

The Importance of the Altarpiece in Art North of the Alps, 1400-1500

Background Notes

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**Robert Campin, *Merode Triptych* (central panel),
1425-30. Metropolitan Museum, New York**

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Medieval Christianity had its distinctive qualities, but it shared many of the features of the polytheistic religions that had been traditional to the Mediterranean for many centuries before Christ. The creation of an altar or shrine over the body of a 'hero' was a very ancient practice recorded in the writings of Homer. Heroes, namely saints and martyrs, translated easily into the Christian world. Early Christian commemorative rituals were close to those already followed in the pagan world. The altar was a place of sacrifice to the gods and was a site of communal worship as the meat cooked would become a communal meal. The altar was not always placed in a temple but could be a separate edifice as for example that seen on the Acropolis in Athens.

During the early Christian era, demolition of pagan temples and theatres was commonplace, though later temples could be preserved and converted for Christian worship. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) asked no more than that pagan buildings be blessed with holy water and supplied with relics before Christians could use them.

The introduction of a choir in 1144 in St. Denis, the Romanesque cathedral in Paris, marks the opening of the Gothic architectural period. The word *cathedral* is derived from the Greek *kathedra*, meaning seat, which came to mean the seat of the bishop, close to the high altar. Sculpture was a part of the theological agenda for decoration and a type of polyptych with panels of relief carving emerged in the form of a central altarpiece. Radiating chapels along the side aisles permitted financial contributions from wealthy local citizens. This became a method of personal aggrandisement as each one had a fully consecrated altar, where a priest could celebrate the Mass, and would include some form of family attribution. Prayers would be said for the donor's family, ancestors and descendants to speed their passage to Heaven. The painted altarpiece would be less expensive than sculpture and increased in popularity after the papal *Declaration of Transubstantiation (Real Presence)* in 1215 which made it a liturgical object sanctified by ecclesiastical law. The sanctified altar became a central part of the celebration of the Mass.



Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece* (part of the central panel), Cathedral of St. Bavo, Ghent. Dedicated in 1432, this shows Mary dressed as a bride, a symbol of the Church, 'Christ in Glory' emulating the ancient *Majestas Domini*, and John the Baptist.

The importance and popularity of Mary as the subject for church decoration grew enormously across Europe during the Medieval period. The first church in Rome dedicated to the Virgin was Santa Maria Maggiore, the fourth of 5 patriarchal basilicas initially constructed in Rome 352-366 CE, after Emperor Constantine's official recognition of Christianity. Mary was perceived as the ultimate intercessor in prayers. The Cult of the Immaculate Conception (of Mary) as part of popular religion was approved by the Church but did not officially become dogma until 1496. The Host was an object of devotion, accompanied by an elaborate and costly monstrance, bells, candles, and backcloths. The priest would stand in front of the altar, visible to the congregation as he elevated the host. At this time the congregation did not partake of the bread and wine. They were merely a visible, symbolic part of the worship. The painted altarpiece was intended to form a dramatic backdrop to

this gesture. In the Netherlands artists created a human level of domesticity for religious images. Images of the Incarnation, the moment of conception of Christ, show Mary 'at home' as the archangel Gabriel appears to her as the messenger of God, as depicted by **Robert Campin** in the *Merode Triptych*.

Mary was declared *Theotokos* – 'Mother of God' — at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE after three centuries of debate over whether she was Mother of Christ or Mother of God. Deciding upon the second title underpinned the notion of the divinity of Christ. A long and often acrimonious argument led up to this pronouncement. Mary assumed a higher status than the saints for devotion, but lower than Jesus or God the Father.

Oil paint needs a finely ground pigment which is mixed with a vegetable oil medium such as linseed, poppy or walnut. Its origins are unclear, but its rise to pre-eminence began during the 15th century with **Jan van Eyck** (active 1422-41). He was not its inventor, but was a highly skilled technical innovator, as was a lesser known contemporary of the Van Eyck brothers, **Robert Campin**, otherwise known as the Master of Flémalle (1375-1444), who also one of the great pioneers of Netherlandish art. He was the leading painter in Tournai in Flanders until his death in 1410. **Rogier van der Weyden** was one of his pupils. None of his paintings is documented and his work is known only through the analysis of later art historians using deductions of style. He introduced to painting the monumentality of form and dramatic intensity already achieved by the sculptor **Claus Sluter** who worked for the Burgundian court. This is similar to the early Florentine artists like Masaccio being inspired by the sculpture of Donatello.

Oil paint is highly flexible in that it can be applied in thick impasto and in fine detail – countless types of descriptive brushstrokes are possible with oil paint. Since it is slow drying it can be carefully blended to make soft, seamless shadows, essential for the suggestion of three-dimensional form, inspired by sculpture, as well as worked whilst still wet. All these properties make it especially suitable to communicate the reflective properties of different

surfaces, from polished marble to dazzling jewels; from soft velvet to luminous highlights on hard metal plate. With meticulous exactitude, this was perfected north of the Alps by Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden and Memling during the 15th century.

In 1464 Filarete, the Italian architect and theorist, recorded his admiration for the Netherlandish oil technique specifically, but hints of interest among southern European artists are evident well before this date. Early Dutch artists applied a white ground layer on which transparent colours were placed in a series of thin layers. The result was an unmatched brightness and colours that continue to gleam many centuries later. The combination of this technique and their acute observation of reality enabled them to achieve an exquisitely refined representation of the physical world. It encouraged the development of easel painting which gave the artist freedom to work in a studio rather than on location as is the case with fresco.

Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464) was born and trained in Tournai and spent most of his career in Brussels where he was named Town Painter in 1436. Evidence indicates that Campin was his master, though none of his works in Brussels survives. He also received commissions from Duke Philip the Good and his courtiers. The *Beaune Altarpiece* is one of only three works that are signed or firmly documented to Rogier. The Hospital in Beaune was founded as a result of the poverty and deprivation of the Hundred Years' War in France. The Altarpiece, which was commissioned in 1443 by Nicolas Rolin, Chancellor to the Duke of Burgundy, was in situ when the first patients were admitted.

Rolin and his third wife are shown as donors. When opened, the wings show a vast image of the Last Judgement presided over by St Michael who weighs all the souls dividing the Elect from the Damned – *Peccata versus Vertutis*. An Archangel welcomes saved souls to heaven on the first left panel, whilst the damned enter hellfire on the right.



Rogier van der Weyden, *Beaune Altarpiece*, Polyptych of The Last Judgement, c.1450, Hospices de Beaune, France. Opens to 18 feet wide x 7 feet high with 15 panels.

Towards the end of the 15th century the influence of Northern Renaissance Art upon Italian patrons was increasing. **Joos/Justus van Ghent** (recorded in Antwerp 1460) became best known for his work at the court of Urbino. His altarpiece of *The Communion of the Apostles*, with its predella by Uccello, was created for the *studiolo* of Duke Federigo da Montefeltro.



Justus van Ghent, *The Communion of the Apostles*, 1472-1474. 9ft 6 x 10ft 6. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino

Hugo van der Goes (1440-82) was received into the Ghent Guild of Painters possibly under the patronage of Justus of Ghent. He worked on preparations for the wedding of Duke Charles the Bold to Margaret of York in Bruges. The poetic precision of detail in his work shows the influence of Jan van Eyck. Painted in Bruges and shipped to Florence, the monumentality of the figures in the *Portinari Altarpiece* immediately inspired the Italians. The dramatic sense of composition and the capacity to create a vast background was a great innovation in Florence. The altarpiece was surrounded in St. Egidio by frescoes by Domenico Veneziano, Piero della Francesca, Andrea del Castagno and Baldinovetti so that stylistic comparisons could be made. All the frescoes are now lost.



Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Altarpiece*, 1475-8, 10ft x 8 ft, Uffizzi Gallery, Florence. Commissioned for the high altar of the church of St. Egidio by Tommaso Portinari, a merchant banker representing Medici interests, who lived in Bruges for 40 years.

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