

# Visual Meaning and Audience at the Chartreuse de Champmol: A Reply to Susie Nash's Reconsideration of Claus Sluter's *Well of Moses*

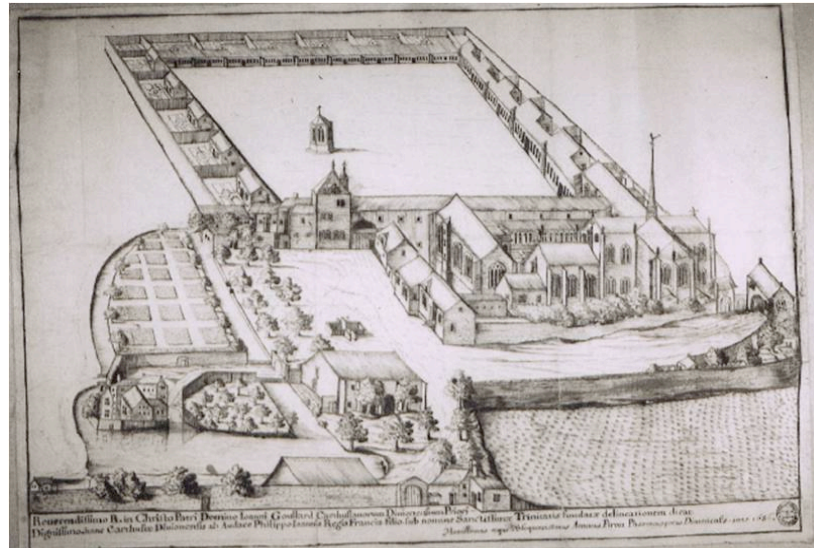
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Sherry C. M. Lindquist

In three recent articles in the *Burlington Magazine*, Susie Nash has re-examined Claus Sluter's justly famous *Well of Moses* from the Chartreuse de Champmol in light of a careful re-reading of the primary source documents together with scrupulous physical observation of the newly restored monument (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Nash's re-reading does more than offer a revision of what an important monument originally looked like; it also has implications about the nature of the documentary source material from this period, the social meaning of devotional practice in the Middle Ages, and how we can reconstruct the public of ideologically potent objects. These are issues that are at the heart of my own study, *Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol*.<sup>2</sup> Our interpretations of such matters are by no means mutually exclusive, but they are far enough apart to merit some reflection about the broader implications of cases such as this one, when scholars look at the same facts and draw differing conclusions.



1. Claus Sluter and workshop. *Well of Moses, David and Jeremiah*. Stone and polychromy, 1395-1406. Dijon, Chartreuse de Champmol *in situ*. Photo: author.



2. Aimé Piron, Chartreuse de Champmol. Drawing, 1686. Portefeuille de la Chartreuse, Bibliothèque Municipale, Dijon. Photo: Bibliothèque Municipale, Dijon.

Nash dramatically alters or destabilizes much of what we have understood about the lost larger monument of which the *Well of Moses* is a fragment. The *Well of Moses* is the pedestal of the “Great Cross” of the large cloister at the Chartreuse de Champmol in Dijon; it was sculpted by Claus Sluter and his workshop--including his talented nephew and successor, Claus de Werve—between 1395-1406. Sculptures from this Carthusian charterhouse are especially prominent because this new foundation served as the dynastic mausoleum of the legendary Valois dukes of Burgundy (Figure 2). The revolutionary new sculpture style associated with Claus Sluter’s work at this monastery plays a pivotal role in the history of art: it is understood to embody a new conception of space on the eve of the Renaissance and to have inaugurated a much admired Netherlandish

tradition of realistic effects. Scholars are still digesting Nash's new reading, and there will no doubt be responses to come, some of which debuted at a conference on the topic held at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Dijon in October of 2008.<sup>3</sup> Nash suggests that the lost cross atop the extant pedestal was taller than previously thought, and was probably placed at the angle over the prophets David and Jeremiah rather than directly over David, which has been the prevailing view (Figure 3). She de-attributes the masterful bust of Christ in the Archeological Museum in Dijon that has so long been thought to be the Christ from the Great Cross (Figure 4). She makes a case that the statue of Jeremiah is a crypto-portrait of Philip the Bold, meant as a reminder to the monks that they were to pray for the Duke's soul with the help of their devotional manuals (Figure 1). Nash insists that the Great Cross, in spite of the indulgence granted to it, was "for the monks' eyes only."<sup>4</sup> Finally, she rereads the evidence to assert that the statues of Mary and John the Evangelist assumed to have been atop the pedestal were never there, thus making the emotional Mary Magdalene weeping at the base of the cross a starker and more poignant focus for the monks' prayers.

I have nothing but admiration for Nash's close reading of the documents and physical evidence that allows her to propose new and thought-provoking interpretive possibilities. I think she has good reasons to doubt the bust of Christ as having originated on the Great Cross, and I am convinced by her re-orientation of the Crucifixion scene at an angle between David and Jeremiah. Nevertheless, I have some reservations about others of Nash's conclusions and the certainty with which she advances them. By analyzing where and how our interpretations

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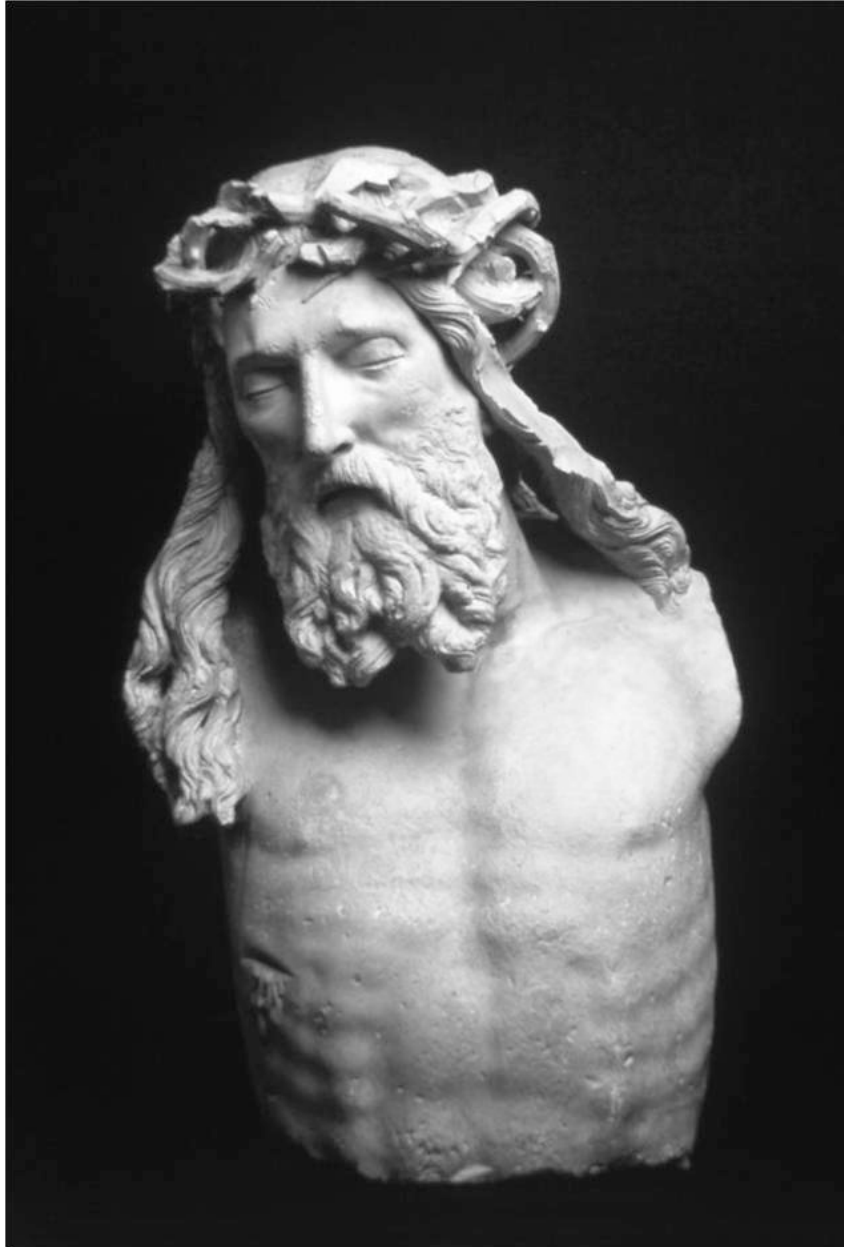
diverge, I hope to contribute to a larger dialogue about the ideological nature of the source material upon which we rely, and about how the visual functions in societies.



**3. Left :** Eileen Greene. Reconstructive drawing of the Great Cross I: Crucifix aligned over David, with the Virgin Mary, John, and Mary Magdalene. Pen and ink, 2000.

**Right:** Tom Bilson. Reconstructive drawing of the Great Cross II: Crucifix aligned over the angel between David and Jeremiah, with a taller column and

Mary Magdalene alone. Pen and ink, 2006, from Susie Nash, "Claus Sluters' 'Well of Moses,' part II," p. 467.



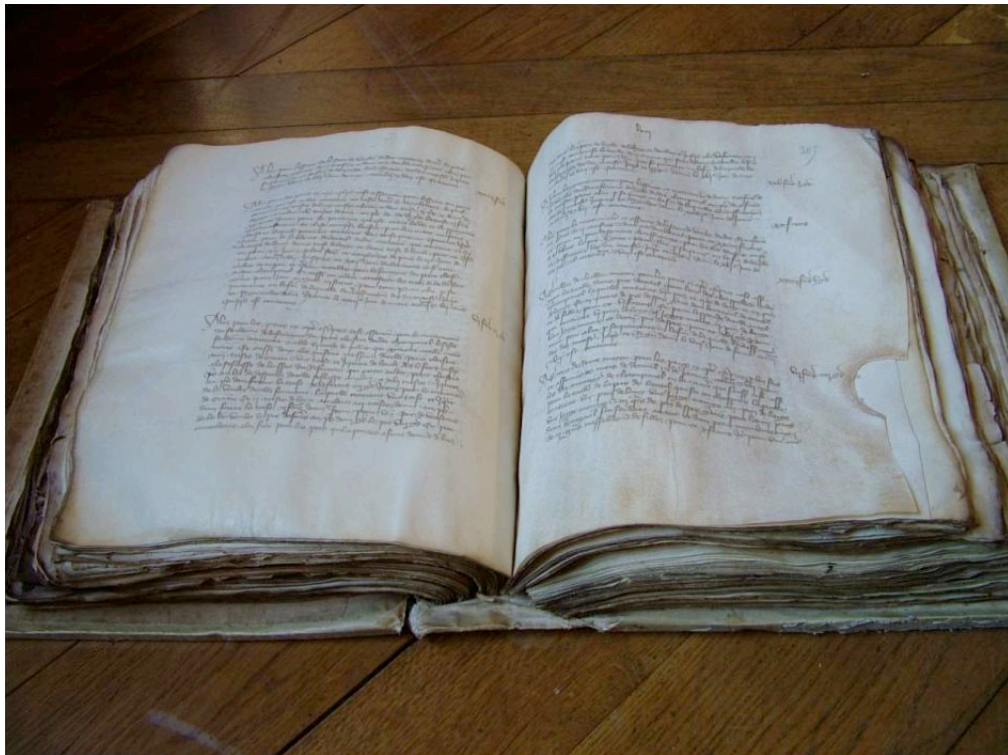
**4.** Anonymous? (Formerly attributed to Claus Sluter and workshop). Bust of Christ. Dijon, Musée Archéologique. Photo: Dijon, Musée Archéologique © François Perrodin.

The dissimilarity in our respective approaches to the documentary source material becomes evident in revisiting Nash's arguments about why she thinks the Magdalene was alone at the base of the Great Cross. Nash finds the surviving account registers now in the Archives départementales de la Côte d'Or, Dijon, to be "mostly complete, very detailed, and usually highly specific."<sup>5</sup> (Figure 5) Thus she finds the lack of mention of John or Mary at the base of the cross "glaring," and says that "it cannot be attributed to lacunae in the accounts."<sup>6</sup> I am far less confident about the completeness and reliability of these accounts, and I believe we should always keep in mind the limitations of such documents, which were meant to record only those transactions that the administrative officers thought they might need to justify to the duke. Even the prosaic account books such as survive from Champmol were tailored to the specific desires and expectations of an elite class; as such, they can hardly be considered complete or objective. As Nash notes, the surviving registers are fair copies of more ephemeral "working accounts" (called *quittances* and *certifications* in the registers themselves).<sup>7</sup> The copies kept by the ducal officers by no means recorded all the details that were once written on scraps and roles of parchment that functioned in the day-to-day operation of the bureaucracy. In fact, there are dozens of entries in which the ducal accountants leave out the long lists of labor and materials on the documents they were copying, simply referring the reader to the details (*parties*) contained on "rolls of parchment."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is also not difficult to imagine circumstances in which these scraps were misplaced or overlooked before being copied into the registers. Accounting, now as in the Middle Ages, is

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often an inexact science. In spite of the unusually expansive written records that survive from Champmol, fourteenth-century Europe was still largely an oral society; there must have been many oral subcontracts and less formal transactions that did not make it into the ducal records—perhaps even involving women and children who were not thought to merit official contracts. Indeed, the bookkeepers demonstrate a certain carelessness about recording every detail evident in the many, many places in the accounts where the fatigued accountant simply cut off a list of items with the non-specific, “and other things necessary for the said works.”<sup>9</sup>



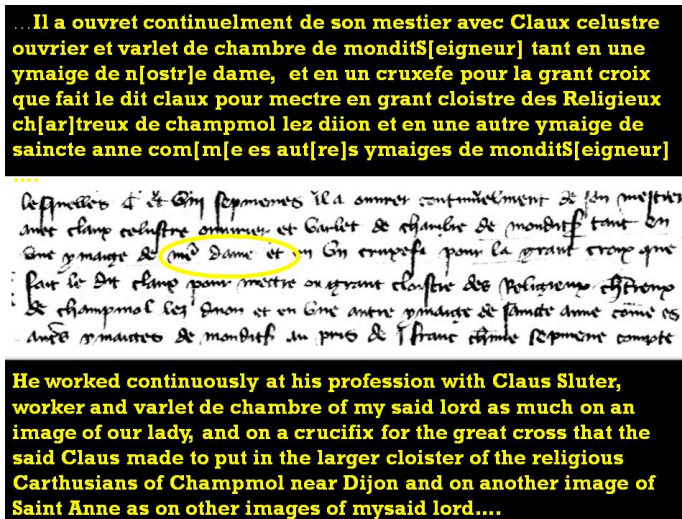
5. Dijon, Archives Départementales de la Côte d’Or, B11670, 206v-207. Photo: author.



That this type of imprecise language also appears in the accounts regarding the Great Cross must give us pause about the entries that Nash examines to rule out the long accepted notion that there were several statues at the foot of the crucifix. Nash points out that the assumption of scholars that there were multiple figures above the pedestal (*sur la terrasse*) was based in part on references in the documents to work on “several statues” for the terrace of the Great Cross (B11673, fol. 49, B4449, fols. 19v-20, and B4450 fol. 29 all mention *plusieurs ymaiges* in connection with the terrace), and another that mentions a Virgin together with the Great Cross (B4447, fol. 23v). Scholars are not to be faulted for drawing the logical conclusion from these ambiguous cues that the cross was flanked by Mary and John, which was a standard iconography. Nash dismisses the archival references that are problematic for her argument on the basis that they were not specific enough. She believes that the references to work on “several images that are on and will be installed on the terrace” (*plus[ieur]s ymaiges de p[ier]re qui sont et seront mis et assis sur la terrasse*, B4450, fol. 29) that took place around 1400 must refer to the angels on the pedestal (I, 802). The reasoning is that “several” is more than two, so the reference could not refer to Mary and John, and it could not include Christ and Mary Magdalene, since we know that they were already in place by that time. Part of this argument further concerns the sequence of installation, discussed below. Here, however, it is worth pointing out that the passage could refer both to some finishing or repair on the statues that were there, in addition to work on statues of Mary and John that were to be installed. Nash dismisses the explicit reference to a Virgin

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alongside the Great Cross in one account by pointing to a “comma” on B4447, fol. 23v that separates the word “Virgin” from the reference to the Crucifix on the Great Cross (“an image of Our Lady, and a Crucifix for the great cross that the said Claus is making;” *une ymaige de No[tr]e Dame, et en un cruxefe pour la grant croix que le fait le dit Claux*) (Figure 6). This Virgin, she therefore concludes, was entirely unrelated to the Great Cross at Champmol, like the St. Anne statue mentioned below in the same list. But the fact remains that the phrase is grammatically ambiguous with or without the comma, with or without the mention of Saint Anne. Either way, the Virgin could have been meant to have been paired with the Crucifix—or not. The accounts are characterized by inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation and usage, which were not regularized at this time, and which were obviously not a primary concern of the *gens des comptes*.



6. Dijon, Archives Départementales de la Côte d’Or, B4447, fol. 23v. Photo: from microfilm supplied by the Dijon, Archives Départementales de la Côte d’Or. Transcription and translation by the author.

Neither were the accountants much interested in recording the iconographic program of the charterhouse. The reason for this was that they were not accountable for the details of how certain monies were spent, particularly anything that was to be covered by the annual salaries paid to the master craftsmen, which were understood to underwrite the quotidian operations of their workshops, including the activities of their apprentices.<sup>10</sup> Thus we mostly only get references to the subject matter of the art at Champmol when it was mentioned incidentally in entries that noted labor or materials (often but not always including crating and carting) that were deemed outside of the master craftsmens' contractual responsibilities. We know almost nothing about the altarpiece designed for the main altar of the church, for example, though certainly there must have been one.<sup>11</sup> It was typical, therefore, rather than glaring, when mention of the subject of a sculpture or painting did not appear in the accounts. The accounts from Champmol, I have argued elsewhere, reflect a complex model of patronage and production that involved multiple agents working together under the auspices of a large bureaucracy that subsumed varying levels of competence, whether by accountants, administrators, workers or artists.<sup>12</sup>

This model differs from a more traditional art historical paradigm that takes for granted that great works of art were the product of singular geniuses who naturally applied the most effective techniques. Nash's argument about production methods in dismissing the possible existence of John and Mary at the

base of the cross assumes that the work on the Great Cross progressed according to hypothesized best practices. She does not think it was possible, for example, that more statues would have been installed after Christ and the Magdalene were already installed, as the operation might have endangered the valuable statuary already there, and they would have had to have twice set up the winches and other apparatus necessary to carry it out.<sup>13</sup> This allows Nash to read the reference to figures on the terrace in B4450, fol. 29 as angels, as discussed above. Should we, however, presume that medieval workshops always avoided expensive mistakes and cost overruns? In fact, there were a number of these at Champmol, and some faulty work was no doubt due to the fact that the both the Duke and Carthusians coerced labor from unskilled and unwilling subjects.<sup>14</sup> Sluter himself was known to have added figures to the program of the church portal at Champmol when figures were already in place, and to have designed an elaborate tabernacle for the trumeau even after the trumeau statue was already installed.<sup>15</sup> Anyone who has hired a contractor knows that damage to existing structures can be an unwelcome result of new work, and at Champmol there were numerous account entries that record sculptural elements that had to be remade due to accidents (e.g. B11672, 50r & v; B11673, fols, 12, 47r & V, 146v-47v). Working methods at Champmol certainly might include work on aspects of the structure that had been previously sculpted, and Nash herself notes that wooden boxes were made to protect sculpted elements of the pedestal of the Great Cross while additional sculpting and installation was in progress.<sup>16</sup>

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Material evidence can also present ambiguities and lacunae that may, in fact, be irresolvable. Nash's examination of the top the *Well of Moses* leads her to conclude that there was no room on top for multiple statues, and that there was no evidence of any "metal fixtures or holes" that would secure such statues to the structure, other than a single iron bar emerging from the center for the cross itself.<sup>17</sup> The Magdalene, Nash concludes, was the only statue possible in this space, which must have been secured "in part by her physical relationship with the cross"--perhaps with help from some red plaster mentioned in the documents as being used to join stones and images on the cross.<sup>18</sup> But Nash does not mention "several" iron grips that were apparently prepared for the terrace; the relevant entry, dated November 17, 1399, records a payment for having "installed in stone several iron grips for the terrace being on the abovesaid *pile*" (en avoir assis en p[ier]re plus[ieurs]s grappes de fer pour la t[er]asse estant sur la pile dessus d[it]e, B11673, fol. 52). Perhaps this iron armature served later in the installation of one or more statues on top of the terrace. As for the amount of room above the *Well of Moses*, the terrace is actually larger than the area of the pedestal in which Sluter fit six near-life-sized prophets. And even if much of that area was covered with a rocky surface to simulate Golgotha, the tiny size of the plinths of the prophets below, as well as the disproportionately small platforms supporting the statues on the portal sculpture, show that Sluter needed a surprisingly small amount of room to stand a rather large statue. It may be that the iron bars sunk into the stone on the terrace allowed plinths to be installed above the uneven surface to hold the figures. At the conference addressing these

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questions held in Dijon in 2008, Judith Kagan showed fifteenth- and sixteenth-century examples of monumental calvaries, such as the cemetery cross at Sasseville, Normandy, that are designed this way (Figure 7).<sup>19</sup> The terrace and its sculptures have been irretrievably damaged and the extant fragment has been altered over the centuries. We just do not know for sure what was there. Susie Nash's deft detective work offers us one possible reconstruction, but it is by no means the only one.



7. Cemetery Cross at Sasseville, Normandy. Photo: La Médiathèque de l'Architecture et de Patrimoine.

We need also proceed with caution in trying to pin down who the audience was for a particular monument, how they approached it and what they thought. That is not to say that we should not use our historical imagination to tease the possibilities out of the sources that we have. My reading of the documents associated with Champmol leads me doubt that the meaning of the Great Cross was, as Nash proposes, primarily dependent on devotional texts familiar to the Carthusians, and that it was “intended for their eyes only.”<sup>20</sup> This seems to me to deny not only the Carthusians’ documented interaction with the world that suggests a larger public for this monument, but also the porous and multivalent nature of the visual. There was a series of indulgences attached to the Great Cross beginning in 1418, and this has reasonably led scholars to think there may have been a lay public for the monument. Nash states that in my book I “develop the idea of the Chartreuse as a pilgrimage centre,” but this misrepresents my larger point.<sup>21</sup> Although I do write that the bulls suggest that the Chartreuse de Champmol was a pilgrimage destination, the main goal of this section of my book is to reconstruct what we know of the lay public of the monument, which is a significantly different endeavor.<sup>22</sup> I see no reason to overlook that visitors to Dijon such as ducal courtiers may have been drawn to make a pilgrimage to the cross, but I do not present the Great Cross as a pilgrimage “center.” In fact, I emphasize the limited contact that lay visitors must have had with it by contrasting it with a Carthusian Charterhouse whose sacred image made it more of a pilgrimage center (Santa Croce in Gerusalemme where the *Imago pietatis*

was in the church).<sup>23</sup> I also note the extent to which the canvas shelter eventually constructed around the Great Cross better allowed the monks to control access to the image. Nash observes that the laity, used to extravagant promises of thousands of years of indulgences at other shrines, would not have flocked to gain the 50-100 indulgences available at Champmol.<sup>24</sup> It may be true that the aristocracy and even the increasing urban professional classes began to have some choices: they could own books containing their own indulgenced images and prayers; they could travel, like the well-heeled Margery Kempe, to a variety of far-flung sites promising miracles and attractive spiritual rewards. But Europe at this time was still overwhelmingly rural, and most people were bound in one way or another to the land. The 50-100 indulgences offered to them at local sites where they could travel to on a Sunday or on certain feast days--Good Friday is mentioned in the 1418 Champmol indulgence directed to the faithful discussed below--must have taken on greater importance for those in the majority.

The way in which we interpret the papal bulls that grant indulgences to viewers of the cross is influenced by what social role we think the Carthusians played in the context of late medieval Dijon. Nash emphasizes the isolation of the monks that prayed in solitude for the soul of their patron in accordance with their rule, while I see their devotional practices as linked not only to their dependence on their patron, but also to their other pastoral and economic activities. Of the three letters of indulgences issued by Cardinal Orsini in 1418, two are directed to the monks, and one to “the Christian faithful.”<sup>25</sup> The latter requires a spirit of penitence and confession, and encourages the beneficiary to



lend “a helping hand” for the upkeep of the monastery. Such wording suggests that the indulgence operated in a pastoral context, as the “helping hand” language was a long repeated formula used in indulgences to solicit offerings from the various patrons, clients and communities of a given place. It does not seem a coincidence that this language was chosen for the only one out of three bulls issued on the same day that specifies that it addressed “the Christian faithful” and not the monks themselves. Nash thinks that because two out of three bulls addressed the Carthusians, the third probably did also, but it seems to me that the desire to address a wider audience necessitated a separate bull using different language.<sup>26</sup>

Both Susie Nash and Michael Grandmontage, who has written a recent substantive volume on the portal sculpture from Champmol, emphasize the devotional meaning of Sluter’s sculpture for the Carthusian monks.<sup>27</sup> But telling the story this way neglects the implications that the Carthusians’ pastoral concerns had for understanding the sculptural program at Champmol. The Carthusians were significant landowners, which came with power over tenants, serfs and servants.<sup>28</sup> Clearly they did not wish to give up such responsibilities: they engaged in a protracted legal dispute with neighboring St.-Philibert, in which they finally agreed to pay the parish church an annual sum so the monks could continue both to carry out pastoral duties to their dependents and others and to keep the revenues that went with them.<sup>29</sup> Claims to devotional prowess by the monks at Champmol were understood to be directly connected to their earthly power, as is evident in the Foundation Charter of the charterhouse and

other documents.<sup>30</sup> In one document from 1396, for example, Philip the Bold put an end to the repeated appeals of the Carthusians' serfs and other dependents to higher justice because he wanted to ensure that the monks "might devote themselves more unreservedly to the divine service" (*affin quilz puissant plus surem[e]nt vacques ou service divin*).<sup>31</sup> Here we see that the Carthusians' devotional activity is the very thing that reifies their authority as feudal lords in the temporal realm. The lavish program of devotional art at this charterhouse enabled, reinforced and advertised that authority.

It is reasonable to think that artists and their patrons considered the impact that such a grand monument would have beyond an audience of Carthusians monks – especially given that the Burgundian sovereigns are noted for their skillful use of public spectacle in solidifying their status and prestige. In the Middle Ages as now, the exclusivity of access to objects and to places could add to their allure. The hidden, the secret, have an irresistible appeal, which was expertly exploited in the Middle Ages through mechanisms like veils, reliquaries and altarpieces that opened and closed. I cannot concur, therefore, with Nash's suggestion that the monks at Champmol were in so much in danger of "ignoring" their spectacular crucifix, due to its being partially hidden by a canvas shelter, that it was considered necessary to issue indulgences to encourage their devotion.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, given that Nash proposes that even the monks were forgetful of the Great Cross in their own cloister only a decade or so after its completion, it seems a little contradictory for her also to argue that an entry ceremony that the town prepared for Philip the Bold's great grandson, Charles

the Bold, made an explicit reference to a proposed crypto-portrait on the statue of Jeremiah on the *Well of Moses*. Nash believes that the resemblance between the long-dead duke and the statue must have been readily recognizable to the public years after the duke's death—even though she had previously argued that the statue was cloistered and inaccessible.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not a crypto-portrait of the duke in Jeremiah was there or would have been decipherable to contemporary viewers in this context is debatable. Although Nash does convincingly establish that there are similarities in the profiles of Jeremiah and several renderings of the duke, it is always a tricky business to determine to what extent a pre-modern portrait of a specific individual incorporated true-to-life physiognomic details. In his recent book on the pre-history of portraiture, Stephen Perkinson argues that fifteenth-century viewers did not necessarily consider a portrait likeness to be sufficient grounds to establish identity, relying instead on other clues: conventional symbols of office, attributes, and gestures as well as heraldry and inscriptions.<sup>34</sup> Perkinson also argues that at this early moment in the history of portraiture renderings that have the quality of physiognomic accuracy may have been attempts on the part of the artists to gain status by claiming through such portraits special powers of memory and a special relationship to their patron.<sup>35</sup> If Jeremiah were a crypto-portrait of Philip—and Nash's suggestion is indeed very intriguing-- it may have been as much or more a statement of the artist's proposing an intimacy with the Duke as it was a reminder to the Carthusians of their obligation to pray for him.<sup>36</sup>

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When Nash argues that the connection she proposes between the statue of Jeremiah and Philip the Bold would linger in the collective memory of the public long after Philip's death, she acknowledges a rather expansive public for the Great Cross outside of the monastic sphere--one that crossed both space and time. Indeed, visits to the spectacular sacred object at Champmol once in a while or once in a lifetime helped to inscribe it on late medieval civic and sacred imaginaries. The duke's courtiers and visiting dignitaries such as Cardinal Orsini, who issued the abovementioned bulls, could have disseminated ideological messages associable with the Great Cross in a number of contexts, which may or may not have been foreseen by the artists and patrons. Who else likely saw it? The artists, workmen, and carters involved in its production, the craftsmen who touched up the polychromy over the years and who erected the canvas shelter, constituted an important local audience. Perhaps it figured in the forced conversion of the Muslim prisoner whom John the Fearless left with the Carthusians to "have him Christianized."<sup>37</sup> The servants who tended to the Carthusians in their cells (the Carthusians had special windows by which to receive supplies, and four ranks of lay servants) who dug the graves and maintained the orchard in the cloister, must have seen it. Ruling powers must constantly proclaim and perform their hegemony in order to maintain a psychological hold over the majority.

The close connection that scholars find—including Nash and myself-- between the Carthusians and the representation of God in their midst, did more than offer models for prayer positions and a reminder to the monks about whom

they were to pray for. It elevated the status of the monks above others who prayed and it visualized a mutually reinforcing alliance between two hegemonic powers, the monks (often referred to by the title *Dom* or “lord” in the accounts) and the ducal sovereigns: between church and state. The Great Cross was not a modest private image to be adored by the monks in their cells. It was an extravaganza of a crucifix with eye-popping gilding and colors, pleasing anecdotal additions like spectacles for Jeremiah and a metal crown for the Magdalene, and emotional, individualized faces, not to mention the novelty of Sluter’s magisterial figure style. Is it likely that the primary purpose of such an object was to help the Carthusians pray? The illuminations in their devotional books and the paintings of the Crucifixion in their cells seem more suited to facilitating contemplation than a glittering two-story Calvary in the middle of their cloister. Furthermore, while medieval monks were certainly known to use images in their devotions, imageless devotion was still considered the ideal for this elite corps of contemplatives. I cannot help but worry that emphasizing how individual monks may have applied devotional precepts to this monument over the way that that imagery structured the social landscape risks promoting a false nostalgia for a Middle Ages as an age of faith, where one could imagine spaces of pure, unadulterated spirituality that expressed the ideals of an ascetic order. Certainly, modern Carthusians encourage this interpretation by the way they represent themselves on the internet and elsewhere, even as modern scholars find more and more connections between the medieval Carthusians and the lay communities of which they were an integral part.<sup>38</sup>

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Such connections are hinted at by the references to reading and writing on the Great Cross that I have emphasized.<sup>39</sup> Nash, however, highlights only the representations of reading, noting only incidentally that Zachariah is shown with a pen and inkwell, and that the “copying of texts was set out in the rules of the order as the special duty of the monks.”<sup>40</sup> (Figured 8-9) For Nash, the theme of reading, rather than writing, confirms the connections that she makes among the image, the content of devotional manuals with which the Carthusians were familiar, and the prayerful activities of the monks. But it seems to me that the references to reading on the monument also advertised and reified the authority that the monks derived through their devotional activities; they did not merely model and encourage such activities, as Nash would have it.<sup>41</sup> And writing plays a larger role than she credits in the iconographic program of the Cross; she does not mention that Isaiah, too, is shown with materials for writing (a penholder and a parchment) (Figures 10-11). The Carthusian Rule explicitly connected writing to the monks’ pastoral work; it was, in fact, the only official concession it made that the monks could have such a role. By writing, they could “preach with their hands, because they could not do so with their mouths.”<sup>42</sup> Images, too, allowed the Carthusians to preach without their mouths, and they therefore had a place in the Carthusians’ pastoral agenda.



**8.** Claus Sluter and workshop, *Well of Moses*. Zachariah. Stone, gilding and polychromy, 1395-1406. Dijon, Chartreuse de Champmol *in situ*. Photo: author.



9. Claus Sluter and workshop, *Well of Moses*. Details of Zachariah's pen and inkwell. Stone, gilding and polychromy, 1395-1406. Dijon, Chartreuse de Champmol *in situ*. Photo: author.





**10.** Claus Sluter and workshop, *Well of Moses*. Isaiah. Stone, gilding and polychromy, 1395-1406. Dijon, Chartreuse de Champmol *in situ*. Photo: author.



**11.** Claus Sluter and workshop, *Well of Moses*. Details of Isaiah's pen and inkwell. Stone, gilding and polychromy, 1395-1406. Dijon, Chartreuse de Champmol *in situ*. Photos: author.

The Great Cross's iconography highlighting the theme of judgment also becomes particularly resonant when one takes into account the judicial powers of the monks, which they were clearly interested in retaining and defending, as discussed above. It was common in the public sphere of Passion Plays and sermons to interpret Old Testament prophecies as "condemning" Christ to death, according to preordained divine law. Nash interprets the particular prophecies copied onto the prophets' phylacteries as working together to form iconographic rhythms that echo the formal rhythms of the prophets as well as to feature the prominent role she assigns to Jeremiah. Perhaps they did. But because there appears to be no one-to-one correspondence between the quotations on the cross and extant Passion Plays and liturgical dramas (as had been asserted in some of the older literature), does not mean that the widespread connection that late medieval people made between Old Testament prophets and themes of judgment disappeared and "should be rejected."<sup>43</sup> In fact, the Great Cross convincingly illustrates the "Christ-on-trial vignette" which was a common theme of Good Friday sermons whose purpose was to bring "the act of private meditation into the public realm."<sup>44</sup> In light of this, it may be no accident that the papal bulls connected to the Great Cross especially encouraged the "faithful" to visit Champmol on Good Friday, when the image could effectively substitute for such a sermon—the message of which emphasized the monks' authority as arbitrators in their pastoral and feudal realms.<sup>45</sup>

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Visual meaning at Champmol surely operated on several levels for varied audiences, which is why I am inclined to resist arguments for fixed meanings or for the closed-circuited reception of the Great Cross. This evocative monument may well have encouraged the monks to make literate connections to their devotional reading and urged them to pray for their patrons through the oblique resemblance to Philip the Bold that Nash finds hidden in the figure of Jeremiah. But the details of this monument can also help us see how the visual constructed hegemonic discourses for diverse viewers, as well as how it sometimes allowed for contradictions and disruptions of those discourses. I have less faith in the completeness and reliability of the sources than Nash, and more interest in the way that the visual functioned in an expansive social arena—one that surely operated both according to and outside of the conscious intentions of artists or patrons. Certainly other legitimate and instructive interpretations not mentioned here are embedded in the current scholarship and more will emerge in the future.

Through her fine essays, Nash makes clear how important it is to be critical about received narratives. She helps us to consider new possibilities for the way the Great Cross might have looked and how it might have been perceived. My fear is, nevertheless, that together they evoke a rosy picture of the Chartreuse de Champmol as a spiritual oasis for observant monks who prayed dutifully for their pious noble patron, a patron who hired an artist of genius who created wondrous works that expressed and encouraged a life of prayer and devotion. In Nash's words, the Great Cross was a "clearly comprehensible guide to how they should live and pray, and how they could, through prayer (which involved

identification and contemplation), be crucified with Christ and receive absolution,” and where “the distance between the Carthusians and the duke collapses” (III, 741). This conclusion minimizes the evidence that the monument functioned as a complicated forum in which hegemonic powers established and proclaimed their mutual interests, where they both competed and collaborated in order to exert control over a broad population. Given the short time in which the charterhouse was built, we can presume that the process of creating its splendid decorative program was sometimes synergistic and inspired, but we should not forget that it was also the product of an often inefficient and exploitative bureaucracy. Furthermore, it is worth envisioning the meaning of this monument not only for the duke and the monks, but for the duchess, the artisans, the court, the servants, the prisoners, the tenants, the townspeople, the serfs, the visitors, the ducal officers and others whose paths likely took them through and around this site.

My major concern is that by narrowing our attention to an elite cadre of monks and nobility, by emphasizing principally positive values for the particular brand of spirituality that they practiced, we risk overlooking the implications of the privileged relationship with the divine that the elite classes claimed through that spirituality. Celebrating artistic virtuosity without also interrogating its ideological implications also leads to a misrepresentation of the complexities of the historical record, which ultimately deprives the majority of a history, and an art history. Too little of art history defends us against identifying with the wealthy and powerful, historicizing and naturalizing their privilege, developing

habits of not seeing, measuring or worrying about the inequalities built into social structures, both then and now. I acknowledge the objections of those who may see my focus on ideology as being dismissive of deeply felt religious beliefs or as rejecting the possibility for “pure” and authentic spiritual experience. If I am skeptical, it is because in the Middle Ages, perhaps even more so than today, the line between secular and sacred was blurred and sketchy. Neglecting the social consequences of this overlap distorts our notions of the past that has formed us. There are undoubtedly a variety of possible syntheses to be constructed between Nash’s interpretation and my own, but they too must contend with the intractable historical gaps and ambiguities that will inevitably lead to unverifiable hypotheses—however plausible. For this reason, we must make good-faith efforts to examine our own working theories and assumptions and be willing to test and revise them in dialogue with our colleagues—which is the primary exercise of this paper--because no historical or art historical account is airtight, and the past is a very drafty place.

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<sup>1</sup> Susie Nash, "Claus Sluter's 'Well of Moses' for the Chartreuse de Champmol Reconsidered: Part I," *Burlington Magazine* CXLVII (2005): 798-809; Part II, CXLVIII (2006): 456-467; and Part III, CL (2008): 724-41. I submitted an earlier version of this reply to *Burlington Magazine*, which declined to publish anything but a short correction if I felt Nash seriously misrepresented my book. I find this to be an entirely disappointing response, since I believe that the mission of scholarly journals should be to encourage productive scholarly exchanges. I do not wish to complain about how Susie Nash refers to my book, but rather to reflect on the larger art historical context of our legitimate scholarly disagreements. I am grateful to *Different Visions* for the opportunity to do so. I would also like to thank Michele Tomasi and an anonymous reviewer for their thoughtful comments.

<sup>2</sup> Sherry Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol* (Aldershot, Hampshire, and Burlington, VT: 2008).

<sup>3</sup> "Autour le Puits de Moïse: pour une nouvelle approche," Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, Oct. 16-18, 2008.

- <sup>4</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III,” 730.
- <sup>5</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part I,” 799. All reference to documents in this article refer to this archive.
- <sup>6</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part I,” 800.
- <sup>7</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part I,” 799.
- <sup>8</sup> See Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, p. 67, n. 91 for many references to these lacunae in the Champmol accounts.
- <sup>9</sup> e.g. B11670, fol. 86v.
- <sup>10</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 86-97.
- <sup>11</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 36 & 107. Michele Tomasi has recently argued that the ivory altarpiece (which survives in fragments at the Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris) by the Embriachi workshop may have been on the main altar—a possibility, though its dimensions seem a little small for this purpose, See Michele Tomasi, *Monumenti d’avorio: I dossali degli Embriachi e I loro committenti* (Paris: Institute National d’histoire de l’art: 2010), 155-158.
- <sup>12</sup> In addition to Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 85-120, see Sherry Lindquist, “Accounting for Status of Artists at the Chartreuse de Champmol,” *Gesta* 41:1 (2002): 15-28.
- <sup>13</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses* ...: Part I”, 804.
- <sup>14</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 91-94, 104-109.
- <sup>15</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 29, 105-106.
- <sup>16</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses* ...: Part I”, 802, n. 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses* ...: Part I”, 805.
- <sup>18</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses* ...: Part I”, 805-6, citing B11673, fol. 37v.
- <sup>19</sup> For this Calvary, see the Médiathèque de l’architecture et du patrimoine, at [http://www.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/merimee\\_fr?ACTION=CHERCHER&FIELD\\_98=REF&VALUE\\_98=PA00101059](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/public/mistral/merimee_fr?ACTION=CHERCHER&FIELD_98=REF&VALUE_98=PA00101059), Accessed 9/11/2011.
- <sup>20</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 730.
- <sup>21</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses* ...: Part III”, 726, n. 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 194.
- <sup>23</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 196-97.
- <sup>24</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 726.
- <sup>25</sup> For this and what follows, see Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 193-95.
- <sup>26</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 726.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael Grandmontagne, *Claus Sluter und die Lesbarkeit mittelalterlicher Skulptur: das Portal der Kartause von Champmol* (Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005).
- <sup>28</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 63, n.33; 94, 102; 117, n.158; 192-195.
- <sup>29</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 193.
- <sup>30</sup> On the Foundation Charter, see Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 19-24.
- <sup>31</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 193.
- <sup>32</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 727.
- <sup>33</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 739-40.
- <sup>34</sup> Stephen Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King: A Prehistory of Portraiture in Late Medieval France* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- <sup>35</sup> Perkinson, *Likeness of the King*, chap. 4.
- <sup>36</sup> Claiming to be on close personal terms with the duke was part of the social economy in the Burgundian realms., as demonstrated by an altercation later in the fifteenth century between ducal sculptor Jean de la Huerta and the Mayor of Dijon, in which both rather unconvincingly claimed to be on intimate terms with the duke, see Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 96.
- <sup>37</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 190, 193, 205.
- <sup>38</sup> See Julian Luxford’s excellent introduction to *Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 1-16.
- <sup>39</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality, and Society*, 167-172.
- <sup>40</sup> Nash, “Claus Sluter’s *Well of Moses*...: Part III”, 734, n. 79

<sup>41</sup> Nash, "Claus Sluter's *Well of Moses*...: Part III, 734.

<sup>42</sup> Guigo I. *Coutumes de Chartreuse*, (Paris: ditions du Cerf, 1984), 28:4.

<sup>43</sup> Nash, "Claus Sluter's *Well of Moses*...: Part III", 735, n. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Holly Johnson, "Fashioning Devotion: The Art of Good Friday Preaching in Chaucerian England," in *Speculum Sermonis: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Medieval Sermon*, ed. Georgiana Donavin, Cary J. Nederman and Richard J. Utz (Turnhout, Belgium, 2004), 315-34, at 329. On Good Friday sermons see also Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (New York; Oxford, 1992), 16.

<sup>45</sup> Lindquist, *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 172-173.