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## **A Miniature Netherlandish Treasure in Detroit**

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Among the many treasures in the encyclopaedic collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts is a miniature Netherlandish altarpiece deftly executed in boxwood – a hardwood favoured by carvers for its fine grain and remarkable density. Measuring no more than nine inches high, the altarpiece comprises three principal components: a triptych body, a circular winged predella, and an openwork tracery foot. The altarpiece's exterior is exceedingly plain. It hardly prepares the viewer for the hypertechanical virtuosity of a world rendered in miniature that waits inside.

When the triptych wings are open, one finds a central scene of the Nativity combined with the Annunciation to the Shepherds. The Nativity is prominently depicted in the lower half, in the foreground, and the Annunciation to the Shepherds in the upper half, but in the background and on a slightly smaller scale. The brick ruins help to separate as well as to connect the two chronologically distinct episodes. This spatial arrangement contributes to the remarkable illusion of pictorial depth in an otherwise shallow space that measures no more than an inch deep. The interior of the left wing bears the Annunciation and that of the right, the Presentation in the Temple. Both are carved in very low relief. In the predella below is an Adoration of the Magi that displays many compositional similarities to the Nativity.

The first half of Matthew 2:6 is inscribed along the bottom edge of the triptych body: ET TV BETHLE[hem] / TERRA•IV[da] NEQVAQVAM MIN[im]A / ES I[n] PRI[n]CIPIB[u]S (But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah). The words appear cramped towards the end of the inscription, with some of the letters carved into the moulding. This suggests that the sculptor might not have planned accordingly. I find this endearing, for it is the plight of the sculptor to carry on, knowing that such oversights cannot be reversed in the art of the carving.



Unknown (Netherlandish), *Miniature Altarpiece with the Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds*, c. 1520, boxwood, dimensions (open): 22.9 x 13.7 x 3.2 cm, (closed): 22.9 x 8.6 x 3.2 cm  
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This altarpiece exemplifies the late medieval tradition of microscopic box-wood carving for which the Duchy of Brabant served as a major centre of production. Having written my dissertation on another popular Brabantine carved form, namely, that of large-scale carved oak retables with painted wings – many of which still adorn the high altars and side chapels of churches scattered throughout the Rhineland, Sweden, and Belgium – I cannot but marvel at this portable miniaturised version. It is small enough for me to cradle with my two hands. Not only can I open and close the wings with just the slightest touch, I can fully rotate the object to examine all sides. The triptych’s back-side is slightly chamfered, not flat – a feature that we sometimes encounter in large-scale winged retables – and on the reverse of the winged predella is a hinged circular door that reveals a relic cavity when opened. Such intimacy of handling is almost impossible with larger altarpieces, making me cherish even more this miniature boxwood one in the DIA’s collection.



