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Catalogue Entry: St. Catherine and St. Barbara

Mary Martha Meyer Hill

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper was prepared for Art History 3440, Northern Renaissance Art of the Fifteenth Century. Each student in this class was assigned a work of art from the McNay Museum's medieval and Renaissance collection, and we were given the task of compiling information about the work into a paper in the style of a *catalogue raisonné*, a comprehensive review of an artist's career, divided into entries discussing a particular work. We had to compile a full history of the work, as well as its current condition, previous conservation efforts, and commentary about the work. The following, therefore, though not reading like a traditional essay, presents the fruit of extensive original research.

ST. CATHERINE AND ST. BARBARA
MCNAY ART MUSEUM
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS
INV. NOS. 1955.12 AND 1955.13

ATTRIBUTION

Master of Frankfurt, Southern Netherlandish

MATERIAL/MEDIUM

Oil on panel

DIMENSIONS

Catherine: 12 3/4 x 8 9/16 in

Barbara: 12 5/8 x 9 in

PROVENANCE

The panel paintings of St. Barbara and St. Catherine were originally kept in the Rosenthal Collection in Munich. F. A. Drey, an art dealer located in London, owned the paintings from 1938 until 1940, at which time they were bought by D. M. Koester, another art dealer residing in London. Dr. and Mrs. Frederic G. Oppenheimer purchased both panel paintings at an auction held by Koester, in conjunction with Sotheby's and Burlington Magazine, in 1940. The Oppenheimers kept the paintings in their possession until 1955, when they donated them to the McNay. The paintings were stolen from the McNay on April 28, 1963. They were recovered in New York and returned to the McNay, where they have subsequently remained, in the Medieval and Renaissance Art collection.

DESCRIPTION

The *St. Barbara* (Fig. 1) and *St. Catherine* (Fig. 2) panel paintings, both done in oil by the Master of Frankfurt, c. 1460–1533, are from the southern Netherlands. The panels themselves are approximately a foot in length, narrower in width by four or five inches. Both the *St. Barbara* and the *St. Catherine* paintings are enclosed in a frame, presumably not the original. The two saints, despite being painted on separate panels, are angled towards each other: St. Barbara is positioned with her head and body directed to the right side of the frame, while St. Catherine is angled and directed to the left. When hung together, the two saints face each other, and it can therefore be assumed that the panels were meant to be a pair, displayed together, most likely as part of a triptych.

The right-hand panel depicts St. Barbara as a young woman, with generic, pleasant features, the left side of her face and body angled towards the viewer. We see Barbara only from the waist up. Her auburn hair, parted in the middle, is almost entirely obscured by her gold, ornate headdress; what we can see of her hair is covered in thin piece of translucent fabric, its edges protruding from the gold headdress. A sheer, insubstantial piece of aqua and red fabric, presumably a scarf covering the back portion of her hair, billows out from behind her head, crinkled and gossamer; small golden baubles dangle from the bottom of the scarf. St. Barbara's face and eyes are cast downwards, her grey irises barely discernable through her downcast eyelids. Barbara's chest is covered by a piece

of sheer, gathered fabric. Her red dress, closely resembling brocaded velvet or another lush, densely packed material, has accents of gold in the form of beads and thread. Barbara's white underdress billows out at the shoulders and elbows from the red velvet garment. A small gold pin or brooch with what appears to be a Rosetta design is pinned to the red dress in the center of her chest. Thrown over Barbara's right shoulder is a deep green cloak of a heavy, substantially thick material. She is clutching a black book with gilt pages to her chest, her arms crossed over the object, and holds a quill in her right hand, in between her third and pointer fingers. Her left hand is not shown, either because it was not painted in or because it was later cut out during a restoration. Directly behind St. Barbara's left shoulder is a castle tower made of a nondescript grey stone; the close proximity of the tower limits our view of it, and much of it is covered by Barbara's body. Farther in the distance, on Barbara's right side, a castle can be seen with four towers, made out of the same grey stone as the castle tower to Barbara's left. The sky above her is a blue with similar tones as the blue in her scarf, interrupted by patches of dingy white, clusters of clouds. Over Barbara's right shoulder, sparse trees can be seen in the background, situated against blue-green rolling hills.

St. Catherine, painted in the left panel, has the same generic, soft features as St. Barbara. Catherine is angled to the left, her face and eyes cast down. As with St. Barbara, we see Catherine only from the waist up. She is young, with auburn hair, parted in the middle, partially obscured by her headdress. The headdress is an ornate piece of gold, made up, in part, by a crown that indicates her status as daughter of King Costus. Lower down the headdress, close to Catherine's right ear, is a gold disc that closely resembles a wheel, a reference to her miraculous escape from the wheel meant to kill her. The wheel spirals into a wing, such as that of an angel. The headdress is attached to red velvet cloth, which extends into a small, short veil. The veil is trimmed around the edges with gold thread, stitched into a scalloped, looping pattern. Catherine wears a very simple gold chain with a circular golden pendant. Her white underdress, trimmed in gold, peeks out from under her black and gold embroidered brocade bodice. Thrown over her shoulders is an overcoat, made of pink and deep aqua fabric, with a brown fur collar. The overcoat appears to be pinned and tucked, creating a draped effect at the bottoms of the shoulders. Catherine looks down at the open book she holds in her left hand, improbably, by her fingertips; her right hand is not visible. The gilt pages of the book flutter open to show us a page with unintelligible text written in black and red ink. The left-hand page, along with the text, has a sketched and undefined image, possibly of a woman. St. Catherine, taking up most of the pictorial field, partially obscures the cliff face just behind her. However, we can still see the top of the plateau, covered in grass and dense thickets of trees. Above that plateau rises another grey, jagged

cliff face, and upon the second grassy plateau a group of approximately eight men are gathered, holding spears with their arms raised. To their left is the contraption intended to put Catherine to death, with two wheels intended to crush her. Extending far in the distance behind St. Catherine and the two cliff faces is a town or fortress (it is not made clear which one), with buildings of grey stone and pointed spires. The expanse of sky behind St. Catherine is a light aqua, shot through at one point with a streak of bright orange. Groups of clouds float hazily and undefined, greyish-white in color.

EXHIBITIONS

- 1937 Zurich Museum, permanent exhibit
- 1940 Sotheby's, London, exhibition organized by Burlington Magazine
- 1975 Rice University's Institute for the Arts, Antwerp's Golden Age

TECHNICAL NOTES

The *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine* panels have undergone restorations in the past, but the extent of these efforts remains unclear. Restoration campaigns retouched parts of the sky in the *St. Catherine* panel, as well as small areas on Catherine's face. The paint on Catherine's face has faded in some places, allowing the underdrawings to show through. In the *St. Barbara* panel, overpaint was applied to the left part of the sky, as well on Barbara's right shoulder and along the edges of the panel. The panels most likely were originally part of a triptych or altarpiece, and they are each painted on a single plank of oak wood. Both panels were cut down from their original size, but the amount trimmed remains unclear. Painted wood strips attached with glue were added around the perimeter of both panel paintings, most likely at the same time that they were thinned and cradled. The original engaged frames in which both panels were housed have since been cut away, separating the paintings from their original triptych or altarpiece context. The panels are now enclosed in oak wood cradles. During various restorations, multiple varnish layers were added to both paintings. Additionally, retouches were added to Barbara's green garment, and to a split in the lower right corner of the *St. Catherine* panel. During another restoration, both compositions were extended approximately 1.5 cm, on the right edge of the *St. Catherine* panel and the left edge of the *St. Barbara* panel. This compositional extension was undertaken to disguise the edges that had originally been neglected as compared with the rest of the paintings, originally hidden by the frames. The panels themselves are in relatively good condition, apart from a small split on the *St. Catherine* panel, near the bottom. The white ground layer applied to both panels remains in good condition.

Several conservation reports have been filed regarding the panels, addressing their condition and advising on how to improve it. In April 1985, Jack Flanagan surveyed both panels, writing that while they were in good condition, they would benefit from conservation treatment, owing mostly to the discolored resinous surface coating on both panels. A report filed in 1995 by Perry Huston made the same observation, stating that the surfaces of both paintings had yellowed and darkened with age, and recommending a surface cleaning and removal of the various added varnishes. In 2014, Claire Barry, working with the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, performed a restoration and conservation campaign. During the campaign, infrared reflectography (IR) was performed on both panel paintings. IR revealed extensive underdrawings in both the *St. Catherine* and the *St. Barbara* panels, drawn in a liquid medium, most likely black ink. Each part of the composition was elaborately mapped out, including the landscape and the garments of both saints. The underdrawing lines were closely followed during the painting stage, with only minor changes. Catherine's nose and eyes were shifted slightly and her necklace was simplified, as was the upper portion of her bodice. Her hair texture was smoothed, diverging from the drawn version. Barbara's shoulder was adjusted, as were edges of the building behind her, and her eyes were narrowed in the final painting stage; similar to Catherine, Barbara's hair was also smoothed out in the painted version, with less texture and no ringlets framing her face. Barry noted that the paint remained in good condition, but was less well-preserved in areas of the sky in both panels, less so in the *St. Barbara* panel, where the damage is confined for the most part to the left half of the sky. She concluded that this damage was most likely due to previous cleaning campaigns. The brown paint used to create the delicate geometric pattern on Catherine's dress had also faded, leaving only fragments of the design. Barry also found that both paintings had multiple layers of thick varnish applied, most likely a natural resin. Barry then cleaned both panel paintings, removing the varnish layers. Cleaning the panels revealed more extensive damage to the paint surfaces, especially in the sky of both panels. Barry retouched those areas of damage, and minimized the visible underdrawing lines in the faces of Barbara and Catherine in their respective panels.

COMMENTARY

The *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panel paintings have commonly been attributed to the Master of Frankfurt, but there is debate over whether they were painted by the master himself or by members of the large workshop he ran. The Master of Frankfurt was a South Netherlandish artist, believed to have been born in 1460 and to have died in 1533. He has been tentatively linked to another artist active at the same time, Henrik van Wueluwe. The Master and his workshop

primarily created pieces for the open market.¹

The Holy Kinship altarpiece, painted in 1503 for the Dominican church in Frankfurt, is one of the Master's better-known works, giving him his attribution as the Master of Frankfurt. The use of oak for the altarpiece, however, suggests that the master was based in Antwerp, not Frankfurt, as his name would indicate. The *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels were also painted on oak panels, giving weight to the attribution. The Master of Frankfurt is known for developing a series of motifs specific to him and his workshop.² Among these motifs, Stephen Goddard, a specialist on the Master of Frankfurt, has identified three brocade patterns the master had in his oeuvre, and the brocade pattern on Catherine's dress closely matches one of them: "A spray of five pomegranate apples on stalks within a flame-shaped wreath of leaves and small pomegranate apples."³ A detail of brocade in a confirmed Master of Frankfurt painting, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, appears to use the same technique used in Catherine's brocade in the panel, with a pattern drawn in relatively thin, dark lines, then given the appearance of texture through free-handed embellishments.⁴ In addition to the specific brocade patterns, the Master of Frankfurt and his workshop used stock images of buildings and landscapes not used by other workshops.⁵ The building behind *St. Barbara* in another altarpiece, the Holy Family now at the Prado, closely resembles the one in the *St. Barbara* panel (see Fig. 3). Based on the use of this stock image, apparently exclusive to the Master of Frankfurt and his workshop, as well as the inclusion of a brocade pattern also used exclusively by the master and workshop, it is reasonable to attribute the work broadly to the Master of Frankfurt or his workshop.

Yet there is also evidence that, rather than simply being produced in his workshop, both the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels were painted by the Master himself. Compared to the Holy Family altarpiece, the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels are strikingly similar. The altarpiece shows *St. Catherine* on the left panel, *St. Barbara* on the right, with the Virgin and Child occupying the central panel. The features of all three women, Catherine, Barbara, and Mary, are remarkably similar to those of the saints in the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels: all have dainty features, with small, pale pink mouths and large, downcast eyes. Catherine in the panel looks remarkably similar to the Virgin in the Holy Family altarpiece: her features are so similar as to be the same as the

- 1 Stephen Goddard, "Masters, Anonymous, and Monogrammists: Master of Frankfurt," Grove Art Online: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T055065pg143> (accessed May 1, 2016).
- 2 Goddard, "Brocade Patterns in the Shop of the Master of Frankfurt: An Accessory to Stylistic Analysis," *Art Bulletin* 67 (1985): 402.
- 3 Goddard, "Brocade Patterns," 403.
- 4 Goddard, "Brocade Patterns," 403.
- 5 Goddard, "Brocade Patterns," 407.



Figure 1. Frankfurt Master, *St. Barbara*. McNay Art Museum, San Antonio. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. Frankfurt Master, *St. Catherine*. McNay Art Museum, San Antonio. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 3. Frankfurt Master, *The Holy Family*. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Public Domain.

Virgin's, and her body positioning is virtually identical, with her right hand extended downwards into her lap, as the Virgin's is, and her left arm bent and positioned to hold something at the height of her waist. The only difference between the two is the object they hold, Catherine with her book and the Virgin with the Christ child. This could perhaps be an example of a reused compositional type circulating within the Master of Frankfurt's workshop, repurposed for different uses. These similarities between a positively attributed work of the Master of Frankfurt, the Holy Family altarpiece, and the tentatively attributed *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels, give weight to the attribution of the panels to the Master of Frankfurt.

Further comparison of the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* to another work, this time attributed to the workshop rather than the Master himself, gives even more credibility behind the attribution of the panels to the Master. The painting, *The Adoration of the Christ Child*, quite clearly lacks the technique present in the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels (Fig. 4). The faces of the people depicted in the *Adoration*, specifically Mary, the only comparable female in the painting, look much less refined than the faces of the saints in the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels. Mary's face and features look stiff and frozen, and they are much less beautifully rendered than the faces of Barbara and Catherine.



Figure 4. Workshop of the Frankfurt Master, *The Adoration of the Christ Child*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain.

Based on this evidence, it would be reasonable to conclude that the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels are indeed painted by the Master of Frankfurt, not his workshop.

It seems likely that the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels were once part of a larger triptych, and were probably the outer panels, framing a central one. Since the panels were detached from each other and a central panel has not been recovered, it is hard to be certain that this was the case, but comparative evidence can allow us to be more confident in identifying the function the panels originally served and the work of which they were originally part. It was quite common to display *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine* together: *Catherine* represented the passive or contemplative way of life, while *Barbara* represented the active.⁶ Especially in light of the undoubtedly similar style of the two paintings, it is therefore safe to assume that they were originally displayed together. A trickier task comes in attempting to identify what was placed between the two panels. One of the most frequently used images between the two saints was the *Virgin and Child*, and therefore, if tentatively, I propose that the *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine* panels were originally part of a larger triptych, framing an image of the *Virgin and Child*, something similar to the *Holy Family* altarpiece. As restoration reports have shown, the panels have been cut down. It seems likely that the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels originally showed the saints' full length, once again in a way similar to the *Holy Kinship* altarpiece.⁷ The settings that *Barbara* and *Catherine* are shown in in the *Holy Kinship* altarpiece again mirror those in the *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine* panels. *St. Barbara's* body positioning in the *St. Barbara* panel, with her sloped shoulders and curved hands and fingers, mimics that of *Barbara's* in the *Holy Family* altarpiece closely enough to draw another direct connection between the two pieces. The *Holy Family* altarpiece appears to have been commissioned by a church, although the Master of Frankfurt and his workshop were known for catering directly to the open market, enough so to make a commission a rare event for the workshop. I further propose that, based on the similarities between the panels and the *Holy Family* altarpiece, the Master, after painting this commissioned altarpiece of the *Virgin and Child* framed by *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine*, created a similar triptych or altarpiece with the same subject matter, of which the *St. Barbara* and *St. Catherine* panels were originally a part.

Europe was changing rapidly in the period during which the *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* panels were painted, and growing economic wealth led to the emergence of a distinction in clothing styles, specifically between the poor and the elite. This distinction caused a shift in ideas regarding what clothing and

6 Anna B. Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna as Represented in the Fine Arts: Forming the Third Series of Sacred and Legendary Art* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1990), 90.

7 Jameson, *Legends of the Madonna*, 90.

dress meant and represented to individuals.⁸ In short, clothing became a way to express a clearly defined identity, a way to associate a person with a social class. The clothing of upper class individuals became lavish, made of “intricate textile weaves and patterns.”⁹ In addition to the extravagant materials used for the clothing themselves, embellishments were also popular, a way of further reinforcing wealth. By incorporating decorations such as gold thread, gold or silver baubles, velvet or fur trims, or jewels sewn on to the fabric, wealth was effectively put on display. As very few people had the resources to afford lavish fabric and embellishments, the ability to display them was a way of conveying wealth.¹⁰ The panel paintings of *St. Catherine* and *St. Barbara* clearly make use of this display of wealth in the garments worn by the saints. Catherine’s rich brocade bodice, her red velvet headdress trimmed in gold thread, her fur lined collar, the billows of lush fabric that make up her over-cloak, all clearly indicate wealth of an almost unimaginable scale. Barbara’s garments, too, with her red velvet dress, fur cloak, gold thread trim, and golden decorative baubles, convey incredible wealth. This display of wealth is a way of expressing their lofty and religious rarefied status as saints, a way of visually expressing their rank as holy figures close to God: wealth of such a scale could only be characteristic of God and his companions, of the splendor and prestige of Heaven and heavenly residents. Sumptuous clothing was seen as a visual manifestation of the power and prestige of the supernatural and divine, and by depicting Catherine and Barbara in such lavish clothes, the Master is able to depict them as appropriately posh residents of the heavenly city.¹¹

Mary Martha Meyer Hill is a junior majoring in art history. She prepared this research as part of Dr. Douglas Brine’s seminar on Northern Renaissance Art of the Fifteenth Century (ARTH 3440, Spring 2016).

8 Margaret F. Rosenthal, “Cultures of Clothing in Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39 (2009): 460.

9 Rosenthal, “Cultures of Clothing,” 460.

10 Rosenthal, “Cultures of Clothing,” 469.

11 Ulinka Rublack, *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83.