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Emma Capron

In order to put an end to the untimely concerns my new office burdens me with, I shall rid the Church of a bad priest, and go and take refuge under an assumed name in some charterhouse.
—Stendhal, The Charterhouse of Parma, 1839

In Stendhal’s masterpiece The Charterhouse of Parma, the adventurous hero Fabrizio del Dongo, crushed by the deaths of his beloved Clelia and their illegitimate child Sandrino, gives up his office as archbishop of Parma and retires to the eponymous charterhouse, where soon thereafter he too meets an early death. In the nineteenth century, as in the Middle Ages, a charterhouse—a monastery of the Carthusian Order—was a place one went to renounce the world. But whereas Fabrizio joined the Carthusian Order to drown the sorrow of an unhappy love and “rid the Church from a bad priest,” the motivation was certainly quite different for the late medieval Carthusian Jan Vos, the patron of The Frick Collection’s Virgin and Child with St. Barbara, St. Elizabeth, and Jan Vos (fig. 1) and The Virgin and Child with St. Barbara and Jan Vos from Berlin’s Gemäldegalerie (see fig. 41 and facing page).

Far from “bad priests,” Carthusians were described as “athletes” of God by their founder Bruno of Cologne, and throughout the Middle Ages they were highly revered for their commitment to a life of solitude, silence, austerity, and contemplation.¹ In apparent contradiction of this asceticism, however, their monasteries became remarkably rich repositories of works of art, ranging from sculptures to painted panels and manuscripts, from funerary monuments to altarpieces and small devotional objects. This material accumulation has often been attributed to lay interventions within the monastic enclosure.² However, this explanation overlooks the complex and numerous ways in which the Carthusians themselves commissioned and used images for their daily devotion and liturgy and also, crucially, for their own commemoration and salvation.
The story of Jan Vos and the two paintings he commissioned from Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus in the 1440s, during his tenure as prior of the Bruges charterhouse, affords us valuable insights into the patronage of a leading monastic figure in the fifteenth century. As a memorial painting with an attached indulgence (that is, a grant that promised viewers a remission of time served in purgatory in exchange for prayers said in front of the panel), the Frick Virgin offers an even rarer window onto the funerary strategy of a late medieval Carthusian monk. This essay brings the Frick and Berlin Virgins into dialogue in the broader context of objects connected to the Bruges charterhouse, and to the Carthusian Order in general. In doing so, and by leaving questions of attribution aside to focus on the works' function, reception, and use, we can better understand the various roles images played in shaping monastic life and preparing for the afterlife in fifteenth-century Netherlands.

**Jan Vos's Career and Patronage**

In the first days of April 1441, the Carthusian monk Jan Vos was elected prior of the Charterhouse of Bruges, known as Val-de-Grâce in French or Genadedal in Flemish. Little is known of Jan Vos's life. Born in Delft, he began his career as a member of the Teutonic Knights, a military religious order with its origins in the Third Crusade, founded with the goals of providing medical care to Christians and defending the Holy Land. By the fifteenth century, Teutonic houses in western Europe were much busier operating hospitals than waging holy war. Their members, called knights or brothers, had sworn vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and most of them were also priests. Despite regulations specifying that nobility was a requirement for entry into the order, in practice Jan Vos's social extraction remains unclear. He is first documented in 1431 at the bailiwick (the Teutonic provincial seat) of Utrecht in the northern Netherlands, where he served as procurator, an important administrative position tasked with the management of the house assets and finances. Soon after, he joined the Carthusian Order, taking his vows at the Charterhouse of Nieuwlicht, just outside Utrecht, about 1432. This coincided with an important moment for this charterhouse: that year, its monks retook possession of their monastery, which they had abandoned for five years due to political and religious strife in Utrecht. By 1437, Jan Vos had ascended to the position of procurator at Nieuwlicht. In 1441, following the death of the prior Gerard de Hammone...
on March 30, Jan Vos was called to Bruges to become the prior of the Charterhouse of Genadedal. Not much is known about his tenure there except that in 1444 he secured a tax exemption for the monastery from Philip the Good—probably an important achievement of his priorate—which also indicates that he had contacts with the ducal court. Jan Vos headed the Bruges charterhouse until 1450, when he was called back to Utrecht to serve as prior of Nieuwlicht. He spent eight years at the helm of the Utrecht charterhouse, where his stewardship was remembered as “wise and commendable” in a later chronicle of the monastery. Due to ill health and age, he asked to be relieved of his charge in 1458; he died at Nieuwlicht four years later, on February 15, 1462. According to Carthusian practice, he was buried in the monastery’s large cloister.

From documents and extant works, Jan Vos can be associated with at least four works of art during his lifetime. The two paintings that survive are the Frick Virgin and Child with St. Barbara, St. Elizabeth, and Jan Vos (see fig. 1) and the Berlin Virgin and Child with St. Barbara and Jan Vos, known as the Exeter Virgin after the British private collection in which it was first recorded (see fig. 41).

In 1938, the Dutch scholar Hendrick Scholtens connected the Frick Virgin to a crucial document: a letter dated September 3, 1443, in which the suffragan (or