpiece . Yet Christus adapts these painterly motifs to a uniquely mid @-@ 15th century sensibility , and the unusually large panel ? perhaps painted as a central altarpiece panel for a triptych ? is nuanced and visually complex . It shows his usual harmonious composition and employment of one @-@ point @-@ perspective , especially evident in the geometric forms of the shed 's roof , and his bold use of color . It is one of Christus 's most important works . Max Friedländer definitely attributed the panel to Christus in 1930 , concluding that " in scope and importance , [it] is superior to all other known creations of this master . "
The overall atmosphere is one of simplicity , serenity and understated sophistication . It is reflective of the 14th @-@ century Devotio Moderna movement , and contains complex Christian symbolism , subtly juxtaposing Old and New Testament iconography . The sculpted figures in the archway depict biblical scenes of sin and punishment , signaling the advent of Christ 's sacrifice , with an over @-@ reaching message of the " Fall and Redemption of humankind " . Inside the archway , surrounded by four angels , is the Holy Family ; beyond , a landscape extends into the far background .
Art historians have suggested completion dates ranging from the early 1440s to the early 1460s , with c . 1455 seen as probable . The panel was acquired by Andrew Mellon in the 1930s , and was one of several hundreds from his personal collection donated to the National Gallery of Art in Washington . It has suffered damage and was restored in the early 1990s for an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art .

= = Description = =

The panel measures 127 @.@ 6 cm × 94 @.@ 9 cm (50 @.@ 2 in × 37 @.@ 4 in) , unusually large for a 15th @-@ century Early Netherlandish single @-@ panel painting . It covers four oak boards . Although there is no evidence of missing wing panels , its size suggests it was a central altarpiece of a large triptych . Art historian Joel Upton writes that with its size , style , tone and composition , Christus painted " an Andachtsbild , given monumental , ciboriumlike dimensions " . The distinction between the figures and the space around them is characteristic of Christus , as is its one @-@ point perspective . The background landscape is typically serene , as are what Upton describes as the " charming , almost doll @-@ like figures who make up the cast of characters . "
The panel is set in a shed enclosed by two pillars and an archway , rendered in sculpture @-@ like grisaille . Each pillar is supported by a relief hunched figure (atlante) at the base , holding the weight on its shoulders . On each pillar stand statues of Adam and Eve ? Adam on the left and Eve to the right . A marble threshold connects the two structures . On the top corners of the arch are two spandrels ; the archivolts contain six biblical scenes in relief from the Book of Genesis , depicting the Fall of Man . Two are of Adam and Eve ; their expulsion from paradise and Adam tilling the soil . The others are of Cain and Abel : their sacrifice to God ; Cain slaying Abel ; God appearing to Abel ; Cain expelled to the Land of Nod .
In the shed Mary and Joseph share an intensely private moment before the Annunciation to the shepherds of the Christ child 's birth to the shepherds . They are rendered in bright colors . Mary wears a long flowing blue robe , Joseph a green @-@ lined red cape over a brown robe . He holds his hat in hand , and his pattens are respectfully removed , left lying on the ground . They gaze reverently at the newborn figure of Jesus who lies on Mary 's robe . Mary 's features have a softness and sweetness more characteristic of Christus 's later paintings and remarkably similar to his Madonna of the Dry Tree , according to Maryan Ainsworth . Kneeling in adoration to either side are four small angels .

Animals are visible in stalls . Behind them is a crumbling wall with three low Romanesque windows . Four shepherds in contemporary 15th @-@ century clothing are chatting amiably , leaning against the wall , looking into the shed . Two are positioned to the left and two to the right ; in each pair one is dressed in red and an other in blue . Behind the shed is a small hill where two shepherds herd sheep along a pathway , and beyond is a Netherlandish town with two domed structures in its center , symbolizing Jerusalem and Christ 's Passion . The large domed building is based on the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem , a replica of which the Adornes family built in Bruges in 1427 , called the Jerusalem chapel . A flock of geese is visible high in the sky through the roof 's trusses .

Light shines into the shed from outside through the low windows . The shadows cast suggest the dawn of a new day . The four onlookers in the rear are in light and shadow , especially noticeable on the face of the man second from the right . Here Christus borrows an optical device from the work of his predecessors Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden , but is bolder and more accomplished with his use of light , which art professor Lola Gellman describes as having " no counterpoint in previous art . "

= = Iconography = =

The panel is rich in Christian iconography , which reflects the shift in religious attitudes to a more meditative and solitary devotion in the 14th century , exemplified by the Devotio Moderna movement . The painting is devotional ; its iconography clearly juxtaposes Old and New Testament imagery , conveying themes of punishment and redemption , against the belief that a second chance is available through the birth of Christ .

Depictions of the Nativity changed significantly in European art following St Bridget 's visions of the event . According to Upton , the scene " became a source of emotional reward for one 's faith , a private vision in response to one 's contemplation . " In Bridget 's version of the event , Mary does not lie in a bed while giving birth . The event occurs in a cave , where , dressed in white , Mary kneels or stands in devotion before the infant lying on the ground . Joseph holds a candle to illuminate the birth . Robert Campin 's c . 1420 Nativity is representative of Bridget 's narrative ; the cave has been substituted by a shed with animals , Mary 's handmaidens are present , while angels and shepherds rejoice . Christus simplified the narrative : removing the handmaidens and relegating the animals to the background . Mary 's white dress is replaced with a deep @-@ blue robe . His Nativity is somber and subdued , an embodiment of the " austere calm of timeless worship . "

The Nativity conveys both the Old Testament themes of sin and punishment and the New Testament doctrine of sacrifice and redemption . Although Adam and Eve to either side of the arch are suggestive of those in van Eyck 's Ghent Altarpiece , they differ significantly . Here they are painted as grisaille statues in contrast to van Eyck 's lifelike versions ; and , unlike van Eyck 's , here Adam and Eve stand in shame hiding their nudity . Earthly sin and strife , anger and revenge , are represented in the warriors in the corner spandrels , and signify that which Christ 's birth would bring to an end .

Themes of punishment and redemption are further explored in the six scenes on the arch , where the reliefs show the events from Genesis 4 : 1 ? 16 (from left to right) : The angel of God expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden ; post @-@ Expulsion life " when Adam delved and Eve spun " ; the sacrifices of Cain and Abel ; Cain killing Abel ; (top) God banishing Cain ; Cain saying farewell to his parents , or possibly his brother Seth leaving to find the Tree of Life , a Jewish legend from The Apocalypse of Moses , a pseudepigraphical work from antiquity .

The two uppermost reliefs on the arch , which have a central focus and function as keystones , bring attention to the juxtaposition of Old and New Testament themes . The relief to the left shows Cain and Abel sacrificing to God ; on the right Cain commits the sin of murder , which God punishes . The two reliefs also function as a temporal device , leading the viewer directly to the moment of Christ 's birth and mankind 's redemption , which occurs below in the shed . The viewer is reminded that mankind must sacrifice to Christ , who lies directly below , or risk punishment and expulsion from the church , just as God expelled Cain . The Fall of man acted out on the archway reminds the viewer of the " necessity of Christ 's sacrifice " .

The semicircle of rock inside the doorsill remind the viewer to abandon sin . The viewer is reminded to reach a full understanding of the significance of the event , achieved with the two groupings of shepherds at the rear of the shed . Two of the four are active and two are passive . The man dressed in blue on the left is listening ; the man in blue to the right is seeing , while their counterparts in red do neither . Although actively looking and listening , the two men in blue do not appear to have a full understanding of the event . Upton explains the medieval viewer would have understood that in the iconography Christus presented " man who would listen without hearing , and look without seeing . " The viewer is reminded to comprehend the painting 's vision and iconography , to fully recognize the significance of Christ 's coming , to hear and see the word of God , and to obey God 's wishes .

The tuft of grass sprouting from the roof 's central truss above the figures conveys multiple meanings . Although the shrub is naturally rendered , Christus almost certainly placed it there for its symbolic value ; its positioning suggests he followed a program of disguised iconography . The most obvious meaning is of new life and new beginnings . On a secular level , the shrub may have indicated Christus 's membership in the Confraternity of the Dry Tree , which he joined sometime around 1462 ? 63 . The confraternity was prestigious , including among its ranks Burgundian nobility , such as Philip the Good and his wife Isabella , wealthy foreign merchants and members from Bruges 's upper classes . The tuft of grass also symbolizes the tree of life , and Upton theorizes that by placing it there , Christus " has given expression to the legend " of Adam 's third son , Seth , whose quest for a branch was a popular legend in the medieval period . Furthermore , alludes to Moses and the burning bush . According to Upton , in Christus 's Nativity Joseph assumes Moses 's role of protector and law @-@ bringer ; just as Joseph has removed his pattens in the presence of Christ , Moses removed his shoes in the presence of the bush .

The setting represents the Mass ? the angels are clothed in Eucharistic vestments , with those on the far right dressed in a deacon 's cope . None wear the celebrant 's chasuble , suggesting Christ is the priest . The shed roof is a ciborium over an altar . A later addition to the painting , added perhaps in the 17th century , and since removed , was a gold paten on which the infant lay , clearly showing Jesus as the Eucharistic host . Mary , Joseph and the angels are the first to worship the infant Christ and the shed " becomes the altar of the first mass " . Upton explains that when viewed in the context of the first mass the iconography is more clearly defined .

= = Composition = =

Christus was the first Netherlandish painter to achieve proficiency in strict mathematical compositional rules with his use of orthogonals , creating a unified perspective . The concept of compositions " based on unitary perspective " was largely a pioneering effort on Christus 's part , although he borrowed from the earlier masters . Compositionally , the Nativity is one of Christus 's most complex and important works , which Ainsworth says is masterfully integrated with the use of color . X @-@ radiography reveals sketched orthogonal lines on the underpainting , used to indicate where the horizontal and vertical axis should meet at the main figures ' heads , and that he used a compass to sketch the spandrels .

The painting contains several geometric constructions . The roof of the shed 's trusses form series of triangles connecting lines joining the base of the pedestals and the crossbeams . These surround the gathering of the Holy Family , who form an inverse pattern . According to art historian Lawrence Steefel , " the detail participates in an almost emblematic pattern of repeated triangles which establish a rhyme scheme above and below , of roof structure and figure disposition . " Upton writes that a " clearly defined diamond " is visible within the apex in the roof . From there it extends down to Eve , and the bottom apex is formed where the infant lies on the ground . It then extends up to Adam and back up to the roof . " This diamond shape , " he writes , " supplemented by the rectangle within it , formed by the shed supports , the base of the triangle and the ground line in the shed , circumscribes the main event of the painting . "

Spatial and temporal borders separating the earthly and heavenly spheres are often seen in Netherlandish art , usually in the form of frames or arches . A boundary is achieved here with the

grisaille archway , strongly reminiscent of van der Weyden 's work . Art historians speculate Christus may have imitated his c . 1455 Altar of Saint John . Instead of merely imitating , Christus innovated and extended the use of van der Weyden 's arch motif ; his arch is meant to be an opening , or a screen , for the viewer to see into the holy space , instead of a simple framing device in which figures are placed directly in @-@ line or under the arch . The multi @-@ hued threshold stones at the bottom emphasize its function says Upton , who writes : " it is an opening through which one passes : a true frame or doorway to the picture ... Yet , since this arch is painted in grisaille , distinct from the rest of the panel , it must also be seen as a separate entity , much like an elaborate border around an illuminated manuscript page . " The shadows cast by the grisaille figures stress " its function as a diaphragm between real and illusory space " .

 A very similar archway is found in Dieric Bouts 's c . 1445 Mary Altarpiece , including spandrels with warriors . Art historians are unsure which was painted earlier ? Christus 's Nativity or Bouts 's altarpiece . Equally , van der Weyden 's arched triptychs were executed at roughly the same period , but art historians are more certain Rogier 's archivolt design set the precedent . Unlike Bouts and van der Weyden , Christus appears to have used the device to encompass a single scene , incorporating all the main characters within the arch , instead of a linked series of scenes with separate archways .

 The arch is only a prelude to the complex divisions beyond . The space inhabited by the Holy Family is holy ground . Mary , Joseph , the Christ child and the four surrounding angels occupy a space partitioned in the front by the archway and by the wall at the rear . A semicircle of figures is positioned around Christ , echoed in the semicircle of rocks placed directly inside the doorsill . Mary and Joseph are echoed by the colorful vertical porphyry columns on the sides , and by the statues of Adam and Eve . The rear of the shed where the four men stand , the small valley with the shepherds , the town , and the background landscape are also spatially discrete areas , which create a " steady , measured movement into space in place of the more abrupt jumping from foreground to distant background common to Flemish painting . " They also function to surround the Holy Family while simultaneously preventing its isolation from the world . Ainsworth writes that the " message of the painting quietly emerges from the strict , perspectively correct space constructed to engage the viewer . " Upton agrees , explaining that the use of geometric devices emphasize the focal point , which " falls well below the horizon in the exact center of the panel " , a perspective that would have given the 15th center viewer , kneeling in front of the panel , a " sense of physical relationship between the actual and ideal act of worship . "

= = Dating and condition = =

 The Nativity 's dating has long been a source of debate among scholars . Estimations range from the mid @-@ 1440s to the mid @-@ 1450s ; early in Christus 's career to about the time van der Weyden painted his c . 1455 Altar of St John . Generally the mid @-@ 1450s seems the most accepted . Ainsworth considers it , along with Christus 's Holy Family (currently in Kansas City) , one of the most important attributed to him and believes it belongs in his later oeuvre , possibly as late as the mid @-@ 1460s . Evidence such as when Christus joined the Confraternity of the Dry Tree (c. early 1460s) points to it as a later work along with the Portrait of a Young Girl . Its use of perspective and assimilation of van Eyck 's and van der Weyden 's earlier influences also suggest a later date . Furthermore , the softer facial types utilized in the Nativity are typical of Christus 's later work , and suggest a date around the mid @-@ 1450s . Technical analysis (dendrochronological evidence) suggests a date of c . 1458 , based on the tree felling date . Christus painted two other versions of the Nativity : one in Bruges and the other in Berlin . The Bruges Nativity is dated 1452 ? whether the date was added by Christus or during a restoration is unknown ? and technical analysis of the brushstrokes suggests it to be earlier than the Washington Nativity .

 Determining the execution date relies on stylistic analysis , and the degree of van der Weyden 's influence . The dating of the work to the 1440s is based on the notion that Christus borrowed heavily from the immediate influence of van der Weyden and Bouts . Although some of the similarities are undeniably striking and might be attributed to following a template , the degree of sophistication in

the Nativity far surpasses the other two painters , according to Ainsworth . She writes that Bouts and van der Weyden " merely expand the narrative " in their use of the archway motif , whereas Christus shows a strong cause and effect between sin and redemption , innovations which almost certainly evolved later in his career , placing the date no earlier than the mid @-@ 1450s .

 The underdrawing is visible through modern technical analysis , revealing the main group of figures and contour lines in the folds and drape of the clothing . The angels ' wings to Mary 's left are visible , but not those to the right , probably because of later overpainting . In the underdrawing Mary 's gown extends far to the left of the angel , but Christus apparently changed his mind about its execution .

 The work has suffered damage : cracking where three wood panels are joined , paint loss to parts of the crackle pattern , and discoloration of varnishes . The largest area of paint loss occurred on Joseph 's shoulder . Mary 's robe has been completely restored and overpainted . Some paint loss is barely discernible in the areas around her hair . In many areas the paint layers and underlying support are in good condition .

 The Nativity was one of 13 works hung at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 's 1994 exhibition , " Petrus Christus : Renaissance Master of Bruges " . It underwent significant restoration in preparation . Technicians removed over @-@ paint probably dating to its Spanish provenance . The addition included the gold paten on Mary 's robe , pigment under the Christ child , and the halos above Mary and Jesus . As early as 1916 , Friedländer questioned the presence of halos in Christus 's work , rarely seen in mid @-@ 15th century Netherlandish painting . When the halos were carefully examined they were found to be later additions ; before the exhibition they were removed from several paintings , including the Portrait of a Carthusian .

= = Provenance = =

 The painting is today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington , D.C. , which was conceived by Pittsburgh financier Andrew Mellon in the late 1930s . It was one of 126 paintings from his personal collection donated to the gallery and was on display at the museum opening in March 1941 ? three years after his death .

 It belonged to Señora O. Yturbe of Madrid , who sold it in 1930 to Franz M. Zatzenstein , founder of the Matthiesen Gallery in Berlin . That April , the Duveen Brothers , less affected by the 1929 stock market crash than other dealers , paid Zatzenstein £ 30 @,@ 000 , in cash , for the painting and sold it immediately to Mellon . A dealer usually had to go through the lengthy process of sending photographs of a painting via trans @-@ Atlantic ship to an American buyer and then wait for a reply ; the transaction for the Nativity is exceptional because it is the first painting of which the photograph was wired via Marconi cable from England to America . To avoid the export fees due if the painting been sent directly to New York , the Duveens took a circuitous route ? from Madrid to Germany , then to Paris and America . In 1936 it was acquired by the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust , and gifted to the National Gallery a year later .

 Given its size and orientation , the panel was probably meant to stand alone , but may have been conceived as the wing of triptych altarpiece . Who commissioned the piece or how it came to be in the possession of a Spanish owner is unknown . At least half of Christus 's known patrons were Italian or Spanish , and he often changed his style to suit their desire . Around eight of his paintings ? only about 25 are extant ? have come from either Italy or Spain , giving credence to speculation that he spent time there . Yet the existence of the thriving export market in early Netherlandish panel painting suggests equally that it could have been painted in Bruges and transported south .