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Review article

Sarah Drummond, *Divine Love: The Art of the Nativity*, Unicorn Press, 2021.

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Writing a book on the Nativity, arguably one of the most familiar stories within the Christian tradition, seems both ambitious and potentially gratuitous. Even more so if the book is focused on images of the Nativity, where the risk is of becoming a sort of catalogue of Christmas cards. However, we find with Sarah Drummond's recent publication *Divine Love: The Art of the Nativity* that she has masterfully avoided these pitfalls by providing a fresh look at the historiography and legends of the birth story. In presenting variations and nuances of the Nativity narrative by revisiting well-known images as well as highlighting often overlooked works of art, Drummond has produced a publication that appeals to a wide variety of readers. The volume itself is attractive, and we are greeted on the cover with Giotto's enchanting *Nativity* fresco from the Lower Church at Assisi, c. 1310, which leads us into the book and begins the dialogue. For those wishing for an innovative interpretation of the art and symbolic traditions of the Nativity, and a reconnection with the imagery's textual origins, then this book is sure to please.

Drummond's success in writing on the Nativity is in her ability to make the story personal. She does this by carefully examining the various players we would expect to find in the visual representations. The layering of meaning in the portrayal of Christ's birth is developed thematically, with individual elements of the story given their own chapters. Thus, we find not only the Virgin Mary, Joseph, the Magi, or the shepherds, each allowed space in their dedicated sections, but also the attending midwives, the manger, and even the humble cave itself. This structure takes the reader on a journey through the individual protagonists' histories, functions, and stories, adding new depth to the visual and written interpretations of the familiar Nativity scene. In veering from a chronological format, and instead presenting the material thematically, Drummond reveals her extensive knowledge of the subject and mastery of the artistic vision and creativity that underpins the iconography. She examines which of the characters needs to be present to make the story recognizable, questioning why they are depicted in the way they are and how they have changed over time. In looking at the origins of the narrative, the book enriches a familiar archetype and through Drummond's assessment of the subject's complex iconography and history, makes it feel original and engaging.



While the story of the birth of Jesus, and its interrelated imagery, is a familiar one, it is still relatively unusual to find a publication that addresses it specifically. In the collected essays, *New Perspectives on the Nativity*, edited by Jeremy Corley (2009), the subject is approached through different aspects of the story within the context of passages from the Gospels. Corley's publication takes a critical view, and while the essays provide deeply complex points for consideration, the volume overlooks the artworks that visually convey the message. Though less academically rigorous in its intent, Drummond's book is nevertheless extensively researched. She succeeds in underscoring the textual and pictorial origins of the Nativity, thereby bringing a greater meaning to both. In weaving the two together, she provides references to the primary texts, such as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, along with sources that artists relied on, like the second-century *Protoevangelium Jacobi* (Gospel of James), the popular thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, and the instrumental *Meditationes Vitae Christi* from the mid-fourteenth century. The book revolves around the idea of Divine Love, which is the thread that carries through the chapters. In the first pages, we are reminded that the birth of Christ as the earthly manifestation of the second person of the Trinity could be considered the highest expression of Divine Love. By starting with this concept, Drummond seeks to address the balance between the human and divine nature of the Christ Child and in turn, how artists confronted the issue.

This is not Drummond's first foray into a thematic publication. A similar pattern was developed in her earlier book *Divine Conception: The Art of the Annunciation* (2019), which examined Annunciation imagery through the study of literal sources and artistic conventions. In writing on the Nativity, Drummond has created a companion volume that chronologically follows the Annunciation. She divides the story into ten parts, but rather than beginning with Mary's role in the birth of Christ, as we might expect and anticipate with a Nativity subject, Chapter I addresses the significance of Joseph by concentrating on less familiar dream iconography and interpretations of the journey to Bethlehem. Here she introduces an ivory panel from the mid-sixth century made for Archbishop Maximian's throne, portraying both a sleeping Joseph and a notably pregnant Mary. Chapter II shifts attention to the presence of the ox and the ass and questions their place in the story. These endearing animals appear alongside the Christ Child in the earliest known representations. We understand that the ass carried Mary on her journey, yet there is no mention of their purpose in the Gospels. Instead,

we find that the images are influenced by the first *praesepe* assembled by St Francis of Assisi and closely follow the *Meditationes*, which inspired the proliferation of numerous works of art.

Likewise, Drummond explains that while there is no reference to a cave in the Gospels, the early commentaries and apocryphal texts establish the cave near Bethlehem. Chapter III looks closely at cave imagery and allegorical meanings connecting it to Christ's burial. The form of the manger also goes through numerous transformations, which are discussed and deliberated in Chapter IV through a series of carefully selected artworks. In the subsequent chapter, we learn of the origins of the midwives who attended the birth and whose role is visually linked to bathing the newborn Christ Child, thereby providing a metaphorical connection to spiritual rebirth and baptism. The humble shepherds, who are the first to hear of the birth, are addressed in Chapter VI. These archetypal figures form some of the oldest Christian symbols, referencing Christ as the good shepherd as well as passages from the Old Testament.

Unusually, Drummond dedicates a chapter to Birgitta's (St Bridget) medieval vision of the Nativity because of its importance in the iconographic development and inclusion of devotional figures in the works of art. The Virgin Mary finally appears in Chapter VIII, which revolves around the belief in Mary as *Theotokos*, God-bearing, and artists' desire to communicate her unique role. The discussion of Mary balances her motherly tenderness towards the Christ Child with her love and devotion, which is illustrated through a selection of artwork. Particularly representative is the *Nativity at Night*, by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1490, which depicts the newborn as the light source illuminating Mary. Following the chapter on Mary is a return to Joseph. Chapter IX explores the challenges of his role as protector in both the textual treatise and the Nativity imagery. The book ends with the arrival of the adoring Magi in Chapter X, in all their glorious colour and lavish embellishment. As with the other chapters, Drummond looks closely at the origins of the Magi figures and the various ways they have been discussed and represented. She concludes with Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco, c. 1459, of the *Journey to Bethlehem* in the Magi Chapel, Florence.

By focusing on the roles of the individual personae in the Nativity, Sarah Drummond brings to life the altarpieces, illuminated manuscripts, devotional panels, sculptures, and



stained glass that continue to communicate the story. Reminding us that "images seek ways to lead the viewer towards a higher level, approaching the mystery by symbolic and metaphorical means that offer a psychological language that conveys man's spiritual path and the difficulties he must overcome" (p. 72).