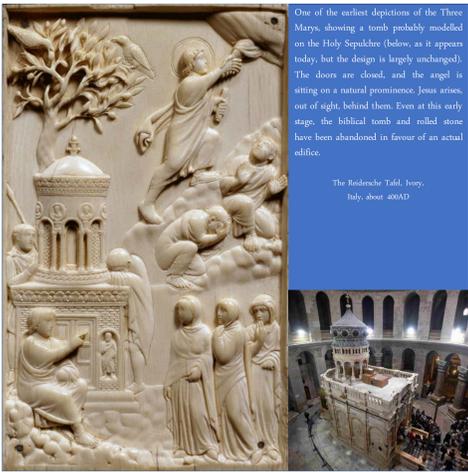


The Development of Three Marys Iconography

Hugh Farey

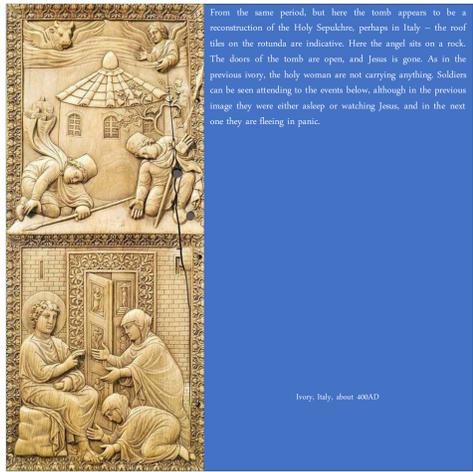
The visit of the holy women to the tomb of Christ on Easter morning was one of the earliest New Testament scenes to become popular, and has been depicted thousands of times. In every case there is a selection from quite a small range of stylistic elements, such as the tomb, the lid, the shroud, the angel and the women, whose exact depiction depends on the period, place, culture and context of the image. Early versions usually show the tomb as a building, whereas later ones show only a box-like sepulchre, sometimes mounted on legs. This reflects the use of the event in the 'Quem Queritis' liturgy, re-enacted by clerics, with portable representations of the scenic elements which could be stored when not in use. The Pray Codex image is an example of this iconography, and does not depart from type. In almost no case, even after the general acceptance of the Shroud as genuine in the 15th century, are the burial cloths shown with an image. Associated Biblical imagery, such as Deposition, Lamentation, and Resurrection scenes, also often show one or more large cloths, none of which are clearly references to the Shroud of Turin.

Although this scene is depicted thousands of times in many different media, often coinciding in date and place, for the purposes of this poster four representative types of representation, (early ivories, manuscript illustrations and two classes of painting) have been chosen, loosely chronological from the early Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. I conclude with a remarkable misrepresentation from a film made in 2016.



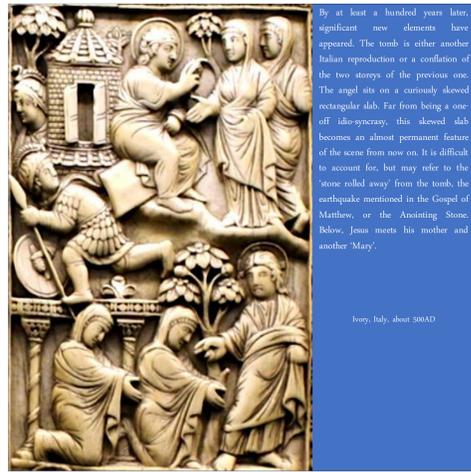
One of the earliest depictions of the Three Marys showing a tomb probably modelled on the Holy Sepulchre (below, as it appears today, but the design is largely unchanged). The doors are closed, and the angel is sitting on a natural prominence. Jesus arises, out of sight, behind them. Even at this early stage, the biblical tomb and rolled stone have been abandoned in favour of an actual edifice.

The Raderach's Tuff, Italy, about 400AD



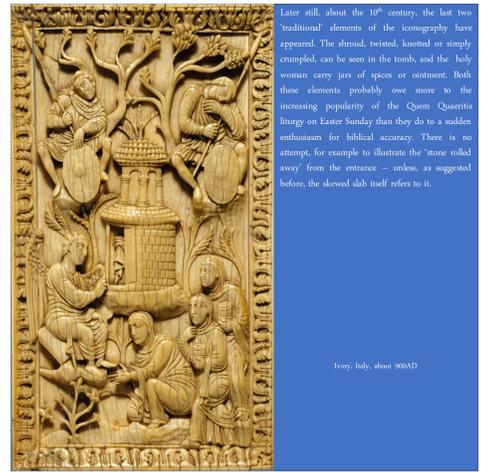
From the same period, but here the tomb appears to be a reconstruction of the Holy Sepulchre, perhaps in Italy – the roof tiles on the rotunda are indicative. Here the angel sits on a rock. The doors of the tomb are open, and Jesus is gone. As in the previous ivory, the holy women are not carrying anything. Soldiers can be seen attending to the events below, although in the previous image they were either asleep or watching Jesus, and in the next one they are fleeing in panic.

Ivory, Italy, about 400AD



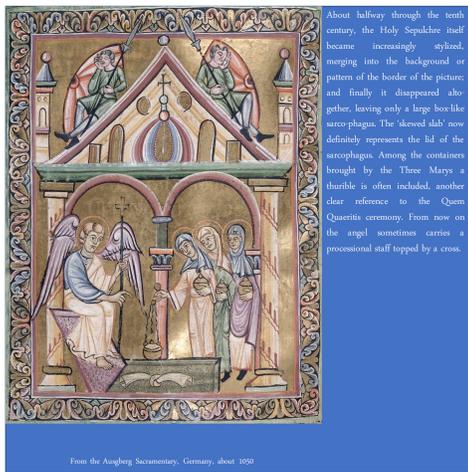
By at least a hundred years later, significant new elements have appeared. The tomb is either another Italian reproduction or a conflation of the two stories of the previous one. The angel sits on a curiously skewed rectangular slab. Far from being a one-off idiosyncrasy, this skewed slab becomes an almost permanent feature of the scene from now on. It is difficult to account for, but may refer to the 'stone rolled away' from the tomb, the earthquake mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, or the Anointing Stone. Below, Jesus meets his mother and another 'Mary'.

Ivory, Italy, about 500AD



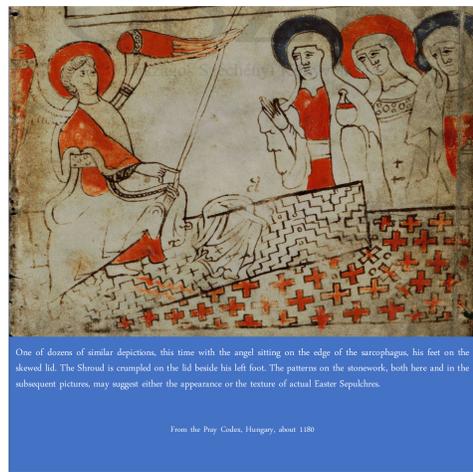
Later still, about the 10th century, the last two 'traditional' elements of the iconography have appeared. The shroud, twisted, knotted or simply crumpled, can be seen in the tomb, and the holy women carry jars of spices or ointment. Both these elements probably owe more to the increasing popularity of the Quem Queritis liturgy on Easter Sunday than they do to a sudden enthusiasm for biblical accuracy. There is no attempt, for example to illustrate the 'stone rolled away' from the entrance – unless, as suggested before, the skewed slab itself refers to it.

Ivory, Italy, about 800AD



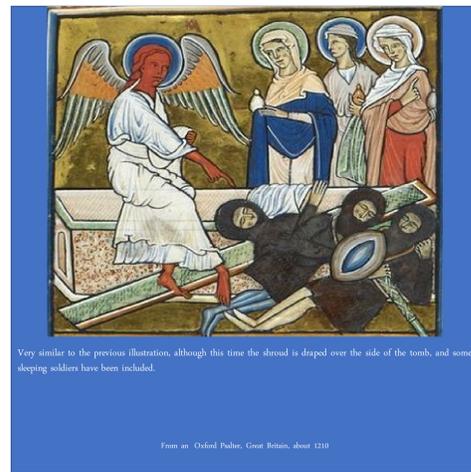
About halfway through the tenth century the Holy Sepulchre itself became increasingly stylized, moving into the background or pattern of the border of the picture, and finally it disappeared altogether, leaving only a large box-like sarcophagus. The 'skewed slab' now definitely represents the lid of the sarcophagus. Among the containers brought by the Three Marys a thurible is often included, another clear reference to the Quem Queritis ceremony. From now on the angel sometimes carries a processional staff topped by a cross.

From the Augsburg Sacramentary, Germany, about 1050



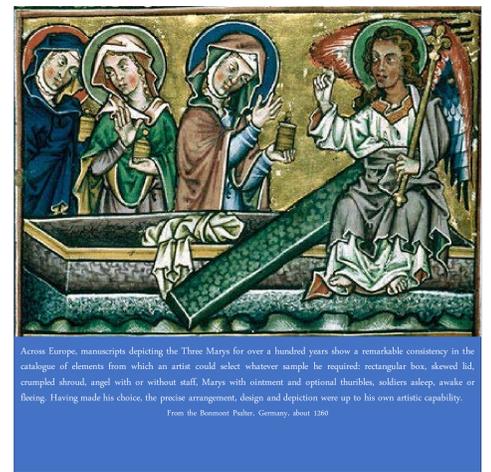
One of dozens of similar depictions, this time with the angel sitting on the edge of the sarcophagus, his feet on the skewed lid. The shroud is crumpled on the lid beside his left foot. The patterns on the stonework, both here and in the subsequent pictures, may suggest either the appearance or the texture of actual Easter Sepulchres.

From the Pray Codex, Hungary, about 1180



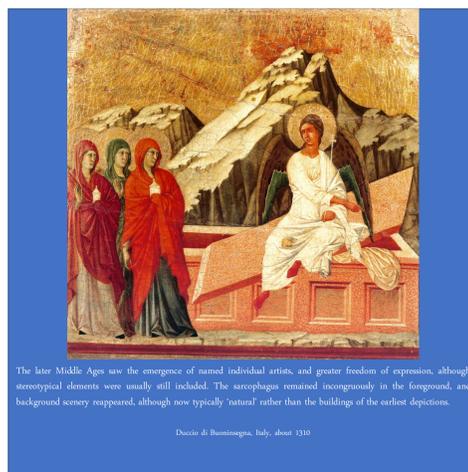
Very similar to the previous illustration, although this time the shroud is draped over the side of the tomb, and some sleeping soldiers have been included.

From an Oxford Psalter, Great Britain, about 1210



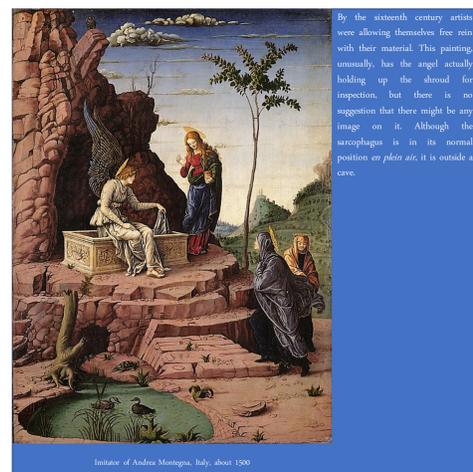
Across Europe, manuscripts depicting the Three Marys for over a hundred years show a remarkable consistency in the catalogue of elements from which an artist could select whatever sample he required: rectangular box, skewed lid, crumpled shroud, angel with or without staff, Marys with ointment and optional thurible, soldiers asleep, awake or fleeing. Having made his choice, the precise arrangement, design and depiction were up to his own artistic capability.

From the Bamberg Psalter, Germany, about 1260



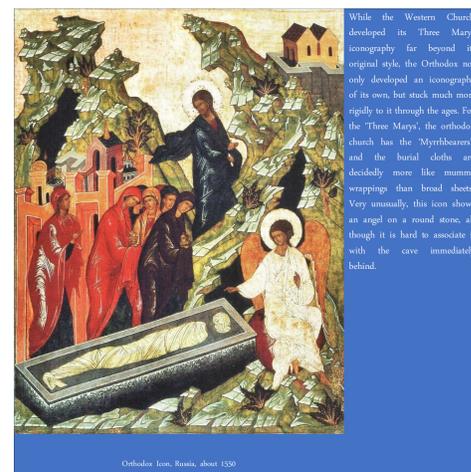
The later Middle Ages saw the emergence of named individual artists, and greater freedom of expression, although stereotypical elements were usually still included. The sarcophagus remained inconspicuously in the foreground, and background scenery reappeared, although now typically 'natural' rather than the buildings of the earliest depictions.

Duccio di Buoninsegna, Italy, about 1310



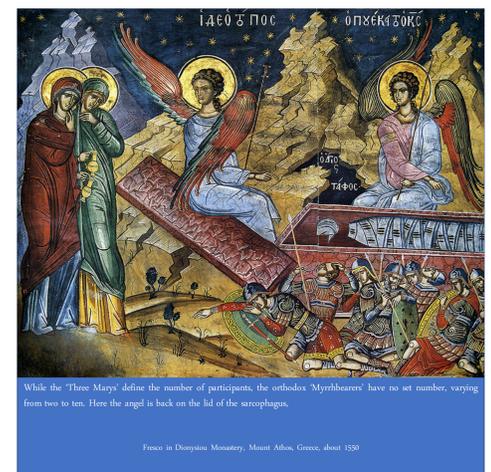
By the sixteenth century artists were allowing themselves free rein with their material. This painting, unusually, has the angel actually building up the shroud for inspection, but there is no suggestion that there might be any image on it. Although the sarcophagus is in its normal position *en plein air*, it is outside a cave.

Imitator of Andrea Mantegna, Italy, about 1500



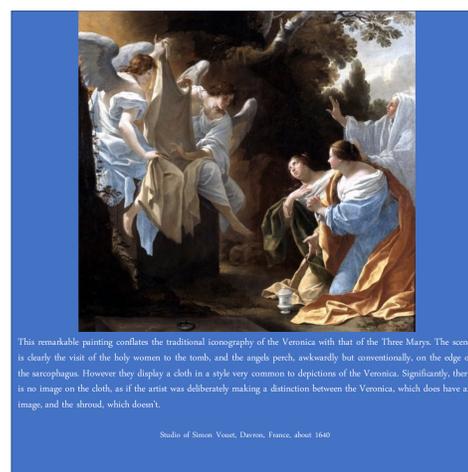
While the Western Church developed its Three Marys iconography far beyond its original style, the Orthodox not only developed an iconography of its own, but stuck much more rigidly to it through the ages. For the 'Three Marys', the orthodox church has the 'Myrrhbearers', and the burial cloths are decidedly more like mummy wrappings than broad sheets. Very unusually, this icon shows an angel on a round stone, although it is hard to associate it with the cave immediately behind.

Orthodox icon, Russia, about 1550



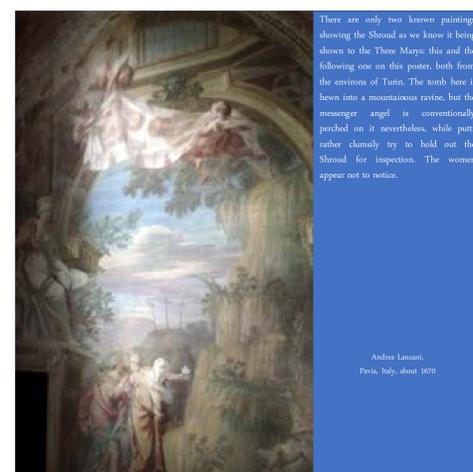
While the 'Three Marys' define the number of participants, the orthodox 'Myrrhbearers' have no set number, varying from two to ten. Here the angel is back on the lid of the sarcophagus.

Fresco in Dionysius Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece, about 1550



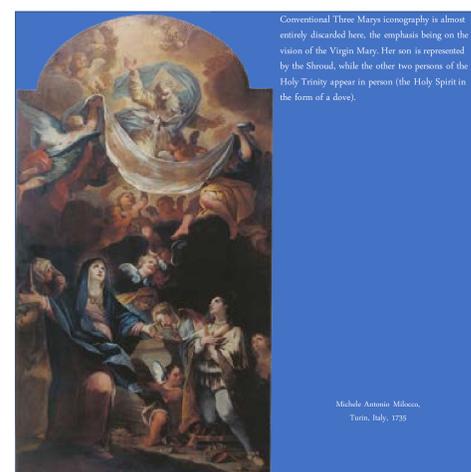
This remarkable painting conflates the traditional iconography of the Veronica with that of the Three Marys. The scene is clearly the visit of the holy women to the tomb, and the angels perch, awkwardly but conventionally, on the edge of the sarcophagus. However they display a cloth in a style very common to depictions of the Veronica. Significantly, there is no image on the cloth, as if the artist was deliberately making a distinction between the Veronica, which does have an image, and the shroud, which doesn't.

Studio of Simon Vouet, Dijon, France, about 1640



There are only two known paintings showing the Shroud as we know it being shown to the Three Marys: this and the following one on this poster, both from the environs of Turin. The tomb here is hewn into a mountainous ravine, but the messenger angel is conventionally perched on it nevertheless, while putti rather than women try to hold out the Shroud for inspection. The women appear not to notice.

Aldina Lanzani, Pavia, Italy, about 1870



Conventional Three Marys iconography is almost entirely discarded here, the emphasis being on the vision of the Virgin Mary. Her son is represented by the Shroud, while the other two persons of the Holy Trinity appear in person (the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove).

Michela Antonia Milanesi, Turin, Italy, 1735



With rare exceptions, almost exclusively from northern Italy, the image on the Shroud, whenever it was formed, has not been replicated or even suggested in biblical art. The shroud, or other funeral cloths, of Christ appear in thousands of illustrations, in Three Marys, in Depositions and Lamentations, and later in depictions of Saints Peter and John arriving at the tomb, but its image plays no part.

We end this brief review with a still (detail) from *Risen*, a film by Kevin Reynolds, in which a Roman Tribune (Joseph Finnan) converts to Christ after meeting him post-resurrection. Here he finds the discarded shroud in the tomb, and sees, somewhat unrealistically, not the image as it is, but the negative, including the bloodstains, which appear white rather than red.

Blum film by Kevin Reynolds, Columbia Pictures, 2016