

# A Cat under the Bed

On a Motif in the Altarpieces  
by Hermen Rode and Bernt  
Notke in Tallinn

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In the altarpiece of the Church of the Holy Spirit, completed in 1483 in the workshop of Bernt Notke in Lübeck, there is a cat who has caught a mouse under the deathbed of St Elizabeth of Thuringia (fig. 1–2). In another altarpiece in Tallinn, painted by Hermen Rode for the church of St Nicholas in 1478–1481, there was an intention – as revealed by the infra-red studies of the underdrawings conducted in 2010 – to add a mouser under the bed of Emperor Constantine, but the artist gave up the idea (figs. 3–4). Rode also left out some other details in the same scene, such as the chamber pot and slippers of the emperor (fig. 5).

A similar motif can also be found in some other 15th-century artworks in the Baltic Sea region. A carved altarpiece from Boeslunde, now in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, displays a white cat under a bench in the *Birth of the Virgin Mary* (figs. 6–7). It is difficult to determine if it also had a mouse between its teeth because one side of the muzzle is damaged. In the Östra Ny church in Sweden, also in the scene of the *Birth of the Virgin*, a white or light grey cat is chasing a mouse under the bed of St Anne (fig. 8). Both altarpieces were produced in northern Germany. On the murals of the Bromma church near Stockholm, a large white cat who has caught a mouse is painted under the staircase in the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (figs. 9–10). The aim of this article is to discuss the possible meanings of the cat in these works of art.

Animals in late medieval art often functioned as moral allegories, as didactic means to convey religious messages. Like most symbols, the cat could have a positive or a negative connotation. Everything depended on the context of a particular image, and sometimes

there was no symbolic meaning behind the animal. The question is: how can the presence of a mouser be interpreted in the aforementioned artworks?

Medieval attitudes towards the cat can be described as mainly negative, or at least ambivalent. Cats were associated with demons, evil spirits, Satan, witchcraft, black magic and heretics. They also symbolised the sins of sloth and lust, as well as deceitfulness and hypocrisy. In daily life, however, cats were highly appreciated as useful predators of mice and other rodents. They were regarded as hearth-keepers, ridding kitchens of pests that damaged the food supply. But even this utilitarian aspect of cats can be interpreted symbolically. For instance, a parallel can be drawn between the cat who plays with the mouse and the Devil who plays with the sinner.

This article argues that there are at least two possible ways to analyse the presence of the mouser in the Tallinn altarpieces. The first is to proceed from the combination of the cat and the mouse. A mouse or a rat was a symbol of sin and evil and of the Devil himself. In late medieval art, the Devil was often present in holy events disguised as a fly or some other unclean creature. Thus, a cat that has caught a mouse symbolises the victory over evil and impurity. The moral message of the images could be the following: the Devil, in the form of a mouse, is secretly witnessing holy events, such as the birth of the Virgin or the death of St Elizabeth, and trying to capture the souls of the saints in these vulnerable moments. But the cat – a good hunter – prevents him. The mouser under the bed of Constantine (figs. 3–4) would have emphasised the message that the three noblemen in shackles in the background, whose innocence was

revealed to the emperor by St Nicholas, were imprisoned on false grounds, due to the plot of Evil. It should also be noted that in several images described above, the cat is white or light grey – and this is another indicator that in this particular context it has a positive connotation.

Another possibility is to analyse the spatial context in which the cat occurs in these images: the bedchamber, the most intimate room in a household. Several late medieval panel paintings and murals indicate that by the 15th century (in Italy, even somewhat earlier) the cat in art had developed into a symbol of domesticity. It shared this function with the dog, but dogs are normally to be found in reception halls and other rooms that display one's status, whereas the cat is usually found in the kitchen (the female space) or in the bedroom, the innermost private space. For example, in the *Last Supper* (c. 1315–1319) by Pietro Lorenzetti in the lower church of St Francis in Assisi, a kitchen is added to the main scene, visually separated by a painted wall. Unlike the holy story taking place in the main scene, the kitchen displays familiar everyday activities: the servants are washing dishes, the dog is licking the plates and the cat is sleeping near the fire. Such tiny additions, depicted in a familiar setting and often humorous, assisted medieval viewers to better remember the holy story, to become emotionally involved and to better understand the didactic-moral message of the image.

One of the first representations of a cat in a bedroom is a fresco in the Cathedral of Orvieto, depicting the birth of the Virgin (c. 1370–1380). The cat has grasped the tablecloth, trying to get some of the delicious food meant for St Anne. The saint, the midwife and the maids are paying no attention to the animal – it

is an inseparable part of the household and there is nothing extraordinary in its presence in the bedchamber. In some other images, such as the *Virgin and Child* by Petrus Christus (c. 1450), in which the domestic space is furnished and decorated in a 'realistic' manner, the cat is sitting near the fireplace, emphasising the 'homely' atmosphere of peace and comfort.

But can we interpret the cat as a symbol of domesticity in the altarpieces of Notke and Rode? At first sight, it seems possible. After all, the other details that were left out of the same scene by Rode – the chamber pot and slippers – are connected specifically to the bedchamber and have no symbolic meaning. Likewise, the cat under the deathbed of St Elizabeth may stress the intimacy of the bedroom and be viewed as part of her household and the female space. The same could be true for the altarpieces of Boeslunde and Östra Ny. The cat in the Bromma murals, however, does not fit well into this category: there, the mouser seems to function as the guardian of the temple and the catcher of the Devil. It is also noteworthy that, in most of the western European examples, the cat in the bedchamber is not catching mice but sleeping near the fire or eating food that is served to it. Therefore, I support the first possibility – that the cat in the Tallinn altarpieces indeed carries a religious symbolism: it is a good hunter who catches the Devil or evil spirits. It is clear, however, that each image should be analysed based on its spatial, temporal and cultural context.