

19820

**Saint Clare of Assisi**

**Germany, Swabia**

**c. 1470**

*68 x 32 cm; oil and gilding on panel;  
a historic vertical split has been re-joined, some  
minor losses and retouching (mostly on back of  
panel), minor abrasion to the gilding*

*Provenance:*

Private Collection, Barcelona

*Born the daughter of a count, Saint Clare (1193 – 1253) abandoned her family and her way of life after hearing Saint Francis preach in San Giorgio in Assisi. She quickly became a fervent follower of Francis and moved to a convent, despite the disapproval of her father. With the help of Francis, she founded the Order of the Poor Clares, originally known as the Order of the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, a name taken from the church adjacent to their foundation. In 1216, Clare accepted the role as Abbess. In early 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe, all nuns lived their lives according to monastic guidelines written by men, most commonly following the Rule of St Benedict. However, Clare wanted to create guidelines which relied closely on the teachings of Saint Francis but which were also composed to fit the life of a woman. In 1253, she wrote the Rule of Life, which was the first set of monastic guidelines written by a woman and which focused on helping the poor and the sick. Eloquently summarised by Catherine Mooney, ‘scholars of Saint Clare see her not just as an influential figure for her contemporaries and subsequent history, not just as a woman able to achieve and gain fame in a world and Church dominated by men, but as a woman whose life, writings, personality, spirituality, and theology are integrally connected to her gender.’<sup>1</sup> Clare was canonised two years after her death in 1255.*



This lavishly gilded panel painting depicts Saint Clare as a nun dressed in the habit of her order and holding a large monstrance in both hands. The microarchitectural monstrance is symbolic of the power attributed to her prayer, which helped rescue Assisi from siege twice. On one occasion, Clare warded off invaders by displaying the sacrament and kneeling in prayer, and so the monstrance has become her attribute in most depictions in medieval art. Her youthful round face is complemented by large eyes, delicate lips and soft skin. The tunic that she wears is fastened by a cincture – a rope belt with several knots, representing the vows taken by the nun. The lavishly punched background, abundance of heavy fabric and delicate gilding along the hem of Clare’s cloak emphasise that this image is a heavenly vision, far from the poverty that Clare would have endured during her life. The back of the panel depicts a fragment of a gruesome scene against a blood red background. A dead tree rises across the centre of the

<sup>1</sup> Catherine M. Mooney, *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (University of Pennsylvania, 1999), 52 – 3.

panel as two naked bodies are impaled on its large thorns. The scene probably depicts The Theban Legion, which was a legion of 6666 men who converted to Christianity and who were all martyred.

The style of this image finds parallels with German painting from the third quarter of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially from the region between Swabia and Franconia. It can be compared to the work of the Master of the Burg Weiler Altarpiece, whose name is derived from the altarpiece that he painted for the chapel of the castle of Burg Weiler near Heilbronn (fig. 1). The large hooded eyes that slant downwards, delicate rounded eyebrows and darkened bags under the eyes all find parallels here. The painting of the drapery, which is extremely heavy and deeply accentuated with shadows, is extremely similar. Likewise, the exterior of one of the wings of the Burg Weiler Altarpiece is related to our panel because it depicts the Theban Legion, imagined with a very similar composition (fig. 2). The panel also finds a certain affinity with other Swabian artists, such as Friedrich Herlin, active in Nördlingen, or the Strigel family of artists, active in Memmingen in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 3).

Moreover, the iconography of this panel is relevant to this region because the cult of Saint Clare gained a large following in southern Germany already during her lifetime. Two important institutions of Poor Clares were established in Bamberg and in Nuremberg, the latter being able to secure a donation already in 1246. The Klarakirche in Nuremberg is the oldest ecclesiastical building to have survived in the city, despite the dissolution of the convent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And although it is uncertain which institution this panel originated in, its style and iconography create a link with the traditions established in this region by the Poor Clares.

*Literature:*

Ainsworth, Maryan W., and Joshua P. Waterman. *German Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1350–1600*. New York, 2013.

Bushart, Bruno. 'Studien zur Altschwäbischen Malerei.' In *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* Vol. 22 Bd. H. 2 (1959), pp. 133-157.

Kahsnitz, Rainer, and William D. Wixom. *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg, 1300–1550*. New York, 1986.

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Fig. 1  
Master of Burg Weiler Altarpiece  
Detail of Saint Appolonia  
Germany, Burg Weiler Castle  
c. 1470  
MET 53.21



Fig. 2  
Master of Burg Weiler Altarpiece  
Detail of Saint Appolonia  
Germany, Burg Weiler Castle  
c. 1470  
MET



Fig. 3  
Hans Strigel d. J. und Ivo Strigel  
Archangel Gabriel (detail from Annunciation)  
Germany, Swabia, Memmingen  
c. 1470  
Strigel Museum, Memmingen