

Sacred Candle And Candlelight Scenes in Western Medieval And Early Renaissance Art

Batı Orta Çağ ve Erken Rönesans Sanatında Kutsal Mum ve Mum Işığı Sahneleri

Derya DAŞDEMİR 

Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters,
Department of Art History, İstanbul/Türkiye
derya.ing@hotmail.com

Simge ÖZER PINARBAŞI 

Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters,
Department of Art History, İstanbul/Türkiye
simge@istanbul.edu.tr

Abstract

This study critically examines the formal and semantic contexts of scenes depicting both illuminated and extinguished candles in Western art. Within the repertoire of religious imagery, candlelight functions as a symbol of the divine presence, representing the eye of God, while Christ is identified as the lux mundi (light of the universe). The iconographic themes associated with these periods encompass significant scenes such as the Nativity, the Birth of the Virgin Mary, the Annunciation, the Pietà, the Adoration of the Shepherds, and the Death of the Virgin. Moreover, the candle assumes symbolic connotations of desire, votive offering, and commemoration, which are intrinsically linked to these themes. Through a systematic semantic and formal analysis of these depictions, the study identifies the Revelations of St. Bridget as a fundamental textual source informing the use of candles and candlelight in artistic representations. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the inclusion of candle imagery varies across artworks in both semantic interpretation and stylistic execution. This research is grounded in an extensive theoretical framework informed by scholarly monographs, journal articles, and visual documentation. The study's methodological approach involves the systematic collection and organization of relevant materials, the construction of a rigorous analytical framework, and the critical examination of primary and secondary sources accessed through various research libraries. Additionally, visual references have been obtained from academically recognized repositories and credible national and international digital archives, thereby ensuring the study's methodological rigor and scholarly validity.

Keywords: Candlelight, Early Renaissance Art, Nativity, Annunciation, Pietà.

Öz

Bu makalenin konusu Batı sanatında Orta Çağ ve erken Rönesans dönemlerinde hem yanmakta olan hem de sönmük durumda betimlenen mumların bulunduğu sahneleri anlamsal ve biçimsel bağlamda değerlendirmektir. Batı sanatı bağlamında, dinsel imgeler repertuarında karşımıza çıkan mum ışığı sahneleri Tanrı'nın gözünü imlemekte ve İsa'nın evrenin ışığı olduğu anlamına gelmektedir. Söz konusu dönemlerin ikonografik temsilde mumun yer aldığı sahneler İsa'nın Doğumu, Meryem'in Doğumu, Müjde, Pietà, Çobanların Secdesi, Kralların Secdesi, Meryem'in Ölümü, azizlerle ilgili ve kutsal figürlerin yer almadığı muma atfedilen istek, adak, anma gibi anlamlara sahip olan yapıtlardır. Yapılan araştırma neticesinde makaleye konu olan betimlerin anlamsal ve biçimsel incelenmesi sonucu mum ışığının yapıtlarda kullanımının kaynağı Azize Bridget'in Vahiyleri gösterilirken mum imgesine sahip sahnelerde anlamsal ve biçimsel olarak farklılıklar gözlenmiştir. Bu çalışma, yoğunluklu olarak sözü edilen teorik çerçevenin kurgulanışında faydalanılan kitaplar, makale çalışmaları, görsel materyaller ile oluşturulmuştur. Çalışmanın ortaya çıkışı gerekli materyallerin belirlenmesi, belli bir kurguyla ele alınması, bunlar oluşturulduktan sonra da ilgili araştırmaların başlatılmasıyla şekillenmiştir. Araştırma süreci çoğunlukla birincil veya ikincil kaynakların değerlendirilmesi ve çeşitli kütüphaneler aracılığıyla bu kaynaklara ulaşılmasıyla gelişmiştir. Görseller akademik referanslı veya ulusal-uluslararası çapta önem arz eden internet kaynaklarının ilgili sitelerinden alınan resimlerden oluşmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mum Işığı, Erken Rönesans Sanatı, İsa'nın Doğumu, Müjde, Pietà.

Açıklama: Bu çalışma "Batı Sanatında Mum Işığı Temsilleri" isimli doktora tez çalışmasından üretilmiştir.

Explanation: This article is produced from a PhD thesis named "Candlelight Representations In Western Art" by Derya Daşdemir.

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 24.02.2025

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 23.03.2025

Yayın Tarihi/Publication Date: 29.03.2025

Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author:

Derya DAŞDEMİR

Cite this article: Daşdemir, D. & Özer Pınarbaşı, S. (2025). Sacred Candle And Candlelight Scenes in Western Medieval And Early Renaissance Art. *Journal of Palmette*, 7, 79-83.

Atıf: Daşdemir, D. & Özer Pınarbaşı, S. (2025). Batı Orta Çağ ve Erken Rönesans Sanatında Kutsal Mum ve Mum Işığı. *Palmet Dergisi*, 7, 79-83.



Content of this journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Although the symbolism of candles and light has undergone significant transformations in form and meaning throughout history, a fundamental continuity persists between the fire kindled by early humans and the candle flame ignited in contemporary times. This continuity is rooted in the shared human experiences of hope, desire, devotion to life, sacrifice, eternal happiness, and spiritual purification through transcendence. While the ritual of candle lighting has historically been integrated into sacred practices within an intellectual and theological framework, candlelight has also symbolized self-sacrifice for society, enlightenment, moral guidance, and ultimate salvation. The image of the candle has been attributed various meanings, extending from its act of burning to its gradual melting and eventual extinguishment.

Within the visual tradition of medieval religious art, candle and candlelight imagery have served as potent symbolic motifs, consistently present in Western artistic discourse, albeit with varying degrees of prominence across different periods. In the scenes analyzed within this study such as the Nativity, the Birth of Virgin, The Death of Virgin the lit candle signifies the presence of God and affirms Christ as the *lux mundi* (light of the universe). And also in depictions of saints where neither Christ nor the Virgin Mary is present, the candle assumes the role of the *oculus Dei* (eye of God), while simultaneously embodying broader symbolic concepts such as *vanitas*, *memento mori*, remembrance, and contemplation. Moreover, this study extends its analysis to secular scenes in which candle symbolism plays a significant role, emphasizing the semantic and symbolic diversity inherent in its artistic representation.

Light in A Metaphysical Context

In a metaphysical context, light is more than a physical phenomenon, it is a symbol of existence, knowledge, truth and divine power. In philosophical and religious traditions, light is often associated with the source of existence, consciousness and enlightenment. According to Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.), light is a means of accessing the World of Ideas, while Plotinus (205-270) treats light as a reflection of God (the One); light is at the top of the hierarchy of being and loses its power as it descends. The philosophers of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, considered light as a manifestation of divine knowledge and divinity. St Bonaventura (1217-1274) considered light in three forms (*lux*, *lumen*, *splendor*) and argued that it is one of the fundamental elements of the order existing in the universe. The Italian humanist Francesco Patrizi da Cherso (1529-97), on the other hand, saw light as the most fundamental principle of existence in the universe and placed it in a superior position to matter and form. In religious contexts, light is identified with the existence and wisdom of God and is considered a symbol of truth and enlightenment. To summarise, in metaphysical terms, light is not only a physical phenomenon, but also a symbol of existence, knowledge and divine truth.

In religions and belief systems, light is a symbol of holiness, knowledge, enlightenment and salvation. The Torah, the holy book of the Jews, has been accepted as light in the context of illuminating the path of humanity and guiding people. According to the first book of the Torah, Genesis, the creation of the universe begins with light in the heavens and ends with man. God realises the creation with light in six days, so that Adam can see the world from beginning to end. Jesus tells his disciples, “*you are the light of the world*”¹ to pave the way for humanity and illuminate the darkness like light. Again in the

Gospel of Luke, light is connected to salvation:

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”*²

In Islam, the spiritual guidance of light, the illumination of God, is expressed by the concept of ‘*nur*’. The verse in Surah An-Nur in the Qur’an expresses this situation:

*“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star, lit from ‘the oil of’ a blessed olive tree, ‘located’ neither to the east nor the west, whose oil would almost glow, even without being touched by fire. Light upon light! Allah guides whoever He wills to His light. And Allah sets forth parables for humanity. For Allah has ‘perfect’ knowledge of all things.”*³

Sacred Candle and Candlelight Scenes in Western Medieval and Early Renaissance Art

The tradition of using candles symbolically in medieval and early Renaissance scenes in Western art is based on the vision of St Bridgette of Sweden⁴. The part of St Bridgette’s text on her vision of the Nativity that is relevant to this study is as follows:

“...When I was at the manger of the Lord in Bethlehem, I saw a Virgin, pregnant and most very beautiful, clothed in a white mantle and a finely woven tunic through which from without I could clearly discern her virginal flesh. Her womb was full and much swollen, for she was now ready to give birth. With her there was a very dignified old man; and with them they had both an ox and an ass. When they had entered the cave, and after the ox and the ass had been tied to the manger, the old man went outside and brought to the Virgin a lighted candle and fixed it in the wall and went outside in order not to be personally present at the birth. And so the Virgin then took the shoes from her feet, put off the white mantle that covered her, removed the veil from her head, and laid these things beside her, remaining in only her tunic, with her most beautiful hair-as if of gold - spread out upon her shoulder blades. She then drew out two small cloths of linen and two of wool, very clean and finely woven, which she carried with her to wrap the infant that was to be born, and two other small linens to cover and bind his head; and she laid these cloths beside her that she might use them in due time.

And when all these had thus been prepared, then the Virgin knelt with great reverence, putting herself at prayer; and she kept her back toward the manger and her face lifted to heaven toward the east. And so, with raised hands and with her eyes intent on heaven, she was as if suspended in an ecstasy of contemplation, inebriated with divine sweetness. And while she was thus in prayer, I saw the One lying in her womb then move; and then and there, in a moment and the twinkling of an eye, she gave birth to a Son, from whom there went out such great and ineffable light and splendor that the sun could not be compared to it. Nor did that candle that the old man had put in place give light at all because that divine splendor totally annihilated the material splendor of the candle. And so sudden and momentary was that manner of giving birth that I was unable to notice or discern how or in what member she was giving birth. But yet, at once, I saw that glorious infant lying on the earth, naked and glowing in the greatest of neatness. His

¹ Matta 5-14.

² Luka 2:29-32

³ Nûr 71/35.

⁴ Bridget had religious visions from an early age, which influenced her whole life. She gave birth to eight

children, including St Catherine of Sweden. On the death of her husband in 1344, Bridget went into seclusion near the Cistercian monastery at Alvastra on Lake Vetter. She dictated revelations to the abbot, Peter Olafsson, who translated them into Latin.

flesh was most clean of all filth and uncleanness. I saw also the afterbirth, lying wrapped very neatly beside him. And then I heard the wonderfully sweet and most dulcet songs of the angels. And the Virgin's womb, which before the birth had been very swollen, at once retracted; and her body then looked wonderfully beautiful and delicate..." (Cornell, 1924, p. 21-22)

The earliest example of a scene with a candle in the Western artistic tradition is by the Florentine artist Niccolò di Tommaso⁵ (1339-1376). In the centre panel of the triptych "Vision of St Brigid of the Nativity", St Bridget is shown praying with her rosary on the right side of the scene, just as in her vision. The time is night, and the cave is brightly lit because the birth took place at night. The candle is at a high point in the cave and the reason for this brightness is not the candlelight, the cave is illuminated by the birth of child Jesus. Jesus, the light of the universe, was born (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Niccolò di Tommaso, Vision of St Brigid of the Nativity, Tempera on wood, After 1373.

Another example of one of the earliest works in which the candle is shown is the Master of Flamalle (Robert Campin). The artist's "The Nativity" depicts three different presentations from the life of Jesus on a single panel: the Nativity, the Midwives and the Adoration of the Shepherds. In the painting "The Nativity", the child Jesus and his family are shown on the threshold of a very dilapidated manger. The ox and donkey, who are expected to warm Jesus with their breath, are turned back. Mary in her white dress, the symbol of purity, kneels in front of Jesus. Behind Mary are the shepherds, and behind Joseph, who makes a screen with his hand so that the candle does not go out, there are two midwives. Light is an important symbolic element in Campin's scene, which has a very realistic narrative. The candle, which is depicted as lit even though it is daytime, gives the message that even though Jesus was born at night, darkness suddenly turns into light with his birth, that is, even the laws of nature harmonise (Figure 2).

The placement of the candle is different from the placement of the candle in Tommaso's example. While in Tommaso's painting the candle is placed on the wall in the upper right corner of the scene in the centre panel of the triptych, in Campin's painting Joseph is shown protecting the flame of the candle from the wind with his right hand to indicate that Jesus is the light as mentioned in the Bible (Zirpolo, 2008, p. 275). Therefore, the idea that the real light comes from Jesus lying on the ground is supported by the idea of the rising sun in the landscape, which is the symbol of Jesus (Cuttler, 1968, p. 75).



Figure 2. Master of Flamalle /Robert Campin, Nativity, oil on wood, 1420.

Another scene in western art in medieval and early renaissance periods in which the image of the candle appears is "The Birth of Virgin". In the Birth of Virgin paintings, the candle creates a symbolic meaning such as a gospel, the eye of God. Jan de Beer (c.1475- 1528), in his painting "The Birth of Virgin" (Figure 3), treated the nativity scene as a domestic scene and equipped the room with details and everyday objects. In this room, where women busy with their duties join St Anna lying on the bed in prayer, the baby Mary is looking at her mother from the lap of one of the midwives. The artist's realistic and detailed style has transformed this holy scene into a genre painting. The candle in the gold-plated candlestick is depicted burning with all its vitality. The candlelight, which shows the sanctity of Mary's birth, symbolically fulfils the task of illuminating the room. Although it does not physically take place in the scene as a lighting element, it adds a mystical and spiritual meaning.

The scenes with candles, which we encounter in the Nativity scenes in the Netherlands, have started to diversify over time. The candle is no longer just an object held by Joseph, it has become an indispensable element of sacred scenes and has come to life in the hands of different figures in the interiors.



Figure 3. Jan de Beer, The Birth of the Virgin, oil on panel, c.1520.

Another scene in which candle scenes take place in the context of this study is the Annunciation to Mary. Although this story is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, it is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke. The Annunciation was recognised as one of the twelve feasts and depictions of the Annunciation were widely practised. Joos van Cleve's (c.1485-1540/41) "The Annunciation" is set in a 16th century bedroom (Figure 4). The place where Gabriel comes to give the good news to Mary is a Dutch interior. The scenes with candles have

⁵ The first examples of this new iconography, based on Bridget's vision were created by Niccolò di Tommaso. This triptych, one of the earliest examples of the representation of the 'Nativity' and the

representation of the candle, is almost contemporary with the life of the saint and corresponds to her revelations, so that the painting has become a historical document.

diversified over time and maintain their symbolic meaning. While the candle in the upper left is clearly lit, the candles in the chandelier are not lit. Motifs such as the brightness of the scene and the light around the holy spirit show that the burning candle has a symbolic meaning. For the eye of God is already signalled by the burning candle.



Figure 4. Joos van Cleve, *The Annunciation*, oil on wood, c. 1525.

Originating in the 12th century in Byzantine art and appearing in the West from the 13th century onwards, *Pieta* scenes depict the mourning for the body of the dead Christ taken down from the cross⁶. In the Middle Ages, people believed that if they prayed in front of the original painting or copies of it, their 20,000 years in Purgatory would be reduced, so throughout the Middle Ages the image of the “Man of Sorrows” became one of the most popular ways of depicting Jesus.

Scenes of saints and saints with candles, which we also encounter outside the images of Jesus and Mary, are numerous and diversified in terms of meaning in the Early Renaissance period. The image of the candle is also seen in scenes with St Sebastian, St Ursula, St Barbara, St Martin and St Jerome (Hieronymus) (ca. 347-420 AD). In Ghirlandaio's (1448-1494) “*St Jerome in his Study*”, (Figure 5) which shows the saint, who translated the Bible into Latin, in his study, the saint is shown with his hand on his head, the genius-melancholic gesture⁷ of the period (Yüzgüller, Altun, 2016, p. 41,44). While the writing instruments and manuscripts in the room accompany the saint's scientific studies, the hourglass, inkwell and extinguished candle motif on the desk reflect his impermanence and at the same time transform the scene into a *memento mori* representation (Ady, 1924, p. 232; Davies, 1908, p. 33, 38).



Figure 5. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *St. Jerome in His Study*, fresco, 1480.

Conclusion

In the visual culture of the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance in Western art, the candle serves as a symbolic manifestation of the *oculus Dei* (eye of God) in compositions featuring both illuminated and extinguished candles. Beyond its association with Christ as the *lux mundi* (light of the universe), the candle also functions as a signifier of the Virgin Mary, denoting her presence and sanctity. In works where sacred figures are absent, candlelight operates as a symbolic substitute, alluding to their divine presence. Iconographically, candles appear in scenes such as the Nativity, the Birth of the Virgin, the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Shepherds, the *Pietà*, the Adoration of the Magi, the Death of the Virgin, and depictions of various saints.

In Nativity scenes, the candle motif, derived from the Revelations of St. Bridget, is incorporated into pictorial iconography, often represented as a candle held by Joseph. This iconographic tradition was widely adopted by Northern European artists, who introduced diverse variations of the motif. The candle in Joseph's hand appears both lit and extinguished in different representations; at times, it is placed within the stable, while in other instances, it is positioned alongside sacred figures.

The presence of the candle in depictions of the Birth of the Virgin, the Annunciation, and the Death of the Virgin underscores Mary's sanctity. In Birth of the Virgin scenes, the candle signifies her witnessing of her own birth and her role in illuminating the universe, akin to Christ. In Annunciation depictions, the candle is frequently extinguished, with residual smoke still visible upon the Archangel Gabriel's entrance, signifying the transition from earthly light to divine illumination. Conversely, in certain Gospel scenes, the candle remains lit, reinforcing Christ's divine radiance. In these contexts, the candle transcends its material

The candle is also a prominent element in depictions of saints, particularly in representations of contemplative figures such as St. Jerome. Furthermore, in portrayals of saints such as St. Jerome and St. Sebastian, the candle carries *vanitas* connotations, serving as a reminder of mortality and the transient nature of earthly existence. Additionally, candle imagery appears in other contexts related to votive practices, including scenes of offerings and supplications. Although rare, some works feature extinguished or melted candles with implicit sexual connotations, symbolizing ephemeral worldly pleasures. The motif of “Joseph with a Candle” became a standardized pictorial formula until the 16th century. However, with the artistic advancements of the Renaissance—particularly the development of perspective and nuanced light modulation—this motif underwent interpretative transformations, reflecting broader shifts in visual representation and theological symbolism.

Light has maintained its metaphysical, cosmological and religious meanings in different thought systems throughout history. While Aristotle considered light as a physical phenomenon, Plotinus saw light as a reflection of God and considered it the fundamental element of the hierarchy of being. St Bonaventura defined light in three ways (*lux*, *lumen*, *splendor*), giving it different dimensions, while Francesco Patrizi argued that light is the fundamental principle of the universe and considered it in a metaphysical and physical context. During the Renaissance period, Leonardo da Vinci defined shadow as the lack of light and stated that darkness ceased to be a frightening element over time. In religious beliefs, light is seen as a symbol of holiness and wisdom. In belief systems such as Christianity, Islam light has been the foundation of the divine realm and the symbol of the ascension of the soul. In Judaism, the Torah is regarded as a light

⁶ This subject is not mentioned in the Bible, but it is mentioned in the religious records of the late Middle Ages.

⁷ Melancholy, which is associated with many phenomena and moods such as mourning, grief, laziness, contemplation, sadness, madness, offers a rich world of images in parallel with the different meanings attributed to the concept (Yüzgüller, Altun, 2016, 41,44).

that guides humanity. In general, light has been regarded throughout history as a symbol of wisdom, holiness, guidance and spiritual ascension.

Luka 2:29-32

Nûr 71/35.

Author Contributions: Concept: D.D.S.Ö.P Design: S.Ö.P., D.D Supervision: S.Ö.P., D.D Resources: D.D., S.Ö.P. Materials: D.D., S.Ö.P. Data Collection and/or Processing: D.D., S.Ö.P. Analysis and/or Interpretation: D.D., S.Ö.P. Literature Search: D.D., S.Ö.P. Writing Manuscript: D.D., S.Ö.P. Critical Review: D.D., S.Ö.P.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial Disclosure: The authors declared that this study has received no financial support.

Yazar Katkıları: Fikir: D.D., S.Ö.P. Tasarım: D.D., S.Ö.P. Kaynaklar: D.D., S.Ö.P. Malzemeler: D.D., S.Ö.P. Veri Toplama ve/veya işleme: D.D., S.Ö.P. Analiz ve/veya yorum: D.D., S.Ö.P. Literatür Taraması: D.D., S.Ö.P. Yazıyı yazan: D.D., S.Ö.P. Eleştirel İnceleme: D.D., S.Ö.P.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazarlar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazarlar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

Kaynaklar

Ady, J.M.C. (1924). *The Painters of Florence from the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Century*, New York, E.P. Duttona and Co.

Borchert, T. H. (1997). *Rogier's St. Luke: The Case for Corporate Identification*, Rogier van der Weyden, St. Luke Drawing the Virgin: *Selected Essays in Context*, Ed. Carol J. Purtle, Turnhout, Brepols.

Cornell, H. (1924). *The Prophecies and Revelations of Saint Bridget (Birgitta) of Sweden, 7.Book, Chapter 21, Iconography of the Nativity of Christ*, Uppsala.

Cuttler, Charles D. (1968). *Northern Painting from Pucelle to Bruegel: Fourteenth, Fifteenth and the Sixteenth Centuries*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Davies, G. S. (1908). *Ghirlandaio*, London, Methuen and co.

Elliot, J. K. (2008) *The Apocryphical Jesus*, NewYork: Oxford University Press.

Hetherington, P. (1996) *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna*, Oakwood Publications, California.

Tükel, U. and Arsal, Y. S. (2014) *Sözden İmgeye Batı Sanatında İkonografi*, İstanbul, Kabalcı.

Yüzgüller, S. and Altun, C. G. (2016). Satürn'ün Çocukları: Batı Sanatı'nda Melancholia İmgesi, *Navisalvia: Sina Kabağaç'ı Anma Toplantısı 2016 Bildiri Kitabı*, İstanbul, Arkeoloji ve Sanat.

White, M. (2002). *Leonardo İlk Bilgin*, Çev. Ahmet Aybars Çağlayan, İstanbul, İnkılap Kitabevi.

Zirpolo, L. H. (2008). *Historical Dictionary of Renaissance Art*, Scarecrow Press.

Matta 5-14.