

Emil Nolde's 'Legend: St Mary of Egypt': 'vita activa'/'vita contemplativa'

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DURING THE SUMMER of 1912, Emil Nolde completed four paintings on the theme of an obscure Christian saint, Mary of Egypt, who worked the port of Alexandria as a prostitute, experienced a conversion to Christianity at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and died a hermit in the wilderness beyond the river Jordan. In one sense, Nolde's choice of religious subject-matter represented continuity. In the summer of 1909, with just such Christian subjects, he had made his first decisive steps away from an early impressionistic mode towards a dramatic, painterly and colouristic style. Each summer since then, when staying in rural northern Germany, he had produced a handful of religious paintings.¹ But, in another sense, it marked a significant change, for although he had already painted twenty-one works on biblical themes, Nolde for the first time chose a subject not from scripture but from Christian legend.² The last three of the four canvases of this theme have always been hung as a unit – approximating a triptych – and remain together today in the Kunsthalle, Hamburg (the fourth is in the Museum Folkwang, Essen). Collectively Nolde called them *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* and titled them individually *In the port of Alexandria* (left; Fig. 31), *The conversion* (centre; Fig. 32) and *Death in the desert* (right; Fig. 33). In his memoirs, he described them briefly as 'Mary among the rough seamen; Mary on her knees, in turmoil, praying to the mother of God; St Mary sought, found and buried by a prior'.³

Nolde chose a large format of 86 by 100 cm. for three of the canvases; *The conversion*, the central image of the triptych, is larger still (105 by 120 cm.). To him, they clearly represented major works. But although the advent of Nolde's religious paintings marks his stylistic breakthrough to Expressionism, and although they are arguably his most significant works, *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* has received scant attention. Oddly, Nolde initiated this trend: he left no direct account of the creation of these four works in his memoirs, as he had for the first religious paintings of 1909, for *The life of Christ* of 1912 and, to a lesser extent, for the religious paintings of 1911. This is unfortunate, for in its sources, style and subject-matter, the series reflects the struggle between the conservative and the

progressive that tugged at the artist's character. It incorporates all the strategies he devised to resolve a possible contradiction in the paintings – the conjunction of an iconic style and a discursive subject-matter. It is also unusually complex on both a literary and an allegorical level. Finally, it relates to the subject of three allusive episodes in Nolde's memoirs which invest the series with a contemporary and personal significance.

Although Nolde never wrote in detail about the series, he dutifully catalogued each canvas in the handlist of paintings that he had kept since 1910 – as nos. 435 to 438, all from 1912 – so that the order of the works and his procedure seem reasonably clear. According to this, he began with a single picture, *St Mary of Egypt* (no. 435), showing the saint's burial in the desert. He then expanded the project by creating a separate, three-canvas ensemble that repeats the subject and imagery of the first painting in the final canvas.⁴

By leaving no account of the creation of the series, Nolde skirted two questions: why he selected the legend of an obscure Christian saint, and what was his source for the three particular episodes he chose. The saint, although not entirely unknown, was not greatly popular in Germany nor, for that matter, in most of Europe.⁵ Nolde perhaps knew the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke, who in 1908 published the second half of *Neue Gedichte*, with verses entitled *Die ägyptische Maria*. But Rilke's poem deals only with the final phase of the saint's life, so that although it possibly introduced Nolde to her and inspired his first painting – thus explaining his decision to paint her death first – it could not furnish the narrative for the two earlier episodes.⁶

Nolde did, however, provide a clue to his source. In a letter of 23rd June 1917 to the owner of the triptych, he included three lines which, he stated, correlated with the three paintings: 'I have the text of the legend of St Mary right here; these are the concise words that suggested the arrangement: "Take my body as your payment." "I prayed to you with great solemnity." "The lion dug the grave there with its paws."' ⁷ Writers on Nolde tend to ignore these lines and thus their origin, but a small book published in 1910, with a brief

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¹ Four were produced in the summer of 1909, seven in 1910 and four in 1911. Nolde painted six of the nine canvases of *The life of Christ* in Berlin.

² Three additional paintings now have titles that associate them with the series: *Saint in the desert* (1911), *Young ascetic and Maria Aegyptiaca* (both 1913); see nos. U425, U516 and U533 respectively in M. Urban: *Emil Nolde: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Oil Paintings*, London 1987. However, Nolde gave the paintings these titles at a later date. For consistency, I have used Urban's English translations of Nolde's titles throughout this article.

³ Nolde published his memoirs in four volumes: *Das eigene Leben*, Berlin 1931; *Jahre der Kämpfe*, Berlin 1934; *Welt und Heimat. Die Südseereise*, Flensburg 1965; *Reisen, Ächtung, Befreiung*, Cologne 1976. See also *Briefe aus den Jahren 1894–1926*, ed. M.

Sauerlandt, Berlin 1927. This quotation is from *Jahre der Kämpfe*, p. 230. All translations are the present writer's.

⁴ Although this handlist may not always correspond to the exact sequence of his paintings, it is unlikely that Nolde would have confused the order of a short but major series. That the single canvas preceded the triptych also seems more likely than the reverse.

⁵ In his encyclopaedic account of the veneration of saints and their relics in Germany during the Middle Ages, Stephan Beissel mentioned her only twice: as co-patron of a church in Cologne and as the subject of two paintings in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne; see S. Beissel: *Die Verehrung der Heiligen und ihrer Reliquien in Deutschland im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1976, pp. 60 and 67. Catalogues of the saints in art list less than thirty images of her, with none in Germany during Nolde's lifetime, and very few which he might have seen while travelling.

⁶ For the text and an English translation, see R.M. Rilke: *New Poems*, trans. J. B. Leishman, New York 1964, pp. 201–02.

selection of the legends of the saints edited by Richard Benz and entitled *Alte deutsche Legenden*, contains each of them verbatim; this obviously provided Nolde's source.⁸ Like the painter's triptych, Benz's version of the legend has three sections, although not the same ones as painted by Nolde. The first involves the pious abbot Zosimus, his search for a holy hermit in the wilderness beyond the river Jordan (prompted by God in a dream), and his discovery and pursuit of Mary. When confronted, she knows his name and priestly office and reads his thoughts; elsewhere, she floats above the ground as they pray and so, after initial doubts, he recognises in her a surpassing sanctity.

Urged by Zosimus, Mary tells her story, thus opening the second portion of the legend. This also consists of three episodes. Born in Egypt, and possessing great beauty, she came to Alexandria at the age of twelve and lived for seventeen years on the streets not from material desire, but from insatiable lust. Seeing local citizens embarking by sea to venerate the holy cross in Jerusalem, she boarded with them, offering her body to the seamen as payment for her voyage. On board she was mistress to all, living in 'revel and riot'. In Jerusalem, Mary approached the door of the church three times, along with the pilgrims, only to have an unseen force restrain her. Recognising this as the effect of a sinful life, she turned in despair to a painting of the Virgin Mary, begged pardon for her sins and vowed to change her ways. Finally entering the church unhindered, she was given three gold pieces by a stranger and advised by a voice to seek salvation beyond the Jordan. She washed herself in the river, then spent forty-six years in the wilderness, seeing no one and miraculously sustained only by three loaves of bread purchased with the gold pieces. The devil tempted her daily with food, drink, beautiful clothes and other worldly comforts, but without success.

The three paintings of *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* roughly match the three subdivisions of this central portion of the tale: the prostitute in Alexandria, the convert in Jerusalem, the hermit in the desert. However, Nolde's final episode comes from the third part of the legend. Mary asks Zosimus to return at Easter with a consecrated host. On that day she crosses over the flooded waters of the Jordan to join him, receives the sacrament, asks him to return the following Easter, and departs again across the water. One year later, failing to find her in the appointed spot, he returns to the site of their original encounter, only to see her lying dead in a beam of light. Beside her is an inscription in the sand requesting that he bury her and giving her death date (2nd April, her feast day). She

had died just days after receiving communion. After exhausting himself digging, Zosimus enlists a lion to help him with the interment; afterwards the animal goes off quietly and Zosimus returns to his monastery.

Nolde's fascination with the figures of early legends places him squarely within a broad intellectual and cultural current, notwithstanding his claims of insularity.⁹ In the nineteenth century, interest in the lives of the saints had resurfaced in Germany in ecclesiastical circles, both Catholic and Protestant, in the form of new editions of medieval texts. Likewise, contemporary German literary scholars published new editions of the tales and research on their manuscripts, sources and translations.¹⁰ This renewed interest followed a revival in medieval art and culture among the German Romantics, who established a trend that grew in popularity throughout the century.¹¹

With perhaps the deepest Romantic roots of any of the German Expressionists, Nolde clearly inherited this revivalist tradition and, no doubt, it sparked his interest in early legends. But Nolde's use of the tale is also an elaboration of the subjects and themes that are found in his earlier biblical paintings: the hermit embodies the same type of simple, powerful faith and inward spirituality that mark the central figures of those works, and the subject, like his biblical ones, provided a vehicle for other, more personal, concerns of the artist, religious or otherwise.

The imagery of *In the port of Alexandria* (Fig. 31), the left-hand picture of the triptych, derives from earlier religious paintings by Nolde such as *Derision* of 1909 (Fig. 35) and *Joseph recounts his dream* of 1910 (Fig. 34). In both, vulgar men encircle and gape at a pious protagonist (although the, as yet, less-than-saintly Mary invites such groping and leering). In particular, the triangular arrangement of the heads of the sailors resembles that of the three brothers to the right of Joseph; but if the triangle of heads is reversed, with two below instead of above, one has the composition of *Party* of 1911 (U448), one of Nolde's cabaret scenes.

Although Nolde was able to adapt the composition of *Party* for *In the port of Alexandria*, they are notably different. The former is a contemporary subject, essentially an urban genre scene; the latter a centuries' old Christian legend. This points to a central contradiction in Nolde's religious paintings: he first made his leap to a progressive style through traditional subject-matter. Thus, these paintings are the clearest expression of a distinct conservative streak in his character, belied by the avant-garde posturing in his memoirs.¹² But this is only

⁷ Nolde 1927, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.127. He quoted exactly the same lines in his memoirs; Nolde 1934, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.187.

⁸ R. Benz, ed.: *Alte deutsche Legenden*, Jena 1909, pp.13–16; see also *idem*: *Die Legenda aurea aus dem Lateinischen übersetzt*, Jena 1917–21.

⁹ For these claims, see Nolde 1934, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.234, and Nolde 1976, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.71. For the revival of *The Golden Legend*, see S. Reams: *The Legenda Aurea: a Reexamination of its Paradoxical History*, Madison 1985.

¹⁰ For example, a new Latin version of *The Golden Legend*, J. Graesse, ed.: *Jacobus a Voragine: Legenda aurea*, Dresden and Leipzig 1846; a new, abridged German translation of *The Golden Legend*, J. de Voragine: *Die Goldene Legende der Heiligen*, ed. E. Jaffé, Berlin 1912; and three sections of a medieval German *Passional*, published in two volumes: *Das Passional. Eine Legenden-Sammlung des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. F. Köpke, Quedlinburg and Leipzig 1852; and *Das alte Passional*, ed. K. Hahn, Frankfurt 1857. For further information, see W. Sieger: 'The Religious Paintings of Emil Nolde, 1909–1912', Ph.D. diss. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1998). pp.199–200.

¹¹ For example, see L. Kosegarten: *Legenden*, Berlin 1804. For Gottfried Keller's *Seven Legends* of 1871, see J. M. Lindsay: *Gottfried Keller. Life and works*, London 1968, pp.175–76; and A. Banasik: 'Gottfried Keller's Adaptation of Medieval Legends for the XIXth C. Audience', in B. Dunn-Lardeau, ed.: *Legenda Aurea: sept siècles de diffusion*, Montreal 1986, pp.281–88. For the Grimm brothers' stories for children, see J. Schmidt: 'Golden Legends during the Reformation Controversy: Polemical Trivialization in the German Vernacular', in *ibid.*, pp.274–75. For cartoonist Wilhelm Busch's series on the legends of the saints, see W. Busch: *Werke, historische kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. F. Bohne, Zürich [n.d.], II, pp.75–136.

¹² Nolde acknowledged the contradiction: his closest friend, Hans Fehr, recounted his assessment of the 'new' or modern art in a conversation of 1909: "'One must not only believe in a new art and see it, one must also examine the old art with new eyes. I myself now see the old art with old and simultaneously with modern eyes"'; H. Fehr: *Emil Nolde. Ein Buch der Freundschaft*, Cologne 1957, p.46.



31. *Legend: St Mary of Egypt: In the port of Alexandria*, by Emil Nolde. 1912. 86 by 100 cm. (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).



32. *Legend: St Mary of Egypt: The conversion*, by Emil Nolde. 1912. 105 by 120 cm. (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

one contradiction inherent in the religious paintings. *Party* is also a fine example of Nolde's Expressionism – contemporary in subject, immediate in its unmodulated primary and secondary colours, and vigorous in its brushwork. It is simple, direct and powerful and has no anecdotal content. *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* shares some of these qualities but, by virtue of its multiple episodes and complex narrative subject, it requires additional elements if it is to be meaningful beyond stylistic expression. Subject-matter of this type has been characterised as discursive in that it draws near to language. This conjunction of an Expressionist style and literary subject was not necessarily a natural fit, and, no doubt sensing a potential contradiction at the heart of his enterprise, Nolde spent three years, from his first religious paintings to this triptych, devising strategies to reconcile the iconic and the discursive.¹³

In terms of style, *In the port of Alexandria* represents Nolde at his most Expressionist. Bright colours predominate in the riot of twisting and interlocking shapes, ambiguous space and roughly painted forms. These, plus the tangle of limbs and bodies, lend the work an unbalanced, precarious quality, expressive of the intemperate passions of the quartet. The sailors have the same brutish features and hulking limbs as Joseph's brothers, but an even cruder sense of vigour, evoked by Nolde's looser brushwork and more opaque colour. For the female nude, the artist employed a type that he had painted in a group of works immediately preceding the triptych. In *Kneeling nudes* (U508), perhaps the first of the group, the figures have broad, curving contours and a pronounced corporeality while Nolde's painterly brushwork and vibrant

colours invest the bodies with voluptuous vitality. For the episode during Mary's life as a harlot, he turned to this formula, and she resembles, for example, the women in *Nudes and eunuch* (Fig.37), with black hair, dark eyes and red lips, plus the same broad contours and vibrant fleshiness. Now, however, her body shows all the effects of her depravity: bright red nipples and an ample, over-ripe figure redolent of decay.

For the sailors, Nolde employed a second strategy to create meaning, that of caricature. He had already used this in religious paintings such as *Derision* and *Joseph recounts his dream*, and he gave the tormentors in each picture similar features, including gaping mouths and snagged teeth, allowing outward disfigurements to signify inner moral corruption. But some of his most exaggerated distortions are reserved for the sailors who, odious as they seem, are nonetheless enticed by Mary with a gleeful grin and an insouciant gesture as she undrapes herself.

Nolde appropriated his motif and use of caricature from northern late medieval and early Renaissance painting, a further indication of his conservative leanings. In fact, in a letter of 20th March 1908, over a year before his first religious paintings, he made an explicit connection between his own work, northern art and the issue of national identity: 'In Germany, we have a great uphill battle before us, if we are to truly succeed in creating a great German art, a second period – the first falling within the time of Grünewald, Holbein and Dürer.'¹⁴ Caricature of a broad type was a conspicuous and well-developed tradition in northern art and had been employed emblematically by artists such as Hieronymus

¹³ Nolde's iconic and discursive modes developed hand-in-hand, with *The Last Supper* (U316), his first religious painting, nearly stripped of literary and anecdotal nuances, representing the iconic, and *Derision* (U317), his second, more complex in its literary dimension, the discursive.

¹⁴ In Nolde 1927, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.73–74, he added: 'I feel myself on the verge of it, and I truly hope that this period of a great German art will come. The artists must

lead the great fight. But it requires new young people with independent minds.' See similar, later, comments (Nolde 1934, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.234) on his passionate love of 'old, pure German art' and its 'spiritually perfect beauty', and on his desire 'to give back to German art its Germanic character, which it had lost two and a half centuries ago'.

¹⁵ These last three panels were in Munich when Nolde visited it just before 1900. His interest in these artists corresponds with their revival in Germany; see, for instance,



33. *Legend: St Mary of Egypt: Death in the desert*, by Emil Nolde. 1912. 86 by 100 cm. (Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

Bosch (for example his *Christ carrying the cross*; Fig. 36), Matthias Grünewald (*The mocking of Christ*; 1503), Dieric Bouts (*The betrayal of Christ*; c.1450) and Jan Sanders van Hemessen (*Christ scorned*; 1544).¹⁵ But Nolde also used caricature to establish one part of a crucial dualism of a type that is among the most significant mechanisms of meaning in his painting. Such oppositions take the form of broad contrasts of themes, types and colours. Here, among others, Bosch and Van Hemessen also guided him. These two artists presented Christ, the protagonist of their scenes, in a manner quite distinct from his antagonists. In each case Christ has a calm, self-possessed demeanour and an inwardly directed expression, similar, in fact, to those of Joseph in *Joseph recounts his dream*. But with three canvases at his disposal, Nolde had no need to present the dualism of protagonist/antagonist or pious/faithless in a single painting. Mary, so far, shares the ignoble character of the sailors. *In the port of Alexandria* establishes one side of the dichotomy, involving the flesh; the other side appears in the third canvas of the triptych, where the hermit symbolises the spirit.

In addition, we have the initial portion of a second dichotomy here, for which the textual source is crucial, in the popular medieval Christian theme of the *vita activa* versus the *vita contemplativa*. Nolde had treated this theme earlier, in a different context, in *Christ in Bethany* of 1910 (Fig. 38), on the subject of Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha. In St Luke's Gospel, and in the painting, Martha scurries about performing a series of domestic tasks, while Mary quietly contemplates the words of Jesus, choosing in the words of scripture, the 'better half'.¹⁶

In medieval legends, hermits withdraw to the wilderness, eschewing the active in favour of the contemplative life. This theme informs the legends of St Mary of Egypt, St Paul of Thebes and St Anthony, the latter two as hermits in the Egyptian wilderness. The legend of St Anthony, prince of hermits, was well known among northern European artists: it was painted by Bosch at least four times, and Martin Schongauer represented an episode from it in his most famous print, *The temptation of St Anthony* (Fig. 39). Nolde, a talented printmaker, almost certainly knew the Schongauer print (in which the remarkably quiescent and contemplative Anthony is shown in sharp contrast to his demonic tormentors, à la Bosch). He also may have known at least one version of the St Anthony legend attributed to Bosch – either the *Altarpiece of the hermits* (with Anthony at the left), once in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (from 1893 to 1919), or the panel of *The temptation of St Anthony* in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin.¹⁷ The book by Benz which was Nolde's literary source also includes two stories from the life of St Anthony. The legend presents him as the model of the contemplative life. It also describes explicitly one of the chief temptations of the active life: the flesh, in the form of the beautiful 'Devil-Queen of the Nile' who lures him from the wilderness to the city and attempts to seduce him into a more 'active life'.¹⁸ Nolde's triptych presents the same dichotomy as the medieval story: the active, urban life represented at the left and, at right, the contemplative, rural life as suggested by the pose of the abbot and the hermit's hands crossed in prayer.

For *Death in the desert* (Fig. 33), the canvas on the right in *Legend: St Mary of Egypt*, Nolde created a second version of the first of his four paintings on the subject. Overall, the composition remains the same, but with markedly bolder forms set closer to the picture plane. Most notably, the pose of Zosimus has changed: he prays intently, rather than exhibiting grief at the discovery of the corpse, indicating a difference in psychology essential to the meaning of the triptych. Like the nudes preceding her, Mary has a full, round body, perhaps alluding to her years as a prostitute, but not their opulent colour or handling, as befits a hermit who foreswore fleshly indulgence. Her pose is largely the same, but now her primitive state is signified by her hirsute appearance.¹⁹

The attraction for Nolde to expand upon the life of Mary no doubt lay in the opportunity to juxtapose its first and final phases. *In the port of Alexandria* and *Death in the desert* create the starkest dichotomies of style, imagery and theme of any of his religious paintings, the latter presenting the ascetic life, the former, life within society. The grotesque lecherousness of the sailors and the perverse glee of the prostitute in the former give way to the dignified, pious saints of the latter. The fleshiness of the prostitute becomes the hair of the hermit. Whereas the colour and handling of the former reinforce the sinner's

M. Escherich: *Grünewald-Bibliographie*, Strasbourg 1914, in which there are no entries for 1867, the year of Nolde's birth, but forty-three for 1912, the year of *Legend: St Mary of Egypt*.

¹⁶ See Luke 10:38–42.

¹⁷ Nolde visited museums in Vienna in the 1890s while he was an industrial design teacher in St Gall, Switzerland. He spent most of his winters in Berlin in the early twentieth century; see the chronology in Urban, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 13–30.

¹⁸ For a concise account of the iconography of the legend of St Anthony in Bosch's work, see J. Synder: *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, Englewood Cliffs NJ 1985, pp. 208–10.

¹⁹ Nolde perhaps repainted the subject knowing that the first version would be overpowered by the bold vividness of *In the port of Alexandria* if used in the three-part work. He perhaps took the idea for the furry skin from an illustration in Benz 1909, *op. cit.* (note 8), of St John Chrysostom as a hermit.



34. *Joseph recounts his dream*, by Emil Nolde. 1910. 86 by 106 cm. (Österreichische Staatsgalerie, Vienna).



36. *Christ carrying the cross*, by Hieronymus Bosch. c.1515. Panel, 76.8 by 83.5 cm. (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent).



35. *Derision*, by Emil Nolde. 1909. 86 by 106.5 cm. (Brücke-Museum, Berlin).

lustful frenzy, the stable composition and more subdued painting style of the latter stress the saint's quietism.

Death in the desert also presents three personal themes: the purity of nature, the ascetic life and the state of grace. Nolde's attitude towards nature informed many aspects of his conception of art and life and of his understanding of what he called 'primitive' cultures. The St Mary legend afforded him an opportunity to link the themes of nature and spirit more explicitly than any of his earlier biblical subjects had allowed. In the Old Testament and in the hagiographical tales of Christian anchorites and penitents, the wilderness symbolises purity and is the setting for encounters with God. For his part,

Nolde frequently painted the spare, unsullied, fecund landscape of his native northern Germany. And for years, he had used vividly coloured flowers as symbols of the purity and vibrancy of nature.²⁰ In *Death in the desert*, he brought together fulgent temperate flowers and verdant tropical foliage, and the corpse of Mary lies in intimate contact with the blossoms, her body stimulating their growth, while they reclaim her remains. The plants become the saint's attributes, symbolising her return to nature, her cleansed spirit and her state of grace.

However, a glance at an inner panel of Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim altarpiece*, representing the meeting of St Anthony and St Paul the Hermit (Fig.40), reveals that the inclusion of fertile nature in Mary's wilderness is not Nolde's invention but another appropriation. In the legend of Paul, Anthony meets him in the Egyptian desert and exclaims 'I have seen Paul in paradise', referring to the mystical Eden that bloomed from the wasteland where the hermit settled. The imagery of this paradise includes a deer, a palm tree in the background and plants in the foreground (in the legend, medicinal herbs); likewise Nolde introduced a palm tree and flowers and foliage in his picture.²¹

Nolde no doubt conceived of Mary of Egypt, in her untouched wilderness, as something of a primitive by virtue of her ascetic life and her intimacy with nature. In legend, early Christian ascetics estrange themselves from the city; the ideal existence is a rural one. This movement from the civilised to the natural world implies a commitment to chastity and purity.²² Likewise, Mary of Egypt abandons the material life of sinful pleasures for the realm of the spirit, one closer to nature and beyond all social compulsions and conventions (for example, clothing). Nolde clearly meant such images to underscore Mary's state of grace (note the earnest

²⁰ For example, *Flower garden, woman in a white dress*, 1908 (U268); *Flower garden, woman in a white dress en face*, 1908 (U272); and *Flower garden, little girl*, 1908 (U276).

²¹ Nolde may have known the colour folio of the *Isenheim altarpiece* in M.J. Friedländer: *Grünewalds Isenheimer Altar*, Munich 1908.

²² See A. Elliott: *Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*, London 1987, p.170.

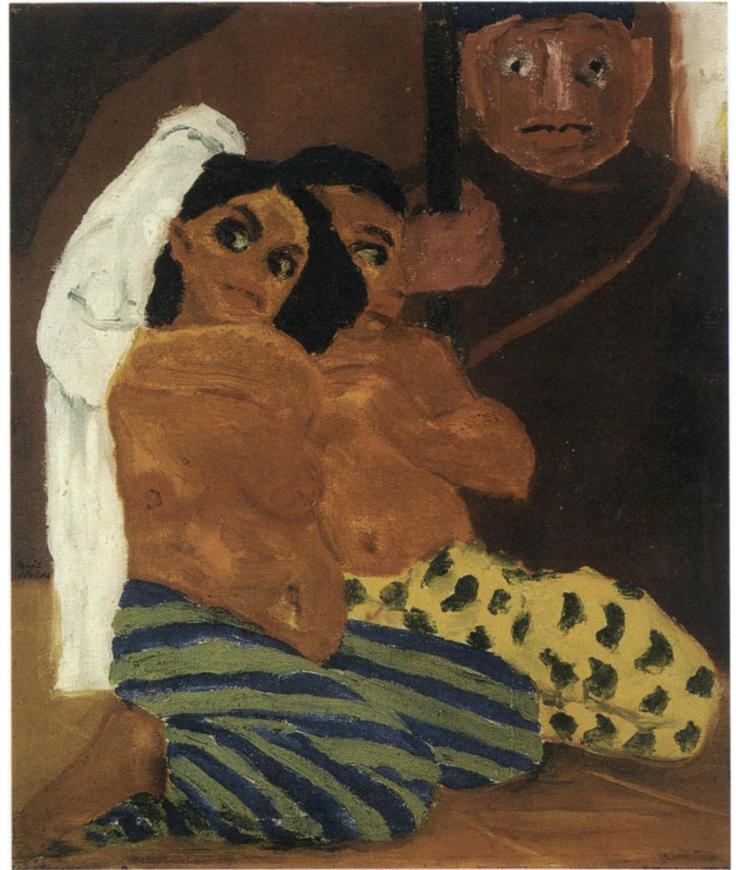
²³ For example, Christ in *The Last Supper* (U316) and *Derision*, both of 1909, and Joseph in *Joseph recounts his dream*.

²⁴ Le Douanier Rousseau enjoyed a vogue in Germany at that date, promoted by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, and Marc visited Nolde in Berlin around Christmas 1911; see W. Kandinsky and F. Marc: *The Blue Rider*, ed. K. Lankheit, New York

prayers of Zosimus) and in both paintings her hands are clasped in prayer and she bears the self-contained demeanour of the pious figures as found in his other religious paintings. The exotic nude becomes the saint.²³ And, following the legend, her body betrays no corruption, although her death had preceded this episode by a year. Like Eve's before the fall, her nudity reinforces her purity and untouched nature becomes, in effect, the closest state to paradise humanity can achieve. In fact, the tropical foliage and placement of the figures in the landscape resemble the jungle paradises of Le Douanier Rousseau, although in Nolde they are transformed from a linear into a painterly style.²⁴

Nolde set up one further dichotomy in *Death in the desert*, that between the hermit and the churchmen. He was suspicious of orthodoxy, and this had already informed his treatment of the theme of Christ and the teachers in the temple in an earlier painting, *The twelve-year-old Christ* (U442), now part of *The life of Christ*.²⁵ The medieval story of Mary of Egypt emphasises the divinely inspired quest of the abbot Zosimus to discover a holy figure beyond the Jordan. He finds Mary, a woman of unsurpassed sanctity, yet one without ties to established churches or formal creeds. As a result of this encounter, he too is transformed. In *Death in the desert* he prays calmly, revealing an inner strength (rather than the grief and alarm of the first version of the subject) and, like Mary, he assumes the attributes of the saint. As in other religious paintings by Nolde, colour – the monk's deep purple robe, for example – signifies inner, spiritual intensity, a state achieved in the isolation of the desert rather than within his monastic community.

For *The conversion* (Fig. 32), the large central image of the triptych, Nolde devised a simple, loosely symmetrical scheme. Pilgrims from Alexandria enter an archway to the right, presumably leading to the shrine they have come to venerate. Mary, now in a more modest garment, prays at the centre before an icon of the Virgin and Child. Only the diagonal recession from lower left to upper right breaks the straightforward symmetry of the composition, which in turn is matched by the simplicity of Nolde's imagery. The pilgrims constitute a faceless mass of heads, legs and tunics (following a medieval convention); the icon is generalised; Mary's box-like garment shows only the faintest modulations, and she is seen in strict profile, with the unarticulated features and boneless body of a figure in a child's drawing. But although *The conversion* shares its almost artless simplicity with *In the port of Alexandria*, it lacks that painting's crude vitality. The manner is more controlled and deliberate, with a clearer sense of space, and, except for the bright yellow surrounding the Madonna, the colour is more subdued. The brushwork is softer and more restrained, and the drawing carefully delineates the forms – especially the flagstones and brickwork – in the untutored way of naive art. Nolde no doubt intended such artless simplicity to suggest Mary's unaffected, child-like faith, one that he had exalted earlier in works such as *Christ among the children* of 1910 (U350).



37. *Nudes and eunuch*, by Emil Nolde. 1912. 88 by 74 cm. (Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington).

Within the triptych, *The conversion* represents the crucial, transitional moment in the life of Mary of Egypt and the mediation point between the dichotomies established in *In the port of Alexandria* and *Death in the desert*. Nolde emphasised the pivotal nature of the episode by placing Mary directly at the centre of the canvas on a vertical axis of outstretched arms and body that reaches from top to bottom. The entire triptych turns on this image, as Mary's life turns on this moment. The riotous physical action of *In the port of Alexandria* is exchanged for a concentrated image of inner fervour and Nolde emphasises the transformation by presenting Mary in a very different fashion. Now, all her physical, emotional and spiritual energy points heavenwards. The experience of the divine and the intensity of Mary's spiritual state is primarily suggested through colour. She wears a radiant deep-red garment of the type reserved elsewhere in Nolde's work for the figure of Christ. The wall before her is yellow with tinges of orange, and orange, yellow and red dominate the icon of the Virgin and Child, suggesting that it is not merely a painted image but also a miraculous presence. Nolde reinforces this point, perhaps, by his choice of icon, for it represents the Byzantine type known as the *Panagia Hodegetria*, in which the Madonna, with the gesture of her hand towards the Child, 'shows the way' to redemption.²⁶

1974, pp.40–41. The Berlin Secession hung ten of Rousseau's works in its spring 1912 exhibition, including at least one jungle painting, *Urwald* (fig. 54 in the catalogue); see D. Gordon: *Modern Art Exhibitions: 1900–1916*, Munich 1974, II, p. 568. Nolde remained in Berlin until May that year; see also a letter from Ada Nolde in Berlin dated 6th May 1912, in H. Hesse-Frielinghaus, ed.: *Emil und Ada Nolde – Karl Ernst und Gertrud Osthaus: Briefwechsel*, Bonn 1985, p. 82.

²⁵ Reportedly, Nolde did not attend church services regularly; see K. Jörn: 'Ada und Emil Nolde auf Alsen: 1902–1906', *Deutscher Volkskalender Nordschleswig* (1972).

²⁶ My thanks to Stella Theophilus, of the Art Department at Northeastern Illinois University, who guided me through the Byzantine types of the motif of the Virgin and Child.



38. *Christ in Bethany*, by Emil Nolde. 1910. 106.5 by 86.5 cm. (Hans Wilhelm Wiebe, Bielefeld).

Nolde's closest friend, Hans Fehr, in his book on the artist, specifically identified this triptych (together with *The life of Christ* cycle) as one in which the artist worked through his doubts concerning the goodness of God and the guilt of humanity.²⁷ Similarly, in his memoirs, following the spare comments on *Legend: St Mary of Egypt*, Nolde continues with a discussion of the religious dilemmas that dogged him at this time, all of which coincide with the themes of the triptych – the nature of sin and guilt, the goodness of God versus the evil of the world, salvation versus damnation, and the longing for the transcendental that marks humanity.

Nolde's textual source, which he insisted upon in his letter to the purchaser of the paintings, allows for a variety of levels of meaning in *Legend: St Mary of Egypt*. Beyond its allegorical content, Nolde's fascination with the legend obviously lay in the particulars of the narrative and the contrasts it offers. However, other aspects of the meaning of the work are accessible not via the legend itself, but from a subsequent text – Nolde's memoirs. Here he inserted three narratives – *ex post facto* commentaries, or covert glosses, each one correlating with a particular canvas of the triptych, and each constructing a more personal frame of reference. The first, corresponding to *In the port of Alexandria*, appears as an account of Nolde's

own experiences in the port of Hamburg. Before citing this, it is crucial to realise that the current location of the series is not accidental. In his memoirs, Nolde wrote of his 'belief that this work should find a place in the Hamburg Kunsthalle, in the city where I felt a bit at home'.²⁸ Here he referred to his brief residence in Hamburg in 1910, staying in a small seamen's hotel by the harbour, while preparing a set of etchings. In his memoirs, he wrote of the bustle and noise of the harbour and the exotic presence of foreign seamen. But he also noted the taste of these sailors for foreign women and illicit sex, mentioning, for example, an innkeeper who informed him that a certain captain kept a prostitute from Amsterdam at the inn during his travels, and a seaman who procured Chinese women for his shipmates.²⁹ Nolde commented on these matters in a moralising tone, consistent with the triptych: 'Otherwise I spoke with no one. Perhaps that is why I occupied myself with moralising over these events all the more.' He then pretended to quote his thoughts of the time: "It is not a child's fault how and where it was born! In filth or in the purest human happiness! And how different are both possibilities, both styles of life in morality and happiness!"³⁰ He added, again quoting himself: "Will this govern me, or I it?"³¹ And he told of finding relief: 'I commenced to work, and nothing else disturbed me.'³¹ These are the same moral and personal preoccupations that Nolde and Fehr associated with the *Mary of Egypt* series, and they clearly informed the artist's choice of this obscure subject.

A reference to *Death in the desert* is illuminated by other, scattered statements in his memoirs. Nolde continually emphasised that he painted nearly all of his early religious paintings during his summers spent in remote northern Germany. He wrote of the simplicity of his fisherman's cottage on the island of Alsen, and of the crudeness of the timber shack that served as his studio there. He stressed that his wife, Ada, left him alone to spurn the world and paint madly through the night. In this manner, his second specific statement refers to his contemplation of the newly completed triptych hung on the outside wall of his shed, while surrounded by flora and fauna. The implication that he painted the pictures in the same conditions as the saint lived – an ascetic isolated in the wilderness – is unmistakable.³² More tellingly, he specifically mentioned deer among the wildlife, no doubt aware that Anthony and Paul share such companionship in their wing of the *Isenheim altarpiece*.

For the central canvas, Nolde recounted a situation intended to amplify the triptych's theme of personal transformation. At an exhibition of *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* in Wiesbaden, the collector Heinrich Kirchhoff first 'stood paralysed before it for a moment and then left again immediately, irritated and angry that anyone would have the insolence to offer something like that to people'.³³ Then, returning an hour later, he faced it again 'until his opinion changed, and hardly knowing how, he looked and understood all'. Finally, he 'stood there in front

²⁷ 'Tormenting, punishing thoughts followed him while awake and in his dreams. In his deep belief in God he asked himself again and again about the love and the goodness of God and about the guilt of humanity. From this deep depression, from this disintegrating grief, he found refuge in his great religious pictures, such as *Mary of*

Egypt and his powerful nine-part altarpiece'; Fehr, *op. cit.* (note 15), p.80. See also Nolde 1934, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.187–89.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.230.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.98–99.

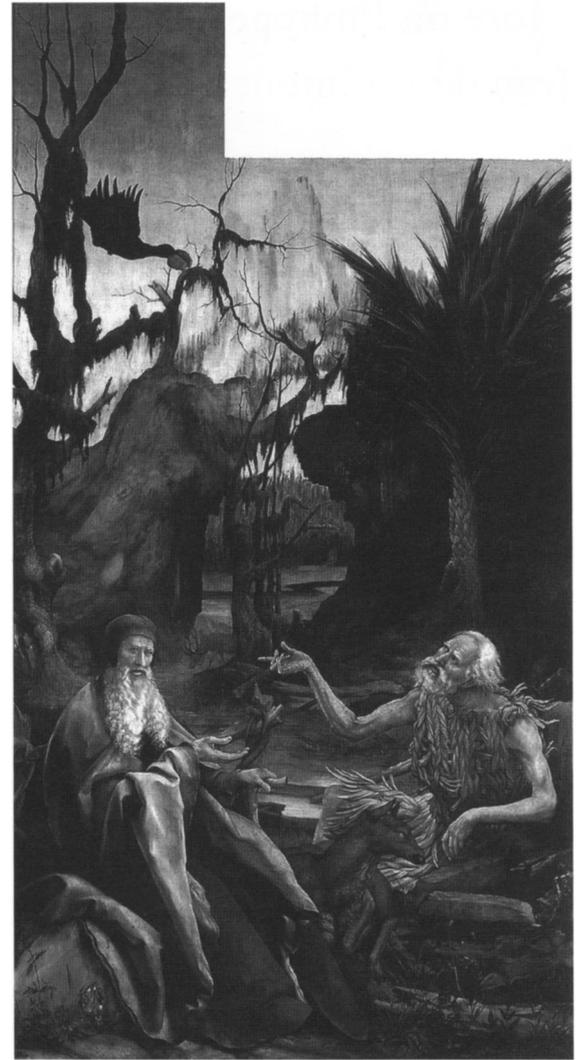


39. *The temptation of St Anthony*, by Martin Schongauer. c.1480–90. Engraving, 31.1 by 22.9 cm. (Art Institute of Chicago).

of the work captivated and inspired, defending it to all the people who still held the opinion that he had previously held'.³⁴ Eventually he purchased it. With this Nolde conflated the spiritual and the aesthetic: Kirchhoff experienced a conversion before the three canvases, just as Mary had undergone a spiritual conversion before the icon of the Madonna. Afterwards, he became a witness to the power of art among the philistines of Wiesbaden, a prophet, as it were, calling out in the wilderness.

These references in Nolde's memoirs underline how the content of the triptych involves nearly every issue that Nolde had addressed in his earlier religious paintings. As in *The wise and the foolish virgins* and *Joseph recounts his dream*, it confronts ardent spirituality with callous faithlessness. But the episodic nature of the triptych allowed Nolde not only to make this contrast, but also to show the transition from one state to the other. The roughly symmetrical schemes of *Christ and the children*, *Christ in Bethany* and *Crucifixion* (from *The life of Christ*) introduced the figure of Christ mediating between individuals representative of these two different states; only the Mary triptych makes explicit the theme of personal transformation from one state to another, in this case from the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*.

The strata of personal meaning found in *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* help to explain Nolde's selection of the legend of Mary as his subject. Crucial is the urban/rural dichotomy of the first and third canvases, mirroring the artist's own habits: winter in



40. *St Anthony and St Paul the Hermit* from *The Isenheim altarpiece*, by Matthias Grünewald. 1515. Panel, 269 by 142 cm. (Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar).

worldly Berlin; spring and summer in the wilderness of the north, rapt in creative isolation. Furthermore, with his Protestant roots, Nolde surely sympathised with the central theme of spiritual rebirth through the grace of God and individual faith. However, this same heritage might make a tale in which the Virgin sparks the transformation seem less attractive. Many Christian legends of conversion involve a repudiation of worldliness without the agency of the Madonna. The vital element for Nolde may have been that the icon before which the conversion occurs permitted him to suggest a contemporary, personal theme in which he ardently believed: the twofold power of art. Only by spurning society and embracing nature might the artist tap the transforming power of creativity; and only through the medium of progressive art might ordinary individuals likewise renew themselves. In this sense, Kirchhoff is Zosimus to Nolde's Mary. Above all, perhaps, *Legend: St Mary of Egypt* refers to a crucial turning point in Nolde's own life – his breakthrough in 1909 to an original, personal style by means of his first religious paintings.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p.186.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.229–230. The triptych is not documented in an exhibition in Wiesbaden

until 1917, when it was already in Kirchhoff's collection. Nolde was perhaps recalling a one-man exhibition of paintings held there in early 1916: its contents are not documented; see Urban, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.456 and 580.

³⁴ Nolde 1934, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.230.