

THE MYSTIC MARRIAGE IN CHRISTIAN ART

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Giving corporeal form to an ethereal ideal is by its very nature paradoxical and hence problematic, the more so when the 'holy' is expressed in terms of mystical experiences. Each culture comes to terms with this transformation of the verbal into the visual in different ways through different idioms. The main concern of this paper is with the iconographical representation of mystic marriage in the Christian tradition.

Allusions to mystical nuptials can be found in both the Old and New Testaments. References to Israel as Yahweh's bride occur in the writings of Hosea, Jeremiah and other prophets, and the symbol of the bride appears in a Christian context in the writings of Paul and John.¹ But these references are laconic, in comparison with the more developed commentaries by medieval theologians on the Song of Songs, the text which most strongly shaped the Christian concept of mystic marriage.

In their discussions of the allegorical meaning of the Song of Songs, early Church writers such as Origen, Ambrose, and Jerome identified the bridegroom as Christ and the bride as either the Church or the individual soul.² The Marian identification of the Bride did not develop fully until the 12th century, in the writings of Rupert of Deutz and Bernard of Clairvaux.³ Both the interpretations of the Bride as Mary and as the individual soul have had a far reaching impact on Christian thought and art. The influence of the latter interpretation on religious women has been particularly strong and can be seen in elements of the consecration ceremony of nuns as well as in the writings of many female mystics. It is both of these images - that of Mary as the Bride, and the individual soul as Bride - with which I am concerned here.

The earlier images occurring in art are those which present Mary as the Bride of Christ. While a few twelfth century illustrations of the Song of Songs explicitly identify the Bride as Mary by means of inscriptions or attributes, a clear typology was established only with illustrations of Christ and his Bride seated side by side, with inscriptions identifying the Bride as 'Sponsa' (spouse) or 'Ecclesia' (the church).

This seated type of Christ and his Bride formed the basis of new subjects in art, the Triumph and Coronation of the Virgin, with Mary in the role of Bride. Twelfth and thirteenth century sources such as the *Golden*

Legend refer to Mary as Christ's spouse in descriptions of her Assumption.⁴ Contemporary artworks show Mary and Christ seated side by side, with her presented as his consort. A mosaic from S. Maria in Trastevere represents Christ embracing her with one hand, and holding a book with the line, 'Come my chosen one, I shall place thee on my throne', a quote from the antiphon for the feast of Assumption, which drew heavily on the imagery of the Song of Songs.⁵ Mary's phylactery reads, 'O, that his left hand were under my head; and that his right hand embraced me' (Song 8:3). Isaiah's presence on the lateral wall of the apse further confirms the bride's identification with Mary, for he holds a scroll referring to the Virgin's role in the Incarnation.⁶ This type of image gradually changed by the mid-13th century to one of Mary shown as more submissive to Christ and crowned by him, as in an example by Agnolo Gaddi.

This association of Mary with the Bride of Christ can be found frequently in art, and is not confined to representations of her Coronation. The imagery of the Song of Songs provided a rich store of metaphors with which commentators and artists described the Virgin. Mary as a rose of Sharon, a lily, a garden locked, a fountain sealed, a star, a spotless mirror - all of these became part of her standard iconography⁷, and their presence in art serves as a constant reminder of her status as the Bride of Christ. Yet these references, perhaps because of their frequent appearance in art and their allegorical nature, may not always remind the modern viewer of their true meaning. The image of Mary as Christ's beloved confronts us more forcefully in images in which their relationship is shown not only as intimate, to be expected in a mother and her son, but lover-like. Quentin Massy's Virgin kisses her son on the lips, reminding us unambiguously of their relationship. A painting by Jan Gossaert shows Christ caressing his mother's chin in a gesture known as the 'chin chuck.' Leo Steinberg has convincingly traced this gesture's meaning from ancient Egypt and Greece through the Renaissance, showing it to be a sign of lovers.⁸

However, although these images indicate Mary's status as Bride of Christ, they do not show a marriage ceremony. This is the most obvious way in which the iconography of this subject for Mary differs from that for saints, whose visual imagery emphasises the ceremony itself.

With writers from Jerome to Bernard describing female devotees of Christ as his Brides, it is hardly surprising to encounter a large body of mystical literature in which women describe Christ as their beloved or spouse. There was a great surge of mystical writing by women during the 12th to 14th centuries. Mystics from Hadewijch of Brabant to Mechtild of

Magdeburg to Angela of Foligno, in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy, routinely referred to Christ in marital terms. Much of their imagery is overtly sensual in nature, with descriptions of the soul offering itself to the lover, touching Christ's body, and swooning with delight.⁹

Yet far fewer female mystics actually record having experienced a marriage ceremony with Christ. I have found only a dozen who did so, and of those, an even smaller number had their mystic marriages represented in art.

I have been able thus far to find evidence of art images of mystic marriages for four women, all saints: St. Catherine of Alexandria, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Catherine of Ricci, and St. Teresa of Avila. This gives rise to other questions: under what circumstances was religious art produced, and why were certain saints represented and not others? It is striking that only Dominican and Carmelite saints, whose orders were well known for their art patronage, are among this group. Many of the most renowned female mystics were neither saints nor affiliated with a religious body responsible for major art commissions.

Of the four saints mentioned, I have not yet been able to examine any mystic marriage images for St. Catherine of Ricci and St. Teresa of Avila (and have only one or two references for each as well). I would therefore like to examine this imagery for the other two, St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Catherine of Siena. Before doing so, however, it may be helpful to briefly consider the visual conventions for the depiction of actual marriage ceremonies, which influenced both artists and the mystics themselves in their conceptions of the spiritual event of a mystic marriage.

European marriage customs evolved over time, with the 12th century seeing a codification of Christian marriage practices. Additional changes were made during the 16th century, when the sacrament of marriage was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent, which then required a church ceremony and a priest's involvement.¹⁰

By the 14th century, the most essential elements of the marriage ritual included the joining of the right hands of the bride and groom, and the giving of a ring to the bride by the groom. Both of these actions normally took place with the priest's help. However, the joining of hands was of far greater importance in Northern Europe than the ceremony of the ring. In contrast, the ring ceremony was the central element in Italy, where regional custom dictated on which hand the ring was placed - left for Florence, and right for most of the rest of Italy.¹¹

These practices can be seen reflected in art, whether one is looking at representations of the sacrament of marriage, marriages of specific nobles or kings, or the marriage of Mary and Joseph. A standard format developed, with examples from Northern European and Italian art reflecting their regional differences vis-à-vis hand gestures and ring placement.

These types of images provided the model for artists wishing to portray mystic marriages, to which I will now turn. Of those religious figures experiencing such marriages, it was St. Catherine of Alexandria, the much-beloved 4th century saint, whose imagery dominated this subject. St. Catherine's marriage first appears in a text from c.1337, and in art images soon thereafter.¹² The text describes how, after praying before a painting of the Madonna and Child, she was visited by them while asleep and married to Christ.¹³

Although some 14th century examples show Catherine praying before a painting, and then asleep during her visionary experience, a standard iconography soon developed which focused on the crucial marriage ceremony itself. Typically Mary is shown holding the infant Christ in her lap, who leans forward to place a ring on Catherine's finger. While the three figures are sometimes alone, in other versions they are accompanied by saints or angels. A great many variations naturally occur in terms of setting, costumes, and the presence and role of other figures.

The features on which I would like to focus are the most significant variations within this standard iconography. The first involves the ceremony itself. Despite the Northern European custom of the joining of the right hands during the marriage ceremony, it is the giving of the ring that dominates Catherine's imagery, no matter what the country of origin of the artist. This may derive from the fact that for over 100 years, the visual examples of this subject were exclusively Italian; hence the Italian custom came to dominate the standard iconography. The ring is usually placed on her right hand, following the normal custom, with twice as many images showing this practise compared to those showing the left hand.

Much rarer is the joining of the hands, but echoes of that part of the marriage ceremony can be observed in a small number of images. More commonly, Christ holds Catherine's hand with one of his as he prepares to place the ring with his other. An example by Guercino, however, shows a more ritualistic handling of the hand gestures, with Catherine laying one of hers on top of Christ's.

Particularly interesting is Mary's role in the ceremony. She is frequently shown as totally passive, functioning simply as a throne for

Christ, and not involved in the action in any way. But especially in examples from the 16th and 17th centuries, her involvement dramatically increases, so that she functions like the priest in the marriage ceremony, who takes hold of the hands of the couple and assists with the placement of the ring. Alternatively, he places his hands on the shoulders of the marrying pair, drawing them together. Both of these functions are performed by Mary in certain paintings of St. Catherine's marriage. Mary's role clearly increases in the later versions of the subject, which occur at a time when the Church newly required a priest to be present at the ceremony.

The final variation which I find striking in these images is that of the relationship between Christ and Catherine. Most paintings show a formality between the main figures which reinforces the solemnity of the event. An example by Gerard David clearly shows this reserve. However, certain examples from the 17th century show real affection and even physical intimacy among the three figures, as in a painting by Giovanni Procaccini. While such extreme examples are in the minority, there is a growing trend towards greater affection and closeness in the later images. This coincides with a general tendency towards a more emotional and dramatic form of religious art during the Catholic Reformation.

Artistic representations of St. Catherine's mystic marriage provided a model for artists in representing other saints' mystic marriages, as well as for mystics themselves in describing their experiences. I would like to conclude with a look at the mystic marriage imagery of three other saints, one female and two male, in comparison with that of St. Catherine of Alexandria.

Visual images of St. Catherine of Siena's mystic marriage were quite popular during the Renaissance. This event in the 14th century saint's life was described by her biographer, Raymond of Capua, as occurring in her cell after a period of fasting and prayer. Christ appeared to her in the company of Mary, St. John, St. Paul, St. Dominic, David and angels, and placed a golden jewelled ring on her finger, with Mary's assistance.¹⁴ The similarity with Catherine of Alexandria's mystic marriage is clear.

Giovanni di Paolo's painted version is quite faithful to Catherine's vision, including the adult Christ and the accompanying figures described by her biographer. As shown here, she is usually distinguished from her namesake by her Dominican habit, as well as Christ's being shown as an adult. This latter point however was not always followed, as this second image shows (and in fact there was similar inconsistency in images of the Alexandrian Catherine, which sometimes show her married to an adult Christ).

The situation for males with regard to nuptial experiences was more complex. Bridal metaphors with a male deity normally involved a conception of the soul as female, a straightforward and common theme for female mystics. There are instances, however, of male mystics seeing their souls as female and therefore able to unite with Christ. The 14th century mystic Henry Suso wrote, "The heavenly Father created me more lovely than all mere creatures and chose me for his tender loving bride."¹⁵

More common, however, were instances of male mystics experiencing nuptial visions of Mary. By the 14th century, courtly love poetry affected the popular conception of the Virgin, who in some poems and plays became the beloved one, even sometimes becoming a divine bride to her worshippers. In a 14th century poem in which the Virgin addresses a knight, the final refrain of each stanza is 'Quia amore languo' (For I am sick with love) from the Song of Songs. The last stanza reads:

Now man, have mind on me forever
Look on thy love thus languishing;
Let us never from other dis sever...
Take me for thy wife and learn to sing,
*Quia amore languo*¹⁶

Instances of male saints experiencing visionary marriages with Mary persisted into the 17th century.¹⁷ These cases of nuptial imagery for men, however, whether with Christ or Mary, rarely appear in art. The only visual example I have found thus far of this phenomenon is of the 13th century German mystic, the Blessed Herman Joseph, who experienced a vision in which he was mystically married to the Virgin with a ring.¹⁸ A painting by Van Dyck shows Mary accompanied by two angels, one of whom assists in the ring ceremony.

A different instance of a man's experiencing a mystic marriage is that of St. Francis of Assisi, in his case with the allegorical figure of Lady Poverty. His biographer described his meeting three women on the road to Siena, who greeted him, saying 'Welcome, Lady Poverty' and then disappeared.¹⁹ Although there is no written source for the saint's having experienced an actual marriage, he spoke of her as his bride.²⁰ This metaphor, however, is far more cerebral than sensual compared with similar writings by female mystics. Painted versions of this subject translate the event into a marriage ceremony with Christ presiding as priest, or with Poverty attended by her two companions, Chastity and Obedience. In both cases, the conventional ring ceremony defines the moment of marriage. The mystic marriages of

both Herman Joseph and St. Francis clearly resemble those of the two Saint Catherines in their visual portrayals, and one can observe definite conventions of representation which had evolved for this subject.

What is particularly striking after an examination of these paintings is the central role of the visual image in the participants' experience of mystic marriage. St. Catherine of Alexandria's marriage arose directly from her contemplation of a painting of the Madonna and Child. Many of St. Catherine of Siena's visions were likewise stimulated by and resembled paintings of similar subjects which she had seen in churches.²¹ Although she does not say so with regard to her mystic marriage, it is certainly likely that she was familiar with this subject as shown for the Alexandrian Catherine. Meiss suggests that St. Francis' marriage scene too was probably inspired by similar scenes of the Marriage of Mary and Joseph, which it certainly resembles.²² The iconography of mystic marriage in the Christian tradition serves as further testimony to the power of the visual image in giving substantive form to spiritual ideals and by so doing, helping to shape the very development of religious concepts themselves.

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²¹ Meiss, 105-106.

²² *Ibid.*, 109.