e-ISSN 2385-2720

Venezia Arti
Nuova Serie 7 — Vol. 34 — Dicembre 2025

Revealing the Threshold
The *Vierge Ouvrante* as Liminal Devotion in Medieval Europe

Aisling Reid
Queen's University Belfast, UK

Abstract The article explores late-medieval *Vierges ouvrantes* (hinged Virgins that reveal Christological or Trinitarian interiors) as thresholds between secrecy and revelation. They translate the *porta clausa* of Ezekiel 44:2 and the *hortus conclusus* of Song of Songs 4:12 into sculpture, illustrating the paradox of a body that is both inviolate and permeable. Their mechanisms turn the Incarnation into a visible event and also expose cultural fears about vision, curiosity and trespass. Patristic writers framed these fears in theological terms. Jean Gerson condemned the *Vierge ouvrante* as 'unwarranted exposure.' Later comparanda, from illuminated manuscripts, obstetrical collections and the Mechelen *Besloten Hofjes*, repeat the same tension between revelation and restraint. The article argues that both the opening and the later sealing or destruction of these statues reveal a theology of thresholds that reshaped the act of seeing.

Keywords Vierge ouvrante. Opening Madonna. Porta clausa. hortus conclusus. Threshold.

Index 1. Crossing the Velvet Threshold: From *Étui*-Man to Destructive Character. – 2. Doors to the Divine: Devotion, Transgression and the *Porta Clausa* in Medieval Opening Madonnas. – 3. The Threshold Garden: *Hortus Conclusus* Imagery and the Limits of Visual Access. – 4. Conclusion: The Threshold Unmade.

1 Crossing the Velvet Threshold: From *Étui*-Man to Destructive Character

In the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Texas), there is a small nineteenth-century *étui* **[fig. 1]**. The velvet-lined case is no larger than a matchbox and was designed to hold small items of refinement. These might include tweezers, a needle, or perhaps a vial of scent. Worn close to the body, it served as a portable container for private possessions. Its opening marked a threshold between concealment and display. For the German philosopher, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), the *étui* emblematised a particular mentality, or way of thinking. In his 1931 essay, *The Destructive Character*, Benjamin describes the *Étui-Mensch* as a person who cushions life with comfort and routine, who prefers quiet enclosure to exposure. A 'destructive character,' by contrast, is a person willing to break open rigid social and historical structures. In doing so, they allow history to change and move forward.[1] For Benjamin, renewal therefore begins with *opening*; disruption clears space for possibility. Years later, in his *Image ouverte*, the French art theorist, Georges Didi-Huberman, similarly explored openings as an epistemic act; "Ouvrir", he writes, "c'est commencer, entrer en exercice" ['to open

1 Benjamin 1978, 47-8.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2025-08-29
Accepted 2025-10-29
Published 2025-12-15

Open access

Citation Reid, A. (2025). "Revealing the Threshold. The *Vierge Ouvrante* as Liminal Devotion in Medieval Europe". *Venezia Arti*, 34, 39-50.

DOI 10.30687/VA/2385-2720/2025/003

Figure 1 Étui with sewing implements, ca. 1850–1860. Ivory, gilt silver, blued steel, velvet and brass, 1,6 × 12,1 × 6,7 cm. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, Bayou Bend Collection, inv. B.2002.18. Source: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Figure 2 (right) *Schreinmadonna* / *Vierge ouvrante* (Virgin of Mercy with Throne of Grace), West Prussia, ca. 1390. Polychromed wood. Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Source: Germanisches Nationalmuseum; Wikimedia Commons

is to begin, to enter into practice'].[2] Medieval devotional objects operated on similar principles, as in the case of opening Madonna sculptures **[fig. 2]**. Known across Europe as *Vierges ouvrantes* or *Schreinmadonnen*, these painted wooden Virgins open at the torso to reveal interiors showing the Trinity-Christ enthroned, the dove of the Holy Spirit and the Cross.[3] Such works materialised the paradox of incarnation through virginal bodies that remain closed yet nonetheless disclose divinity. The hinges coalesced physical movement and spiritual experience, making theology explicitly visible and indeed tangible.[4] In this way, the *Vierge ouvrante* exemplifies how medieval artworks choreographed devotion. As Nagel and Wood argue, such objects gather multiple temporalities into a single form, often through gesture.[5] Opening a triptych or other hinged devotional artwork thus entailed a multi-sensory ritual that made present the sacred past. Recent scholars argue that these movable objects were not simply passive artefacts for the devotee to behold, but rather, they actively shaped and participated in religious rituals.[6] The hinges of the opening Madonnas were not just functional; they turned the act of opening the sculpture into a devotional performance, where handling the object was itself an expression of faith.[7] Indeed, the act of physically opening these sculptures reflected medieval theories of vision, which understood seeing as a tactile, reciprocal exchange where the gaze physically touched its object and transformed the viewer in return. The opening Virgin enacted these ideas and converted metaphysical concepts into embodied experience.[8]

Yet the physical nature of such devotional artefacts also made them theologically contentious.

2 Didi-Huberman 2007, 52.

3 Bäumer 1977, 237-72.

4 For further analyses and a complete bibliography of the sculptures, see Katz 2011, 63-91; Gertsman 2015; Koehler 1998, 303-7; Simpson 2022.

5 Nagel, Wood 2010, 13.

6 Jurkowlaniec, Matyjaszkiewicz, Sarnecka 2018.

7 Katz 2011, 63-91.

8 Jung 2010, 203-40.

e-ISSN 2385-2720

The mechanism that granted sacred access to the virgin's innards created a fragile and fraught boundary. Medieval culture inherited a tradition that mapped visual desire onto the female body. The gaze itself became charged, capable of expressing both piety and carnal desire.[9] Opening the Virgin's interior blurred the line between pious wonder and forbidden curiosity. In this regard, Benjamin's *étui* and Didi-Huberman's thinking on opening images offer productive frameworks for understanding the hinge as a mechanism that managed this precarious balance between revelation and concealment. The following analyses explore how the *Vierges ouvrantes* materialised the theological paradoxes of the *porta clausa* and *hortus conclusus* in sculptural form, ultimately provoking clerical censure. The eventual sealing and destruction of these objects reveal an anxiety less about vision or gender than about the unstable ontology of the sacred image itself. These sculptures marked a threshold where revelation and violation became indistinguishable. As instruments of divine access, they carried inherent danger. Their history testifies to the risks of making the invisible apparent and to a faith that dared to touch what it worshipped.

2 Doors to the Divine: Devotion, Transgression and the *Porta Clausa* in Medieval Opening Madonnas

In late medieval churches across Europe, sculptures of the Virgin were built with a mechanism that would eventually lead to their condemnation: hinges that allowed their torsos to open. Sealed yet accessible, the Virgin's body enacted the paradox of the inviolate gate that must open to admit divinity. These sculptures turned devotion into sanctified trespass, as their hinges literalised the doors of Mary's womb. The practice of opening sacred images to reveal hidden interiors was already well established in medieval devotional life. For centuries, viewers had encountered multi-part images that featured doors. Lynn F. Jacobs, for example, has shown that church inventories and contracts routinely describe triptychs as 'paintings with doors' (*dueren*). Such comparisons clearly frame the image itself as a threshold between outside and inside.[10] The practice of opening these objects was, therefore, not incidental but central to their function. Indeed, the remaining opening Madonna sculptures bear witness to repeated use; their worn edges reveal where hands gripped the hinges. More intriguingly, the numerous locks and latches that decorate the sculptures suggest that access to their innards was tightly controlled and ritualised.

Priests or church attendants likely opened the sculptures during feast days or processions, when their full numinous power was needed. The devotional ceremonies accompanying these openings were elaborate. Contemporary accounts describe how candles were lit and prayers recited as the doors swung open. Communities gathered to witness the moment of disclosure. A sixteenth-century text, *The Rites of Durham*, for example, records how Marian images were ceremonially opened before congregations. Such ritual unveiling transformed an apparently mechanical operation into a collective act of worship.[11] Within this context, the opening itself became a form of devotion rather than mere preparation for worship. Historian Jean-Claude Schmitt has argued that such practices reveal something fundamental about how medieval culture perceived images. The act of opening an image was not simply a revelation of its content but a performance with spiritual consequences.[12] Images operated through bodies and ritual gestures rather than as passive signs awaiting interpretation. They demanded physical engagement that transformed viewing into performance. When a triptych opened, the viewer did not simply see more clearly but crossed from one sacred space into another. The *Vierges ouvrantes* embodied this principle with particular intensity because they operated in three dimensions. Unlike painted triptychs that revealed more paintings within, these sculptures exposed intricately carved and brightly painted interiors that seemed to emerge from within the Virgin's own body. Concealment became the precondition for revelation; vision itself became an epistemic event. Yet the logic that made these sculptures compelling also made them contentious, since the act of opening blurred the boundary between sacred access and forbidden curiosity.

The paradox enacted by the *Vierges ouvrantes* (i.e., a closed body that nonetheless reveals) did

9 Biernoff 2002, 17-21.

10 Jacobs 2012, 19-25.

11 Fowler 1903, 30.

12 Schmitt 2002, 20-1.

e-ISSN 2385-2720

not originate with them. Its theological roots extend back to early Christian exegesis. Centuries before the sculptures were carved, Saints Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine developed the *porta clausa* motif from Ezekiel 44:2, where God declares that "a certain gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the Lord, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it". Patristic exegesis interpreted this closed gate as a symbol of Mary's *virginitas in partu*, her virginity preserved even during childbirth. The image was intentionally paradoxical: Mary was simultaneously the passage through which divinity entered the world and an eternally sealed threshold that remained inviolate. She was envisioned as a gate and, architecturally, as a chamber or temple capable of miraculously containing the divine while remaining structurally intact. The *Vierges ouvrantes* embodied this paradox in sculpture; each time the wooden doors of Mary's torso opened, abstract doctrine became tangible. The link between Marian theology and architectural language was firmly established by the early middle ages; Elina Gertsman references the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, which describe the Virgin's body as "a folding door of the belly".[13] His phrase translates anatomy into architecture and reveals the impulse to conceive of the sacred in structural terms. The *Vierges ouvrantes* materialise this tendency; their hinges make visible the incarnation that Isidore had only described in words.

A similar architectural imagination animates the late medieval Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Here, Mary is variously described as a church, a temple and a sanctuary. She is "the house in which the vessels were filled" and "the gate closed by the lock of virginity, through which the Lord God of Israel has entered".[14] In this version, her virginity functions simultaneously as doctrinal truth and spatial reality: she is the cloister that guards purity and a tabernacle of divine presence. The language insists on closure and enclosure even as it describes penetration and habitation; it constructs a body that admits divinity without surrendering its integrity, creating a paradox that the *Vierges ouvrantes* would later render in matter. In a similar vein, the thirteenth-century Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi ruminates on the same impossible duality in his affective celebration of the Virgin as a *porta serrata* (a sealed gate) that both admits grace and resists entry. He writes: "The Word that created all things is clothed in you, O Virgin, leaving His fortress while the gate remains shut".[15] Both Jacopone and the Pseudo-Bonaventuran author are clearly keen to stress the inviolate nature of Mary's parturient body. Their insistence suggests that the material reality of virgin birth posed interpretive difficulties even for orthodox thinkers; how might a body give birth yet remain sealed? How could flesh be penetrated yet remain intact? The texts answer by *insisting* on paradox, by declaring that what seems materially impossible is spiritually true. The *Vierges ouvrantes*, by contrast, complicated such claims. By rendering theological metaphor in wood and hinges, the sculptures threatened to collapse paradox into explicit mechanics. They seemed to suggest that Mary's body could be opened like a box, that the mystery of incarnation might be easily inspected like the contents of a reliquary. In making the invisible Trinity visible, they risked transforming theological wonder into brute anatomical spectacle. That risk became more acute as the sculptures were created in an era increasingly preoccupied with opening up human bodies to better understand their complex anatomical workings.

The *Vierges ouvrantes* anticipated, perhaps uncomfortably, the obstetrical wax models of early modern Bologna, where wombs split open to display the stages of pregnancy and birth in explicit, clinical detail **[fig. 3]**. Yet the shift from devotional to anatomical display was neither immediate nor uniform. Medieval medical manuscripts had already established precedents for imagining the opened body. Illustrations in texts such as the Wound Man or the pregnant female figures in *De formato foetu* (ca. 1250s), presented the body as a legible surface where interior and exterior could meet.[16] Anatomical images of these types collated Galenic theory, Aristotelian generation and practical observations from midwifery but they did not yet claim the empirical authority that dissection would later provide. By the fifteenth century, however, the visual language was shifting. The *Fasciculus medicinae* (1491), a printed compendium of earlier medical treatises, moved toward more systematic anatomical illustration. It presented the womb less as a theological mystery and more as an object available for empirical study. This transition from scholastic diagram to specimen helps explain why

13 Gertsman 2015, 65-6.

14 Pseudo-Bonaventure 1961, 69-70.

15 Jacopone 1915, II.

16 Park 2006, 39-75.

Figure 3 Obstetrical Room, Palazzo Poggi, Bologna. Photograph by Elena Manente, 26 September 2009. Source: Wikimedia Commons

the opening Madonnas had become increasingly intolerable by the sixteenth century. What had seemed devotionally permissible when medicine remained largely theoretical collided violently with new modes of visualising and knowing the female body through direct observation and dissection. Other forms of late medieval imagery had already tested the boundary between sacred mystery and anatomical revelation. In certain Visitation scenes, artists depicted the fetuses of Mary and Elizabeth visible within translucent wombs, rendering sacred pregnancy both concealed and revealed. As Silke Tammen observes, these images presented the womb as simultaneously 'Marian' and 'natural,' at once a theological sign and an anatomical reality.[17] Like the *Vierges ouvrantes*, such Visitation imagery exposed what doctrine preferred to veil, transforming the maternal body into a site of intense devotional scrutiny.[18] Both iconographies provoked comparable anxieties and ultimately encountered similar censure, particularly within the atmosphere of suspicion that followed the Council of Trent.

The *Vierge ouvrante* also prefigured another form of revelatory image: the anatomical flap-books of the sixteenth century, whose layered paper bodies invited readers to peel back successive sheets representing skin, muscle and organ systems until the deepest interior was exposed **[fig. 4]**. Amid this culture of sacred and medical voyeurism, the hinged Madonna wavered between devotional icon and anatomical specimen. Such images, poised between devotion and dissection, exposed a tension that theology could not easily

17 Tammen 2003, 425-30; Velu 2012.

18 Tramarin 2024.

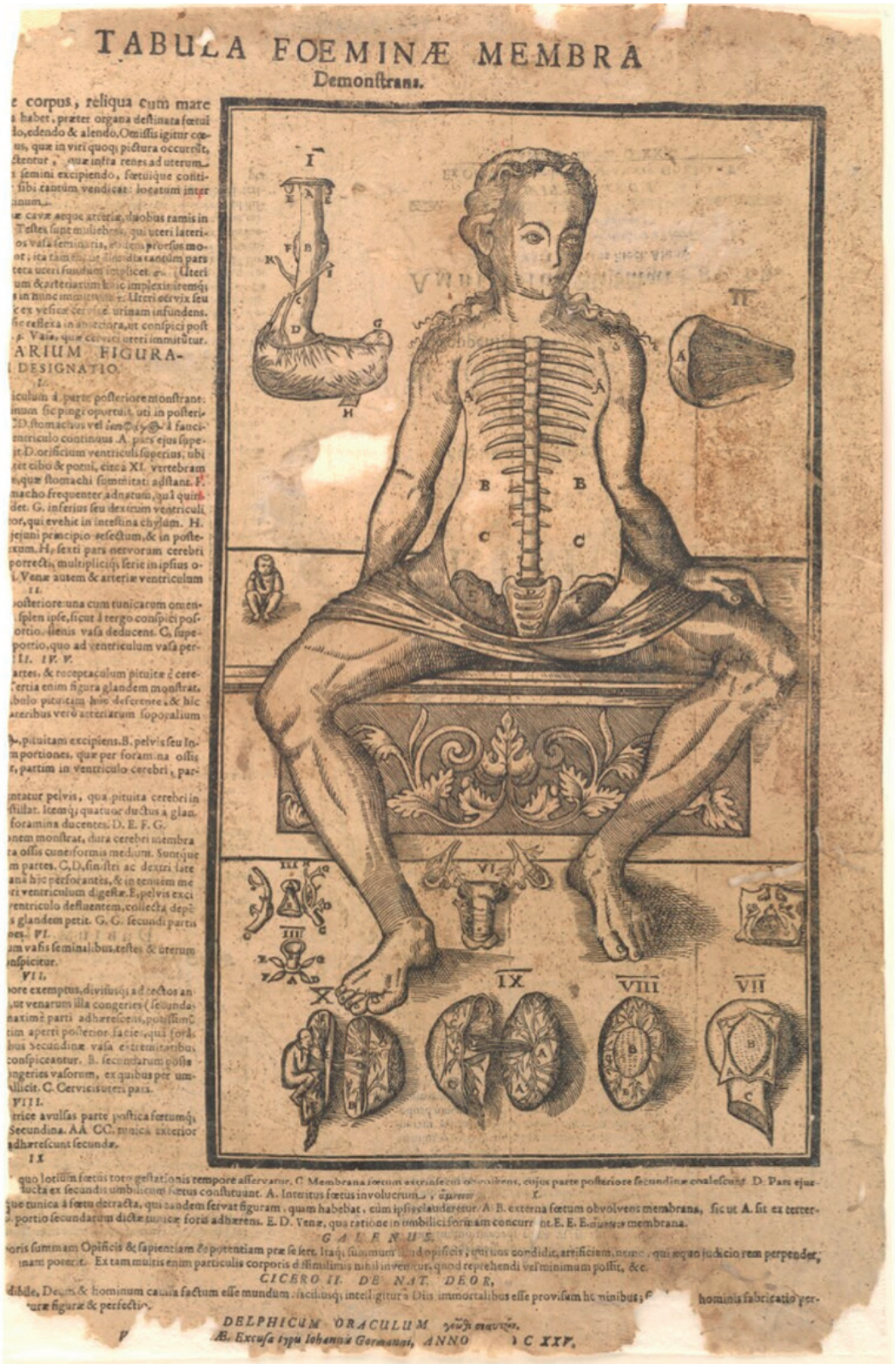

Figure 4 *Tabula Foeminæ Membra Demonstrans*, 1573. Anatomical "fugitive sheet" with hinged flaps, engraving. Wittenberg, publisher S. Groneberg. London, Wellcome Collection, obj. 11912i. Source: Wellcome Collection

Figure 5 Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia* (Bologna: Nicola Tebaldini, 1642), plate "Donna con gravidanza multipla". Engraving. Source: Wikimedia Commons (photo: Sailko)

contain. The unease they provoked eventually found explicit voice in the writings of Jean Gerson (1363-1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, who condemned the sculptures in his Christmas sermon of 1396. He stated that there was neither beauty nor devotion in their unwarranted exposure.[19] His objection was not merely aesthetic but theological; Gerson feared that viewers might take the image too literally, imagining that the Virgin's body had physically contained the Trinity, as a vessel holds its contents. Such an interpretation, he argued, confused the spiritual mystery of the incarnation with a material event. Medieval theologians had carefully maintained Mary's paradoxical nature – closed yet open, inviolate yet receptive to divinity. The opening Madonnas appeared to undo that balance. Their hinges made the mystery visible in a way that risked turning metaphor into mechanism.

Gerson's defence of the Virgin's bodily integrity foreshadowed anxieties about penetration and revelation that would persist long after the medieval period. In the early modern era, those same impulses to look inside the body reappeared within the emerging sciences. In Bologna, for example, the natural philosopher Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) compiled a systematic catalogue of bodily anomalies. His *Monstrorum Historia* (1642) treats birth defects and anatomical irregularities as objects of empirical observation. While earlier traditions interpreted such bodies as divine portents, Aldrovandi subjects them to anatomical investigation in an effort to demystify them. Nevertheless, this empirical project inevitably generated its own forms of wonder: the meticulous documentation of monstrous bodies did not produce clarity, but rather proliferated categories of the strange.

Where late medieval theology had debated the Virgin's closed gate through scriptural exegesis and metaphorical elaboration, early modern natural philosophy approached the pregnant body through dissection and direct observation.[20] Aldrovandi's engravings of monstrous pregnancies and abdominal deformities bear an uncanny resemblance to the multiple holy faces and figures within the opened Madonnas **[fig. 5]**. As Williams observes, such bodily anomalies were perceived as challenges to normative structures and threats to established order.[21] The numerous faces and bodies that erupt from a single torso in Aldrovandi's images seem to violate natural boundaries. The opened Madonnas present a similar epistemic threat; they deform visual norms by showing what should not be seen. They also deform theological norms by materialising what ought to remain spiritually veiled. So too, they unsettle biological order by disclosing several bodies contained within one form.

The empirical curiosity that shaped Aldrovandi's project was the very impulse Gerson sought to contain. For Gerson, these sculptures embodied a perilous drive toward excessive inquiry, toward knowing too much. He denounced attempts to investigate the mystery of Mary's virginal birth as a form of lustful curiosity. It was a dangerous desire to penetrate what should remain veiled.[22] His language draws on a long intellectual tradition

19 Gerson 1960, 94-5.
20 Park 2006, 177-208.
21 Williams 1996, 109-10.
22 Gerson 1960, 954-5.

e-ISSN 2385-2720

that linked *curiositas* (excessive curiosity) and *cupiditas* (lustful desire), treating both as failures to restrain appetite. The curious eye, like the lustful one, is greedy and transgressive.[23] Augustine had already set this precedent when he wrote that "curiosity is stimulated by the lust of the eyes".[24] For Gerson, the opening Madonnas epitomised illicit *curiositas* because they transformed sacred mystery into spectacle and invited precisely the kind of invasive scrutiny that scripture warned against. Their hinged mechanisms literalised a dangerous desire to penetrate divine secrets that should remain forever sealed. They made visible what theology insisted should remain hidden. Gerson's condemnation clarifies how opening images operated. When closed, they preserved mystery and invited contemplation. The Virgin's sealed body suggested hidden depth and created a productive tension: coverings did not simply conceal but provoked desire to see within. When opened, that tension collapsed. The act of unveiling made mystery tangible, turning revelation into knowledge. The *Vierges ouvrantes* thus provoked a gaze that fused epistemic desire with erotic charge. Viewers sought to know what lay hidden, yet that desire carried the implication of physical penetration, a conflation of intellectual and bodily curiosity that unsettled clerics. The Dominican theologian Ambrosius Catharinus articulated this unease when he condemned what he saw as rampant lasciviousness in religious art: "The most disgusting aspect of this age is the fact that you come across pictures of great indecency in the greatest churches and chapels, so that one can look at them all the bodily states that nature has concealed, with the effect of arousing not piety and devotion but every lust of the corrupt flesh".[25] Catharinus's anxiety centred on revelation itself, on exposing what nature had hidden. His words reveal a broader fear of the image's agency and its power to transform contemplation into desire. Counter-Reformation theorists shared this concern and insisted that art remain stable, unambiguous and doctrinally contained. Images, they argued, must not move or invite touch.

The opening Madonnas violated every one of these principles. Their appearance shifted radically between states of closure and disclosure. Closed, they offered a familiar image of the Virgin and Child; opened, they revealed dense interiors filled with the Crucifixion, the Trinity, or other scenes that seemed to (improbably) emerge from within Mary's body. They oscillated between accessibility and withdrawal, transforming themselves from passive objects into active agents. The *Vierges ouvrantes* refused containment, existing between concealment and revelation as if the Madonna herself or the sculpture as her proxy decided when the divine might be seen. The implications were severe. Alarmed authorities took action during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to eradicate or disable these sculptures. Less than fifty examples remain, as remnants of a practice that was once widespread. Most were burned as dangerous curiosities; others were sealed, their hinges removed or nailed shut. The Virgin and Child in San Martino at Antagnod in the Valle d'Aosta, for example, testifies to this fate, its mechanism deliberately immobilised. Thus, what was once a threshold image became static and permanent.[26]

3 The Threshold Garden: *Hortus Conclusus* Imagery and the Limits of Visual Access

The near-erasure of the opening Madonnas reveals the unease they provoked. These sculptures transformed metaphor into mechanism as Mary's body became a threshold that opened at will. What had long circulated as poetic conceit or theological doctrine became material practice, creating risks no authority could contain. Two examples make the danger especially clear. The lost Madonna of Bolton in Durham Cathedral, described in *The Rites of Durham* (1593), and a surviving *Vierge ouvrante* in Palau-del-Vidre both enclosed Christ within interiors painted as gardens **[fig. 6]**.[27] In both cases, Mary's torso became a literal *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden of Song of Songs 4:12, long interpreted by exegetes as a figure for the Virgin's inviolate womb. What scripture had offered as metaphor was here rendered in wood and green pigment, turning the invisible into something visible and tangible. This shift into visibility was troubling because the garden metaphor always entailed an erotic charge. As Liz Herbert McAvoy observes, the *hortus conclusus*

23 al-Rahim 2022, 465.

24 Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.54.

25 Freedberg 1971, 239.

26 Gertsman 2016, 16-7.

27 Fowler 1903, 30.

e-ISSN 2385-2720

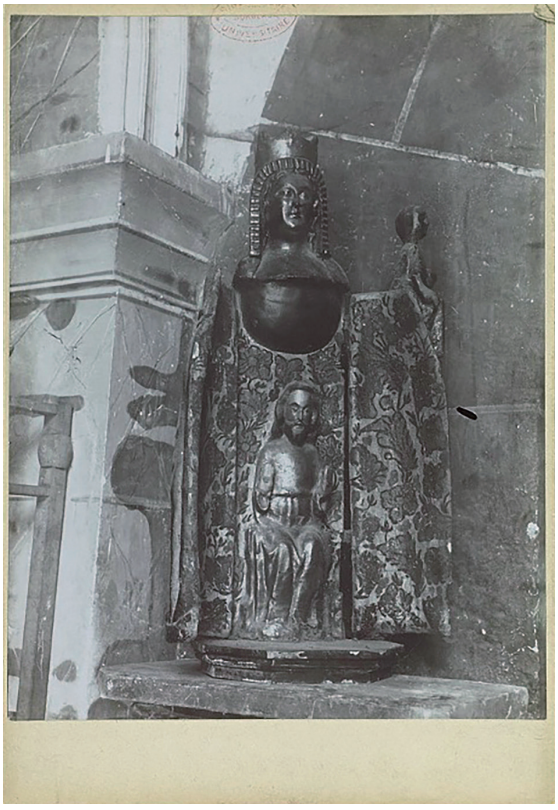

Figure 6 Vierge ouvrante, sixteenth century. Polychromed wood. Palau-del-Vidre. Source: Université Bordeaux Montaigne, Fonds Brutails; Wikimedia Commons

Figure 7 Besloten Hofje with Saints Elisabeth, Ursula, and Catharina, sixteenth century. Mechelen, Museum Hof van Busleyden. Source: Wikimedia Commons (photo: Paul Hermans)

was among the most insistent gendered spaces of the medieval imagination. It functioned as a site of chastity yet was persistently shadowed by desire.[28] Exegetes tried to stabilise the image as a sign of virginity, but secular writers continually exposed its carnality. The *Roman de la Rose* built its entire allegory around the lover's attempt to breach the walled garden. Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* similarly transformed garden enclosures into theatres of sexual pursuit.[29] Such texts reveal how easily the enclosed garden could slip from sacred emblem to locus of desire, unsettling the very boundaries exegetes sought to defend. Jean Gerson recognised the danger these images posed to doctrine. Where theology had maintained Mary as both sealed and open, preserving paradox through metaphor, the *Vierges ouvrantes* translated that paradox into mechanism and mystery into physical access. The Pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditations on the Life of Christ states that Christ left the womb "without a murmur or lesion, in a moment", portraying the birth as immediate and swift incorporeal.[30] The sculptures, by contrast, staged divine birth as a visible operation that could be witnessed through the simple act of opening wooden doors. Some, such as Notre-Dame de Quelven, with its prominent lock and key, only intensified the impression that the Virgin's body had become disturbingly available to human touch.

The play between enclosure and exposure was not confined to the *Vierges ouvrantes*. The sixteenth-century *Enclosed Gardens* (*Besloten Hofjes*) *of Mechelen* pursued the same logic on an intimate scale. Crafted by Augustinian nuns, these cabinets turned the Virgin into a walled garden made flesh. Their doors, veils and lattices regulated sight and touch and turned access itself into ritual approach.[31] In one tableau, Mary sits in a garden while a unicorn rests its head in her lap **[fig. 7]**. The scene unites chastity and desire: the garden that encloses her also stages an erotic encounter. The unicorn, a symbol of Christ who submits only to virgins, presses against her body and transforms purity into penetration. Within these gardens, enclosure and longing exist in the same space. The *Besloten Hofjes* thus expose, as the *Vierges ouvrantes* had done, the perilous boundary where devotion meets curious desire.

28 McAvoy 2021, 112.

29 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun 1965-75, ll. 127-330; Chaucer 1987, ll. 1720-1815; Ariosto 1974, VII: 11-76.

30 Ragusa and Green 1961, 38.

31 Anaf et al. 2018, 177.

4 Conclusion: The Threshold Unmade

The *Vierges ouvrantes* posed a question medieval theology could not resolve: how to make the incarnation visible without violating its mystery. When closed, the sculptures invited contemplation; when opened, they transformed viewers by exposing what doctrine insisted should remain hidden. Jean Gerson condemned them as unwarranted exposure. Yet for those who gathered to watch priests unlatch the wooden doors, the act of opening was itself devotion. The sculptures stood at an impossible threshold where matter met metaphor, where the sealed body admitted divinity without ceasing to be sealed. That impossibility proved intolerable. By the sixteenth century, Counter-Reformation authorities had destroyed or sealed most examples. Fewer than fifty survive. The sculptures embodied a principle reformers could not accept: that images possess agency and act upon viewers. To destroy them was to reassert control over vision itself. Benjamin called this the work of the 'destructive character,' which breaks open closed forms to clear space for encounter.[32] So too, Didi-Huberman writes that to open is to begin, to enter into practice.[33] The *Vierges ouvrantes* did both. They show that revelation is never neutral but an event that reshapes both the object seen and the seer. To look inside is to alter what is seen, a truth that modern culture has forgotten. Ours is a culture enthralled by exposure; medical imaging renders the body transparent, digital networks promise limitless access and surveillance erases privacy. We assume transparency is a virtue and secrecy a vice. Today, to reveal is to know. The *Vierges ouvrantes* offer a medieval corrective. They remind us that images are thresholds, not containers. Medieval worshippers understood this vulnerability: to see was to be touched and changed by the act of seeing. We, by contrast, scroll through endless content, mistaking images for inert data. The *Vierges ouvrantes* remind us otherwise. Images that matter are dangerous precisely because they refuse to remain objects. They act. The few that survive testify to a devotion that recognised both the power and the peril of opening. Their destruction marks the price of certainty, the cost of demanding that mystery yield to control. We face similar choices when algorithms claim to decode behaviour, when neuroscience promises to explain consciousness and when genetics seeks to reveal our essence. The urge to see inside, to know completely, carries the same promise and threat it did in medieval Europe. The *Vierges ouvrantes* warn that some thresholds, once crossed, cannot be recrossed. Some revelations transform irreversibly. Certain mysteries, once exposed, become mere spectacle. The challenge remains to know when opening must be resisted, when the sealed threshold protects something more valuable than what lies beyond.

Bibliography

al-Rahim, A.H. (2022). "Concupiscent Curiosity of the Gaze in Medieval Islam. Qurʾān 24:30-31". Speer, A; Schneider, R.M. (eds.) *Curiositas*. Berlin; Boston. 465-80.

Aldrovandi, U. (1642). *Monstrorum historia: Cum paralipomenis historiae omnium animalium*. Bologna.

Ambrose. (1845). *De institutione virginis et sanctae Mariae virginitate perpetua ad Eusebium*. In *Patrologia Latina*, 16, col. 319. Paris.

Anaf, S; Ramakers, B.; Watteeuw, L.; Kapelle, A.K. (2018). "The Enclosed Gardens of Mechelen". Baert, B.; Varela Braga, A.; De Poorter, I.A.R. (eds), *Enclosed Gardens: The Art of the Mechelen Nuns*. Leuven, 159-93.

Ariosto, L. (1974). *Orlando furioso*. Edited by C. Segre. Milan.

Augustine. Confessions. Transl. by E.B. Pusey. Grand Rapids (MI). https://ccel.org/ccel/a/augustine/confess/cache/confess.pdf.

Bäumer, C. (1977). "Die Schreinmadonna". *Marian Library Studies*, 9, 237-72.

Benjamin, W. (1978). "The Destructive Character". In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Edited by P. Demetz; transl. by E. Jephcott. New York, 301-3.

Biernoff, S. (2002). *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. New York.

Camille, M. (1992). *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art*. Cambridge.

Chaucer, G. (1987). *The Riverside Chaucer.* 3rd ed. Edited by L.D. Benson. Oxford.

de Lorris, G.; de Meun, J. (1965-75). *Le Roman de la Rose*. Edited by F. Lecoy. Paris.

Didi-Huberman, G. (2007). *L'Image ouverte. Motifs de l'incarnation dans les arts visuels*. Paris.

Fowler, J.T. (ed.) (1903). *The Rites of Durham: Being a Description or Brief Declaration of All the Ancient Monuments, Rites, and Customs Belonging or Being Within the Monastical Church of Durham Before the Suppression*. Durham; London. Surtees Society 107. https://archive.org/details/ritesofdurhambei00cathrich.

Freedberg, D. (1971). "Johannes Molanus on Provocative Paintings: De Historia Sanctarum Imaginum et Picturarum, Book II, Ch. 42". *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 34(1), 229-45.

32 Benjamin 1978, 47.

33 Didi-Huberman 2007, 37.

Gambero, L. (1999). *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*. Transl. by Thomas Buffer. San Francisco.

Gerson, J. (1960). *Œuvres complètes*. vol. 10. Edited by P. Glorieux. Paris.

Gertsman, E. (2015). *Worlds Within: Opening the Medieval Shrine Madonna*. University Park (PA).

Gertsman, E. (2016). "The Lives and Afterlives of Shrine Madonnas". *California Italian Studies*, 6(1). https://doi.org/10.5070/C361028901.

Hamburger, J. F. (2000). "Speculations on Speculation: Vision and Perception in the Theory and Practice of Mystical Devotions". Haug, W.; Schneider-Lastin, W. (eds), *Deutsche Mystik im abendländischen Zusammenhang: neu erschlossene Texte, neue methodische Ansätze, neue theoretische Konzepte*. Berlin; Boston, 353-408.

Herbert McAvoy, L. (2021). *The Enclosed Garden and the Medieval Religious Imaginary*. Woodbridge.

Isidore of Seville (2006). *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. Edited and transl. by S.A. Barney; W.J. Lewis; J.A. Beach; O. Berghof. Cambridge.

Jacobs, L.F. (2012). *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted*. University Park (PA).

Jacopone. (1915). *Le Laude: Secondo la stampa fiorentina del 1490*. Bari.

Jerome (1845). *Adversus Helvidium de perpetua virginitate beatae Mariae*. In *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 23, cols. 183-206. Paris.

Jung, J.E. (2010). "The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination". Hourihane, C. (ed.), *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams and Insights in Medieval Art and History*. University Park (PA), 203-40.

Jurkowlaniec, G., Matyjaszkiewicz, I.; Sarnecka, Z. (eds) (2018). *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art: Materials, Power and Manipulation*. New York.

Katz, M.R. (2011). "Marian Motion: Opening the Body of the Vierge Ouvrante". Zchomelidse, N.; Freni, G. (eds), *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*. Princeton, 63-91.

Ketham, J. de (attrib.) (1491). *Fasciculus medicinae*. Venice.

Koehler, T. (1998). "Vierges ouvrantes non cataloguées: Note au sujet d'une dévotion oubliée". *Marian Library Studies*, 26, 303-7.

Laugerud, H.; Ryan, J.S.; Skinnebach, L.K. (eds) (2016). *The Materiality of Devotion in Late Medieval Northern Europe: Images, Objects and Practices*. Dublin.

Nagel, A.; Wood, C. (2010). *Anachronic Renaissance*. New York.

Novacich, S.E. (2017). "Transparent Mary: Visible Interiors and the Maternal Body in the Middle Ages". *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 116(4), 464-90.

Park, K. (2006). *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation and the Origins of Human Dissection*. New York.

Pinkus, A. (2012). "The Womb and the Eye: Viewing the Shrine Madonna". *Arte Medievale*, IV/II, 223-42.

Pseudo-Bonaventure (1961). *Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Transl. by J. Stock. St Louis.

Ragusa, I. (transl.); Green, R.B. (ed.) (1961). *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS Ital. 115)*. Princeton (NJ).

Schmitt, J.-C. (2002). *Le corps des images. Essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge*. Paris.

Simpson, J. (2022). "Mobile Shrines and Magical Bodies: Modern Afterlives of Shrine Madonnas". Znorovszky, A.-B.; Jaritz, G. (eds), *Marian Devotion in the Late Middle Ages: Image and Performance*. London; New York, 63-91. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003179054-11.

Tammen, S. (2003). "Marianischer und 'natürlicher' Uterus: Überlegungen zur Anatomie des Heils am Beispiel einer spätmittelalterlichen Heimsuchungsgruppe". Dilg, P. (ed.), *'Natur' im Mittelalter: Konzeptionen – Erfahrungen – Wirkungen*. Berlin, 419-41.

The Holy Bible (1899). Douay-Rheims Version. Baltimore.

Tramarin, D. (2024). "Sensing the Eternal Birth: Mystical Vision 'Inside' The Visitation in the Met". *Religions*, 15(1051). https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091051.

Velu, A-M. (2012). *La Visitation dans l'art: Orient et Occident V^e^-XVI^e^ siècle*. Paris.

Walker Bynum, C. (1991). *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*. New York.

Williams, D.A. (1996). *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*. Exeter.

Wohlfarth, I. (1978). "No-Man's-Land: On Walter Benjamin's 'Destructive Character'". *Diacritics*, 8(2), 47-65. https://doi.org/10.2307/465131.