



Figure 1: The Tree of Jesse, (circle of) Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1500, Rijksmuseum.nl.

The Tree of Jesse

(Circle of) Van Geertgen tot Sint Jans

Oil on panel, gold brocade

89,8 x 60,6 cm

C. 1500

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

SK-A-3901

Two vertical oak planks

Opaque paint, visible underdrawing on the woman down left

provenance: Likely commissioned by (a member of) the Wittevrouwenklooster, Haarlem, the St. John's Commandery in Haarlem, passed through Russian and Italian private collections before its 1956 museum acquisition for the Rijksmuseum. (more information on Rijksmuseum.nl)

A sleeping man lies horizontally at the bottom, with a large tree growing from his side. Figures are seated within the tree's branches. This line of figures leads to a woman and child enthroned at the very top.

Introduction

In *The Tree of Jesse*, attributed to the (circle of) Van Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Jesse, the father of king David is sleeping within a courtyard, likely that of a monastery.^{1 2} From his side grows a tree, holding his royal descendants with at its peak Mary and the infant Jesus. This festive oil on panel shows the prophecy coming true, that a savior would come from Jesse's family. Geertgen frames this as a vision given to a praying nun on the left side.^{3 4}

The biblical story depicted derives from the book of Isaiah 11:1 (KJV) which reads: "*There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots*".^{5 6} In a theological analysis of Isaiah 11:1-10, Kaeley Sells concludes that one of the main themes in the biblical book is the arrival of God's kingdom.⁷ Snyder aligns with this idea and applies it to Geertgen's painting. He states that the story of the tree of Jesse in art has two main functions; the first function is that the portrayal traces the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth back to King David, framing it as the realization of a prophetic tradition that emphasizes his royalty.⁸ The second function, as Snyder says, is a symbol of Christ's birth from the Virgin Mary".⁹

Geertgen's *Tree of Jesse* represents a significant innovation in Northern European art. What makes Geertgen's painting so groundbreaking is its use of a literal organic branch.¹⁰ While earlier artists used tree-like schedules, Geertgen depicted a realistic tree.¹¹ The painting was suspected to be commissioned by a member of the Wittevrouwenklooster of Haarlem and likely produced for private devotion.^{12 13}

This paper answers what Geertgen's innovative depiction reveals about shifting spiritual currents and religious priorities in early Netherlandish art. The paper will have the following structure: first, contextualizing the early medieval depictions of the tree of Jesse in Northern Europe; second, analyzing Geertgen's innovations; and third, by exploring the theological currents that made this new visualization possible and influential.

¹ The Rijksmuseum attributes this painting to Geertgen tot Sint Jans or a contemporary from his immediate circle, for this essay I will assume that the maker of this painting is Geertgen tot Sint Jans. Kok, "*Tree of Jesse*".

² Green, *Iconography*, 107.

³ Kok, "*Tree of Jesse*".

⁴ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 87.

⁵ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 85.

⁶ Hall, *Dictionary, On; Isaiah*.

⁷ Sells, "Isaiah 11:1-10," 10.

⁸ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 85.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 87.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kuijl, *Mirakel van Haarlem*, 267.

¹³ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 74.

Earlier depictions in Medieval Northern Europe

Throughout Northern Europe the image of the Tree of Jesse was common and featured on a wide variety of religious items.¹⁴ The earliest examples, dating back to the 10th century, are mostly in the form of manuscript decorations.¹⁵ According to Ligtenberg, visual documentation for genealogies exists as early as the early Middle Ages in the West.¹⁶ The first visualization Ligtenberg proposes has the form of a schedule and is seen in the *apocalypse of S. Sever*.¹⁷ While the original text dates to before 785, the only existing documentation of its genealogy tables come from much later copies produced in the 10th and 11th centuries.¹⁸ The book shows a schematic diagram with a portrait of king David and his ancestors (figure 2).¹⁹

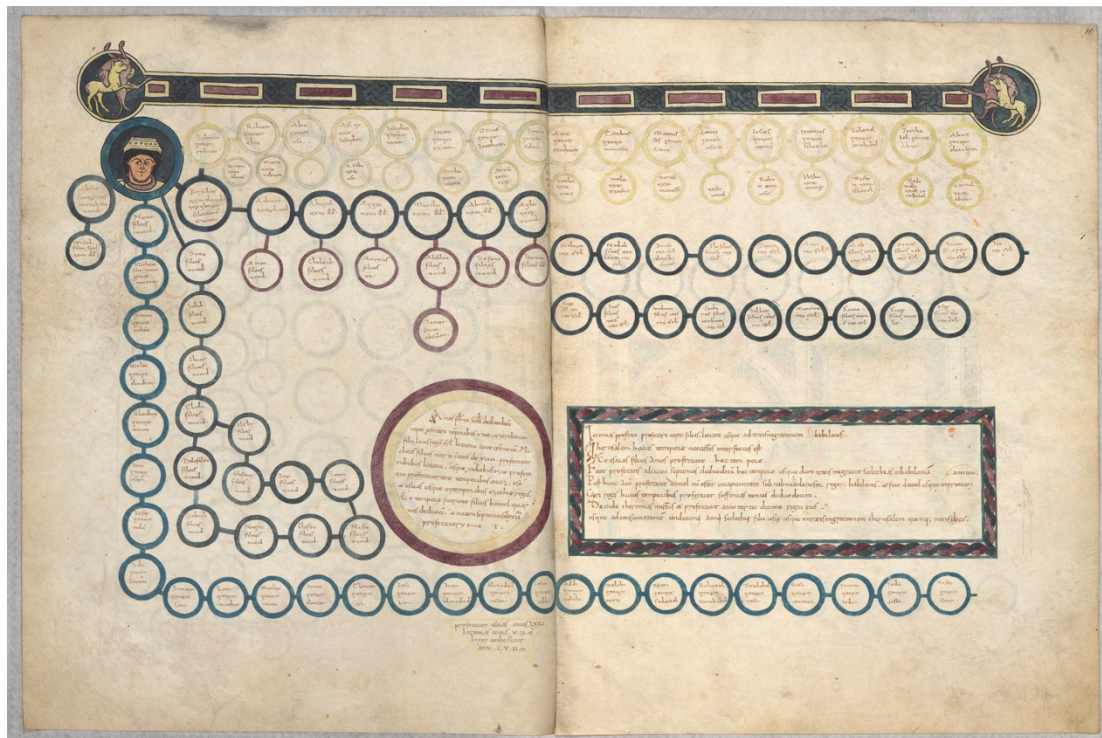


Figure 2: Tables XI-XIV, of David at the coming of the blessed Christ of Saint-Sever in the Beatus a Liebana, Commentarius in Apocalypsin, pages 10v-11r, c. 1050, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Among the biblical themes depicted in medieval stained glass, the Tree of Jesse was one of the most common.²⁰ A prominent example that still exists today is the well-preserved window found in France's Chartres Cathedral, dating back to c.1145. The tree is structured like a central column rather than a natural tree (Figure 3). Its branches, which are more like vines, create a formal order for the royal ancestors. The Chartres window is a public declaration of Christ's royal lineage, designed to be seen from afar. Geertgen tot Sint Jans's version is far more centered around private devotion. Firstly, through the nun who is praying the rosary, a highly personal prayer method that originated in the second half of the 15th century.²¹ Secondly, by comparing the size of the artworks,

¹⁴ Green, *Iconography*, 1.

¹⁵ Green, *Iconography*, 4.

¹⁶ However, it is unclear what the author views as "the West"

¹⁷ Ligtenberg "Genealogie van Christus," 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bibliothèque nationale France "beatus de saint-sever,".

²⁰ Green, *Iconography*, 167.

²¹ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 154.

we can state that Geertgen's painting was made to be looked at more closely due to the significantly smaller size (89,8 x 60,6 cm) compared to the cathedral window (8.4 x 2.6 m).²²



Figure 3: (detail of) *The Tree of Jesse*, c.1145, Stained glass window, maker unknown, Chartres Cathedral, France, 8.4 x 2.6 m, photo source: cathedrale-chartres.org

When examining the many depictions of Christ's genealogy, a common iconographic tradition is recognizable. As seen in the works of Hans Schilling, an anonymous tempera painter, and Israel van Meckenem (figures 4, 5, 6), the tree is depicted with (green) curly branches and only a few leaves. These spiraling branches form circles that serve as frames for the characters. In some depictions, characters actively engage with the tree by sitting on its branches or holding onto it, as illustrated in figures 4 and 6. However, the figures are still limited in their interaction with each other. In a stiffer composition, figures are illustrated as busts contained within the circular motifs of the vines (figure 5).

²² Kuijl, *Mirakel van Haarlem*, 269.



Figure 4: *The Tree of Jesse*, Hans Schilling, 1469, Ink with colored washes and tempera colors, 28.6 x 20.3 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XV 9, fol. 64v, 83. MR.179.64v.



Figure 5: *The Tree of Jesse*, Maker unknown, c. 1240-1250, Tempera colors, gold leaf, and silver leaf, 22.7 x 15.7 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig VIII 2, fol. 7v, 83. MK.93.7v



Figure 6: *Ornamental with the Tree of Jesse*, Israhel van Meckenem the Younger, c. 1480-1490, Engraving on paper, 12.1 x 26.8 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.

The work I found to be most aligned with Geertgen's visual approach is *The Tree of Saint Bruno and the Carthusian Order*, which was created around 1510 (figure 7). Although it was made 10 years later than Geertgen's piece, it shows a lot of similarities. In contrast to the earlier-mentioned, more schematic depictions that resembled vines or columns, both of these artworks present the tree with a more accurate sense of realism.

While every depiction of the Tree of Jesse is unique, they generally share a common purpose: to emphasize dynasty and divine order.²³ These works served as a visual proof of Christ's royal ancestry, presenting a formal and structured diagram of biblical lineage. The branches, which are more like vines, create a formal order for the royal ancestors. This vine-like portrayal aligns with the argument Green makes; she argues that the concept of the 'tree' is absent in both the early scripture and medieval biblical exegesis, rather these sources discuss the rod, shoot, stem, or even the flower of Jesse.²⁴ With the examples provided, we can now state that artists typically maintained a schematic, non-naturalistic tree structure. This established tradition makes Geertgen's organic and intimate interpretation stand out as a significant innovation.

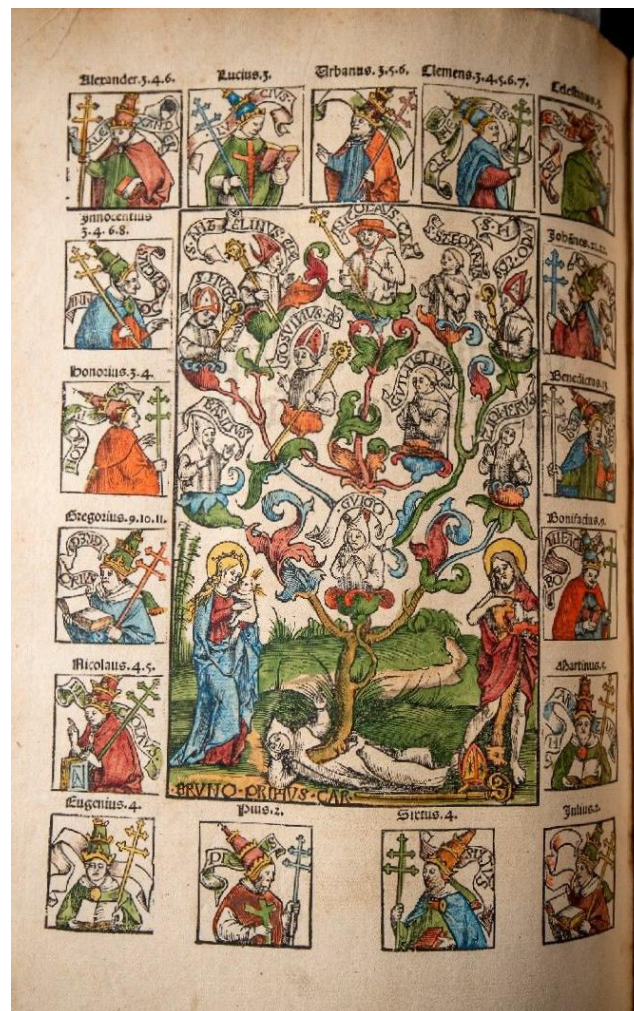


Figure 7: *Tree of saint Bruno and the Carthusian order*, woodcut from the *statuata ordinis cartusisensis*, c. 1510, 33 x 23, Biblio.com.

²³ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 85.

²⁴ Green, *Iconography*, 13.

Geertgen's innovation

Geertgen's tree is organic, asymmetrical, and lacks the typically seen winding and twisting of vines. The composition is driven by a vertical stem with dynamic horizontal stems that lead the viewer's gaze from Jesse to the Virgin and Child, structuring the entire narrative. The figures are no longer isolated in medallions but are integrated into the dynamic composition. They interact more naturally with the branch and each other, holding onto it, leaning against it, and even pushing each other upwards (figure 8). Thus, Geertgen's *Tree of Jesse* breaks from tradition; its composition departs from the static verticality of earlier versions, confirming Snyder's argument that it is a non-traditional depiction.²⁵ With this shift, the scene is no longer a distant symbolic diagram but feels like a tangible sacred event unfolding within the real world.

A central concern in Decker's work is understanding how 15th-century viewers approached and interacted with religious imagery.²⁶ Since it is easier to imagine oneself present in a scene containing a familiar-looking branch than in front of a schematic diagram, Geertgen's literal branch provides a concrete, naturalistic gateway for the viewer's imagination.

So, not only does Geertgen's choice of style look more natural, but the naturalism itself also has a theological purpose. This use of naturalism influences the viewer's engagement with the sacred story to make the mystery of the Incarnation more tangible and physically immediate.



Figure 8: The Tree of Jesse (Detail of Abia pushing Rehoboam), (circle of) Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1500, Rijksmuseum.nl.

²⁵ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 87.

²⁶ Decker, *Technology of Salvation*, 2.

Theological currents

Religious paintings functioned as crucial instruments within the spiritual journey of the faithful.²⁷ As noted in the exhibition catalog for *The Art of Devotion* (Rijksmuseum, 1994) by van Os, there was “a great need among people in the late Middle Ages to really comprehend biblical narratives that stimulated prayer”.²⁸ Through meditation, practitioners could achieve a state of mental presence at sacred events, which served to deepen their active engagement with the story.²⁹ Realistic representation in art allowed the viewer to engage with biblical narratives immediately and personally, transcending the barriers of time and space.³⁰

From the 14th century onward, it became common among believers to use their imagination to connect with biblical stories as if they were present in them.³¹ The *devotio moderna* encouraged believers to use their senses and imagination to reconstruct biblical scenes in their minds as a form of prayer.³² Geertgen’s naturalistic branch serves this spirituality. It invites the viewer to imagine this scene, to meditate on the reality of the Incarnation using a familiar object from nature, fostering a personal connection. The realism of the branch makes this miraculous vision feel grounded and believable, helping the viewer feel closer to the story.

In his book, Decker introduces his “*Theory of Salvation*,” in which highlights what he calls the “do-it-yourself” aspects of Christianity. This theory argues that Christians were to make their souls worthy of salvation by using the tools provided and engaging in a self-directed journey toward Christ.³³ In *Technology of Salvation*, Decker discusses the theologian Hendrik Herp, who encouraged Christians to meditate, arguing that these exercises would help them achieve the changes necessary to rectify their souls.³⁴

As discussed, the tree functions as a bridge, connecting the viewer’s everyday world to the sacred history of the biblical event. From the perspective of Decker’s theory, the *Tree of Jesse* can be understood as a devotional instrument designed to structure and guide the viewer’s religious experience.³⁵ This practice facilitated a deeper contemplation of and emotional connection to Christ’s genealogy.

In *Art of Devotion*, Van Os summarizes the functions of medieval art as instruction, veneration, and remembrance, to which he adds a fourth: adornment.³⁶ He applies this framework to the *Tree of Jesse*, arguing that just like images serve to instruct the public at large, they assist the individual viewer of the *Tree of Jesse* in their meditation on the genealogy of Christ better than the written word could achieve.³⁷

A particularly compelling concept Decker shares in his work is the idea of meditating as maintaining a garden. Decker argues that Geertgen’s image functioned as a meditational tool, enabling Christians to “*plant their inner gardens and bring them to fruition*”.³⁸ This is illustrated in the *Tree of Jesse* through the depiction of the nun meditating in the monastery’s courtyard

²⁷ Decker, *Technology of Salvation*, 46.

²⁸ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 104.

²⁹ Decker, *technology of salvation*, 81.

³⁰ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 104.

³¹ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 159 and 172.

³² Os, *Art of Devotion*, 168.

³³ Decker, *technology of salvation*, 42-43.

³⁴ Decker, *Technology of Salvation*, 133. In reference to original source: Hendrik Herp, *Spiegel der volcomenheit*, 177.

³⁵ Decker, *technology of salvation*, 46-47.

³⁶ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 158.

³⁷ Os, *Art of Devotion*, 158-159.

³⁸ Decker, *technology of salvation*, 135.

garden.

The whole genealogy of Christ appears as a direct result of the nun's faith and prayer within the courtyard, emphasizing the power of private meditation.³⁹ Even if this is not the original narrative of the painting, we do see the nun praying in the direction of the genealogical tree. This portrayal of meditation, whether from the nun's perspective or the viewer's, stimulates or depicts an emotional engagement with the biblical story.⁴⁰

³⁹ Snyder "Geertgen Schildert," 87.

⁴⁰ Decker, *technology of salvation*, 81.

Conclusion

To answer to the question proposed in the introduction, Geertgen tot Sint Jans's use of a literal, organic branch in his *Tree of Jesse* was far more than a stylistic innovation. It was a conceptual shift driven by the era's spiritual priorities. By replacing the traditional schematic vine with a naturalistic branch, Geertgen moved the sacred genealogy from an abstract diagram into the intimate, physical space of an enclosed courtyard. The naturalistic branch was a deliberate devotional tool, accurately aligned with the *devotio moderna*'s emphasis on personal meditation. It transformed the image from an impersonal portrayal of royal lineage into a tangible, intimate version, making the mystery of the Incarnation more realistic and thus more usable for the viewer's private spiritual journey.

NOTE: For this essay, generative AI (*chat.deepseek.com*) was used to help with putting the bibliography in alphabetical order.

Bibliography

Bibliothèque nationale de France, "Présentation du contenu, beatus de saint-sever Département des manuscrits." online catalog. Portal Biblisma. (accessed 23 October 2025). <https://portail.biblissima.fr/ark:/43093/mdata8b86b6c148764931efc629a1fb20df52dcf2453d#presentation>.

Boon, K. G. "Geertgen Tot Sint Jans of Mostaert." *Oud Holland* 81, no. 2 (1966): 61–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42710749>.

Decker, John R. *The Technology of Salvation and the Art of Geertgen tot Sint Jans*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters. "Private Devotion in Medieval Christianity." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001. Accessed 10-10-2025. <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/private-devotion-in-medieval-christianity>.

Green, Susan L. *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. London – New York: Routledge, 2019.

Hall, James. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2014. <https://doi-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/10.4324/9780429493959>.

Kancheva, Stefka Petrova. "The Preparation for the Incarnation of God in Iconography: The Fresco Painting 'Tree of Jesse'." *Napoca Roots* 11, no. 1 (2024): 66–83. <https://doi.org/10.24193/ROOTS.2024.1.5>.

Kok, J.P. Filedt. "Circle of Geertgen tot Sint Jans, The Tree of Jesse, Haarlem, c. 1500". *Early Netherlandish Paintings*. Online collection catalog. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. <https://data.rijksmuseum.nl/200107774> (accessed 18 October 2025).

Kuijl, Aart van der, ed. *Geertgen tot Sint Jans: het mirakel van Haarlem*. By Gerard Jaspers and Michel Bakker. Uitgeverij Loutje Bv, 2019.

Ligtenberg, R. "De genealogie van Christus in de beeldende kunst der middeleeuwen, voornamelijk van het Westen." *Oudheidkundig Jaarboek (Bulletin van den Nederlandschen Oudheidkundigen Bond)* 4 (1924): 61–97.

Očenášová, Kristina. "An Iconographic Analysis of The Tree of Jesse-Stained Glass Window at Chartres Cathedral." University of Aberdeen, 2022.

Os, H. W. Van. *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe 1300-1500*. Translated by Michael Hoyle. Princeton Univ Pr, 1995.

Sells, Kaeley. "A Biblical Theological Analysis of Isaiah 11:1-10" (2023). Biblical Studies Student Projects. <https://pillars.taylor.edu/biblical-studies/10>.

Snyder, James E. "Geertgen Schildert de Voorouders van Christus." *Bulletin van Het Rijksmuseum* 5, no. 3 (1957): 84–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40381376>.

Van Schendel, A. "De Boom van Jesse En Het Probleem van Geertgen Tot St. Jans." *Bulletin van Het Rijksmuseum* 5, no. 3 (1957): 75–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40381375>.

List of images

- Figure 1 The Tree of Jesse, (circle of) Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1500, Rijksmuseum.nl.
- Figure 2 *Tables XI-XIV, of David at the coming of the blessed Christ of Saint-Sever in the Beatus a Liebana, Commentarius in Apocalypsin, pages 10v-11r, c. 1050, Bibliothèque Nationale de France.*
- Figure 3 (detail of) *The Tree of Jesse*, c.1145, Stained glass window, Chartres Cathedral, France, 8.4 x 2.6 m, photo source: cathedrale-chartres.org
- Figure 4 *The Tree of Jesse*, Hans Schilling, 1469, Ink with colored washes and tempera colors, 28.6 x 20.3 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig XV 9, fol. 64v, 83. MR.179.64v.
- Figure 5 *The Tree of Jesse*, Maker unknown, c. 1240-1250, Tempera colors, gold leaf, and silver leaf, 22.7 x 15.7 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. Ludwig VIII 2, fol. 7v, 83. MK.93.7v
- Figure 6 Ornamental with the Tree of Jesse, Israhel van Meckenem the Younger, c. 1480-1490, Engraving on paper, 12.1 x 26.8 cm, Art Institute of Chicago.
- Figure 7 *Tree of Saint Bruno and the Carthusian order*, woodcut from the *statuata ordinis cartusisensis*, c. 1510, 33 x 23, biblio.com.
- Figure 8 The Tree of Jesse (Detail of Abia pushing Rehoboam), (circle of) Geertgen tot Sint Jans, c. 1500, Rijksmuseum.nl.