



**Geertgen tot Sint Jans (Dutch, about 1455/56-1495)**

***The Nativity at Night*, ca. 1490**

**Oil on wood (probably oak)**

**34 x 25.3 cm. (13 x 10 inches)**

**National Gallery, London, NG4081**

Most of the details of Geertgen's life have been lost to us. It is known that he was probably born in Leiden and died in Haarlem. From 1480, he lived with the Sint Jansheren (Knights of St John of Jerusalem) in their Commandery in Haarlem, hence the addition 'tot Sint Jans' to his name. Although he was not actually a member of this monastic order, Geertgen possibly worked as a lay brother for the monks. He painted a large altarpiece for their church, among other things. The earliest published account of his life and work is from 1604, in a book about Dutch artists by Karel van Mander. He was most probably an apprentice to Albert van Ouwater, and it is thought that a

number of early Netherlandish artists including Albrecht Dürer were inspired by his work. Approximately (12) paintings have been attributed to Geertgen.

His most ambitious paintings are two panels from the high altar of the church of St. John at Haarlem, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. These show knowledge of the work of Hugo van der Goes (c. 1440-1482) and Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1400-1464), two well-known artists of the Northern Renaissance era. However, Geertgen's works are distinctive in their directness and simplicity, peopled by figures engagingly child-like in their appearance and behavior. Geertgen is known especially for his charming doll-like female figures with smooth, oval faces, and slender fingers.

This night-time Nativity scene, created for private devotional use, is based on two nocturnal Nativities (now lost) by Hugo van der Goes. In Geertgen's *The Nativity at Night*, the stable is lit by the divine glow of the Christ child. Originally the rays emanating from Christ would have been more visible. This idea comes from the writings of the popular 14th century mystic Saint Bridget of Sweden who described the birth of Christ: "she gave birth to her son, from whom radiated such an ineffable light and splendor, that the sun was not comparable to it, nor did the candle that Saint Joseph had put there, give any light at all, the divine light totally annihilating the material light of the candle."

*The Nativity at Night* visually describes the traditional Christmas story, how Christ was born in a stable, and his mother "laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn" (Luke 2:7). The infant Christ is watched over by Mary, Joseph and adoring angels, while an ox and donkey peer out of the darkness behind. The Bible goes on to describe how shepherds were watching their flocks at night when "an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone around them" (Luke 2:9). Above the crumbling back wall of the stable, Geertgen has included them, huddled around a fire, their dog beside them, the sheep close by. They gaze up in awe at the shining angel dressed in white, some throwing up their hands in wonder, and others falling to their knees in reverential prayer.

Geertgen's night scene has darkened over time, and was originally more colorful. Some of the details are now difficult to see, especially the basket hanging in the top right corner, and the sheaf of corn leaning against the back wall. The Virgin's dress and mantle were once different shades of blue, but now look black as does the sky. The panel was cut down to its present size in 1901, and was damaged by fire in 1904 while it was in a private collection in Berlin.

Whereas Italian artists favored fresco painting (painting on plaster walls) or tempera paints on panel (powdered pigments mixed with a binder - often egg yolk), fifteenth century artists in Northern Europe preferred oil paints (powdered pigments suspended in linseed or walnut oil). Tempera paint dries very quickly and appears matte on the surface. Oil paints are translucent when applied in thin layers, take longer to dry, and reflect light.