

SALOMON LILIAN

DUTCH OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

Hans Rottenhammer

Munich 1564 (?) – 1625 Augsburg

The Adoration of the Christ Child with Angels Carrying the Arma Christi

Signed lower right: Gio. / Rottenhamer / Venetia 1601

Oil on copper

26.5 x 21 cm.

Provenance:

South Germany, private collection

Literature:

H Schlichtenmaier, *Studien zum Werk Hans Rottenhammers des Älteren (1564–1625), Maler und Zeichner : mit Werkkatalog*, diss. Tübingen, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen 1988, pp. 109-110, 219, cat. no. G I 20¹

M. Fahn, 'Das Wiener Anbetungsrelief – ein Werk von Christoph und Zacharias Lencker', in: R. Eikermann, A. Schommers, L. Seelig (eds.), *Studien zur europäischen Goldschmiedekunst des 14. bis 20. Jahrhunderts : Festschrift für Helmut Seling zum 80. Geburtstag am 12. Februar 2001*, Munich 2001, pp. 39-50, pp. 40, 45-46, fig. 2

M. Bisschoff, in: H. Borggrefe, M. Bisschoff, T. Fusenig, *Hans Rottenhammer : begehrt, vergesen, neu entdeckt*, exh. cat. Lemgo, Weserrenaissance-Museum Schloss Brake, Prague, Národní Galerie v Praze 2008-2009, pp. 66, 170, under cat. no. 77

Versions (all unsigned):²

- 1) oil on copper, 50 x 40.5 cm., sale London, Sotheby Parke Bernet, 9 December 1981, lot 18 (as Hans Rottenhammer)
- 2) oil on copper, 27 x 21 cm., Lindau, Stadtmuseum Lindau (as Hans Rottenhammer?)

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- 3) oil on copper, 25 x 21 cm., sale Cologne, Lempertz, 26-28 May 1971, lot 340 (as Hans Rottenhammer)
- 4) oil on copper, 23.5 x 19.5 cm., sale New York, Christie's, 31 January 1997, lot 5 (as Hans Rottenhammer)
- 5) oil on panel, 28 x 22 cm., sale Munich, Hampel, 15-16 September 2011, lot 232 (as Hans Rottenhammer)
- 6) oil on metal (copper?), 28 x 23 cm., sale London, Sotheby's, 12 July 1978, lot 140 (as Hans Rottenhammer)
- 7) oil on copper, measurements unknown, sale Cologne, Van Ham, 6-8 April 2006, lot 1553 (as attributed to Jan van Balen after Hans Rottenhammer)
- 8) oil on copper, 28 x 23 cm., sale Bruges, Carlo Bonte, 20 May 2025, lot 51 (as attributed to Johann König)

Alternate media:

- 9) Christoph and Zacharias Lencker, *The Adoration of the Christ Child by the Angels with the Arma Christi*, signed and dated 1609, silver relief, 26.3 x 19 cm., Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum
- 10) Hans Friedrich Schorer the Elder, *The Adoration of the Christ Child with Angels Carrying the Arma Christi*, signed and dated 1626, pen in black, brown wash, white heightening, gridded in pencil on paper, 51.7 x 38.2 cm., Darmstadt, Hessisches Landesmuseum³

A native of Munich, Hans Rottenhammer was the child of Thomas Rottenhammer, master of the Bavarian court stables, and his wife Augustine Donauer.⁴ In 1582, at around eighteen years old, he was apprenticed to Hans Donauer the Elder (c. 1521-1596), painter at the Munich court of Duke Wilhelm V (1548-1626) and in all probability related Hans's mother. In this stimulating artistic environment – Wilhelm invited and employed artists such as Friedrich Sustris (c. 1540-1599), Peter Candid (c. 1548-1628), Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600/01) and Hans von Aachen (1552-1615) –

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Rottenhammer quickly acquainted himself with the latest stylistic developments and international fashions. Sustis, son of the Netherlandish artist Lambert Sustis, the longtime assistant of Titian (148/90-1576) in Venice, seem to have had a decisive impact; but before all the mannerist Von Aachen, who had worked in Venice for many years before coming to Munich in 1588, inspired Rottenhammer's decision to travel south, a journey that was probably sponsored by Duke Wilhelm. A drawing in Rotterdam inscribed 'Terfiss 1589' documents Rottenhammer's stay in Treviso, north of Venice, where he joined the workshop of Von Aachen's friend, the Flemish artist Lodewijk Toeput (c. 1550-c. 1605). From 1591 on Rottenhammer stayed in Venice, and apart from a period in Rome, where he collaborated with the Flemish artists Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625) and Paul Bril (1554-1626), he would remain in the lagoon city until 1606, when he returned a famous artist to Augsburg near Munich. He died in 1626.

His residence in Venice proved quintessential for Rottenhammer, whose previous Munich court contacts provided him with recommendations and access to the city's high-end German collectors' circles. Taking in the art of Titian and other Venetian artists such as Tintoretto (1518-1594), Veronese (1528-1588), the Bassani and Palma il Giovane (1548/50-1626), Rottenhammer specialised in delicate history paintings – often Biblical narratives – inspired by the Venetian masters' output, yet in a personal style, often on small format, the most beautiful of them painted on copper support, allowing for the most delicate painterly effect, and exquisitely suitable for personal devotion (figs. 1, 2).

The present, newly resurfaced painting is precisely such a gem. Executed in Venice in 1601 – and not in the 1590s, as was previously assumed – the work is a marvel of finesse and intimacy, in which Rottenhammer shows all his capabilities in the rendering of flesh tones, coloristic nuances, atmospheric perspective, and the expression of both tenderness and emotional depth. Depicted is the Adoration of the Christ Child by the angels, an important theme within the iconography of the Nativity. In a landscape, against the immediate background of an antique columnated edifice, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, joined by nine angels, are grouped around the Christ Child, who lays down in a crib, as he embraces a wooden cross with a banner carrying the initials INRI (Iesus

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Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum). Hovering above this grouping are three putti. Both these putti and the angels carry objects that specifically relate to Christ's future crucifixion, the so-called *Arma Christi*, or Instruments of the Passion of Christ. The angel in the left foreground holds Veronica's veil, not to be confused with Christ's seamless robe, that lays in the foreground. The angel in the left background supports the column of Christ's flagellation; another one, beside him, carries the jug and wash basin used by Pontius Pilate to wash his hands in innocence. Kneeling in front of the crib, another angel holds the birch and flagellum used to scourge Christ. Turning upwards, an angel dressed in a red gown carries the reed placed in Christ's hand as a sceptre in mockery, while the central angel standing beside Joseph holds both the spear that wounded Christ on the cross, and the sponge on a pole used to offer the gall and vinegar. To the extreme right another angel carries the ladder used for the Deposition, while the angels standing behind Joseph raise the torch held by the soldiers during Christ's capture. In front of the crib, furthermore, are the armoured glove with which Christ was hit, another lantern used for the arrest, and the bloody sword with which St Peter cut off the ear of the High Priest Caiaphas's servant, Malchus, which lays beside it. The putti hovering above hold the thorned crown, the nails of the cross, and the hammer and pincers used to drive the nails into Christ's body and remove them after his death.

The iconography of the angels gathering around the newborn Christ Child finds no solid foundation in the New Testament. The Gospel of Luke (2: 7-14) describes that after Mary gave birth:

'an angel of the Lord appeared to [the shepherds], and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

While the Gospel thus mentions an angel and 'a great company of the heavenly host' it proceeds to inform that 'the angels had left and gone into heaven'. Rottenhammer instead follows a long-existing pictorial tradition existing both north and south of the Alps that depicts the angels adoring

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the newborn Christ Child, often – but not always – in combination with the approaching shepherds (figs. 3, 4).

Considerably less common is the inclusion of the *Arma Christi*, which explicitly reference Christ's future suffering and his sacrifice on the cross as humanity's Saviour, thus invoking a sense of looming destiny over the otherwise immaculate scene, and inviting devotional compassion. Rottenhammer could have adopted the unusual motif from a painting by Benvenuto Tisi, better known as Il Garofalo (1481-1559), who was active in Ferrara. Rottenhammer no doubt passed through Ferrara – some 100 kilometres southwest of Venice – upon his return from Rome and in the city's Chiesa di San Girolamo he might well have admired Garofalo's monumental *Mary in Adoration of the Child and Angels with the Instruments of the Passion* altar piece of 1517, today in Dresden (fig. 5).⁵ Garofalo's heavenly choir of angels with the *Arma Christi*, over a mountainous landscape in the background, with Mary in adoration to the right of the crib, an angel in the left foreground carrying Veronica's veil, shows considerable analogies with Rottenhammer's composition. Similar to Rottenhammer, Denys Calvaert (1540-1619), an Antwerp painter working in Bologna, included angels with the *Arma Christi* in his depiction of the youthful Christ adored by his cousin John the Baptist during the rest on the flight to Egypt, in a painting likewise executed on copper around 1590-1600 (fig. 6).⁶

Clearly Rottenhammer did not operate in a vacuum; visual culture was embedded in a broader cultural-religious landscape, and the emphasis on the predestined suffering and Passion of Christ, and on sacrifice and redemption were an integral part of late medieval theological thinking. Hugely popular books of spiritual instruction such as Thomas à Kempis' 1441 published *De Imitatione Christi* (*The Imitation of Christ*), moreover, propagated devotion through personal, inward experience and compassion. Within such context, both the Nativity and the *Arma Christi* could serve as meditative focal points to worship and engage privately with Christ's holy fate. In the *Revelationes Celestes* (*Heavenly Revelations*) of St Birgitta of Sweden, first published in 1492, a vision is related of how Mary's unspeakable joy and admiration at the birth of her child were simultaneously instilled with thoughts of suffering and death: 'But when I looked at the marks on

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his hands and feet, of which I had heard from the prophets that they would be pierced with nails at the Crucifixion, it filled my eyes with tears, and my heart was close to breaking with sorrow.’⁷

Intriguingly, the same theme of the Nativity combined with the *Arma Christi*, and also featuring the adoration of the angels, is described in great detail in *Puerperium Marianum* (*Mary’s Childbed*), a devotional book specifically concerned with the 40-day period between Mary’s childbirth and the Presentation in the Temple. Written in 1599 by Christoph Marianus, a professor of theology in Würzburg, the book was published in Konstanz on the border of Germany and Switzerland, in the same year 1601 our painting is dated.⁸ Providing day-to-day records, the book relates how from the 21st to the 29th day nine choirs of different angelic orders made their way to the crib. First came the Seraphim, followed by the Cherubim, the Thrones, the Dominions, the Principalities, the Powers, the Virtues, the Archangels and, lastly, the regular angels.⁹ Discussing the visit of the archangels on the 28th day, Marianus notes that they:

‘carry the arms and signs of the bitter suffering and dying, the chalice of suffering, rope, chains, column, whip, rod, sponge on the pole, lances and cross, these are offered to the infant Jesus, as God and man, and that he, as a man, will suffer much and great torment from all this and other things, and thereby make mankind blessed.’¹⁰

The parallels between Marianus’ descriptions and Rottenhammer’s painting – the nine orders of angels, and the offering of the Instruments of the Passion – are striking. For Rottenhammer, who specialized in precious, personal devotional images, the *Puerperium Marianum* would certainly have been resourceful, and the book’s publishing date emphatically leaves open the possibility that he, or his commissioner, was aware of it. While the provenance of our painting remains unknown, it must have been made for the private devotional purposes of an elite patron.

At any rate Rottenhammer’s composition proved to be hugely popular. No less than eight versions – all unsigned – have come down to us (see Versions), of which several might originate from Rottenhammer’s workshop, while others were presumably executed by other artists. A precious silver relief depicting the composition with minimal alterations, kept at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, is signed by the goldsmiths Christoph Lencker (c. 1556-1613) and his son

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Zacharias Lencker (d. 1612) and dated 1609 (fig. 7).¹¹ Rottenhammer's personal involvement might be suspected, as he is documented to have been positively aware of the abilities of father and son Lencker, whose services he recommended to others in 1610, a year after the Vienna relief is dated.¹² If Christoph and Zacharias Lencker based the relief on the present painting – from which it deviates only minimally, for instance in the detail of the cross that the Christ Child holds in his arms in the painting, whereas it is positioned underneath the Child in the relief – or that a now lost drawing might have served as their model, is not known. Clear echoes of the present work can, furthermore, be found in Rottenhammer's subsequent output, such as the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a drawing in Nürnberg that served as the model for a number of silver reliefs (fig. 8); the *Adoration of the Shepherds* of 1605 in Munich (fig. 2); and a painting with the same subject, dated 1610, in Vienna, again underlining the composition's success (fig. 9). Finally, one wonders if a conspicuously similar drawing of the *Adoration of the Christ Child with Angels Carrying the Arma Christi* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, with a rejected attribution to the Italian artist Francesco Vanni (1563-1610), doesn't, rather, originate from the circle of Hans Rottenhammer (fig. 10).

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¹ Schlichtenmaier defended his dissertation on 17 March 1983 (p. 2). As his cat. no. G I 20, the author lists (but doesn't depict) a work that by his own admittance he knew only from a (bl/w) photo in the Photo Archive of the Austrian National Library (Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv) in Vienna. He lists this work as on panel, with measurements 20.5 x 26.5 cm. (= 26.5 x 20.5 cm.) and a signature and dating in the lower right on a stone: 'Gio: / Rotenhamer / Venetia 159(?)'. These observations, combined with the fact that Rottenhammer never signed alternate versions of one composition, indicate that the painting in the photo mentioned is in fact the present work, which is of identical measurements, not on panel but on copper, and signed identically in the same area (on the stone in the lower right corner). The misreading of the date is understandable, as the 6 could – certainly from a photo – be mistaken for a 5, in which case the 0 would logically be a 9. Schlichtenmaier references the work alternatively as in a Viennese private collection (p. 109: 'Wiener Privatbesitz') and as possibly in an Austrian private collection (p. 219: 'Privatbesitz (wohl Österreich)'). However, as detailed information is not provided by the author, this cannot be confirmed. The website of the Austrian National Library's Photo Archive (<https://www.onb.ac.at/sammlungen/bildarchiv-und-grafiksammlung>) does not contain the photo referenced by Schlichtenmaier (website accessed 3 September 2026). However, the assumption that Schlichtenmaier's cat. no. G I 20 is identical to the present work is corroborated by Fahn 2001, who depicts the present painting, to which she refers as Schlichtenmaier's cat. no. G I 20.

² Versions 1-3 are listed by Schlichtenmaier 1988, pp. 280-282, cat. nos. G II 15-17, respectively. For version 4, see M. Bischhof, in: Lemgo/Prague 2008-2009, p. 170, under cat. no. 77, fig. 205. The other painted versions seem unrecorded in Rottenhammer literature.

³ Schlichtenmaier 1988, p. 405, cat. no. K 13; Fahn 2001, p. 46.

⁴ Biography based on K. Andrews, 'Hans Rottenhammer I', in J. Turner (ed.), *The Dictionary of Art*, 34 vols., New York 1996, 27, pp. 227-229; H. Borggreve, 'Hans Rottenhammer (1564?-1625)', in: Lemgo/Prague 2008-2009, pp. 10-23; S.Q. McCabe, *Hans Rottenhammer in Venice: Networking in Style between Italy and Germany*, diss. Santa Barbara, University of California 2019, pp. 13-63 ('Hans Rottenhammer's Life and Work in the International Style').

⁵ See H. Marx, *Gemäldegalerie alte Meister Dresden : illustrierter Katalog in zwei Bänden*, 2 vols. Dresden 2005, 2, p. 263, cat. no. 755, ill. The painting was transferred to Dresden in 1728. A smaller version of the work is kept in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres. See M. Danieli, in: T. Kustodieva, M. Lucco, *Garofalo : pittore della Ferrara Estense*, exh. cat. Ferrara, Castello Estense 2008, p. 156, cat. no. 123, ill.

⁶ Another version of the painting is in the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, inv. NG 2447.

⁷ See Fahn 2001, p. 43, with further references.

⁸ C. Marianus, *Puerperium Marianum: Das ist: Ein Vorrat außerleßnen Betrachtungen und Gebett, deren man sich nit allein inn den frölichen Weyhenacht Predigen, sonder auch zu Entzündung eigner Andacht gebrauchen möge ; Gerichtet, Auff die vierzig Tage von der freudenreichen Geburt Jesu Christi an, biß auff den H. Liechtmeß Tag* (etc.), Konstanz 1601. The foreword is dated 8 September 1599. The association of this book and its specific content with the present composition was first recognised by Monika Fahn (Fahn 2001), in her thorough discussion of the silver relief by Christoph and Zacharias Lencker after the present composition, signed and dated 1609, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (see Versions, and discussion below, our fig. 7). At the time Fahn, basing herself on Schlichtenmaier 1988, presumed that the painting was illegibly dated 159(?), and datable to c. 1596.

⁹ Fahn 2001, pp. 44-46.

¹⁰ Marianus 1601, p. 231; Fahn 2001, p. 45, '...den Kelch des Leydens, strick, Ketten, Säul, Geysel, Ruten, Schwamm an der Stangen, Lantzen und Creutz, dise opffern die dem Jesuslein, als Gott und Menschen, und dass es als ein Mensch von allem disen und andern vil und grosse Marter leiden werde, und dadurch die Menschen selig machen.'

¹¹ Schlichtenmaier 1988, pp. 430-431, cat. no. K 73; Fahn 2001 (discussing earlier literature); M. Bischhof, in: Lemgo/Prague 2008-2009, p. 170, cat. no. 77

¹² Fahn 2001, pp. 39-40.