A DIVINE LIGHT
Northern Renaissance Paintings from the Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery
Frist Center for the Visual Arts
Nashville, Tennessee
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Cover: Colijn de Coter (Flemish, ca. 1455–1538). St. Michael the Archangel and St. Agnes (detail), ca. 1490. Oil on panel, 61 3/4 x 32 1/16 in. Bob Jones Collection, 1967; Inv. no. P67.4076
The twenty-eight panel paintings in this exhibition come from the Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery in Greenville, South Carolina, home of one of the largest and finest Old Master collections in the United States. The museum is widely acclaimed for its Italian Baroque holdings. This exhibition is the first to spotlight its equally beautiful fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings from the modern-day countries of Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain.

Dr. Bob Jones, Jr. (1911–1997), the second president of Bob Jones University, had a strong interest in the arts and founded the campus art museum in 1951. He acquired these paintings at a time that in retrospect we can see was a pivotal moment in the study and collecting of Northern Renaissance art in America. In 1931 the noted German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) began teaching in the United States, and in 1953 he published *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, which has since become one of the cornerstones of art history. Panofsky and his book have inspired subsequent generations to study the functions, materials, meanings, modes of display, and techniques of Northern Renaissance paintings. In 1941 the National Gallery of Art in Washington opened to the public with a collection that already includ-
ed such Northern Renaissance masterpieces as Jan van Eyck’s (ca. 1390–1441) *Annunciation* (ca. 1434/36) and Rogier van der Weyden’s (ca. 1400–1464) *Portrait of a Lady* (ca. 1460). At the same time, many paintings formerly in European private collections entered the art market and came to America. In 1951 Dr. Jones acquired the first Northern Renaissance painting for his museum—Jan Swart van Groningen’s (ca. 1500–ca. 1560) triptych composed of *The Nativity*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, and *The Flight into Egypt* (1520s, fig. 1)—from Julius Weitzner, a leading art dealer based in New York and London. That painting is on view in this exhibition, along with three other paintings acquired by Dr. Jones the following year: *Madonna and Child* (ca. 1520) by Ambrosius Benson (late 15th century–before 1550), *Salome with the Head of St. John the Baptist* (1530) by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), and *Madonna of the Fireplace* (ca. 1520, figs. 2 and 3) attributed to Jan Gossaert (ca. 1478–1532). The last picture, formerly in the Cook Collection in England, presents a cozy domestic interior with the Virgin and Child seated before a hearth. It is similar in subject to a famous painting—Robert Campin’s (ca. 1375–1444) *The Mérode Triptych* (ca. 1425, fig. 4)—
acquired four years later in 1956 for the Cloisters by The Metropolitan Museum of Art from a Belgian private collection. Since the late 1960s, it has been increasingly difficult for museums and collectors throughout the world to purchase Old Master paintings because of rising prices and scarcity, but Dr. Jones continued acquiring Northern Renaissance paintings for his museum until 1997, the year of his death.

This exhibition presents approximately one quarter of the Northern Renaissance paintings in the Bob Jones Collection. The pictures have been selected with an eye to quality and variety in terms of size, function, subject matter, and place of origin. They range from a tiny devotional panel probably used by nuns cloistered in a convent to a triptych (a painting composed of three parts) that most likely ornamented a side altar in a church. Most are small- to medium-sized panels that were used in domestic settings by members of the upper-middle class. A particularly large number of paintings were made by artists working in the Netherlandish cities of Antwerp or Bruges, where popular subjects such as the Virgin and Child and the Crucifixion were produced for sale on the open market.
These paintings exemplify the religious art of the Northern Renaissance and are organized thematically in our galleries. The exhibition opens with William Adriaenz. Key’s (ca. 1515/16–1568) *Judith and Holofernes* (ca. 1540, fig. 5), an Old Testament image of justice, and continues with tender scenes from Christ’s Infancy, followed by harrowing images of Christ’s Passion. It concludes with representations of saints, including Michael the Archangel (cover) who plays an intercessory role in the Last Judgment. The groupings are intended to draw attention to the ways Northern Renaissance artists conveyed the central mysteries of the Christian faith through setting, color, pose, gesture, and the objects of everyday life.

Fig. 5. William Adriaenz. Key (Dutch, 1515/16–1568). *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1540. Oil on panel, 64 x 75 11/16 in. Bob Jones Collection, 1964. Inv no. P64.343.7
These paintings epitomize the art of the Renaissance. The term renaissance—French for “rebirth”—is often applied to European visual art and culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. During this time, artists south of the Alps were primarily concerned with a revival of classical antiquity, while north of the Alps they self-consciously described the physical world. Northern artists were also early to embrace oil painting. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, they were often already employing oil rather than egg yolk as the binding agent for their pigments, and their masterful use of the medium makes their paintings seem to glow from within. Oil paint was a means through which these artists were able to mimic virtually every aspect of the material world: atmosphere, color, figures, objects, and space. The illusionism of Northern Renaissance paintings and the ways in which they appeal to the senses enable viewers to have a particularly close encounter with the subjects portrayed.

The small size of this exhibition serves as an invitation to examine these paintings closely and think about how they were used, displayed, and handled by their original owners. Prior to their presentation here, four paintings, including *Madonna of the Fireplace* (figs. 2 and 3), underwent cleaning and conservation, as indicated on the labels in the galleries. These important restoration campaigns have revealed original colors and tonalities in these works for the first time in living memory. Our goal has been to show all the pictures in the best possible condition so their extraordinary refinement and remarkable brilliance can be fully enjoyed by our visitors.

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