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## Pieter Claeissins I, Madonna and Child, 1550

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Pieter Claeissins I  
Bruges (1499/1500-1576)  
*Madonna and Child*, 1550

Oil on panel

46 x 34 in.

Gift of Catherine and David Straz, Jr., 2005.5



o one approaches a piece of art without certain predispositions. In my case, especially regarding religious art, I am probably more likely to be drawn to images of Mary than one for whom “Our Lady” does not occupy a prominent place in one’s spirituality. However, one need not be imbued with Marian piety to appreciate the beauty of Pieter Claeissins’ *Madonna and Child*. Yes, the religious symbolism is there—the interior window frame in the shape of a cross and the small bird in the hand of the child Jesus suggesting new life. But this portrayal of Madonna and Child also hints at the “Holy Family”—for Joseph is present even if only in the background. This is intriguing for several reasons. While Mary and Jesus occupy prominence in the foreground I am drawn to the gaze of Joseph so occupied with his work as a carpenter. I perceive his as a look of contentment, of doing his job well with perhaps a peripheral but deep awareness that wife and child are what really matters. Mary is wholly and gently absorbed in her son, fondling one of his feet while the child Jesus looks intently off into the distance with an air of transcendence and focus, dare I say, determination for what lies ahead in his vocation and mission as he prepares to release this small bird into flight. By taking in all three figures, one is struck that in the very domesticity of the scene we are catching a glimpse of something that will far exceed the comfort and harmony of this home and family. The door to the house, slightly ajar, invites our contemplation of this revelatory moment of familial life and love, now out in the open, in the foreground of the viewer’s contemplation. I sense a movement from interior to exterior into the center of our gaze, yet restful and at peace. Here is the fertile ground for the anticipation present in the child’s eyes. Mary can only hold and gently caress his foot, whose path is not one that she necessarily chooses but one that she interiorly ponders. And as for Joseph, work continues on the horizon of what will unfold. Do I as well simply get on with my labor? I wonder.

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