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Small Pipe-Clay Devotional Figures: Touch, Play and Animation

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Abstract: Small, mass-produced pipe-clay figurines were popular devotionalia in the late medieval Low Countries. In this paper, focusing on representations of the Christ Child, I study the sensory and playful ways in which such objects were used as ‘props of perception’ in spiritual games of make-believe or role-play. Not only does this particular iconography invite tactile and playful behaviour, the figurines fit within a larger context of image practices involving visions and make-believe. Through such practices images were animated and imbued with a divine power. Contemporary written sources suggest that, especially for women, ownership of and sensory engagement with small-scale figures provided them with agency.

Keywords: Low Countries, statuettes, senses, play, devotional practices

During an internship at Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, I was given a replica of a small, pipe-clay statuette of a saint. This object was a remnant of an exhibition on medieval sculpture, which included an interactive installation comprising a series of figurines created in schools and other institutions as an educational project.¹ The aim was to enhance understanding of the historical process of production by making it tangible, and increase public appreciation for medieval art. Holding this small object, which fitted nicely in the hand, sparked my interest in medieval people’s engagement with material culture. Although the historical experience could not be replicated by my holding of the object, it did raise questions with regard to medieval image practices coupled with tactile encounters, which have ultimately informed my research.² In this article I focus on the devo-

1 ‘Ontsnapt aan de Beeldenstorm’ (Surviving the Iconoclasm), 2012–2013. I thank Karen Dempsey, Jitske Jasperse and Dasol Kim for their valuable comment on earlier versions of this article.

2 As Linda Hurcombe states in an articles in which she argues for a larger role of the senses in archaeological practice: “Nobody argues that staging an ancient play is a reconstruction of past

tional use of small pipe-clay figures. By concentrating on the sensory appeal of these small objects, we can attend to how these things interacted with and acted on people. In order to further our understanding of the experience of tactile engagement with devotional objects, and the ways in which texts and objects themselves encouraged such multisensory practices, I focus on an aspect that has not gained much attention as of yet: the playful element of these practices, which will be explored through both the objects themselves and textual sources.

Perhaps less well regarded in medieval scholarship than they deserve, small pipe-clay and terracotta figurines of Jesus and various saints belong to the category of mass-produced, affordable devotionalia that were increasingly available in the late medieval Low Countries. They typically come in the form of small statuettes between c. 5 and 13 cm as well as larger figures, and reliefs. Popular themes for the free-standing statuettes were the infant Jesus, Mary with Child, the Crucifixion and other scenes of Christ's Passion, as well as various saints; female martyrs like Catherine and Barbara were especially popular.³ They sometimes stand on a pedestal, and usually depict the figure from head to toe. Apart from specialised *beeldedruckers* (image pressers) or *heyiligenbakers* (saint bakers), pipe-clay figures were also produced in monasteries, and possibly by regular potters too.⁴ They were formed in one- or two-sided moulds, fired in a kiln and sometimes painted.

Pipe-clay objects from the 15th and early 16th centuries have been found in great quantities in the Low Countries, with Utrecht as an important centre of production in the North.⁵ Figures, reliefs and fragments thereof, moulds and produc-

productions but, equally, the practical engagement with the words and the staging offer another means of understanding the words on the page [...] If material culture gives expression to a sensory order then, although cultural outsiders cannot experience the material culture as originally intended, it is still possible to think through what features would draw attention by considering the material culture of past societies holistically." Linda Hurcombe, *A Sense of Materials and Sensory Perception in Concepts of Materiality*. In: *World Archaeology* 39 (2007), p. 532–545, here p. 533, 539. For a similar call to abandon *reading* for *playing*, see Mary Weismantel, *Obstinate Things*. In: Barbara Voss and Eleanor Casella (eds.), *The Archaeology of Colonialism. Intimate Encounters and Sexual Effects*. Cambridge 2011, p. 303–320, here p. 312–316.

³ Some other types can be found, like monks, priests and angels; E.V. Henry-Buitenhuis, 1990. *Pijpaarden beeldjes uit Leidse bodem*. In: *Archeologisch Jaarverslag. Bodemonderzoek in Leiden 11–12 (1988–1989)*, p. 62–76, here p. 75. Profane pipe-clay figures from the Middle Ages are rare, but became popular after the Reformation.

⁴ Sebastiaan Ostkamp, *Van Utrechtse bodem? Utrecht en de productie van pijpaarden devotionalia*. In: Micha Leeflang en Kees van Schooten (eds.), *Middeleeuwse beelden uit Utrecht 1430–1530* (Exhibition catalogue Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht). Utrecht 2012, p. 108–127, here p. 117.

⁵ On their production in Cologne in the 14th Century, see Hubert Wilm, *Gotische Tonplastik in Deutschland*. Augsburg 1929; Gerald Volker Grimm and Tünde Kaszab-Olschewski (eds.), *Heilige, Spielzeug, Glücksbringer. Pfeifentonfiguren aus Köln* (Katalog zu der Ausstellung im Akade-

tion waste have been excavated from cesspits, waste disposal sites and canals. As cheap products, they were likely discarded by manufacturers if they did not meet quality requirements or by owners when damaged or no longer in fashion. It is also likely that many of the figure of saint were disposed of or destroyed during the *Beeldenstorm* (Iconoclastic Fury) of the 16th century. In some exceptional cases the find spot tells us something about the special meanings ascribed by their users. At Foy in the Southern Low Countries a pipe-clay statuette of Mary was recovered from a tree in which may have operated as a sort of shrine, and in some cases pipe-clay figures have been found in graves, which informs us of their social value.⁶

Given the number of finds, it is hardly a surprise that they have mainly been studied by archaeologists, who discuss local finds, types of figures, production centres and ownership. Just as the production took place in both secular and religious contexts, the objects were used by lay-people, professed religious and beguines alike.⁷ Lack of systematic inventories makes it difficult to get an exact grasp on the relative popularity of the figures in these different contexts. Several findings are known from female convents, some from male monasteries, and the number of urban findings has even led to the suggestion that practically every household must have been in possession of pipe-clay devotionalia.⁸ As such, they

mischen Kunstmuseum der Universität Bonn vom 13. Juli bis zum 26. August 2012). Bonn 2012. On their later production in the Low Countries, see Sebastiaan Ostkamp, *Productie en gebruik van pijpvaard en terracotta devotionalia in de Nederlanden (ca. 1350–ca. 1550). Het ambacht van de heiligenbacker voor Judocis Vredis, een archeologisch verslag*. In: Antonius Böing and Günther Inhester (eds.), *Judocos Vredis. Kunst aus der Stille. Eine Klosterwerkstatt der Dürerzeit*. Borken 2001. An early archival source is the Utrecht *Buurspraakboek* (a book containing civic normative ruling) of 1466, mentioning *Peter Dyrxcsz. die beelddrucker*. See S. Muller, *Catalogus van het Museum van Oudheden*. Utrecht 1878, p. 111.

6 See Ostkamp: *Productie en gebruik* (note 5), p. 215. One such grave find concerns the site of the convent St Barbaradal near Den Dungen, inhabited by sisters of the Third Order of St Francis; see T.G.M. Graas, *Pijpaarden beeldjes*. In: Hans L. Janssen (red.), *Van Bos tot Stad. Opgravingen in 's-Hertogenbosch*. 's-Hertogenbosch 1983, p. 223–228, here p. 224.

7 Ostkamp: *Utrechtse bodem* (note 4), p. 111.

8 Suggested by Sebastiaan Ostkamp, *Christus per dozijn*. In: *Vind 1* (2011), p. 68–75, here p. 70. Female convents include Diepenveen (see Willem Moll, *Diepenveensche Oudheden*. In: *Kalender voor de Protestanten in Nederland 3* [1858], p. 93–98), St Barbaradal near Den Dungen (see Graas [note 6]), the St Agnes convent in Kampen (J. Assink et al., *De materiële cultuur van het Agnietenconvent*. In: F. van der Pol and M. Smit [eds.], *De susteren van het Sanct-Agnietenhuus. De geschiedenis, materiële cultuur en spiritualiteit van het Kamper Agnietenconvent*. Kampen 1997, p. 59–100, here p. 79, 88) and Bethlehem near Hoorn (see Christiaan Schrickx, *Bethlehem in de Bangert. Een historische en archeologische studie naar de ontwikkeling van een vrouwenklooster onder de Orde van het Heilig Kruis in het buitengebied van Hoorn (1475–1572)*. Hilversum 2015, p. 277–298). Several pipe-clay figures found in the male moastery Eemstein in Zwijndrecht are mentioned in Jos Koldewij, *De inventaris van het middeleeuwse klooster*. In: Hans Kroeze and Martin Hillenga

provide evidence of a shared culture of devotion between lay and religious people.⁹ Sebastiaan OSTKAMP's synthesising study of pipe-clay objects, discussing production, use and iconography, suggest that the statuettes were used in daily prayer and meditation.¹⁰

Pipe-clay figures are often overlooked in art-historical studies. Being considered popular devotionalia of low quality, they are seldom placed in the wider context of late medieval visual culture. An exception is a recent article by Ingmar REESING, in which he postulates there was a continuum between late medieval luxury items and affordable, mass-produced objects, based on a study of pipe-clay and terracotta reproductions of ivories.¹¹ M. CARON placed pipe-clay statuettes in the context of mass culture and individual devotion, suggesting that the small figurines were primarily meant to be placed in shrines, as they do not easily stand on their own.¹² Indeed, such shrines containing pipe-clay figures survive, for example the so-called 'enclosed gardens' from the Southern Low Countries: mixed-media objects also containing silk flowers and relics, appealing to the 'spiritual senses'.¹³ However, the large quantity of surviving objects compared to such shrines suggests a wider use,¹⁴ and in this article I argue they were particularly suitable for hands-on devotion and playful interaction.

(eds.), *De middeleeuwse kloostergeschiedenis van de Nederlanden*. Zwolle 2011, p. 28–57, here p. 42. For a more elaborate overview of published findings connected to monastic contexts, see Schrickx, op cit., p. 296, n. 48.

9 On this shared culture, see June Mecham, *Cooperative Piety among Monastic and Secular Women in Late Medieval Germany*. In: *Church History and Religious Culture* 88/4 (2008), p. 581–611; Corbellini, Sabrina (ed.), *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages: Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit, and Awakening the Passion* (Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 25). Leiden 2013.

10 Ostkamp: *Productie en gebruik* (note 5), p. 215; Ostkamp: *Utrechtse bodem* (note 4). See also Grimm / Kaszab-Olschewski (note 5); Gerald Volker Grimm (ed.), *Kleine Meisterwerke des Bild-drucks. Ungeliebte Kinder der Kunstgeschichte*. Büchenbach 2011.

11 Ingmar Reesing, *From Ivory to Pipeclay. The Reproduction of Late Medieval Sculpture in the Low Countries*. In: *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art / Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 67 (2017), p. 256–285, esp. p. 258, 278f.

12 M. L. Caron, *Pijpaarden beeldjes, individuele devotie en massacultuur*. In: *Vroomheid per dozijn*. Exhibition catalogue Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. Utrecht 1982, p. 17–21.

13 Barbara Baert, *Late Mediaeval 'Enclosed Gardens' of the Low Countries. Contributions to Gender and Artistic Expression*. Louvain 2016; Id., *Art and Mysticism as Horticulture. Late Medieval Enclosed Gardens of the Low Countries in an Interdisciplinary Perspective*. In: Louise Nelstrop and Helen Appleton (eds.), *Art and Mysticism. Interfaces in the Medieval and Modern Periods*. London 2018, p. 104–127.

14 In his archaeological study of the material culture of the convent of Bethlehem near Hoorn, Christiaan Schrickx concludes that the large amount of pipe-clay figures found means they must have been used outside of the chapel as pious decoration: Schrickx (note 8), p. 297.

Devotional Sensing and Play

I build on the rapidly-growing scholarship on the sensory and especially the tactile aspects of medieval devotional material culture. Scholars of medieval religion have recognized a revaluation of the sense of touch in Western theology from the 12th century onwards, and the embodiment of sight in medieval theories of sensory perception.¹⁵ Medieval ideas on perception and the bodily senses were gendered. While men were associated with the Word, women were connected with more experiential types of devotion involving images and bodily visions – not necessarily because their lack of education, as images could be just as difficult to interpret as texts, but because of their association with both ‘body’ (*corpus*) and ‘flesh’ (*caro*).¹⁶ The original perfect body was an instrument of salvation, the flesh was sinful and had to be mortified. Similarly, women’s sensory practices could be either seen as useful to their spiritual process or criticized. As we will see, this ambiguous evaluation of the bodily senses was also part of the often gendered devotional practices involving small-scale objects.

The tactile and embodied aspects of medieval perception of images and other material objects has been explored in art-historical studies. Hans Henrik Lohfert JØRGENSEN has defined the medieval paradigm of perception as ‘hagiosensorium’, which refers to the ‘sacred senses’, trained to perceive everything in the world through Christ, as well as the ‘sensing of the sacred’.¹⁷ The hagiosensorium was trained with the aid of ‘props of perception’: devotional images and objects directing the gaze at the sacred and both sanctifying the object of the senses and the senses themselves.¹⁸ Jacqueline JUNG makes a similar argument specifically with regard to devotional practices of touching, arguing that in the process tactile

15 Niklaus Largier, *Inner Senses – Outer Senses. The Practice of Emotions in Medieval Mysticism*. In: C. Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten (eds.), *Codierung von Emotionen im Mittelalter / Emotions and Sensibilities in the Middle Ages*. Berlin 2003, p. 3–15; Niklaus Largier, *Tactus spiritualis. Remarques sur le toucher, la volupté et les sens spirituels au Moyen Âge*. In: *Micrologus* 13 (2005), p. 233–249; Suzannah Biernoff, *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. Basingstoke 2002.

16 Biernoff (note 15), p. 23–29; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption. Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York 1991, p. 119–150; Id., *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336*. New York 1995.

17 Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen, *Sensorium. A Model for Medieval Perception*. In: H. H. L. Jørgensen, H. Laugerud, and L. K. Skinnebach (eds.), *The Saturated Sensorium. Principles of Perception and Meditation in the Middle Ages*. Aarhus 2015, p. 24–71, here p. 31.

18 Ibid., p. 45–47.

sense is “cultivated and sensitized”.¹⁹ The hagio-sensorium makes, as JØRGENSEN argues, use of the intersensorium: the experience is synesthetic, with the senses overlapping and interacting.²⁰ Hence, sensory practices not only involve looking at images, but also touching and kissing them.

The notion of play has entered cultural history through Johan HUIZINGA’s ground-breaking study ‘*Homo ludens*’, in which he presents play as an essential prerequisite to culture.²¹ According to HUIZINGA, play is a free activity, ‘not serious’ and absorbing at the same time, standing outside of ordinary life because it is not connected with any material interests or the fulfilment of desires, just like a child’s game of make-believe. He sees a close connection to religious rituals, subject to rules and often taking place in a demarcated, holy space.²² Critics have challenged the view of play as detached from the real world; building on HUIZINGA’s work, philosopher Eugen FINK developed an understanding of play more integrated with ordinary life.²³ Ludic activities, he asserts, recast the world itself as an object of inquiry, allowing for an embodied understanding through constructing and interrogating the boundaries between play and the actual world. Likewise, in anthropology, where dolls and other small figures are studied in relation to ritual and play, the ‘play world’ of make-believe is seen as capable of effectuating change in the ‘real world’.²⁴ Similar ideas have entered the study of medieval art through the work of Mary CARRUTHERS, who discusses what she calls its “ludic play space”.²⁵ I adopt her view that this ludic space was not separated from but integrated with the ordinary world. Play is often posed in opposition to ‘seriousness’;²⁶ however, like many dualisms this is more indicative of modern scholar-

19 Jacqueline Jung, *The Tactile and the Visionary. Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination*. In: Colum Hourihane (ed.), *Looking Beyond. Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*. Princeton 2010, p. 203–240.

20 “The hagio-sensorium conflated different sensorial approaches and modalities into the common goal of sacred experience, whatever means they used and whatever perceptual distances they mediated. The hagio-sensorium made purposeful use of the intersensorium as its medium of sensation – communicating, accessing, and producing the sacred at the interchange of senses near and far, touchable and visible, worldly and otherworldly.” Jørgensen (note 17), p. 42.

21 Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*. Haarlem 1938.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 29–39.

23 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks. Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels*. Freiburg 1957; Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol*. Stuttgart 1960.

24 See, for example, Elisabeth Cameron, *Isn’t S/He a Doll? Play and Ritual in African Sculpture*. Los Angeles 1996, p. 11; John Mack, *The Art of Small Things*. Harvard 2007, p. 155–157.

25 Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*. Oxford 2013, p. 17–19, 27–28.

26 E. g. Alfred Acres, *Rogier van der Weyden’s Painted Texts*. In: *Artibus et Historiae* 21 (2000), p. 75–109.

ship than reflective of medieval culture, in which play and meditation were highly intertwined.

Playful engagement with small objects has been studied with regard to late-gothic prayer nuts: boxwood micro-carvings from the Low Countries. Being of high artistic and technical quality, these have been extensively analysed by art historians, recently in the context of an exhibition at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum. In his study of the meditative practices involving these objects, Frits SCHOLTEN argues that such micro-carvings were part of hands-on playful meditation, as they could be opened, contained hidden secrets, required movement and in some cases even looked like dice.²⁷ SCHOLTEN also pays attention to the impact the miniature scale would have had on the practice of prayer, arguing that the small size leads to immersion and detachment from the surroundings, causing devotees to lose themselves in the scenes, which can facilitate an experience of God's presence.²⁸ This is supported by psychological evidence that the scale of spatial environment affects the experience of time; a smaller scale can make time seem to go faster.²⁹

Thus, small-scale devotionalia might be particularly effective as props of perception through which the hagio-sensorium is activated. Through close observation of creation, the world around us might eventually be forgotten, drawing attention inward and upward, to the divine. Although the pipe-clay figurines do not contain as much sophisticated small detail as prayer nuts, the small attributes of Jesus and the saints and the fact that they can be held in the hand and brought closely to the face suggests they might have been part of similar meditative scrutiny, involving not only an optical experience but also one of touch and smell.

The interconnections between visual, tactile, and playful experience are central to the remainder of this study in which I focus on figures of the infant Jesus. Representations of the Christ Child as an independent figure without Mary, relatively rare in other media, are among the most popular themes found in pipe-clay figures, especially in the female monastic context.³⁰ They often invite play, and – as we will see – can be linked to other sources which suggest tactile engagement. Moreover, pipe-clay statuettes of the Christ Child as holding a bird can be interpreted as inciting playful engagement with devotional objects. In the following, I

27 Frits Scholten, *Scale, Prayer and Play*. In: Frits Scholten (ed.), *Small Wonders. Late-Gothic Boxwood Micro-Carvings from the Low Countries*. Amsterdam 2016, p. 171–210, here p. 198.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 181f.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

30 Adriaan van der Dorpel, *Middeleeuwse pijpen en terracotta heiligenbeeldjes in Zeeland. Een analyse van de middeleeuwse religieuze beleving in Zeeland in functie van heiligenbeeldjes*. Master's thesis Ghent University 2013, p. 48; Graas (note 6), p. 225; Schrickx (note 8), p. 296, n. 48.

first discuss this iconography and what it suggests about the use of these pipe-clay figures, after which the tactile engagement with small-scale objects is addressed.

Jesus Holding a Bird: An Invitation to Play

Pipe-clay statuettes of Jesus as a child holding a bird, naked and usually standing, have been found all over the Low Countries (Fig. 1).³¹ There are some variations, like the Christ Child being seated (Fig. 2) or held by the Virgin Mary.³² Some have been executed in terracotta.³³ The objects with known find spots suggest that, just as other pipe-clay figures of the Infant Jesus, they were popular among female religious communities.³⁴ A striking feature of the iconography is Jesus' age. Being able to stand, he seems older than the Christ Child in most depictions of Mary holding her Son, of an age not narrated in the Gospels, which skip from infancy to Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy. The depiction of Jesus at this age of perhaps four or five years old became popular in late medieval art, when the devotion to Christ's humanity sparked interest in these 'lost' childhood years, a curiosity which was satisfied with help of the imagination and apocryphal literature.³⁵

31 Examples include Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-NM-11283 (5,8 cm), BK-KOG-1272-O (4.7 cm) and BK-NM-11284 (5.7 cm, found in Diepenveen); Centraal Museum Utrecht 1975 (4.9 cm), 1976 (4.7 cm, found in Utrecht), 1973 (5.3 cm, found in Utrecht); Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, LB 1 (5.4 cm, found in Limburg), h 1989/5.36 (4.4 cm, found in Leiden), h 1989/5.37 (4.9 cm, found in Leiden), WD 87 (4.2 cm, found in Wijk bij Duurstede). The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden also holds several moulds found in Leiden.

32 Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, h 1989/5.34 (8,9 cm, found in Leiden). For a parallel executed in alabaster and of larger size, see Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-NM-11912 (69 cm, Île-de-France, c. 1425–1450). Mary with Christ Child holding a bird is found more often in sculpture and painting (see below, note 36) and seems to belong to an iconographical tradition of an origin separate from the independent Christ Child holding a bird, although viewers must have seen them as parallels.

33 van der Dorpel (note 30), p. 55.

34 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum BK-NM-11284 was excavated at the convent of Diepenveen. Three examples from the convent of St Barbaradal near Den Dungen have been published in Graas (note 6), p. 225f.

35 Mary Dzon, *The Quest for the Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia 2017.



Fig. 1: Christ Child holding a bird, 15th or 16th century, pipe clay, h 5.7 cm. Excavated at the site of the convent of Diepenveen (near Deventer). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. BK-NM-11284.



Fig. 2: Seated Christ Child holding a bird, 15th or 16th century, pipe clay. Found during excavations in Riemerswaal, Utrecht. Photo from van der Dorpel (note 30), p. 57.

The iconography of the infant Jesus holding a bird can be interpreted in various ways. If the bird represents a dove, it could symbolise the Holy Spirit, or the human soul. A goldfinch, regularly depicted in the hands of the Christ Child sitting on Mary's lap, could also reference the human soul, among other possible meanings.³⁶ Of greater interest to this paper, is exploring how this iconography might relate to an apocryphal story about Jesus playing with clay birds as a child.³⁷ It is first found in the 'Infancy Gospel of Thomas', written in Syrian or Greek in the 2nd century, and also part of the early medieval Latin 'Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew'.³⁸ It occurs in a sequence of anecdotes narrating Jesus playing with other children, displaying behaviour we would call naughty, and performing miracles. Chronologically, these events take place after the Holy Family has returned from Egypt to Nazareth. Jesus' exact age differs; in the 'Infancy Gospel of Thomas' he is at the age of five, while 'Pseudo-Matthew' casts him as a three-year-old boy. Both versions of the story of Jesus and the birds are set during the sabbath. Jesus is playing at a stream, and moulds twelve sparrows out of clay. A Jewish person witnessing the child's activity reports this to Joseph, as work is forbidden on the sabbath.³⁹ After Joseph's reprimand, Jesus performs his miracle: at his command, the birds come to life and fly away.

This apocryphal anecdote from Jesus' childhood was also transmitted in various vernaculars.⁴⁰ It is not entirely clear where we should look for the textual inspiration for the iconography of the pipe-clay figurines; those from the Low Countries might be imitations of examples from Cologne, the centre of pipe-clay production in the 14th century. Pipe-clay statuettes of Jesus holding a bird have indeed been found in Germany,⁴¹ but since datings are rarely precise it is difficult

36 Herbert Friedmann, *The Symbolic Goldfinch. Its History and Significance in European Devotional Art*. Washington DC 1946, p. 7. See p. 54–56 and 139f. for paintings of Jesus on Mary's lap holding a bird from the Low Countries.

37 This was already suggested by Moll (note 8) in 1858, but I have not encountered it in later publications and catalogue descriptions of the pipe-clay objects. Scholten briefly mentions the apocryphal story as prefiguration of the resurrection in connection to an alabaster statuette of Virgin and Child, holding a bird, in the Rijksmuseum (inv. no. BK-NM-11912): Frits Scholten (ed.), 1100–1600. Amsterdam 2015, p. 61.

38 On these two texts and later versions of the story, see Mary Dzon, *Jesus and the Birds in Medieval Abrahamic Traditions*. In: *Traditio* 66 (2011), p. 189–230.

39 On the antisemitic aspects of this story, see *Ibid.*, p. 197–200.

40 For the story in Middle English narratives, see Dzon: *Jesus and the Birds* (note 38); for other vernaculars, including Middle High German, see Oskar Dähnhardt, *Natursagen. Eine Sammlung naturdeutender Sagen, Märchen, Fabeln und Legenden*. Vol. 2, *Sagen zum neuen Testament*. Leipzig 1909, p. 71–76.

41 See for example Grimm / Kaszab-Olschewski (note 5), cat. nos. 1, 3 and 5; Gerald Volker Grimm, *Tonfiguren der Spätgotik und Renaissance im Töpfereimuseum Raeren. Im Andenken an Otto Eu-*

to establish the origin of the iconography. For the use and sensory experience of the statuettes under consideration here, the circulation of the narrative in the Low Countries is most relevant. The story is briefly mentioned in the widely popular ‘Legenda aurea’, written by the Dominican Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1260–1263), translated into Middle Dutch in the 14th century by Petrus Nagel and used by preachers as sermon material.⁴² Although the passage on Jesus and the birds is not found in all manuscripts, it is presented as one of truths told in the Quran about Jesus: “[Muhammed] also said in his book that when Christ was a child, he created birds out of the slime of the earth.”⁴³ It was also part of the Middle Dutch ‘Der leken spiegel’ (‘The Laymen’s Mirror’), written around 1330 by the Antwerp author Jan van Boendale, and primarily intended for the nobility and urban elite.⁴⁴ The apocryphal story can also be found in a collection of Marian legends from St Mary Magdalen of Bethany in Amsterdam, inhabited by sisters of the Third Order of Augustine.⁴⁵ The compiler made use of Jan van Boendale’s work, among other sources.⁴⁶ In this version of the story Christ vivifies the birds in order to prevent the Jewish man from trampling them, after which he feels ashamed and leaves the children alone.⁴⁷

Besides the circulation of this narrative in the Low Countries, there are other reasons why the apocryphal story of Jesus and the birds is a likely candidate for the intended iconography of our pipe-clay figures of Jesus holding a bird. To start

gen Mayer. In: Raerener Museumskurier 28 (2010), p. 63–75. Textual sources from the German language region narrating the apocryphal story include ‘Die Kindheit Jesu’ by Konrad von Fussesbrunnen (12th century) and ‘Marienleben’ by Bruder Philipp (1316). See Gerard Jaspers, *Een Amsterdam Marialeven in 25 legenden uit handschrift 846 van Museum Amstelkring*. Hilversum 2003, p. 77, 117.

⁴² On the reception of the ‘Legenda aurea’ in the Low Countries, see Werner Williams-Krapp, *Die deutschen und niederländischen Legendare des Mittelalters. Studien zu ihrer Überlieferungs-, Text- und Wirkungsgeschichte*. Tübingen 1986; Anneke Mulder-Bakker and Marijke Carasso-Kok (eds), *Gouden legenden. Heiligenlevens en heiligenverering in de Nederlanden*. Hilversum 1997, p. 41–46; Amand, Berteloot, Hans van Dijk and Jasmin Hlatky (eds), “Een boec dat men te Latine heet Aurea Legenda”. *Beiträge zur niederländischen Übersetzung der Legenda aurea*. Münster 2003.

⁴³ *Oec seit hi in zine bouke, doe Cristus noch een kint was, dat Hi voghelkine sciep vander limen der erden*. Petrus Nagel, *Gulden legende*. Ed. by Amand Berteloot, Geert Claassens and Willem Kuiper. Turnhout 2017, p. CII.

⁴⁴ Jan van Boendale, *Der leken spiegel*. In: Instituut voor Nederlandse Lexicologie (red.), *CD-ROM Middelnederlands*. Den Haag 1998, fols. 52va–52vb; Dirk Kinable, *Geïntendeerde publieks-groepen in Boendales Lekenspiegel en Jans Teesteye*. In: Herman Pleij (ed.), *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen*. Amsterdam 1991, p. 69–99, here p. 72–94.

⁴⁵ Jaspers (note 41), p. 27f.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

with, the age of the depicted child more or less matches the apocryphal story. Furthermore, the story must have been appealing to clay craftworkers, as it presents Jesus as a practitioner of their craft and suggests clay objects can be animated. I will return to the importance of animation of these images below. The choice of subject matter might be a meta-reflection on the craft and on the properties of clay, as it provided the opportunity to depict the clay bird in the very same material it was meant to represent. Jesus moulding and vivifying the sparrows is not a common theme in medieval art. Most examples are manuscript illuminations, and none of the known examples are from the Low Countries.⁴⁸ If the figures do indeed depict the story of Jesus and the birds, the rarity of the theme makes this a conscious choice that can be at least partly explained by playful meditation.

The connection between medieval meditational and contemplative practices and play has been established in recent scholarship. Noteworthy in this respect is John R. DECKER's analysis of the 'Holy Kinship' (1496) which the painter Geertgen of Sint Jans produced for a monastic audience (Fig. 3).⁴⁹ The extended Holy Family is situated in a church interior, in the middle of which three boys, Simon, James the Greater, and John the Evangelist, are engaged in a game of make-believe using the instruments of their future passion. DECKER interprets the painting through the lens of Thomas Aquinas' theories on play. Aquinas compares play to contemplation because both bring delight, and play can set in motion a process of interiorization. Moreover, relaxation and recreation were, according to Aquinas, useful to prepare and renew the soul for contemplation. He refers to an apocryphal story of John the Evangelist, also part of the 'Legenda aurea', who, when criticized for stroking a bird instead of engaging in more productive activities,

⁴⁸ Examples include a ceiling painting in the Church of S. Martin, Zilis, Switzerland, c. 1120, a manuscript illumination in a 13th-century Pseudo-Matthew (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, lat. 2688), an illustrated German prose translation of the Gospels, including Apocrypha, called the *Klosterneuburger Evangelienwerk* (Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Gen. 8, f. 28r); a 14th-century manuscript containing an Anglo-Norman poem on Jesus' childhood (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Selden Supra 38, f. 10v), an early 15th-century Latin Bible Harmony (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, SP II 64, f. 13r), a 15th-century French vernacular manuscript (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fr. 992, f. 36r) and a Swabian Picture Bible from around 1500 (New York, The Pierpont Morgan Library, M.268, f. 26r) and). See Dzon: Jesus and the Birds (note 38), p. 205–209; David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art & the Christian Apocrypha*. London 2001, p. 107f.; Pamela Sheingorn, *Reshapings of the Childhood Miracles of Jesus*. In: Mary Dzon and Theresa M. Kenney (eds.), *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture*. Alpha es et O! Toronto 2012, p. 254–292.

⁴⁹ John R. Decker, *More Strength for Contemplation. Spiritual Play in the Amsterdam Holy Kinship*. In: *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 8/1 (2016), DOI: 10.5092/jhna.2016.8.1.2.

warns that relaxation provides strength for contemplation. DECKER concludes that the painting can be read as an invitation to a sacred game of contemplation.



Fig. 3: Geertgen tot Sint Jans (or workshop), *Holy Kinship*, 1496, oil on oak, 137.2 x 105.8 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. SK-A-500.

Similarly, the pipe-clay statuettes of Jesus holding a bird seem to be an invitation to playful meditation or contemplation, at least for a monastic audience familiar with this theological matter. In addition to the ideas forwarded by Aquinas, in the

monastic tradition mystical play was seen as an imitation of God: ancient Christian theology developed the notion that God's act of creation was a form of play.⁵⁰ The link with creation is also present in the story of Jesus and the birds, Jesus bringing the sparrows to life, which can be seen as analogous to the creation of Adam out of clay.⁵¹ Christ as creator made theological sense, as all three persons of the Trinity were thought to be the creator. Simultaneously, taking a child as example for meditation fits into the medieval view of children as present-minded and taking delight in play, and play as an activity for the blessed in heaven.⁵² The association between birds and play was present in visual culture as well, for example in images of Jesus holding toys and other objects, including birds (Fig. 4), sometimes held by Jesus with a string attached to the bird's leg (Fig. 5).⁵³ In fact, medieval children played with bird-shaped toys, as archeological evidence suggests.⁵⁴

Thus, while we cannot be certain about people's individual experience, based on archaeological, historical and theological evidence, we know that the figurine of Jesus holding a bird invites, through visual devotional stimuli, an inner process of meditation. The iconography could give rise to a meditation game involving a myriad of pious images and associations, as explained above: Jesus' childhood in general, the specific story of Jesus and the birds, the Holy Spirit, creation, and perhaps even the John the Evangelist's apology for relaxation. Their size and iconography do, however, suggest that these figurines had a hands-on component as well; Jesus's holding of the clay bird can be seen as a mirroring of the devotee's tactile interactions with the clay objects.

50 Jörg Sonntag, *Vita religiosa als Spiel*. In: Jörg Sonntag (ed.), *Religiosus Ludens. Das Spiel als kulturelles Phänomen in mittelalterlichen Klöstern und Orden* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 122). Berlin 2013, p. 63–78, here p. 70–72.

51 See Dzon: Jesus and the Birds (note 38), p. 196.

52 Mary Dzon, *Boys Will Be Boys. The Physiology of Childhood and the Apocryphal Christ Child in the Later Middle Ages*. In: *Viator* 42 (2011), p. 179–226, here p. 205–206.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 179, 211; Friedmann (note 36); Dorothy Schorr, *The Christ Child in Devotional Images in Italy during the XIV Century*. New York 1954.

54 Hollow-cast birds that could be mechanically moved from 13th or 14th century have been found in England and the Netherlands: Hazel Forsyth and Geoff Egan, *Toys, Trifles & Trinkets. Base-Metal Miniatures from London 1200 to 1800*. London 2005, p. 63–64, 143. What is more, the child holding a bird might evoke images of playful putti, sometimes including birds. It has been suggested that naked children playing became a motif in late medieval art under influence of Italian putti; see Sophie Oosterwijk, *Kint ende kinne, man ende wijf. De plaats van het kind in de middeleeuwse kunst*. In: *Madoc* (1997), p. 214–224, here p. 222.



Fig. 4: Madonna in a Closed Garden, c. 1460, Rhineland, hand-coloured woodcut, 19.2 x 13.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection, inv. no. 1943.3.562.



Fig. 5: Virgin and Child, fragment of a frieze from a Chimney-piece, 1475–1500, Utrecht, Baumberg limestone, 42 x 35.8 x 6.5 cm. Collection Centraal Museum, Utrecht, inv. no. 1757. © Centraal Museum Utrecht / Ernst Moritz.

Hands-on Devotion and Animation

Pipe-clay figurines of the infant Jesus were used in a tactile and playful devotional practices involving cradles, in which CARON advanced they were placed.⁵⁵ Some of the pipe clay figurines of the Christ Child had moveable arms, perhaps allowing the figure to be dressed. There were also small cribs with the infant Jesus made

⁵⁵ Caron (note 12), p. 19f.



Fig. 6: Crib with Christ Child, 15th or 16th century, Rhineland, pipe clay, 5.1 x 2.6 x 1.8 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. no. BK-NM-11290.

entirely out of pipe clay (Fig. 6), some rounded off at the bottom, making it possible to rock them, a practice discussed in more detail below.⁵⁶ Larger wooden cradles were made for use in the church during the Advent period in combination with larger, also wooden, dolls, while smaller cradles which would have fitted pipe-clay figurines were used in private devotion, mainly by women who received

⁵⁶ Caron (note 12), p. 20; Ostkamp: Christus per dozijn (note 8).

them as gifts when entering a convent or beguinage.⁵⁷ This matches the popularity of pipe-clay statuettes of the Christ Child in convents, although there is also evidence of laypeople owning such cribs, which could be displayed in the home during the Christmas period, and taken to Church on Christmas Day.⁵⁸

Two textual sources from the Low Countries contextualize the use of these dolls. The booklet ‘Van die gheestlike kintscheyt ihesu ghemoraliseeret’ (‘On the Spiritual Childhood of Jesus’, printed by Gerard Leeu, Antwerp, 1488) provides us with a glimpse of the devotional practices in which they functioned; the book explains how “one should swaddle the infant Jesus, lay him in his crib, bathe and wash him, play with him, rock him, lull him to sleep and sing to him.”⁵⁹ The text, aimed at both men and women,⁶⁰ is accompanied by illustrations of female personifications of the Virtues, Justitia and Veritas, taking care of the Christ Child, and rocking his cradle (Fig. 7). Playing with and rocking the actual cradle must have been a multisensorial experience, with different fabrics and textures of the sheets and clothes to dress the doll, bells that were sometimes attached that would ring, and decorative flowers alluding to the sense of smell. More information on such practices comes from a collection of sermons from 1565 which belonged to Sister Weyncken, tertiary at the Convent of Poor Clares in Amsterdam (first mentioned in 1513). The sermons were by Father Bartholomaeus of Middelburg (1484–1564), who had gifted the sisters a Christmas crib and explained how to use it toward their spiritual growth. The cradle, he posited, symbolized the meek heart in which the sisters should receive Christ.⁶¹

57 On these cradles and dolls, sometimes called *Jésueaux*, see Edmond Niffle-Anciaux, *Les repos de Jésus et les berceaux reliquaires*. Namur 1896; Henk van Os, *Gebed in schoonheid. Schatten van privé-devotie in Europa 1300–1500*. Exhibition catalogue Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Zwolle 1994, p. 87–103; Annette LeZotte, *Cradling Power. Female Devotions and Early Netherlandish Jésusaux*. In: Sarah Blick and Laura Gelfand (eds.), *Push Me, Pull You. Physical and Spatial Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, 2 vols. Leiden 2011, vol. 2, p. 59–84; Iris Ippel, *A Christmas Crib as a Meek Heart of the Late Mediaeval Christian*. In: *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 62 (2014), p. 330–347.

58 A crib in Musée de Cluny comes with a cask containing the painted arms of two families from Brussels, and probably belonged to the silk merchant Gérard Cockaert (d. 1546) and his second wife Marguerite-Madeleine van Cattenbroeck (d. 1540): Ippel (note 57), p. 336, 340f.

59 [...] *hoe men het kindekijn ihesus sal zwachtelen, in sijn crebbeken legghen, baden ende wasschen, er mee spelen, wieghen ende wackelen, besuysen ende besinghen*. Quoted from Cornelius G. N. De Vooy, *Middelnederlandsche legenden en exempelen*. The Hague 1900, p. 142. Transl. from Ippel (note 57), p. 337.

60 The booklet uses both male and female pronouns for the human soul; see Andrea Pearson, *Gardens of Morality in Early Netherlandish Art*. Leiden 2019, p. 219.

61 A. Ampe, *Uit de kerstvroomheid der 16de eeuw. Onbekend werk van Bartholomaeus van Middelburg*. In: *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 41 (1967), p. 121–190; Caron (note 12), p. 19f.; Ippel (note 57), p. 138;



Fig. 7: Justitia and Veritas at Christ's cradle. Title page of 'Van die gheestlike kintscheyt ihesu ghemoraliseeret'. Antwerp, Gerard Leeu, 16 February 1488. Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, KW 150 F 10.

In addition, playful practices involving baby Jesus dolls can be connected to visions in which devotional objects come to life. A well-known example can be found in the 'Revelations' of the 14th-century German mystic Margaretha Ebner. She had a carved doll of the Christ Child in her possession, which, if it is indeed

the same object still preserved in the convent of Maria-Medingen, was holding a bird in its left hand.⁶² When playing in its cradle, the doll requested to be kissed and suckled at her breast.⁶³ Many other German nuns, and male mystics like Suso and Friedrich Sunder, had similar visions of playfully interacting with the Christ Child, although they are not always explicitly linked to a material image.⁶⁴ Visions in which images are animated might have provided a stimulus for both monastic and lay owners of pipe-clay figurines to imitate these visionaries and mystics by affectively handling their objects, hoping they would come to life.⁶⁵ Imitating the mystic's vision is a type of role-play, in which the image becomes animated in the imagination. This playful meditation has a mental capacity, in which the imagination is used, and a physical component, in which the image can be touched and embraced.

Individualized Devotion

In this process of animation through make-believe, the personal and intimate bond between image and beholder is central. The relationship with a specific image was expressed with affective gestures such as embraces, implying a love relationship. This may seem at odds with the mass-produced clay objects, which are far from unique. However, devotees could playfully choose and combine figurines, in shrines as mentioned above, or by simply arranging the figures, creating a personalized altar space at home. Thus, they allowed for a personalized religious experience, which has parallels with the practice of choosing from a selection of parchment paintings, mass-produced devotional prints or pilgrim's badges to be sewn or pasted into one's personal prayer book.⁶⁶ We can also see a continuity between liturgical and private devotional practices. Devotees were accus-

⁶² Hans Wentzel, *Eine Wiener Christkindwiege in München und das Jesuskind der Margaretha Ebner*. In: *Pantheon* 18 (1960), p. 276–283; Ulinka Rublack, *Female Spirituality and the Infant Jesus in Late Medieval Dominican Convents*. In: *Gender & History* 6 (1994), p. 35–57 (including a photo of the doll).

⁶³ Ippel (note 57), p. 338.

⁶⁴ Rublack (note 62); Richard Kieckhefer, *Ihesus ist unser! The Christ Child in the German Sister Books*. In: Dzon / Kenney (note 48), p. 167–198.

⁶⁵ The imitation of saints through image devotion by laypeople was already noted by Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago 1994, p. 362.

⁶⁶ Kathryn Rudy, *Postcards on Parchment. The Social Lives of Medieval Books*. New Haven 2016; Hanneke van Asperen, *Pelgrimstekens op perkament. Originele en nageschilderde bedevaartssouvenirs in religieuze boeken (ca. 1450–ca. 1350)*. Edam 2009; Id., *The Book as Shrine, the Badge as Bookmark. Religious Badges and Pilgrims' Souvenirs in Devotional Manuscripts*. In: Marco Faini

tomed to handling and kissing (touching with the lips) clay objects during Mass, where pipe clay paxes were kissed by the congregants to perform the kiss of peace (Fig. 8). Kathryn M. Rudy argues that liturgical practices of kissing were copied by laypeople in their private devotion at home, with the help of prayer books and smaller devotional artefacts.⁶⁷



Fig. 8: Pax with Christ as the Man of Sorrows, late 15th century, possibly from Utrecht, pipe clay, h 6.2 cm. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, inv. no. ABM bs688 / photo Ruben de Heer.

and Alessia Meneghin (eds.), *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*. Leiden 2018, p. 288–312.

67 Mark Amsler, *Affective Literacies. Writing and Multilingualism in the Late Middle Ages*. Turnhout 2012, p. 96f.; Kathryn M. Rudy, *Kissing Images, Unfurling Rolls, Measuring Wounds, Sewing Badges and Carrying Talismans. Considering Some Harley Manuscripts through the Physical Rituals They Reveal*. In: *Electronic British Library Journal* (2011), p. 1–56, esp. p. 2, 15, 21. <http://www.bl.uk/ebj/2011articles/pdf/ebjarticle52011.pdf> (accessed: 19/08/2015). On the personal devotional use of pax tablets, see Reesing (note 11), p. 271; Frits Scholten, *Een Nederlandse ivoren pax uit de Late Middeleeuwen*. In: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 52 (2004), p. 2–23, here p. 4–6. Woolgar states that kissing an object went beyond reverence, involving a desire for transfer of the object's power: Chris M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*. New Haven 2006, p. 41.

Reading textual sources from a gendered perspective, it is clear that women exercised their agency by owning and having access to small-scale images which allowed them perform an interactive but private devotional practice. Through sensory engagement with powerful objects, functioning as props of perception, they could gain access to the divine. However, we should be cautious here because the large amount of sources narrating women's sensory practices does not necessarily conform to the reality of women's devotion compared to men's. Medieval authors might have emphasized the physicality of their practices out of as stereotypical connection between women and body, as mentioned above, a male desire to control women's spirituality, or simply a lack of knowledge of their inner lives. Jennifer Brown, for example, argues that the hagiographer Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240), in his *vita* of beguine and anchoress Marie d'Oignies (1177–1223), focused on bodily phenomena because as her confessor he had control and knowledge over them, and sought to compensate for the spiritual control the holy woman exercised over him because of her access to the divine.⁶⁸ Roberta GILCHRIST pays attention to medieval religious women's sensory experience as affected by celibacy. Enclosure and sensual asceticism, she suggests, created "an interior space, a place of elevated senses and ecstatic states of consciousness. Celibacy, enclosure and contemplation were the avenues through which religious women discovered an intense, profound desire for the suffering body of Christ."⁶⁹ The inwardness of women's cloistered life and devotion is, as Jeffrey HAMBURGER posits, reflected in devotional images and objects of small scale.⁷⁰ The materiality and bodily aspects of women's devotion are thus not necessarily signs of outwardness, but associated with a spiritual interiority.

The power and prestige small, mass-produced devotionalia embodied is testified by their role in miracles. One story involves a small and unsightly statuette of the Virgin Mary, probably made out of pipe clay.⁷¹ It was tossed away by a girl on her way to entering a convent, because she was ashamed of its shabby appearance. A few weeks later, on 19 December 1444 (a week before Christmas Day), it

⁶⁸ Jennifer Brown, *The Chaste Erotics of Marie d'Oignies and Jacques de Vitry*. In: *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19 (2010), p. 74–93, here p. 88.

⁶⁹ Roberta Gilchrist, *Unsexed the Body. The Interior Sexuality of Medieval Religious Women*. In: Robert Schmidt and Barbara Voss (eds.) *Archaeologies of Sexuality*. London 2000, p. 89–103, here p. 89.

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists. The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*. Berkeley 1997, p. 51.

⁷¹ This is suggested by the remains of the figure, kept in the Old-Catholic church Sint-Gregorius op 't Zand in Amersfoort: Dick de Boer and Ludo Jongen (eds.), *In het water gevonden. Het Amersfoortse Mirakelboek naar het handschrift Brussel, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, 8179–8180* (Middeleeuwse Studies en Bronnen 155). Hilversum 2015, p. 29f.

was recovered in a canal in Amersfoort, in the Northern Low Countries, by Margriete Albert Gysendochter, after she received visions in which the Virgin Mary urged her to rescue the object from under the ice. The statuette continued to perform miracles and became a site of pilgrimage, which, in turn, led to a mass-production of devotionalia, such as pilgrim badges.⁷² These and similar miracles show that even the smallest things could have a large impact.⁷³

Because images held power, sensory interactions could transfer these powers to their owners, thus providing the devotee with agency. Margaretha Ebner, discussed above for her possession of a baby Jesus doll, interacted with many different types of devotional objects:

Wherever I found that I had a cross, I kissed it as vehemently and frequently as possible, and I pressed it with all my strength as firmly against my heart as I could, and did so zealously, so that I often thought I would never be able to get away alive, so great was the grace and so overpowering the sweetness that penetrated my heart and all my members so forcefully that I could not withdraw myself. When I went away, I still had a cross to carry. In addition, I possessed a little book in which there was a [picture of] the Lord on the cross. I placed it secretly between my breasts, leaving it open at that place, and wherever I went I pressed it against my heart with great joy and [in receipt of] immeasurable grace.⁷⁴

Margaretha continues this enumeration with a cross to wear around her neck, a large cross to carry with her, and the large crucifix in the choir which she greatly desired to kiss. One night, this came about in a dream vision, Christ bending down to her from the cross. The visionary experiences enabled her to create intimate bonds with images and objects, large and small.⁷⁵ Through her sensory en-

72 H. J. E. van Beuningen and A. M. Koldewey, *Heilig en Profaan. 1000 laatmiddeleeuwse insignes uit de collectie H. J. E. van Beuningen* (Rotterdam Papers 8). Cothen 1993, p. 125; Jonas van Mulder, *Wonderkoorts. Autoriteit, authenticiteit en religieuze ervaring in mirakelcollecties in de Bourgondische Nederlanden (1381–1534)*. Doctoral dissertation Antwerp University 2016, p. 79–83.

73 For similar miracle stories involving small, simple statuettes, see van Mulder (note 72), p. 84f., 258f.

74 [...] *und wa ich mich gefüegen maht, daz ich ain criucz hete, daz kuset ich als vil und dick, als ich immer maht. und druket ez an min hertz, als vil ich von creften maht, und daz tet ich emsclichen, daz mich dick duht, ich möht lebent da von nimmer geschaiden von als grosser gnaud und übercreftiger süezkait, diu mir zo starclichen in drang in daz hertz und alliu miniu lider, daz ich niene kund komen. als ich gieng, so het ich ain criucz an mir. dar zuo het ich ain büechlin, da was auch ain herre an dem criucz, daz schob ich haimlich in den buosen als offenz, und wa ich gieng, so drukt ich ez an min hercz mit grosser fräude und mit unmessiger gnaud.* Margaretha Ebner, *Offenbarungen*. Ed. by Philipp Strauch. Freiburg i. Br. 1882, p. 20f., transl. with assistance of Nigel F. Palmer. Margaretha possibly refers to verse 1:12 of the Song of Songs: *A little bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, between the breasts he shall linger.*

75 Another German Dominican nun, Behte Vinchin of Adelhouse, had a special relation with a specific small crucifix in her possession. She spoke with the crucifix as if it were a friend, and one

gagement with objects, not only looking at them but also touching and kissing, she made them into proxies for Christ and thus into props in her spiritual role-play, enabling them to come to life.

Another potent example is found in the life of St Hedwig of Silesia (1175/1180–1243, canonized in 1267), a duchess from present-day Poland, described in the ‘Codex of St Hedwig’.⁷⁶ Hedwig’s possession of and practices around images, in particular a small ivory figurine of Mary and Child which she holds in an illustration in the Codex (Fig. 9), are repeatedly narrated, such as in the following passage:

[Hedwig] possessed many images and relics of saints, to which she showed due reverence; when she went to church she had them carried near her and set up there where she prayed so that by the sight of these saints, whom she loved, their merits would be recalled to memory in a more lively fashion, and through their self-same intercession, she would prepare herself to be set aflame in greater devotion. As was proper, she embraced the Mother of the Lord with a greater love than all the other saints. Therefore she always carried with her a small ivory image, which she often took up in her hands, so that out of love she could see it more often and through the seeing could more devoutly incite herself to even greater love of the glorious Virgin. When she once blessed the sick with this image they were cured immediately. Thus it was confirmed and made known to all through the power of miracles, what greatness of merit she had already achieved, who, out of fervent love, diligently carried with her this image of the Mother of the Son of God.⁷⁷

day Christ inclined his head from the cross and placed it against her cheek, speaking back to her. See Erika Lindgren, *Sensual Encounters. Monastic Women and Spirituality in Medieval Germany*. New York 2009, p. 7f.

76 The book was commissioned in 1353 by her descendant Ludwig I of Liegnitz and his wife Agnes of Glogau, but the text is based on earlier sources.

77 *Sanctorum quamplurimas habebat ymagine atque relliquias, quibus decentem exhibebat reverenciam et eas coram se portari faciebat ad ecclesiam et in loco, ubi orabat, reponi, ut in earum intuitu sanctorum, quos amabat, merita vivacius revocaret ad memoriam et per ipsorum suffragia se ad devocionis incendium amplius prepararet. Matrem vero Domini inter alios sanctos, quia maiori, ut dignum erat, amplexabatur amore, ideo ipsius parvam semper apud se gerebat ymaginem, quam etiam eburneam sepe accipiens in manibus deferebat, ut ex dilectione sepius eam posset respicere et respiciendo devocius se valeret ad amorem gloriose virginis amplius excitare. De qua ymagine dum aliquando benediceret languidos, protinus curabantur, ut sic miraculorum virtute comprobaretur et innotesceret omnibus, ad quantam meritorum celsitudinem illa iam pervenerat, que ex fervore caritatis hanc filii Dei matris sedule secum ymaginem deportabat.* Codex of St Hedwig. Ed. by Peter Moraw. Berlin 1972, p. 94; transl. adapted from Corine Schleif, *St. Hedwig’s Personal Ivory Madonna. Women’s Agency and the Power of Possessing Portable Figures*. In: Evelyn Staudinger Lane, Elizabeth Carson Pastan and Ellen Shortall (eds.), *The Four Modes of Seeing. Approaches to Medieval Imagery in Honor of Madeline H. Caviness*. Farnham 2009, p. 382–403, here p. 382.

Hedwig performed intimate visual and tactile interactions with her small, miraculous images. Corine SCHLEIF argues that Hedwig should not be regarded as a passive beholder and user of devotional images, but rather as someone who, through the possession of holy objects, controlled access to these images and thus acquired agency and authority.⁷⁸ The passage indicates how small figures were held, as in the illustration, brought to church and to the sick. This sheds light on the places pipe-clay statuettes, easily fitting in the pocket, could likewise have been brought to, and the hands-on, sensory and miracle-working ways in which they were used.



Fig. 9: Saint Hedwig of Silesia holding a statuette of Mary and Child in the Codex of St Hedwig. Silesia, 1353. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig XI 7 (83.MN.126), fol. 12v. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, esp. p. 396.

A similar practice of bringing images to church, and criticism thereof, is found in an account of 1475 by Johannes Busch, an Augustinian canon from Windesheim, in his ‘*Liber de reformatione monasteriorum*’.⁷⁹ During a visitation at the convent of Neuwerk in Erfurt he witnessed the following scene:

We saw that in the choir where they stood, behind their backs and in their seats, most of the sisters each had images of Christ and the saints, both sculpted and painted, according to their own devotion, all of which we thence removed and replaced toward the east in the space between their choir and the church, so that all could see them equally and have devotion from them in common, not in private in the manner to which they were accustomed.⁸⁰

This passage indicates that the sisters felt a need to personalize their church experience by bringing the material props of perception which fitted their devotional preference best. In this account, Johannes Busch’s criticism might have several reasons: the ban on personal possession, the value of communality over personal actions, but also a desire for control over women’s spirituality.

These accounts suggest that objects were vehicles of women’s agency through which they shaped their material spaces of devotion. Material objects provided a focus point to ask and hope for a divine response through the image’s power, be it animation through spiritual role-play or the performance of miracles. According to Hans BELTING, laypeople wanted images with which to have imaginary dialogues, modelled on the visionary encounters between saints and holy images. As a consequence, “[d]evotion as stimulated by images now became a general practice, in which mysticism was merely the ideal but not the rule”.⁸¹ Similarly, in the female monastic context image practices, such as those of the sisters of Neuwerk, might have served to pursue a mystical ideal. For the enclosed sisters, inwardness was inherent to their life and devotion, and contemplation was more common than for laypeople. Possession of a small figure, even a simple, mass-produced one made out of pipe clay, allowed devotees, be it at home, in the church or in their cells, access to the divine through cultivation of the *hagiosensorium*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 387f.

⁸⁰ *Vidimus ibi, quod singule sorores plures retro dorsum suum in choro, ubi stabant, et in sedibus suis habebant imagines Christi et sanctorum et sculptas et depictas iuxta singularum devotionem, quas omnes inde sustulimus et ad orientem circa intersticiu[m] chori ipsarum et ecclesiam reposuimus, ut omnes eas equaliter aspicerent, devotionem in communi ab eis haberent et non more consueto in privato.* Johannes Busch, *Liber de reformatione monasteriorum*. Ed. by Karl Grube. Halle 1886, p. 609–611; transl. adapted from Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary. Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. New York 1998, p. 87–89.

⁸¹ Belting (note 65), p. 410.

Conclusion

Analysing pipe-clay figurines of the Christ Child from a sensory perspective and through the notion of play, has brought to the fore that their scale and iconography invited hands-on and playful engagement, something that has not received the attention it deserves in the study of these mass-produced artefacts. Through role-play and make-believe, intimate interactions with these statuettes were possible and a relation with the animated image was shaped, which could be called a parasocial relationship: an imagined relationship that involved imaginary interactions and emotional investment, and may not be that different from our relationships with the people and things around us, allowing the boundaries between ordinary life and the 'ludic play space' to blur.⁸² Having access to or owning an image can be seen as a form of spiritual capital, since such a 'prop of perception' allowed for a sensory, embodied experience of the divine. Affordable, mass-produced pipe-clay figurines made this experience accessible to a wide audience, while the power and the agency they provided were not necessarily inferior to that of more costly objects. Thus, those pipe-clay figurines that were sometimes tossed away out of shame as in the miracle noted previously still do not hold a central place in art history, yet they played intimate roles in some medieval devotees' sensory and inner lives.

⁸² Jonathan Cohen, Parasocial Break-Up from Favorite Television Characters. The Role of Attachment Styles and Relationship Intensity. In: *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 21 (2015), p. 187–202.