

# Why is Michel Sittow Called Netherlandish?

**A**lthough he was born and died in Tallinn (Reval) in what is now called Estonia, Michel Sittow's paintings are catalogued and characterized as Netherlandish. The reasons for this are basically stylistic and reflect Sittow's training, technique, and the influences upon his work. From 1484 on he studied in Bruges, a center of Netherlandish art and culture, and as an apprentice he learned the Netherlandish technique of oil painting. The name of his teacher is unknown, but presumably was Hans Memling (active c. 1465–1494), the city's leading artist.

It was not until 1940 that Michel Sittow's life and career were documented and he was identified as the author of a group of paintings. Previously these works were thought to be by other Netherlandish artists.

# Chronology

1248

Tallinn (then Reval), later the capital of Estonia, is founded on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland.

1285

Tallinn joins the Hanseatic League, a confederation of merchants from cities in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Norway, and England who dominate trade in the Baltic region.

c. 1469

Sittow is born in Tallinn; his first teacher was almost certainly his father Clawes van der Sittow, a painter and sculptor.

1484

Sittow moves to Bruges, then part of the Netherlands, presumably to study with Hans Memling, the city's leading painter.

1492

Appointed court painter to Queen Isabella of Castile (who with her husband King Ferdinand also sponsored Christopher Columbus). Sittow accompanies the court as it moves to Barcelona, Burgos, Granada, and other Spanish cities.

1504

Queen Isabella dies; Sittow's employment at her court officially ends.

1506

Sittow documented in Tallinn where he stays until 1514.

1514

Summoned to Copenhagen to paint a portrait of the Danish king Christian II.

1515

In Brussels he is employed by Margaret of Austria (Isabella's daughter-in-law), Regent of the Netherlands. He also works for Margaret's nephew, the future Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

1518

Sittow returns to Tallinn where he would marry Dorothea Allunsze, the daughter of a noblewoman and a merchant.



Map of Europe showing different places Sittow worked.

1523

Elected chairman of the Guild of Saint Canute, a charitable brotherhood for painters, sculptors, goldsmiths, woodcarvers, and other skilled artists.

1525

Dies in Tallinn in late December.

## ATTRIBUTED TO MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

### *The Virgin with Child and Apple*

1480s (?)

oil on panel

Szépművészeti Múzeum/Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Thought to be an early work by Sittow, this painting is a near copy of a *Virgin and Child* from the workshop of the Netherlandish artist Hans Memling, supporting the belief that Sittow studied with Memling during



his years in Bruges. The original is lost but is known from a later copy done in Memling's workshop. Sittow followed his model closely, down to the detail of the Christ child pinching his toe, adding a real-life effect to the iconic image. The apple symbolizing sin alludes to Christ as the Redeemer.

*Virgin and Child*, Follower of Hans Memling

The Jules Bache Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Photo: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*A Young Man in a Red Cap*

1490s

oil on panel

Detroit Institute of Arts,

Gift of Anne and Henry Ford II

The small size of this portrait and the sitter's informal dress and red cap suggest an intriguing possibility regarding this man's identity. The patron saint of artists, Saint Luke, is often shown wearing a red cap while painting images of the Virgin Mary. Might this be a portrait of an artist or even a self-portrait, perhaps painted while Sittow was training to be an artist in the Netherlands?

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*The Assumption of the Virgin*

c. 1500/1504

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

This exquisite painting and the adjacent *Ascension of Christ* (no. 4) are Sittow's only securely documented works. Along with Juan de Flandes's *Temptation of Christ* (no. 5), they were originally part of an altarpiece comprising forty-seven panels depicting scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin. The altarpiece was commissioned by Queen Isabella of Castile but likely not completed at her death in 1504, soon after which the panels were dispersed.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*The Ascension of Christ*

c. 1500/1504

oil on panel

Private collection

This painting, now obscured by darkened varnish, was once framed with *The Assumption of the Virgin* (no. 3). The two works are linked by their subject matter: both depict the bodily translation into heaven of the two holiest persons in Christianity. According to the Bible (Acts 1:1–9) Christ's ascent took place forty days after his Resurrection in the presence of the apostles. Mary's assumption is not described in the Bible, but found in apocryphal writings from an early date.

## JUAN DE FLANDES

Hispano-Flemish, active 1496–1519

*The Temptation of Christ*

c. 1500/1504

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

According to the Gospels, Christ retreated to the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and was tempted three times by the devil. Here the devil holds a stone and challenges Christ to transform it into bread, to which Christ replied, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.” Although disguised in the robes of a Franciscan monk, the devil’s horns and webbed, reptilian feet reveal his evilness.

NETHERLANDISH ARTIST  
 (FORMERLY ATTRIBUTED  
 TO MICHEL SITTOW)

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*The Coronation of the Virgin*

c. 1500

oil on panel

Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, Paris

Christ and God the Father sit on a gold and rock-crystal throne and bless the Virgin being crowned by angels. Technical study indicates that the throne originally was to be topped with tall Gothic arches. This painting was formerly attributed to Sittow in the mistaken belief that it belonged to the same altarpiece as the artist's *Assumption of the Virgin* (no. 3) and *The Ascension of Christ* (no. 4), commissioned by Queen Isabella. The larger size of this panel proves otherwise, as the panels that comprised Isabella's altarpiece were all of equal dimension.

## HANS MEMLING

Netherlandish, active c. 1465–1494

*Portrait of a Man with an Arrow*

c. 1470/1475

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Andrew W. Mellon Collection

Sittow likely apprenticed as an artist with Memling, admired for the realism of his portraits that nonetheless subtly flatter their subjects. The unknown sitter for this portrait wears a tiny gold badge of the Virgin and Child on a crescent moon affixed to his hat. Technical analysis shows that the arrow he holds is not part of the original composition, but is very old, possibly added by Memling himself at a later date. The arrow could refer to the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian; to the archers' guild; or to a symbol of authority in tournaments held at the Burgundian court. Conservation of the panel in 2004 disclosed a “fly” perched near the man's thumb.

JAN GOSSAERT

Netherlandish, c. 1478–1532

*Portrait of a Man*

c. 1520/1525

oil on panel

Kunsthistorisches Museum,

Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

The monogram on the man's gold ring has not been identified and thus the sitter remains unknown. The Netherlandish painter Jan Gossaert was a virtual contemporary of Michel Sittow and, like him, primarily a court artist. At different points in their careers they served the same patrons (Margaret of Austria, Christian II of Denmark) and likely knew each other's work.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Mary Rose Tudor (1496–1533),  
Sister of Henry VIII of England*

c. 1514

oil on panel

Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

This woman's facial features closely resemble those of the woman in the adjacent portrait (no. 10) and both have sometimes been identified as Catherine of Aragón (1485–1536), daughter of Isabella of Castile and wife of Henry VIII of England. More likely, this painting portrays Mary Rose Tudor (1496–1533), the youngest sister of Henry VIII. She wears a necklace in which the rose symbolizing the House of Tudor alternates with the letter K, which stands for "Karolus," that is, Charles, the future Holy Roman Emperor to whom she was betrothed. The marriage did not take place.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Catherine of Aragón as the Magdalene*

c. 1515

oil on panel

Detroit Institute of Arts,

Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund

Although this painting is traditionally said to represent Catherine of Aragón, her authentic portraits do not match this woman's features. They resemble instead those of Sittow's *Madonna* (no. 12) and *Mary Rose Tudor* (no. 9), suggesting that he had a general preference for this facial type in images of beautiful women. A Renaissance tradition of female portraits in the guise of Mary Magdalene—identified by the jar of ointment she used to anoint Christ's feet—was especially popular in Germany and the Netherlands. The Magdalene's piety and close relationship to Christ made her an ideal recipient of worshippers' prayers.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of the Danish King Christian II*

1514/1515

oil on panel

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Christian II (1481–1559) had recently been installed as King of Denmark and Norway when Sittow was summoned in 1514 to paint this portrait. Sittow's mastery is on full display, particularly in the superbly rendered texture of the massive fur collar. Christian II's reign ended in 1523 when he was deposed and exiled to the Netherlands. In 1531 his attempt to regain the throne failed and he spent the rest of his life as a prisoner of state in Denmark.

## MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Madonna and Child*

c. 1515/1518

oil on panel

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

These two panels were once hinged, forming a diptych that is one of Sittow's greatest accomplishments. The images are linked by an oriental carpet that runs across the foreground ledge, a device that was used earlier by his supposed teacher Hans Memling. The goldfinch held by the Christ child refers to his future suffering: according to legend, the bird tried to pluck away the crown of thorns worn by Christ as he carried the cross to Calvary. The Virgin is subtly but discernibly larger than the adoring donor in the facing panel, underscoring her greater importance.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of Diego de Guevara (?)*

c. 1515/1518

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Andrew W. Mellon Collection

The donor's pensive, almost melancholy expression, rapt in contemplation of the Virgin and Child, is extraordinary in its humanity. Equally remarkable is the artist's sensitivity to the effects of light and texture — especially that of the man's splendidly rendered lynx fur collar. He is likely Diego de Guevara, a Spaniard who served with distinction for over forty years at the court of the dukes of Burgundy. In 1517 Emperor Charles V made him a Knight of the Order of Calatrava, whose emblem is a lobed cross, here embroidered on this man's vest and partially visible in pink just above the fingers of his right hand.

MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of a Man*

c. 1510

oil on panel

Mauritshuis, The Hague, Purchase made possible by the testamentary disposition of Mr. Volz and with the support of the Rembrandt Association, 1946

The earliest known owners of this carefully observed portrayal of an unknown man were a prominent family from Tartu, one of the oldest cities in Estonia. Scientific analysis of the oak panel suggests, but does not prove, that Sittow painted this portrait during his second stay in Tallinn (Reval) between 1506 and 1514.

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MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of a Man with the Pearl*

1515/1517

oil on panel

Royal Collection, Patrimonio Nacional,

Palacio Real de Madrid

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MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of a Man with a Rosary*

c. 1520

oil on panel

Private collection, courtesy of Het Noordbrabants Museum,

's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands

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MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of a Man with a Book*

c. 1515

oil on panel

Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA)

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MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Portrait of a Woman*

early 16th century

oil on panel

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

## ATTRIBUTED TO MICHEL SITTOW

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*The Nativity at Night*

early 16th century

oil on panel

Upton House, The Bearsted Collection  
(National Trust), United Kingdom

The writings of the fourteenth-century mystic Saint Bridget of Sweden inspired this nocturnal Nativity scene. She described a vision in which the newborn Christ “radiated such ineffable light and splendor that the sun was not comparable to it...I saw the glorious infant lying on the ground naked and shining.” In this painting, the divine radiance emanating from the Christ child is the sole source of light, illuminating the faces of Mary and the angels.

# The Passion Altarpiece

The two full-length paintings of saints and the Virgin and Child on view (nos. 21, 22) come from an altarpiece that has been in Tallinn since the early sixteenth century. When open, it shows the crucifixion of Christ flanked by scenes of Christ carrying the cross and Mary's lamentation over the death of her son, attributed to the workshop of the Netherlandish painter Adrian Isenbrant. When the altarpiece is closed with the wings folded over the central scene, viewers originally would have seen images of four Franciscan saints painted on the wings' exterior. Soon after the completion of the altarpiece, however, the exterior wings were painted over, possibly by Sittow and his workshop.



Interior of the *Passion Altarpiece* by the workshop of Adrian Isenbrant c. 1515,  
Art Museum of Estonia–Niguliste Museum  
©Art Museum of Estonia, photo by Stanislav Stepaško

The new saints—James the Great with the Virgin and Child and Saints Adrian and Anthony—were painted directly over the original saints and even incorporate parts of the earlier composition: the hands of the Virgin and feet of Saint James peek through from the first painting. The coats of arms at the base of the stone niches are those of the Grest and Lippe families, indicating that the overpainting occurred sometime after they were united by marriage in 1514 and likely when they acquired the altarpiece for their family chapel. The quality of the overpainting is uneven, suggesting the presence of assistants, but the figure of James, the modeling of the Virgin's face, and the armor of Adrian are masterful and recall works by Sittow.

MICHEL SITTOW  
AND WORKSHOP?

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Saint James the Great  
and the Virgin and Child  
from The Passion Altarpiece*

c. 1520

oil on panel

Art Museum of Estonia–Niguliste Museum

MICHEL SITTOW  
AND WORKSHOP?

Netherlandish, c. 1469–1525

*Saint Adrian and Saint Anthony  
from The Passion Altarpiece*

c. 1520

oil on panel

Art Museum of Estonia–Niguliste Museum