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## ST. BRIDGET

The religious currents, which dominated Europe, one after the other during the time of St. Bridget, are clearly reflected in sculpture and painting. In her youth, in the beginning of the 14th century a deep religious conception predominated. It gave expression to the devoted contemplation of the sufferings of Christ, which in the spirit of St. Bernhard had been developed by St. Francis of Assisi, and then so to say had been organised by St. Bonaventura. This predilection for the tragic, that has got its great monument in Dante's journey to hell and purgatory, has left many traces in Italian art of the 13th century. We find works of this kind north of the Alps from about 1300. From this time date the spiritualized sculptures of apostles and prophets on the cathedral of Strasburg. This style flourished until the middle of the century. During the period of the religious tragical style, motives of the Virgin of pietà and of Christ bearing his cross evolved into independent representations in art. An example is to be seen in the almost caricatured tragical pietà sculpture in Veste Coburg. During this period and from this kind of comprehension St. Bridget had received impressions decisive for her whole life. When she at the age of 46 — she had just become a widow — in 1349 set out on her journey for Rome, her strange character developed under these conditions was already formed.

Before the earnest religious style, founded on the monastic ideal, quite another, optimistic conception had prevailed, which has stamped the harmonious and elegant works, which from the middle of the 13th century were created by the Paris sculptors in the spirit of the wordly, French aristocracy. The best representative of this is the statue of Our Lady in the north porch of Notre Dame in Paris. Compared with her cheerful, radiant figure, the

uncertainty, the helplessness, the sentiment filled with conceptions of suffering in the art of the beginning 14th century sets off clearly.

The religious style again was met in the middle of the 14th century by a mighty opposition, a realistic mind and way of thinking, that as a strong contrast to the spiritualizing and refinement of the religious style turned towards the commonplace, the obvious, the ugly, even the coarse. This style, which also has got positive qualities in its power and heaviness, as is seen for instance in sculptures in Prague from about 1360 by Peter Parler, has been called the first bourgeois realism. Certainly St. Bridget could express herself in a realistic — even drastic way, she was however eagerly adverse to the realistic style because of its predilection for triviality and its lack of veneration for holyness. We shall see an example of her endeavour to remove such features from art in her revelation of the nativity of Christ. The bourgeois realism is from about 1380 followed by the period of the great harmony, the characteristic of which are the beautiful forms, the softly curved, unbroken lines and the lyric refinement. St. Bridget died in 1373 and consequently did not live to witness this period, which with enthusiasm adopted her effort to deliver art from the commonplace element, that had penetrated the representations of the life of Christ. Even if she never dreamt of the lyric, often equally worldly as spiritual loveliness of the beautiful, international style, that would follow about 1400, she however actively contributed to prepare the way for its ideals.

Only a few of St. Bridget's revelations have been represented in painting, sculpture or the graphic arts. Among these *one* however, that is the revelation about the birth of Christ, which St. Bridget received while visiting Bethlehem in 1372, has given the impulse to a totally new formation of this subject, at first in Italian art, later also north of the Alps. St. Bridget surely had no evident artistic ambition. But she was aware that the growing realism in the representations in art of the events of the Gospels often had led to triviality and banality, and reduced them to more commonplace scenes. It is scarcely astonishing, if St. Bridget disapproved of such pictures which for instance illustrate the poorness of the holy Family by representing Joseph taking off his trousers and using them to wrap in the new-born child with, because everything was missing, even swaddling-clothes. To St. Bridget it was by no

means the question of describing a natural event. The birth of Christ was and remained something supernatural. We may remember that St. Bridget in another connection has revealed something essential about her religious attitude, when she declared that divinity is totally incomprehensible to man and that Christ chose human shape, to make it possible for us to conceive anything at all of him and what he said. That St. Bridget succeeded in her intentions when she wanted to deliver art from the trivial taste, is connected with the fact, that the period which took charge of the inheritance from her was as a whole affected by a taste for beauty, refinement and idealizing of the human world. St. Bridget was one of the first to react against the low realistic taste, dominating Europe in the middle of the 14th century. Though generally not giving the impression of a lyrical person, St. Bridget anticipates the great lyric period of about 1380–1430 in occidental art.

St. Bridget's attitude to art is most clearly to be seen in her revelations of the nativity. She had been occupied to work it out and pondered over its contents at least during 15 years, or from the day where the Virgin in an earlier revelation had promised her that she once would come to Bethlehem, where St. Mary would show her, as she had said "how it was when I begot my son". She received the revelation in the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and made it after her return to Italy immediately known. She was anxious to reform the comprehension of the birth of Christ, and was eager to propagate for the circulating of her opinion of how it happened. This is made quite evident from a special and further revelation about the nativity, in which St. Mary enforced on her the importance of that St. Bridget's vision of the nativity were acknowledged as the only truthful description of it. Her words are clear enough, and they show, that St. Bridget insisted upon that her version of the birth was something new, that was opposed to the prevalent comprehension. As St. Mary says: "And this thou shalt know, that though people assert, that my son was born in the ordinary way, it is still true and above all doubt that he was born, as I told thee before, and as thou now have behold".

In her revelation in Bethlehem St. Bridget anew saw the drama of the birth before her eyes. Through many characteristic details her description differs from the reports of others. She saw St. Mary and Joseph coming, how they with the ox and the ass sought

shelter in the cave. Joseph, usually described as a trivial, even ridiculous figure, means to St. Bridget a worthy and holy man. He lighted a candle, which he left in the cave, and then went outside, so that he might not be present at the birth. Then the virgin pulled off her shoes, drew off the white mantle, removed the veil from her head, laying it by her side, thus remaining in her tunic alone, her hair falling down her shoulders. Then she produced two small linen clothes and two woollen ones in which to wrap up the child who was to be born. When all this was prepared she knelt down in an attitude of prayer, the hands extended and suddenly, in a moment she gave birth to her son. All of a sudden the infant was lying on the ground, and from him radiated an ineffable light. When St. Mary felt she had born the child she greeted it with the words: "Be welcome my God, my Lord and my Son".

Of greatest importance in St. Bridget's vision is the kneeling of St. Mary in attitude of prayer. Earlier she always was represented as a woman in childbed as in this fresco in Rome by Cavallini from the end of the 13th century. This idea of St. Bridget was soon adopted by the Italian painters. As early as in 1380, such a representation is mentioned in the church of St. Antonio extra muros in Naples and at the end of the nineties or about 1400 a fresco was painted in Sta Maria Novella in Florens in accordance with St. Bridget. St. Bridget herself is represented at the side, watching the event, a fact that puts beyond all doubt that the picture refers to her revelation and is not meant as merely a representation of the nativity. In the same way she is depicted at the side of the nativity in several other Italian paintings. Before long the new interpretation of the Nativity is also introduced in art north of the Alps, and also here we find instances of the Saint watching the scene. From about 1420 the new scheme has been generally accepted. St. Bridget had reached her aim: the realistic representation of St. Mary as a woman in childbed had disappeared from art.

If the praying attitude of the Virgin is a novelty introduced by St. Bridget, on the other hand her revelation has contributed to the reintroduction of an old-fashioned detail, which the gothic art north of the Alps had discarded from the Nativity, that is the Byzantine cave. St. Bridget mentions however the cave only by the way, even though the cave to her meant the evident place for



Pietà; Vestibule Coburg.

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Our Lady of the North Porch; Paris, Notre Dame.



The Monument of Ottokar I; Cathedral, Prag, by Peter Parler.

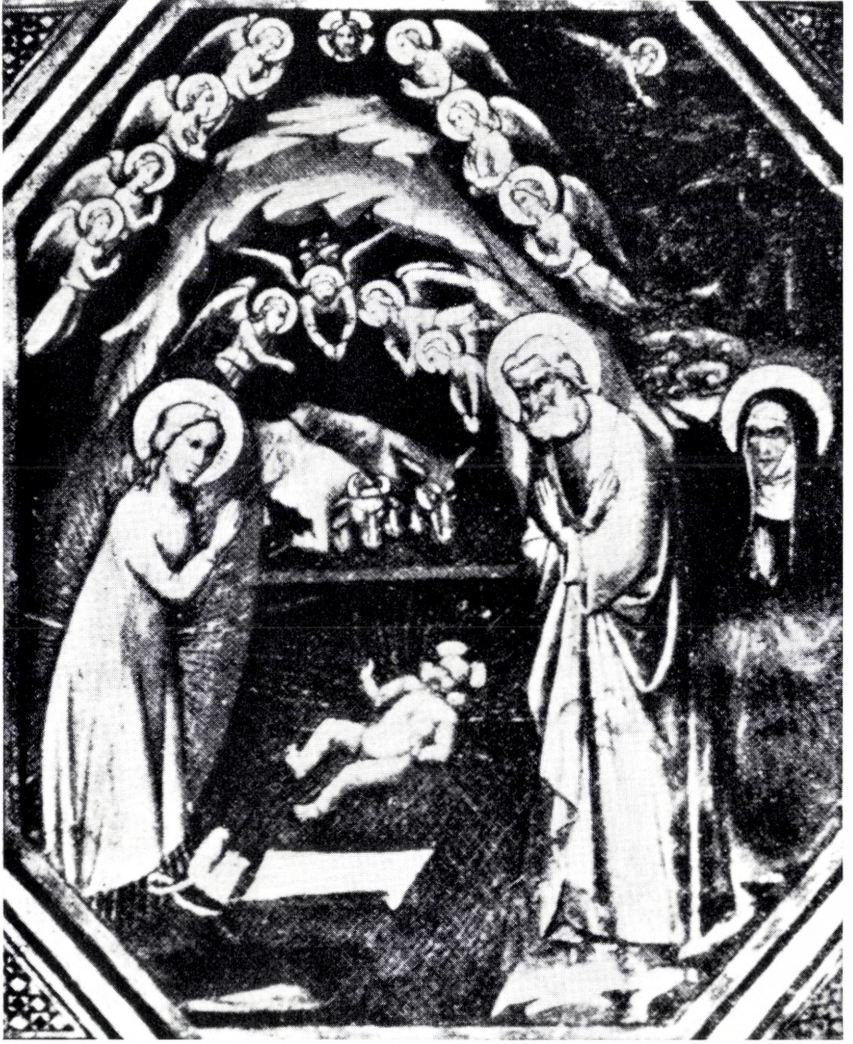


The Coronation of the Virgin;  
 by Pol de Limbourg, from the «Très riches Heures» du Duc de Barry.  
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Nativity; S. Maria in Trastevere, Rome, by Pietro Cavallini.



Nativity; S. Maria Novella, Firenze, about 1395.



Nativity; les Heures de Milan.

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Crucifixion, by a follower of Guido da Siena; Wellesley, Mass., U.S.A.

the birth. The fact that the cave was reintroduced in the French painting, as in this miniature of the Heures de Milan, is not only to be considered as an influence from St. Bridget but also from Italy. The Byzantine cave had namely never been excluded in the gothic art of Italy. We just saw it on the fresco of Sta Maria in Trastevere by Pietro Cavallini. Later the conception of the nativity-cave survived as a cellar-window or a pit in the earth admitting a view into the cave, which we sometimes come across in Nativity scenes of the 15th and 16th centuries.

If we now are going to consider a revelation which St. Bridget has composed of material which she has found in art, we choose one of her chief experiences, namely the revelation she received 1372 in the church of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. She here beheld the whole drama of the crucifixion and has given us a detailed description of it. She was acquainted with many from each other in smaller details differing narrations of the theme. But surely she also has seen and been impressed by pictures, such as this one of the 13th century painted by a successor of Guido da Siena. We shall only point at the most characteristic features. St. Bridget saw the rock of Golgotha and a hole in it, where the cross was fastened. She saw how they erected the cross and wedged it into the fissure of the rock with wooden nails, hammered down by the executioners (tormentors). She saw how they made an arrangement of ladders, on which Christ and the executioners could mount. She saw how the Saviour was fastened on the cross with one nail through each hand. One foot was crossed over the other, then both feet together were fastened with two nails. When the drama of death was completed and they had taken down the body of Christ, St. Bridget saw the mourning Mary, sitting with the body of her dead son on her knees (an analogy with the Virgin of Pietà so called Pietà in art).

In the well-known and in art usual iconography, Christ is as a rule fastened on the cross *before* it is raised. In literature the previously (in advance) raised cross occurs in St. Bonaventura. Most likely St. Bridget has seen pictures of the kind our slide shows, they were however not very common.

When St. Bridget finally beholds the Virgin sitting with the Corpus Christi on her knees, she surely has taken the motive from art. It belonged to the new, tragically sentimental motives

created by the intense piety in the beginning of the 14th century. To the earliest known works of art with this motive belongs the exaggerated description of affliction and pain we have seen in the sculptured pietà in Veste Coburg from about 1320. The motive had very soon grown popular in art and was frequent in the time of St. Bridget. In literature it appears as soon as shortly after the middle of the 13th century. It is mentioned by St. Bonaventura in authentic works in a way, which presumes that it was commonly known. Telling us after the crucifixion that the Virgin held the body of her dead son upon her knees, he adds: "Ut pie creditur", "as we piously believe" — hence, a reservation, it shows however that the motive even at this time belonged to a current tradition.

If somebody now asks to what extent St. Bridget herself has created the literary motives, not taken from the Bible, it is to be considered that for the middle ages the originality of a work or of an author was a question of less importance. Narratives intended to enrich the sometimes spare epic matter of the Gospels, formed a long and rich tradition, which St. Bridget followed. Many of the religious motives, described by her, we meet in earlier authors; they were however so well known, that the exact origin cannot be fixed with certainty. Evidently she could, like St. Bonaventura often have added: "ut pie creditur", in that way telling us that she had taken the motive from a current tradition. The meditations of Pseudo-Bonaventura have been pointed out as the chief source for the iconography of the late middle ages. The contents of this book are however also to be found in other connections. The almost generally accepted theory of EMILE MALE about the meditations, ought to be considerably modified. The *authentic* works of Bonaventura on the other hand must be regarded as primary sources, from which the unknown Franciscan, who compiled the meditations, fetched most of his matter. We now know that he was not — as used to be believed — identical with Johannes a Canlibus. Possibly St. Bridget has, through her own reading and quite certainly through discourses with her confessors and other learned persons, been acquainted with a good deal of Bonaventura's ideas, surely also the Meditations. For us it is of importance to state, that she did not take the essential in her revelation of the nativity from the Meditations. The kneeling position of the Virgin is in the Meditations not sanctified and supernatural as by

St. Bridget, but considered as the position of an earthly woman while bearing. This is made evident by the annexed columns alluding to a more or less spread, popular belief, that the act of the birth would be made easier, if the confined woman stood up-right holding on to a post or a column.

For the north-south communication in mediaeval Europe the personality and work of St. Bridget was of the greatest importance. Through her confessor Matthias, dean of the chapter of Linköping, she acquired in her youth much knowledge, which he had collected while studying in Paris and Italy. At her arrival in Rome she possessed already a broad religious education. Through her many friends in Italian aristocracy, through frequent conversations and correspondence with her confessors and other learned men in Rome, her knowledge was multiplied. With her revelations it was sent out to all parts of occidental christianity. She always remained in Rome, where she had lived for 24 years when she died in 1373. But in the shape of the revelations, and through the convent that she had founded, she mentally returned to her northern native country. The history of herself and of her thoughts therefore gives us an impressing idea of the perpetual reciprocal communication between the north and the south in mediaeval Europe.