

In *The Nativity at Night*, by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (c. 1458), the painter depicts the Child Jesus as a source of light

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SHROUDING MEN'S DESTINY.
FORTUNATELY JESUS, THE
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BORN. GEERTGEN, THIS
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BRINGS THIS MESSAGE HOME TO US AS
FEW HAVE DONE"**

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD IS BORN



by ANTONIO PAOLUCCI

Amongst the most touching representations of Christ's nativity is that by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, dating back to about 1485. It is a small wood panel as large as a medium sized book (34.3 centimeters x 25.1) kept in London's National Gallery. We know very little about Geertgen, a painter who lived and worked in Holland and died as a lay brother in the monastery of Saint John of Harlem between 1460 and 1490. His absolute masterpiece is this London Nativity, a work that could be defined as the first nocturne in the history of European painting. Geertgen represents the mystery and magic of light in a dark night long before Caravaggio and La Tour. Yet the light of this Dutch painter is not naturalistic like that of the followers of Caravaggio. It is an abstract, metaphysical light intended to amaze and turn people and things into

surrealistic visions.

If we look at the painting with any attention, we will notice two sources of light, an inner and an outer one. In the background we see an angel descending from a black sky and setting, as it were, the night on fire over the sleeping shepherds. Inside the grotto the Infant Jesus sends light from below up to the protagonists of the Nativity scene. The combination and contrast of these two sources of light produce peculiar effects, altering perspective, bringing out and distorting some details and making others invisible. The Virgin Mary's face stands out abashed and transfigured whilst the melancholic image of Saint Joseph is hidden in shadow. Infant angels on tiptoe crowd around Jesus' cradle dazzled by that mysterious light. The smallest of these infant angels throws his arms open in an act of childish bewilderment. The others are absorbed and with joined hands

as if on the point of reciting a Christmas poem. The ox's head stands out from the shadow like a surreal appearance. All around there is darkness shrouding man's destiny. Fortunately Jesus, the light of the world, is born. Geertgen, this humble lay brother of Saint John's Monastery, brings this message home to us as few have done.

- Antonio Paolucci

Director of the Vatican Museums