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Dominican Altar Card with a Miniature of the *Last Supper* (after Leonardo da Vinci) In Latin, illuminated manuscript sheet on parchment Northern France, nineteenth century

One folio on parchment, added sections of parchment for the lateral text columns pasted on, ruled in red ink, written in black ink imitating Gothic textualis book script (with a different script used for the central column and the two lateral columns) on 14 lines in the central column (and a rubric in the space above), on 25 lines in the left column and on 29 lines in the right column, rubrics in red, central column decorated with three 4-line initials, one 2-line initial and one 1-line initial painted in imitation of tree branches and foliage on liquid gold grounds and infilled with strawberries, pearls and a pimpernel, line-fillers with foliage in red and blue on liquid gold grounds, the space around the text in the panel for the central column is filled with fine penwork in red ink incorporating motifs of fleurs-de-lis, lateral columns decorated with eight 4- to 9-line initials painted in liquid gold and colors on liquid gold grounds, decorated and infilled with a large variety of motifs, including heraldry, jewels, pearls, reptile skin, crown of thorns, foliage, tree trunk, and fleurs-de-lis, spaces between paragraphs filled with acanthus leaves, berry vines, and flower stems, floral border in the original part of the altar card decorated with naturalistic roses, lilies, pansies, cornflowers, daisies, strawberries, acanthus leaves in red, blue, pink and green, and white fleurs-de-lis in the corners, a large miniature representing the Last Supper of Leonardo da Vinci, minor loss of paint in the miniature, a few minor stains, in overall excellent condition. Dimensions 550 x 370 mm.

Altar cards were *aides mémoires* used by priests during the celebration of the Mass. The nineteenth-century artists of this beautifully illuminated and finely hand-written altar card looked to medieval manuscripts and the painting of the High Renaissance for their models. A large miniature of the *Last Supper*, copied after the famous mural painting by Leonardo da Vinci, is the focal point here, accompanied by eleven large initials, and a rich floral border, painted in bright colors and with a generous use of gold. This is a remarkable piece of liturgical art executed with notable skill.

PROVENANCE

1. Evidence of the style of the painting and the text suggests this was made for Dominican use in Northern France in the nineteenth century, probably in two stages. The script and illumination of the original parchment sheet, containing the large miniature of the *Last Supper*, the floral border, and the decorated initials within the central column of text, differs those of the two sections in the lateral columns, which were pasted onto the original parchment sheet, apparently in spaces that were then blank. The decoration of the lateral columns is distinctly in the Gothic revival style, whereas the painting of the main part is somewhat closer in style to the models that it copies; the style of both, however, suggests they were painted in the nineteenth century.

The text indicates that the altar card was made for use in a Dominican church. For instance, the prayer *In Spiritu humilitatis*, in the lefthand column, is according to Dominican rite, a slightly divergent text from the Roman use. This is followed by the invitation to pray, which in the Dominican rite is "Orate, fratres, ut meum ac vestrum pariter in conspectu Domini sit acceptum sacrificium" (Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice

and yours may be pleasing in the sight of the Lord). It is quite different from the Roman rite, in which the celebrant's exhortation is "Orate, fratres, ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipotentem" (Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father). The Dominican origin of the altar card is also indicated by the coat of arms that belong to that order and decorate initial "D" in the righthand column (with the dog (canus Domini) holding the torch and the crossed branches of a palm and a lily).

The altar card was probably framed when placed on the altar, and likely had two side panels for each side of the altar, our manuscript serving as the central part of a triptych (see below).

2. Private Collection, France.

TEXT

[Central column contains the Eucharistic prayers for the consecration of the host and chalice], *Accipiendo in manibus hostium dicit, incipit, "Qui pridie quam pateretur ... Hoc est enim corpus meum. Simili modo postquam cenatum est ... Hic est enim calix sanguinis mei ... Haec quotiescumque feceritis, in mei memoriam facietis";*

[Left column contains the following prayers], incipit, "Aufer a nobis, Domine ..." [said by the priest when he approaches the altar in the first part of the Mass]; "Suscipe, Sancta Trinitas ...," "In spiritu humilitatis ...," "Orate, fratres, ut meum ac vestrum ...," "Corpus et Sanguis et Sanguis Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, custodiat me in vitam æternam. Amen";

[Right column contains the following prayers], incipit, "Hec sacrosanta commixtio corporis et sanguinis Domini nostri Jesu Christi, fiat mihi et omnibus sumentibus ...," "Domine Jesu Christe fili Dei vivi qui ex voluntate patris, cooperante Spiritu Sancto...," [and at the end of Mass], "Placeat tibi, Sancta Trinitas, obsequium servitutis meae... propitiabile. Per Christum Dominum Nostrum. Amen."

Altar cards (*canon d'autel*) contain the invariable prayers recited by the celebrant during the Holy Mass, serving as a memory aid. The first examples of altar cards are known from the second half of the fifteenth century, but the use only spread in the post-Tridentine period, following the standardization of the Roman Rite in 1570 (amended until 1962). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generally only one altar card was used, *tabella secretarum*, which was placed in the middle of the altar, resting against the crucifix or tabernacle. Later in the seventeenth century another altar card, containing the Gospel of St. John, recited at the end of the Mass, was added on the Gospel side (left), and another, containing the prayer "Deus qui humanae substantiae" and the psalm "Lavabo," was placed on the Epistle side (right) of the altar for symmetry.

Altar cards were memory aids for the priest celebrating Mass. Examples, both printed and manuscript, exist from the sixteenth century. Most date after the Council of Trent, although there is some evidence that an earlier printed example may have existed; a very early example, c. 1520, is now in the Morgan Library (Online Resources). They were usually very beautifully decorated and could be made in a variety of media. For example, the altar cards in enamel of the

Cathedral of Limoges were painted by Noël Laudin (1657-1727), the altar cards of the Saint-Riquier Abbey were engraved on silver plates, and the altar cards of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet and of Saint-Pierre of Loudun were made in embroidery (Marsaux, 1895, p. 236; Online Resources). Our altar card is illustrated with a large miniature representing the *Last Supper*. The scene is copied from the mural painting made around 1495-1498 by Leonardo da Vinci in the refectory of Santa Maria della Grazie convent in Milan.

The first copies of Leonardo's *Last Supper* were made by artists working in Milan. One of the earliest copies was by Leonardo's contemporary Marco d'Oggiono, which he made for Anne de Montmorency for his chapel at Ecouen in 1506. Another is a life-size copy by an unknown painter, now kept in Oxford. About fifty copies were made in the sixteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century, Louis XVI of France commissioned André Dutertre to produce a perfect replica of the *Last Supper*, for which Dutertre studied the painting and its copies in detail.

The *Last Supper* in our manuscript lacks the figures of Thaddeus and Simon on the right. One interesting iconographic detail is the large crayfish on the plate to the right of the table. Dominique Rigaux has shown that representations of the *Last Supper* with crayfish were especially common in the Italian Alps during the Middle Ages; see, for instance, the mural painting in the Basilica Santuario dei Ss. Vittore e Corona in Feltre (Veneto) by Tommaso da Modena (1326-1379) and his school (Rigaux, 1989). The crayfish, which symbolizes hypocrisy, was often placed near Judas in the *Last Supper* (Rigaux, 1992, p. 224). The symbolic meaning may have escaped the artist who painted the scene here, as he placed the crayfish before Matthew.

The luxurious flower border includes several lilies, painted both naturalistic and stylized, representing by the end of the fifteenth century the entity of France (and no longer only the king or a royal individual or family). Until the eighteenth century, the lily of France continued to symbolize especially the alliance of God with the very Christian kingdom of France, a new Israel (Dupuigrenet Desroussilles, 1991, p. 13).

The different scripts used for the scripts in the central and lateral columns, as well as the plethora of motifs in different decorative styles, suggest that this altar card was copied from a number of different manuscript cuttings. The manner with which the fifteenth-century motifs, such as the acanthus leaves, roses and lilies, are painted suggests dating the work in the nineteenth century. This date is supported by the overall pastiche nature of the ensemble, imitating and mixing a variety of different styles.

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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Andre Dutertre, *La Cène*, 1794
<https://www.meisterdrucke.lu/fine-art-prints/Andre-Dutertre/1194923/La-C%C3%A8ne,-1794.html>

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