Paintings with Doors: Three Case Studies from the Fifteenth Century Netherlands

Jacqueline T. Chapman
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: http://publish.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons, Art Practice Commons, Catholic Studies Commons, Interactive Arts Commons, Interior Architecture Commons, and the Painting Commons

Recommended Citation
http://publish.wm.edu/honorstheses/1088

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M Publish. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M Publish. For more information, please contact wmpublish@wm.edu.
Paintings with Doors:
Three Case Studies from the Fifteenth Century Netherlands

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Department from The College of William and Mary

by

Jacqueline Tabor Chapman

Accepted for Honors

Catherine Levesque, Director

Cristina Stancioiu

Monica Potkay

Williamsburg, VA
May 3, 2017
But equally important, the “painting with doors” is a structure that establishes thresholds between exterior and interior, as well as between center and sides.

—Lynn Jacobs
Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Chapter 1: Introduction 4

Chapter 2: Robert Campin: Domesticity and the Divine 14

Chapter 3: Rogier van der Weyden: Divinity in the Archways 37

Chapter 4: Hugo van der Goes: Divine Dislocation 61

Chapter 5: Conclusion 83

Figures 92

Bibliography 106
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three cases studies from fifteenth century Netherlands: the Merode Altarpiece, Miraflores Altarpiece, and Portinari Altarpiece. It focuses on how the triptych format combined with the painted elements worked together to aid the viewer in communicating with the divine. These triptychs functioned as a prayer aid and helped the viewer to enter a meditative state, where they could engage with divine figures. Each artist was able to encourage this type of meditative state by underlining the separation between the temporal and divine world. The separation between the two worlds was further enhanced by the door-like nature of the triptych and other conventions of the Netherlandish triptych. However, despite these similarities, this thesis proposes that each artist created a triptych that engaged a different type of audience and functioned in a multiplicity of manners. Robert Campin painted the annunciation within a domestic setting in the Merode Altarpiece to encourage private devotion in the home. Rogier van der Weyden organized the Miraflores Altarpiece in a series of archways to aid Carthusian monks in completing the rosary. Finally, Hugo van Der Goes constructed the Portinari Altarpiece’s Nativity scene to encourage hospital employees, and comfort sick patients with the notion of salvation. In this way, each of these artists and their respective triptych, which combines physical framing and painted elements, manipulate these two qualities to serve the purposes of different audiences, functions and the artist's’ own interests.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: PAINTINGS WITH DOORS

In Greek, the word triptych derives from triptukhon, tri denoting three while ptyssō means to fold, or otherwise altogether meaning: three-fold. Traditionally, scholars have viewed the triptych as an altarpiece and generally considered it within an ecclesiastical and decorative scheme of the church. More recent scholarship has begun to reconsider the triptych and especially examined the thresholds that are so important to the experience of the format. Helene Verougstraete, in particular, has studied the framing of Netherlandish panel paintings and considered the process of constructing this frame for these types of paintings. Verougstraete only examines the physical elements of the triptych and so does not concern herself with the triptych in its historic context. In contrast, the role of thresholds and boundaries is Lynn Jacobs’ main concern. She tracks the evolution of the triptych and examines the different ways in which artists approached the format. Jacobs, however, fails to connect the triptych to its distinct function, patronage, and social context. Neither scholar connects the physical mechanics of the format to the patronage, the intended function and or to how the viewer would have seen these triptychs. Consequently, these scholars ignore the artists’ ability to draw on their ingenuity to rework tradition and instead only connected the triptych to either its physical mechanics or its painterly aspects. My thesis will connect the physical framing to the patronage, to its intended function and explain how this affected the painterly boundaries depicted within the triptych. In other words, this thesis will construct a threefold perspective on the triptych format and consider the painterly as well as physical framing: and will look at how all of these elements work together.
The “Paintings with Doors” referred to in my title, evokes the traditional Netherlandish triptych, a format that consists of three panels that are hinged together and can be closed like a door. In addition to their practical protective and ritual functions, early Netherlandish triptychs presented a solution to the problem of representing the sacred without transgressing the divide between sacred and temporal space. This issue dates back to the iconoclasm in Byzantium that reappears again as a significant theme in the century before the Reformation. In both periods, theologians pondered how artists could represent the sacred without being sacrilegious. These scholars also raised the question of how images could communicate to the viewer that the image is only a representation. Such questions stemmed from the fear during these periods that individuals were participating in idol-worship because they considered images to be actual sacred figures. This fear continued through the centuries, Otto Pacht goes so far as to assert that the sacred could be brought down to earth and as a result, could divide the sacred and the temporal worlds. The format of the triptych was utilized in the Netherlands to denote a boundary between the viewer and the sacred scene. Not only does the physical mechanics of the triptych create the effect of a doorway, or a boundary to cross, but the framing of the triptych and painted scenes enhanced this quality. Effectively, the triptych format conveys that the sacred figures and events exist in a liminal space: separate from the viewer but also accessible through the door of the triptych. The presence of a doorway was found in all triptychs, but potentially the artist could create his own distinct opening by utilizing older Netherlandish conventions in a new manner. By adapting the triptych format, Netherlandish artists used the painting with doors to solve a longstanding theological problem in a way that expressed their own artistic style.
The purpose of these boundaries was not only to separate the temporal world from the divine but also to facilitate a specific response from the viewer. The devotional triptych was meant to establish a mode of communication that is well illustrated in a miniature from the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy* (fig. 1). This book of hours was completed c. 1477 by an unknown artist for Mary of Burgundy, the only child of Charles the Bold.\(^1\) The miniature shows the owner of the book, Mary of Burgundy, attired in a yellow-brown gown, seated with a dog and a book of hours in her lap. She sits next to an open window that shows the interior of a church. In the center of the church is the Virgin dressed in blue and holding the Christ child in front of an altar. In the middleground of the miniature, several individuals—including Mary of Burgundy and her attendants—kneel. This identification of Mary of Burgundy is supported by the juxtaposition of the foreground Mary to the one in the church interior. The miniature presents a type of communication that is achieved by individuals, who are engaged in a meditative state. Either a devotional book or painting could be used to help them reach this state. In this meditative state, the individual would imagine themselves before the sacred figure. This is illustrated in the *Hours of Mary Burgundy*, where the ‘real’ Mary of Burgundy is reading the book in the foreground frame; the book of hours presumably enables her to achieve a meditative state shown through the window. The window-frame was used to make a transition from the foreground to the background and more importantly, work as a representation of a mode of communication with the divine.\(^2\) Framing plays a similar role in the triptychs we will examine in this study.

Triptychs from the Netherlands share characteristics from an older tradition but cultivated a distinct Netherlandish quality during the course of the fifteenth century. It is directly related to

---


2 Ibid., p. 299.
Byzantine icon and their association with the doors of the *templon*, a screen like structure that separated the nave from the altar. More importantly, this tradition developed into the choir screen widely used in the Netherlands and Western Europe, where the nave and altar were separated by a gated archway. In addition, northern furniture, tabernacles altarpieces, and reliquaries influenced the Netherlandish triptych.\(^3\) The use of a gated archway in the church interior was meant to delineate the sacredness of the nave because of the ritual of the mass performed there. For the viewer within the church, it denoted that this area was revered and to pass through the archway was entering a sacred space. In a manner similar to the thresholds of a triptych, which denoted the entrance to a sacred space. Therefore, the screen and the format of the Netherlandish triptych functioned in a similar capacity.

Although the Netherlandish triptych shared commonalities with earlier sources, it cultivated its own distinct characteristics in the juxtaposition between sculptural and painted elements. Earlier northern triptychs, from around 1400, combined both painting and sculpture. This can be seen in the *Retable of the Crucifixion*, ca. 1400 (fig. 2), sculpted by Jacques de Baerze while Melchior Broederlam painted the exterior wings. The interior central panel depicted the adoration of the magi, the crucifixion and the entombment of Christ while the left and right panels show ranks of saints. Baerze carved the interior before it was gilded and then the exterior wings were painted by Broederlam.\(^4\) This triptych united painting and sculpture which would become characteristic of Netherlandish triptychs. Normally, sculpture-like qualities and painted elements would be isolated to either the interior or exterior, but the tradition would often

---


be reverted by the successors of Baerze and Broederlam. The sculptural and painted elements become a traditional element of the triptych and a reoccurring theme that appears throughout this case study as it often reworked in different manners.

My thesis examines in three case studies that taken together demonstrate how the triptych transformed over the course of the fifteenth century. Chapter 2 discusses the emergence of the characteristic form of the triptych that begins with Robert Campin. Campin, who lived from 1375-1444, and who is usually identified with the Master of Flemalle. He is also considered to be the first master of Flemish and early Netherlandish painting and established the typical form of the Netherlandish triptych. Campin settled into Tournai in the early 1400s as a free master of the guild of goldsmiths and painters. Eventually, Campin represented the guild on the city council. Since there are no documents relating to Campin’s apprenticeship or training, three stylistic sources have been proposed. The first is Franco-Flemish manuscript illuminations. Melchior Broederlam, who worked on the Retable of the Passion (fig. 2), Henri Bellechose, who was known for working with Philip the Bold, and Claus Sluter, a Burgundian sculpture, who worked on the Charterhouse of Champmol. Broederlam is an important influence because his retable is one of the earliest forms of a triptych in the Netherlands. Campin utilized some elements from the Retable of the Passion (fig. 2), but ultimately was the first to create a standard for triptychs. He was known for realistic figures, the depiction of emotions in his paintings and also a sense of ambiguity. That ambiguity is evident in Campin’s Virgin and Child (fig. 3), the nimbi of the Virgin’s intersects with the Christ Child’s head and creates a touching moment of intimacy.

between mother and child. Their halos also act as a mediator between the foreground and background. The shape of the gems in the halo reflects the rectilinear nature of the background, but the solid quality of the halo separates it from the background. The halo seems to exist in both levels, creating a valency. This sense of ambiguity and multivalence would come to characterize Campin’s work.

In this chapter, I examine the Merode Altarpiece (fig. 4), ca. 1425, and how Campin utilized a domestic setting to separate the divine and the temporal world. Campin was the first artist to place sacred figures within a domestic setting and the Merode Altarpiece is the first triptych to do this. Here, Campin utilized the domestic environment not only to establish boundaries but to set up a sacred hierarchy. In this manner, Campin was the first artist to establish how the format for the triptych worked and illustrated how to set up boundaries between the viewer and the sacred imagery. The Merode Altarpiece also serves as an example of how Campin implemented his own style in choosing the setting for the triptych. He also continued the tradition of Baerze and Broederlam by using both sculptural and painted elements within his triptych, where he often used grisaille on the exterior wings to emulate sculpture and painted the interiors of the triptychs. This convention would continue to be used in subsequent triptychs after the time of Campin. Therefore in many regards, Campin established the traditional Netherlandish triptych and introduce his own personal style into this conventional form of the triptych.

Chapter 3 focuses on Rogier van der Weyden and I will examine how he changed the Netherlandish triptych. Van der Weyden was born in Tournai around 1399 as Roger de la Pasture. Some records show that van der Weyden was apprenticed to Robert Campin in 1427.
After five years, he became the master of the Tournai Guild of St. Luke in 1435. His style incorporates influences from his master. In comparing Campin’s *Thief* (fig. 5) and Rogier’s *Descent from the Cross* (fig. 6), it becomes clear that both utilized a masterful skill of representing scenes of pain and torment.⁷ Although the style and emotion of Campin influenced Van der Weyden, the latter was also known for distorting the natural form in order to exaggerate the expressive effects.⁸ His work is often known by its rich colorization and sympathetic expression that communicates natural ethos. Van der Weyden also revolutionized the art of Brussels. Before Van der Weyden, artists often executed paintings in a similar manner to other existing paintings. In other words, the artist often used the same conventions for representing sacred moments. Generation after generation, artists continued to use the same pattern of representations that could be tweaked to the tastes of different patrons. Van der Weyden’s work was viewed as entirely original and thus patrons began to expect painters to paint masterpieces like Van der Weyden. As a result, Van der Weyden established a new artistic style and broke the conventions set forth by earlier Netherlandish artists.⁹

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* (fig. 7), ca. 1442-45, illustrates this break from tradition and convention. Not only is the *Miraflores Altarpiece* a fixed-wing triptych, which means it does not open and close, but it is the first triptych to make use of an arch motif. Van der Weyden placed his sacred figures within an archway. In the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, his archway denotes the proximity of a sacred opening, establishes a sacred space and recalls traditional Netherlandish conventions of sculpture and painting. This seems to stem from Van der Weyden’s familiarity with the Byzantine icon, such as seen in his copy of the Virgin Cambrai, known as *Virgin and

---

⁸ Ibid., p. 11.
Child (fig. 8), and his later reinterpretation of the icon-like Virgin and Child in Standing Madonna (fig. 9), who is situated in an archway. The arch motif also evolved from earlier traditions, such as seen in Campin’s Betrothal of the Virgin (fig. 10), who placed the Virgin within an architectural setting. In his work, Van der Weyden preferred sculptural elements, such as the archway and grisaille. This is evident in the way in which the Miraflores Altarpiece contains both sculptural and painted elements in the interior unlike earlier triptychs, which only used sculptural elements on the exterior. His skill at depicting emotions to incite a response from the viewer is also evident within this tripartite. As a result, Van der Weyden carried on the tradition of the Netherlandish triptych but subverted conventions to include more architectural and sculptural elements, that became characteristic of his work.

Chapter 4 examines Hugo van der Goes and the Portinari Altarpiece. Van der Goes was born in Ghent around 1440. He became a master in the painter’s guild of Ghent around 1467. He was sponsored for his membership by Joos van Wassenhove and Daneel Ruthaert. Joos van Wassenhove, or Joos van Ghent, moved to Italy and worked for Derico da Montefeltro in Urbino. The career of van der Goes was characterized by elite patronage as well as important commissions from the Burgundian church, Italian businessmen located in the Low Countries and other affluent individuals. A year after becoming a master, Van der Goes was commissioned by Ghent officials to create works for the Great Indulgence. He also made decorations for the marriage of Charles the Bold and Margaret of York, and also worked in the service of Federico de Montefeltro and Tommaso Portinari, who were important Italian patrons. At the pinnacle of his success, though, Van der Goes closed up his studio and became a lay brother at Rood Klooster, which belonged to the Windesheim Congregation, near Brussels in 1477. As a lay
brother, he continued to paint and completed the unfinished works of Dieric Bouts. Eventually, after coming back from a trip, van der Goes became depressed and declared himself to be damned. He tried to kill himself because he feared damnation and after making a brief recovery, he died in Rood Klooster. In many cases, earlier interpretations focused on Van der Goes’ struggle with his inner demons to interpret his work. As a result, many scholars often looked for the hidden demons and other signs of madness while overlooking the powerful devotional efficacy of his works.

Van der Goes’ *Portinari Altarpiece* (fig. 11) demonstrates his use of illusionism and one point perspective while returning to a more traditional format of the triptych. My final chapter, examines the *Portinari Altarpiece* and analyzes the ways in which Van der Goes implemented his own unique style and incorporated elements from both Campin and van der Weyden into his work. As with Campin, Van der Goes too reworked the traditional triptych format; like the older artist, he utilized sculptural elements, or grisaille, on the exterior wings. Van der Goes also utilized doors and apertures to create separation between the viewer and the sacred, but in a subtler manner than Campin. Rather than just straightforward doorways, he mostly relies on more mystical elements, such as displacement of the figures and time discrepancies, to create thresholds. In this capacity, the evolution of the triptych from Campin to Van der Goes has changed drastically and becomes more complicated in its achievement of a separation between the viewer and the sacred.

---

In Chapter 5—the conclusion—I will reflect on the Netherlandish triptych as characterized by these three artists. Baerze and Broederlam started the tradition of using sculptural and painted elements in their triptych, and this became a convention that appeared in each triptych. First in the 1400s, Campin will be shown to have continued this convention by utilizing sculptural elements on the exteriors wings. As a result, Campin established the format and usual use of this convention while also implementing the earliest appearance of divine figures in a domestic setting in the *Merode Altarpiece*. This domesticity will be shown to be a means by which Campin establishes boundaries and facilitates a devotional response from the viewer. Later on Rogier van der Weyden, in his *Miraflores Altarpiece*, will be seen to subvert some of the earlier conventions. His use of sculptural elements, the archway, and architectural settings create divine archways and evoke a similar but more carefully focused devotional response from the viewer. Finally, Hugo van der Goes drew upon all of these conventions, traditions and even the styles of Campin and Van der Weyden to create his own unique style. Van der Goes reverts back to older traditions in the *Portinari Altarpiece* only to make it radically his own. The *Portinari Altarpiece* demonstrates the complex and more subtle style of van der Goes, who preferred to use illusionistic techniques rather than explicit architectural features to create thresholds. Each of these three artists will be shown to have implemented their own style while still achieving separation between the viewer and the divine and consequently, creating an image that aids in achieving a mode of communication with the divine.
Chapter 2.

ROBERT CAMPIN: DOMESTICITY AND THE DIVINE
THE MERODE ALTARPIECE: A NEW TRADITION

Robert Campin, or his workshop, painted the *Merode Altarpiece* (Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) sometime between 1425-1428. This work is a hinged triptych, which means it has three panels, two smaller size wings that can physically close like doors over the larger central panel. The work is oil paint on panel and each section is framed by oak paneling. It measures roughly twenty-five by forty-eight inches when open. Campin, was one of the earliest Netherlandish artists to establish the painted triptychs, and almost certainly, the first to introduce a domestic setting. The complexity of the domestic setting in the *Merode Altarpiece* (fig. 4) parallels the mysterious identity of its creator, Robert Campin, who is usually identified as the Master of Flemalle. The triptych generally suggests a domestic setting, this is most particularized in the main scene—the Annunciation—at the center. In placing the annunciation in a domestic setting, Campin started a new tradition that would be repeated in later generations.

The *Merode Altarpiece’s* three scenes seem to exist in a shared space and the events shown appear to transpire in the temporal world. In the left panel, the setting is established by the skyline shown above the brick wall with an open gate through which the viewer is able to glimpse a house and the architecture of a city. In the central scene, two windows reveal a blue sky dotted with clouds. In the final scene, the windows show a view of a cityscape from a much higher perspective than the first scene, which shows a cityscape. This distant view depicts

---

14 There is debate surrounding the authorship of the *Merode Altarpiece* (fig. 4). The triptych is usually attributed to the Master of Flemalle or to his workshop, his assistants or apprentices. Scholars have debated about whether the Master of Flemalle is the same person as Robert Campin, or two separate individuals. This thesis does not attempt to prove that the Master of Flemalle is in fact, Robert Campin, but it acknowledges that there is no valid conclusion on who the Master of Flemalle is. For the purposes of this thesis, the identity of the Master of Flemalle will follow Thürlemann’s argument from *Robert Campin: A Monographic Study with Critical Catalogue* that, these two individuals are the same person.
buildings and what appear to be churches in the far background. These various glimpses of a
cityscape suggest that the space within the *Merode Altarpiece* exists in a small, probably
Netherlandish, city. Campin by choosing to place the Annunciation in a house that might exist at
the edge of a busy city, presents sacred figures in the midst of the temporal world and who seem
to be within arm’s reach of the viewer. Despite this seeming continuity, each panel portrays
different temporal elements.

In the left panel of the *Merode Altarpiece* the patrons kneel before the steps and face the
doorway of a domestic house. A brick wall obscures most of the background except for the hazy,
blue sky. The wall is pierced in one spot by a gatehouse, with a door. A guard stands next to the
open door beyond which one can see a figure. Birds perch on the high ledge of the wall and a
rose bush grows below. The two carefully identified figures kneel before the open door in the
foreground. The man is dressed in black, complete with a purse and the hilt of a sword peeks out
from his belt. The woman kneels behind him and wears a white headdress, a black cloak, a red
dress trimmed with fur and tied with bright red prayer beads, which thread through her fingers.
They kneel just in front of the stairs and face the open door towards the central scene. This
placement of the figures setups their relationship with the Annunciation which appears to take
place in a domestic space beyond the doorway.

The central panel depicts a domestic interior and the everyday activities of ordinary life
in the fifteenth century. In the background, a lavabo hangs down in alcove, while a towel hangs
nearby on rod. An albarello jar, which holds a lily flower, and a smoking candle and a devotional
book with a green pouch stand on the central table. To the right, the Virgin leans up against a
wooden bench. Behind her, is a fireplace with a fireback and black soot trailing up the chimney
defines the border of the room. The Virgin is so immersed in her book that she does not notice the angel, who approaches her, or the Christ Child flying through the closed window. This scene captures the moment when the Virgin is about to become the mother of God, but in a domestic setting. The placement of the Virgin, the angel and the Christ Child within a domestic interior all emphasize this earthly location.

The final scene again shows the interior of the house, but this time a workshop complete with the figure of Joseph, who is shown working at a carpentry project. He is seated on a bench with his body turned towards the viewer. In one hand, he holds a board that displays numerous holes that seems to be drilled by the tool in his hand. Below his hands, an axe is buried in a piece of wood along with a saw. On the table is an assortment of tools, including what appears to be a hammer, pliers, another type of saw, wood shavings and mousetrap among other instruments. Joseph’s position is parallel to the Virgin’s and a closed door appears behind his bench. In the background, the cityscape is shown most prominently complete with figures dressed in black and red strolling about a city square. Several churches appear beyond this area. The elements of the domestic interior characterize Joseph as a middle class craftsman and shows him in a situation familiar to the viewer.

Campin was one of the first artists to depict sacred history by situating holy figures into a domestic setting. In the *Merode Altarpiece*, the annunciation is placed within the interior of a house. This approach contrasts with an earlier tradition, mostly manuscripts, in which the sacred moment is displaced in time. For example, in the *Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux* (fig. 12) the moment of the annunciation is placed within a familiar architecture, but there is something mystical about the structure and setting. The Virgin is placed in an enclosed setting, the angel comes from the
only opening in the architecture and the surrounding area is indistinct. This image lacks a decisive setting and is complementary to the notion that sacred history cannot be truly represented within our own reality. In Campin’s triptych, the setting is transformed into a domestic interior with familiar figures and seemingly the sacred moment is placed into time and even, witnessed by mere mortals who peer through a doorway. Yet, more closely considered, the displacements within the triptych panels, the domestic setting, the particular type of Mary and the discrepancies between the panels all utilize the setting to separate the secular from the divine.

The three panels in the *Merode Altarpiece* unified by a temporal space, are further united through an appearance of apertures and doors. In the first panel, the open gateway in the wall, and the smaller door in the upper gatehouse, and—of course—the door at which the donors kneel, are all doorways. The main gatehouse doorway leads into the garden and the other one on before the donor leads into the central scene. The central panel also depicts a number of apertures. Two round windows, through which the Christ Child descends, pierce the left wall. While in the background, two rectilinear windows though partly covered by elaborate wooden shutters, also show the sky. The uppermost portion of these windows is covered in glass decorated with a coat of arms. Finally, in Joseph’s workshop, three apertures allow the viewer to look beyond this room to the cityscape beyond and below. These apertures are formed by a type of shop window that could be closed or opened up by wooden panels. This is evident in the panels, which articulate the ceiling of the workshop. There is also the outline of a wooden door in the back of his workshop, which is closed. This appearance of apertures and doors unifies the triptych, but also establishes boundaries between the temporal world and the divine, between the viewer and the sacred figures.
PHYSICAL FRAMING

In the *Merode Altarpiece*, the many apertures, or doorways and windows, emphasize its tripartite physical make-up and the theme of threshold and boundaries. It is as if within his triptych, Campin amplifies the physical format and actual mechanism of the triptychs. Here, even more than usual, the standard format interconnects the three scenes, but also draws attention their separation through the physical frame. Physical framing in this sense became a fundamental element of the painting and interacts with the painted elements. Overall, the physical framing separates and establishes boundaries between the three events while also playing an integral part in the painted scenes. Each portion of the *Merode Altarpiece* manipulated this play between the actual and painted framing. In the farthest left scene, a doorway complete with an attendant shows a glimpse of the city beyond this domestic exterior. At the foreground, a man and a woman kneel before another open door. Here, the actual frame obscures the frame of the painted door. Nonetheless, the viewer assumes that the kneeling figures are able to see into the central scene with its hint of a door in this outward scene. However in the central panel, the open windows are the only visible opening in the central scene. In this manner, the framing establishes a boundary between the donors and the central image while isolating the donors in their urban setting. Therefore, the frame seemingly covers the opening of the door at the left and becomes a part of the painted elements. In looking at the last scene, Joseph is isolated in his carpentry workshop. The framing in the central and third panel obscures the doorway into his workshop. Behind Joseph are several open windows, which show the cityscape that the viewer caught a glimpse in the first scene. There is also a door with a hinge to his right, but it is closed and
cannot be opened because of the bench. The windows are the only opening within the scene.

Again, the physical frame becomes an essential component of sense since it obscures the “door” into Joseph’s room, which is hinted at by dark shadows in the corner of the central scene. The physical framing works to isolate this event as well as to obscure whether Joseph is able to access the central panel. Logically, Joseph should be able to access the entirety of the domestic setting, but the framing of the triptych obscures this fact. In this manner, the physical framing is utilized to encourage the assumption of continuity, but subtly separates each scene into its own world.

The process of creating the frames for a triptych involved forethought and this physical make-up had its own requirement and preconditions. First, the craftsman would create flat boards that would serve as the panels. This involved flattening the boards as well as creating straight edges along the board before gluing the individual strips together by heating it. In this view, the physicality of creating the panels alone show how these triptychs were fused together with glue and joints.  

A frame involves two stiles and two rails, which makes use of a variety of different joints in order to hold the frames together. In Jan Van Eyck’s time, the frame was often carved from the same wood as the plank, or panels on the back. Some vertical moldings were carved from the same plank and cross moldings were pinned with no real joinery but instead were pinned. For a triptych, the different panels would have been held together by a hinge, and most likely dovetailed or given a rectangular hinge. Usually the hinge, nailed into the side of the frame, consisted of two iron blades joined together by a pin, which aligned the frames and

---

17 Verougstraete, _Frames and Support_, p. 103.
allowed it to be rotated. There are a variety of ways to allow the triptych to open, but shows that these triptychs were closed during certain times.\textsuperscript{18} Although the \textit{Merode Altarpiece} is probably not in its original frame, the way it was put together is crucial to its final appearance. Even the current reconstructed frame, considered to be similar to the original demonstrates that framing was not an afterthought, but a crucial part of the art. Craftsmen, or the artist, would have to carefully construct the frame and physically placed the painting into the frame before infusing the wooden frames together. In this sense, the paintings were fitted into the wooden frame and became a triptych, or one entity.

Although, the exterior paintings on the \textit{Merode Altarpiece} did not survive, Campin was known for featuring grisaille on his exteriors wings and leads the viewer into the interior. Despite this lack of painted exterior wings in the \textit{Merode Altarpiece}, Campin’s other works demonstrate a recurring tradition of using grisaille on the exterior.\textsuperscript{19} This can be seen in the fragment of the \textit{Thief} (fig. 5) in Frankfort, whose exterior is painted with an image of \textit{Saint John the Baptist} (fig. 13) in grisaille. Here, the figure is placed within a niche and creates a trompe l’oeil effect with the realistic nature of the sculptural quality. This use of grisaille on the exterior is important because it emphasizes the difference between the monochromatic exterior and the polychrome interior. It creates another level of division in the triptych. In this manner, the use of grisaille enforces the concept of the triptych as a door and denotes the threshold between the inside and outside of the triptych.\textsuperscript{20} Although the grisaille is not essential to the triptych itself, it is extreme example of the how the physical opening and closing of the triptych establishes boundaries between the exterior and interior. In this example, the \textit{Thief} fragment shows the entrance from a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Verougstraete, \textit{Frames and Support}, p. 107.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Jacobs \textit{Opening Doors}, p. 35.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 40.
\end{itemize}
monochromatic world to a colorful world and how grisaille becomes associated with divine portals.

The portrayal of St. John the Baptist in the *Thief* (fig. 5) illustrates another traditional aspect of the triptych exteriors. In this tradition, the exterior wings usually show saintly figures, who lead the viewer through the physical door and to the interior images. This can be illustrated in the *Ghent Altarpiece* (fig. 14), where the exterior wings depict the Annunciation, grisaille saints and donors and sibyls/prophets. The depiction of the donors, who commissioned the altarpiece, illustrates who brought the art to fruition. Furthermore the saints, usually patron saints, accompany the donors and guide them into the sacred moment depicted within the interior. In a manner similar to how saints present donors to sacred figures and mediate between the threshold that separate the temporal and the divine. The Annunciation and the sibyls provide the sacred event that made the interior possible and the sibyls also foreshadow the coming of Christ, the sacred lamb, who is celebrated in the interior. In this manner, these figures lead the viewer into the interior and act as a guide to opening the interior. This altarpiece demonstrates the relationship between the exterior and interior panels, and additionally how the act of opening and closing the triptych acts as a multi-layered physical threshold between the viewer and the image. Although, *The Merode Altarpiece* no longer has exterior paintings, it can be assumed that those exterior paintings would have created another boundary and acted as a doorway, or guide into the interior of the triptych.

---

PATRONAGE: RELATIONSHIP TO THE VIEWER

The presence of donors in the Merode Altarpiece establishes the relationship between the viewer and the triptych. Its relatively small size roughly twenty-five inches by forty-six, suggests that the triptych was used for private devotion. This small size would have been suitable for a very personal contact and possibly used for home display, or an informal house altar, as portrayed in Joos van Cleve’s Annunciation (fig. 15). Furthermore, the choice of a domestic setting would have been more prevalent among objects constructed for private devotion and not for public ritual. In this capacity, the reason for the domestic setting in the Merode Altarpiece is reflected in the patronage of the commission. This patrons are evident in the donor portraits that are present in the left wing of the triptych, a common theme within Campin’s milieu. The donors are priant figures, that is they kneel in prayer. Another aspect of these donors’ portraits is that their size is the same as the sacred figures. In earlier works, but even in works by Campin’s contemporaries such as Calvary of Hendrik van Rijn (fig. 16), the donors are rendered significantly smaller than the sacred figures. Furthermore, the donor present in Calvary of Hendrik van Rijn is accompanied by a patron saint, who presents him and acts as a guardian, but the Merode Altarpiece does not include the saintly figure. The significance of these characteristics is the donors’ appearance is more realistic and also, it conveys the message that these donors are worthy counterparts to the holy figures. In this manner, these donors are portrayed as pious individuals who are similar in size and able to access the sacred scene in the center of the triptych.

23 Jacobs Opening Doors, p. 40.
24 Ibid., p. 41.
The purpose of the *Merode Altarpiece* was not intended to be an actual altarpiece as is evident in its size, the lack of saintly figures, but also by the size of the donors and the identity of the donors. In the central panel, the window shows a coat of arms of the Ingelbrechts. The Ingelbrechts have been variously identified as Ymbrechts, Imbrect or Engelbrechts and were from a family in Mechelen.\(^{25}\) This coat of arms was added in later over the previous golden background and the addition of the wings suggests, that these additions were requested by the patron.\(^{26}\) The particular family has been traced to Peter Ingelbrecht and his wife, Margarethe Schrinmechers. It has been suggested that the names of the donors affected the nature of the scenes portrayed in the triptych. The name Schrinmechers is a canting name, which means “cabinetmaker” and influences the occupation of Joseph, who is no longer a carpenter but a cabinetmaker.\(^{27}\) In addition, the name Inghelbrecht is derived from “der Engel brachte” which means, “the angel brought [it]”.\(^{28}\) In this view, the two scenes refer to the names of the donors and establish a personal connection with them. Whether this information is true or not, the purpose of the triptych seems to have been a private object of devotion for the Ingelbrechts. The history of the Ingelbrechts, who were a merchant family and were based in Mechelen supports this likely function. Peter Ingelbrecht was probably a merchant of wool and cloth and presumably well-off, with property in Antwerp, Mechelen and Luxembourg and ties to Cologne through his first wife. His first wife, Marguerite Scrijnmakere or Schrinmecher, was said to be richer than her husband and more well off in real estate He commissioned a chapel to be added to the oldest parish church in Mechelen and employed a chaplain, who was to say mass daily with


\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 66.
the De Profundis. This evidence indicates that most likely, this altarpiece was used in the Ingelbrecht’s home and served as a domestic object. In other words, this triptych was meant for private devotion and the coat of arms along with equal proportions of the figures suggests that the triptych created a liminal space exclusive to this particular family.

FUNCTION

The Merode Altarpiece’s function as a private devotional object is suggested by the unusual choice of the Annunciation as the triptych’s pivotal scene. This theme as Cynthia Hahn, argues, places particular importance on the nuclear family and perhaps, served as an ex voto for individuals who were hoping for children. This thesis is supported by the gaze of the Ingelbrechts, who look directly into the Virgin’s room in a way that seems to follow the prayer of Bernard of Clairvaux. The prayer admonishes the supplicant to “Approach this virginal bed, enter if you can the nuptial chamber. ... Put your ear to the keyhole, listen well to what he [Gabriel] announces and judge if that is not a message consoling to you.” He further advises the individual to watch, but cautions that only the truly devout will enter the sacred space. Hahn also argues that the inclusion of Joseph creates an image of sacred marriage that is appropriate for an image devoted to fertility. In addition, the verdant bloom of the garden suggests fertility as well as the manner in which Christ was said to be conceived amidst the bloom of spring.

30 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 49.
32 Ibid., 55.
Finally, the physical context and mechanics of the *Merode Altarpiece* as a triptych manifests in its function and setting within a domestic setting. Although there is no substantial documentation of triptych wings being angled, some visual evidence shows that triptychs were displayed in a manner similar to diptychs. In Joos van Cleve’s *Annunciation* (fig. 15), there is a depiction of a small triptych within a private chamber. Here the triptych is shown as being positioned as half-closed and allows the viewers to see the exterior panels. Furthermore, it also shows the domestic set-up of the triptych, which is situated on a cabinet or perhaps a smaller altarpiece. Whatever its intended function, Van Cleve’s image shows how triptychs were situated within a private setting and suggests that owners displayed their triptychs opened, angled or closed. It also establishes that these were not hung. This relationship is further demonstrated in the Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 17) where the *Merode Altarpiece* is displayed half-open. This recreation, demonstrates a similar setting to the one displayed in Cleve’s *Annunciation* and would have created the effect of a doorway that had been opened in the space.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, there was no specific term for a triptych; in the Netherlands during this period such works were usually referred to as “dueren,” or doors. Such is the case for a Last Judgement by Dieric Bouts, where a document refers to the painting as “eenen cleinene Tafelnelkene met synen *dueren van den Ordele*”. In French, in this period, triptychs were sometimes referred to as “porte”. The inventory of Philip the Good, for example, refers to a triptych as “Un tableau d’argent dore, ouvrant en facon de *porte*”. The wings of the triptych were also referred to as feuilles. For example, in a will from 1412, the triptych is described as “one large painting, which opens with two leaves” In this manner, the term feuilles associates the triptych format with books and a more narrative quality. This usage parallels the idea of
page-turning and suggests that the triptych is meant to be moved, or opened like doors. The book-like quality relates to manuscripts and diptychs. The diptych normally depicted a portrait of the donor and reflected a tradition from manuscripts. In this manner, the small size of the diptych allows for an intimate display and for the owner to be framed in a state of devotional perpetuity. Furthermore, the image itself allows the viewer to behold the appropriate devotional behavior and for the triptych, relates to the outer exterior wings. From this, it can be argued that like shown in the *Diptych of Christiaan de Hondt* (fig. 18), the smaller triptych was used for devotional purposes in the home. For viewers, the triptych functioned like a door, or a portal, which would create boundaries and thresholds within in the triptych. Anthropologist, Ike Arnold van Gennep recognized that doors are essential in rites of passage from one status to another, or from one place to another.

**PAINTED FRAMES**

The *Merode Altarpiece* constructs a sacred hierarchy in the three panels by using the different temporal settings. In the first panel, the donors are shown within a verdant garden at the moment when the male donor opens the door and falls to knees before it. At first glance, it would seem that the donors have been granted access to central, sacred event and are able to gaze upon the scene of the annunciation. It becomes clear upon closer examination though that the donor’s door and the visible section of the door in the annunciation are not precisely aligned. The door in the central is positioned too high to correspond with the donor’s door. This establishes a hierarchy within the triptych by suggesting that the central panel, which contains divine figures,

---


is higher than the temporal setting of the left panel. Furthermore, the angle of the donor’s door seems to block the entrance and prevent the individuals from mounting the stair. Consequently, the donors are denied entrance into the inner sanctum. These subtle details portray the idea that the donors have been allowed to see, or be in the presence of, the annunciation, but are denied the ability to cross the threshold into the sacred space. It reinforces the notion that humans may only glimpse into the world of the supernatural that is positioned above the earthly world through the structure of a door. As for the panel on the right, Joseph lacks any way to enter into the central panel. This is evident on both sides of the panel, as the central panel depicts a fireplace on the wall that could contain a door into Joseph’s workshop. Although, this closing off of Jospeh can be explained by acknowledging the biblical traditional of the account of the annunciation in which he plays no part. This placement also establishes that Joseph, while, a particularly sacred figure is emphatically mortal, and so separated from the sacred scene at the center. These details work to delineate a clear threshold between the divine scene and the mortal figures.

The hierarchy between the sacred and mundane is further supported by the different views in the background of each panel. As noted earlier, the donors are depicted within a walled garden that shows a glimpse of a rolling cityscape through an open door. In addition above the brick wall, there is a view of a cloudy sky. These figures are portrayed as existing on the earthly plane. In contrast, the window in the central scene is positioned lower than the wall in the left panel, but shows a crisp, blue sky. In theory, the window should not have a view of the sky, but instead of the brick wall that should have continued from the garden scene. This detail conveys the idea that this central scene exists on a divine level that is high above the garden at the left. To

the right in Joseph’s workshop, there are several windows that portray a clear view of a cityscape complete with buildings and people milling around. The view from these windows seems to hover slightly above the cityscape and is not on the same level as the donor’s panel. Consequently, the views from the apertures in each scene convey that the central panel is above the other two panels. Joseph, who is not quite at the same level, is still above the donors, who exist on the ground, or in the temporal realm. Through displacement suggested by these details the *Merode Altarpiece* establishes a sacred hierarchy that signals that these scenes and figures exist on different planes.

The division between the levels of the sacred and mundane established in the landscape views of each scene is further enhanced by stylistic differences present in each panel. In the central panel, the brilliant, white color of Gabriel’s garments, the rich red of Mary’s gown and the indigo color of the cushions that the Virgin sits upon create a bright tone. This contrasts with the dull, darker colors that are present in Joseph’s workshop, which is more muted. Furthermore, the donors although outside are also depicted with mostly earth tones. This differentiation is further reinforced through the use of lighting used in each scenes. The central figures are surrounded by a diffused golden light, which is further aided by the bright colors. Consequently, the combined elements make this central scene notably bright. Even the walls seem to reflect lighter colors than the others present in the panel. In contrast, the right panel displays Joseph in a dimly lit room with a chiaroscuro effect while the background of the image is shadowed in darkness. Even though there is an open window, there is less light and the walls are not as brightly lite as the central panel. As for the left panel, it has no shadows and uniform light.

---

These differences are consistent with Otto Pächt’s argument about the varied approaches to spaces within the *Merode Altarpiece*. He points out that the angel Gabriel is seen from eye level and the Virgin Mary from above and these two figures exist in a room with a tipped-up room with a rapidly receding perspective. Joseph’s perspective is more logical, but does not conform to the perspective scheme of the other two panels. The panels do not share a uniform sense of light and subtly communicates the separation between these figures and the location. Similarly, the use of color, light and perspective conveys a difference between each of the panels and supports the notion that these panels exist in different planes of existence.

Perhaps reinforcing the fact that Joseph and the donors are denied entrance into the main scene, Mary evokes her traditional symbol as the doorway to heaven. Certainly, Mary seated in the central panel, leaning against a wooden bench and holds open in her hands a book is the focal point of the triptych. Compositionally, the Virgin is important to the narrative of the painting but her symbolic meaning adds another threshold. The figure of Mary was a prominent figure in triptychs because of her association with doors since she opened the gates to heaven after the fall of Adam and Eve. Since the Virgin carried in her womb the savior, who would die for the sins of man, and open the door to salvation. This notion was initially proposed in the Song of Solomon, where believers thought of Mary’s body as a vessel through which the Holy Ghost was channeled. Moreover, her virginity is identified with the notion of a closed door, or the *porta clausa*. The door is also associated with Mary to denote her dualism. Since Mary is both a virgin and a mortal mother, who bore the Son of God, she functions a symbol of possessing a human and supernatural natural. In this aspect, Virgin exists in both divine and temporal realms and is

---

39 Ainsworth and Christiansen, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, p. 92.
often seen as intercessory figure between man and God. Therefore, the Virgin is seen as a
doorway to salvation and becomes a portal in paintings. The role of Mary within the Merode
Altarpiece creates multiple openings, but she functions as the link between the two realms.41

The particular representation of the Virgin and the Annunciation in the domestic setting
seems to have originated in an older tradition of paintings. Older depictions of the annunciation
usually show the Virgin against a church, or a chapel-like space or even architectural portal. This
is evident in both Van Eyck’s Annunciation (fig. 19) and more importantly portrayed in
Campin’s Betrothal of the Virgin (fig. 10) from the Prado. Van Eyck’s Virgin is seated within a
church interior as she receives the message from Gabriel while Campin’s Annunciation portrays
the Virgin being lead through the crowd towards an architectural portal. The setting is framed by
this archway and the Virgin proceeds towards it. In these images the Virgin is usually placed in
the nave or the space used predominantly by the laity.42 While these scenes continued to be
produced, another iconographic type originated in the circle of Robert Campin in which the
Annunciation takes place in explicitly domestic room. Although there is no physical evidence, it
is likely that these images were often used in conjunction with devotional texts, or prayer books.
Medieval laity increasingly began to focus on their inner spirituality and take responsibility for
devoting time to prayer. This is made evident by the increasing number of laypersons acquiring
devotional objects, such as a book of hours or devotional images. Nonetheless, images in these
books were connected to texts and direct prayers. This is, perhaps, reflected in the depiction,
where the Virgin is shown with a book that is explicitly shown to have decoration akin to a book
of hours. In choosing to portray the Virgin at home rather than a church, the domestic Madonna

41 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 7.
becomes associated with daily life of ecclesiastical institutions. It communicates that the living
rooms of private homes were just as appropriate as churches for the sacred figures to enter and it
makes the Virgin become more personal to the viewer.⁴³

The presence of Mary in the *Merode Altarpiece* creates a central opening into the sacred
space and shows a model for devotional behavior. Campin’s Virgin is also a *Madonna
humilitatis*, who is usually in close proximity to the earth, which ties her to this earthly world.
However before Campin, Mary was usually portrayed outside of the sanctuary, where the
sacraments are handled, in a church. This role was transferred when Mary was placed in
domestic setting and denoted by the activity of her reading. From this, it showed how the secular
world connected with the divine, or church, and portrayed the manner in how religious devotion
should be carried out in the home.⁴⁴ This is evident in the silent mood of Mary, which was
unusual because most annunciations convey a sense of surprise at the anticipation of the
moment. However, this Mary is deeply engrossed in her book and the viewer is unable to discern
whether she is even aware of the presence of Gabriel within this panel. Furthermore, the
perspective on the Virgin, which is shown from above and unlike the profile views of the other
figures, allows the viewer to behold her expression and behavior.⁴⁵ This neutralization works on
several levels to convey a sense of earthly realism, but it also communicates that the viewer is
not allowed to witness the actual sacred moment. It portrays to the viewer how they are
supposed to engage with the divine and aids them in achieving a meditative state. Viewers are
supposed to be attentive but detached from the image. The figure of Mary works as an

⁴⁵ Ainsworth and Christiansen, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, p. 92.
intercessor between realms since she works as doorway, or visual, to the divine realm and helps individuals communicate with the divine. Mary is not only a door to the divine, but also as a neutral template, which allows the viewer to access the scene.\textsuperscript{46}

The inclusion of a fireplace in the \textit{Merode Altarpiece} also links the triptych to traditional considerations of fireplaces as a link to the spiritual world. Domestic architecture since the Neolithic period allocated a space for fire. The domestic hearth once symbolized in Indo-Europeans culture the basic social unit. Through the rituals and ceremonies performed about it, the hearth expressed the religious ideology of the kinship group, bonding its member and grounding it to the home it occupied. The hearth served as an altar since fire descended from the sun and its cosmic power designated it for worship. The family was grouped around the head of the household, who was the priest of the hearth. Its ceremonies were directed towards ancestors in exchange for tutelary power extended to the living. From generation to generation the hearth was a cosmic center where the living contacted the dead and united the family to its predecessors. The fireplace was also associated with birth as the infant was received into the family by being carried ritually about the fire.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, the tradition of the fireplace was linked to this connotation and continued through the medieval period and later on. Since Mary is positioned in front of the fireplace, her role as an intercessor is further emphasized.

The \textit{Merode Altarpiece} sets up the dichotomy between the exclusion and accessibility of the viewers to further emphasize the separation between the divine and the temporal worlds. This imagery of barriers in various stages of being unlocked or decisively locked guides the viewer


and establishes the limits of his or her access. The visibility of these barriers also incorporates the element of the invisible in order to support the established thresholds. The left panel provides a study on the use of keys and the act of unlocking. In the background, the brick wall that separates the city from the garden contains a door. This door is not closed, but instead is slightly open and suggests that it has been unlocked. However, the half-opened door that the viewers seem to be looking through is actually blocking their view: it seems to suggest, that some mysteries are not unlocked to the temporal realm.\textsuperscript{48} There are numerous examples found within panels between the realm of seeing and not-seeing, witnessing and exclusion and locking up and unlocking the scenes present within these scenes.\textsuperscript{49} This theme of open and closed apertures reappears in the \textit{Brussel Annunciation} (fig. 20), a reinterpretation of the \textit{Merode Altarpiece}. Scholars generally assumed that it is in fact a workshop production, with substantial contributions by Jacques Daret.\textsuperscript{50} In this work, the visibilities of these apertures are made obvious. Here, the windows are boarded up and draw attention to their presence as the artist has added into the image another window and made them a pair. Furthermore, this artist has also included a door within this version of the Annunciation. This work seems to represent an apprentice, who looks to his master and copies what his master masterfully paints, but lacks the subtlety to render thresholds and instead creates gaping apertures. In looking back to the \textit{Merode Altarpiece}, the complexity of the spatial and temporal elements aided by the physical framing in turn works to display who are able to see and who cannot see. These complexities are further complicated by the figures such as the man riding his horse, who do not seem intrigued by this

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 161.
\textsuperscript{50} National Gallery, \textit{Robert Campin: New Directions in Scholarship}, p. 96.
event. The Merode Altarpiece is able to create a door into the supernatural by framing, which by means of subtle disjuncture and disparities within the scenes shows whether the figures see the sacred event or not.

CONCLUSION

Robert Campin was the first Netherlandish artist to place the annunciation within a domestic setting. It was an unusual choice for the central panel of a triptych, but it spoke to the specific desires of the patrons, the Ingelbrechts. These donors appear as the couple in the left panel and in the coat of arms present in the central windows. Most scholars believe that the Merode Altarpiece was utilized for private devotional and perhaps based on the iconography, as an ex voto object. Campin was able to fulfill the desires of the patrons while also creating a series of thresholds within the domestic setting of the Merode Altarpiece. He constructed a hierarchy of space by utilizing the domestic interior in several manners. The first was to create open and closed apertures within the panels, such as seen in the donor door and the lack of doors in the central and right panel. The appearance of the door in the left panel is placed lower than the one in the central and creates a discontinuity. This further emphasized through the hierarchy established through the background views. The left panel is placed on the ground, while the windows in the central reveal that this panel exists high above the ground. In addition, the colors of each panel are different. The left and right panels are duller and muted in color than the brightly colored central panel. All of these elements work together to establish a sacred hierarchy. The Virgin is also a door and in previous paintings, she was often placed within a

---

51 Holly, Looking Past, p. 169.
church interior or underneath an architectural frame. In this manner, Campin transferred her role as a door from an ecclesiastical setting to a domestic one. Scholars have suggested that these domestic paintings were used alongside devotional texts to show readers how to engage with the divine and help them achieve a mode of reflection. Finally, the appearance of opened and closed apertures, as well as the act of unlocking and locking present in all left panel, demonstrates who is able to see the sacred, while maintaining that they cannot pass over the threshold.
CHAPTER 3.

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN: DIVINITY IN THE ARCHWAY
**MIRAFLORES ALTARPIECE: A REINTERPRETATION OF TRADITION**

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* (fig. 7) was created sometime between 1442 and 1445 by Rogier van der Weyden. This particular “triptych” is not a traditional triptych, but instead is a fixed wing triptych, which does not physically open or close. Van der Weyden was the first Netherlandish painter to utilize this particular type of tripartite division. Each panel was completed in oil paint and individually framed by oak strips creating a triptych-like format. The *Miraflores Altarpiece* measures roughly twenty-nine by fifty-two inches, which makes it only slightly bigger than the *Merode Altarpiece*. Similar to Campin’s triptych, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* (fig. 4) is sectioned into three parts and focuses primarily on the life of Mary. In many ways, Van der Weyden’s tripartites are similar to earlier traditional Netherlandish triptychs and he takes advantage of the architectural and sculptural qualities of his new type of triptych to compensate for its lack of physical mobility.

In the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, each of the three scenes shares corresponding qualities that create a static platform, which heightens the different sacred figures and events shown. The Virgin Mary is central to each scene. Her appearance creates continuity even as the focus shifts between the different events — joyful, sorrowful and glorious — from her life. The Virgin even here, however, does not appear in a typical fashion but instead is framed by an archway. For each scene, Van der Weyden uses an archway to construct a portal that frames the individual scene. In this way, the semi-circular arch appears in each scene and further unifies the three scenes. This archway combines both physical and painted elements since the actual oak framing runs along the outside of the semi-circular arch. Each semi-circular arch is made up of a number of voussoir
stones sculptured individually and that taken together within each niche relate to a different 
episode in Mary’s life. Although the sculptures are not the same in each panel, they function in 
the same capacity. Respectively, the sculptures start at the far left with a saint and an 
ecclesiastical structure and terminates at the right with another ecclesiastical structure and saintly 
figure. Each semi-circular arch contains six individual sculptures that depict one event from the 
bible that is situated on a pointed architectural base. In this manner, the semi-circular arch 
depicts six events from the bible that relate to the overall theme of the scene. Finally, each scene 
contains an angel, who floats below the arch, and holds a crown with an inscribed banderole. 
These banderoles announce to the viewer, in Latin, the virtues and worthiness of the Virgin.52 
The repeated appearance of the Virgin and the archway three times works to unify the multiple 
scenes, but each scene is also different.

The first scene depicts the Holy Family within an ecclesiastical interior and this niche as 
a whole focuses on the joyful events of the Virgin’s life. Here, the Virgin is seated, dressed in 
white, and extends her hands in prayer while tilting her head towards the Christ child, who lies in 
her lap. Joseph is seated behind the mother and child, dressed in red and dark blue, his hands 
propped up on his cane. The Holy Family is positioned in a space underneath what seems to be a 
barrel vault supported by four Corinthian columns, each of which has a dark, cherry, wooden 
base. A green baldacchino decorated with a gold and brown brocaded cloth hangs down behind 
the Holy Family. Two glass windows appear just beyond the barrel vault and green canopy. This 
heightens the effect of the baldacchino as a backdrop to the Holy Family and a feature that 
blocks the view of the extended interior structure. An angel dressed in indigo with a banderole

that states, “This woman was found most worthy and free from all blemish, therefore she shall receive the crown,” floats in front of the top of the arch.\textsuperscript{53} This banderole is complete with a crown and overall the scene celebrates the Virgin’s purity. In accord with this theme, the archway sculptures all depict the joyful events from Mary’s life including the annunciation, the visitation, the nativity, the adoration of the Shepherds, the adoration of the magi, and the presentation at the temple. This archway begins with St. Peter and terminates with St. Luke.\textsuperscript{54} Overall, this scene celebrates the joys of the Virgin’s life and emphasizes her purity.

The second scene features the Pietá within a barrel vault structure and surrounded by scenes that depicted sorrowful events from the Virgin’s life. Here, the barrel vault is not limited to an enclosed interior scene but opens out into a lush scenery which includes an empty cross, rolling hills and a city tucked away in distant foliage. Instead of a green canopy, the foreground is set against a verdant landscape. The foreground focuses on the Virgin, dressed in scarlet, as she cradles the body of the dead Christ within the semi-circular arch. John the Evangelist and St. Peter, who stand at either side, attempt to comfort the Virgin. A mauve angel, who holds a crown and a banderole, which announces, “This woman was most faithful in the Passion of Christ, therefore there is given to her the crown,” appears above the semi-circular arch.\textsuperscript{55} Here the banderole exalts the faithfulness of the Virgin while the semi-circular arch above focuses on sorrowful events from her life including Christ taking leave of the Virgin, the Virgin told of Christ’s arrest, the way to Calvary, the raising of the cross, the crucifixion and the entombment.

\textsuperscript{53} Acres, "Rogier Van Der Weyden's Painted Texts," p. 92.
\textsuperscript{54} Campbell, \textit{Rogier van der Weyden}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{55} Acres, "Rogier Van Der Weyden's Painted Texts," p. 92.
This archway starts with St. John the Evangelist and ends with St. Matthew. This scene features the sorrowful events from the Virgin’s life and emphasizes her continual faithfulness.

The final scene shows the final appearance of Christ to his mother and focuses on the glorious episodes from her life. The same barrel vault appears once again but this time, another room stretches out behind the main scene. A door and flanking windows set this scene within an architectural space that opens out onto another lush landscape that might almost continue from the previous scene. At the foreground, the kneeling Virgin, who is dressed in dark blue, turns away from the bench with a closed prayer book, as if interrupted in the middle of prayer by the appearance of her Son. Above Mary a blue angel holds a crown and a banderole that states, “This woman persevered, conquering everything, therefore there is given to her the crown of life”. To either side of the angel, the semi-circular arch features glorious events including the Virgin and the three Maries, the Ascension, Pentecost, the Annunciation of the Virgin’s death, the death of the Virgin and the coronation of the Virgin. This archivolt begins with St. Mark and ends with St. Paul. This scene focuses on the glorious events from the Virgin’s life and celebrates her overall steadfast perseverance.

Altogether, these three events from the Virgin’s life are framed by semicircular arches that extend into a barrel vault while each main scene is set against a green background. The semicircular arches, barrel vault, and green background create continuity as well as establishing boundaries between the viewer and the divine scene. These boundaries maintain the separation of the temporal and divine by showing a sacred space of the divine events and allow the viewer to reflect upon each scene.

---

56 Campbell, *Rogier van der Weyden*, p. 43.
57 Acres, “Rogier Van Der Weyden's Painted Texts,” p. 92.
58 Campbell, *Rogier van der Weyden*, p. 43.
PHYSICAL FRAMING

The Miraflores Triptych is an adaption of the traditional format of a Netherlandish triptych. It is the first example of a fixed wing triptych, which unlike the conventional triptych, could not be closed. The wings lack of mobility presupposes a particular relationship with the viewer. Unlike the traditional triptych with wings that would open only on special days, the main scene was available to the viewer everyday. Moreover, these images were seen directly without the context of exterior images on the wings, which were usually decorated with donors or saints. Traditionally, as seen in the Merode Altarpiece, the viewer is granted entrance through the physical mechanics of the triptych, which opens likes a door, and allows the viewer to stand before the physical threshold of the framing to look upon the sacred interior. In Van der Weyden’s, this physical threshold is eliminated. The viewer, here, is allowed to look into a sacred space without the physical act of opening a door to the sacred. In this way, the physical mobility of the wings, which would have provided an experience comparable experience to walking through a church portal, is lost. This does not mean that the Miraflores Altarpiece does not have a similar effect, but that this sense of inward movement was achieved in a different way. Dirk de Vos, who suggests that the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece (fig. 21) was intended for the Chevrot Chapel, offers a key insight. In his account, the architecture of the Chevrot Chapel consisted of a narrow and high walled surface. A conventional triptych would have been unable to open in such narrow confines, but according to De Vos, Van der Weyden adapted the format

---

59 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 92.
to create a “triptych” that still functioned as a door by using grisaille and archways to achieve the same effect.

The use of grisaille within the *Miraflores Altarpiece* signifies the presence of a sacred doorway to the viewer. Traditionally, grisaille was used on exterior wings of triptychs. A major difference between the *Miraflores Triptych* and the *Merode Altarpiece* is the way in which the grisaille is utilized. In the *Miraflores Triptych*, grisaille is not used on the exterior wings but instead in the interior scenes. Instead, the semicircular arches are decorated with grisaille sculpture and therefore, which subverts the tradition exemplified by Robert Campin in the *Merode Altarpiece*. In Rogier van der Weyden’s work grisaille is used to articulate sculptural representation of bible events, and as importantly, to denote a sacred entrance to the viewer. For such a viewer the semi-circular arches with sculptural platforms would operate in the same capacity of a sacred portal as the physical opening of the triptych. The *Miraflores Altarpiece’s* use of grisaille in the interior and not the exterior as well as the lack of exterior decoration suggests that this tripartite work was viewed as a stationary and smaller piece of architecture.

The framing of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* emulates an architectural structure that projects into the viewer’s space. The wooden framing of the tripartite format is important in creating this structure. Since the fixed wing characteristic does not allow for opening and closing, the structure is static. As result, van der Weyden designed his archways to look like a church portal. The three entries with their three events are interconnected through the wooden frame, which becomes barrel-vault structures, or familiar church architecture. The notion of the sacred archway can be seen in the *Seven Sacrament Altarpiece* (fig. 21), where the crucifixion of Christ

---

60 Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, p. 92.
is shown in an ecclesiastical setting. Here, the sacraments are being performed underneath archways while Christ’s sacrifice is placed beneath the curve of the roof. In the background, the most sacred area of the sacristy is framed by a rood screen through which the viewer sees the altar and becomes a temporal portal.

In looking back at the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, the painted elements interact with the actual wooden frame of the triptych. The frame coincides and interacts with painted elements and the space becomes similar to a sculptural relief. Van der Weyden utilized low and high relief to denote the differences in the framing. The actual wooden framing works as a high relief, which projects into our space. It creates sculptural-like niches so that the sacred scenes exist within a space similar to that seen in the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* (fig. 21). The seamless blending of the wooden framing and painted elements in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* emulates an actual portal opening. In this way, the framing blends together levels of reality and creates three openings that project outwards into the viewer’s space like an ecclesiastical portal.

Van der Weyden use of a fixed wing triptych with archways appears elsewhere in his work. The *Altar of St. John* (fig. 22) is also a fixed wing triptych that utilizes archways to frame the sacred figures. This approach was characteristic of Van der Weyden’s distinctive way of looking at sacred events. In the *Altar of St. John*, the sacred figures step out before the portal and invite the viewer to look at them. Here, a fluid narrative is created because the foreground shows the sacred individuals and is connected throughout the three scenes. Furthermore, the viewer does not have to look into the portals to see the sacred figures. The figures are tied to the archways since they stand in close proximity to the archway and appear underneath. Instead, a viewer looks at the figures, lingers for a moment and then continues onto the next scene. The
format of the *Altar of St. John* emphasizes how the viewer is supposed to stop at each archway and look at the scene. The *Altar of St. John* reinforces that the ecclesiastical archway was characteristic of van der Weyden’s composition that implements a specific type of looking.

The use of physical framing and grisaille in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* constructs a sacred opening, similar to the conventional opening of triptychs. By these means, the framing creates a unique mode of communication between the viewer and the divine. Since the wooden frame projected into the viewer’s space, the framing became the foundation for an ecclesiastical archway. The interaction between the wooden frame and the painted elements created the effect of an open portal that revealed a sacred space. This effect was further strengthened by the inclusion of grisaille on the semi-circular arches. Viewers would have recognized the grisaille as a conventional element used in other triptychs and associated it with the sacred openings. By using the grisaille on the semi-circular arches, van der Weyden characterized his archways as sharing qualities with the exterior wings on conventional triptychs. Despite the lack of mobility, viewers recognized the archways as opening up to a sacred scene and achieving a similar effect evident in the *Merode Altarpiece*. Despite the fact that the fixed wing lacks the physicality of the *Merode Altarpiece*, viewers were still engaged by the sense of a door opening. Although this tripartite lacked exterior wings, it created a new type of framing and doorway into the sacred. In this capacity, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* created the same effect a portal opening as seen in the previous example through physical framing that blended in with the painted elements.
PATRONAGE: RELATIONSHIP TO THE VIEWER

Despite its physical differences, the Miraflores Altarpiece shares some similarities of viewership with the Merode Altarpiece. The purpose of each triptych was to facilitate a mode of communication between the temporal and divine worlds. In creating a distinct opening, Van der Weyden created a triptych that encouraged spiritual reflections and devotion. This intent is, in part, explained by the patronage and planned function of the work. King Juan II of Castile donated the Miraflores Altarpiece to a Carthusian convent located in Miraflores, Spain in 1445. Surviving documents suggests that the Miraflores Altarpiece may have been a gift to Juan II from a pope, who wanted to express his gratitude to the king.61 Others, such as a document from 1438, describe how Pope Eugenius IV gave King Juan II a portable altar to hear a private mass before dawn. The Miraflores Altarpiece is a likely candidate for being such a temporary oratory, but nothing can be substantiated.

Elite patronage is a common characteristic in Rogier van der Weyden’s oeuvre. The Seven Sacraments Altarpiece (fig. 21) and St. John Triptych (fig. 22) were both commissioned by important men, who donated the items to churches. Bishop Jean Chevrot commissioned the former triptych for a church in Poligny.62 Battista Agnelli, a merchant from Pisa, commissioned the St. John Triptych for St. James’ church in Bruges.63 Similarly, the Miraflores Altarpiece was given by an elite patron to an ecclesiastical order, specifically the Carthusians, and for the Carthusian Charterhouse. The Charterhouse of Miraflores was originally the site of a royal hunting lodge located near the city of Burgos. King Henry II commissioned this building. His

61 Friedländer, From Van Eyck to Bruegel, p. 218.
62 Ibid., p. 23.
successor was Juan II, who replaced the hunting lodge with the Carthusian monastery. Juan II also desired to be buried in the monastery upon his death where monks could pray for his soul. The *Miraflores Altarpiece* was donated to the Carthusians as evidence of the king’s devotion and as an aid for the Carthusian monks to focus their prayers towards.\(^{64}\) Hence, the Carthusian Charterhouse was converted from a courtly pleasure setting into a religious setting and became a monument to the virtues of the Spanish monarchy.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* was donated to the Carthusians as a devotional object and presumably, as a stimulus to pray for the Spanish monarchy’s salvation. This function is also evident in that Isabella, Juan II’s daughter, commissioned a copy after the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. It is known as the *Granada Altarpiece* (fig. 23) completed by Juan de Flandes, ca. 1496. By replicating the triptych, Isabella connoted the importance of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. It has been suggested that Isabella’s commission is continuing the tradition of her family’s devotional practices. And that the triptych may have helped her to offer prayers for the souls of her family since the panel was found in her collection.\(^{65}\) Whatever the original function, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* served, as evident from its patronage, as a devotional object, to which prayers were addressed. More importantly, it was used specifically by the Carthusians.

**FUNCTION**

The function of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* as a devotional object is further substantiated by other Van der Weyden’s works. This tripartite work measures seventy-four by one hundred and thirty-four centimeters, which as noted previously makes it only slightly bigger than the

---

\(^{64}\) Bustillo, A. *The Church of the Charterhouse of Miraflores in Burgos: Virtual Reconstruction of Artistic Imagery*, p. 56.  
\(^{65}\) Friedländer, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, p. 219.
Merode Altarpiece (fig. 4). This suggests that the Miraflores Altarpiece, like the Merode Altarpiece, was utilized for private devotion. It also could not have been part of an altar or used formally as an altarpiece because of this. Other works by van der Weyden such as The Seven Sacraments (fig. 21) commissioned by Jean Chevrot for a private chapel and the St. John Triptych (fig. 22), have been suggested to be a private devotional object. It has even been suggested that the St. John Triptych was intended for the Miraflores Charterhouse and had Spanish patronage. Some evidence suggests that the Carthusian monastery of Santa Maria de las Cuevas in Seville held the St. John Triptych. Since in 1744, Jose Martin Rincon described a portable oratory showing the baptism of Christ with side wings that depicted the birth and beheading of St. John the Baptist. A later historian discussed the same altarpiece and commented on “its’ pilasters and arch”. The Miraflores Altarpiece and the St. John Altar are the only works where van der Weyden uses the arch motif. Rincon described the St. John Altar as a portable oratory in the same manner that Antonio Ponz described the Miraflores Altarpiece.

Van der Weyden’s tripartites share in common elite patronage and a likelihood that they were devotional objects. Specific, evidence indicates that the Miraflores Altarpiece was once housed in the convent’s sacristy and served a particular devotional purpose. Although it’s later location is unknown, it is likely to have been housed in the chapel where monks would come together three times a day for communal prayers. The importance of these various textual and historical accounts is to demonstrate that the Miraflores Altarpiece is usually categorized as a private,

---

68 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 108.
devotional object. In this manner, we can surmise that the Miraflores Altarpiece based on its similar framing structure, fixed wings, and elite patronage was also most likely used as a private devotional object.

The function of the Miraflores Altarpiece as a private, devotional object corresponds to the daily life and ritual of the Carthusians. The Carthusian order is characterized by a life of solitude, silence, and prayers. When initiated into the order, a Carthusian monk took a vow of silence and abandoned the pursuit of worldly pleasure, pageantry, and interactions with the outside world. In this manner, Carthusians dedicated their lives to prayer. They did not engage with the public sphere, but instead, the daily life of the Carthusian monk was characterized by silence. It was rare if the monks came together and prayer and images instead comforted them. The Carthusians’ rich life is reflected in their manuscripts, mass, canonical hours and images.70 In such a community, images functioned as a way of engaging with the spiritual and the focus of devotion in a world without sound. Images in such a setting could act as guides to spiritual enlightenment. Nicolas Cusa, who though not a Carthusian himself was associated with the order, stated that a painted Head of Christ by Roger was suitable to this purpose because it seems to behold everything around it. Cusa recommended, “Hang this icon somewhere, e.g., on the north wall; and you brothers stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it.”71 Once a monk perceived that the image beholds him in a similar expression no matter where he stood, and therefore would follow in devotion to achieve a taste of eternal happiness.72 Three times a day, Carthusians would gather together in joint prayer. They also gathered for silent prayer, the

70 Jessica Brantley, Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 27.
72 Ibid., p. 681-2.
Gregorian Chant, subdued liturgy and other readings to express devotion in front of these images. During the van der Weyden’s time, an early form of rosary meditation was becoming increasingly popular among the orders. At the time, monastic orders, particularly the Carthusians meditated on the life and Passion of Christ and his mother while reciting *Aves*. Since the rosary was completed by saying one hundred and fifty hail Marys is it clearly a form of Marian devotion. The content of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, which combines narratives from the life of the Virgin and Christ, reflects these themes of early rosary meditation.

The sequence and organization of images in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* make it suitable format to support private meditation. Nicole Sinclair points out that the *Miraflores Altarpiece* is organized in a Marian-Psalter arrangement and therefore, could have served as a mnemonic device during prayer. This is supported by the appearance of Mary and the sculptures of biblical events in archivolts. Some sculpture celebrates a “mystery” of the rosary, or an event tied to Mary, or Jesus life, that the person is intended to prey upon. In the first scene, the annunciation, the visitation, the birth of Christ, and the presentation are mysteries of the rosary. Interestingly enough, the Carthusians promoted the rosary as a manner to meet the needs of the layperson in finding guidance during their daily devotions. As noted earlier, in a world without sound, images and sculptures became a focal point in engaging with the divine. These items were often located in the communal areas of the charterhouse and private space of the Monk’s oratory. Thus, the role of art in Carthusian meditation would have been fundamental. The *Miraflores*

---

73 Sinclair, “En Route Ave”, p. 52.
75 Sinclair, “En Route Ave”, p. 4.
76 Carroll, "Praying the Rosary", p. 487.
77 Sinclair, “En Route Ave”, p. 50-51.
Altarpiece would have been used as a tool to visualization or used as an aid to gain deeper knowledge to make oneself more Christ-like. As defined by Sinclair, the goal of visualization was to gain an inner visualization or a pure or abstract of understanding of God without the aid of images.78

Van der Weyden implemented familiar architecture of the Carthusian monastery into the Miraflores Altarpiece. The typical architecture of a Carthusian monastery reflects the isolation of the Carthusian lifestyle. Typically, a Carthusian charterhouse consisted of a central cloister, which was surrounded by the monks’ private cells. This allowed for inhabitants to live in seclusion and silence according to the order’s vows. Such individual cells promoted individual reflection and allowed for private prayer and devotion, which is reflected in the setting. The cells were furnished with a bed, stove, oratorium and book case among other items; each cell was orientated towards its own private garden and workshop. In this way, a monk’s cell became a sacred space for the particular individual.79

To enter the Charterhouse and other sacred places, such as the chapel, a person had to walk through a number of doorways and through archways. In the Recepción area of the Miraflores Charterhouse, there are rounded archways like the portals and barrel vault structures similar to the ones in the Miraflores Altarpiece. This familiar architecture works to facilitate a devotional response as it capture the viewer’s empathic engagement. Moreover, by drawing on similar architecture forms would encourage the notion that the holy can be found within the setting of the Carthusian charterhouse.80

In this manner, the Carthusians resonated with this painted architecture and achieved a mode of communication with the divine.

78 Sinclair, “En Route Ave”, p. 54-55.
79 Brantley, Reading in the Wilderness, p. 37.
80 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 109.
PAINTED FRAMES

Van der Weyden’s oeuvre demonstrates a familiarity with devotional aids and a desire to emulate the effect of the icon. In looking back to the Byzantine icon, it was often used as a meditative aid. During this era, pilgrimages were also spiritual journeys and the icon functioned as a guide for the viewer to establish a connection with the divine. We know from Van der Weyden’s Virgin and Child (fig. 8) that he was aware of the Byzantine icon and its traditions. In this image, van der Weyden shows the Virgin and Child at half-length and the Christ Child leaning up against his mother’s face. This type of technique was known as andachtsbild, in which figures were isolated to become an emotional center and a symbol of feeling. These narratives were used as an aid to help individuals reach a contemplative absorption with historical scenes, or sacred. These representational forms became a Netherlandish interpretation of the icon and aided individuals in achieving a meditative stage. Therefore, the Miraflores Altarpiece probably functioned as a visual aid to create a mode of communication with the divine and used by the Carthusians to enter a meditative state.

In its original context, the Miraflores Altarpiece functions as a devotional object for the Carthusians and a means for the individual monk to establish a doorway to the divine, while still constructing boundaries for their devotion. As in van der Weyden’s Standing Madonna (fig. 9) completed by van der Weyden (1433), the Virgin, here, is reminiscent of a hodegetria type, that often appeared in Byzantine icons. Instead of a traditional framing, an elaborate archway frames

82 Ibid., p. 56.
the Virgin and presents her to the temporal world. This is similar to the *Miraflores Altarpiece* and its use of archways. Here, van der Weyden creates a meditation aid by reinventing the icon and presenting it in a manner that works for the Carthusians. It does not just focus on a singular image but presents three episodes from the life of the Virgin: the Nativity, the Pieta and Christ’s final appearance to his mother. As Nicole Sinclair notes, this arrangement is similar to the Marian-psalter and would have been suitable for prayer, specifically for the rosary. Since the rosary meditates on a series of holy events, this tripartite format is more appropriate for the Carthusians, who used the rosarian devotion. Instead of relying on one image and mood, Van der Weyden provides a series of scenes that relate to the joyous, sorrowful and glorious events of the Virgin’s life. In this capacity, a Carthusian could look upon each scene as he prayed the rosary and shift mentally between the individually framed panels.

The organization of the episodes within archways is very different than the domestic environment of Campin’s Annunciation in the *Merode Altarpiece*. A characteristic element of Van der Weyden is his utilization of an arch motif. This semicircular arch is intended to focus the viewer’s devotional contemplation. As established previously, these arches function in a manner similar to the illustrated doors in the domestic environment of the *Merode Altarpiece*. The arch establishes a threshold between the viewer and akin to Campin’s painted doors. Here, though, each panel allows the viewer to look into the sacred scene even as they are made aware of their limited view. Consequently, the threshold works to restrict the access of the viewer and encourage the viewer to visualize the sacred figures within their own mind. Therefore, the arch motifs are painted elements that create openings to the sacred while establishing a boundary.

---

between the temporal world and the divine. The arch motif is intrinsic to van der Weyden’s setting because it captures sacred events from the Virgin’s life and moves the viewer, both emotionally and physically.

The arch motif is multi-functional since it creates a doorway to a sacred scene, but it also works as a mnemonic jog to guide a viewer, specifically a Carthusian viewer, in his daily devotions. These fictitious arches are unique as they contain Gothic influences, but more importantly, display sculptures depicting typology meant to emphasize Mary’s life and which work as a mnemonic device. This desired function as an andachtsbild was achieved by using the additional figures, who were integrated into the image by a means of a uniting narrative. This structure evokes Thomas Bradwardine’s method of mnemonics, which shares a couple of similarities with van der Weyden’s portal. Here, as Bradwardine recommends, the images are of a moderate size, similar in style and should retain only what is extraordinary or intensely invigorated with emotion. Moreover, as he notes, the figures should be grouped against a plain background and their relative position should be cues to order the material. Bradwardine stresses that the image should utilize perspective in the image, but not too much distance that might distract the viewer from the mnemonic setting. This characteristic is manifested in the Miraflores Altarpiece since van der Weyden’s style has been described to communicate a sense of sameness - otherwise not distracting the viewer. It is clear from Bradwardine’s description that these elements should have a depth to them and that the figures should not occupy a flat plane but instead be arranged similarly to the effect of carved relief.

84 Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, p. 71.
85 Mary Carruthers, Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 133.
86 Max J. Freundländer, From Van Eyck, p. 31.
Van der Weyden’s composition follows Bradwardine’s order. He, like Bradwardine, places the first image to be recalled—the Virgin—towards the front of the setting rather than in a hierarchical order. According to Bradwardine’s method in order to read this, one starts the center and looks left. Likewise, in each scene from the Miraflores Altarpiece, one’s eye is drawn towards the center first and then looks left towards the semicircular arch.\(^{87}\) Van der Weyden’s scenes seem to be constructed in a similar fashion using sculptural objects to represent sacred events and an arch motif as an entryway into the divine events. The function of the arch as a framing device guides the viewer’s mind to contemplating specific religious ideals, such as the sacrifice of Christ. Each arch frames a unique space, which contains a sacred moment that the viewer is allowed to witness, be reminded of specific biblical moments and contemplate their meaning. Therefore as described by one scholar, these sculptural portals work as quotation marks to establish boundaries between them and deemphasize the historical sequence. Instead, the viewer should not be interested in the accuracy of the event but contemplate their mnemonic jogs and finally turn their thoughts to Christ.\(^{88}\)

The arch motif frames three principal scenes from the Virgin’s life and establishes doorways to sacred events, but Mary herself also functions as a doorway into these sacred moments. Here, as in Campin’s work, the Virgin becomes a doorway for the viewer to witness these events through her role in the re-opening of the Gates to Heaven. These settings, or boxed spaces, utilize Mary’s role as \textit{porta paradisi}, or the one who opened the door to salvation, to emphasize and remind the viewer of her importance in bringing salvation to the temporal world.\(^{89}\) In addition, biblical content is present in the figure of Mary, but it is compartmentalized. It is

\(^{87}\) Carruthers, \textit{Book of Memory}, p. 133.
\(^{88}\) Blum, \textit{Early Netherlandish Triptychs}, p. 23.
\(^{89}\) Jacobs, \textit{Opening Doors}, p. 92.
denoted by the Virgin’s focal placement in the foreground and by the way in which the Virgin is framed within the archways—as if to suggest a parallel between the two. In effect, Van der Weyden evokes the role of the Virgin as the *porta paradisi*. The traditional attribute of the Virgin would garner an emotional response from the viewer, who should remember her importance as a mediator. It further inspires devotion without trespassing sacred boundaries.

Although, the arches cut through these spaces, the placement of the figures is also crucial to constructing threshold from within the sacred space. In a way comparable to Campin’s hierarchy in the *Merode Altarpiece*, Van der Weyden plays with a similar notion in this tripartite work. In Van der Weyden’s work, the sacred space is established through the tunnel-vaulted vision of each scene and except for the first, each scene opens into a landscape. In addition, van der Weyden’s use of another frame within the background of the scene transforms the natural landscape as outside of the sacred space. As a result, the double frame works to create two separate spaces and everything in front of the landscape is closed off from the natural world. Consequently, the landscape primarily functions to illustrate the three-dimensional box that these figures are placed into and that separates them from the outside or temporal world.

Each section of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* exists in its own separate space and the close proximity of the figures conveys their existence in this sacred space. As in a stage set, these events are situated on a platform. The scene is accessible through the opening of the archway but the background is closed off by either a baldacchino, a cross or a door frame. Therefore, the arch motif functions to establish a boundary of crossing into a sacred space. Other techniques maintain this fact such as van der Weyden’s ability to convey a divide between the divine and

---

temporal through the painted figures themselves. The placement of these figures establishes their status within the divine hierarchy. In the first panel, the figures of Mary and Christ are placed neither behind nor in front of the arch, but instead inhabit a space underneath; they dwell within the arch’s frame, or within the sacred space.\(^91\) In the Nativity scene, though, Joseph is separated from the central space of the Virgin and Child and is placed behind the arch. Van der Weyden highlights the importance of the figure of St. Joseph. In the Pieta scene, Joseph of Arimathea visibly stands behind the frame whereas John the Evangelist is actively within the scene and reaches out to comfort the Virgin. However, John the Evangelist stands behind the Virgin and consequently, the arch. In the last scene, the Virgin and Christ are placed alongside the frame, but still, do not exist outside of the frame. In this manner, the placement of these figures articulates that the figures only exist within the arch or sacred space. The figures, therefore, establish the boundary present at the opening of the arch and convey a divide between the sacred and temporal.\(^92\)

The location of the painted figures within the arch motif also facilitates the viewer’s emotional response to the placement and further emphasizes the divide between the temporal and divine. Van der Weyden carefully places his figures into each scene in order to evoke a reaction from the viewer. In the Nativity, the figures are placed farthest back from the arch and do not protrude outside to the arch. This invokes a reverence from the viewer, which is further amplified by the background. The Nativity is enclosed off and speaks to the miracle of Christ’s birth. In this capacity, the location of the figures emphasizes the sacredness of the moment even as it restricts the viewer’s access and warns against his attempting to fully understand the sacred

---

\(^{91}\) Birkmeyer, "The Arch Motif in Netherlandish Painting," p. 3.
\(^{92}\) Pacht, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 34.
nature of Christ’s birth. In the central scene, Christ’s toes are almost peeping out from the frame and threaten to enter into the viewer’s space. This detail creates tension within the viewer since it transgresses into the space of the viewer and denotes that this moment is when Christ was the most human. While in the final scene depicts the figures within the middle of the arch, it stirs a similar reaction to the first panel. The final scene makes visible the open doors and landscape, which shows Christ rising from the tomb. In this sense, the viewer is invited to look closer at this scene, and meditate on the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice. In this manner, these figures are shown in their own space and evoke emotions from the audience looking upon them because of a hierarchy of holiness.

Van der Weyden’s arch motifs distinguish the position of the holy figures from that of the viewer and transform these episodes into a representation of these events. The work of Van der Weyden is marked by a tendency towards a symbolic or devotional interpretation of biblical accounts. This distinct quality manifests in the isolation of the major figures and transformation of their settings. These effects are visible in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. In fact, the farthest left scene was considered to be a nativity scene until Panofsky stated that it was, in fact, a Holy Family scene. In this image, the Virgin Mary, the Child Jesus, and Joseph are placed in a nonspecific location, but a vaguely ecclesiastical. This placement into a nonspecific location communicates a sense of detachment to the usual depictions of the nativity. Thus, the placement of the figures within these scenes suggested that they were meant to be representational of sacred figures and events. In this manner, Rogier de-emphasizes the historical iconography used to identify the event and instead he makes the viewer aware of the isolated subject as the main focal

point in the scene. Each panel is meant to amplify a principal theme: the first to depict purity and humility of Mary, the second to demonstrate her suffering and compassion, and final one shows Mary’s perseverance. In looking at Rogier’s *Descent from the Cross* (Madrid, Prado), it presents the man of sorrows, a beloved subject of the late Medieval period, in a simplified form. It renders the moment when the body of Christ is held by Joseph of Arimathea and shows Mary right before the lamentation. It cuts to the emotional essence of the event and moves the viewer. In this effect, it visualizes the emotion of mourners at which Rogier was skilled at and creates an *andachtsbild*, a narrative of emotions but utilizes an icon’s elements. Furthermore, the colors of Mary’s gown are painted as bright and hard, flat, open, naked and not affected by the given light denoting a special effect. His figures are mute, speechless, frozen and rigid as Friedlander states: silence is their ultimate wisdom, sorrow and faith. In this way, van der Weyden is able to give his figures the same silent emotion Campin gave his Virgin the Merode Altarpiece.

**CONCLUSION**

Rogier van der Weyden subverted the well-established conventions found in earlier Netherlandish triptychs. His *Miraflores Altarpiece* was not the typical structure but instead was a fixed-wing triptych, which did not physically open and close. He also implemented conventions in a new manner, such as his use of grisaille. Van der Weyden used grisaille on the archivolts in each episode to denote the presence of a sacred portal. He also made the actual wooden framing interact with the painted elements to create an archway that projected into the viewer’s space.

94 Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs*, p. 17-18
95 Birkmeyer, “The Arch Motif”, p. 3.
96 Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, p. 124.
97 Friedländer, *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, p. 31.
98 Ibid., p. 31.
These changes were seemingly made to accommodate the desires of the patron and its intended function. The Miraflores Altarpiece was donated by King Juan II of Castile to the Carthusian Charterhouse in Miraflores, which had recently been converted from a royal hunting lodge. It was intended to be used by the Carthusians, who dedicated their life to prayer and were known to use an early form of the rosary. The visual organization of the Miraflores Altarpiece is suitable to meditation because it contains three episodes focused on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the Virgin’s life. Van der Weyden’s familiarity with the Byzantine icon and his interest in arches created a mnemonic arch that framed the episodes, but also referred to other biblical events. The Virgin as the porta paradissi created a door within a door and constructed a sacred space that is accessible to the front. Van der Weyden constructed a sacred space by using background elements, such as a baldacchino and empty crosses, to separate the divine figures from rolling landscape, or temporal world. He also used the placement of his sacred figures to convey that they only existed in their sacred space. Furthermore, the episodes are de-emphasized and do not contain the historical iconography. In paring down these episodes, van der Weyden focused on the emotional intensity of the figures and used flat colors to convey that these episodes were merely representational versions of the event. In this capacity, van der Weyden created a liminal space that only existed within the framing of his archways.
Chapter 4.

HUGO VAN DER GOES: DIVINE DISLOCATION
PORTINARI ALTARP ie: LOOKING BACK AT TRADITION

The Portinari Altarpiece (fig. 11) was completed in 1475 by Hugo van der Goes. It represents a conventional Netherlandish triptych. This oil on panel altarpiece is very large; it roughly measures one hundred inches by one hundred and twenty inches. This makes it over eight feet tall and ten feet wide, which makes it considerably larger than life size. This altarpiece is roughly five times as large as the Merode Altarpiece and the Miraflores Altarpiece and by far the largest triptych examined in this thesis. Similar to the other traditional triptychs, the Portinari Altarpiece is sectioned into three parts and focuses primarily on the scene of the nativity. It was commissioned specifically to be an altarpiece for the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, Italy. The two side panels function as donor portraits in a similar format to earlier triptychs. Still like his predecessors, Campin and Van der Weyden, Van der Goes reworked tradition to create a new way of establishing boundaries while still looking back at traditional elements. In particular, Van der Goes experiments with the continuity of space and natural barriers in order to create a divide.

The Portinari Altarpiece depicts three scenes, which initially seem to exist in a shared space within a rolling, green landscape. At first sight, this landscape unites the three scenes and creates a sense of continuity. The first panel focuses on a group of individuals but within the background is a rocky outcrop. This rocky hillside set against a clear blue sky places this particular scene outside. A stone architectural structure in the middleground of this panel continues into the next central panel, where it terminates against a landscape. The landscape consists of several green hills. In the far right panel, the landscape continues in the background.
Several village-like figures seem to be approaching the center scene. The rolling hills appear again complete with trees and distance mountains in the background. The appearance of landscape within each panel works to unite the three scenes, but there are also some differences between them.

The left panel shows the patron, Tommaso Portinari kneeling in prayer with his sons, Antonio and Pigello, behind him. Tommaso is dressed in black and significantly larger than his sons, but smaller than the two figures, who stand behind him. These figures are accompanied by the towering figures of St. Anthony, who is dressed in dark brown robes and carries a bell in his hand, and St. Thomas, who wears a robe of brilliant red and green, holds a spear upright and gestures towards the scene in the center. The left panel is connected to the center through the use of what appears to be a stone and brick arch. Tommaso appears beneath this arch, which seems to continue into the center. Farther back in the landscape, two much smaller figures with a donkey travel down a rocky road. This is the Virgin Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem. Their appearance here marks a different time in the nativity story than the adoration shown in the central scene.

In the central panel, the Virgin kneels beside the naked infant Christ in a representation of the nativity. She is sheltered within a stone structure that appears to be a stable and contains a donkey and a cow. From the side, angels dressed in ecclesiastical clothes are flying above and announce the arrival of the savior. The figure of Joseph kneels near a stone column on the left and is clothed in striking red garb. He holds his hands in prayer but is positioned farther away from the central scene. Near to the center is a collection of kneeling ecclesiastical angels. On the right, there are more angels and a group of shepherds, characterized by their more mundane
clothes, kneel before the center scene. A wooden frame extends over the heads of the shepherds and terminates behind the last one. A village is situated beyond this structure and near a couple of rolling green hills. A sheaf of hay and vases with flowers are positioned at the lowest edge of the painting.

In the right wing, Maria, the wife of Tommaso Portinari kneels with her daughter, Margarita. They are accompanied by Mary Magdalen, who wears a white gown decorated with gold patterns which she holds in her hand along with a bottle of oil. Next to her, Saint Margaret, who wears a dark gown with a red mantle, holds a book and crucifix and stands on the head of a demon, with yellow eyes, fangs, and open mouth. In the middleground, three horsemen—the magi—ride through the landscape. One man, presumably their servant, has dismounted and seems to be asking a peasant for directions. Taken together, the imagery of the three panels includes the nativity, the donors and their saints, and background stories referring to the narrative of Christ’s birth.

**FRAMING**

The exterior wings of Van der Goes’s *Portinari Altarpiece* revert to the traditional use of grisaille in order to create a physical transition from the temporal world to the divine. The two closed wings emulate sculptural niches and depict the Annunciation as if carved in-situ. The left panel shows the Virgin seated on a bench, she turns away from an open book and tilts her head towards the right panel. The Holy Spirit hovers above her head. On the right, the angel Gabriel bends slightly forward as if he has just landed, he holds a scepter in one hand and beckons towards the Virgin. The use of grisaille mimics the effect of sculpture. Here, the holy figures appear to be sculptures and Van der Goes enhances this illusion by showing a strut behind the
dove in the shallow niche space.\textsuperscript{99} Although, grisaille exteriors are traditional Van der Goes’ witty illusionism is reminiscent of the grisaille used by Van der Weyden for the archivolts in his \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}. Here, though, grisaille does take on its traditional function to mark the transition from the exterior wings to the interior. The monochromatic palette on the exterior wings creates a bright contrast between the interior and exterior wings. The interior is usually brightly colored and creates the effect as if walking from one world into another. In this manner, the use of grisaille denotes the presence of a sacred door and becomes a physical frame, through its sculptural quality.

The \textit{Portinari Altarpiece} also employs conventional elements and new inventions in order to frame a doorway on the exterior wings through the use of an archway. As established, Mary and Gabriel are sculpture-like. Even the space where these figures are situated seems to be sculpted niches, in which sculptures in the round are positioned. In this way, Van der Goes seems to borrow sculptural elements from Van der Weyden and uses an archway to frame his door. Here, the Virgin and the angel sit within an archway while the shape of the archway recedes into the background. Although this archway does not interact with the actual frame as in the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}, the black frame similarly encloses these sacred spaces and presents the opening as a sacred space. This aspect of outer wings as an exterior portal is further strengthened by the presence of the Virgin, who is again understood as a doorway to the sacred. The choice to depict the annunciation or the moment when Christ enters the world and eventually, serves as a motif of the doorway to the divine.

In the *Portinari Altarpiece*, the interior panels are connected and also separated by the framing. Here, as in the *Merode Altarpiece*, the wooden framing surrounds each panel and obscures details of the painting. In the first panel, Tommaso Portinari and his sons kneel within stone and brick archway. The framing intersects through this archway and obscures details from the central scene that should appear to the left. This includes the back of Joseph’s mantle and the interior of the archway. In this way, the framing creates a degree of separation between the donor panel and the central because it hides details that would assert their existence in the same space. This happens again the central scene, the framing obscures the back of the angel’s mantle, part of a shepherd, the stone wall and a hill in the right panel. Again in a similar manner, it cuts through the painting and creates a physical separation between the panels. The actual wooden framing works to divide the triptych into three section and creates a solid boundary between all these scenes.

Taken together, the grisaille, the sculptural niches and figures, and the interaction of the black framing create a dialogue between the physical and painted frames and the viewer. By framing these figures and portraying them in grisaille, these figures are frozen in time, captured in sculptural form and present a degree of separation between the scene and the viewer who encounters it. The *Portinari Altarpiece* is unique within the tradition of Netherlandish triptychs because of its large size. Helene Verougstraete, an expert on frames for Netherlandish panel painting, considers this particular triptych to be the largest triptych that she has ever examined.  

The triptych stands at twenty feet wide and eight feet tall and required sixteen men to carry it to across the Alps from the Netherlands to Italy. The size of the Portinari Triptych is very much

---

larger than the two triptychs examined in chapters 2 and 3. When a viewer stands before this triptych, he or she is enveloped into the scene. Here, the painted figures of Mary, Joseph, and the others figures are not smaller than the viewer, but instead are close to life-size. The viewer is confronted by this large scene and by the near life-size figures. When a viewer prayed in front of this image, or otherwise beheld the altarpiece it would not have appeared to be a painting but instead as an actual doorway present before them. Consequently, it was easier for the viewer to be included within the sacred world of the Nativity and would not have required a close looking, or be suitable for hours of devotional prayer. Instead, the Portinari Altarpiece stood ready, almost welcoming to viewers, and created a dialogue that was more apparent- more evident and easier to access for the viewer than ever seen before. In this context, the viewer would stand before the triptych, gazing at the angled exterior wings with the sculptural niches framing sacred figures and how they guard the opening of the portal. The sculpted figures establish that this image is separate from our world and this message is communicated through the continuing black frame that encircles around the panels within the interior and separates the life-size figures of the donors from the sacred.

PATRONAGE: RELATIONSHIP TO THE VIEWER

The patronage of the Portinari Altarpiece is better documented than that of the Merode Altarpiece and the Miraflores Altarpiece. The donor, his wife, and children appear within the interior panels of the triptych and are known to be the Portinari family. Tommaso Portinari was a representation of the Medici banking in the Netherlands.101 His father, Giovanni Portinari, was important in the Venice Branch and was head of the Florence branch. Orphaned at a young age,

he was raised in the household of Cosimo de Medici and eventually became a banker for the Medici bank in Bruges. Some scholars have suggested that Cosimo took the three sons of Giovanni in order to indebt the Portinari boys to the Medici.\textsuperscript{102} Therefore, the patronage of Tommaso was connected to the Medici and so exerted a lot of political influence.

The commission of the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece} also demonstrates Tommaso’s elite status and his relationship to an important Florentine family. Tommaso’s family originated from Portico di Romagna and included Beatrice Portinari, who supposedly inspired Dante to write his famous \textit{Divine Comedy}.\textsuperscript{103} Tommaso’s legacy was connected specifically to Folco Portinari, who established the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in 1288 and also, was the father of Beatrice. Folco was convinced to construct the hospital after Monna Tessa, the matriarch of the family, persuaded him to build it. Her remains were buried at the Cloisters and like the Carthusian Charterhouse, demonstrate a physical connection between the hospital and the Portinari family. Thus, the hospital became in some sense a Portinari legacy.\textsuperscript{104} Although Portinari failed to rise higher than the status of assistant manager and factor, apparently due to Cosimo’s mistrust, he was nonetheless able to establish some elite ties. After Francesco Sassetti’s influence removed the ban on loaning to secular rulers, Portinari used his position to loan Charles the Bold, a large and risky sum of money, which was never repaid. Despite the fact that Portinari fell in the graces of the Italians, Charles the Bold made Portinari a favored councilor. Eventually, the Medici dissolved the partnership in Bruges and essentially fired Portinari. Portinari attempted to become

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 112.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
self-sufficient, but failed and died a pauper in the Santa Maria Nuova, where he had placed his commissioned piece, the Portinari Altarpiece.\(^{105}\)

**FUNCTION**

A devotional portrait is never simply a prayer made visible, but instead is an articulation of identity, wealth, and status. According to scholars, the Florentine attitude towards banking had changed by the 1420s. Instead of being humble, individuals used their wealth to seek different forms of pleasure and to establish an elite status. Portinari’s commissions were typical of this. In one account, Portinari is reprimanded by Piero de Medici to decrease his spending when he was only a clerk. Despite this, Portinari subsequently commissioned portraits of himself and his bride, Maria di Francesco di Bandini Baroncelli, by Hans Memling.\(^{106}\) From this, it is clear that Tommaso Portinari lived a luxurious life from a young age and continued to be extravagant throughout his life. In this sense, the devotional portrait speaks to the donor’s wealth and taste. When Tommaso Portinari shipped home a very large triptych executed by a foremost painter from the Low Countries - he creates a makes statement. The size boasts of his wealth while the foreign style and format attest to the far-flung nature of his business endeavors and attests to his sophistication and accomplishment.\(^{107}\) For Portinari, who was disfavored by the Medici, the commission, its large size, and its intended location were a statement of power. Since it was intended for the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, which is the oldest institute of welfare in Florence, the hospital became a powerful symbol over the centuries due to the legacy as well as a donation


\(^{107}\) Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality*, p. 92.
of the Portinari family. His family’s hand in founding the hospital at such an early time - trumped the achievement of any other ruling class family.\textsuperscript{108} Thus, the Portinari family’s relationship to the church communicated status and their continuing stewardship was reflected in Tommaso’s patronage of Netherlandish arts. Along with his duties of appointing a hospital director, Tommaso was responsible for maintaining the church but also for contributing goods works, which further elevated his status.\textsuperscript{109}

Besides serving a political and social purpose for Tommaso Portinari, the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece} also functioned in a hospital context, specifically for the sick and dying. In the early days, the Hospital Santa Maria Nuova was the sole source of care for the sick in Florence. It continued to be a significant hospital because of its large size as well as for its renown for taking in the poor sick. The hospital was described by Landino as “the first hospital among Christians”, and the first hospital, in the modern sense of the word, in the Western world. It was an institution organized along therapeutic lines and dedicated solely to the care of the sick, in other words, a specialized hospital. The concept of a specialized hospital was emerging, shifting from charity to specialized care of which the Santa Maria Nuova was a prototype. In the beginning, it could only accommodate twelve beds for the “poor and sick” for which Folco Portinari defined its function as providing for those who belonging to the category of the “Poor of Christ”. In the next two centuries, the hospital expanded, created separate wings for men and women and had 62 beds for sick men and 58 for sick women by 1376. It eventually became a specialized medical institution, and by the fourteenth century, it employed two doctors, physician and a surgeon, and four by 1450. This development was allowed through the continued donations and sponsorship of

\textsuperscript{109} Koster, “Northern Invention and Florentine Invention”, p. 83-84.
individuals, including the Portinari family, who maintained the hospital as a place for the sick and the poor. Thus, the intended audience for the *Portinari Altarpiece* would be the sick and the dying. In their last days or weeks, the altarpiece was probably meant as a comfort to show that salvation could be achieved since Christ had been born. More importantly, the individuals, who worked at the hospital, used it.

The Hospital Santa Maria Nuova contained an organized staff that would have also looked upon the *Portinari Altarpiece*. The hospital was overseen by the Rector, who was elected by the Portinari family and had to be at least forty years of age, of excellent character, and with a morally good reputation. The rector was supposed to administer and oversee the male and female hospitals. He also had the authority to appoint and dismiss male and female staff and perpetual servants. These perpetual servants were also known as conversi. The word *converso* originally denoted a person, who had attached himself to a monastic order and made a conversion of life. He became a member of the monastic “family” and served the monks as a lay brother. Loosely, this was used for a person, who had more or less spontaneously taken up a life of asceticism. Documents from early communal periods record examples of conversi, who privately vowed a “conversion of life” before their local priest and continued to live in their homes. The conversi were described as being inspired to enter the state of penance. Therefore, the staff of the hospital was primarily made up of these perpetual servants, who were inspired to serve the hospital in perpetuity.

---

111 Ibid., p. 177.
The staff at the Hospital Santa Maria Nuova were bound to the hospital and had no ties to the outside world. As laid out by Folco Portinari, who petitioned the Bishop of Florence and asked for the immunity “that other hospitals and religious places subject to you have, that is may enjoy ecclesiastical liberty and be free and exempt from every secular tie and servitude.”\textsuperscript{113} There were restrictions on the mobility of conversi; they could not leave the hospital’s grounds without the superintendent’s permission. The conversi and the superintendent, or rector and other servants prohibited them from owning property. Those who came to work of Santa Maria Nuova had to turn over their property to the hospital within three months “so that it can be converted to support the sick and poor of the hospital.”\textsuperscript{114} The rector was not allowed to manage, occupy any other position or own private properties once he became the rector. This applied to all other staff at the hospital as well. The members were also required to participate in the holy sacraments, had to go to confession at least three times a year and take communion twice a year at Christmas and Easter.\textsuperscript{115} Therefore, we can establish with some certainty that every member of the staff would have interacted with the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece} on a regular basis.

Another type of staff member, the sacristan, establishes who else also viewed the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece}. The rector chose the sacristan. He had to be someone older and his duties were to look after the church. He oversaw twelve priests and six clerics, who conducted services, along with their acolytes. On days appointed by the Rector, the sacristan saw that two masses are celebrated at Prime, the first canonical hour of the Divine office beginning at 6 a.m. or at sunrise. One service had to be offered in the men’s church and one in the women’s. As noted, the

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 174.
\textsuperscript{115} Park and Henderson, “The First Hospital Among Christians”, p. 179.
Portinari Altarpiece was placed in Sant’Egidio, the main church in the hospital. In looking at the map of the hospital, the Church of Sant'Egidio was situated between the courtyard and the cemetery. It was near the Rector’s office and near the men’s ward. Therefore, it can be surmised that the men’s ward as well as the staff, who cared for the sick, viewed the Portinari Altarpiece. More importantly, the Portinari Altarpiece unlike the other two triptychs did not serve as a devotional object but instead as an altarpiece. It would have been utilized in the ritual of the mass and oversaw the liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Portinari Altarpiece served a very specific function for the viewers, many of whom were hospital residents, and so was able to communicate several messages. Sant'Egidio was dedicated to the Virgin and was decorated with various images from the Life of Mary. These various images celebrated the role of Mary as an intercessor and stressed this idea of the connection between the temporal and divine world. To the sick and dying, this would have been comforting because it conveyed salvation and Mary’s role in opening the gates of heaven. The Portinari Altarpiece was complimentary because it showed the Nativity, a scene from Mary’s life, but it also conveys Eucharistic themes as well. In the central panel, the Christ Child is parallel with a bundle of wheat as well as to the altar. In this capacity, the iconography of the scene depicts Christ’s eventual role in the sacraments as well as the manner to salvation. For those, who take part in communion, they are ensuring their right to enter the kingdom of heaven. To the laypeople, who served the hospital, the background scenes show charity, such as the magi asking for help and Joseph leading Mary to Bethlehem. Therefore, the charitable acts of the lay people would be encouraged and honored but more importantly, the central scene shows the

---

shepherds and the magi coming together as representations of the elite and the common. This reflected the role of the laypeople, who serve the hospital that was established by an elite donor to service the poor sick. It also would have encouraged the workers to continue their good deeds because it depicted the coming together of classes. Geert Groote noted that it would appeal to a wide variety of individuals because it showed the state, or poverty, into which Christ was born.\textsuperscript{117} However to Portinari, the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece} solidified his duty to family tradition and demonstrates his ties to the famous Portinari family to Italian connections. In this capacity, the altarpiece served as a symbol of Tommaso’s contribution to the church and marked on his eternal fame.

**PAINTED FRAMES**

In the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece}, the exterior wings create the first painted threshold that is guarded by supernatural gatekeepers. On the exterior wings, the Annunciation is shown in two sculptural niches. Both the Virgin Mary and the angel, Gabriel, are depicted in grisaille and within receding spaces. The utilization of grisaille on the exterior wings denotes the sacred doorway and communicates the transition between the temporal and the divine realm. This usage of grisaille reinforces the changing levels of holiness from the exterior wings to the interior panel. In the \textit{Portinari Altarpiece}, the exterior is a muted because of the use of grisaille while the interior is brightly colored. This difference between the monochromatic exterior wings and the chromatic interior creates a transition between two and the sense of moving into another world.\textsuperscript{118} In addition, Mary and the angel, Gabriel, occupy their own niche. However, they are

\textsuperscript{117} Margaret Koster, \textit{The Procedures of Art and Salvation}, p. 45.  
interconnected with the audience as well as with each other since Mary looks towards the angel. This draws some comparison with Van der Weyden’s use of the arch motif in framing a unique space for holy figures and allow the audience access to the sacred event through the figures presence in the altarpiece. Additionally, this niche creates an abstract space that exists beyond the temporal time of the viewer and establishes the first instance of subtle time discrepancies.119 Through these figures, Van der Goes opens the portal into his painting through holy figures, who exist in their own sacred space and open the door into a scene that the audience is allowed to access.

When opened the *Portinari Altarpiece* depicts a series of apertures and doors, which allowed not only the painted figures but also the viewer access to the sacred image. In the left panel, the figure of Tommaso Portinari is situated underneath a stone archway. This particular archway continues on into the central panel, where it shields the figures of Joseph, some angels, and even the Virgin Mary. Similar to the *Merode Altarpiece*, Tommaso’s gaze creates continuity since he looks towards the central scene. In the center, the building behind Mary contains a number of windows, a door, and even an archway. There are also three windows on the second level of the building and one on the lower level; the two angels are situated in front of a door and the archway. Next to this archway, a man and a woman appear behind a wooden gate and they seem to be in the process of opening it. This creates a sense of individual figures entering and moving towards the center scene. Even the shepherds in the central panel are moving towards the center and are situated underneath a wooden archway. In the right panel, the magis and other peasants are also running, walking and riding towards the center scene. And at the very edge of

---

the right frame, there appears an opening in the side of the rock. In this capacity, the series of openings through the three panels creates a sense of continuity but it also frames the figures in their own opening. The sacred ones are brought forth through a divine portal while mortal individuals enter into this liminal space through others. This series of doorways, apertures, and archways seems to comment on the andachtsbild nature of the Portinari Altarpiece. Hugo van der Goes used a condensed form of narrative and provided a devotional aid for individuals to achieve a mode of communication with the divine. Therefore, the series of openings becomes a metaphor for this meditative state in overcoming the divide while still maintaining that the temporal world and divine do not exist in the same place.

Van der Goes carefully places figures into the Portinari Altarpiece in order to establish time discrepancies between the three panels. The left and right donor panels contain hidden scenes within the background. In the foreground of the left, Tommaso Portinari kneels with his sons and two saints. However in the background, a woman and a man are descending down a rocky path. A donkey accompanies them and the woman, who is dressed in blue, appears to be pregnant. This image illustrates the journey to Jerusalem and depicts Mary and Joseph as they travel. In the right panel, three riders repeatedly appear behind the figures of Margaret Portinari and her daughter. These riders are shown progressing through the hills and two riders accompany their foremost appearance. One has dismounted to speak with a peasant and seems to be asking a question. The peasant gestures towards the center scene. This scene illustrates the journey of the three magi and somewhat humorously, asking for directions to the nativity. The placement of these smaller narratives into the work creates a threshold between the three panels, but also a

---

120 Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, p. 125.
time discrepancies.\textsuperscript{121} The smaller narratives within the left and right panels displace the donors from the time of the middle panel since the central scenes show the Nativity. The journey to Bethlehem, the Nativity and the journey of the three magi cannot have happened at the same time. Even though the donors appear to be looking upon the Nativity, the donors are actually presented in a different space and time within the narrative of Christ’s birth.

The details of the mortal figures within the altarpiece also works to establish the separation between the temporal and the divine world. Upon first glance, Tommaso Portinari seems to effortlessly enter the central with no barriers to bar his entrance. On closer inspection, though, the disjointed architecture and discontinuities between the two panels and colors create a sense of separation. Similar to the \textit{Merode Altarpiece}, a sliver of a doorframe appears alongside the figure of Tommaso and opens towards the donor. However in the central panel, this doorway disappears and disjoints the continuity between the two scenes. In this capacity, the doorframe establishes a threshold, which the donor kneels before, and becomes a portal to the more sacred event in the center. This divergence between the left and central panel are further emphasized by subtle details, such as color changes. The similar color schemes of each foreground creates an illusion of continuity or a shared space between the two panels. The color, however, becomes an element that further enhances the differences between the two panels. The arch of the stable exists within both the central and left panel. However when it crosses over into the center, the arch changes from cold gray and brown to a very warm brown color. And finally, Joseph appears to kneel right in front of Tommaso, but his red cloak does not appear in the left panel. Between the center and the right panel, the wooden structure does not appear to the right while the cave

\textsuperscript{121} Blum, \textit{Early Netherlandish Triptychs}, p. 77.
disappears in the center. In this capacity, these smaller details create a discontinuity between the two panels and create a sense of separate spaces.

The theme of discontinuity is also present within the background landscapes. The natural background in each panel introduces more disjointedness between the three panels. In the left panel, a craggy rockside appears behind Tommaso and his patron, St. Thomas. Further in the distance appears a small house connected to the forest by a pathway. However in the central scene, the village appears much closer and situated within green rolling hills. In contrast, the landscape present in the left panel consists of yellow-brown grasslands and set against a forest. The right panel also plays with similar discrepancies where the magi seem to be able to enter into the central panel but are impeded by an abrupt change of scenery.\(^{122}\) In the central panel, the landscape depicts lush rolling hills and the highest hill appears taller than the one in the right panel. In addition, there is a color contrast between the green color of the hills in the center while the hills in the right are yellow, brown and even orange. Although a mountain appears in the background of each scene, it is also shown at different elevations, distances and recedes downward into the ground. The landscape continues to contribute to this overall sense of discontinuity and situates each panel in its own space and time. More importantly, it conveys that the mortal figures are allowed to witness the sacred event, but are physically separated from the divine.

This physical separation between the divine and the temporal figures is further emphasized by barriers. In the center scene, the placement of figures becomes a manner of constructing barriers. The figures of Joseph, Mary, different groups of angels and the shepherds

\(^{122}\) Blum, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs*, p. 146.
create a protected, inner sanctum. These figures are arranged in a circular manner around the Christ child and deny entrance into the holy Space of Mary and Christ. This separation is further delineated by the presence of inanimate objects, such as the wooden structure that appears above the shepherds. The wooden structure appears parallel above the shepherds and seems to denote that space as belonging to the group of shepherds. Furthermore, the shepherds, or the common folk, are separated from the miraculous scene by being placed behind the angels, which establishes an invisible barrier. The brownstone architectural structure behind the Virgin serves as a backdrop to the Holy Family and creates an enclosed space for these figures. Joseph is situated underneath the archway while the Virgin shelters below the opening of the structure and separate the sacred figures from the left panel and the village scene. Finally, the pillars from the stable mark the beginning of the sacred space while the low brick wall behind the pale blue angels separates the Nativity from the village scene. In addition, the stone wall in the right panel separates the donors and their saints from the landscape. In this sense, it suggests that the donors and their saints exist outside the narrative of the magi and indicates that they are only witnesses. These details delineate the spaces of the figures within the three panels and suggest that while the donors are attached to the Nativity, they are not allowed across the miraculous threshold. Through these techniques, Van der Goes connects the temporal and the divine while still maintaining that they exist in different spaces.123

The type of clothing that the figures wear also helps to delineate their own separate space within the three panels. The donors are dressed in dark, somber clothes. Tommaso Portinari is in black while his sons also wear dark attire. Even his wife wears a black dress with a white

123 Jacobs, Opening Doors, p. 144.
waistband. Although, his young daughter wears a brighter green, it is accentuated with darker shades within the material itself. More importantly, the Portinari family is attired in contemporary clothing that is different than the dress of their patron saints. For instance, Saint Thomas appears in vaguely classical garb, as does Saint Anthony. The female saints appear to dress in a similar fashion and are attired in clothes that are brighter than the mortal individuals. In the central scene, Joseph is shown in a bright red cloak while Mary’s navy blue dress shimmers with light. The angels gathered around them are attired in ecclesiastical garments, which denotes their divine association. These clothes contrast with the dull muted clothes of the shepherds, who gather at the corner of the central panel. These three men are dressed in clothes that are substantially less rich than the holy figures and even the donors themselves. In this capacity, the clothing of the figures helps to create a divide between the figures and even denote their place in a hierarchy.

The difference between the clothing of the figures and their placement within their portal denotes separation between the sacred and divine. It also translates this spiritual divide into a commonly understood concept: class divide. The elite donors are situated within their own wing while the shepherds although present in the sacred scene, are located underneath a wooden structure. This difference between the material, the wooden structure of the shepherds and the stonework of Mary’s portal, also communicates a divide between the spiritual. However, it also uses the contrast between the wood and the stone to create a social context. The shepherds shown next to the wood are equated with more common individuals. The ecclesiastical clothes of the angels and more luxe clothes of donors further enhance this. In this way, the divide between the

---

124 Koster, the Procedures of Art and Salvation, p. 39-40.
shepherds illustrated by the different portals and the time discrepancies between the panels shows that all of these individuals have more or less equal access to the nativity scene. Although class stratification differentiates them, all of them are still separate from the divine despite their wealth. Furthermore, the symbolism of the wheat as the Eucharist unites these individuals through the liturgy. Thus, van der Goes uses social context as a tool to help the viewer understand separation, but show that all individuals are equal before the sacred - that is they exist in a temporal world that is separate from the sacred.

CONCLUSION

Hugo van der Goes reverted to traditional elements within his triptych, but his technique was innovative in creating a subtle and more complicated separation between the divine and temporal. The Portinari Altarpiece is the largest Netherlandish triptychs created from this period and this size is attributed to the patronage and function. Tommaso Portinari was a Medici banker, who wanted to flaunt his wealth and status. Furthermore, Portinari’s lineage was tied to the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, which cared for the poor sick and dying in Florence. In this capacity, the Portinari Altarpiece served as Portinari’s contribution to his family-affiliated hospital, but it also served a different function than the other triptychs. The Portinari Altarpiece was installed in the Sant'Egidio church and functioned as an actual altarpiece, evident by its Eucharistic symbolism. The employees, who worked at the hospital, and the poor sick and dying patients from the male ward, also would have seen it. Therefore, this triptych would have served the daily needs of the employees, who attended mass and provided comfort and hope of salvation to the dying. The separation between the temporal and the divine is achieved through the landscape, the placement of figures, as well as their clothing and the natural barriers that frame them and creates a specific
space for each group of figures. Van der Goes constructs a distinct space for the donors and their saints as well as for the sacred figures and the ordinary characters of the divine scene. In this effect, Van der Goes creates a shared space between temporal and divine figures without transgressing sacred boundaries. He achieves this by giving each figure their own space. These distinct spaces are important because they are accessed through an opening that Van der Goes has created. The shepherds enter underneath the wooden structure, while the Virgin and St. Joseph are sheltered by the brownstone architecture. Consequently, Van der Goes creates liminal spaces where these figures are able to come together while maintaining through subtle discrepancies and time displacement that these worlds exist in separate realms. Therefore, the *Portinari Altarpiece* becomes a representation of smaller microcosms that seems to exist on the same plane, but in reality appear from separate times, in different clothes and so becomes a metaphor for the meditative state.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

These three case studies from the fifteenth-century Netherlands convey the range of responses elicited by artists, who shared a tradition but were able to rework that tradition to suit the needs of specific patrons with particular requirements and, of course, communicate a separation between the divine and the temporal. The Merode Altarpiece, the Miraflores Altarpiece and the Portinari Altarpiece range in date from the beginning to the end of the fifteenth century. In the course of that century boundaries were articulated in three distinct manners. They were constructed not only by the physical frame but the painterly ones as well. Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes utilized both traditional conventions of the triptych, as well as innovations to the format to create their own unique type of boundary. Campin utilized the domestic interior for private devotional use by a merchant family, Van der Weyden created the arch motif to guide the Carthusians in their daily prayer, and Van der Goes implemented illusionism to create a larger than life altarpiece for use in a hospital and to attest to the legacy of a prominent family. In each instance, the boundaries of the triptych, both physical and painterly, were affected by the patronage and intended function that has not been considered in the earlier scholarship.

The emphasis in this study on the physical format, the patronage, and the function of each work draws attention to the role of the viewer’s’ experience, and how that experience was shaped and controlled by the artists. Overall, the function of a triptych is shared between all three examples and as expected with that format encouraged the viewer to enter a devotional state. This was accomplished by taking advantage, in different ways, of the physical mechanics and painterly aspects of the format to show the divide between the temporal and divine worlds. When
a viewer approached a triptych, they recognized the presence of a divine portal and understood it as an aid to reach a meditative state through the manipulations of the artist. Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hugo van der Goes developed their own technique of denoting the divide between the temporal and divine world by installing barriers between the viewer and the sacred image. Campin used the familiar domestic setting to encourage the viewer to navigate through the unlocked and locked doors present in the *Merode Altarpiece*. Van der Weyden utilized sculptural qualities, his arch motif and mnemonic devices to aid the viewer in realizing that the scene was only a representation. Finally, Van der Goes implemented dislocation, discrepancies of time and illusionism to convey that the viewer is prohibited from witnessing the sacred event. The emphasis on liminal spaces and apertures encouraged such viewers to overcome these barriers and create a space within their minds, where they could be present with the sacred figures. In the same vein as portrayed in the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, the *Merode Altarpiece*, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* and the *Portinari Altarpiece* encouraged and died the viewer in achieving a meditative state, where they could communicate with the divine. In this manner, the viewers would no longer see the triptychs as actually representing the sacred and encouraged reflective private devotion. This contemplative function, triptych format and devotional response linked all of these triptychs, but how the viewer achieve this meditative state was different.

These three triptychs also shared common elements, such as the figure of the Virgin and grisaille, but these features are utilized in different ways by each artist. The Virgin Mary appears as a central figure within each triptych and evokes the *porta paradisi*, or this notion of a door within a door: a meta-door. Campin shows the Virgin within a domestic interior while Van der
Weyden places her at the center of an archway and Van der Goes makes her central to the composition but displaced the Virgin in time and space. Each triptych uses amazingly versatile painting technique to depict illusionistic sculpture that contrasts with seemingly naturalistic scenes. Campin used grisaille on the exterior wings to emulate sculpture and started a tradition that continued on in triptychs. Grisaille became associated with the presence of a divine portal and signaled to the viewer of this sacred proximity. While van der Weyden subverted the tradition of painted and sculptural qualities, he still used grisaille to denote divinity. Instead of using grisaille on the exterior, van der Weyden implemented this tradition in his arch motif, which combined both sculptural and painted qualities. However, van der Goes returned to a more traditional, or Campin-like, use of grisaille and used it on the exterior wings. Therefore, these commonalities demonstrate the conventions present in Netherlandish triptychs, but they also show the choice of the artist and heighten the effectiveness of the work.

Although each triptych invoked a devotional response from the viewer and shared common conventions, the artist constructed their own type of portal to a liminal space according to their artistic interests, the needs of the patron and the intended function of the work. In the second chapter, I examined Robert Campin’s *Merode Altarpiece* and how it utilized the domestic interior to fulfill the overall function. The patronage of the Ingelbrechts, a merchant class family from Mechelen. The small size and choice to depict the annunciation in the central panel suggest that the item served as an *ex voto* object. In other words, it would have been a private, devotional object within the home. This seems to be reflected in Campin’s choice to show the annunciation happening within a domestic setting, specifically a home. However, Campin was the first Netherlandish artist to use a domestic setting within a triptych and we know from other images,
such as *Betrothal of the Virgin* (fig. 10), that Campin had a preference for domestic settings. So although patronage and the intended function as an *ex voto*, may have affected the choices of Campin. It also seems probable that the domestic interior was a conscious choice of the artist.

Campin established separation by using the domestic setting of the *Merode Altarpiece* to create a sacred hierarchy. The first panel shows a garden scene with two patrons, while the central scene focused on the moment of the annunciation and the last one, on Joseph’s workshop. Each panel centers on a different realm of the temporal world and Campin uses the different rooms to create a sacred hierarchy. Despite the appearance that each scene exist on the same plane, the apertures and doorways reveal the separation between each panel. In the first scene, the donors are portrayed on the ground while in the background is a view of a city street. However in the central panel, the windows behind the angel and the Virgin show the skyline. In the left panel, a brick wall appears at the same level as the windows, but this wall does not appear within the windows in the center. In the last panel, the windows show that Joseph’s workshop is placed higher up from the ground. Thus, the central scene is shown existing above the city while the other two are closer in proximity to the ground. Campin communicates to the viewers, or donors, that they are not able to access the interior sacred space. However, the viewers are allowed to look upon the sacred scene. This imparts the notion that the domestic interior serves as an aid to the viewer. The viewer is meant to look upon the *Merode Altarpiece* and its series of doors, apertures as a subliminal message of unlocking a devotional state of mind. It encourages the viewer to pray before the *Merode Altarpiece*, like the donors before the doorway, in order to enter the sacred space. Therefore, Campin utilized the domestic setting, its sacred hierarchy, and series of apertures to create a devotional aid for the viewer.
In the third chapter, I examine van der Weyden’s *Miraflores Altarpiece*. This triptych portrayed three events from the Virgin’s life: the Holy Family, *the pieta* and the final appearance of Christ to his mother. Van der Weyden’s use of the fixed-wing triptych seems to have tied to the specific function of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. The triptych is associated with the patronage of Juan II of Castile, or the Spanish monarchy. While its original intended function is unknown, it was placed within the Miraflores Charterhouse. Originally, this Charterhouse had served as a hunting lodge, but it was converted into a Carthusian Charterhouse. Therefore, the triptych was intended for use by the Carthusians, who were known for their piety and devotional practices. When a Carthusian entered into the order, they took a vow of silence and promised to abstain from worldly pursuits. Carthusian monks did not interact with the public and rarely conversed amongst themselves instead they devoted their life to prayer. In short, they were experts in devotion. Images were active participants in their life and acted as guides to help the monks focus on their devotions. It was noted that the Carthusians were associated with an early form of the rosary and were known to use this prayer. The organization of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* supports this type of prayer because it focuses on the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the Virgin’s life. These mysteries are clearly organized, separated from each other and rely on a mnemonic device to help the monk remain focused. Thus, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* aptly fulfilled its function as a devotional object and used by an order well versed in contemplative prayer and attuned to its complexities.

The arrangement of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* functions to guide the viewer in their daily prayers and encouraged devotion through the separation between the divine and the temporal. Each episode is framed by an archivolt that contained sculptural depictions of events from the
Bible. These events were tied to the specific mystery and also celebrated a specific virtue of the Virgin. The first scene focused on the joyful events of the Virgin’s life, the second on her sorrowful moments and the third on the glorious ones. Each scene focuses the viewer on a specific virtue of the Virgin and the archivolts work as a mnemonic device to help the viewer remember the events associated with this virtue. As a result, the mnemonic devices turns the viewer’s thoughts towards prayer. Furthermore, the barrel-vault structure, the background structure, and separation from the landscape, or temporal world, reminds the viewer to separate themselves from worldly thoughts. It further encourages the viewer to enter and stay within this sacred space. The organization of the Miraflores Altarpiece, with its repeated archways and episodes, and the Carthusian preference for the rosary, seems to suggest that this triptych was meant for that type of prayer. The repetition of prayer was believed to help an individual reach a meditative state and allow them to enter a sacred space. Therefore, the repeated pattern of the archways, biblical scenes on the archivolts, the angel with the banderoles and the figure of Mary, supports this function.

Finally, Hugo van der Goes’s Portinari Altarpiece is examined in the fourth chapter. This triptych centers on the nativity an appropriate subject for an altarpiece commissioned as a family monument in a hospital context. The patronage of the Portinari Altarpiece is quite different than that of Campin and Van der Weyden and connects it to a different function. Tommaso Portinari commissioned this altarpiece to be placed in the Sant'Egidio church in the Santa Maria Nuova hospital. This hospital was established by his family and served as one of oldest hospitals in Florence. It was the responsibility of the Portinari family to continually support this hospital since it served as a symbol of status and wealth. Thus, it was Portinari’s duty, as well as in his
interest, to commission beautiful works for this hospital. More importantly, the hospital cared for the sick and the poor. Santa Maria Nuova relied on the employment of conversi, who served as a perpetual servant and converted to a life of piety. None of the employees were allowed to leave, or live elsewhere. Thus, the people who most likely interacted with and saw the Portinari Altarpiece were the employees of the hospital as well as the patients. Therefore, this triptych actually served as an altarpiece in the ritual of the mass. It also illustrated to the masses, a coming together of the upper and lower classes embodied by the shepherds, holy figures and elite donors, and served as a symbol of the hospital, which oversaw the care of the poor by lay piety.

In the Portinari Altarpiece’s thresholds and boundaries are constructed in a more complicated and subtle manner than the other triptychs. Van der Goes reverts back to the traditional format of the triptych with grisaille exterior wings, but he places numerous narratives in the interior wings to create time discrepancies. The first panel shows Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem with the nativity in the center and the three magi asking for directions in the right panel. These subtle details create discrepancies between the three panels and communicates that these panels do not exist during the same time. So even though Portinari appears to look into the central scene, in reality, he does not. In addition, van der Goes also situates the sacred and temporal figures underneath their own doorways. Mary and Joseph are located beneath their own stone archways while the shepherds exist beneath a wooden frame. The choice to depict the Nativity with the coming together of the common people and sacred figures was a fitting choice for an altarpiece situated in a hospital. The altarpiece invites a range of viewers to explore and position themselves in relation to the sacred scene—the Portinari’s, the administrators and religious who lived in and ran the hospital, and—of course—the sick.
Moreover, not only does this altarpiece comfort the sick and dying, but it also helps them achieve a meditative state. This is accomplished because Van der Goes communicates the separation between the divine from the temporal by using the metaphor of classes. A viewer in Sant'Egidio would look upon this altarpiece and understand the separation between the different figures as analogous to the divide between the temporal and the divine. Individuals, who prayed before this altarpiece, would understand that all humans, no matter their status on earth, were equal in the eyes of the divine. In addition, the coming together of lower and higher-class individuals with the divine would encourage them to reflect upon entering a sacred space. It would then prompt the viewer to then enter his or her own space of meditative reflection.

The *Merode Altarpiece*, the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, and the *Portinari Altarpiece* share their format and tradition but each utilizes a different technique to create a unique liminal space between this world and the divine. In using the domestic interior, Campin chose the domestic layout of a home, the windows, and doorways to show that the donors and the sacred figures existed on different realms. Van der Weyden used the archivolt, the barrel-vault, and sculptures, to define a sacred space and to convey that the sacred figures only existed within the archway. Lastly, Van der Goes constructed time discrepancies, dislocation physical barriers and contrasts clothing and other material to convey a divide between the sacred scene and the mortal figures. Despite their differences in approach, each artist constructed works that enabled the viewer to position him or herself relative to the sacred and to cultivate a space of contemplation by evoking a response from the viewer. The viewer would use each triptych format in very different ways as an aid to achieve a mode of communication with the divine and enter a meditative state, where they could envision the divine and pray before them. This purpose can be seen in the *Hours of*
Mary of Burgundy but it is also evident in each triptych examined in this thesis. Although different in imagery, each triptych communicates a divide between the sacred and divine and encouraged very different viewers in quite different situations to best respond in an appropriate devotional manner. Therefore, these Netherlandish triptychs become paintings with doors, both physically and within the painted panels.
FIGURES

6. Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, ca. 1435-40. Madrid, Museo del Prado. From WMDID. 80 x 102 inches.
   https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/arts/design/the-merode-altarpiece-at-the-cloisters-represents-time-immemorial.html?_r=0


23. Juan de Flandes, *Christ Appearing to His Mother*, ca. 1496. New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. From the Metropolitan Museum of Art website: 
Figure 1: *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*

![Hours of Mary of Burgundy](image1)

Figure 2: *Retable of the Crucifixion*

![Retable of the Crucifixion](image2)
Figure 3: Virgin and Child

Figure 4: Merode Altarpiece
Figure 5: *Thief*

Figure 6: *Descent from the Cross*
Figure 7: *Miraflores Altarpiece*

![Miraflores Altarpiece](image)

Figure 8: *Virgin and Child*

![Virgin and Child](image)
Figure 9: Standing Madonna

Figure 10: Betrothal of the Virgin
Figure 11: Portinari Altarpiece

Figure 12: The Hours of Jeanne D’Evreux
Figure 13: *St. John the Baptist*

Figure 14: *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior wings)
Figure 15: *Annunciation*

![Annunciation](image)

Figure 16: *Calvary of Hendrik van Rijn*

![Calvary of Hendrik van Rijn](image)
Figure 17: *The Merode Altarpiece displayed in the Cloisters from the Metropolitan Museum*

![The Merode Altarpiece displayed in the Cloisters from the Metropolitan Museum](image)

Figure 18: *Diptych of Christiaan de Hondt*

![Diptych of Christiaan de Hondt](image)
Figure 19: *Annunciation*

Figure 20: *Brussels Annunciation*
Figure 21: *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*

![Image of the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece]

Figure 22: *The Altar of St. John*

![Image of the Altar of St. John]
Figure 23: *Christ Appearing to His Mother*
BIBLIOGRAPHY


