

JAN PROVOOST

(Bergen-Mons, Henegouwen c.1465 - Bruges 1529)

The Madonna and Child in a Niche, an Extensive Landscape beyond

oil on panel (arched top)
49.2 x 34.2 cm (19³/₈ x 13¹/₂ in)

LUDWIG MEYER HAS CONFIRMED THE ATTRIBUTION of this work. He dates *The Madonna and Child in a Niche, an Extensive Landscape Beyond* to c.1500 and notes a comparison with a triptych in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, (fig. 1). Mary gently cradles her son, whilst standing in front of a simple hanging, which frames her and reinforces the focus of the viewer onto the Virgin, rather than the extensive landscape which is visible on either side. This technique is reminiscent of another of Jan Provoost's work, the Prado's *Virgin and Child*, though there the framing device is a much more detailed, embroidered tapestry (fig. 2). The whole work is framed by the painted, fictive architecture of the niche.

The Madonna and Child in a Niche displays a number of similarities with the rest of Provoost's oeuvre, not least the subject matter. However, although he did paint numerous images of the Virgin and Child early in his career, this present work displays a number of typical characteristics that recur in many of his later paintings. These include the shape and position of the Madonna's hands with their long fingers bent at the second joint, or the idealised, tender faces with high foreheads, wide cheeks and protruding lower lips. This type of face, although constructed as in Rogier van der Weyden's (c.1399-1464) work - he had a great influence on painting in Bruges through Hans Memling (c.1435-1494) - and modelled by light, has more in common with the tradition of northern French painting than with the Flemish Primitives.

Provoost's *Madonna with the Child* (fig. 3) was bequeathed to the



Jan Provoost, *Triptych with the Virgin and Child, John the Evangelist, and Mary Magdalene*, c.1520-25,
The Mauritshuis, The Hague (Figure 1)



Jan Provoost, *Virgin and Child*, early sixteenth century,
The Prado, Madrid (Figure 2)

Hermitage by the Russian diplomat Dmitry Tatishchev, (1767-1845), together with his collections of weapons, sculpture, mosaics and paintings. Among the most valuable items from the Tatishchev collection were Spanish and Netherlandish paintings, in particular diptychs by Jan van Eyck (c.1395-1441) and Robert Campin (c.1375/9-1444), as well as this work by Provoost.

The Hermitage work is clearly comparable to *The Madonna and Child in a Niche*. The Virgin's right hand has one of those characteristic bent fingers, the same heavy-lidded eyes and a beautifully modelled face and neck. Both works also use colour to highlight Mary, the Hermitage's painting using a bold red to stand out against the dark





Jan Provoost, *Madonna with the Child*, between 1465 and 1529, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; acquired from the collection of D. P. Tatishchev, St. Petersburg (according to the owner's bequest), 1845 (Figure 3)

background. However, in *The Madonna and Child in a Niche*, Provoost dresses Mary in folds of pink, then the colours of the painting recede with the landscape into a muted green and finally to the hazy blue.

In many ways, however, the paintings are very different, despite depicting the same two figures. In *Madonna with the Child*, the painting seems to be of Mary as Queen of Heaven. Dressed in a luxurious red garment with a fur trim and a gold belt, she is being crowned by two angels, and Christ's gesture directs the viewer's attention toward her. However, in *The Madonna and Child in a Niche*, Mary is dressed less regally, although still extremely elegantly. Rather than the crown she has a halo, as does Christ, so that there is a slight change of emphasis towards their spirituality. She also cradles Christ, supporting his head with her long thumb and so the relationship between mother and son becomes more of a focus.

In another of Provoost's paintings housed in the Hermitage, *The Virgin Mary in Glory*, both of these roles are realised in one work (fig. 4). One of Provoost's best works, the painting was produced in 1524 for the Cathedral of St. Donatian in Bruges, but it was bricked up during religious unrest of the 1560s to save it from the iconoclasts and immediately forgotten. It was discovered only in 1796 when the cathedral was destroyed by the French, and it entered the collection of King William II of the Netherlands (1792-1849). In the painting, there is a definite sense of Mary as Queen of Heaven as she stands surrounded by a golden aureole. However there are also elements that reinforce her role as mother of Christ. In the hands of the Persian Sibyl, for example,

is a scroll with the inscription *cremium virginis erit salus gentium* ('The womb of the Virgin will bring salvation to humankind'). There are also stylistic similarities between *The Madonna and Child in a Niche* and *The Virgin Mary in Glory* such as the central vertical spine of both compositions and the use of landscape in the background.

Provoost probably came into contact with Simon Marmion (c.1425-1489), the renowned painter and book illuminator from Valenciennes, via Jacquemart Pilavaine (fl.1450-1485), a publisher and illuminator in his native Bergen. Provoost married Marmion's widow, Jeanne de Quaroube, c.1491, and also inherited his studio and it is consequently often assumed that Marmion was his teacher. Provoost's time as a pupil in the workshop of the northern French miniaturist was certainly a decisive influence on his work. A comparison between *The Madonna and Child in a Niche* and Marmion's miniature of *Saint Bernard's Vision of the Virgin and Child* illustrates this influence (fig. 5). Both works have the same assured, precise drawing, evident in the hair or drapery of Marmion's figures, or the foliage in Provoost's landscape. The figures have the same restrained expressions and high foreheads and both backgrounds include light, airy landscapes.

The Madonna and Child in a Niche is as finely painted as a miniature and has similarities with another probable pupil of Marmion's, Jean Bellegambe of Douai (c.1470-1535/6), who was known as 'the Master of Colours' in the seventeenth-century. Both artists used the same bright, soft colouring and favoured complex theological content. The calm and



Jan Provoost, *The Virgin Mary in Glory*, 1524, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; acquired from the collection of William II, The Hague, 1850 (Figure 4)

serenity of Bellegambe's compositions, his treatment of landscape, his lightness of technique, his pursuit of clear, soft colours and delicate harmonies all indicate links with the work of Gérard David (c.1460-1523) and Quinten Metsys (1466-1530), artists who also have strong similarities with Provoost's work.

In 1493, two years after marrying Marmion's widow, Provoost moved to Antwerp, a promising town for artists, where he registered as a master at the Guild of St. Luke. It was here that he came into contact, for the first time, with Metsys, an artist considered to be the first representative of the Flemish Renaissance. Metsys should also be considered an influence on Provoost's innovations to the tradition of the Flemish Primitives. Both artists' work is characterised by very pure line, fine modelling and delicate use of colour.

However, in 1494 he travelled to Bruges, became a citizen there and soon started to play an important part in the painters' guild and took on pupils, such as Maximiliaen Frans (1490-1547). The demand for painting in Bruges was linked to the city's expanding population and its prosperous merchant communities and urban nobility, who embellished their own houses and founded private family chapels in the parish churches, furnishing them with liturgical objects and altarpieces. As a result, in the second half of the fifteenth century and the first three decades of the sixteenth, an increasing number of painters came to Bruges for their professional advancement. Provoost received numerous commissions for decorative work from the town council and church authorities including work on the decorations for the triumphal entry of Charles V (1500-1558) into Bruges, in 1520. He returned to Antwerp the same year to meet Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), who may have drawn his portrait. Dürer visited Bruges in April 1521 and was Provoost's guest. He became very successful in Bruges, where there was relatively little competition for commissions after the death of Memling in 1494.

It seems likely that Provoost also visited Italy at some point, possibly as a stop on his way to the Holy Land. In 1523 Provoost is listed as a member of the Fraternity of Jerusalem Pilgrims and in 1527 is listed as governor of that organisation. In fact, the register of deaths kept by the Bruges Corporation of Image Makers describes him as *schilder* and *ridder* ('painter' and 'knight'), thus suggesting that he may have been a Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.

Provoost never repeated himself, neither compositionally nor in his figures. That he strove to break out of fixed iconographic schemes is clear from the various versions of the *Last Judgement* attributed to him, in all of which the iconography is ingenious and unconventional. The earliest, painted c.1500 and residing in the Hamburg Kunsthalle, has a pyramidal composition, in which the blessing Christ is in the upper centre, surrounded by angels, the Virgin is to the right of him, as a spokeswoman for the people, while the praying John the Baptist looks on from the left. In the left foreground are the saved and on the right the damned. The figures move in all directions and there is a strong architectural component. Although the background is still closed off, this is not so in the Detroit Institute of Art's *Last Judgement* of c.1520, where the sea and beach are visible in the distance and the scene is also much more densely populated and more harmonious. Although it is a very different work from *The Madonna and Child in a Niche*, there are similarities between the two, for example the soft colouring, the figure of the Virgin and the recession into a landscape. The last, and finest, version of the *Last Judgement* is Provoost's only documented work: the version commissioned for the council chamber of the Bruges Stadhuis. This altarpiece stands at the moment of transition between the Gothic and Renaissance styles. The detailed representation of materials, use of glaze and the decorative draperies are typically Gothic. On



Simon Marmion, *Saint Bernard's Vision of the Virgin and Child*, c.1475-1480, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (Figure 5)

the left centre the chosen people pass into Heaven through a Late Gothic portal but in the lower left-hand corner there is a piece of Renaissance architecture with volutes. The scene of Hell on the right, where the wicked are represented as lapsed clergy, is inspired by Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516), but it is not at all dramatic; it was over-painted by Pieter Pourbus the Elder (1523/4-1584) in 1550, following Charles V's edict forbidding any disrespectful representation of the clergy. Although the composition is not strictly symmetrical and the lively figures are somewhat ponderous, the artist attempted to represent the perspective and anatomy correctly. The placement of the figures is less hieratic and the golden and silvery colouring cooler than in the work of the Flemish Primitives. All this, together with the broad distant panorama in the background, is indicative of the innovation and the inventive departures from tradition that characterise Provoost's later work. Thus Provoost wrought changes to the tradition of the Flemish Primitives, although in one sense he simply took over the torch from David on the latter's death in 1523.