

**Lluís Borrassà (doc. 1380-1424)**  
**Panels from an altarpiece dedicated to the Virgin**  
**Catalonia, Barcelona**  
**c. 1420**



*Tempera on softwood panels:*

*Joachim Retires to the Sheepfold: 56.5 x 26cm*

*A King from the Epiphany: 71 x 25cm*

*Two Musician Angels: 50.5 x 16cm*

*Provenance*

Painted as part of a Marian altarpiece for an unidentified foundation, c. 1420;  
 Removed, cut up, and reused during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of a larger complex of  
 panelled liturgical furnishings;  
 Private collection, Barcelona

These newly resurfaced panels belong to a group of six painted fragments (for the whole group together see fig. 8 at the end of this essay) evidently removed from what was once a larger altarpiece dedicated to the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> Each panel bears the remains of Baroque overpainting on its reverse, which indicates that before the altarpiece's dismemberment it had been turned away from view and reused as part of the liturgical furnishings of the church for which it had originally been made over two centuries previous.

The largest panel of the group depicts the Epiphany, with a kneeling king richly clad in white brocaded cloth holding a slender hanap or container in his right hand and gesturing upwards (presumably towards what would have been the star over Bethlehem depicted above) with his left. His youthful face and fashionable fifteenth-century hairstyle and robes, may suggest that he was intended as a pseudo-portrait of a royal figure, perhaps even the patron of the altarpiece from which the panels originate.



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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Dr. Alberto Velasco González for his help in cataloguing these panels. The present description is based in large part on his findings and analysis.





At his feet is a second figure, kneeling prostrate in what appears an act of proskynesis. This would likely be identifiable as Melchior, the oldest of the Magi, who normally undertakes this act of reverence before Christ in scenes of the Epiphany. He also wears brocaded robes, this time in azurite blue. On the right of the composition, we can just make out a fragment of the third of the Magi, of whom only a part of the back and head are visible, thanks to a lock of his hair and one of the termini of his crown. All three figures' robes are depicted using the *estofado* technique, in which pigments are applied over a layer of tooled and worked gold leaf before being scraped back in places to reveal the shimmering surface beneath. Negotiating a path through the rocky landscape behind



the Magi is a page or valet who leads a horse loaded an open chest, perhaps bearing further offerings for the Christ Child to which the men appear in reverence.

The second of our panels depicts a bearded figure seated among sheep in a rocky landscape, looking towards the forehead and wings of an angel just visible appearing from the right-hand edge of the scene. It can be identified as a depiction of Joachim in the Sheepfold, a moment recounted in the Apocryphal Gospels, where we are told that once his offering had been rejected in the temple, he withdrew in isolation with a group of shepherds. The apparition of the angel, evidently having taken Joachim by surprise, is complemented by a phylactery bearing a slightly stilted version of the angel's traditional greeting to Joachim of 'do not be afraid Joachim'; "E[cc?]e noli te[mere]



d[ominu]s era[?]"'. A cusped pattern running diagonally across the upper left-hand corner highlights the part of the panel to which the altarpiece's original moulded *guardapolvos* frame was once attached.

As was convention for large Spanish altarpiece complexes during the fifteenth century, both of these fragments, and the larger destroyed panels to which they originally belonged, would have been positioned at or just above eye level immediately behind the altar table. They would have been fixed in place against the east wall of the church or chapel in which they were displayed, and viewed as part of a much larger complex with a number of stand-alone scenes individually framed by ornate traceried *guardapolvos* mouldings, arranged together around a central larger image (see fig. 1 below for an example of this). It is likely that this central image showed either the Coronation of the Virgin or the enthroned Virgin and Child (a choice of subject matter employed by our artist on other surviving commissions and which will be discussed further below; see fig. 2), not only since such imagery would have been wholly in keeping with the iconography of the panels above, but also because sections of an ornate gilded throne presumably belonging to just such a scene are preserved along the left-hand edge of a third fragment from the surviving group, which shows a pair of musician angels in flight against a starry backdrop. Both figures turn in three-quarter profile to our left, towards a figure or figures



we can no longer see, and float in mid-air with unfurling wings carefully shaded in four shades of pink. Their gingery blond hair radiates out from either side of their heads in tight switchback curls and is pinned over the crowns of their heads with black ribbon-like diadems, each set with a central cross emanating from a large cabochon gemstone. Their stringed instruments suggest a scene full of sound and celebration.





Fig. 1  
Catalan painter  
The altarpiece of the archangel Gabriel  
1381-90  
*Tempera and gilding on softwood panels*  
Barcelona Cathedral, Chapel of Santa Elena





Fig. 2, left  
 Guerau Gener and Lluís Borrassà  
 The Coronation of the Virgin, from  
 the Altarpiece of Santas Creus  
 Completed in 1411  
*Tempera and gilding on softwood  
 panels*  
 Tarragona Cathedral

Fig. 3, below  
 Detail of the reverse of the panel  
 with *Two Musician Angels* by Lluís  
 Borrassà, showing the Baroque  
 painted scheme applied when the  
 altarpiece was dismembered in the  
 18<sup>th</sup> century.



The reverses of all three of our panels are covered in a thick layer of chalky ground and painted with fictive marbling accompanied in one instance by gilded ornament indicative of its execution during of the Baroque period (see fig. 3, right), which shows that once its original purpose had run its course, the altarpiece to which they belonged was dismantled, reversed, and reused for another piece of liturgical furniture, in all likelihood adapted to the tastes and aesthetics of the eighteenth century. It is well known that in Catalonia, and other parts of the Hispanic kingdoms, Gothic altarpieces ended up being stored away in vestries or were reused as building material for making all sorts of altarpieces or other liturgical furnishings. The dismantling of the altarpiece would undoubtedly have been connected to its being replaced by another one that was better suited to the new artistic language of the period.

***Reconstruction, Attribution, Dating***

Two further panels believed from their iconographical details and the identical treatment of the decoration on their reverse faces to have been part of the same altarpiece as our fragments are now in private collections (figs. 4-5), and depict the *Announcement to Joachim and Anne* (76.5 x 41cm) and the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* (77 x 43cm). While their condition presents issues to any discussion of their authorship and artistic intentions, both can be attributed to the same hand as ours on the basis of close stylistic similarities, the shared use of punching on their gilded elements, and the same colour palette. Taken together, they allow us to reconstruct something of the narrative thread of the altarpiece to which our panels originally belonged, which evidently focused on Mary's immaculate



Figs. 4-5

Lluís Borrassà

*The Announcement to Joachim and Anne, and the Meeting at the Golden Gate*

c. 1420

*Tempera and gilding on softwood panels*

Private collection

conception and childhood, the Marian Joys, and possibly also the Dormition and Ascension of the Virgin, and culminating at its centre with an image either of the Virgin



and Child enthroned or the Coronation of the Virgin, most likely - given the starry backdrop against which the angels on one of our fragments float - showing the Virgin crowned (or being crowned) in her role as Queen of Heaven (see fig. 2 above).

Comparison of the various figure types on our three panels, especially their garment-wrapped anatomies and smoothly-modelled facial types, as well as the more general compositional structuring of the scenes and the decorative tooling and punchwork that enlivens their surfaces, indicates that we are without doubt looking at the accidental survivals of a long-lost Marian altarpiece firmly attributable to the celebrated early fifteenth-century Catalan painter Lluís Borrassà. Born in Girona but active throughout his long career in the leading centre of Catalonia, Barcelona, Borrassà was one of the most important painters in the region during the final two decades of the fourteenth century and the first three of the fifteenth. His name left a deep historiographical imprint, and his career cast a long shadow over much of the painting produced in Barcelona during the fruitful artistic period commonly described as International Gothic. He was the main master of a workshop that received a breath-taking number of important commissions from the uppermost echelons of society and the foremost institutions of the church, and his diverse patrons spread across a wide region of Catalonia. His was a career from which thankfully several key projects and major material vestiges have survived, both in terms of the works that have come down to us and the artist's presence in documentary records. Starting with his first documented commission in 1385 for the main altarpiece in the monastery of San Antonio in Barcelona, paid for by King Peter IV (the Ceremonious), his workshop went on to receive important commissions from Selva del Camp, Tarragona, Girona, Sant Pere Sallavinera, Vilafranca del Penedès, Mieres, Calaf, Valls, Albarells, Copons, Manlleu, Guardiola, the monastery of Sant Miquel de Fluvià, Manresa, the monastery of Santes Creus, Terrassa, Vic, Sant Joan de les Abadesses, Sant Gervasi de Cassoles, Palafrugell, Sant Climent de Sescebes, Gironella, Gurb, Seva, the monastery of Sant Miquel de Cruïlles, Cervera, Sant Llorenç de Morunys, Palafolls, Lladurs and Sant Esteve de Palautordera. All of these commissions fall within a chronological timeframe spanning just over forty years from 1380 to 1424, the year of his death. Borrassà did not, however, limit himself purely to painting altarpieces. We know that his services were called upon by King Joan I to undertake pictorial work within the context of his coronation in Zaragoza, and there are also records of his involvement in the execution of stained-glass windows (1380) and *entremesos* (temporary artistic montages),

such as those undertaken to mark the return of Martin of Aragon from Sicily (1397), or those commissioned on the occasion of Queen Maria's arrival in Barcelona (1400).<sup>2</sup>

A number of private and museum collections around the world now celebrate the artist's work in their holdings, including the Museu Episcopal de Vic, the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, the Museu Diocesà de Barcelona, the Museu Diocesà i Comarcal de Solsona, the Museu d'Art de Girona, the Prado Museum in Madrid, the Fogg Art Museum (Cambridge, Mass.), the Museo Franz Mayer (Mexico City), the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (Lisbon), the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp. However, of the artist's known corpus of surviving altarpiece panels and fragments, no others appear to be linked iconographically or in terms of provenance and history to the ensemble of Marian panels we have grouped together and illustrated here, and as such we must conclude that it represents a previously-unknown altarpiece and an important addition to Borrassà's catalogue raisonné.<sup>3</sup> There are, nevertheless, a number of surviving panels as well as complete altarpieces dedicated to Mary and the Joys of the Virgin, which ground our fragments firmly in the artist's career. We know, for instance, of his Copons altarpiece, the contract for which is dated 26 January 1402 (currently in private hands)<sup>4</sup>; the Clarissan altarpiece preserved in the monastery of Sant Francesc de Vilafranca del Penedès, which also included scenes dedicated to Saint George<sup>5</sup>; the main altarpiece from the monastery of Santes Creus, which Borrassà finished in 1411<sup>6</sup>; and the main altarpiece from the church of Seva, from which a number of predella panels are now preserved at the Museu Episcopal de Vic.<sup>7</sup>

Two documented Marian altarpieces by Borrassà have not survived, which at first offer tantalising grounds for the precise dating of the present group early in the artist's career; an altarpiece commissioned in 1404 and also painted for the convent at Vilafranca del Penedès; and another executed for an unknown church in Girona, subsequent to a

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<sup>2</sup> We have taken these references from GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, pp. 75-80 and RUIZ 2005a, pp. 56-59.

<sup>3</sup> For the corpus of works attributed to Borrassà, see GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, pp. 80-84, cat. 187-217. Recently revised in RUIZ 2005a, pp. 56-61.

<sup>4</sup> GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 81, cat. 192, fig. 358.

<sup>5</sup> GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 81, cat. 191, fig. 27.

<sup>6</sup> GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 82, cat. 200, fig. 360.

<sup>7</sup> GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, p. 84, cat. 206.



commission from Pere Miró and for which payment to Borrassà is recorded from 1406.<sup>8</sup> Stylistically, however, the panels under discussion afford the most direct parallels to a group of altarpieces and altarpiece fragments attributed in the surrounding scholarship to the closing years of his career and not this early period, such as the *Altarpiece of Saints Martha, Dominic and Peter Martyr* formerly in the chapel of Santa Marta in Barcelona Cathedral, executed around 1421-1425 and commissioned by the apothecary Guillem Despujol.<sup>9</sup> Like our panels, this is another dismembered ensemble with fragments that continue to come to light, including the *Profession of Saint Peter Martyr* which was acquired in 2020 for the MNAC in Barcelona (fig. 6; above right).<sup>10</sup> The same



Fig. 6  
Lluís Borrassà  
*The Profession of Saint Peter Martyr*, from the  
Altarpiece of Saints Martha, Dominic and Peter  
Martyr, Chapel of Santa Marta, Barcelona Cathedral  
c. 1421-5  
*Tempera and gilding on softwood panels*  
Barcelona, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

institution also purchased another analogously executed panel to our three, this time depicting the *Martyrdom of the Servants and Family of St. Hippolytus*, part of a

<sup>8</sup> For more on these works, see the documentation included in GUDIOL-ALCOLEA 1986, pp. 76-80. Cfr. RUIZ 2005a, pp. 56-59.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this altarpiece, see RUIZ 1996, pp. 229-235; ALCOLEA 1998, pp. 395-399, RUIZ 2005b, pp. 81-82.

<sup>10</sup> The attribution is ours. The compartment was purchased by the Generalitat de Catalunya (Catalonian regional government), which deposited it in the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

documented commission painted in 1419 for the chapel of San Lorenzo in Barcelona Cathedral (fig. 7, below).<sup>11</sup> Both of these altarpieces, commissioned by members of the Despujol family, remained like ours in their respective chapels until the second half of the eighteenth century, when they were dismantled. That both were produced by our artist is undeniable, but what seems just as clear is that they were executed at around the same time, by a mature painter in full control of his materials. A further parallel to our fragments is offered by the type of punch-mark decoration found on the gold nimbuses of both of the Barcelona panels.



Fig. 7

Lluís Borrassà

*The Martyrdom of the Servants and Family of St. Hippolytus*, part of a documented commission painted for the chapel of San Lorenzo in Barcelona Cathedral in 1419  
*Tempera and gilding on softwood panels*

Barcelona, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

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<sup>11</sup> For more on said altarpiece, see RUIZ 1996, pp. 216-228; ALCOLEA 1998, pp. 395-406; Ruiz 2005b, pp. 81-82.



With regard to the chronology of the newly resurfaced panels under discussion, in the light of the many parallels they offer to the altarpieces commissioned by members of the Despujol family for Barcelona Cathedral, and their documented chronology, it is possible to conclude that our altarpiece fragments, along with the two panels also recently resurfaced from the same ensemble (*Announcement to Joachim and Anne* and *Meeting at the Golden Gate*) belong to an altarpiece that must have been executed by Lluís Borrassà in around 1420, during the closing years of his fruitful and productive career at the centre of the Catalan cultural sphere.

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Fig. 8

The three fragments under discussion in this essay are part of a larger group from the same collection numbering six panels in total. *Joachim Retires to the Sheepfold*, *A King from the Epiphany*, and *Two Musician Angels* here pictured together with the three other panels from the same altarpiece, depicting the *Expulsion of Joachim and Anne from the Temple*, *Jesus Disputing with the Doctors*, and the *Dormition of the Virgin* (each measuring 71 x 25cm)