

## Article

# Sensing the Eternal Birth: Mystical Vision “Inside” The Visitation in the Met

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**Abstract:** Much scholarly attention has been paid to *The Visitation* group housed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sculpture, dated between 1310 and 1320 and attributed to Master Heinrich of Constance, comes from the Dominican convent of St. Katherinental, in present-day Switzerland, and is notable for its two rock crystal cabochons embedded in the wombs of the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth. In this paper, I support and substantiate the original inclusion of the two stones in the artwork, arguing that it was conceived in close connection with the mystical doctrine on inner vision and the Eternal Birth of God within the soul, as theorized by the Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart (1260–1328). Considering the role of vision in medieval spirituality, the rock crystals, as symbols of purity and divine illumination, functioned as pivotal tools in the mystical experience of Katherinental nuns, fostering their profound spiritual connection with the divine. This article provides a fresh and in-depth analysis of the iconological essence of *The Visitation* in the Met, incorporating notions established in the field of sensory studies together with methods developed in visual and material culture studies.

**Keywords:** female religiosity; mysticism; sensory studies; Meister Eckhart; St. Katherinental



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## 1. Introduction

In the vast literature on the art of nunneries in the Middle Ages, *The Visitation*, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,<sup>1</sup> is certainly one of the most famous works of art and has been considered or mentioned in numerous studies (Figure 1). It measures 59.1 × 30.2 × 18.4 cm and is carved in walnut, retaining most of its original polychromy and gilding. Additionally, it is adorned with two rock crystal cabochons, which will be examined in greater detail in this article. Mary, on the viewer’s left, gently rests her left hand on the shoulder of Elizabeth, who takes the Virgin’s right hand in hers and with the other holds the inscription “VNDE HOC MICH I VT VENIAT MAT(ER)”.<sup>2</sup>

Critics believe unanimously that *The Visitation* was originally created for the Dominican convent of St. Katherinental, located on the Rhine at Diessenhofen near Konstanz, in present-day Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> Scholars also agree in dating it between 1310 and 1320 and attributing it to Master Heinrich of Constance, who also made another famous sculpture for St. Katherinental towards the end of the thirteenth century, the group of *Christ and St. John*, now in Antwerp (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> This master is one of the most representative artists of Gothic art in the Upper Rhine Valley (including Constance), because he was receptive to the cultural climate determined by the German theological and mystical current that developed in this region during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Le Pogam 2020, p. 315). As we shall see, delving into this cultural aspect is essential for achieving a better understanding of *The Visitation*.



**Figure 1.** Attributed to Master Heinrich of Constance (German, active in Constance, between ca. 1280 and ca. 1320), *The Visitation*, ca. 1310–20. Walnut with polychromy, rock-crystal cabochons, gilding, and silver (59.1 × 30.2 × 18.4 cm). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 17.190.724. Creative Commons License—CC0.



**Figure 2.** Master Heinrich of Costance (German, active in Costance, between ca. 1280 and ca. 1320), *Group of Christ and St. John the Apostle*, ca. 1280–90. Walnut with polychromy, gilding, and silver (141 × 73 × 48 cm). Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, MMB.0224. Courtesy of Museum Mayer van den Bergh, image: Bart Huysmans.

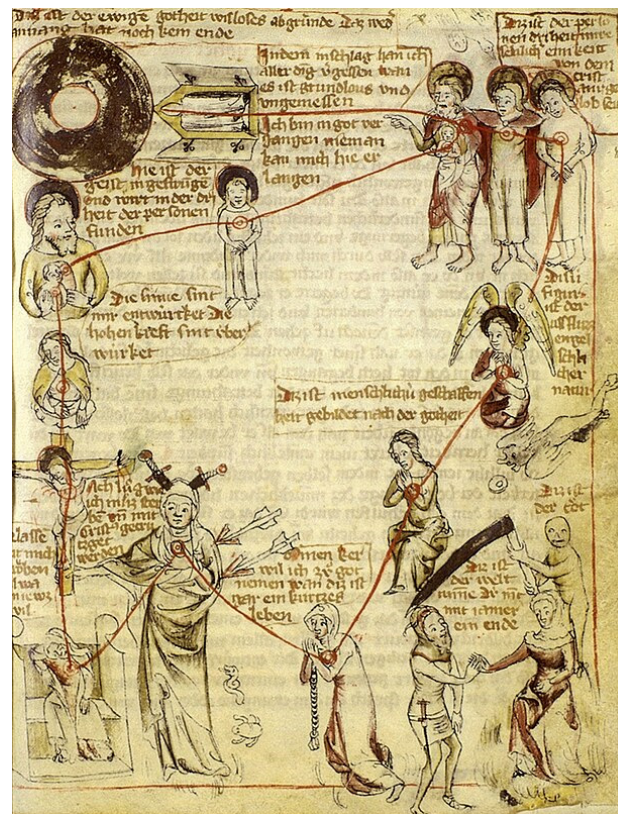
Thanks to Hans Belting's landmark studies on image and worship, the artworks of St. Katherinental have gained critical relevance for their exemplarity in the context of the mysticism that marked religious life in convents of the German-speaking area around 1300. Specifically, with regard to *The Visitation*, the scholar pointed out that it was used by the viewer to go beyond the simple narrative dimension of the Gospel episode, in order to carry out a spiritual exercise that, through the image, fostered an inner imaginative vision (Belting 1991, pp. 462–65). In addition, Belting posited that two representations of the fetus, now lost, would have been visible through the transparency of the stones.<sup>5</sup>

Later, other important studies further deepened its relationship to the community of nuns for whom it was made, definitively establishing its emblematic value in the art and devotion of medieval convents, although unfortunately, it has not been possible to reconstruct the original precise location of the sculpture at St. Katherinental.<sup>6</sup>

The feature that makes *The Visitation* unique and especially significant is undoubtedly the inclusion in the wombs of the Virgin Mary and Elizabeth of two rock crystal cabochons. As evidence of its connection with female religious mystical culture, this characteristic has been correctly juxtaposed with a vision in which the mystic Gertrude of Hefta (1256–1302) recounts the appearance of the Virgin Mary with her womb “as transparent as the purest crystal” (Bynum 1991, p. 198; Hamburger 1998, pp. 117–18). Even the Dominican Heinrich Suso, in his devotional autobiography, recounts that during his meditation, he looked into his heart as “clear as crystal” and saw in its center the “Eternal Knowledge in lovely form and beside it sat the soul of the Servant [. . .] in the arms of the beloved God”.<sup>7</sup> Jaqueline Jung has traced this excerpt to the devotional framework of *The Visitation* by considering the illustration of the *Diagram of the soul's journey from and to the Godhead*, found in the so-called Strasbourg *Exemplar* (1361–1363), which contains all the works of Suso (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> Since in the illumination, the link between person and divine is made through the chest, according to Jung, “such images, and the labile concepts of the body-soul relationship they visualize, enable us to imagine the nuns seeing in the gleaming chests of their Visitation figures not only miraculously pregnant wombs, but also grace-filled hearts or souls, reflecting back on one another as the women touch” (Jung 2007, pp. 228–29).

This observation undoubtedly grasps an essential matter, but it must also be acknowledged that Suso's experience and writings came after the creation of the sculpture. In fact, I think that it is possible to demonstrate a direct connection between the original presence of the rock crystal in *The Visitation* and the precepts of Suso's master, i.e., Meister Eckhart<sup>9</sup>, whose mystical doctrine has so far been only marginally addressed with reference to the sculpture. As I will argue, drawing on evidence from the sources, it is plausible that the distinctive configuration of the sculpture was inspired by Eckhart's thought. Therefore, as a result of a broader research on the sensory agency of sacred art on female monasticism in medieval Germany, this article will propose an original and specific iconological<sup>10</sup> reading of *The Visitation* that, for the first time, brings together the material qualities of the object and the peculiar visual experience of it (in properly sensorial and spiritual terms) it exerted on its audience. My analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the original conception of the sculpture by incorporating and developing notions established in the field on the sensory studies dedicated to the relation between art and sight in the Middle Ages.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this study will integrate the external peculiarities and iconography of the artwork with diverse written sources associable with it, in order to demonstrate how its materiality engaged the sense of sight in a specific form of meditation. Consequently, by precisely elucidating the devotional practice underlying the sculpture's reception, its intrinsic meaning will finally become more apparent.

Nevertheless, it should be reminded that the presence of rock crystal in the sculpture still represents a crucial issue. Therefore, my analysis will not only elucidate the meaning and agency of the sculpture but will also support the hypothesis of the original presence of rock crystal. For this reason, this study will begin by addressing this fundamental problem.



**Figure 3.** Diagram of the soul’s journey from and to the Godhead from Henry Suso’s *Exemplar* (Germany, ca. 1370). Tempera and ink on parchment (21 × 17 cm). Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, MS 2929, fol. 82r. Wikimedia Creative Commons License—CC0.

## 2. The Visitation and Its Rock Crystals

This first section will argue for the plausibility that *The Visitation* originally featured two rock crystals. Albert Knoepfli, in his 1989 book on St. Katherinental, argued that, in actual fact, the two cabochons are not authentic and were added in Paris in 1907 in place of two gold lids that closed the openings (Knoepfli 1989, p. 236). Regarding this important matter, however, the author does not cite any evidence to document his assertion, which has led critics to assume and try to prove that the sculpture originally had two rock crystals.<sup>12</sup> The most significant study on this aspect to date has been conducted by Jung. The scholar argues that although the stones we see today may not be the original ones, considering the medieval preference for incorporating crystal ornamentation into devotional and liturgical artifacts, there is no reason to doubt that the piece was equipped with a similar stone or a glass from the outset (Jung 2007, p. 225). In support of her assertion, Jung presents a technical analysis of the artwork and reports a personal communication (dated 15 February 2006) from Charles Little, Curator of medieval art at The Metropolitan Museum at the time, which convinced her of the authenticity of the sculpture’s current state (Jung 2007, p. 359 (footnote 5)). In addition, Jung has compared *The Visitation* to the *Maria in der Hoffnung* (“*Maria gravida*”)<sup>13</sup> of the Cistercian convent of Marienstern (Panschwitz-Kuckau, eastern Saxony, Germany), also carved in wood and dating from the second third of the fourteenth century, and argues that the opening in the womb where the Child is still held was originally covered by a crystal or glass (Figure 4) (Jung 2007, p. 359 (footnote 7)). I believe this insight can be further developed and substantiated.

As a matter of fact, this comparison allows us to focus on a practice of alteration that can also be traced to the conservation history of *The Visitation* in the Met. Indeed, the Madonna of Marienstern underwent a significant transformation during the Baroque period, when it was repainted and probably modified in its conformation—as can be seen from the hands, which were adapted by joining the fingertips—while a groove with recesses

for small bolts suggests that the opening on the abdomen was closed off by a small door (Walter 1998, p. 89). In the same period, a similar cover was applied to the womb of another fifteenth-century *Maria in der Hoffnung* in Marienstern (Figure 5). In this case, the interior of the belly, which should have contained an image of the Child as in the previous one, has been altered with dark paint, and the iconographic and formal inconsistency between the obliterated space and the rays framing the opening is clearly visible (Walter 1998, pp. 91–92).



**Figure 4.** Unknown Master (German, Silesian), *Maria in der Hoffnung* “*Maria gravida*” (Germany second third of 14th century). Lime wood with polychromy (94 × 27 × 22 cm). Panschwitz-Kuckau, Kloster St. Marienstern (eastern Saxony, Germany). Courtesy of Kloster St. Marienstern.



**Figure 5.** Unknown Master (German, Silesian), *Maria in der Hoffnung* “*Maria gravida*” (Germany, ca. 1480–90). Lime wood with polychromy (66.5 × 22.5 × 16 cm). Panschwitz-Kuckau, Kloster St. Marienstern (eastern Saxony, Germany). Courtesy of Kloster St. Marienstern.

A second fifteenth-century wooden *Maria gravida* of unknown provenance but presumably carved in Germany and now in the Musei Civici of Reggio Emilia, Italy (Figure 6), can be included in the group of artworks that can be compared to the Met's piece. Although neglected in the studies conducted thus far on this kind of iconographic image, it is very significant since, as probably was the case for the two previous ones, the opening on the abdomen of this sculpture is still closed by a wooden cover, which was discovered under modern repainting during restoration in 1970 (Gazzotti 2010, p. 201). Therefore, the fact that this lid has reappeared thanks to the removal of the pictorial layer, which was laid over the medieval one, leads to the assumption that this Virgin too had been modified by covering the original cavity of the womb for the unborn Child.



**Figure 6.** Unknown Master (German?), *Maria Gravida*, late 15th century (?). Wood with polychromy (104 × 43 × 30 cm). Reggio Emilia (Italy), Musei Civici, Galleria Parmeggiani, Inv. 292. Courtesy of Musei Civici di Reggio Emilia.

The comparative examination of these three artworks proves crucial in addressing the problem regarding the original appearance of *The Visitation*. Indeed, echoing Knoepfli's statement, in the early twentieth century, there were two golden lids instead of rock crystals (Knoepfli 1989, p. 236).

At this point, it should be emphasized that, as stated by Silke Tammen, the properly anatomical (i.e., not a symbolic, generic reference) representation of the fetus in *The Visitation* and in other images of the Virgin was among the types of figures that were rejected and prohibited after the Council of Trent.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, this was one of the effects of the decree issued by the Church on the regulation of artistic representation, published on 3 December 1563 after a long debate held at the Council itself. This epochal provision reaffirmed the primarily didactic function of sacred art and forbade, among other regulations, the use and creation of images of dogmas that were false and did not respect the content of Scriptures; the deification or veneration of images for the form or material of which they were composed; and any kind of lasciviousness in the representations.<sup>15</sup> Vague as they were, these rules probably established the belief that it was abhorrent and unorthodox to see the fetus of Christ in contact with the womb of the Virgin. The result was an aversion to this iconography similar to that of the Shrine Madonnas described by Elina Gertsman (Figure 7) (Gertsman 2015, pp. 1–14).



**Figure 7.** Unknown Master (German, Renish-Valley), *Schreinmadonna* “Shrine of the Virgin”, ca. 1300. Oak with linen covering, gesso, polychromy, and gilding (open: 36.8 × 34.6 × 13 cm; closed 12.7 cm). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 17.190.185a,b. Creative Commons License—CC0.

Regarding Germany specifically, it is also crucial not to overlook the potential effects on sacred medieval art that occurred with the spread of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>16</sup>

In view of the changes that took place over the centuries, especially during the Counter-Reformation, in the wake of the above-mentioned regulations determined at the Council of Trent, it seems highly plausible that the representations of the Child in the two Madonnas of Marienstern and the one in Reggio Emilia were hidden for censorship reasons, especially if we compare these sculptures with the original medieval iconography of unborn infant Christs “in or out of the womb” preserved in Visitations or pregnant Virgins, still visible in illuminations, paintings, or stone statues.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it can be assumed that even the original conformation of *The Visitation* might have been modified or “corrected” from that time on, precisely by covering the openings with the wooden covers mentioned by Knoepfli.

Furthermore, there is other compelling proof to believe in the initial inclusion of rock crystal, a material regarded as divine during the Middle Ages, as we will explore. The contents of the “Sister Book” of St. Katherinental (Frauenfeld, Kantonsbibliothek Thurgau, Y 74) hold exceptional documentary significance concerning *The Visitation* in its context. This manuscript was written collectively by various members of the community. Written in the early decades of the fifteenth century, this book falls within the category of monastic vitae literature, encompassing the life narratives and instances of divine grace encountered by fifty-eight nuns residing within the convent. In her critical edition of the text, Ruth Meyer has shown that the first fifty-three vitae, which she identifies as the main body of the book, concern sisters who lived between 1245 and 1345 (Meyer 1995, pp. 40–41). Some of the excerpts belonging to this part tell anecdotes in which the image of transparency and glass is a metaphor for the piety of the nunnery and its inhabitants over the years.<sup>18</sup>

Three passages are particularly eloquent and deserve to be carefully underlined because I believe they reflect a direct connection to the rock crystal of *The Visitation*. Mechthild von Eschenz “is seen glowing so brightly that Sister Adelheit Ludwigin could truly see through her as through a pure crystal”; similarly, Anne von Ramschwag “becomes as translucent as a crystal and truly [one sees] a shining light emanating from her”; then, one evening a nun called Aldheit, who was taking care of sister Kathrin von Überlingen, saw St. Catherine appear as a “translucent maiden [...] dressed in dazzling gold” (Meyer 1995, pp. 122, 103, 129; Ayanna 2017, pp. 35–36).

Written after the deaths of the nuns mentioned, these visions were primarily intended to provide models of religious discipline in the context of the principles of the fifteenth-century Observance reform. In addition, I believe this manuscript is crucial in providing a contextual interpretative framework for *The Visitation*, offering insights into how it was experienced by the nuns and on the ways in which it exerted sensorial and spiritual agency on its audience. The devotional bond between the St. Katherinental community and this sculpture could have generated and fostered patterns of identification and, above all, provided the inspiration for the nuns who wrote these visions to celebrate their former sisters. On this last aspect, they would have directly recalled their own closest visual culture, and along with the references to crystal and translucency, the description of St. Catherine's appearance seems to reflect the golden robes of Mary and Elizabeth (Figure 1). Thus, the statue of *The Visitation* was perceived by the nuns as a visual model of spiritual perfection with which they could identify.

### 3. Why Rock Crystal? *The Visitation* and Eckhart's Sermons on the Eternal Birth

What has been said so far seems to substantiate the assumption that rock crystal originally adorned *The Visitation*. Still, compared to the other sculptures of the Visitation and of the *Maria gravida*, its features remain absolutely extraordinary and unique.

Recent advances in the study of this matter, together with the volume published recently on the occasion of the "Magic Rock Crystal" exhibition,<sup>19</sup> have comprehensively established the significance of this stone in the Middle Ages and, in particular, in the spirituality of the time. These new studies are therefore extremely valuable and offer some very useful arguments to complement the analysis of *The Visitation*.

Since ancient times, man has attributed magical, healing, and protective powers to this stone (Beer 2022b, pp. 383–86). Later, with Christianity, its association with the sacred sphere became commonplace. Due to its physical properties of hardness and transparency and its association with pure frozen water, rock crystal was perceived as a mysterious and incorruptible material. To highlight its reception in medieval spirituality, one may recall that, over the centuries, theologians such as Gregory the Great, Richard of St. Victor or Bernard of Clairvaux—just to mention some of the prominent theologians—associated the crystal with the nature of Christ, and it became a widely employed medium in sacred art to symbolize Christ himself.<sup>20</sup> Concurrently, another point that has long been established is that, thanks to its purity, luminosity, and transparency, rock crystal became the preferred material for the storage and presentation of relics (Figure 8) but not necessarily to facilitate an easy "viewing" of sacred items. Indeed, as Cynthia Hahn has noted, our contemporary notion of visual clarity is unquestionably unsuitable when applied to the Middle Ages; the act of looking at relics was not sought as an optical event of contemplation but rather as an unearthly devotional experience, wherein the perception of divine reality manifested as a "vision effect" (Hahn 2022, pp. 39–40).

In general, in the medieval imagination and cognition, rock crystal in itself had extraordinary evocative and sacred value, determined by its appearance and the perceptual dynamics it stimulated in devotees. In this regard, cabochons were often backed with gold or silver foil, or even red pigment. Gold and silver emit striking visual effects, while red hues could mimic the appearance of a carbuncle, a legendary red gem renowned for its luminous properties. Sources from the Middle Ages consistently suggested that gemstones, particularly crystals, possessed an intrinsic radiance or exhibited a unique interaction with light, hinting at their divine significance (Hahn 2022, p. 41).

That is why the unique presence of the two rock crystal cabochons in *The Visitation* is the key to a precise reconstruction of the original iconological essence of the artwork and the dynamics that characterized its fruition through the senses, which was based on sight. Now, that such a work of art was created to be looked at is a truism, but it is essential to overcome our current notion of the sense of sight, based solely on the concept of observation, by focusing on why, how, and what the nuns of St. Katherinental sought during their contemplation.





**Figure 8.** German workshop (Cologne), *Rock Crystal Reliquary on Lion's Feet* (ca. 1200). Rock crystal, gilt copper, gold filigree, precious stones, glass stones (16.3 × 17.5 × 10.3 cm). Cologne, Museum Schnütgen, Inv. G 17. Courtesy of Museum Schnütgen.

Embracing now well-established notions on the values and meanings that vision had in the Middle Ages, it will be possible to reconstruct how nuns experienced the material object through their bodily and spiritual senses and eventually, through this process, the full range of religious meanings that the artwork conveyed.

It is essential to recall that Gothic art fell under significant influence from a fundamental paradigm shift in the conceptualization of vision that was affirmed during the late Middle Ages; the Augustinian principle of extramission—for whom visual rays emanating from the beholder's eyes combined with rays coming from the perceived object—was replaced by the Aristotelian conception of intromission, which reversed the flow of the visual rays from object to beholder, and thus from image to the eye, within the light (Camille 2000, pp. 204–8). This change resulted in a model of subjective and bodily perceiving in the viewer, in both secular and religious circles, and assumed a pivotal role in expressions of mystical devotion (Camille 2000, p. 207).

This perspective spread within the Dominican Order, especially through the writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who in his *Summa Theologiae* conceived sight as the most perfect, universal, and spiritual (i.e., immaterial and transcendent) sense, recognizing man's psychological ability to abstract himself from the sensible datum by means of the imagination, to exercise his natural inclination to desire the knowledge of God through the intellect, and ultimately to find beatitude in ecstatic contemplation of the divine.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Aquinas' doctrine accommodates a devotional attitude that emphasized the significance of visual experiences and images, while also delving into the theoretical examination of the physiological mechanisms of perception and their psychological outcomes as part of mystical experience.<sup>22</sup>

In the early fourteenth century, Rhenish mystical doctrine, led by another well-known Dominican theologian, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328),<sup>23</sup> affirmed the same fundament of divine beatitude, but from an opposite perspective, based on abandonment to God rather than desire for God, and centered its theorization entirely in the spirituality of the soul and the interiority of the individual.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, while pursuing the same goal as Aquinas, Eckhart approached the relationship between vision and image differently.

As Hamburger argued, Eckhart's thought could superficially be considered almost at the antipodes of the idea of artistic representation of his time, since his conception of vision was based (although not exclusively) on extramission, and he did not define sight in hierarchical terms as a ladder allowing for gradual ascent. The scholar has underlined that, as a matter of fact, Eckhart too considered vision not only the noblest of the senses,

but also the means by which the soul is reunited with God as His emanation (Hamburger 2002, pp. 192–96).

As I am going to argue, given the crucial role that Eckhart assumed in the German Dominican Order during the first decades of the fourteenth century, and especially in the Rhine Valley and convents (both male and female) of that area, an analysis that relates *The Visitation* and its rock crystal to his mystical doctrine and his conception of the sense of sight may be decisive to understand fully the essence of the sculpture.

In truth, this new perspective starts from a theme that has so far only been hinted at by critics. Hans Belting, in his study of the devotional images of St. Katherinental, pointed out, in general terms, the necessity of investigating the connection between the sermons—or edifying literature—and the artistic production reserved for religious women in the German area. This is a valuable suggestion that, strangely enough, has so far been almost ignored in the studies on *The Visitation*.<sup>25</sup>

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the control and spiritual direction of convents took on a significant centrality for the Dominican order. First Eckhart and, after him, his disciples Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–1361) and Heinrich Suso (1295–1366) led this activity in Germany, preaching the concept of annihilation in God to the nuns and thus the model of the spiritual soul's generation of Christ according to the example of the Virgin Mary (Gaffuri 2001, p. 214). Residing in Strasbourg between 1313 and 1323 as vicar to the Master General of the Order, Eckhart was responsible for the Dominican convents in the province of Teutonia, which also included the territory around Lake Constance.<sup>26</sup> This phase is of paramount importance as it roughly corresponds chronologically to the dating of *The Visitation*, and the preacher unquestionably visited St. Katherinental at least once, as evidenced by the fact that the Sister Book records Anne de Ramschwag—one of the nuns remembered in a vision as being “as transparent as a crystal”—having a private spiritual consultation with him.<sup>27</sup> The contents of this dialogue remain unknown, but the event can prove Eckhart's direct influence on the spiritual life of the St. Katherinental community.

The precepts that the Master conveyed during his preaching activities can, nevertheless, be gleaned from the texts of his sermons in the vernacular, also known as the *German Works*, which he himself transcribed.<sup>28</sup> However, before examining in detail some excerpts from Eckhart's sermons addressed to the nuns, which are useful for comparison, it is fundamental to summarize one of the cornerstones of his doctrine, namely that of the Eternal Birth and his argument that God's birth occurs within us as spirit, since it is crucial to our understanding of the meaning embodied by *The Visitation*.

Through this principle, which often recurs in his works and in his sermons, the Master defines the concept of the spiritual relationship between humans and God. He identifies God, as the Father, as the eternal creative intelligence and power, who transmits all of Himself in Christ, that is, in the Son. Thus, the Son is such insofar as he is identical with the Father and forms an absolute unity with Him. According to Eckhart, humans are part of this same unity, because as the Father generates the Son, he also generates the human being. Therefore, humans, like the Son, derive from the eternal relationship with God before becoming creatures afflicted by the limitations of time and space, shaped by their earthly attributions.

Hence, in order to return to God and achieve salvation of the spirit, a human being must be able to share in the divine life and thus participate in the same unity. To achieve this state, however, a human being must detach himself from the sensible world and look inward to his own interiority, abandoning everything and even himself behind to find his true Being, and thus God, reborn in his own soul.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, it is the renunciation of earthly individuality and the attainment of contemplative abstraction that enables humans to become united with God.

Eckhart actively promoted this mystical principle in Dominican convents, making these concepts available and apt for a female audience—that is, for the nuns. Of those that can be traced in content or detail to women's religious communities, at least two are

extremely significant because they help us understand how the Master conveyed the fundament of Eternal Birth through preaching and are directly relevant to the present analysis.

The first one is a commentary on the selection of three verses from the Gospel of Luke concerning the miraculous pregnancy and delivery of Elizabeth, which immediately follow the narrative of the Visitation and the Magnificat:

“Now Elisabeth’s full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. [. . .] His name is John. [. . .] And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, what manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him.” [Luke, 1.57.63.66]<sup>30</sup>

Having uttered these words, Eckhart then explains the concept of God’s gift of the generation of the Son in the soul, which was epitomized by the miraculous pregnancy of Elisabeth. He explains that soul can only attain grace when it is completely clear and thus ready to allow God to generate His Son. Therefore, he illustrates the inner process and the difficulties that must be overcome in order to unite the soul with God. Eckhart explains the earthly obstacles that prevent contact with God, listing time, corporeality, and multiplicity—to be contrasted with the aforementioned concept of “absolute unity”. Overcoming them coincides with the attainment of fullness, which represents completeness in spatial terms, i.e., in width and length, height and depth. Eckhart then juxtaposes dimensions with three kinds of knowledge: the sensitive, which depends on what the eye sees outwardly; the intellectual, which is defined as “higher”; and finally, the one that depends on a noble, immeasurable, and eternal power of the soul that grasps God and truth, where truth thus coincides with a total revelation of God through an inner spiritual journey, i.e., the union with God as the ultimate goal of mystical experience.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear, then, how the preacher briefly refers to the episode of Elizabeth’s delivery in an edifying key to illustrate the Eternal Birth of God in the soul, which should be sought by each of the nuns whom he was addressing.<sup>32</sup>

The second sermon begins with the greeting of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation:

“Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.” [Lk. 1:28]<sup>33</sup>

Here, the principles set out as a commentary on the previous one are present in an even sharper and more direct way. In fact, Eckhart insists on the precept of the spiritual conception of God, making it explicitly clear in at least three passages: “it is more worthy of God that He is spiritually born of any young woman or any good soul than being born bodily of Mary”; “this is what God does: he generates his only begotten Son in the highest part of the soul. At the same time as He generates His only begotten Son in me, I in turn generate Him in the Father”; “God generates His only begotten Son in you: whether you have joy or sorrow, whether you sleep or wake, He does His work” (Sturlese and Vinzent 2019, pp. 123–32).

Both texts under consideration show that Eckhart used the Gospel episodes as a starting point for inculcating the precept of the Eternal Birth in the nuns. In other words, he defined the main coordinates within which the Dominican sisters had to carry out their contemplative and mystical practice, going beyond the textual meaning of the short verses that he pronounced in the incipit of his sermon.

According to the same mechanism, moving from the words of the sermons to the artistic representation, in the context outlined so far, it can be hypothesized that the group of *The Visitation* was conceived and commissioned to go beyond the illustrative function of the Gospel episode itself. On the contrary, the sculpture would have symbolized in a broader and deeper way—one might even say metonymically—the precept of the Eternal Birth and would have been a material instrument for seeking it through mystical contemplation. Furthermore, the inscription held by Elisabeth from the Gospel of Luke (“And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”, Luke 1:43) significantly recalls the incipits adopted by Eckhart during his sermons. Thus, the evangelical evocation could have

visually brought to the nun's mind—and consequently into her spiritual cognition—the path of mystical identification taught by Eckhart. Indeed, the inscription seems to be a link to the act of generating God in the soul, which had to be realized through prayer. Therefore, visual contemplation of the sculpture took on a crucial function, directly connecting it to the individual's experience.

A phrase of Eckhart's expresses very well what his mystical conception of the use of the sense of sight was: "If my eye sees color, it must be devoid of all color; if I see a blue or white color, the vision of my eye seeing color is identical to what is seen by the eye. The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one vision or act of seeing and one knowing and one loving" (Faggin 1982, p. 250). Thus, in my opinion, this sentence is crucial to emphasize how Eckhart explains that, in the inner state of detachment and abandonment to God fostered by contemplation (*Gelâzenheit*, or *Gelassenheit* in modern German, which literally means "letting be" or "serenity", Barzaghi 2003, p. 195), vision enables soul, and thus intellect, to see as God and to coincide with Him. Another excerpt better sums the idea: "The true image of the soul is the one where there is no form, neither outer nor inner, but where there is God Himself. The soul has two eyes, one inner and one outer. The inner eye of the soul is the one that looks into being and receives its being from God without any mediation. The outer eye of the soul is the one that turns towards all creatures and perceives them according to the mode of images" (Faggin 1982, p. 234).

These concepts offer an exegesis of the spiritual point of arrival that the Master believed had to be sought through contemplative action; mystical meditation coincided with a path of introspection through which, once the physical sensory dimension had been abandoned, the mind's eye<sup>34</sup> had to become uniquely attuned to the perception of God.

Within this hypothesis of devotional practice related to *The Visitation*, the fact that rock crystal may have been present in the sculpture from the very beginning, both for its ideal significance and for its properties of visual stimulation, proves crucial. The metaphorical meaning of purity and spiritual perfection that the crystal took on in German mysticism—as in the examples of Gertrude of Hefta and some of the lives in St. Katherinental's Sister Book mentioned above—certainly seems to hark back to its relation with the divine. According to Eckhart, as we have seen, the generation of God should take place in the soul, and the placement of the rock crystal in the two pregnant figures of *The Visitation* could have been a medium and a clear heavenly—and material, according to our contemporary conception—reference to this principle. Indeed, the symbolic meaning attributed to this material was intended to be evident within the perception of the sculpture's viewers. Thus, the two stones would have been the main focus of the nuns' contemplation of the sculpture to accomplish the spiritual prescriptions given by the Master. Enhanced by the flickering lights of candles, the crystal's brilliance would allow the viewer's eyes to seek sensory detachment and enter a mystical dimension, acting as a lens open to both heavenly and inner vision.<sup>35</sup> Then, the viewer would have been able to visualize the Eternal Birth of God in her soul through the representation of the children behind the stones.

This possible reconstruction of the meditation process recalls the above-mentioned sentence by Eckhart: "The eye in which I see God is the same eye in which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, and one vision or act of seeing, and one knowing, and one loving." Thus, the presence of the rock crystal in *The Visitation* seems to be a key feature in the pursuit of this type of spiritual attainment, as it would have allowed the viewer to transcend the materiality of the image by having before her a substance that was considered a gateway to the divine (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** *The Visitation* rock crystal cabochons, detail. Creative Commons License—CC0.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study has proposed a deeper understanding of the function and iconological meaning of the Met’s famous sculpture, *The Visitation*.

The material analysis of the sculpture has been crucial, focusing on its main feature: the two rock crystals within the two figures. However, the original presence of the two stones needed further substantiation, as the current ones might have been added in the early 1900s. Therefore, the first part of this article has addressed this issue.

The comparison with other sculptures, along with information on the conservation history of the work, allowed me to reconstruct a possible alteration during the Counter-Reformation era, which likely led to the removal of the original crystals.

In addition, some compelling information found in the 15th century Sisters’ Book of the St. Katherinental nunnery (i.e., the place of origin of the artwork) demonstrates the nuns’ familiarity with crystal symbolism and its centrality in their visual culture.

The sacred and deifying meanings attributed to this material during the Middle Ages align precisely with the mystical devotional practices likely performed by the nuns of St. Katherinental. My interpretation, which posits a possible direct connection between the sculpture and Eckhart’s mysticism, offers a deeper understanding of the theological significance of crystal in a devotional object of this kind, within Dominican female monasteries of the Upper Rhine Valley during that period. Indeed, the historical evidence we have allows us to infer that this nunnery was influenced by the spiritual teachings of Meister Eckhart, who is mentioned as having visited St. Katherinental in its Sister Book and was particularly active in preaching at Dominican convents in the Upper Rhine Valley in the early 14th century. During those years, the main cornerstone of the friar’s sermons was the principle of the Birth of God in the soul. As I have argued in detail, *The Visitation* was likely conceived to be used by the nuns during their meditation to seek this mystical attainment. In this practice, the rock crystals in the pregnant wombs of Mary and Elizabeth would have played a crucial role in the visual and cognitive stimulation of the nuns. The divine symbolism of the wombs and the effects of transparency and luminosity were united in the two stones, becoming materially perceptible and activating a sensory influence in the nuns that, through sight, was intended to affect their inner spirituality by “making the sacred visible” to their souls. This aspect has thus allowed for a more complete and specific reconstruction of the sculpture’s function and its iconological meaning.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> John Pierpont Morgan purchased the sculpture in Paris in 1907 and donated it to the Metropolitan Museum in 1917. (Rothenhäusler 1951, p. 12).
- <sup>2</sup> “And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”, Luke 1:43.
- <sup>3</sup> It is plausible that the sculpture, along with other devotional artworks, some of which have been preserved alongside it, belonged to the endowment of this female monastery. See (Jäggi 2004, pp. 65–75).
- <sup>4</sup> The information that this sculpture was created by Heinrich of Constance is reported in a historiographical account (7.44.9 A, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Thurgau, Fraunfeld) handwritten in the monastery during the nineteenth century. See (Knoepfli 1989, p. 232, p. 274 (note 13); Belting 1991, p. 463). On the stylistic framing of the work and its artist, see (Futterer 1930, pp. 60–63; Gaborit 1978, pp. 71, 150; Knoepfli 1989, pp. 235–38; Wixom 2005, p. 47; Benton 2009, pp. 145, 162; Le Pogam 2020, p. 315).
- <sup>5</sup> (Belting 1991, p. 464). This iconographical reconstruction has also been recently underlined by (Velu 2012, p. 111; Lutz 2022, p. 295).
- <sup>6</sup> On the devotional relationship between *The Visitation* in the Met and the nuns of St. Katherinental, see (Urner-Astholz 1981, pp. 31–32; Bynum 1991, pp. 198–200; Hamburger 1998, pp. 117–18; Jäggi 2004, pp. 72–74; Jung 2007, pp. 223–37; Hamburger et al. 2008, pp. 45–50; Velu 2012, pp. 111–13; Novacich 2017, pp. 485–87; Lutz 2022, p. 295).
- <sup>7</sup> Here is the full transcript of the passage: “[. . .] Once, after a period of suffering, it happened early one morning that he was surrounded by heavenly company in a vision. Then he asked one of the luminous heavenly princes to show him how the hidden dwelling of God was formed in his soul. The angel thus spoke to him: ‘turn thou therefore a jubilant gaze within thyself and behold how God plays His game of love with thy loving soul.’ Ready he looked and saw that his body above his heart was as pure as crystal, and he saw, in the centre of his heart, placidly seated the Eternal Wisdom in lovable form, and beside her was seated the soul of the Servant, in heavenly yearning; it was lovingly bent upon his side, clasped in his arms and pressed upon his divine heart; and it lay thus submerged and intoxicated in love, in the arms of the beloved God. [. . .]” (De Blasio 1971, pp. 49–50).
- <sup>8</sup> Strasbourg, Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, ms. 2929. On the relationship between mystical experience and vision in Suso’s *Exemplar*, see (Falque 2017, pp. 447–92).
- <sup>9</sup> In Suso’s works, there are many direct or indirect references to his Master. Among these, with respect to the themes of this essay, a vision in his autobiography that narrates an apparition of Eckhart after his death (1328) is very significant. Here is a brief transcription: “In those same times he had many visions [. . .]. Among others, the blessed Master Eckhart appeared to him [. . .]. The Master manifested to him that he was in an extraordinary splendour, where his soul was purely divined by God. Then the Servant desired to know two things from him. One was: how were men in God who had willingly satisfied the highest truth, in true abandonment without falsehood. It was shown to him that no one could manifest in words the absorption of those men in the abyss without way. He further questioned him in this way: what would be the most beneficial exercise for a man who wanted to get there? He replied: ‘He must sink into himself as far as his own selfishness is concerned, into deep surrender, and take all things from God, not from the creature, and establish a silent patience with all wolf-men. [. . .]’” (De Blasio 1971, pp. 52–53).
- <sup>10</sup> Since, as I shall argue, the sculpture was interpreted far beyond the iconography of the Visitation itself, it will be necessary to employ an analytical method that integrates a material and art historical approach with an exploration of the theological and mystical thought of its period. Regarding this latter aspect, the chronological, historical–geographical, and documentary information suggests focusing on the figure of the Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart. Furthermore, I have used the term iconology in reference to the traditional definition developed by Erwin Panofsky, i.e., the branch of art history that studies the intrinsic meaning of works of art, going beyond their outer, aesthetic, formal, and conventional characteristics (here, for example, the conventional meaning of the Visitation lies in the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant, as narrated in the Gospel of Luke, 1:39–45, 56). For a critical assessment of Panofsky, see (Ann Holly 1985).
- <sup>11</sup> Regarding this field of investigation, the following studies are crucial: (Camille 2000, pp. 197–223; Biernoff 2002; Hamburger 2000; Morgan 2005; Hamburger and Buoché 2006; Barr 2017, pp. 186–208; Falque 2017, pp. 447–92).
- <sup>12</sup> This aspect has been addressed in particular by (Jung 2007, pp. 223–37) and recently taken up by (Lutz 2022, p. 295).
- <sup>13</sup> As explained in Oexle (Walter 1998, p. 88), this type of iconography of the Virgin Mary, in whose pregnant womb the Child is revealed as an expression of celestial conception, combines with the apocryphal tradition of Mary as the Virgin of the Temple.

- 14 This iconography had been widespread since the fourteenth century, especially in Germany, and was therefore particularly censored in that region after the Council of Trent. See (Tammen 2003, pp. 420–22).
- 15 The contents of the decree have been reported and examined by (Roggero 1969, pp. 150–67).
- 16 On this aspect, with regard to convents, the insights offered in (Bynum 2015, pp. 18–40), are noteworthy.
- 17 The classification of the depiction of visible unborn children “in utero” or “ex utero” was proposed by (Velu 2012, pp. 108–32), after conducting a comprehensive census of a significant number of representations of *The Visitation* from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries.
- 18 An in-depth analysis of these excerpts is provided by (Ayanna 2017, pp. 34–42), who focuses her attention on the information the book provides about the religious life of the nuns of Katherinental.
- 19 See the miscellany (Hahn and Shalem 2020) and the catalogue (Beer 2022a). The “Magic Rock Crystal” exhibition was held at the Museum Schnütgen in Cologne (25 November 2022–19 March 2023).
- 20 (Gerevini 2014, pp. 92–99), apart from giving an important analysis on Gregory the Great as a primary source, illustrates the Christological meanings of rock crystal and its theological connection with Baptism, Incarnation, and Resurrection; (Kempkens 2022, pp. 255–58), highlights numerous sources. To give just a couple of examples, the Parisian theologian Richard of St. Victor (ca. 1110–1173) interpreted the sea of glass in the Apocalypse as referring to the cleansing of Baptism, the crystal as the elect established in God, and coined the term *Christus crystallus*. Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1090–1153) interpreted the crystal as an image of the Virgin Mary and related it to pure conception and thus again to the incarnation of Christ.
- 21 The analysis of vision as sense is discussed in the “Questione 78” of *Summa*. On the mystical experience in Aquinas, see (Olmi 2001, pp. 151–57). About the concept of desire for God in Aquinas’ metaphysical theorization, see (Barzaghi 2003, pp. 175–89).
- 22 (Hamburger 2000, p. 394). Recalling Henning Laugerud’s studies, it is pertinent to clarify that in Aquinas—and more generally in much of medieval theory inspired by Aristotle—the senses were understood as being mutually interlaced. For this reason, vision in particular, due to optical perception and imagination, was regarded as a revelatory process. Indeed, Aquinas considered sense perception as the starting point of knowledge, emphasizing that sight is the principal sense for acquiring knowledge. See: (Laugerud 2015, pp. 246–72; Laugerud 2016, pp. 41–43).
- 23 Eckhart was an epochal figure of the Dominican Order; after Aquinas, the friar was a leading protagonist of scholasticism and played a prominent role in the religious debate of his time, even being accused of heresy in 1325. Among the copious biographical profiles on the Master, for a complete introduction see (Haas 1997, pp. 11–16, 123–33).
- 24 See (Barzaghi 2003, pp. 189–201), who proposes a comparison between Aquinas and Eckhart regarding the principle of divine beatitude.
- 25 In addition to the general observations made by (Belting 1991, p. 483), only (Velu 2012, p. 113) briefly mentions the meditation and mystical experience based on the union of the soul with God but does not take into account possible information in Eckhart’s sermon literature.
- 26 On Eckhart’s time in Strasbourg, the in-house volume (Mieth et al. 2017) is of reference. In it, on the preacher’s role in Strasbourg, see in particular (Vannier 2017, pp. 325–29). For more information on Eckhart and the Dominican convent in Strasbourg, see also (Hildebrand 1997, pp. 151–73).
- 27 The precise date of the visit is unknown; (Meyer 1995, pp. 36–37) identifies 1316 as the terminus post quem of the event.
- 28 The volumes (Sturlese and Vinzent 2019, 2020) offer a new edition of the sermons and are, respectively, divided into those for the temporal year and those for the saints’ year.
- 29 Among the various studies on Eckhart’s Eternal Birth theory, see for example (Faggini 1953, pp. VII–XXX; Kertz 1965; Kieckhefer 1978; McGinn 1981; Flasch 2015, pp. 57–74).
- 30 This is the incipit of Sermon No. 76, titled *Impletus est tempus Elizabeth*. (Sturlese and Vinzent 2020, p. 168).
- 31 These concepts are drawn from the entire sermon transcription of (Sturlese and Vinzent 2020, pp. 168–80).
- 32 That the sermon was reserved for a female monastic community is clear from the concluding exhortation: “I once said: virgins immediately follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Here there are some virgins, and others who are not but believe they are. The true virgins are those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes, in sorrow as in joy. Some virgins follow the Lamb in sweetness and pleasure, but when he goes in pain, affliction, and toil, they turn their backs and do not follow him. Verily, these are not virgins, though they appear to be such. Verily, if the Lamb lived and came before us, I think it well for you to follow him in the same way: for virgins follow the Lamb along narrow paths and along broad ones, and wherever he goes”. (Sturlese and Vinzent 2020, p. 180).
- 33 This is the incipit of Sermon No. 5, titled “Ave Maria Grazia Plena”. (Sturlese and Vinzent 2019, pp. 122–23).
- 34 This concept refers to the mechanism through which, during the Middle Ages, things seen in material images were believed to be capable of leading viewers to the invisible deity. On this argument, (Hamburger and Buoché 2006) is fundamental.
- 35 Regarding the reception of the distinctive and evocative visual effects produced by rock crystal in the Middle Ages, see, for example (Pentcheva 2020; Toussaint 2020).

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