

Chapter 20

PIETY, PASSION, AND POLITICS

15th-Century Art in Northern Europe and Spain

Summary:

The pessimism after the Black Plague could not last and toward the end of the century a new spirit arose throughout Europe called the International Gothic style. *This style may be seen as a reaction against the severe religiosity that followed the Black Death. It seems to be a rebirth of courtly late Gothic. It finds more beauty in actual observations than in symbols.*

During the later Middle Ages France lost its dominating position as a result of the difficulties of the 100 Years War (1337-1453), however its nobility was still dedicated to the acquisition of art. The aristocratic aspects of the International style were gradually supplanted by the growing realism associated with the rising bourgeoisie of the fifteenth century who themselves came to be patrons of the arts.

In addition to the bourgeoisie, the courts of the kings were also becoming art patrons. Emerging capitalism was creating an economic network throughout Europe, augmenting trade and commerce. This rise in wealth also gave rise to more works commissioned by individuals for personal devotion.

I. Lecture Model

These approaches can help to establish the importance of the religious commissions and the alignment of the secular patron with the religious interpretation as a tool to fix political authority.

The Limbourg Brothers were famous manuscript painters and their most famous work is probably *Tres Riches Heures du Duc De Berry* (very rich hours of the duke of berry). The duke was one of the Burgundian dukes who dominated northern Europe at this time and his passion was books. A book of hours is a prayer book often as here attached to a calendar decorated with miniatures of the months of the year.

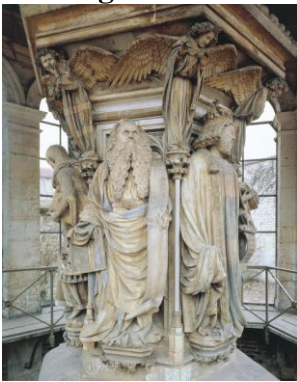
Among the greatest collectors were John Duke de Berry and his brothers. Characteristics of the International Gothic style can be seen in the works commissioned by these men, a good example of which is the *Très Riches Heures* painted for the Duke of Berry by the Limbourg Brothers in the early fifteenth century (20-1 and 20-2).



20-01 Limbourg brothers (Pol, Hennequin, Herman), January, from Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, 1413-1416. Ink on vellum, approx. 8 1/2" x 5 1/2". Musée Condé, Chantilly.

- The noble company out for a ride in the woods wears the elegant costumes, carefully delineated and lavishly decorated with gold, that characterized the aristocratic style.
- The northern interest in detailed realism, however, was closely interwoven with the characteristics of the International Gothic style as seen in this selection from the book.
- The famous calendar pages illustrate the activities of both peasants (20- 2) and nobles that characterized the various months of the year, and show the fascination with the visible world that was to mark fifteenth-century painting.

In the fifteenth century Flanders roughly comprised the area of present day Holland and Belgium. The wealth of Flanders, like that of Florence, was based on trade and banking.



20-03 CLAUS SLUTER, Well of Moses, Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon, France, 1395-1406. Limestone with traces of paint, figures approx. 6' high.

Like his brother John, Philip the Bold of Burgundy was a collector. A financially prudent marriage to the daughter of the Count of Flanders made him wealthy enough to pursue his interests in art collection and patronage.

- Philip focused his artistic concerns primarily on the establishment of a Carthusian Monastery at the Chartreuse de Champmol near Dijon in Burgundy.

■ He hired Claus Sluter, to create his tomb, as well as the Well of Moses 1395-1406 (20-3) that served the cloister as a water source. Sluter combined powerful volumes with realism in these life-sized figures. Each of the six prophets (Moses, David, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah) portrayed held banderoles foretelling the death of Christ, just as Christ's blood is the water of life, the monument itself formed a fountain within the well from which the monks of the cloister obtained their water.



20-04a, b MELCHIOR BROEDERLAM, outer wings of the Retable de Champmol. Annunciation and Visitation (left) and Presentation and Flight into Egypt (right), from Chapel of the Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon, France, installed 1399. Panels, each 5' 5 3/4" x 4' 1 1/4". Musée de la Ville, Dijon.

- The altarpiece commissioned for the chapel, Retable de Champmol (20-4) carried the idea of salvation, as well as showing an interest in specific details of the natural world.
- Broederlam, paid special attention to the detail he observed, particularly the detail of Joseph drinking from a water bag (Presentation/Flight into Egypt).

Artists of the Northern Renaissance observed nature, but they also looked at it as a reflection of the divine. This reflection of the divine was understood through symbols. When a medieval monk thought about a nut he didn't just think about a food to eat. The nut was for him a symbol of the mystery of Christ's dual nature, the shell representing his human nature and the nutmeat his divine nature that was hidden in the shell of the mortal body.

- Symbols have long been used in art both in the spiritual and social contexts (a cross is a symbol for Christianity, a flag is a symbol for a country), and symbols were very important for medieval artists.
- The love of symbolism carried over to the artists of fifteenth century Flanders, but these artists added a new dimension to it; they disguised their religious symbols behind a facade of ordinary naturalistic representation, and sanctified nature in the process.



20-12 ROBERT CAMPIN (Master of Flémalle), Mérode Altarpiece (open), The Annunciation (center panel), ca. 1425-1428. Oil on wood, center panel approx. 2' 1" x 2' 1". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (The Cloisters Collection, 1956).

In work done only ten years after the *Très Riches Heures*, the so-called *Mérode Altarpiece* c.1425-28 (20-12), the triumph of bourgeois realism is apparent. Like the frescoes in Giotto's Arena Chapel (19-8), the *Mérode Altarpiece* was intended for private devotional worship.

The form of this altarpiece is very different from Giotto's frescoes, however. While Giotto's scenes were painted on a large scale and covered all the wall surfaces of the chapel, Robert Campin's altarpiece is quite small with the central panel only a little over two feet square.

Scholars now generally attribute this work to him, Robert Campin. Giotto's work is fixed to the wall, but the *Mérode Altarpiece* is movable.

Robert Campin worked in Tournai, south of Bruges and Ghent, and his paintings often incorporate views of the town.

It is formed from three panels. The wings, or outer panels, are hinged and can be closed to cover the inner panel. Giotto's work was done with the full forms and opaque color typical of fresco (19-9), the *Mérode Altarpiece* shows the careful detailing and brilliant jewel-like colors possible with the new technique of oil painting.

We can look at the *Mérode Altarpiece* as a representation of a typical fifteenth-century Flemish house, with two people kneeling in the courtyard on left wing panel, a carpenter working in his shop on the right wing panel, and a lady is sitting reading in a room interior in the center panel.

■ On the left wing, donors are seen kneeling in a small courtyard just outside a door that leads to the room in which the Annunciation unfolds. The woman was added, probably after the couple was married since she is painted over the grass. A servant stands at the gate to the town: one historian has suggested that this is a self-portrait of Robert Campin.

■ ON the central panel is the *Virgin of humility*, who seems not to notice the angel who has come through the door. The *lavabo* and towel in the niche parallel those in the Ghent Altar *Annunciation* and carry the same symbolic meaning. The lilies on the table also refer to Mary's virginity and the Incarnation.

■ The Incarnation is imminent; a tiny figure carrying a miniature cross has entered the room through the glass window at the left, without breaking it, signifying the perpetual virginity of Mary.

■ Everything in the room can be read symbolically, but its warmth also affects us. Although the angular drawing of the robes reflects the style of traditional Gothic art, the comfortable interior reflects a contemporary Flemish home and furnishing.

■ The angel is an obvious symbol, but there are many other symbols in the painting that extend the meaning of the work far beyond the representation of a bourgeois household interior.

■ The white lilies in the vase on the table in the central panel could be considered as just decoration, but they are in fact a symbol referring to the purity of the Virgin Mary.

■ The water pot in the niche at the back and the clean white towel could also refer to Pontius Pilate washing his hands of Christ.

■ The book she is reading symbolizes her wisdom. The two lions on the bench refer to the lions that were on the throne of King Solomon.

■ And thus also symbolize Mary's wisdom, as she was of the house of David the father of Solomon. The enclosed garden is a common reference to Mary, while the rose specifically refers to her as "the rose among thorns."

■ On the right wing is Joseph's workshop and he is carpenter. He is busily boring holes in a board, probably the top of a stool. The images show Joseph's mousetraps, which are meant to catch the devil, an analogy of St. Augustine's in which the Incarnation was devised to fool the devil, as mice are fooled by bait. One trap is on his worktable and other on a ledge projecting from his window.

■ Although this work is very small artist have lavished their attention on small details even while constructing larger forms. The ability to paint small details with compelling clarity is a mark of artistic genius not just a technical accomplishment.



20-05 JAN VAN EYCK, Ghent Altarpiece (closed), Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium, completed 1432. Oil on wood, approx. 11' 6" x 7' 6".

20-06 JAN VAN EYCK, Ghent Altarpiece (open), Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium, completed 1432. Oil on wood, approx. 11' 6" x 15'.

GHENT ALTARPIECE *KLOSS* NOTES:

TOP:

■ Two prophets flank two sibyls, pagan women who were believed to have prophesized the coming of Christ. In the middle tier is the *Annunciation*, and on the bottom tier, the donors flank what appear to be two sculptures of saints.

■ Though it is said it was painted by Jan van Eyck, the inscription seems to credit Hubert van Eyck, Jan's brother, as principal painter. God, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist on the interior are assumed to be his work because their style and scale are different. One theory is that Jan honored his deceased brother by placing his name first on the altarpiece, which Hubert may have begun as early as 1420 and Jan finished after his death.

■ This altarpiece was for the donors' chapel in the crypt below the choir and it was moved up to a chapel in the ambulatory behind the choir in the 16th century. In recent years, it has been transferred to a new room constructed at the front of the nave where visitors can see it without disrupting services.

■ The second middle level contains the central image of the exterior of the altarpiece with the Annunciation. The Archangel Gabriel is at the left and the Virgin Mary is on the right. *The drapery is sharply sculptural but is given the warm tone of muslin as the figures themselves are rendered in flesh tones.*

■ Gabriel's spoken words are printed out here in Gothic script. *Ave gratia plena* "Hail thou that art full of grace". Words also proceed from Mary's head, *ecce ancilla* "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" These words are

inscribed upside down so that they may be read not by the viewer but by God!
The dove of the Holy Spirit above Mary's head marks the conception of Jesus.

■ Mary's side of the painting contains a niche in a wall that house a *lavabo* (a *hand-washing dish*), a pitcher, a white towel—each signifying purity and virginity. Above the pitcher is a trefoil window, the three circles symbolizing the Trinity.

Open Altarpiece:

■ **The upper level** shows the three huge figures thought to be painted by Hubert van Eyck: God the Father flanked by Mary and St. John the Baptist. Two panels painted with groups of musical angels flank this central trio. The figures of Adam on the left and Eve on the right close the sequence. The lower level shows a large multi-figure composition, the thematic focus of the altarpiece, the *Adoration of the Lamb*. There is a pair of panels on each side, and as with the *Annunciation* on the outside, the entire space is represented as continuous.

■ **Adam and Eve**, shown after the Fall, represent sinful mankind and they look toward the enthroned Lord, flanked by Mary and John, who in Catholic theology are intercessors on behalf of mankind. Mary is also considered a second Eve, redeeming Eve's original sin.

■ Adam is a bearded, full-length nude with detailed anatomy, thought covered with a fig leaf. Above the small arch with his name is a sculpture showing the sacrifices of Cain and Abel. Note that Adam's feet seem to be below the level of the frame van Eyck has painted him in a foreshortened view as we see him from the floor level.

■ Eve is holding, a small golden fruit “from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” not the traditional apple (which has no scriptural basis). Above her is a sculpture of Cain slaying Abel, the first murder following the revelation of good and evil to Eve and Adam.

■ Adam and Eve are un-idealized, with a particular poignancy in their faces, in the curves of Eve's body, and in the musculature of Adam.

■ **The center trio** shows the Virgin Mary, God the Father, and St. John the Baptist. This hieratic presentation is close to a standard Byzantine composition. However, the figures do not show the careful observation in realistic representation that is characteristic of the rest of the altarpiece.

■ Between Eve and the Baptist is a smaller arched panel dominated by an organ played by an angel in a brocaded robe. The faces of four other musical angels are seen behind the organ. The nearest plays a viol while another plays a small harp. Musicians and instruments are well represented in Netherlandish art of this period.

■ On the left is a group of eight angelic singers behind an elaborate music stand. These are perhaps the only angels without wings in Netherlandish painting of the century. Compare them to Luca della Robbia's Cantoria in the Duomo in Florence.

- **The lower half** of the opened altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Lamb* has a landscape teeming with figures. Groups on the left and the right flank this. These groups have come to worship the Lamb: most of them belong to the community of saints.
- The left side depicts Christian knights led by St. George. Behind them are the Just Judges, which may refer to a specific group of dignitaries in Ghent. The original panel was stolen during World War II and has not been recovered.
- The right side presents the nearest group, Christian hermits. Behind them are pilgrims, led by the giant St. Christopher.
- **The center panel and largest painting** is the *Adoration of the Lamb*. Set in a remarkable landscape, it is as wide as the combined panels of Mary, God and St. John above it. The title is sometimes given *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb or Sacred Lamb*. The lamb is Jesus and represents sacrifice, The Mass, and the Eucharist. It derives from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, “in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain.”
- The interior of the Ghent Altar may be called an *all-saints picture*, in which believing souls gather in worship. It has a pyramidal composition with an intuitive, not mathematical, perspective. Note the high horizon line.
- The large groups of figures converge on a central axis of a fountain in the foreground and an altar above it. At lower right are the dignitaries of the Church, including popes and bishops. On the left are gathered patriarchs, poets, and philosophers, mostly Old Testament characters. The fountain is the fountain of baptism, therefore redemption, the fountain of eternal life.
- Emerging from the foliage at left are confessors and martyrs, while the virgin martyrs are seen to the right. Note van Eyck’s depictions of plants and other living things, which are accurate and highly detailed.
- The central act is simple, despite being clothed in symbolism. It is Christ in the guise of the Lamb, his blood pouring into a chalice offered by the Church.
- The landscape continues to *Heavenly Jerusalem*, with its richly detailed architecture. The landscape is contiguous with that of the central *Adoration*.
- The beginnings of northern European painting are here:
 - From the Naturalism of detail
 - To the broad sweep of unifying landscape
 - From the preoccupation with Christian themes to
 - The embracing of the Humanistic response to the world.

KLEINER Notes

Van Eyck's most important work is the *Ghent Altarpiece* 1432 (20-5 and 20-6). It has many panels and is called a polyptych. A triptych, as we have seen, has three panels, while a polyptych has many panels.

The *Ghent Altar* closed (20-5) sets the religious tone for the *Ghent Altar* open.

- The washbasin and towel, seen in the small panel immediately adjacent of the Virgin, are symbols of the Virgin's purity as well as a reference to the

Baptism and the washing away of the First Sin as well as Pontius Pilate's role in the Passion, thus supporting the theme of salvation.

- The open window adjacent to the Angel Gabriel panel refers to the dual nature of Christ.
- The Virgin kneels in a posture of humility as she receives Gabriel's salutation. His words are written in gold, as is her answer; but the letters of her answer are written upside down, for they are addressed to God directly, and not to the spectator.
- The patrons who commissioned this work, Burgomaster Jodocus Vyd and his wife Isabel Borluut represent the spectators.
- These earnest fifteenth-century business people preferred to be shown exactly as they were.
- Between the donors are figures of the two Saint Johns, which look like stone statues for they are painted only in tones of gray. The technique, which was often used on the exterior of altarpieces, was known as grisaille.
- Earlier in the Middle Ages a gray painted cloth was draped over the altarpiece during Lent, and during the 15th century from this custom came the idea of painting the exterior of some altarpieces with tones of gray.
- The altarpiece was closed during the period of Lent, so the people would only see the outside; the promise of salvation, represented by the Annunciation carried the faithful through the Lenten cycle.
- The open altarpiece (20-6) shows Mary, John, and God the Father in the upper register flanked by music making angels with Adam and Eve on the far outside.
- Unlike the other panels, the representation of these two figures seems to have been done with this positioning in mind.
- Because of this, it is thought that they were painted last, and they certainly represent an advance in realism and moral vulnerability by means of the unprotected naked bodies of Adam and Eve.
- These figures are far from the glorified nudes of classical antiquity (5-38 and 5-60). Instead van Eyck *gives us human beings aware of their dilemma*.
- The other panels of the altarpiece provide the answer to the human awareness of sin and of God's love because of the promise of salvation, represented by the central panel.
- The mystic lamb from the central panel symbolizes salvation and redemption. Christ has become the sacrificial lamb used in Judaic religious practices. The blood of the sacrifice washed away the sins of the devout.
- The hallowed lamb stands on the altar, his blood streaming into the chalice, thus embodying the central mystery of the Mass, the Eucharist when the wine in the chalice is transformed into the redeeming blood of Christ.
- The sacrificial blood is symbolized, again, on the sides of the throne of God the Father by the pelican, which, according to legend, pierced her own breast with her beak so that her blood might sustain her brood.

The beginnings of northern European painting are here:

- From the Naturalism of detail
- To the broad sweep of unifying landscape

- From the preoccupation with Christian themes to
- The embracing of the Humanistic response to the world



20-13 JAN VAN EYCK, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, 1434. Oil on wood, approx. 2' 8" x 1' 11 1/2". National Gallery, London.

Jan van Eyck is one of the most famous artist of the Northern Renaissance often thought of as the inventor of oil painting. He served as diplomat and painter and his art was known and collected throughout Europe. He did not invent oil painting.

Oil painting is the medium in which pigments are suspended in linseed or walnut oil. This method was widely used in the southern Netherlands when van Eyck began to paint. It is a slow-drying medium but durable when dry. The artist is able to paint more slowly add detail more easily than when working in tempera or fresco and make changes invisible. Oil painting also offers transparency and brilliant color. The effects of light and shade, reflection and atmosphere, gave the artist more possibilities than in tempera painting and created a greater illusion or realism.

The painting of *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* 1434 (20-13) by Jan van Eyck not only memorialized the marriage, but in all probability it was itself a legal document. The painting represented a transition between medieval and 15th century marriage customs.

During the Middle Ages a church ceremony was not necessary. All that was required was for the man and the woman to promise each other to abide by the marriage vows they exchanged before witnesses.



This system had certain advantages, but it also had certain obvious disadvantages. The couple is almost certainly Giovanni Arnolfini, an Italian merchant in the Netherlands and his wife Giovanna Cenami. The scholar Erwin Panofsky tried to demonstrate that this was a private marriage ceremony. It was unnecessary to have either a priest or a civil authority for a valid marriage, but there are two witnesses reflected in the convex mirror. One is the painter, who is signed the painting above the mirror: “Jan van Eyck was here, 1434” In Panofsky’s view the painting serves as a kind marriage certificate.

- **The Arnolfini wedding portrait is in effect proof of the marriage and the presence of the two witnesses who are reflected in the mirror solemnized the marriage.**
- **Around the mirror are scenes from Christ's passion, indicating his saving grace.**
- **The single burning candle symbolizes matrimony and unity and God’s presence as well, while the shoes symbolize sanctity and that the marriage takes place on holy ground and in the divine presence.**
- **The spotless mirror equals purity**
- **The dog symbolizes the bride's fidelity, while the broom symbolizes her wifely duties.**
- **A tiny statue of St. Margaret shown on the chair will keep her safe in childbirth.**
- **The fruit on the windowsill could indicate innocence before the Fall.**
- **There are many symbols that could support the idea of a marriage, but they also can support the view that the painting is a symbol of the close relationship of the couple.**

The mood of the painting sanctifies the marriage, whether is the actual ceremony or the continuity of married life. Every object and person in the painting is studied by the artist with the idea that they are worthy of scrutiny, because the visible world was symbolic of the invisible, higher reality.



20-08 ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, Last Judgment Altarpiece (open), Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune, France, ca. 1444-1448. Panel, 7' 4 5/8" x 17' 11". Musée de l'Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune.

Rogier van der Weyden was not as interested in symbolism as van Eyck had been. *The Last Judgment Altarpiece* c.1444-48 (20-8) is a good indication of his interests, for while van Eyck excelled in painting the things he saw, van der Weyden excelled in painting the things he felt.

- The nine panels: looking at the bottom of this painting we see the dead arise from their earthly graves and head toward their eternal reward. The blessed are on Christ's right and the eternally damned are on Christ's left.
- Above them are the figures of the apostles, the Pope, Philip the Good, Rolin and his wife, the Virgin Mary, and St. John the Baptist.
- In the tall center panel is Christ, enthroned on a rainbow, with St. Michael.
- In the small flanking panels are angels bearing the instruments of Christ's Passion. Christ dispenses final judgment with his gestures, while St. Michael weighs the souls to see how heavily their sins weigh upon them.
- One of the most magnificent figures in the 15c painting is St. Michael. He is tall and elegant a perfect vertical center pole for the altarpiece.
- The sixteenth-century biographer of many of the Flemish artists, Karl Van Mander, praised him for his "characterization of emotions such as sorrow, anger, or joy, as required by the subject."
- His mastery of depicting emotion is apparent in this work. The grim determination of Michael carrying the scales of judgment and the pleading hands of the Virgin interceding on behalf of the judged symbolized what the Italians considered to be the achievement of Flemish art: pictorial brilliance and sentiment.



20-10 HUGO VAN DER GOES, Portinari Altarpiece (open), from Sant'Egidio, Florence, Italy, ca. 1476. Tempera and oil on wood, 8' 3 1/2" x 10' (center panel), 8' 3 1/2" x 4' 7 1/2" (each wing). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Painted in the Netherlands for an Italian patron then shipped to Florence for placement in the Church of Sant'Egidio at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova about eight years after completion.

- **Tommaso Portinari (the patron), who was the principal agent (head) for the Medici bank in Flanders, Bruges, commissioned from *Hugo van der Goes* the triptych, *Portinari Altarpiece*, done in the 1470s (20- 10).**
- **Because the painting was going to Italy, the figures are monumental in their scale and proportions they are more Italian than northern.**
- **It combined an interest in emotional expression with van Eyck's interest in symbolism.**
- **On the left wing are Tommaso Portinari, his sons, and their hieratic patron saints, with a rocky landscape behind them.**
- **ON the right wing are Portinari's wife, Maria Baroncelli, their daughter, and saints. The barren landscape brought a Flemish winter to Florence.**
- **The *Adoration of the Shepherds* shows un-idealized shepherds with Naturalistic details that had an immediate impact on Florentine artists. Everyone is seen adoring the child, Joseph, Mary and the angels. The child is not in a manger but on the bare floor, with only his own radiance to support him.**
- **The scene is also symbolic, note the angel with the priest's vestment, on the edge of which is embroidered the words, *sanctus sanctus sanctus*. In a variation on similar sacramental paintings, the infant is on the ground among the adoring throng. Everything points to an embodiment of the mystery of transubstantiation, which is the Mass.**
- **In the center panel we see the shoe, again symbolizing holy ground.**
- **The pillar supporting the shed prefigures the pillar to which Christ will be tied during the scourging.**
- **The cow that watches the scene symbolizes the Gentiles, while the donkey that ignores it all symbolizes the Jews.**
- **The small still life in the foreground contains many symbols. The sheaf of wheat refers to Bethlehem and bread transformed into the body of Christ, hence the Eucharist.**

■ While the flowers refer to the Sorrows of the Madonna. Irises were known as sword lilies, and the seven columbine flowers refer to the seven sorrows of the Virgin.

■ This painting was displayed above the high altar of St. Egidius. The still life of flowers in the foreground would have been at eye level, its compelling realism pulling the viewer into the painting just in front of the Christ Child.

■ The seven sorrows are represented as swords piercing her heart. The grapes depicted on the vase may refer to the Eucharist as the wine, which symbolized the blood of Christ.

■ A strange isolation exists between the various figures, and the odd intensity of the composition is most noticeable in the three shepherds who come from the right.

■ The strangeness might be explained by the fact of Hugo's emotional difficulties. Hugo became a lay brother in the monastery, and reportedly went through periods of deep depression. He tried to commit suicide at one time because he believed he was possessed by the devil. When Tommaso returned to Florence the triptych with him, it became very influential in Italy.



20-11 Hans Memling, *Virgin with Saints and Angels*, center panel of the *Saint John Altarpiece*, Hospitaal Sint Jan, Bruges, Belgium, 1479. Oil on wood, approx. 5' 7 3/4" x 5' 7 3/4" (center panel), 5' 7 3/4" x 2' 7 1/8" (each wing).

The Altarpiece of the Virgin and Saints with Angels (St. John Altarpiece) 1479 (20-11) by

Hugo's contemporary Hans Memling shows some interest in symbolism. We see St. Catherine kneeling before the Virgin and Christ Child with the wheel of her torture on the carpet at her feet. On the right side of the Virgin appears St. Barbara reading before a small model of the tower, her place of confinement. Standing on either side of the Virgin and Child are St. John the Evangelist with his chalice and St. John the Baptist with his lamb. The chalice of John refers to the blood of Christ and the salvation/redemption theme. The lamb of the Baptist is an iconic form for his sacrifice as the precursor of Christ. Most of Memling's compositions show the same sweet faces, careful detailing, and balanced grouping. He achieved this balance by placing the figures in carefully designed compositional formats. For example, Sts. Catherine and Barbara show a rounded mass of fabric and folds, which balance their placement in the foreground of the composition.

The two side wings also support the primary theme of the altarpiece; the left panel depicts the head of the Baptist presented to Salome while the right wing depicts St. John on Patmos, salvation and redemption achieved through sacrifice.



20-18 HIERONYMUS BOSCH, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Creation of Eve (left wing), *Garden of Earthly Delights* (central panel), Hell (right wing), 1505-1510. Oil on wood, center panel 7' 2 5/8" x 6' 4 3/4". Museo del Prado, Madrid.

The most enigmatic painter for this period was Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* a triptych presents an ambiguous visual statement, the meaning of which is open to speculation and much research.

- The work (20-18) opens to three panels illustrating the state of the world after humanity was created.
- The panel on the left represents the Garden of Eden with the presentation of Eve to Adam.
- The central panel represents the Garden of Earthly Delights, while the panel on the right represents Hell.
- On the left wing Eve is represented as a beautiful woman and bride of Adam.
- The landscape of the Garden of Eden is not idyllic, but rather fanciful, as is evidenced by the creatures that come from the Fountain of Life.
- In the central panel the elegant figures are arranged over the surface of the painting like a tapestry.
- This is one of the first known representations of masses of people, and these people are doing some of the strangest things imaginable.
- Some ride animals, others stand on their heads, creep into eggs, hug giant owls, are crushed in giant shells, poke flowers into each other's backsides, and so forth.
- According to a late medieval dream book the huge fish they carry so triumphantly refers to voluptuousness, and the large cherries, strawberries, raspberries, and grapes scattered throughout the composition symbolize the sweet but fleeting pleasures of sexual enjoyment which can lead to procreation.

■ Many of the strange forms of the background resemble alchemy apparatus. This could represent the alchemists' transformation of one form of life into another.

■ The black man and white woman embracing while floating on the pool seen in the 112 background of the central panel may represent the alchemy fusion of opposites, and birds were often used to symbolize the volatile spirits that result from the distillation process.

■ The right panel represents Hell; Bosch has depicted this place as horrible and loathsome in keeping with medieval renderings as well.

■ In the lower right is a great bird-like creature with a pot on its head eating a man. He sits on a wooden throne, the damned go through, down into the pit, passing through his body as refuse.

■ Beside this pit a beautiful naked girl is being punished for lechery through an embrace with a hideous monster. Many sins are represented on the panel, each with its appropriate punishment.

■ His own hunting dogs devour a proud knight. The gambler is nailed to the gaming table. A lecherous nun-turned-pig embraces a man.

■ Perhaps the most vivid is the musician's hell. Each is punished on his instrument.

■ It is a very odd picture and it has led to much research and speculation. The most fruitful research has been based on the study of old Flemish Proverbs, medieval dream books, and alchemy texts.

■ Current scholarship has suggested additional speculations. It is a visual treatise on the virtues and vices of humanity and the consequences of actions not carefully planned.

■ The right wing, Hell, depicts graphically the failure to live a good life, no matter the status of the sinner.

Bosch is revealed as a moralist: he felt this painting symbolized:

- Humanity's constant search to satisfy earthly desires with over indulgence and sin: He is showing pessimistic look at humanity- Showing there is no chance of salvation.

2) These images are all witnesses to the patron's devotion and need to show that devotion for both public (20-6) and private (20-12) worship. These same patrons also wanted their portraits as remembrances of their place within their respective worlds. The portraits commissioned were to represent not only the importance of the individual; but also, to give them the reality of an object which memorialized them more or less permanently. *The Flemish artists were very accomplished at creating portraits that depicted wealth circumspectly; moreover, they also were able to capture the psychological being of the patron.*



20-17 ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, Portrait of a Lady, ca. 1460. Oil on panel, 1' 1 3/8" x 10 1/16". National Gallery, Washington (Andrew W. Mellon Collection).

For example, Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Lady* c.1460 (20-17), her clothing distinguishes her position within Flemish society;

- But her pursed lips and lowered eyes indicate a shy and retiring personality. He has emphasized her features by the angularity of her veil and the three-quarter presentation of the sitter.
- The inverted V form of her veil is counterbalanced by the neckline of her gown.



In contrast to the van der Weyden portrait is the *Man in a Red Turban* 1433 (20-16) by Jan van Eyck.

- Here the artist confronts the viewer with assurance. This is a man who is confident and secure in his society.
- It is thought that, perhaps, this is a self-portrait of Jan van Eyck, nevertheless, the artist, Jan van Eyck, has recorded this individual's personality as confident and secure.



20-19 JEAN FOUQUET, Melun Diptych. Étienne Chevalier and Saint Stephen, (left wing), ca. 1450. Oil on wood, 3' 1/2" x 2' 9 1/2". Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Virgin and Child, right wing of Melun Diptych, ca. 1451. Oil on wood, 3' 1 1/4" x 2' 9 1/2". Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium

The French artist, Jean Fouquet, also did a portrait of *Étienne Chevalier and St. Stephen* from the *Melun Diptych* c.1450 (20-19), rather than present Étienne Chevalier alone as van der Weyden and van Eyck did;

- Fouquet opted to depict the sitter with his patron saint, St. Stephen, similar to a devotional work, such as the *Mérode Altarpiece* (20-12);
- yet Fouquet has singularized the portrait rather than create a truly devotional work. By linking the portrait to the devotional quality of the work Fouquet did not completely secularize the portrait.

German sculpture maintained its commitment to emotional religious fervor as well. In the Gothic period German sculpture was emotional and deeply committed to the depiction of the pain and suffering of the principals. For example the *Death of the Virgin* (18-48) from the tympanum of Strasbourg Cathedral, depicts the pathos of the scene,



in Tilman Riemenschneider's *The Assumption of the Virgin* c.1495-99 (20-23.), the artist is depicting the emotion of religious joy. The Apostles are gathered to witness her assumption into heaven, witnessing the triumph of her position and faith. The Virgin forms the apex of the group of the Apostles, some of whom are looking out and drawing the viewer into the miracle and the viewer also becomes a witness to the event. By witnessing the event, the viewer, in this case, inside a parish church, also has the confirmation of both salvation and redemption.

In Spain the works that were commissioned emphasized the emotional commitment to the Church. The altarpiece Gil de Siloé did for the Carthusian monastery in Miraflores sums up the iconography of both the late medieval period and the fifteenth century. The overall presentation is the Crucifixion, representing salvation. The suffering of the figure is defined by the ribs of the body showing through the skin, blood pouring from the side. Yet the background segments also detail the love of God for humanity by detailing the awful suffering Christ willingly underwent before the crucifixion. Salvation is understood by the very fact of the crucifixion and the Virgin looks out at the viewer, once again, drawing them into the event as witnesses. The thin spare figures and the deep folds of the draperies also show the inheritance from the Gothic period. But the emphasis on salvation is further marked by the pelican above the cross, in the act of piercing its breast, another analogy for sacrifice and above all an expression of love for its offspring. This would have been understood as a symbol and reference for the sacrifice of Christ and the love God had for humanity. In contrast to this very graphic suffering, Spain also produced the Plateresque style of ornamentation for the architectural surface. The portal facade of the Colegio de San Gregorio, Valladolid (20-26) is a beautiful example of such surface treatment. The pomegranate tree takes on the position of anchor and from its sinuous branches comes a movement that is both graceful and swirling; from these branches figures cavort, drawing our eye ever upward to the great coat-of-arms of the triumphant

Isabella and Ferdinand. It becomes a charming visual document attesting to the victory of the monarchs.

Resources:

Videotapes

The Invisible Made Visible 25 min. BVL3308 \$89.95

Northern Renaissance 60 min. BVL10354 \$89.95

Jan van Eyck 28 min. BVL7787 \$89.95

The World Inscribed: The Illuminated Manuscript 24 min. BVL7619 \$89.95

Hieronymous Bosch 30 min. BVL2236 \$149.95

The Beginning: The emergence of the Renaissance 60 min. BVL11326 \$149.95

Films for the Humanities

1-800-257-5126

<http://www.films.com>

Books

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Texas Press, 1991.

Perouse-Montclos, Jean-Marie. *Paris, City of Art*. New York: Vendome Press, 2003.

Web Resources

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch>

http://keptar.demasz.hu/arthp/bio/e/eyck_van/biograph.htm

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/eyck/ghent>