

Figure 1: Map of the Burgundian Netherlands
(from: J. W. Steyaert, *Late Gothic Sculpture. The Burgundian Netherlands*,
Gent: Ludion Press, 1994, 40).

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

Dagmar Eichberger

The term 'early Netherlandish' is generally reserved for paintings dating from the beginning of the fifteenth century up to about 1500. This term was popularised by art historians such as Max Friedländer, Erwin Panofsky and Otto Pächt, who established the autonomy and significance of this period in their lectures and publications. The core provinces and principalities which are generally associated with the production of 'early Netherlandish art' are Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Liège and Limburg, now part of Belgium, the Netherlands and Northern France (Fig. 1). The majority of the studies undertaken on this period focus on the medium of panel painting, whereas sculpture, book illumination and the decorative arts usually receive less attention. This has only partly to do with the relative importance of panel painting at the time when these objects were produced. While artists such as Jan van Eyck (c.1390/1400–1441), Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–1464) and Hans Memling (1430/40–94), for instance, were highly sought after by contemporary patrons and buyers from the Netherlands, as well as from other parts of Europe, and enjoyed a high social standing in the civic culture in which they lived, this situation also applied to leading artists working in other media, e.g. Pol Limbourg and his brothers (Herman and Jannequin: all three died in 1416), Jacques de Baerze (documented 1390–99), et al. Our perception of artistic quality and our preference for paintings rather than for sculpture, tapestry or goldsmiths' work has equally contributed to shaping the canon of art history in this particular way.

In the following chapter, I will discuss two major triptychs, the first one by Jan van Eyck, the second by Dieric Bouts (1410/20–75), which will exemplify some of the most prominent features of Netherlandish-painted altarpieces. While Netherlandish panel painters have been hailed as the leading force in introducing new ideas and concepts into art, there is no doubt that sculptors and book illuminators were equally prolific and contributed in the same way to the high market value of Netherlandish art all over Europe. It has been shown that carved altarpieces were important export articles of early Netherlandish sculpture and provided a steady income for many artists and craftsmen in Brussels and Antwerp (Nieuwdorp 1993: 14–23; Jacobs 1989). In contrast to the realm of panel paintings, the names of many sculptors and

joiners involved in producing large carved altarpieces have been lost. The involvement of several different guilds in the process of production, as well as the common practice of workshop participation make an identification of individual artistic personalities more difficult in this field. In his book on 'Northern Renaissance Art' James Snyder tried to overcome the anachronistic separation of paintings from works produced in other media, and has systematically included sculpture as well as prints and drawings in his observations (Snyder 1985: 266-314). Many of the carved altarpieces which had remained in the Netherlands during the fifteenth century did not survive the various waves of iconoclasm which swept this region during the sixteenth century. Export pieces, on the other hand, can still be found in large numbers all over Europe (Nieuwdorp 1993). As these large folding altarpieces constitute an important facet of Netherlandish art from the late fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries, I will discuss one example from this group, the so called *Antwerp Triptych* in Melbourne towards the end of this chapter. Before I comment on specific altarpieces, I want to discuss in more general terms the emergence of the winged altarpiece north of the Alps and the history of early Netherlandish altarpieces in particular.

The Form and Function of the Winged Altarpiece

From the end of the 13th century, painted and carved altarpieces played an increasingly important role in the ritual of the Christian church and in the devotional practice of the medieval beholder. A change in the celebration of Holy Mass slowly led to the replacement of the *antependium* or altar-frontal by a new form of decoration, the altarpiece or retable at the back of the *mensa* (Braun 1937: 530). As a consequence of the changed ritual, the celebrant was now facing east and turned his back to the congregation, while performing mass. Recently, Christian Beutler has argued that in some places this process already began in the late eighth century (Beutler 1996). He has identified examples of stone rétables which date back to Carolingian times. Thus the concept of the altarpiece, first as a static retable, then as a folding altarpiece could be developed over the following centuries. Altarpieces increasingly became a major point of reference for the congregation and the clergy. From the fourteenth century onwards, altarpieces played a significant role in highlighting the function of the altar by forming an ornate and at the same time often a highly symbolic backdrop for the celebration of the Eucharist. Altarpieces in different parts of Europe surprise by their wealth of shapes and sizes and by their different forms of representation.

In Italy, many antependia were transformed into altarpieces at the end of the thirteenth century, in response to the changes happening in eucharistic ritual. The *Pala d'Altare*, or, the single wooden panel, soon became one of the most popular forms of decoration for the Christian altar. These large, painted wooden panels, which in the early period were mostly decorated with a gable and carved architectural framework, never had folding wings attached to

them. Nor were 'polyptychs', an alternative form of altar decoration popular south of the Alps, ever provided with wings. In Italian art, the term 'polyptych' is used to describe retables which consist of several gabled panels mostly arranged in a row and held together by a carved wooden frame. During the late Middle Ages public altarpieces and their frames became more and more ornate as can be seen, for example, in the oeuvre of Pietro Lorenzetti (c.1280-1348) (plate 90). Occasionally, these panels could be seen from the front as well as from the back as was the case with Duccio di Buoninsegna's (c.1255-1318/9) *Maestà* (Siena, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, 7' x 13', some predella panels dispersed, completed 1311). The main body of this kind of altarpiece remained static and more or less unaltered throughout the liturgical year. Italian altarpieces for private use, on the contrary, were often arranged in the shape of a triptych with movable wings. Many examples of this kind were produced in Florence by Bernardo Daddi (active in Florence, c.1312-48) and the Di Cione family (Van Os 1995: 22-3) (plate 91). Most of these small-scale folding triptychs also had pointed gables and intricate ornamental frameworks. Surprisingly, these small triptychs for private devotion did not have any obvious impact on the shape of large scale altarpieces which were designed for a place in public. These adhered in general to the pala or the two-dimensional polyptych format.

Artists and patrons north of the Alps introduced similarly radical changes to the decoration of their altars slightly later. From about 1300 onwards, more and more antependia became derelict and were subsequently transformed into or replaced by altarpieces on top of the altar. Churches in northern Europe were predominantly decorated with winged altarpieces and not with a pala or a two-dimensional polyptych in the Italian manner. 'Winged or folding altarpieces', also called 'Flügelaltar' or 'Wandelaltar', were not only aesthetically but also structurally different and had a decisive impact on the changed appearance of the altar as a whole. A winged altarpiece usually consisted of a central body and one or two pairs of shutters, which were hinged to the middle part. In the fifteenth century, altarpieces could also be fitted with an intricate crowning structure and occasionally with a predella; this applied more often to carved than to painted altarpieces. In contrast to their Italian counterparts these altarpieces could be opened and closed for different purposes.

On weekdays and during the period of Lent, the triptych remained shut, so that only the painted exterior panels could be seen by the congregation. The exterior of these altarpieces were mostly painted in grisaille or in plainer, less brilliant colours. On Sundays and on high feast days the wings of the altarpiece were opened, so that the altarpiece appeared to be twice as large as before. On these days, the brightly painted interior panels and the gilded reliefs were used as a festive setting for the celebration of mass. If the altarpiece had two pairs of wings there was also the possibility of showing an

intermediate state, for instance in order to display the favorite saints of a church or to show a different set of scenes from the life of Christ.

In contrast to the development of Italian altarpieces described above, early examples of winged altarpieces, such as the large triptychs from Cismar and Oberwesel (plate 92), were almost exclusively carved of wood. In most cases these altarpieces were composed of a box-like frame which was filled with painted or gilded wooden sculptures. The wings were often decorated with flat relief sculpture. This early form of winged altarpiece emerged at the turn of the thirteenth to the fourteenth century in the Rhine area and in Northern Germany. Its development has been explained by two different factors, firstly, by the need to protect the relics which were kept in some of these early altarpieces and secondly, by the desire to change the face of the altarpiece according to the liturgical calendar (Keller 1965; Ehresmann 1982: 368). The concept of the winged triptych probably evolved from small-scale reliquaries, especially those made for enshrining fragments of the holy cross. These reliquaries had traditionally been provided with wings in order to protect the relics when not on display. This type of triptych can be found frequently in gold-enamel reliquaries from the Mosan area, for example the Stavelot triptych (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, gold-enamelled metalwork, Mosan, after 1154), which itself protects a minute byzantine reliquary also in the shape of a triptych. Folding altarpieces as a repository for relics became particularly common in Cistercian churches, but lost popularity during the second half of the fourteenth century.

Already in 1331, a twelfth-century gold-enamelled ambo made by Nicolas of Verdun (c.1130–c.1205) had been transformed into an altarpiece with movable painted wings (Buschhausen 1980: 111). The *Klosterneuburg Altarpiece* (Klosterneuburg, Chorherrenstift, gilded and enamelled copper plate, c.1181, central panel: 1,085 × 2.63m) as it is called according to its later form, is an early example of an altarpiece which contains no sculptures and does not serve as a reliquary either. The interest in painted altarpieces received an important impulse through Emperor Charles IV and his court in Bohemia. Charles travelled to Italy several times during his reign and brought with him several painted polyptychs, which he then installed in his castle called Karlstein. Bohemian art from this period reflects the absorption of stylistic and formal characteristics prevailing in Italian art of the time (Stejskal 1978). Despite Italy's strong impact on Bohemian panel painting in the middle of the fourteenth century, the idea of the winged altarpiece was not replaced by the concept of a flat two-dimensional retable. Two examples which may illustrate this point, are the altarpiece by the Master of Vyšší Bród (c.1350, National Gallery, Prague) and the altarpiece by the Master of the Třeboň Altarpiece (c.1385–1390, National Gallery, Prague). The still existing panels originally belonged to two large painted altarpieces with wings. Apart from the region of the Czech and the Slovak Republics, large folding altarpieces can also be found in Austria and northern Germany towards the end of the fourteenth

century. In 1383 for example, Master Bertram created a spectacular altarpiece for the high altar of the church of St. Peter in Hamburg with two sets of wings, one painted, the other carved in relief (Beutler 1984: 5-14) (plate 93).

The Emergence of the Winged Altarpiece in Early Netherlandish Art

The leading role played by Flemish panel painters such as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden and others in fifteenth-century art cannot be seen in isolation from the overall success of Flemish artists in northern Europe from the end of the fourteenth century onwards. In the late fourteenth century many migrant artists from this region gained popularity at the various courts of the French royal family. Jean Bondol of Bruges (documented 1368-81), Jean Malouel of Nijmegen (c.1370-1415), the Limbourg brothers and Claus Sluter of Haarlem (c.1340/50-1405/6) are only some names from a long list of artists who worked for patrons such as Charles V, Duke Jean de Berry and Duke Philip the Bold. As Erwin Panofsky has discussed in detail, these artists were seminal for the introduction of a new naturalism into Northern art and fundamentally affected the way in which man and nature were portrayed in the following decades (Panofsky 1953: chap. I-III). Melchior Broederlam (active 1381-1409), for instance, who had his workshop in Ypres and worked at Philip the Bold's castle in Hesdin in the northern province of Artois in 1399, completed one of the earliest known early Netherlandish triptychs by adding a pair of painted wings to the carved centre part of a triptych, which had been executed slightly earlier by Jacques de Baerze in Termonde in Flanders (Snyder 1985: 70-1) (plate 94). Like many other examples from the fourteenth century, this large triptych is composed of a carved and gilded centre part: the use of painted panels is restricted to the exterior. The longevity of the carved centre piece, which existed side by side with the fully painted altarpiece in the fifteenth century, has not yet been explained satisfactorily. The close links between this kind of altarpiece and three-dimensional gold-metal reliquaries can certainly be considered as one important factor in their popularity. However, with the introduction of a heightened realism into Flemish art and, with the improvement of the technique of oil painting in the early fifteenth century, panel paintings came more and more into fashion, and consequently soon conquered the centre of the opened altarpiece. An early example of the fully painted altarpiece is the so-called *Norfolk triptych* (Rotterdam, Boijmans Van Beunigen Museum, oak, 33.2 x 59 cm, c.1415-20) (plate 95) which has been attributed to an anonymous southern Netherlandish master (Van Os 1995: 116-22). Although both the interior and the exterior of the triptych have now been covered completely with painting, the compartmentalisation of the interior pictorial plane by means of a painted architectural substructure refers back to the earlier type of the carved altarpiece. In most of these compartments one can find depictions of statue-like male and female saints. The middle axis of the central panel depicts devotional images, the *Man of Sorrows* supported by

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

angels, and the *Coronation of the Virgin*, both placed under illusionistically painted carved baldachins.

If one compares the existing body of winged altarpieces from the fourteenth century with the corpus of folding altarpieces from the fifteenth century, one can observe a sharp increase in the production of fully-painted examples. Due to the growing importance of the city as an active centre of trade and due to the strengthening of a wealthy middle class, painted diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs were more widely commissioned and acquired than before. From the early fifteenth century onwards, burghers from the prospering northern provinces were increasingly acting as patrons of the arts, a role which had been filled previously by members of the court, princes of the church and by the high nobility. Now, some of the most ostentatious altarpieces were purchased by influential individuals such as merchants, lawyers, bankers and craftsmen. Nicholas Rolin and his wife Guigone de Salins, Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut, the Portinari family are some of the names which spring to mind and which may exemplify this trend. Many of these patrons, though, are not known by name. Their portrait on the altarpiece itself is a striking documentation of their perpetual devotion and also demonstrates their wish to be immortalised in a realistic representation of their likeness. Apart from these men and women, groups of individuals, who formed an important part of the social fabric of civic communities, also acted as patrons of the art. Guilds, confraternities or city councils are documented as having commissioned altarpieces for the decoration of their places of communal worship.

Netherlandish altarpieces do not all follow the same structural pattern or lay-out, but are, on the contrary, characterised by a diversity of shapes and sizes. By far the most common form of altarpiece is the triptych. Rogier van der Weyden's *Columba altarpiece* in Munich (Munich, Alte Pinakothek, oil on oak, central panel: 138 × 153 cm, c.1450-55) and Memling's *SS John Altarpiece* in the Hospital of St John in Bruges (Bruges, Memling Museum, oil on oak, central panel: 193.5 × 194.7 cm, 1479) (plate 96) are two examples of this kind (Panofsky 1971: 286-9; Blum 1969: 87-96). These triptychs can vary considerably in size according to the needs of the patron and depending on the context for which they were made. These aspects will be elaborated in more depth when discussing the *Dresden Triptych* by Jan van Eyck and the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* by Dieric Bouts.

Painted polyptychs occur occasionally in fifteenth-century northern Europe, but are not as common as triptychs or diptychs. However, the existence of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Hubert and Jan van Eyck (Ghent, S. Bavo Cathedral, oil on oak, central panel: with new frame: 375 × 260 cm, completed in 1432), alone justifies the mentioning of this third category in our context (Dhanens 1980: 74-121). The large and iconographically complex *Ghent Altarpiece* is a unique manifestation rather than a representative example of a well established tradition in the genesis of early Netherlandish

altarpieces. Polyptychs can be found more frequently among a different group of Netherlandish altarpieces, namely those which comprise a range of different media, in particular painting and sculpture. There are large numbers of altarpieces of Netherlandish and German origin, which display a multitude of relief sculptures in the centre and on the interior wings and are decorated with paintings on the outer wings. A representative of this kind will be introduced at the end of this chapter.

A third group of Netherlandish paintings which could also function as altarpieces are 'diptychs', mostly painted in oil and tempera on wood, which immediately became a favourite among the clientele of Flemish artists. The 'devotional half-length portrait diptych' in particular, which was probably first introduced by Jean Malouel and soon after adopted by Rogier van der Weyden, ingeniously combines two traditions, the devotional image and the secular portrait, both of which had featured on single panels beforehand (Friedman 1977). One of the most accomplished examples of this kind is the diptych of Martin van Nieuwenhove in Bruges (Bruges, Memling Museum, oil on oak, each panel 52 × 41.5 cm, 1487) which was painted in 1487 by Hans Memling. It shows the owner in adoration of the Virgin with child, who are now placed in close proximity in the same room.

Altarpieces for Private Devotion: the Dresden Triptych by Jan van Eyck (Plate 97)

The *Dresden Triptych* (Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, oil on oak, central panel with original frame: 33.1 × 27.5 cm, 1437) is one of the best preserved paintings in the oeuvre of Jan van Eyck, who can be counted among the most successful and most influential painters of his time. In contrast to many of his colleagues, he was employed as a court artist, with the title of '*varlet de chambre*' by Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (Belting and Kruse 1995: 157–8). As can be seen from his body of surviving works, Van Eyck was not working exclusively for the court, but accepted several commissions from the wider public, that is foreign bankers, local merchants and craftsmen (Dhanens 1980).

An inscription on the lower frame of the central panel not only names the artist, Jan van Eyck, and the date of completion, 1437, but also includes the painter's motto 'ALS ICH CAN' or 'As I can'. (Dhanens 1980: 385). As is the case in a number of other works by the same artist, the motto is not written in Latin like the rest of the inscription, but consists of a mixture of Flemish words encoded in Greek letters. The artist's interest in cryptic inscriptions and the play with words and alphabets makes the study of the surviving original frames particularly interesting and worthwhile. The recently discovered date on the frame enables us to firmly place the small triptych in the late oeuvre of the artist, who died in Bruges in 1441. The minute size of the triptych, which measures 33.1 by 27.5cm when closed, has led to the conclusion that this painting was most likely used as a portable

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

triptych for private devotion by the original owner. Several suggestions have been made as to the identity of the patron, who is portrayed on the left wing of the opened triptych. Due to the loss of the authentic coat of arms, which was destroyed when painted over by a later owner, neither the name nor the nationality of the piously kneeling patron have yet been ascertained.

As is the case with other examples of early Netherlandish altarpieces, this triptych conveys a strong sense of hierarchy between the wings and the central panel, as well as between the inner and the outer faces of the triptych. The difference in material and spiritual value is expressed symbolically by the use of *grisaille* on the exterior of the wings (plate 98). Van Eyck seems to have taken pleasure in deceiving the beholder through his intricate play with realism and illusionism. He did not simply paint the scene in monochrome colours on neutral ground, but depicted the Virgin and St. Gabriel as ivory or alabaster statuettes situated in faintly lit three-dimensional niches. Towards the end of his career, Jan van Eyck experimented systematically with the different spheres of reality and thus provides a visual answer to the artistic concerns of his time. As Rudolf Preimesberger has demonstrated in the case of the *Annunciation Diptych* (Madrid, Museum Thyssen-Bornemisza, c.1437-41, oil on wood, each panel with original frame: 38.8 × 23.2 cm) van Eyck responds in a highly sophisticated manner to the theoretical ideas expressed by Alberti in contemporary Florence (Preimesberger 1991).

The focal point of the *Dresden Triptych* is the mother and child group on the centre panel of the opened triptych. The youthful and almost maiden-like Virgin Mary is seated on a slightly elevated bronze throne under an elaborate gold-brocade baldachin, which has been placed at the eastern end of a richly decorated medieval church. In this painting, Mary and the Christ child occupy the space in the sanctuary which is usually designated for the high altar. In recent literature the figure of Mary has been interpreted as a symbol for the altar whereby the artist makes a subtle reference to the sacrament of mass (Purtle 1982; Lane 1984: 13-35). The idea of conveying a specific message to the beholder is expressed more openly in the gesture of the naked child on Mary's lap. Here, Christ has turned to the donor on the left, holding out an open scroll with the inscription 'Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart' (Matthew 11: 29, Dhanens 1980: 248). The donor and St. Michael and St. Catherine, on the two wings of the opened triptych, have been placed in the aisles of the same church interior. The triptych is held together by the continuity of space and the flow of diffuse light which is flooding through the glass windows on the northern side of the church. The unification of the pictorial space in the opened triptych is one of the major innovations introduced by early Netherlandish artists in the first quarter of the 15th century. In order to achieve this effect, artists such as Jan van Eyck and the Master of Flémalle did not use mathematically constructed perspective, as they were not yet familiar with this technique. In the *Dresden Triptych* for instance, the converging lines of the architecture, the oriental carpet and the

colourful tiles do not meet in one focal point, because van Eyck had based his constructions on observation only. Nevertheless, the proportions are well balanced, Mary and the Christ child are seated convincingly at the back of the church, whereas the donor and the saints feature in the foreground of the picture. In general, van Eyck's paintings do not lack depth and three-dimensionality because they are based on empiricism. On the contrary, due to the artist's incorruptible eye, his paintings convince by their atmospheric qualities and by their luminosity.

Among early Netherlandish artists, the Master of Flémalle was one of the first to experiment with the idea of the unification of space. His interest in this concept can be observed in the so-called *Seilern Triptych* (London, Courtauld Institute, Prince Gate Collection, oil on wood, central panel: 60 × 48.9 cm) (Belting and Eichberger 1983: 138–42; J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer et al. 1992: 84–87) (plate 99). In both examples the artist had expanded the landscape of the central panel to the left and the right and filled the additional space with topographical information as well as with related scenes of minor importance. Similar to the *Dresden Triptych*, a donor appears in a kneeling pose at the bottom of the left wing, but nevertheless within the same pictorial space. In these two examples, the progressiveness of the naturalistic spatial setting is curtailed by the archaic use of gold background, which in the case of the *Seilern Triptych* is filled with ornaments carrying symbolic meaning. The final step towards a more realistic depiction of the sky and nature in general, is taken in a slightly later work by the same master, the *Nativity in Dijon* (Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, oil on wood, 84.1 × 69.9 cm, c.1425) and is further developed by Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries.

Jan van Eyck has often been praised for his mature naturalism, his jewel-like rendering of forms of figures and his ability to capture the essence of such different material as glass and velvet, stone and metalwork. He achieved these effects not only by meticulous observation, but also by using the technique of oil painting which enabled him to achieve this greater luminosity and depth of colour, which is so typical of his works. The practice of dissolving pigments of colour in fast-drying oils was not invented by van Eyck and his contemporaries as suggested by Vasari, but was perfected and refined by these artists (Dhanens 1980: 66–70). The mastery of this technique contributed considerably to the success of early Netherlandish artists in their own country as well as in other parts of Europe.

The realism in van Eyck's work can be found in paintings depicting domestic interiors as well as in landscapes. This realism is often counter-balanced by a subtle symbolism which can be found in most of his works yet at different levels of prevalence. Marian symbolism features most prominently in van Eyck's *oeuvre* as he was, more than any other artist, concerned with depictions of the Virgin Mary (Purtle 1992). Many of the objects and attributes in van Eyck's pictures have been read as metaphorical images and it is on the basis of several inscriptions on the frames and in the paintings

themselves that we can document the artist's familiarity with certain aspects of Marian symbolism. One inscription for example has been used by van Eyck in four of his works in order to describe the outstanding virtues of the Virgin. The following text which consists of fragments from the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, initially appeared on the wooden frames of the *Dresden Triptych* and of the *Van der Paele Madonna* (Bruges, Groeningemuseum, oil on wood, with original frame: 140.8 × 176.5 cm, c.1434–36), on the painted frames of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and on the hinges of the *Madonna in the Church* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, oil on wood, 31 × 14 cm, original frame lost, c.1425): 'She is more beautiful than the sun and all the army of the stars; compared to the light she is superior. She is truly the reflection of light and the spotless mirror of God.' (Dhanens 1980: 385). Consequently, the portrayal of light in its different forms and reflections as well as specific objects such as the mirror have been interpreted as symbolic representations of the nature of the Virgin. In addition to deciphering the various attributes of the Virgin and the Christ child, attempts have been made to interpret early Netherlandish altarpieces in the context of the mass and the celebration of the Eucharist (Lane 1984). Recently, Panofsky's fundamental concept of 'disguised' or 'hidden' symbolism, which was the main theoretical basis for many far-reaching and sometimes contradictory iconographic studies, has come under attack from various quarters (Silver 1986: 523–5). Many scholars now argue rather in favour of 'overt' than of 'hidden' symbolism, which is especially evident in the case of van Eyck's Marian imagery.

Collective Bodies as Patrons of the Arts: Dieric Bouts' Holy Sacrament Altarpiece (Plate 100)

The second example to be considered in this brief discourse on Netherlandish altarpieces is the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* by Dieric Bouts in the church of St. Peter in Louvain (Louvain, St Peter church, oil on oak, central panel: 180 × 150 cm, 1467). This altarpiece, which was executed by an artist slightly younger than van Eyck, was painted about thirty years later than the *Dresden Triptych* and represents a different category of altarpiece, namely work which was commissioned by a group for display in public.

The altarpiece by Dieric Bouts is one of the best documented triptychs in early Netherlandish art as its original contract has survived in transcription (Blum 1969: 146; Welzel 1991). The contract, which was discovered in the archives of the church of St. Peter at the beginning of the twentieth century, tells us a considerable amount about the conditions under which it was produced. It names the artist, the date of the commission and the period of time allowed for its completion. It lists four representatives who acted on behalf of the brotherhood and two theologians who were employed to help Dieric Bouts with the correct interpretation of a clearly defined typological programme.

As we know from the contract and the history of the church of St Peter, the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* was not commissioned by a devout individual but by a religious community, the brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, which saw it as one of its tasks to embellish the two chapels in the choir of the church of St Peter with painted altarpieces, tapestries and sculptural objects. *The Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* as well as the earlier commissioned sacrament tower bear witness to the brotherhood's central spiritual concern, the veneration of the holy sacrament. In the late Middle Ages, guilds, confraternities and other collective bodies can increasingly be traced as major clients of Netherlandish art. Most artists active during this period executed works for collective bodies as well as for individual patrons. *The SS John altarpiece* by Hans Memling for instance (plate 96) or Geertgen tot Sint Jan's (c.1460–c.1490) panels in the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna may serve as examples of this widespread trend. As in the case of individual owners, these commissions were usually made as an act of piety as well as an act of self-representation, which explains the presence of several portraits among the saints and the holy figures in the foreground. In the case of the Holy Sacrament altarpiece for example, we can observe four men, clad in Burgundian dress, who appear on the central panel behind Christ and the twelve apostles. In the past they have been identified with the various members of the brotherhood as well as with the artist, Dieric Bouts himself. Already in 1450, the brotherhood had become active in decorating the church of St Peter by commissioning a stone tabernacle or monstrance tower. This spire functioned as a receptacle for the consecrated host and was situated opposite the chapel of the Holy Sacrament. S. N. Blum has argued that the altarpiece itself was commissioned for the bicentennial celebrations of the installation of the feast of Corpus Christi (Blum 1969: 62). The considerable size of the altarpiece as well as the shape of the still existing chapel in the church of St. Peter, suggest that the altarpiece was designed to serve the lay confraternity in its devotional exercises. At the same time it can be seen as a public statement intended to demonstrate the religious activity of the lay confraternity to the community as a whole.

In contrast to the *Dresden Triptych*, the *Last Supper* scene in the centre of the opened triptych has been designed by mathematically constructed perspective, which had been introduced to the North by Petrus Christus in the middle of the century. Despite the fact that Bouts was well-informed about the latest technical innovations in Netherlandish painting, his altarpiece looks much more old-fashioned than the earlier discussed triptych by van Eyck. The arrangement of figures in the central panel, for instance, follows a rather rigid, symmetrical pattern with an emphasis on the main axis in order to highlight Christ and the act of consecration of the host. The spatiality of the central panel is however severely obstructed by the archaic compartmentalisation of the wings. The paragraphs in the contract which are concerned with subject matter, leave little room for the new concept of

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

unified space, and consequently the scenes on the wings do not form a harmonious whole with the central panel. Three of the four side scenes depict rigid figure compositions in an open landscapes. The 'Eating of the Paschal Lamb', an interior scene in the lower left hand corner, however, shows the artist's attempt to complement the central scene by using oblique perspective. The programme chosen by the confraternity and its theological advisers is based on the concept of typology. *Typology* is a term used to describe a particular system of reasoning which was developed already in early Christian discourse in an attempt to explain the deeper meaning of the life and death of Christ and to relate these events to a broader concept of human salvation (e.g. St. Augustine). According to this school of thought incidents and prophecies taking place in the Old Testament already foreshadow major events happening in the New Testament. In high medieval treatises such as the *Biblia Pauperum* (Bible of the Poor) or the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* (Mirror of human Salvation) up to three different Old Testament scenes were put in relation to one New Testament scene. Illustrated manuscripts of this kind have been identified as the most likely source for three of the scenes, which accompany the *Last Supper* on the central panel of the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* (Blum 1969: 61). The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* was still a popular text in the late Middle Ages as can be seen from the fact that it was chosen as one of the first manuscripts to be printed in the Netherlands with movable types. An edition from the early seventies of the 15th century, for example, shows the last supper accompanied by the 'Collecting of Manna', the 'Meeting of Abraham and Melchisedech' and the 'Eating of the Paschal Lamb' (Snyder 1985: 271, fig. 270). The fourth scene, the 'Dream of Elijah', is not part of the standard iconography of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, which was developed in Dominican circles during the first quarter of the fourteenth century. In her investigation of sacramental themes in early Netherlandish painting, Barbara Lane stresses Christ's dual role as priest and sacrifice and points out the strong emphasis on sacramental themes for this particular altarpiece (Lane 1984: 107-117). Bouts' painting is therefore almost an ideal backdrop for the celebration of the mass, as it illustrates the biblical scene on which the mass is modelled, as well as those Old Testament scenes which were seen as prefigurations of the last supper by the medieval theologians.

Coming back to the question of disguised or overt symbolism discussed briefly in the previous section, it can be said that the notion of hidden symbolism hardly applies to this particular altarpiece. The underlying programme is almost self-evident and the arrangement of scenes is so logical and self-contained that there seems to be little room for a more subtle message. This altarpiece could almost be described as an example of dry didacticism as its form and content are dominated by the concept of typology. Preference has been given to a more traditional principle of composition, which forced the artist to forsake the more illusionistic concept of a unified

space as put into practice by Jan van Eyck and the Master of Flémalle. Some attempts have been made by scholars to imbue individual objects such as the chandelier, the fireplace and the water basin with symbolic meaning in accordance with Panofsky's concept of 'disguised symbolism'. Whether these objects were indeed intended to convey symbolic meaning or were merely quotations from earlier altarpieces remains open to discussion. Their inclusion in the picture is, however, a good example of the eclectic style of Dieric Bouts and some of his colleagues who frequently appropriated single motifs or whole compositions from works by van Eyck and the Master of Flémalle.

Mass Production and Team Work in the Production of Netherlandish Altarpieces: the Carved and Painted Retable in the National Gallery of Victoria (Plate 101)

The triptychs by Jan van Eyck and Dieric Bouts represent two important facets of the production of early Netherlandish altarpieces in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the custom-made altarpiece for one or several individuals. In the case of such commissions, verbal arrangements were made, or written agreements were drawn up, between the artist and the patron, to secure the quality of a work, its price, the period of time in which it had to be completed and, occasionally, its subject matter. Generally, these contracts rather served to secure the interests of the client than to protect the rights of the artist. The contract for the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece*, for example, contained the following clause, which was inserted to ensure that the head of the workshop executed the work himself and did not pass on this task to his assistants: 'And the aforementioned Master Dieric has contracted to make this altarpiece to the best of his ability, to spare neither labour nor time, but to do his utmost to demonstrate in it the art which God has bestowed on him ... And it is understood that said Master Dieric, having begun work on this altarpiece, shall not contract any other work of this kind until this one has been completed...' (Blum 1969: 146)

In the second half of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, an increasing number of panel paintings and altarpieces were produced without having a specific commission or patron in mind. They were made with the intention of selling them in the workshop or at one of the big annual fairs held in important centres of trade such as Bruges, Antwerp or Brussels. Due to a considerable increase in demand and to the popularity of Netherlandish art in different parts of Europe, popular designs for devotional images and altarpieces were copied and multiplied, often by the workshop of the master who had initially created a new image (De Patoul and van Schoute 1994: 125-41). The *St. Luke Painting the Madonna* by Rogier van der Weyden for example exists in several fifteenth-century replicas and was additionally reproduced in reverse in a sixteenth-century Brussels tapestry. This practice of making high-quality replicas in the workshop of a master was only one way of dealing with the growing need for altarpieces and other works of art.

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

Standardisation of designs and a development towards mass production can be seen as alternative responses to this situation. This approach becomes apparent in the production of large-scale carved and painted altarpieces, which were produced in great numbers in Antwerp and Brussels. Many of these ready-made altarpieces were acquired by customers from abroad who were interested in embellishing their church with a fashionable Netherlandish altarpiece, as it was highly decorative and affordable at the same time (Jacobs 1989). The *Retable of the Childhood and Passion of Christ* in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne is a typical example of this type of altarpiece. These mixed-media altarpieces usually consisted of a carved centre and one or several pairs of shutters with panel paintings hinged to the central body of the retable. The tradition of combining carved elements with painted panels can be traced back well into the fourteenth century and had been kept alive during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Perier d'Ieteren 1984). As artists from the various guilds constantly co-operated with one another and therefore used a similar pool of visual material, it seems reasonable not to look at carved and painted altarpieces as separate entities. Early Netherlandish painters such as Robert Campin were frequently employed to polychrome sculptures, as this task fell to members of the painters' guild. Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of Flemish sculpture in their painted work and occasionally even competed with artists working in other media. Van der Weyden's *Deposition Altarpiece* in Madrid (Madrid, Prado Museum, oil on wood, central panel: 220 × 262 cm, c.1430-35), for instance, is a pictorial response to carved and painted altarpieces of the time. The already-mentioned *Retable of Champmol* mentioned earlier (plate 94), by the sculptor Jacques de Baerze and the painter Melchior Broederlam, is an early example of a multi-media altarpiece, which combines the work of two of the best Flemish artists, in this case for a custom-made altarpiece (Panofsky 1971: 86-9).

The altarpiece in Melbourne which was carved and painted over a century later than the retable in Dijon, gives proof of the strength of this tradition of mixed-media altarpieces. In both the earlier and the later examples, the central carved body of the altarpiece consists of separate narrative scenes depicting the infancy and the passion of Christ. In keeping with other Brabantine altarpieces the central scene is placed within an elevated central section which is filled with an elaborately carved canopy which has been decorated with late Gothic tracery. In the Melbourne retable the four major passion scenes fill the larger compartments, whereas further episodes from the same narrative can be found on each side of the highly ornamental frame which enshrines each major scene. This element can also be found in other carved altarpieces such as the contemporaneous triptychs in Elmpt (Elmpt/Overhetfeld, St Maria-an-der-Heide, oak, 217 × 198 × 37 cm, c.1510-20) (plate 102) and in Arlon (Arlon, Musée Luxembourgeois, oak, painted wings, 201 × 230 cm, c.1510-15) (Marijnissen et al. 1983: 103; Nieuwdorp

1993: 40–51). It recalls the popular arch motif which appears frequently in Rogier van der Weyden's, Petrus Christus' and Dieric Bouts' painted altarpieces. In the Melbourne retable, three episodes from the childhood of Christ are fitted into smaller compartments at the bottom of the central corpus, where they almost form a predella structure. The liveliness and naturalism of each single scene is counterbalanced by a prolific use of gold leaf, silver foil and blue colour which undercuts the heightened naturalism of the sculptural form and gives the interior scenes a more precious, non-worldly appearance. Neither an inscription on the frame nor any other written document provide us with information on the maker of the retable or the circumstances under which it was produced. Nevertheless we can assume that the Melbourne retable was carved and painted in Antwerp during the first two decades of the sixteenth century. The guild mark of Antwerp, a palm with five fingers, can be found 28 times on the sculptures and once on the case of the central body as well as on the frame of one of the painted wings (Marijnissen et al. 1983: 106). This practice of documenting the place of origin of carved altarpieces can already be observed in the middle of the fifteenth century in the city of Brussels and slightly later also in the cities of Mechelen and Antwerp. The guilds decided to use these marks as a means of quality control which would guarantee that non-commissioned objects complied with the standards of the guild. By making the issuing of a stamp a condition for sale the guild committee attempted to reinforce its strict regulation of the quality of the material and the standard of craftsmanship. In the case of the commissioned altarpiece this function had been fulfilled by the contract between artist and patron (Jacobs 1989: 213). Whereas in Brussels, painters, sculptors and joiners belonged to different guilds, each of which used their own mark, the Antwerp guild of St. Luke encompassed both painters and sculptors alike.

The complexity of the production process can be seen from the involvement of several highly specialised craftsmen who all contributed to the completion of the final product. In the case of the Melbourne altarpiece, which measures 2.3 by 4.5m when opened, we can assume that at least one joiner, two painters and two to three sculptors were involved in the production of the retable (Marijnissen et al. 1983: 106–8). The painters, for example, not only provided the six painted wings which are hinged to the carved centre, but also painted the individual sculptures after they had been assembled in their deep box-like frame.

Many of these carved and painted altarpieces were made for export to places such as Sweden, Portugal, Spain, Germany and France. Analyses of the surviving retables have given evidence of a strong trend towards mass production and standardisation, which manifests itself in the repetition of single motives, individual figures or whole scenes (Marijnissen, et al. 1983: 100–101; Jacobs 1987). The prefabrication of specific sculptures and ornaments as well as a certain uniformity in design and iconography reveals

THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

this practice (Jacobs 1989: 219–222). Because of these specific workshop conditions it seems wrong to search for a single creative ‘hand’ behind these carved and painted Netherlandish altarpieces. The overall layout of the painted wings and the carved centre is in keeping with many of the other retables from the same period (Nieuwdorp 1993). In a typical fashion some of the most common scenes from the childhood and the passion of Christ have been arranged according to their relative importance and their place in the narrative itself. Although none of the existing altarpieces is identical in shape or subject matter, the iconography is usually kept as general as possible in order to be suitable for almost every environment. This can also be observed in the case of the Melbourne retable with its vast array of individual scenes. The diversity of themes to be found in the opened polyptych makes the retable extremely versatile as it can be used for different devotional purposes. It can be read as a narrative account of the infancy and passion of Christ and it can be equally used in the context of the celebration of the mass. Some of the depictions can be associated with important church feasts, e.g. Easter, Pentecost and Christmas, whereas the Pietà scene at the bottom of the crucifixion stands in the tradition of devotional images of a different kind. The iconography of the closed altarpiece which could be seen on normal weekdays stresses the importance of the Eucharist in the context of an altarpiece. On the four larger panels we can find scenes which are in part already familiar to us from the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece*. Additional to the ‘Last Supper’ and the ‘Meeting between Abraham and Melchisedech’, the two central panels, as well as the two smaller panels at the top, display the ‘Mass of St. Gregory’. These three scenes were placed on the outside of the retable in order to allude to the spiritual and symbolic meaning of the mass, which was performed by the priest in front of the altarpiece.

The similarities between the exterior of the Melbourne retable and Dieric Bouts’ *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece* can be explained by the sacramental character of the programme, which reflects the primary function of the public altarpiece. Drawing a comparison between the small *Dresden Triptych* and the Melbourne retable is less fruitful, as these two altarpieces have very little in common. To explain the incongruities between the jewel-like, portable triptych in Dresden and the busy and boisterous retable in Melbourne exclusively in terms of the differences in the skills and talents of the artists involved, would not do justice to either of these works of art. The two altarpieces were not only made under completely different circumstances, but also aimed at a different clientele and fulfilled different functions in the context for which they were conceived. Additionally, both works of art can be seen as representatives of two distinct traditions, the carved and painted altarpiece of the kind produced by Jacques de Baerze and Melchior Broederlam and the fully painted triptych as could be found in the œuvres of the Master of Flémalle and Jan van Eyck. It is this wealth of forms and functions, media and techniques which makes the development of early

Netherlandish altarpieces a particularly worthwhile subject for study. The three examples discussed above have been chosen to illustrate the fact that the character of folding altarpieces from the fifteenth and early sixteenth century is dependent on a number of different factors. While the creative talent of the artist in charge is essential for its success as a work of art, the character of the final product is equally determined by the specific workshop conditions, by its function and its future context.

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While a considerable number of studies has been published in recent years on individual diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs from the Burgundian Netherlands, no comprehensive study has been written to date which systematically investigates the genesis of the various types of altarpieces and the difference in function of these objects, which is reflected in the basic structure and in the overall shape of the altarpiece. Barbara Lane's study, *The Altar and the Altarpiece. Sacramental Themes in Netherlandish Painting* (New York, 1984) puts the emphasis on the liturgical role of fifteenth-century panel paintings and is less concerned with the difference between public and private altarpieces. In this context two further articles deserve to be mentioned: Harald Keller, 'Der Flügelaltar als Reliquienschrein', in: *Festschrift Theodor Müller. Studien zur Geschichte der europäischen Plastik* (Munich, 1965), pp. 125-44 and Donald Ehresmann, 'Some Observations on the Role of Liturgy in the Early Winged Altarpiece', *The Art Bulletin* 64 (1982), 359-69. In his early study entitled: *Studien über die Altartypen in der niederländischen Malerei des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1949) Heinz Peters has investigated also a variety of different altarpieces.

There is a considerable number of texts which provide useful information on either triptychs or diptychs. The following studies deal with tri-partite altarpieces in Netherlandish and German Art: Klaus Lankheit, *Das Triptychon als Pathosformel* (Heidelberg, 1959); Shirley Nelson Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969); W. Pils, *Das Triptychon als Kompositions- und Erzählform in der deutschen Tafelmalerei von den Anfängen bis zur Dürerzeit* (Munich, 1970) and more recently Antje M. Neuner, *Das Triptychon in der altniederländischen*

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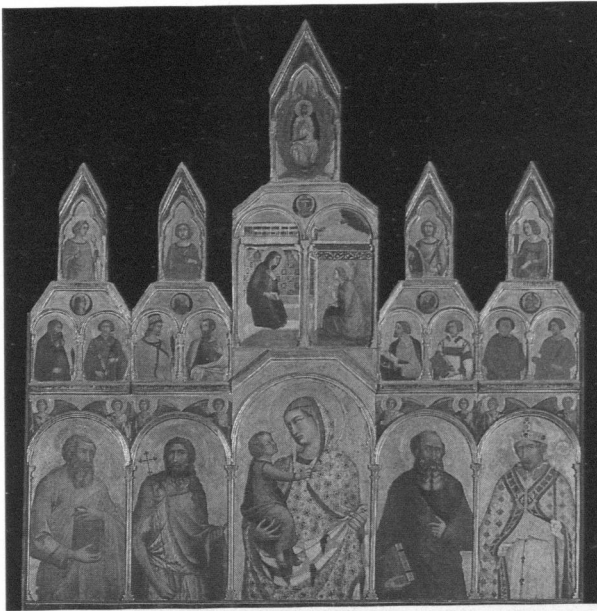
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THE WINGED ALTARPIECE IN EARLY NETHERLANDISH ART

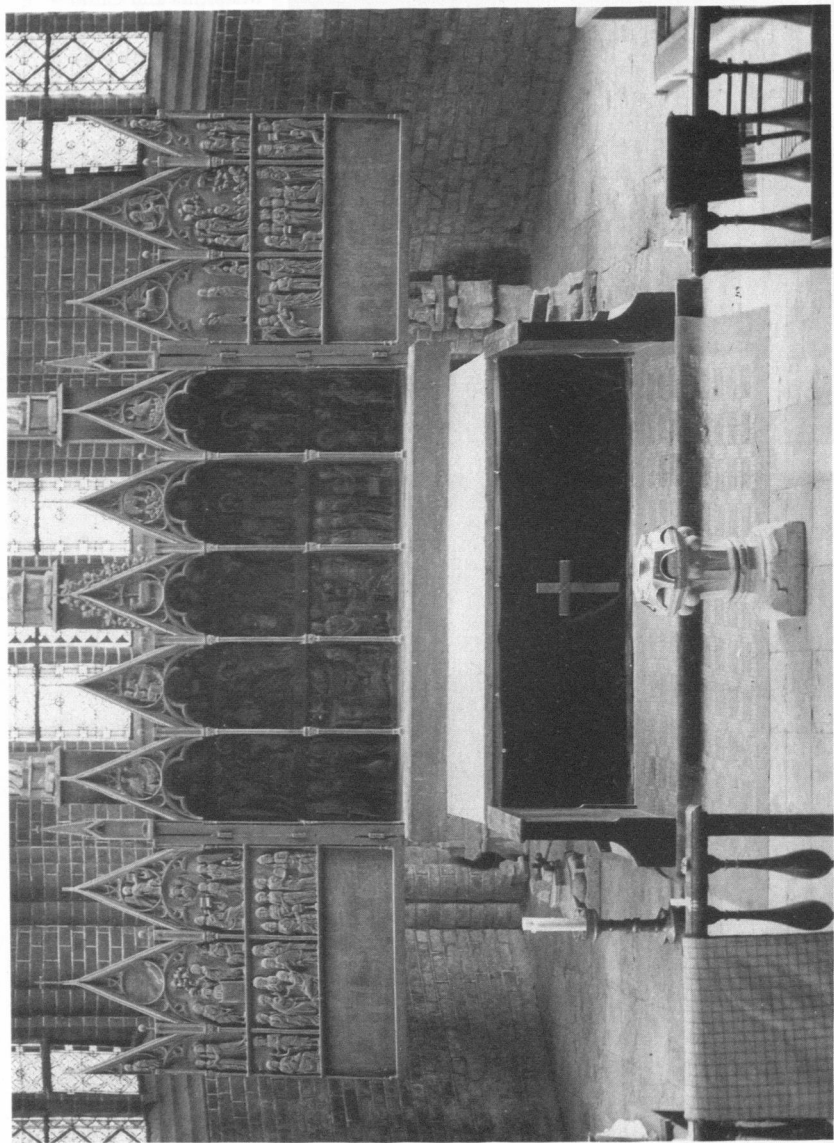
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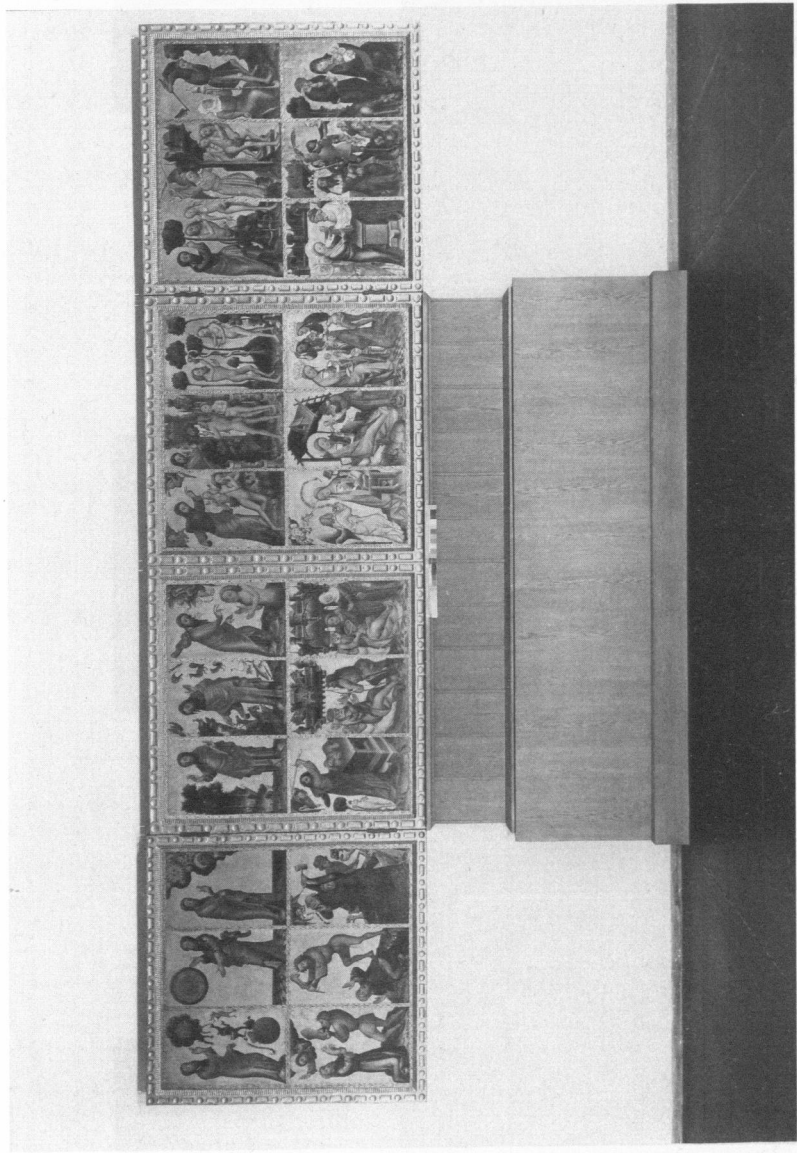
90. Pietro Lorenzetti, polyptych 1320–4, Madonna and Child with Annunciation and Saints, Pieve di Sta. Maria.



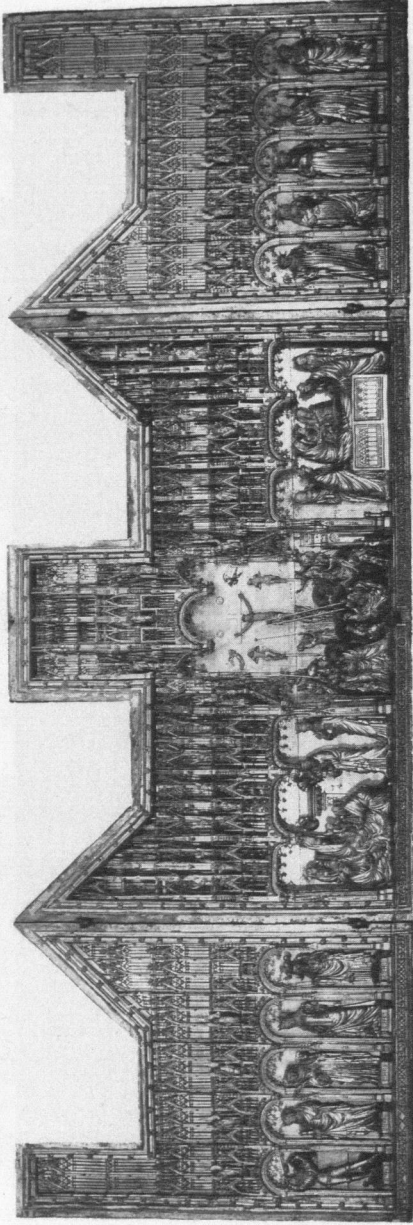
91. Bernardo Daddi, Virgin and Child enthroned with Saints (centre), 1338, 87.5 × 42 cm. © Courtauld Institute Galleries, Princes Gate collection.



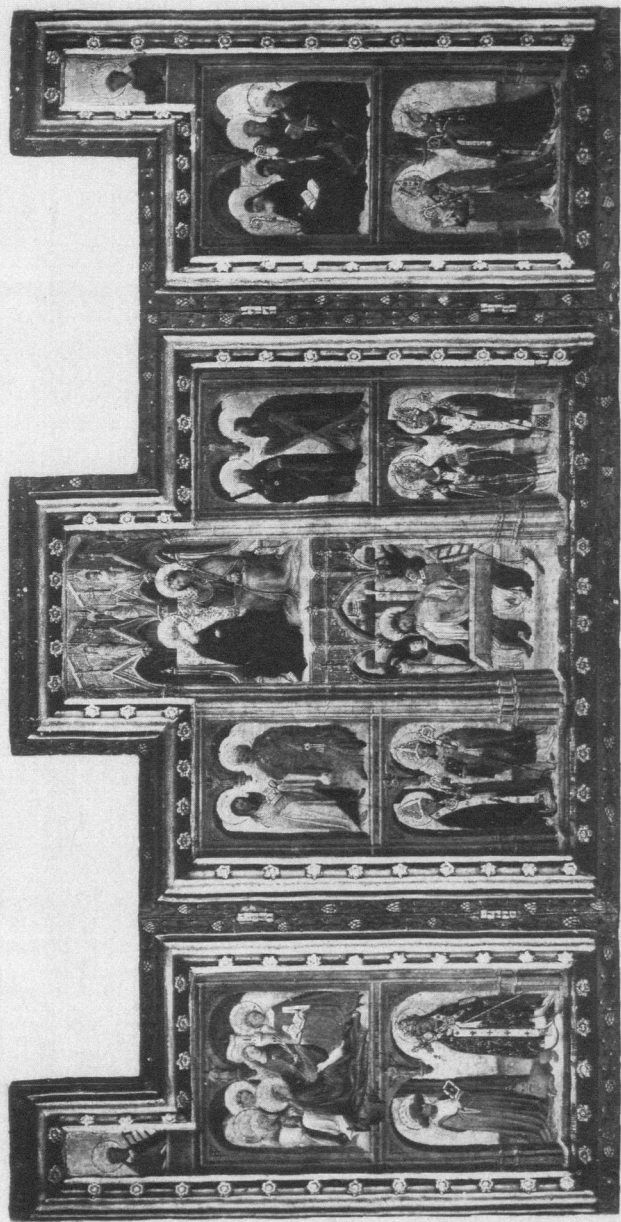
92. Carved altarpiece, with relic compartments, opened, Cismar Abbey, c.1320. © Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.



93. Meister Bertram, Grabow altarpiece, with two sets of painted wings (opened: first state) c.1379, c. 243 × 681 cm, panel.
© Elke Walford, Hamburger Kunsthalle.



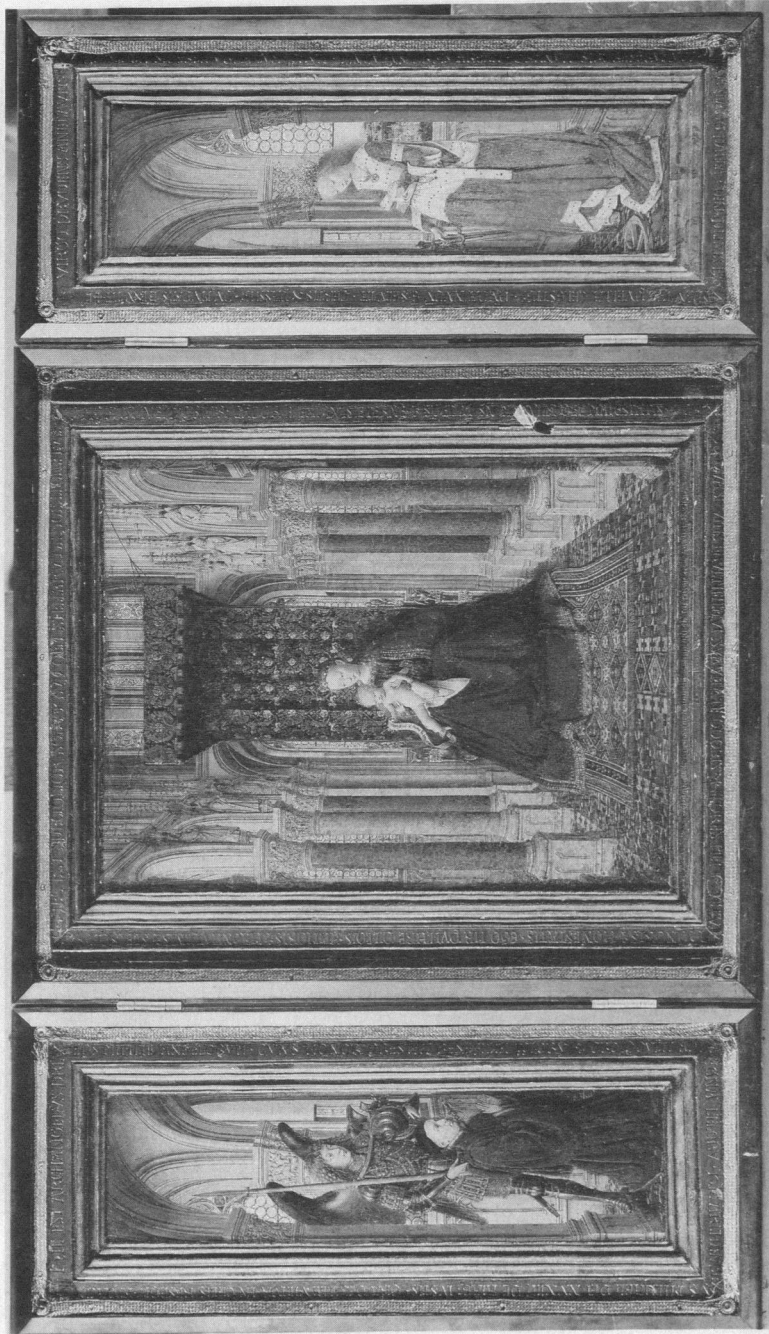
94. Jacques de Baerze (centre) and Melchior Broderlam (wings), The Champmol Altarpiece, Scenes from the Life of Christ, opened, before 1399, Dijon.
The paintings are on the reverse of the sculpted relief wings and are not seen in this photograph.
© Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon.



95. Anonymous, southern Netherlandish, The Norfolk Triptych, Coronation of the Virgin, Man of sorrows and saints, c.1415-20, opened: 33 x 58 cm, © Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.



96. Hans Memling, Altarpiece of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, oak, 1479, central panel: 173.7 × 173.8 cm. © Kik-Brussel.



97. Jan van Eyck, The Dresden Triptych (open), Madonna and Child with donor and saints, 1437, oil on oak, central panel with original frame: 33.1 x 27.5 cm, © Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.



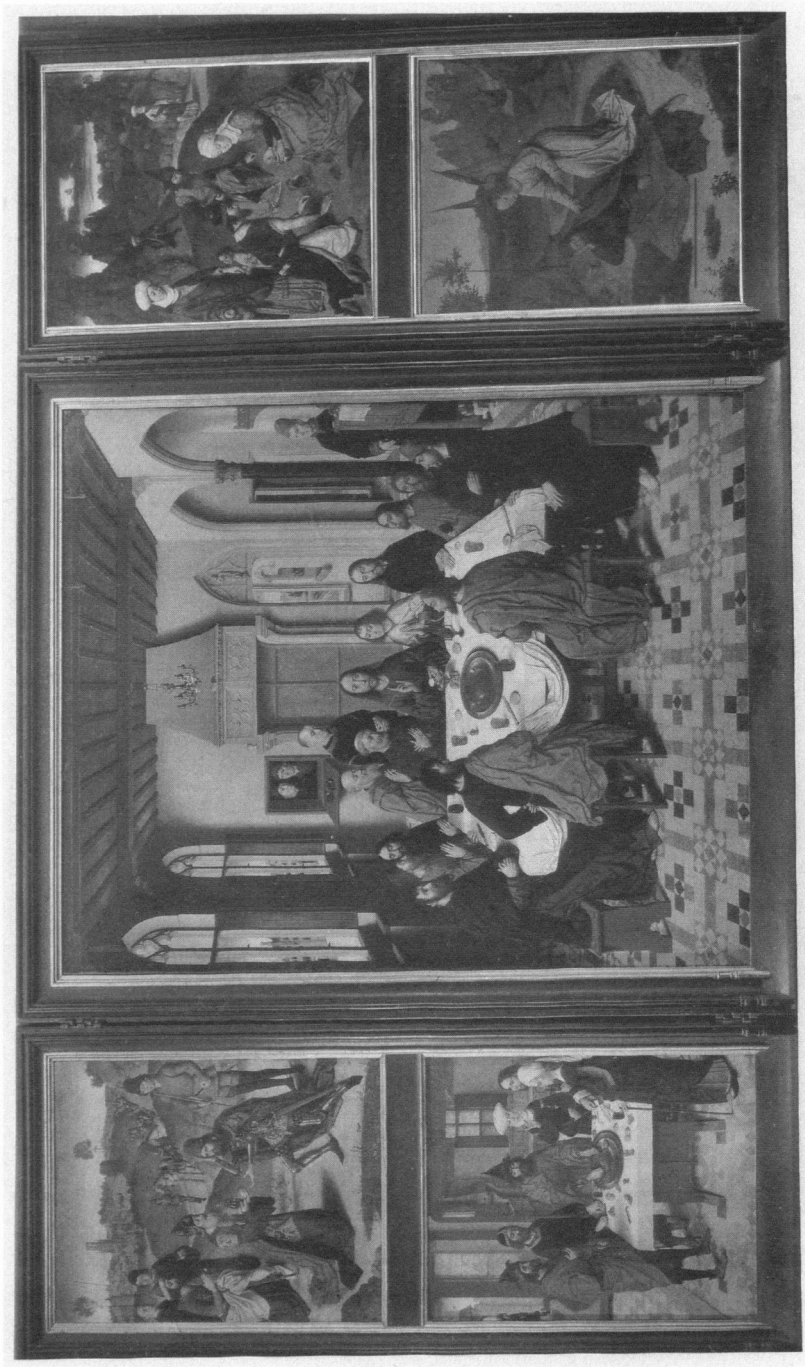
98. Jan van Eyck, The Dresden Triptych (closed), Annunciation, 1437.

Oil on oak, each panel without a frame: 27.5 × 8 cm.

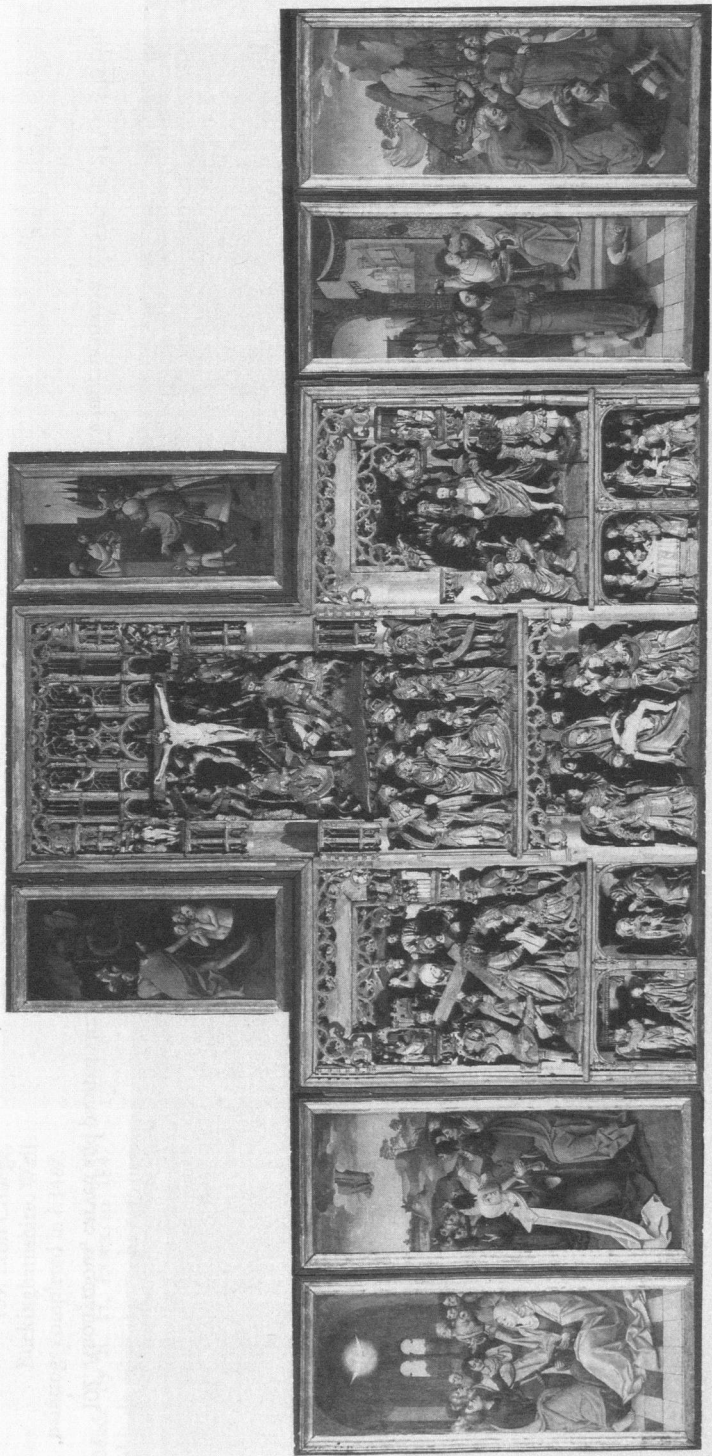
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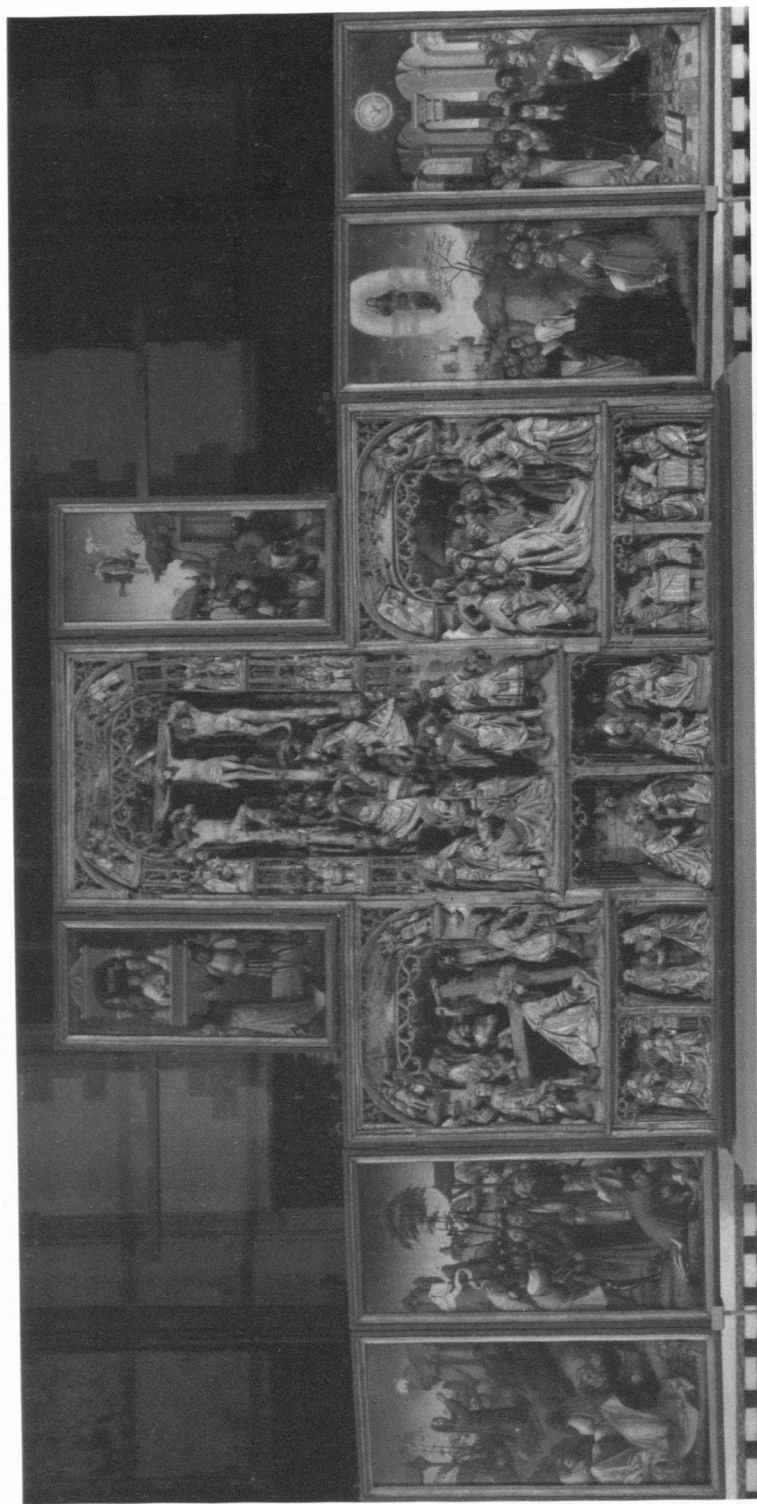
99. The Master of Flémalle, The Seilern Triptych, Entombment and Resurrection with donor, wood.
© Courtauld Institute Galleries, Princes Gate Collection.



100. Dieric Bouts, The Holy Sacrament Altarpiece, The Last Supper with four Old Testament scenes, 1467, oak, central panel: 180 x 150 cm, Leuven, Museum voor kerkelijke Kunst, Sint-Pieterskirk. © Kik-Brussel.



101. Anonymous carved and painted altarpiece from Antwerp (opened), Scenes from the life of Christ with crucifixion, c.1510-20, 203.2 x 401.2 cm,
© Melbourne, National Gallery of Australia.



102. Anonymous, carved and painted altarpiece from Antwerp (opened) Scenes from the life of Christ with crucifixion, c.1510-20, 217 x 396 cm, Elmpt Overhetfeld, St. Maria-an-der-Heide. © Kik-Brussel.