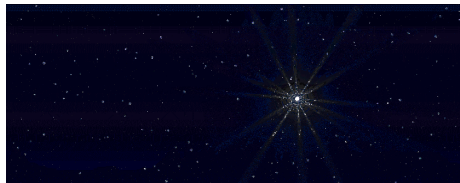


FREDERICK WILLIAM DAME

CHRISTMAS 2013

MESSAGE WITHOUT WORDS



Message with Words

Background

The triptych image is a Nativity painting by Gerard David (1460-1523), a master painter and manuscript illuminator of Bruges, located in what is now the Province of West Flanders in Belgium. The title of the painting is *Nativity with Donors and Saints Jerome and Leonard*. It is presently on display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. (Oil on canvas, transferred from wood; Central panel 35 1/2 x 28 in. (90.2 x 71.1 cm); each wing 35 1/2 x 12 3/8 in. (90.2 x 31.4 cm) The *Nativity with Donors and Saints Jerome and Leonard* painting was accomplished between 1510 and 1515. Gerard David was well known for his religious art, landscape painting, and the unison of the two genres that unfolds in his mastery of rich colors and detailed intricacies. Most of his art work was intended for Italian clients, who most likely resided in Bruges. It was a custom of Gerard David to paint the donors and the original client in his paintings. However, the people shown in this altar piece have remained unknown. Only what they symbolize is apparent.

Interpretive Explanation

The Nativity background is a landscape of rolling green hills and a sky of blue with dim clouds that extends across the triptych, with the Nativity being focused in the center in what appears to be a castle ruins. The atmosphere of life in the form of the foreground figures and the birth of Christ is supported by the advancing shepherds, two of whom are looking at the Nativity through the broken window, and by the presence of sheep in the background. Of course, they are underway to see the Christ child.

The three panels are full of symbolism. There are small plants and stones in the crevices of the brick wall. They symbolize the cycle of decay and rebirth, a metaphor for Christ's birth bringing victory over eternal death.

The mood is contemplative and devotional as depicted by the statures of Mary, Joseph, and the two saints. The donors are depicted on the inside of each wing. In the left wing Saint Jerome is wearing the red clothing of a cardinal. Saint Jerome (347-420) is considered one of the four Fathers of the Roman Catholic Church. He was the translator of the Holy Bible into the Latin Vulgate. The lion that is sitting behind him is his attribute. It is based on the medieval story that Saint Jerome pulled a thorn out of a lion's paw. One of the donors is kneeling and his hands are folded as if in prayer. The dog at his knees symbolizes fidelity and loyalty.

In the right panel Saint Leonard stands behind the female patron of the painting. Saint Leonard (late fifth century – 559) is the Frankish patron saint of political prisoners, imprisoned people, prisoners of war, captives, horses, and appropriate to this painting, women in labor. It is to Gerard David's credit that he portrays the very

significant persons in clarity at the foreground, while at the same time retaining the clarity in the landscape in the background. If one takes the darkened clouds, the blue and green tones of the hills, and the trembling of the tree leaves in the upper portions of the left and right panel into consideration, one can surmise that the time of day is early evening. The gray stone in the immediate background to the figures is somewhat neutral and yet important in giving the colors of the garments a sharp, supporting contrast. These aspects appear to be more thoroughly developed than the clothing of the figures.

The figures have a natural quality about them. They do not display light. Nor are they haloed, as in many Nativity paintings. The natural quality is supported by the ox and the donkey kneeling behind the manger with Baby Jesus.

On the top left of the central panel there are seven angels descending from Heaven. They symbolize the guardian angels. Even sinners have guardian angels. They wear red garments. Such angels implore God to forgive mortals their sins. Gerard David gives the angels depth and motion by presenting their garments with folds. The Virgin Mary and Joseph the Father are not depicted as iconic figures. On the contrary, they are human, Mary being accessible as a loving, caring mother, and Joseph being accessible as a proud father.

The sheaf of grain sheaf lying in front of and parallel to the manger refers the viewer to the Bible verse John 6:41: "I am the bread which came down from Heaven."

Internalizing the Message

The viewer of a work of art can attempt to receive its message without having an explanation. Once that process has taken place, the viewer can collect enough basic information about the artist and the work so that the initial message without words can either be supported or contradicted by the message with words. It behooves the viewer to undergo this intellectual, emotional, and transcending experience.

Concentrate on the Nativity scene and regardless of its origin, its artist, or its locality, internalize Jesus Christ's birth.

With hearty wishes for a Meaningful Christmas and a Healthy 2014!

Frederick William Dame
Patriotic, Steadfast, and True
December 20, 2013

Sources of the images in the order in which they appear:

<http://tatoobild.com/christmas/christmas-garlands-vector-art-download-christmas-vectors.html>.

<http://thisthatandtheotherthang.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/christmas-star-gradient-8r.gif>.

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