

## The Gypsies and Their Impact on Fifteenth-Century Western European Iconography

Erwin Pokorny, University of Vienna

Since Gypsies had no chroniclers of their own, their history is difficult to reconstruct.<sup>1</sup> The origin of the Gypsies was a complete mystery until late in the eighteenth century, when their derivation from India was proved by means of early linguistic comparison. Today, it is generally accepted that they emigrated from India to Persia during the Early Middle Ages, and in the High Middle Ages settled in Byzantine regions. Both cultures left their mark on the Romani language, and most common foreign terms like *Zigeuner*, *Cingaro*, *Tzigan* and so on derive from the Greek *atsinganoi* (*athinganoi*), which means 'untouchables'. This term was used by Byzantine authors in the twelfth century to refer to a Gnostic sect as well as to heathen magicians, bear-trainers and snake-charmers. During the fourteenth century, the Gypsies entered the Balkans. From the early fifteenth century they travelled through the whole of Europe. In France, Gypsies were also called 'Bohémiens', because they arrived with letters of protection from the king of Bohemia, or 'Sarrasins' because of their Oriental appearance. Since they declared they had come from Little-Egypt, they were called 'Égyptiens' by the French, and 'Egypteners' or 'Heydens' in the Netherlands. The contemporary terms 'Gypsy', 'Gitano', 'Gitane' or some equivalent names in Greece and the Balkans derive from those 'Egyptians' as well. However, Little-Egypt was a Venetian-administered region in the Peloponnese, where the Gypsies had settled before being pushed onwards by the Turkish wars.

The migration of Gypsies into western Europe in the early fifteenth century coincided with the northern Renaissance in the visual arts. The new interest in depicting nature, the world and its people made the travelling exotics a subject of artistic curiosity. So, in early Netherlandish paintings, the alleged Egyptians were used as models when depicting heathens from the Bible, Egyptians as well as Jews. However, their earliest surviving depiction as Gypsies per se is found in a German

drawing from the last quarter of the fifteenth century, now in the National Gallery in Prague (see figure 1).<sup>2</sup> It shows a Gypsy mother holding her baby, with the caption 'Ziginer' directly above her head. She wears a turban and a large cloak knotted on one of her shoulders. Such a knotted cloak was a typical costume for fifteenth-century female Gypsies. We know this from a most interesting French record that was written by an eyewitness after a group of 132 Gypsies had arrived in Paris in August 1427:

Nearly all of them had their ears bored, with one or two silver rings in each ... The men were black, their hair curled; the women remarkably black, all their faces scarred, their hair black, their only clothes a large old shaggy garment, tied over the shoulders ... In short, they were the poorest, most miserable creatures that have ever been seen in France.<sup>3</sup>

Another distinguishing detail is not mentioned in the French record, and is not to be seen in the German drawing: the Oriental striped patterns in their garments, as shown in numerous depictions of Gypsies or biblical heathens, as for example in some Tournai tapestries from the second decade of the sixteenth century<sup>4</sup>, or later in a woodcut illustration in Sebastianus Münster's *Cosmographie oder beschreibung aller l nder etc.*<sup>5</sup> and in some drawings by Jacques de Gheyn.<sup>6</sup> We can find them even in the eighteenth century and still in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> In all these images, nearly every Gypsy woman wears a turban, which is flatter than that usually worn by male Muslims. That turban was common for female Gypsy dress—for Muslim women did not wear turbans at all.

Once one becomes aware of these characteristic costume features, one develops an eye for Gypsies. More than twenty years ago, Charles D Cuttler pointed to the first flat turban in Western art, worn by Mary Magdalene in the Master of Fl malle's 'Entombment Triptych' in



**Figure 1** Unknown artist (Upper Rhein region)  
*Ziginer/Heiden/Turken* (detail), c. 1470–90  
 13.5 × 17.0 cm  
 pen and brown ink on paper  
 © Národní galerie v Praze/National Gallery, Prague

the Courtauld Institute Galleries, London, and underlined that this triptych is generally dated about 1420, just when a group of Gypsies led by a duke called Andrew is recorded in Brussels.<sup>8</sup> In 1421, another Gypsy duke called Michael of

Latingham in Egypt visited Mons, the capital of Hainaut, and nearby Tournai, the home town of Robert Campin, who was probably the Master of Flémalle. The striking similarity of appearance between the travelling 'Egyptians' and the oldest preserved European depiction of a flat turban is unlikely to be a coincidence. Nevertheless, the artist's intention was not to dress Mary Magdalene as an Egyptian but just as a heathen, as he or an artist near to him used that striped flat turban for the depiction of the Thracian queen Tomyris as well.<sup>9</sup> In Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* from c. 1425–35, the Eritrean Sibyl is also painted with such a turban<sup>10</sup>, and we find another example in Jacques Daret's *The Nativity* from c. 1434–35, in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.<sup>11</sup>

In these examples, the exotic appearance of the alleged 'Egyptians' was a source of inspiration for the greatest of the early Netherlandish Masters. As Cuttler suggested, some artists who illustrated the finding of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter and her servants had such contemporary 'Egyptians' in mind.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, we can find depictions of Israelites dressed like Gypsies in almost any episode from the Bible. However, most of them are found in pictures of the Exodus from Egypt. For example, Israelite women wear typical Gypsy dress in the Gathering of the Manna in the Altarpiece of the Holy Sacrament by Dirick Bouts in Leuven.<sup>13</sup> A child at the left is wearing an earring, as was mentioned in the French record from 1427.

Since the research on fifteenth-century Gypsy costume began some decades ago, a number of Oriental women have been definitely identified as Gypsies—as, for instance, in a dry-point print by the Master of the Housebook<sup>14</sup>, or in the so-called *Turkish Family* engraved by Albrecht Dürer.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, there must be many more depictions of Gypsies which have not yet been identified. A pen drawing in Munich by Martin Schongauer, or a brilliant imitator, is an impressive example (see figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Even though this drawing definitely depicts a Gypsy woman with one breast bared, and with the characteristic knot on her shoulder, it is hitherto simply entitled *Oriental Woman with Turban*.

The outfit of male Gypsies is less specific. They can appear as beggars, jugglers or mercenaries. From about 1500 onwards, we find depictions of armed Gypsy men wearing hats adorned with a pheasant's feather, a traditional sign of mercenary soldiers and bandits. An early example is in a copy of a drawing by Hans Burgkmair, now in the Veste Coburg.<sup>17</sup> And we know well-armed Gypsies with long feathers on their hats in particular from the much later engravings by Jacques Callot.<sup>18</sup> As so





**Figure 2** Martin Schongauer (workshop?)  
*Oriental Woman with Turban (Gypsy Woman)*, c. 1470–90  
 14.2 × 9.7 cm  
 pen and black ink  
 © Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich

many mercenary soldiers in early modern Europe lived as marauding outlaws, the Gypsy warrior became a model for a type of bandit until the nineteenth century. Another type of male Gypsy, in this case frequently dressed in rags, can be found in the pictures of beggars and blacksmiths, in particular in the Dutch-Italian paintings by the so-called Bamboccianti and their followers.<sup>19</sup>

Wearing a turban, a male Gypsy is hardly distinguishable from a Saracen, but in combination with scruffy curls he is more likely a Gypsy than a Muslim, because wearing long hair under the turban is an Indian, not a Turkish or Arabic fashion. Hence, some of the pictures of Oriental men with messy beards and curls, sometimes plaited or wearing bandeaus, turbans or strange hats, seem to be depictions of Gypsies. We know depictions of such heads from Martin Schongauer and his workshop in particular.<sup>20</sup> Much earlier, in about 1435, Stephan Lochner depicted some bearded men wearing similar exotic hats, sitting together with two Gypsy-like dressed women in the *Crucifixion of St. Andrew*, kept in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt.<sup>21</sup> A reproduction engraving by Wenzel of Olmutz suggests that Lochner's composition became very popular due to those exotic figures.<sup>22</sup>

A particular iconographical tradition in depicting heathens similar to Gypsies can be assumed in the depiction of an assistant in the *Descent from the Cross*. He has dark skin and black curls under his turban, and sometimes he wears striped garments. He is climbing up the ladder, standing at the top, pulling out the nails, or just carrying the ladder to the cross. The earliest example was probably painted by the Master of Flémalle in a triptych, which is known only by a small fragment in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt and a copy in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that converted heathens, more than just the good centurion, played a role in Calvary iconography. Other examples are two typically dressed Gypsy women with their babies in a fragment of a Calvary triptych by the Westphalian painter Derick Baegert (see figure 3)<sup>24</sup>; one of them is pointing to Saint Veronica's *vera icon*, insistently looking out at the viewer. Regarding her dark skin, the question comes up if they mean just heathens, or if the painter knew about any legend of Gypsies in connection with the Crucifixion of Christ. Such legends exist but it cannot be proved that they are of medieval origin. By the sixteenth century, the nomadic life of Gypsies was explained as a punishment for their reported refusal to give shelter to the Holy Family in Egypt<sup>25</sup>, or because a Gypsy blacksmith reportedly forged the nails for Christ's Crucifixion.<sup>26</sup> However, according to the Gypsies' own versions of that legend, it was a Gypsy who stole the fourth nail which was meant to pierce the heart of Christ. For that deed, all Gypsies were blessed by God with permission to steal without fear of damnation.<sup>27</sup> Another version of the legend told of a Jew who stole the nail, converted to Christianity and became the forefather of the Gypsies.<sup>28</sup>

For the most part, however, Gypsies were relegated to playing the role of Christ's evil enemies. According to a number of reports, they descended from condemned or disowned biblical figures. One was Adam's son Cain, condemned by God to be a fugitive and a vagabond. The second was Ham, who was condemned by his father, Noah, and then became the father of the dark-skinned peoples of Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt and pre-Hebrew Canaan. The third was Ishmael, who was dismissed by Abraham, together with his mother, Hagar, and then became the forefather of the Arabs.

Unsurprisingly, the dark-skinned Gypsies were also used to represent morally dubious types in Christian iconography. One of the most famous painters of evil was Hieronymus Bosch. From Bosch's depictions of beggars and cripples, sometimes closely associated with devils, we can deduce that he hated beggars; and it may well be that he



**Figure 3** Derick Baegert  
*Calvary Triptych* (detail from a fragment), c. 1477–78?  
 113.0 × 97.5 cm  
 oil on panel  
 © Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (1936.6)

had a similar antipathy to Gypsies. An early piece of evidence for this hypothesis is the evil-looking soldier to the left of Jesus in Bosch's *Ecce Homo* panel in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt.<sup>29</sup> His skin is greyish; his dark hair looks scruffy; he wears an earring and the flat turban of a Gypsy woman. Bosch's *Carrying of the Cross* in Ghent contains such enemies of Christ as well.<sup>30</sup> One is wearing a bandeau with a striped pattern and is pierced by two rings in his chin. Another one, in frontal view, is pierced by two rings in his cheeks. These rings are connected by a slim chain, which may well have been more than just fantasy. We find a similar kind of earring with a chain some decades earlier in a panel fragment from Derick Baegert's already mentioned triptych which is partly preserved in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.<sup>31</sup> Maybe Baegert and Bosch had heard about Gypsies with chained ear and nose rings, like those still worn today by Gypsy women in Rajasthan.

As we know from the French record of 1427, Gypsies were traditionally accused of magic, palm-reading and pickpocketing:

There were among them women, who by looking into people's hands told their fortunes. And what was worse, they picked people's pockets of their money; and got it into their own, through telling these things by art, magic, etc. But though this was the common report, I spoke to them several times, yet I never lost a farthing by them; or ever saw them look into people's hands.<sup>32</sup>

Both pickpocketing and palm-reading are depicted in the foreground of the 'Haywain Triptych' by a pupil of Bosch.<sup>33</sup> A Gypsy woman is telling a stupid lady's fortune, while a slim child is searching for her money bag—which is not visible in the painting, but survives in the underdrawing.<sup>34</sup> Another depiction of pickpocketing Gypsies is to be assumed in the Louvre drawing attributed to Bosch which shows a conjuror and his audience.<sup>35</sup> At the right, the conjurer's wife wears the typical flat Gypsy turban. At the left in the crowded audience, a man or woman—probably wearing a flat turban as well—is pointing to the conjurer and pickpocketing at the same time. Other early depictions of Gypsies engaged in palm-reading and pickpocketing can be found in a drawing by Hans Burgkmair<sup>36</sup>, or in one of the already mentioned *Carrabarra* tapestries kept in the Castle of Gaasbeek.<sup>37</sup> Later in the sixteenth century the motif became a standard detail of numerous Dutch and Flemish landscapes from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, or was combined with other themes such as the stupid lover or the prodigal son. In all these images, the artist's intention was not only to warn against being swindled by Gypsies; it was also to criticise the foolish people who believed in their fortune-telling. According to the French record from 1427, the bishop of Paris did not condemn the Gypsies, but rather their superstitious customers.

Even if such paintings were not primarily intended to foment prejudices against Gypsies, they certainly helped them to take root. And such prejudices from the time of the early Gypsy migrations into Europe have survived far more strongly and effectively until today than all the later romantic idealisations of Gypsy life created in the nineteenth century.

## NOTES

- 1 I am deeply grateful to Paul Taylor and Charles Zika for numerous suggestions and proofreading.
- 2 Alena Volrábová, *Die deutsche Zeichnung des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts. Zeichnungen von Autoren aus deutschsprachigen Ländern in den Museumssammlungen der Tschechischen Republik*, Národní galerie, Prague, 2003, p. 18, fig. 5.
- 3 John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gypsies ...*, J Hoyland, York, 1816, p. 19.
- 4 See the photographs in 'Un témoignage majeur. Les tapisseries de Tournai', *Histoires tsiganes. Le colloque européen de la Rochelle: Hommage à François de Vaux de Foletier (1893–1988)* (études tsiganes 18/19), between pp. 224 and 225.
- 5 Sebastianus Münster, *Cosmographie oder beschreibung aller länder etc.*, Heinrich Petri, Basel, 1550, p. 300; François de Vaux de Foletier, *Iconographie des*

- 'Égyptiens'. *Pécisions sur le costume ancien des tsiganes*, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1966, p. 170, fig. 8 (from a later Latin edition). In Münster, p. 296, we can find a Gypsy family in a woodcut illustrating the chapter about the Goths, Vandals and Huns. See Margarita Torrión, *El traje antiguo de los gitanos: alteridad y castigo (Iconografía de los siglos XV–XVIII)*, Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos, vol. 536, February 1995, fig. p. 24.
- 6 Iohan Quirrijn van Regteren Altena, *Jacques de Gheyn: Three Generations*, vol. 3, plates, M Nijhoff, The Hague and London, 1983, p. 154, fig. 299.
  - 7 A late example is the painting *Gypsy Sisters of Seville* by John Philip from c. 1854 (Liverpool, Sudley House).
  - 8 Charles D Cuttler, *Exotics in 15th Century Netherlandish Art: Comments on Oriental and Gypsy Costume*, Liber Amicorum Herman Liebaers, Crédit Communal de Belgique, Brussels, 1984, pp. 427, 431, fig. 3.
  - 9 We know that just from copies; see, for instance, Stephanie Buck, *Die niederländischen Zeichnungen des 15. Jahrhunderts im Berliner Kupferstichkabinett*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2001, pp. 79–80, fig. 12.
  - 10 Cuttler, p. 428.
  - 11 Colin Eisler, *Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: Early Netherlandish Painting*, Sotheby's Publications, London, 1989, p. 80, fig. 6.
  - 12 *ibid.*, pp. 428, 430, 433, fig. 4.
  - 13 Dirk de Vos, *Les Primitifs flamands. Les chefs-d'oeuvre*, Fonds Mercator, Antwerp, 2002, fig. p. 124.
  - 14 *Vom Leben im späten Mittelalter. Der Hausbuchmeister oder der Meister des Amsterdamer Kabinetts*, ed. JP Filedt Kok, exhibition catalogue, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 1985, pp. 165–6, figs 82, 83.
  - 15 Fedja Anzelewsky, *Dürer-Studien. Untersuchungen zu den ikonographischen und geistesgeschichtlichen Grundlagen seiner Werke zwischen den beiden Italienreisen*, Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, Berlin, 1983, pp. 57–65, fig. 29.
  - 16 Tilman Falk, *Die deutschen Zeichnungen des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung München, Munich, 1994, p. 19, fig. 25.
  - 17 Paul Holberton, 'Giorgione's "Tempest" or "Little Landscape with Storm with the Gypsy": More on the Gypsy, and a Reassessment', *Art History*, vol. 18, no. 3, September 1995, p. 388, fig. 28.
  - 18 Edward J Sullivan, 'Jacques Callot's Les Bohémiens', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 59, no. 2, June 1977, pp. 217–21, figs 1–4.
  - 19 *I Bamboccianti. Niederländische Malerrebellen im Rom des Barock*, exhibition catalogue, ed. DA Levine & E Mai, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne and Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1991–92, Milan, 1991, pp. 116–17, fig. 1.2; pp. 129–30, fig. 4.1; pp. 178–9, fig. 15.1; pp. 297–9, fig. 38.3.
  - 20 Tilman Falk, *Katalog der Zeichnungen des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts im Kupferstichkabinett Basel, Teil 1: Das 15. Jahrhundert. Hans Holbein der Ältere und Jörg Schweiger, die Basler Goldschmiedrisse*, Schwabe, Basel/Stuttgart, 1979, no. 49; Elfried Bock, *Die Zeichnungen in der Universitätsbibliothek Erlangen*, Prestel, Frankfurt am Main, 1929, no. 111.
  - 21 Anzelewsky, p. 62, n. 16. The side-facing Gypsy women are similar to the one shown in Jacques Daret's *Nativity* in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (see n. 11).
  - 22 Max Lehrs, *Geschichte und kritischer Katalog des deutschen, niederländischen und französischen Kupferstichs im 15. Jahrhundert*, 9 vols and 9 atlases of 284 plates, Gesellschaft für vervielfältigende Kunst, Vienna, 1908–34.
  - 23 Otto Pächt, *Van Eyck. Die Begründer der altniederländischen Malerei*, Prestel, Munich, 1989, p. 48, fig. 28.
  - 24 Isolde Lübbeke, *The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection Early German Painting 1350–1550*, Sotheby's Publications, London, 1991, p. 120, fig. 25.
  - 25 Ines Köhler-Zülch, 'Die verweigerter Herberge. Die Heilige Familie in Ägypten und andere Geschichten von "Zigeunern"—Selbstäußerungen oder Außenbilder?', U Engbring-Romang & W Solms (eds), *'Diebstahl im Blick'? Zur Kriminalisierung der 'Zigeuner'*, vol. 3 (*Beiträge zur Antiziganismusforschung*), I-Verb.de, Seeheim, 2005, pp. 47–53.
  - 26 Francis Hindes Groome, *Gypsy Folk Tales*, Hurst & Blackett, London, 1899, pp. 27–30.
  - 27 *ibid.*, p. 30.
  - 28 *ibid.*, p. 29.
  - 29 Larry Silver, *Hieronymus Bosch*, Hirmer, Munich, 2006, p. 126, fig. 100.
  - 30 *ibid.*, pp. 336–7, fig. 263.
  - 31 Lübbeke, p. 120, fig. 27; fig. p. 122.
  - 32 Hoyland, p. 19.
  - 33 Silver, pp. 266–7, fig. 204.
  - 34 Carmen Garrido & Rogier van Schoute, *Bosch at the Museo del Prado*, Museo del Prado, Madrid, 2001, p. 163, fig. 26.
  - 35 Silver, pp. 281, 284, fig. 219.
  - 36 Peter Halm, 'Hans Burgkmair als Zeichner, Teil I: Unbekanntes Material und neue Zuschreibungen', *Münchener Jahrbuch für bildende Kunst*, 3.F.13, 1962, pp. 120–2.
  - 37 See n. 4.