

The Humble Christ

BY ANN SCHMALSTIEG BARRETT

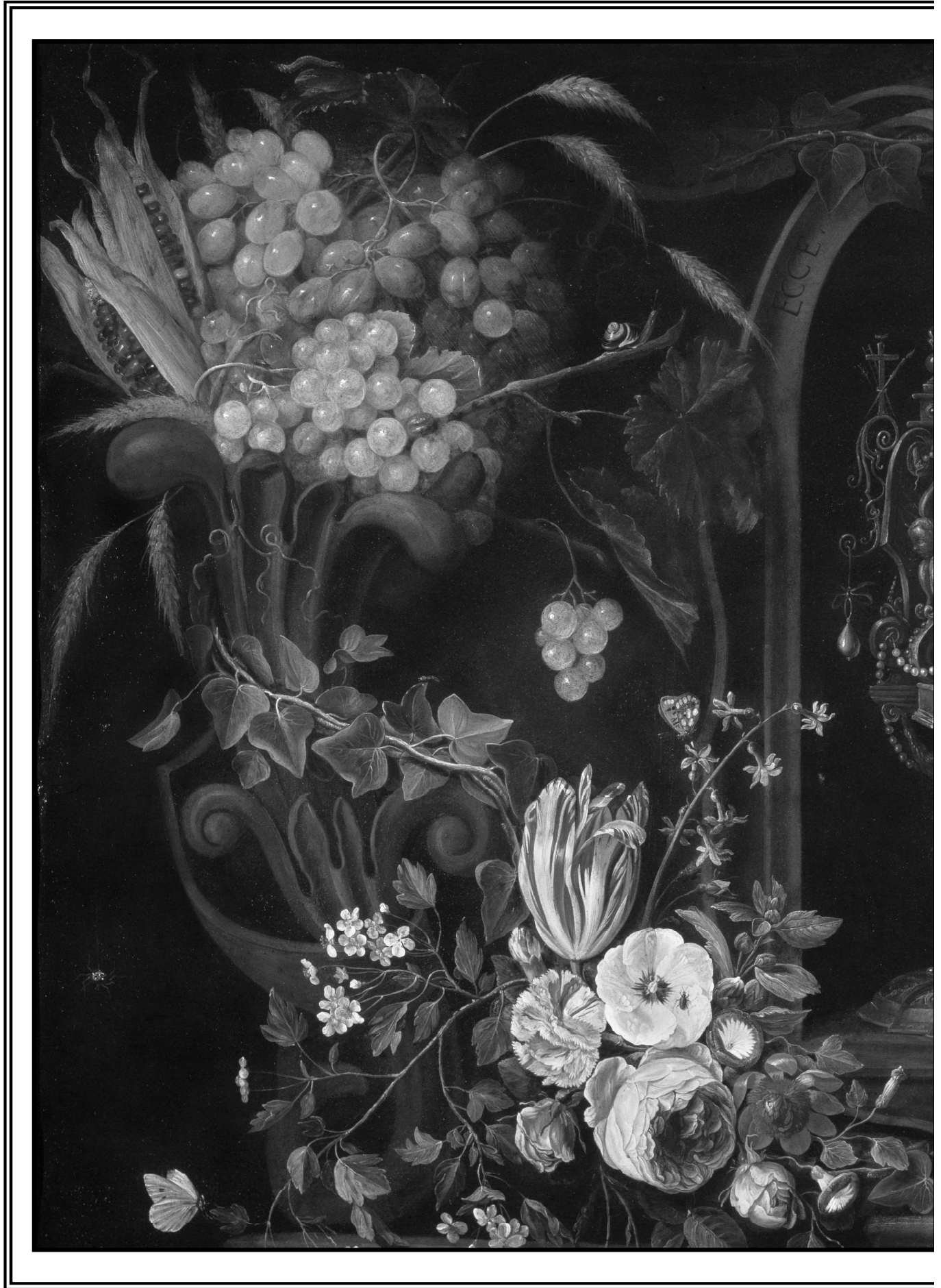
Still Life with Flowers and Grapes Encircling a Monstrance in a Niche by Jan van Kessel. 70 x 105.5 cm oil on copper. 1670. The National Galleries of Scotland. <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/62197>.

A full color image of this painting is available on the back cover of this issue and with the digital version of this article located on the website of the Catechetical Review.



IN THE TRADITIONAL HIERARCHY OF PAINTING, still life has often been viewed as the lowest genre to pursue. While history and religious painting served a moral or spiritual purpose, frequently involving an engaging narrative or drama, still life painting served to depict believable props rather than focusing on the objects themselves. This changed in the Dutch Golden Age as commercial prosperity in the port cities increased the wealth of the 17th-century middle class. With interest in beautifying their homes, the modest still life increased in popularity, adding color to walls while also conveying subtle meaning through composition and the language of symbolism.

One form of still life that developed in the southern part of the Netherlands was the devotional garland painting.





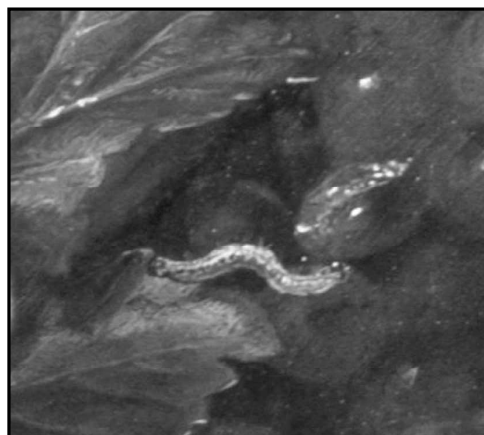
Composed in a predominantly Catholic area, these paintings presented an image of the Madonna and Child or other devotional scene surrounded by an elaborate garland of florals. Not only were the incredible skills of the artist on full display through the intricate detail of the paintings, but the images also reaffirmed the goodness of devotions that were challenged by Protestant neighbors to the north. In preparation for the fourth centennial of the feast of Corpus Christi in 1664, garland paintings adopted a Eucharistic focus, presenting a monstrance or chalice with the Eucharist within an architectural niche. Promoted by the Jesuits, these paintings not only encourage belief in the Real Presence but also cultivated a desire for the Eucharist, combatting the Jansenist discouragement of its frequent reception. In the 1670 painting by Jan van Kessel titled “Still Life of Flowers and Grapes Encircling a Monstrance in a Niche,” we see the rich potential of this humble genre to guide the viewer in meditation on the Eucharist, revealing what appears to be bread to truly be the source and summit of our faith.

Although the Eucharist is at the center of Kessel’s painting, the colorful fruit and florals that frame the niche draw the attention of the viewer. A cornucopia containing the material origins of the Eucharist overflows on each side. The variety of colorful grapes is paired with the variety of grain in the wheat and the corn. While only the wheat is used to make the bread of the Eucharist, the corn (a grain native to the “new world”) highlights the distant lands with which the Gospel is to be shared. We may think of the elevated dignity of the wheat and grapes, chosen by the Creator as that through which he becomes substantially present from generation to generation, but it is even more surprising to consider the humility of the Creator, united to material without distinction and easily trodden underfoot.

Following the vine, the viewer is led to the bouquets of flowers at the foot of the niche. The florals are particularly appropriate for a Eucharistic painting, considering the feast of Corpus Christi was also known as “The Day of Wreaths” due to their use in decorating the streets and in Eucharistic processions.

The symbolism of individual flowers was well known through prayer books, allowing the 17th-century viewer to recognize a deeper meaning within the arrangements. We probably already recognize the rose as a symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the white, bell-shaped lily of the valley representing her tears while witnessing the Passion. The carnation, representing love, appears next to orange and white anemones. These flowers are often depicted in Crucifixion scenes and are thus associated with Christ's suffering and death. The tulip, a symbol of the fragility of life, is found along with the blue hyacinths, conveying a desire for heaven.¹ All together, the bouquets show the beauty of creation offered back to the Creator while also subtly presenting the drama of the Passion.

While studying the meticulously painted florals, we discover animated life throughout the scene. Insects were a common addition to still life paintings, particularly in *vanitas* scenes, in which ants and flies are found crawling among spoiled fruit. Kessel was well known for paintings of insects, which were often displayed along with the curiosity cabinets of the day. In the context of the Eucharist, Kessel used this area of intrigue to offer further meditation and support devotion. Unlike the *vanitas* paintings, the beetles and snail are found among the branches and florals, respectfully leaving the grapes and wheat untouched. Standing on a leaf in the right side of the painting, a caterpillar reaches toward a grape that has been cut (the only damaged grape in the scene). It is as if the caterpillar sees the wound as necessary



1 The striped tulips also expressed great wealth, as was evidenced by the “Tulip Mania” market bubble, which began in 1634 and burst in 1637. Artists would often compose floral bouquets from botanical drawings or other studies, especially when they involved very expensive and exotic flowers.

for metamorphosis. This transformation from an old life to a new resurrection is found throughout the painting, symbolized by the butterflies that fill the scene.

With the static scene thus enlivened, it is easy to miss the spider that quietly hangs on a thread in the lower left section of the painting. Camouflaged by the darkness of the background, the natural predator is not seen within a web to catch its prey. Rather, it is present to recall Isaiah's prophecy regarding the time when a descendant from Jesse will come: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD" (Is 11:6, 9). It is through the smallest members of the animal kingdom that we see creation redeemed to its original purpose: revealing the creative glory of God and the harmony of relationship within his presence.

Aware of this context, the viewer is now prepared to perceive the reality within the center of the painting. Along the frame of the niche are the words "*Ecce Panis Aeng[elorum]*" (behold the bread of angels). With "*aeng[elorum]*" partially hidden, the artist signals that we must consider what we do not see in order to fully understand what is being shown. Although the incised phrase is immediately recognized from the Corpus Christi sequence, it is also found within the Old Testament in reference to the manna that nourished Israel as they wandered through the desert: "and he rained down upon them manna to eat, he gave them the bread of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance" (Ps 78:24–25). The full reality of the manna is revealed by Jesus in the bread of life discourse: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live forever" (Jn 6:51).

This heavenly origin of the Eucharistic bread in the center of the niche is testified by its monstrance. Two angels are presented on either side, like the angels that flanked the ark of the covenant, signifying the presence of God. The pearls and jewels that adorn the monstrance convey the human recognition of the true "pearl of great price" (Mt 13:45–46) and the greatest gift of our faith: Emmanuel, God with us.

While revealing this summit of our faith is the central purpose of the painting, the source of our faith is equally significant.

Crowning the filigrees next to the angels, the *Arma Christi* (weapons



of Christ) are sculpturally rendered. The cross stands on the left side, mounted with the sign identifying the king of the Jews, with a torch from the soldiers in Gethsemane in front and the ladder from the disposition behind. On the right, the pillar of the flagellation stands in the center, topped by the rooster whose crow fulfills Christ's prophecy of Peter's betrayal, with the spear of Longinus leaning before the pillar and the sponge attached to a long branch at an angle in the back. Veiled within the shadow of the niche, this devotion meditates on the tools used in the Crucifixion as the weapons by which Christ defeated sin and death. The jeweled cross at the top of the monstrance expresses the transformation of this instrument of torture into the source of our salvation. Within the monstrance, our crucified Lord is shown embossed on the host, establishing the source of our faith in the self-sacrificing love of God.

Each detail of Kessel's painting beckons the viewer to sit a moment longer. Through the guidance of the composition and symbolic expression, the painting directs the viewer beyond what is seen into meditation on the reality of the Eucharist. Although historical and religious paintings may engage the imagination through narrative and drama, it is through the humility of the still life painting that the viewer is given the lens to perceive the humility of God in Eucharistic adoration.

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