

Altarpiece with the two sets of panels open



Mary cycle

When the altarpiece is fully open, the sculpted tableaux depicting the life of Mary can be seen.

The Saluzzo altarpiece, like many Brussels altarpieces, has the form of an inverted T. This serves to emphasise the central tableau. Moreover, this shape calls to mind the cross-section of a Gothic church, in which the higher central aisle is flanked by two side aisles. The symbolism of the church building is emphasised still further by the presence of the architectural elements. Pinnacles and canopies supported by pillars and openwork friezes can be found on virtually all Brussels altarpieces. The gold leaf and the variety of colours used remain virtually intact on this altarpiece.

A

The **Apostles Peter and Paul** are always depicted with beards in the style of the philosophers of Ancient Times.

B

The **mark of the craft of Brussels polychromers** (*Bruesel*), who applied the gold leaf and the colours, was a guarantee of the quality of the material used.

1

The fifteen steps that Mary climbs at the time of the **Devotion in the Temple** correspond to the fifteen psalms that the people of Israel sang while mounting the steps in the Temple of Solomon.

2

For the **Wedding** with Joseph, Mary wears a dress with a brocade pattern. This typical Brussels form of decoration was used to imitate rich textile embroidery. A white preparation or a wax-based blend was poured into moulds. The figures taken from the mould were then gilded and stuck to the statues.

3

At the time of the **Annunciation**, Mary was reading a Bible, and more specifically a passage from the Book of Isaiah, in which the birth of Jesus is foretold.

4

The ox and the ass warm the child with their breath. Their presence at the **Nativity** is an anecdotal detail that was considered very important in the late Middle Ages.

5

The **Prophet Isaiah** holds a book in his hand bearing the words (translated from the Latin): 'For unto us a child is born, a son is given []'.

6

Sybilla of Cuma, a prophetess inspired by God, who was equated with the prophets in the Middle Ages, is said to have foretold the birth of Jesus.

7

The **Circumcision of Christ** is a theme that is seldom covered and was less bound by precepts. As a result, the garments of the figures are particularly imaginative. Only the figure of Joseph is depicted in traditional style with a staff and cape.

8

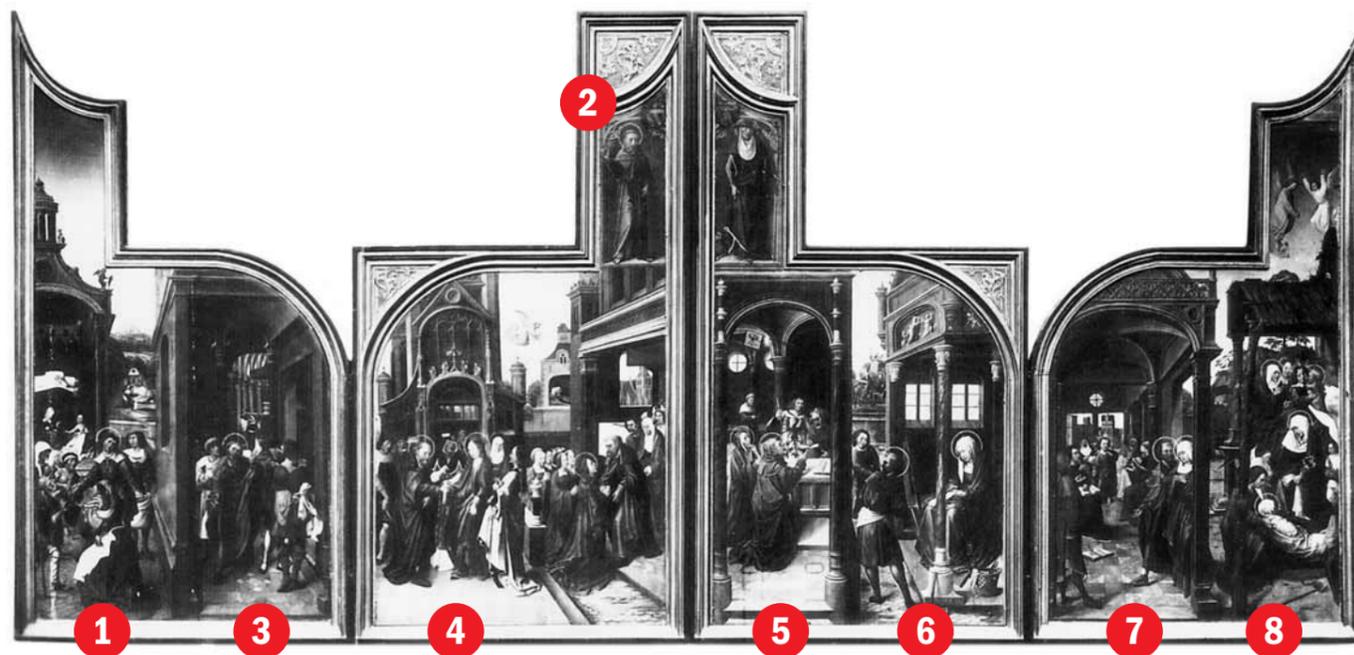
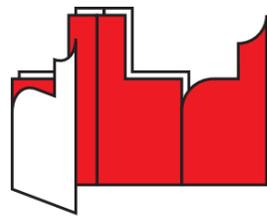
The **coat of arms** refers to the Italian family Pensa di Mondovi di Marsaglia, who commissioned the altarpiece in Brussels, which at the time was a leading centre for altarpiece art. In the 18th century, the altarpiece was kept at their residence in Saluzzo, from where it takes its name.

9

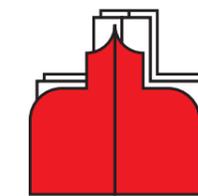
At the **Adoration of the Magi**, the kings offer three gifts: myrrh refers to the suffering of Christ, frankincense points to his divinity and gold stands for his purity.

10

Forty days after the birth, Mary went to the temple to be purified and for the **Devotion of Christ in the Temple**. The small painting on the altar depicting the sacrifice of Abraham prefigures the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.



Altarpiece with the first two panels open



Closed altarpiece

Joseph cycle

Scenes from the life of Joseph appear only from the late Middle Ages.

1

The **Birth of Joseph** is based on that from the Mary cycle. The **Benevolence of Joseph** is depicted in the forefront, while **Joseph's Training** to become a carpenter can be seen in the background.

2

St Bernardinus of Sienna, a Franciscan monk, promoted the cult of Joseph amongst other things as a reaction against the medieval mystery plays, in which he was often made to look ridiculous.

3

This scene depicting the **Testing of the Suitors** presenting themselves in the temple is also taken from the iconography of the Mary cycle. Since the High Priest wishes to give Mary a husband, he arranges for male descendants of the house of David to come to the temple. Joseph's branch alone begins to bloom, which is a sign that he is the Chosen One.

4

The **Wedding** of Joseph and Mary is spread over several tableaux. At the front on the left-hand side, we see the wedding that takes place in front of the synagogue. On the right-hand side Mary and her companions go to Joseph's house. **Joseph's Dream** is depicted in the background.

5

The **Census in Bethlehem** is a theme that is very seldom depicted. Those present include a herald with the coat of arms of the House of Hapsburg.

6

Life in Nazareth portrays Mary, Joseph and Jesus in a family environment. From the late Middle Ages onwards, Joseph was depicted as a good family man. As a family, they are sometimes referred to as the earthly trinity. The **Flight to Egypt** is depicted in the background.

7

The portrayal of **Jesus with the Scribes** is taken from the Childhood of Christ cycle.

8

The **Death and Burial of Joseph** are themes that were extremely innovative in the early 16th century. Mary lays in the grave the hose that Joseph had removed to wrap Jesus.

The edge of the cloak of the Virgin bewailing the death of Joseph bears the inscription 'Orlei'. This may refer to the painter Valentin van Orley, father of Bernard van Orley.

Tree of Jesse

The altarpiece usually remained closed and looked like this. It was only opened on special occasions and for festivals, so that the Joseph and Mary cycles could be seen.

9

The Tree of Jesse is a genealogical theme depicting Jesus' lineage going back to David. A tree sprouts from the breast of David - unusually, not from Jesse - and divides into two branches, leading to Mary and Joseph.

10

The genealogy of Jesus is set out in the Gospels of **Luke** and **Matthew**. Only a few of the many generations between David and Jesus that appear in the Gospels are given here.