INTRODUCTION

EVEN IN A PREDOMINANTLY secular age, the Crucifixion remains an inescapable image, so familiar that it rarely, if ever, commands our attention. The same, however, cannot be said of the single-leaf drawing of the crucified Christ now in the Schnütgen Museum, Cologne (Fig. 1 and Plate 1). Attributed to a draftswoman working in the Rhineland in the fourteenth century, it rivets the eye. Difficult as it is to believe, this startling image has never before been reproduced in color so that we, like the nuns for whom it was made, can experience it in the flesh, Christ's as well as our own.[1]

Although usually classified as a *Kleines Andachtsbild,* or "small devotional image," the drawing in Cologne hardly qualifies as diminutive. Its dimensions, 25.5 × 18 centimeters, increase its impact.[2] Not an object intended for viewing at a disinterested distance, it asks to be handled and touched, even as the body of Christ is caressed in the image. Like St. Bernard at Christ's right and the nun at his left, we are compelled to identify with the body and blood of Christ through the sheer livid profusion of ruddy ink that saturates the paper.[3] Christ's head droops from the otherwise overscale corpus, sinking below the level of the shoulders and the stiff, twiglike arms. His body, almost entirely obscured by blood, appears as one enormous wound, with the only contrast the green band of the crown of thorns, itself dotted in red. Even Christ's halo takes on the sanguine tincture. The pigment—thick, viscous, unevenly applied—suggests a compact sealed in blood, like Christ's own assurance of salvation.[4]

This Crucifixion fascinates even as it repels us. Yet where we might see only an image of unbridled violence, the woman by (and perhaps for) whom it was made—represented by the nun at the foot of the cross—would have experienced more complex meanings and sensations. To see through her eyes and those of her contemporaries, we must forget any preconceived notion of "Art." Instead we

must try to inhabit her world, removed from our own by the passage of time and the seclusion of the cloister.

Sermons delivered to nuns offer insight into the confined spaces inhabited by cloistered women in late medieval Germany. We can juxtapose with the drawing of the Crucifixion a sermon on the wound in Christ's side and the sacrament of the Eucharist by Konrad von Eßlingen, twice Dominican prior provincial of Teutonia (1277–81, 1290–93).[5] Delivered in 1318 to the female community at Adelhausen in Freiburg, his words survive as a precis recorded by the nuns, who heard him only through a grille.[6] Konrad's homily offers an analogy to the drawing without, however, accounting for its visceral power. In good scholastic fashion, the Dominican enumerates the qualities of Christ's blood: its heat, fluidity, and color. Likening the Eucharist to a pigment, Konrad argues that the red color of Christ's blood

> restores and renews the divine image imprinted in the soul; a person may never erase that image, whether he goes to heaven or to hell. With our sins, however, we often act like the man who took the emperor's shield and dunked it in a puddle so that the image was besmirched and yet remained as it was. The red of the blood restores and revarnishes that [the divine image of the sinner].[7]

The shield not only denotes the *imago Dei* imprinted on the soul but also signifies a piece of military gear that safeguards the soul against the ravages of sin. In German, however, *Schild* refers specifically to a coat of arms of the kind often emblazoned on shields, in this instance, the *arma Christi,* the heraldic insignia of Christ's Passion. Painting itself provides an emblem of the process of creation and redemption, with Christ's blood as the medium that binds image and artist, man and his Maker.[8] Man—or, in this case, the women who make up Konrad's listeners—commit through their sins an act of collective lèse majesté. Christ, however, works through the sacraments to restore his image in the soul.

In the drawing the blood-drenched body of Christ assumes sacramental significance. The vivifying fluid rains down in great gouts and gathers in a pool between Christ's devotees. Bernard and the nun, however, maintain both decorum and distance; for all their fervor, they remain untouched, as if to signify their purity now that they have been cleansed by Christ's sacrifice. Where the Cistercian saint grasps the upright beam of the cross with his left hand, the torrent of blood flows under, not over, his fingers, suggesting that no matter how close he is to Christ, he remains distant in time. The nun is still further removed. Even as the image portrays such intimate and privileged proximity to the divine, it bars the participants from complete immersion in the Godhead.

In a time when professional artists increasingly mass-produced images—prints, paintings, even entire altarpieces—for the market, the drawing of the Crucifixion with St. Bernard and a nun and other works like it stand apart by virtue of their singular and unprofessional character.[9] The majority of such images were intended for those who made them, most often nuns lacking both systematic training in art and wide-ranging contact with images outside the convent. They are generally known as *Nonnenarbeiten,* "nuns' works." [10] We would never assign a *Sacra conversatione* by Fra Angelico and a portrait by Fra Filippo Lippi to the same genre simply because both happen to have been painted by friars. Nor would we assume that in identifying both artists as mendicants we had succeeded in identifying all that was typical of their oeuvres. Far from providing an apt, let alone productive, characterization of the images it seeks to define, *Nonnenarbeit* stands by definition for deficiency: a lack of both skill and sophistication.

On close examination, however, drawings such as the Crucifixion address their onlookers in surprisingly complex, and—more important—compelling ways. To write them off as *Nonnenarbeiten* implicitly asks them to meet criteria to which they did not and could not aspire. Such anachronistic considerations need not interfere with our appreciation of these objects any more than they do with our response to other genres, once disdained, that have found a fixed place in the art-historical firmament.[11] As Otto Pächt acknowledged, iconographic imagination does not necessarily go hand in hand with aesthetic accomplishment, nor, to paraphrase Francis Wormald, need we limit our investigations of "popular" images to what they can tell us about their "rich relations." [12] In medieval art what we might set aside as "ugly" constituted as much a moral, social, even religious category, associated not simply with the representation of evil or rustic characters but with the *summum bonum,* Christ himself, the paradoxical figure of the defiled and degraded Godhead who, on behalf of mankind, underwent the ultimate humiliation.[13]

The neologism *Andachtsbild* is no less misleading than *Nonnenarbeit* as a way of coming to terms with the images made by and for nuns. Originally it designated a small group of sculptural types distinguished by their iconography and, it was thought, their exclusive association with convents in southwestern Germany. It has since lost whatever precision it could ever lay claim to, having been applied to virtually any object that might have been used to stimulate devotional experience.[14] The addition of the qualifier, "small," as in *Kleines Andachtsbild,* to this umbrella term implies that size alone allows for a meaningful distinction between works of this type and others belonging to the same supposed family. Yet *Kleine Andachtsbilder* come in the most varied shapes and sizes. The term has been at-

tached to almost any image drawn, painted, or printed on single leaves of either parchment or paper, as well as to a host of other objects (the majority of the sixteenth century or later), sculpted, embroidered, or constructed from such diverse materials as wax and lace.[15]

Instead of supplying coherent categories, *Kleines Andachtsbild* and *Nonnenarbeit* define dumping grounds for images, often made by and for women, with which art history would rather not be bothered.[16] Inaccessible to conventional aesthetics, these unassuming images remain more or less intractable to other forms of inquiry: neither the abstractions of iconography nor the particulars of context seem to explain their significance. Modern variants come dangerously close to *Kitsch,* in Germany linked with the feminine categories of *Heim und Herz* ("hearth and heart"), that is, domesticity and sentimentality.[17] Pigeonholed as examples of popular imagery, *Nonnenarbeiten* and *Kleine Andachtsbilder* sink below the horizon of art-historical regard to remain the concern of pious collectors or the chroniclers of *Volkskunde.*[18] To the extent they have been harnessed to art history, such small-scale devotional images have been used to secure reliable points of reference to date and localize single-leaf woodcuts.[19] Their idiosyncratic imagery also provides precedents for some early modern emblems.[20] *Nonnenarbeiten,* however, had their own rationale, independent of their relationship to other genres and media. Between the medieval and early modern materials there are decisive differences of audience and function.

Rather than discard *Nonnenarbeit* as an outmoded epithet, we can instead, faute de mieux, accept it as an affirmation of difference, just as nuns, in contrast to clerical culture, unapologetically affirmed the role of images in their own spirituality. Whereas theologians rarely mentioned works of art except to criticize them or, on occasion, to concede their utility for pastoral purposes, nuns made them an integral, even indispensable, part of their piety.[21] *Nonnenarbeiten* owe their power in part to their idiosyncratic imagery, in part to the beliefs of the women who made them, but they represent more than mere talismans or curiosities. They gain their vitality from their visual language, a mode of expression as distinctive as the spirituality that informed them.

Far from effusions of "popular piety," *Nonnenarbeiten* can only be understood in relation to the monastic culture that produced them, insofar as it can be reconstructed. "Reconstruction" has become a suspect term, and rightly so: even if St. Walburg, the abbey at the center of this study, had been preserved in a time capsule, we would still confront problems of interpretation. It is difficult, however, to deconstruct the art history of female monasticism, which has yet to be assembled, even in a rudimentary fashion. The principal construction, if one so

wishes to state the issue, has been one of exclusion and disregard. If, however, we set aside established historiographical frameworks and grant these overlooked drawings our regard, we see how images that supposedly make up the prehistories of later genres turn out to have histories all their own. *Nonnenarbeiten* can be seen as their makers saw them, as ends in themselves, not as antecedents or analogues. No works of art speak directly in the manner once assumed for all so-called primitives. Yet the artless images from late medieval convents express with an uncommon immediacy the aspirations of the nuns who made them.