

Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries



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Based on the author's doctoral thesis *O RADIX JESSE: Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe c.1450-1550* defended at the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2014, this book is the first detailed investigation into the late medieval use of the Tree of Jesse, the iconographical motif derived from a prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The book is also one of the first volumes to appear in the series "Routledge Research in Art and Religion". The doctoral project and subsequent book attempt "to fill the gap" in the existing literature and to reiterate "some of the previous assumptions made about the late medieval use of Tree of Jesse iconography." The book's objective is thus to "marry an iconological analysis with a close visual examination, paying attention to each object's social and religious background." This is done in a very successful way and the book materialises as a generously illustrated, well-researched monograph with a solid and varied bibliography and five useful and informative appendices.

We are informed in the Introduction, that the Jesse Tree is a later denomination of the motif; throughout the Middle Ages the trope and the motif would be known as *radix Jesse* or *stirps Jesse* (rod or stem of Jesse) – taking the prophecy that the Messiah would be born to the family of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1–3), com-

bined with the genealogies in Matthew 1:2–16 and Luke 3:23–38, as its point of departure. The earliest known pictorial depiction is the one found in the Bohemian manuscript known as the *Vyšherad Codex* from c.1086. Throughout the next two hundred years, the motif is more commonly found in Bibles and in stained glass windows, but there are also instances of it being included in other ecclesiastical writing, such as in *S. Hieronymi Explanation in Isaiam* – Saint Jerome’s commentaries on Isaiah, from c. 1125. The methodology is also briefly outlined; the author stresses that the choice of objects has been pre-determined by their survival. This goes for all attempts at studying art works from the past, but is particularly pertinent for northern Europe as the region was the stage for waves of iconoclasm in the sixteenth century, the French Revolution and the two World Wars. The book subsequently unfolds over six chapters, each efficiently yet eruditely presented and amply illustrated.

The first chapter focuses on the Tree of Jesse and the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, an anonymous text on popular theology originating in the early fourteenth-century. The author outlines how the motif was also seen as a pre-figuration of the Birth of the Virgin and the Virgin’s role in the story of Salvation within the text, and how the diffusion of the text – in manuscripts and in print – was crucial in increasing the knowledge of these concepts.

The second chapter follows up on the previous, looking into the Tree of Jesse and Saint Anne. In the wake of the many confraternities founded in her honour, the cult of Saint Anne and the images of her extended family would also open up for associations to the immaculate birth of the Virgin and by extension to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Variants of the Holy Kinship and *Arbor Annae* iconography may or may not stress this doctrine. Although related, the author finds, none of the objects analysed give support to the idea that the Jesse Tree was applied solely by those in favour of the doctrine: “as even though they illustrate the Virgin Immaculate, they do not categorically represent her immaculate conception by Saint Anne.”

The third chapter, entitled the Tree of Jesse, the Carmelites and Other Religious Orders, continues the discussion from the second, studying how the motif was adapted by Carmelites and Dominicans to suit their purposes. For the Carmelites, the foundation myth of the vision on Mount Carmel and the fact that the Tree of Jesse came to be associated with the life of Saint Anne in Carmelite liturgy were translated into new forms of imagery. The author proposes



The Jesse Tree in the Schöllnbach altarpiece (c.1515) is divided between the predella and the central compartment. Hubert Chapel, Erbach Castle. Photo: Christine Krienke. After Susan L. Green 2019 (© Landesamt für Denkmalpflege Hessen 2010).

that the visual emphasis on the order’s unique relationship with the matrilinear family of Christ may have meant their altarpieces also served as ‘marketing tools’ for the benefits of confraternity memberships to the altarpieces’ audiences. Nonetheless, this chapter also demonstrates that not all altarpieces or other objects with what seems to be Carmelite imagery were indeed made on request from the order – some appeared in Dominican settings, possibly in an attempt (in particular in Frankfurt) to counter the Carmelite presence. Within a Franciscan context, the Franciscan Tree Tapestry also applied the Jesse Tree for more propagandic measures, combining the Jesse Tree with the Franciscan tradition formulated by Bonaventura in his *Lignum vitae*.

The fourth chapter is a case study of the Schöllnbach altarpiece in Germany, which marries iconographic analysis with the social and religious background,

in accordance with the methodology that the author laid out in the Introduction. Located in a church that was also a pilgrimage site, and situated next to a miracle spring, the iconography pays attention to the donor's lineage as well as to the miracle spring, and the pilgrimages hope for fecundity and safe delivery. The fact that the iconography was also adopted in the neighbouring Amorsbrunn altarpiece is testament to the influence of the Schöllnbach altarpiece.

The fifth chapter studies the Tree of Jesse in altarpieces more broadly yet confined to the ones carved in Antwerp in the period between c.1480–1530. The motif is included in more than 20% of the extant Antwerp altarpieces; or at least those that survived long enough to be properly described in inventories or previous research, as some of the 41 altarpieces containing the motif listed in Appendix 2 are now lost. Three of these altarpieces, the Bocholt, Gifhorn and Pailhe altarpieces, are analysed more in detail. Sharing some common features, but also employing individual artistic and iconographic solutions, the analyses of these three allows the author to cast doubt on the claim that the Antwerp altarpieces were merely standardised workshop productions.

The sixth and final chapter looks into the Tree of Jesse in Northern France, especially the resurgence of the motif in stained-glass windows in parish churches in Normandy, Champagne and Brittany at the time when these regions started to recover from the miseries caused by the Hundred Year's War (1337–1453). This chapter in particular discusses mobility among artists and possible influences across borders as well as the circulation of cartoons.

The methodological approach chosen by the author is not a new one, but it proves a rewarding and effective lens for the study of the abundant artefacts of different media, size and context and the transpositions of the Tree of Jesse. There are many interesting and illuminating sections throughout the book; at times these concern the motif itself and its nuances and subtle shifts in meaning, at times the discussion is directed towards the artists and/or their artistic practices, their re-locations within the region at large and their use of models and cartoons. One could perhaps have asked for a more thorough overall discussion on the transposition and/or fluctuation of motifs between various media, for example in the light of Erwin Panofsky's term *Analogiebildung* or the more recent writings by Nicholas Mirzoeff on cross-referencing across media.

It might have been beneficial for the reader if the author had pursued further contact with resident curators to gain access to artefacts not included in

published literature. She seems to have had some fruitful correspondences and conversations with conservators and curators, mentioned for example in note 2 (Chapter 4) and note 19 (Chapter 6), but this has not been the case with the altarpieces from e.g. Västerås (Sweden) and Ringsaker (Norway). The latter is indeed a missed opportunity as the abridged Jesse Tree iconography in Ringsaker is unique among preserved Antwerp altarpieces and would have added to the author's discussions about the commissioner's influence vs. standardisation in that city. The Parisian book of hours, the *Lamoignon Hours* (c. 1415) mentioned on p. 50, is included as an example of a book with a rich iconographical program devoted to Saint Anne in the roundels surrounding the Annunciation. In fact, this manuscript is also a rare example of a book of hours with a miniature of the Jesse Tree – possibly included in the manuscript for the same dynastic reasons, as is the Tree of Jesse in many other contexts demonstrated throughout Green's book.

The author is, however, to be lauded for including literature in Dutch, German, Swedish and French in addition to English publications. She is also to be lauded that publications from the 1920s and the 1930s forms part of the literature consulted, even if the authors of these are mistaken about dating and provenance.

The reviewer read this book in the format of an e-book on Vital Bookshelf, the digital platform solution for this book when acquired from Routledge. This works well for reading chapter by chapter, but the technological solutions are less helpful if one wants to take a quick look at a corresponding endnote as one is directed to the beginning of the chapter when one tries to return to the main text. It is also unhelpful that there is no possibility to zoom into details or to enlarge the text, two of the advantages of having texts and images transmitted digitally. Perhaps these shortcomings can be improved in subsequent digital editions?

The *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern European Art in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* is without doubt a wonderful and educational read and the book will certainly cater to the need of many students if included in the syllabus of courses on Northern European late Medieval and Renaissance art. Moreover, the wide-ranging objects discussed offer insights both for those not familiar with the topic and for experts in the field – all presented in a precise and well-written prose.

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