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*Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 15, No. 2. (1985), pp. 87-118.

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*Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* is currently published by Stichting voor Nederlandse kunsthistorische publicaties.

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## Visions and meditations in early Flemish painting\*

*Craig Harbison*

In fifteenth-century Flanders we find a religious art in which individual piety is the prime motivating force; not scholastic disputation, transcendent ecstasy or liturgical ritual, but a calculated, personal religious experience, the vision or meditation is found at the center of things. Paintings portray famous visionaries from the past as well as contemporaries in the guise of these sainted predecessors. Above all, fifteenth-century men and women are shown so fervently engaged in their own prayers that the subject of their devotions, whether it be the Virgin or an event from Christ's life, stands before them or indeed surrounds them.

Interest in personal piety and devotion certainly predates this time. Throughout the preceding centuries new forms of personal affective devotion were developed and disseminated. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries some have spoken of "waves" of popular piety sweeping over the Low Countries.<sup>1</sup> What was at least partly being witnessed there was the spread of private devotional practices from clergy to laity. In some ways a difficult, monastically-oriented body of information, and at times speculation, was being assimilated by the populace at large.<sup>2</sup> This assimilation was not taking place either accidentally or haphazardly. Various reli-

gious movements at the time, of which the chief was known as the Modern Devotion, were specifically dedicated to moving beyond the monastic perimeters which had at least partly restricted earlier revitalization efforts.<sup>3</sup> Lay brother and sisterhoods and the use of the vernacular tongue both contributed to the wide effect which the resurgence of personal and practical piety had at the time.

One of the most telling indications of the nature of fifteenth-century piety was the production of various devotional handbooks. These often vernacular works represented the personal and creative choice of the authors and/or patrons; mystic miscellanies in Germany; books of diverse readings and lessons (*rapiaria*) in the Windesheim Congregation, the monastic branch of the Modern Devotion; and, of course, the Book of Hours, the most widely produced lay handbook of the period, no two of which were ever totally alike.<sup>4</sup> Such works represent the primary devotional reading of the literate among the population, fervent and idiosyncratic meditations meant more for personal than for communal use. We can observe here the creation of a prayer-book mentality, certainly among the nobility and upper classes who commissioned works of art.

\* I am grateful to the following for their comments on earlier drafts of this study: Jane Goldsmith, Sherrill Harbison, Robert A. Koch, James Mundy, Mark Roskill, Gloria Russell and Margaret Sullivan.

<sup>1</sup> See James Marrow, *Passion iconography in northern European art of the late middle ages and early Renaissance*, Kortrijk 1979, esp. pp. 20-26; and, in general, Dom Jean Leclercq, Dom François Vanderbroucke and Louis Bouyer, *The spirituality of the middle ages* (A History of Christian Spirituality 2), London 1968; Heiko A. Obermann, "Fourteenth century religious thought: a premature profile," *Speculum* 53 (1978), pp. 80-93; and Steven Ozment, *The age of reform, 1250-1550*, New Haven 1980. Relevant art-historical studies also include: Sixten Ringbom, "Devotional images and imaginative devotions, notes on the place of art in late medieval piety," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, 73 (1969), pp. 159-70; Lloyd Benjamin, *The empathetic relation of observer to image in fifteenth century northern art*, (dissertation), University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill 1973; and idem, "Disguised symbolism exposed and the history of early Netherlandish painting,"

*Studies in Iconography* 2 (1976), pp. 11-24 (this last is somewhat inaccurate both in ideas and understanding).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, F. P. Pickering, "A German mystic miscellany of the late fifteenth century in the John Rylands Library," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester* 22 (1938), pp. 455-92, esp. pp. 455-65.

<sup>3</sup> A basic work on the Modern Devotion is R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: confrontation with Reformation and humanism*, Leiden 1968. An earlier, less careful work is Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance; a history of the "Devotio Moderna"*, 2nd ed., Hamden 1965. See also E. F. Jacob, "The Brethren of the Common Life," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester* 24 (1940), pp. 37-58; and Mathias Goossens, *De meditatie in de eerste tijd van de Moderne Devotie*, Haarlem & Antwerp [1952].

<sup>4</sup> See Marrow, op. cit. (note 1), esp. p. 22; Pickering, op. cit. (note 2), and, for the Book of Hours, John Harthan, *Books of Hours and their owners*, London 1977.

Ultimately, then, one might see the primary devotional thrust of the fifteenth century as somewhat unsophisticated and unlearned, meant to appeal to a fairly broad spectrum of the population. The books produced were not remarkably original or erudite; they were rather handy and often quite personal compendia. The great questions they dealt with did not hinge on abstruse argument and calculation, but basically concerned the mass effectiveness, the stimulation of a natural, one might even be tempted to say, somewhat passive and simple piety in the mass of society. In the end, this rising lay piety was anything but passive—unsophisticated perhaps, but not passive. A good indication of this is found in the promotion of the idea of learned ignorance, *docta ignorantia*. Codified by Nicolas of Cusa for his own somewhat special purposes, the notion of a lay person's humble and direct piety surpassing that of a learned confessor or teacher achieved widespread popularity at the time.<sup>5</sup> Stories about such confrontations inevitably ended with the confessor admitting that the lay person's pious contemplations showed forth a far more godly life than the liturgically based practices prescribed by the clergy.

Contemporary literature espousing the notion of *docta ignorantia* did not carefully or systematically distinguish between contemplations, meditations and visions. There were often rather vague references to "inward" and "outward" devotions, all of which are apparently not clerically prescribed works. The important point was that natural piety and imagination were far more efficacious than learned diatribes. This is important for the consideration of art, partly because visions in fifteenth-century painting often seem simply to be visualizations. For the lay populace, they were certainly

deemed more relevant than the kind of complex, scholastic presentation of church dogma which many art historians have today read into the imagery.

In stressing the crucial importance of visions and meditations for Flemish religious life and art, we are not dealing with the kind of ecstatic experience frequently exhibited by Italian and Spanish saints and art (such as St Teresa of Avila); no trumpets in heaven, no delicious agonies, but a more methodical meditative process which, too, could produce a kind of visionary experience. If the kinds of visions we find in Flemish art are less high-pitched than some others, they do still represent a kind of personal mysticism which transcends traditional liturgical piety.

Studies of the possible liturgical meaning of fifteenth-century Flemish paintings most often present tracings of medieval precedents. A present-day scholarly interpretation of the *Deposition* triptych attributed to Robert Campin (fig. 1) has attempted to see it as "intimately related to the ceremonies celebrated in the chapel for which it was commissioned."<sup>6</sup> The Easter liturgy in particular is here called upon to explain the donor's presence and purpose: to adore the buried and then resurrected host. Such traditional ceremonies will no doubt always inform at least the theologian's view of Christian art. But are we justified in assuming that the anonymous donor of this triptych would have participated in such a liturgical mentality, that he would constantly have thought and lived in the light of traditional Catholic ritual? Detailed statistical evidence from the time has shown that this is unlikely. Attendance at mass, dependence on the clergy for performance of the sacraments, was at a pitiful low point.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, whatever piety fifteenth-century Flemings can be said to have had, it was

<sup>5</sup> See F.P. Pickering, "Notes on late medieval German tales in praise of *docta ignorantia*," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, Manchester* 24 (1940), pp. 121–37. For Cusa, see his own *Of learned ignorance* (trans. G. Heron), London 1954; also the critical studies of Eugene F. Rice, Jr., "Nicholas of Cusa's idea of wisdom," *Traditio* 13 (1957), pp. 345–68; and M.L. Fuehrer, "Wisdom and eloquence in Nicholas of Cusa's *Idiota de sapientia* and *De mente*," *Vivarium* 16 (1978), pp. 142–55.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Lane, "'Depositio et elevatio': the symbolism of the Seilern Triptych," *Art Bulletin* 57 (1975), pp. 21–30. This and other liturgically based interpretations by Lane have now been collected in *The altar and the altarpiece, sacramental themes in early Netherlandish painting*, New York 1984. Several studies by M.B. McNamee have also stressed the importance of Catholic liturgy for Flemish painting: "An additional eucharistic allusion in van der Weyden's 'Columba

Triptych,'" *Studies in Iconography* 2 (1976), pp. 107–13; "The Good Friday liturgy and Hans Memling's Antwerp Triptych," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), pp. 353–56; and "The origin of the vested angel as a eucharistic symbol in Flemish painting," *Art Bulletin* 54 (1972), pp. 263–78. See also Ursula Nilgen, "The Epiphany and the eucharist: on the interpretation of eucharistic motifs in medieval Epiphany scenes," *Art Bulletin* 49 (1967), pp. 311–16. It might be pointed out that all these studies ignore the changing social role and impact of the eucharist, something which is stressed by John Bossy, "The mass as a social institution, 1200–1700," *Past and Present* 100 (1983), pp. 29–61.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du moyen âge*, Paris 1963, *passim*, esp. pp. 160–95; for conditions in Tournai, the location of the presumed painter of the *Deposition* triptych, see esp. pp. 297 and 325.



1 Attributed to Robert Campin, *Triptych with the Entombment*. London, Courtauld Institute Galleries, Seilern Collection

not parochially based. Fifteenth-century Flemings did not, as far as we can tell from the documentary evidence, look to the liturgical forms of the church in order to express their religious feelings. Some have even concluded from this that the population at large was not very religious.<sup>8</sup> As an aside we might point out here that van der Weyden's *Seven sacraments altarpiece* (fig. 2), commissioned by the bishop of Tournai, Jean Chevrot,

was probably meant to insist on the power, largely ignored by the laity, of priestly ritual.<sup>9</sup> The centrality of the sacraments in religious life was here insisted upon, even before they had all become canonical, van der Weyden's painting being a declaration of the clergy's belief in their prime position in the face of lay disinterest.

The donor of Campin's *Deposition* triptych has had himself painted as very involved, very interested in his

8 Ibid. To some extent this is also the view of Johan Huizinga, *The waning of the middle ages* (trans. F. Hopman), New York 1954. Toussaert's rather extreme conclusion is questioned by John Bossy, "The Counter-Reformation and the people of Catholic Europe," *Past and Present* 47 (1970), esp. pp. 52–53. A differing point of view from Toussaert's is also presented by Stephanus Axters, *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden*, 4 vols., Antwerp 1950–60.

9 For the *Seven sacraments altarpiece* see Erwin Panofsky, "Two Roger problems: the donor of the Hague Lamentation and the date of the altarpiece of the Seven sacraments," *Art Bulletin* 33 (1951), pp. 33–40. Panofsky believes that three important prelates may be por-

trayed observing or administering the sacraments in Roger's work. Their combined presence there would certainly reinforce the clerically dominated nature of this work. The poor state of affairs at Tournai Cathedral in the late fourteenth century is referred to repeatedly by Toussaert, op. cit. (note 7). In an unpublished paper Susan Koslow has viewed the Antwerp altarpiece as a clerically dominated work related to Bishop Chevrot's life and his involvement with the church militant. I am grateful to Professor Koslow for sharing this paper with me; the interested reader should also consult her dissertation, *The Chevrot altarpiece: its sources, meaning and significance*, New York University 1972.





2 Roger van der Weyden and assistants, *Seven sacraments altarpiece*. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten

own meditations. Certainly these focus on the sacrifice of Christ, but not necessarily as the basis for church ritual. The donor is praying; a banderole winds up out of his mouth toward the ladder perched against the empty cross. Is it accidental that some of the most popular devotional guides of the time speak of the world as a ladder, by contemplation of which we shall mount up to God?<sup>10</sup> Meditation on the life of Christ, Ludolph of Saxony told his contemporaries, was like a ladder on which one moved from seeing those things which Christ wrought in the flesh to beholding him in the spirit.<sup>11</sup> In order to understand the imagery of this painting we need not refer to abstruse theological speculation; we only need read one of the simple, accessible prayers found at

the end of a chapter of Ludolph's popular *Vita Christi*:

Lord Jesus Christ, at compline thou wert anointed and embalmed with fragrant spices, wrapped and bound in a shroud and other linens, borne to the grave (John 19:39-42), and buried by thy mother and sorrowing friends (Luke 23:55). Grant me the grace to anoint thee with fragrant spices by fervent devotion and useful speech; to wrap thee in a shroud and linens by purity of affection and conscience; to grieve over thee with tears of repentance and compassion; to carry thee in the arms of loving and humble deeds; to bury thee in my heart by undistracted recollection and meditation. Then may I merit to come with thee to the glory of the resurrection. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See St Bonaventura, *The mind's road to God* (trans. G. Boas), New York 1953, esp. p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> See Sister Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt, *The Vita Christi of Ludolphus the Carthusian*, Washington (D.C.) 1944, esp. p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> The translation by Sister Mary Immaculate Bodenstedt is taken from *Praying the life of Christ, first English translation of the prayers concluding the 181 chapters of the Vita Christi of Ludolphus the Carthusian*, Salzburg 1973, p. 160. This is perhaps also the place to emphasize that I would not consider the Campin painting as illustrating

Ludolph's text. Rather, the text simply presents us with an analogous model for approaching contemplation and religious meditation. This is also the case with the other texts mentioned below, Bridget and the Pseudo-Bonaventura in particular (see note 22). Albert Chatelet, "Fenêtre et fontaine dans l'Annonciation, à propos de Jean van Eyck et du Maître de Flémalle," *Études d'art médiéval offertes à Louis Grodecki*, Paris 1981, pp. 317-24, sees combinations of motifs in van Eyck and Campin as being directly derived from Ludolph's text.

Fervent devotion, undistracted meditation, it is in these, not attendance at Easter mass, that the lay populace in general, and this donor in particular, put their trust.

To some extent the mythic quality of such a donor's piety must, even here, be recognized. The view the images leave with us is no doubt in part a contrived one. The donors want us, wanted their contemporaries, to believe in their devoutness. This prayer-book mentality is to some extent a retreat from, or a mask for, personal, social, religious and political conflicts of the time. Beneath the surface of this personal piety one could no doubt find telling signs of the changing status of women or the power of the nobility or peasants.<sup>13</sup> My purpose here, however, is not to investigate issues of social background or personal temperament. Rather it is to show how artists found the means to visualize, subtly and fully, the chief religious ideal of the time, lay visions and meditations. While this study is intentionally limited in one way, it is also right to acknowledge that it could be expanded in several directions.

There were a large number of important saints whose visions were remembered and recorded during the fifteenth century. It is not yet a time when contemporaries provide a constant model for such behavior. The Reformation, a hundred years later, may have had an important effect on this situation, yet throughout the fifteenth century saints' visions are common objects of artists' and patrons' attentions. Among those prominently portrayed are St Francis (Jan van Eyck), Augustus and the Sibyl (van Eyck and Roger van der Weyden, figs. 6 and 9), St Catherine (Master of St Catherine, fig. 33), St John on Patmos (Hans Memling), and St Gregory (Hieronymus Bosch and others). Lesser figures as well crop up repeatedly: Ildefonso, Hubert, Bernard, Benedict and Augustine.<sup>14</sup> In the context of a study of lay visions and meditations it is not the mere portrayal of the visions of these saints or legendary figures which is alone so noteworthy. A more striking feature of fifteenth-century art and an indication of concomitant attitudes is the manner in which contemporaries apparently identi-



3 Limbourg Brothers, *Augustus and the Tiburtine Sibyl*. Chantilly, Musée Condé, *Très Riches Heures* of Jean de Berry, fol. 22

fied with, and showed themselves in the guise of, some of these holy figures.

One of the first great patrons involved in this development, just as he is one of the first great patrons involved in the development of fifteenth-century northern art in general, was Jean de Berry. The duke's model for a dramatic and visionary experience was the Emperor Augustus. According to several medieval sources, the *Golden legend* and *Mirror of human salvation* chief among them, Augustus was about to be deified. Wishing to know if there were any as great as he, the emperor consulted the Tiburtine Sibyl and was shown a vision of a maid and child, the child said by the Sibyl to become a greater

<sup>13</sup> For an interpretation of a social role which meditation might have served for women see Clarissa W. Atkinson, "'Precious balsam in a fragile glass:' the ideology of virginity in the later middle ages," *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983), pp. 131-43.

<sup>14</sup> Examples include paintings of St Ildefonso by a follower of Memling (M.J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish painting*, vol. 6, pt. 1, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 130, nr. 105) and of St Bernard by Joos van Cleve (*ibid.*, vol. 9, pt. 1, Leiden & Brussels 1972, pl. 62, nr. 48).



5 Jan van Eyck, *Chancellor Nicolas Rolin praying to the Virgin*. Paris, Louvre

4 Boucicaut Master, *Marshal Boucicaut and his wife praying to the Virgin*. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, *Boucicaut Hours*, ms. 2, fol. 26v

ruler than the Roman emperor. Augustus was duly converted and a church founded to commemorate the event. Numerous works, especially the most prominent manuscripts commissioned by the duke of Berry, illustrate the emperor's vision (fig. 3). For the latter-day Augustus, Jean de Berry, identification with his predecessor extended beyond the commissioning of works of art to matters of dress: Jean either mimicked the kind of costume Augustus was shown wearing in some of his manuscripts, or the emperor was shown in clothing which Jean commonly wore.<sup>15</sup>

Other prominent patrons at the time displayed a similar desire to identify themselves with this vision from the

past. Marshal Boucicaut and his wife are shown in their Book of Hours kneeling before a mystical apparition of the Virgin and Child which looms over their heads (fig. 4). This composition is related to that of the *Aracoeli*, the emperor and Sibyl having here been supplanted by the two contemporary figures.<sup>16</sup> Other examples are perhaps less obvious, but one wonders if a connection with the Augustan prototype is not implicit. In Jan van Eyck's painting of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin (fig. 5), the Madonna holds the Christ Child forward in a way perhaps responding to the text of this legend and found in several other prominent examples of the vision itself (Roger van der Weyden's so-called *Bladelin altarpiece* among them,

<sup>15</sup> See Philippe Verdier, "A medallion of the 'Ara coeli' and the Netherlandish enamels of the fifteenth century," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 24 (1961), esp. pp. 9–24; Millard Meiss, *French painting in the time of Jean de Berry, the Limbours and their contemporaries*,

New York 1974, esp. pp. 139 ff. and 156; and Millard Meiss, *Late fourteenth century and the patronage of the duke*, London 1967, pp. 233–35.

<sup>16</sup> See Millard Meiss, *French painting in the time of Jean de Berry, the Boucicaut Master*, London 1968, pp. 21 and 146, note 71.



6 Begun by Jan van Eyck, *Triptych of Nicholas van Maelbeke*. Formerly Warwick Castle, Warwick

fig. 9).<sup>17</sup> On the outside of van Eyck's *Maelbeke triptych* (fig. 6) Augustus and the Sibyl gaze heavenward, while on the inside the cleric who commissioned the work repeats the emperor's vision. In Robert Campin's painting of the *Virgin in glory* (Aix-en-Provence, Musée Granet) the Virgin and Child are seated on an altar-like throne again reminiscent of Augustan portrayals such as Roger's. And in the early sixteenth century a series of portraits by Jan Mostaert show the legend in the background (fig. 7). The patrons apparently still kept alive the hope that they would be granted the vision that Augustus experienced.

Being human as well as a powerful earthly ruler,

<sup>17</sup> Meiss, *Late fourteenth century*, cit. (note 15), p. 234, suggested that the Virgin's action in holding the child forward, exhibiting him to beholders, in earlier representations of this legend was related to the Sibyl's declaration to Augustus: "This child is greater lord than thou, worship him" ("Hic puer maior te est et ideo ipsum adora").

Augustus was a natural target for sentiments of self-identification. The desire to have a vision by osmosis extended to other quite saintly figures as well. St Gregory having his vision during mass in order to convert a doubting assistant is almost invariably accompanied by contemporary figures who, too, want to witness this miraculous event.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps most arresting of all are those scenes where someone takes the Virgin's place and has, for instance, her vision of the resurrected Christ, or even receives the angelic greeting, a first-person vision of the Annunciation. Good examples of these occurrences are found in manuscripts owned by the women thus portrayed: Duchess Margaret of York with the resurrected

<sup>18</sup> Examples include paintings in the style of Campin (Friedländer, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1967, pl. 100, nr. 73) and David (ibid., vol. 6, pt. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 207, nr. 204) and the work by Bosch already mentioned (ibid., vol. 5, Leiden & Brussels 1969, pl. 47, nr. 68).



Christ, a scene often elaborated upon by various visionaries and mystics (fig. 8);<sup>19</sup> and Duchess Mary of Guelders receiving the heavenly salutation in the vernacular ("O milde Marie").<sup>20</sup> Throughout the century other women were portrayed in the guise of sibyls, those women whose visionary knowledge had, for instance, first stimulated men like Augustus.<sup>21</sup>

There was thus in the fifteenth century a strong desire to emulate visionaries and relive visions from the past. This notion of identifying with, and ultimately taking inspiration from, another more famous individual's per-

<sup>19</sup> See James D. Breckenridge, "'Et prima videt:' the iconography of the appearance of Christ to his mother," *Art Bulletin* 39 (1957), pp. 9–32, esp. pp. 31–32; also Otto Pächt, *The Master of Mary of Burgundy*, London 1948.

<sup>20</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, Cambridge



8 Master of the Girard de Roussillon, *Resurrected Christ appearing to Margaret of York*, in Nicolas Finet, *Le dialogue de Jésus Christ et de la duchesse*. London, British Museum, Add. Ms. 7970, fol. 4

7 Jan Mostaert, *Portrait of Abel van de Coulster with the Emperor Augustus's vision*. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts

sonal religious experience suggests an important way of understanding a painting like Roger van der Weyden's *Bladelin altarpiece* (fig. 9). This work, as well as many others, contains significant features derived from one of the great visionary or meditative treatises of the late middle ages, the *Revelations* of St Bridget of Sweden. Thus the Virgin is robed in white, her blue mantle dropped to the ground around her; and a prominent column, mentioned in a speech by the Virgin to Bridget, indicates her foreknowledge of her son's Passion.

Roger's painting represents in part a re-enactment of

1953, p. 101; and Harthan, op. cit. (note 4), pp. 80–81.

<sup>21</sup> Examples include a painting attributed to Roger van der Weyden of *Isabella of Portugal as the Persian Sibyl* (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum), and another by Hans Memling of a *Woman as the Sambetha Sibyl* (Bruges, Memling Museum).



9 Roger van der Weyden, *Bladelin altarpiece*. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

Bridget's vision, a re-enactment taking place in the mind of the donor, who kneels at the right of the center panel staring off blankly. Bridget's *Revelations* were just one great literary model for the fifteenth century. Equally important were the *Meditations* of the Pseudo-Bonaventura and the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony.<sup>22</sup> In all cases the reader of the text was encouraged to relive the life and Passion of Christ. The viewer of a painting derived from such a text was in turn encouraged to relive the events as envisioned by that particular holy person. The experience was heightened by the fervor of the author and artist. The historical, biblical narrative was made a fitting object of devotion and of visionary art. Fifteenth-century patrons and artists identified with figures like St Bridget because it made their devotional images more powerful and more personal—more personal since they imagined an event from the past through the very special eyes, with the vision, of a St Bridget.

<sup>22</sup> Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, (eds.), *Meditations on the Life of Christ, an illustrated manuscript of the fourteenth century*, Princeton 1961; Charles Abbott Conway, Jr., *The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and late medieval devotion centered on the Incarnation: a descriptive analysis*, Salzburg 1976; and the references cited in notes 11 and 12 above. For the impact of Bridget's visions on art see, for in-

stance, Panofsky, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 46, 94 and 125–26. See also note 12 above for the qualification on the use of these literary works as “texts” for the paintings.

Practice at the time emphasized the need for a direct, vivid, visual re-enactment of Christ's life on earth. Devotional treatises repeatedly encouraged the devout to focus their attention so that they might truly be present at certain moments of Christ's life. Through methodical meditations the Passion of Christ was to unfold dramatically in the mind's eye. Some paintings and miniatures show an inviting, open prayer-book in the foreground, a scene from Christ's life in the background (figs. 10 and 11).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In this way, we can be certain that narrative images were meant to function in a devotional context. Painted images of Christ's life were meant to form or reflect the spectator's own pious meditations. As the texts told the reader imaginatively to recreate the scene, to participate empathetically in the Passion of Christ, so the paintings provided a similarly gripping view. And they indicate this intention quite often by the inclusion in a narrative

stance, Panofsky, op. cit. (note 20), pp. 46, 94 and 125–26. See also note 12 above for the qualification on the use of these literary works as “texts” for the paintings.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the works illustrated here, another relevant example, with foreground landscape acting as *prie-dieu*, is in the Museo Lazaro-Galdiano, Madrid (attributed to Quentin Metsys).



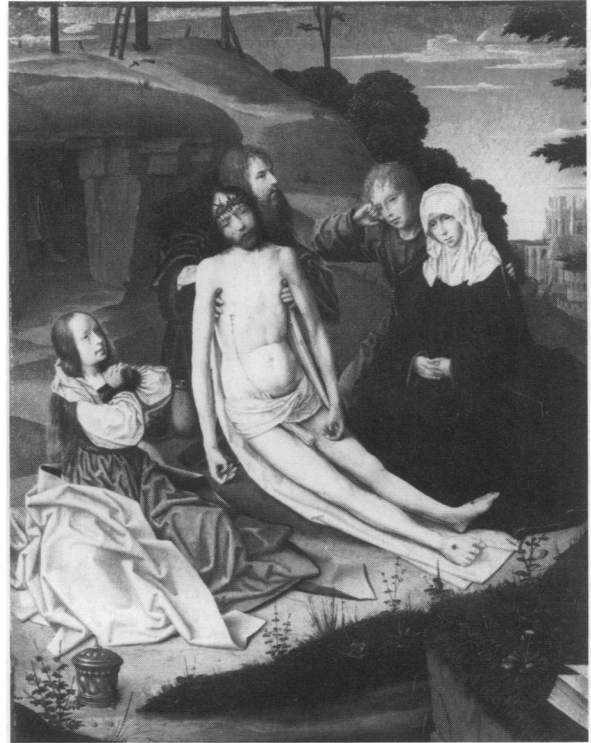


10 Master of Mary of Burgundy, *Nailing to the Cross*. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, *Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, ms. 1857, fol. 43v

context of a contemporary donor. The presence of the donor at the Crucifixion is not just a daring anachronism (fig. 12). Nor is it only a sign that some proprietary connection exists between donor and painting. Of course, it may to some extent be both of these things. It is however especially indicative of the devotional function of the work of art. The donor is having a vision of the Crucifixion, is visualizing it in the course of his or her pious meditations.

This is not only consistent with contemporary prac-

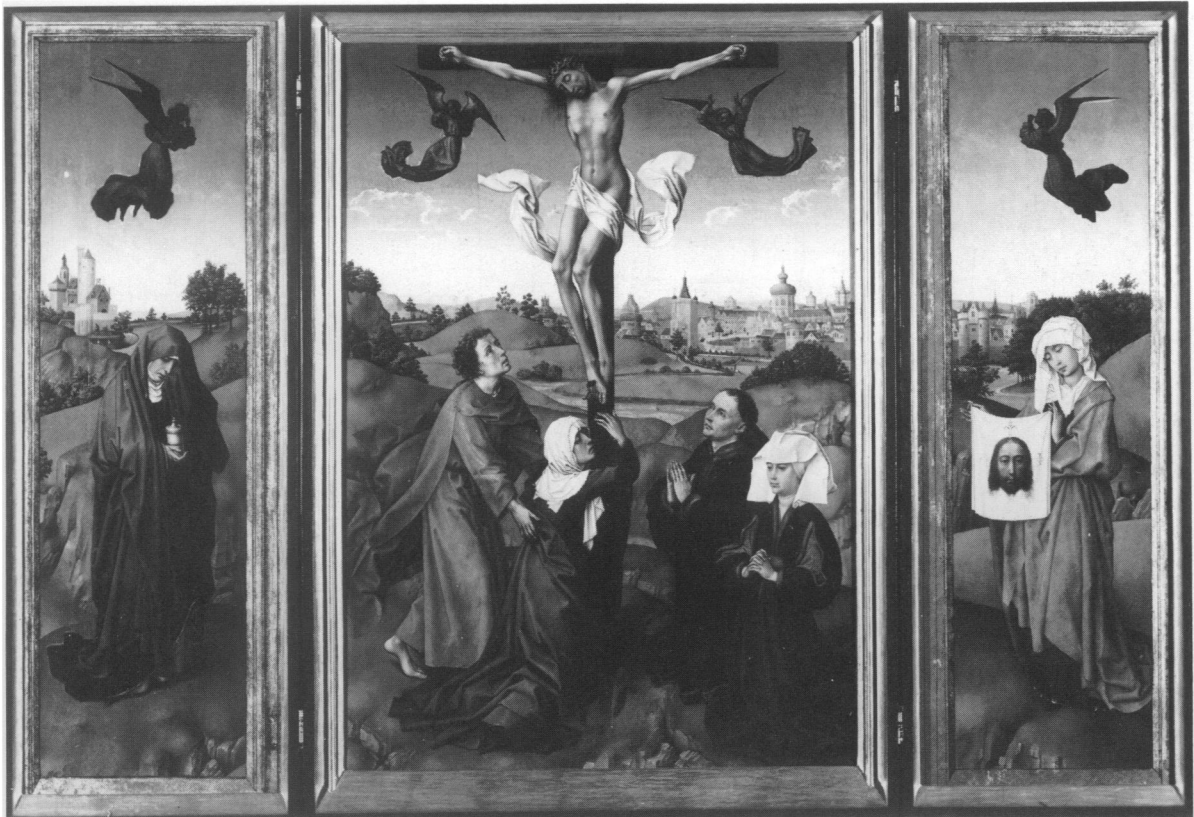
<sup>24</sup> This idea goes back to the *Meditations* of the Pseudo-Bonaventura and the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph the Carthusian (see the references cited in note 22 above). It was also strongly espoused by followers of the Modern Devotion, and in this context it has been repeatedly analyzed by modern commentators; see K. Smits, "De Moderne Devoten en de kunst," *Historisch Tijdschrift* 14 (1935), pp. 331-41; Goossens, op. cit. (note 3), esp. p. 176; Benjamin, "Disguised symbolism," cit. (note 1), esp. pp. 17-18; and Marrow, op. cit. (note 1), p. 20.



11 Jan Provost, *Lamentation*. Williamstown, Clark Art Institute

tice, it is specifically and rigorously prescribed: think on, envision, participate imaginatively in the life and Passion of Christ, contemporaries were told.<sup>24</sup> Painters portrayed their contemporaries' visions just as they portrayed those from the past. Paintings in which donors are present at the Nativity (*Bladelin altarpiece*; fig. 9); the Adoration (Roger's *Columba altarpiece*; fig. 13) or the Crucifixion (Roger's Vienna triptych; fig. 12) are not therefore just historical events. They are someone's personal vision of those events.<sup>25</sup> For what might appear to

<sup>25</sup> The donors in these three Roger paintings are quite different in scale and seeming importance within the work. This might partly be explained by the presumably more public function served by the *Columba altarpiece*, which is much larger (138 × 293 cm.) than either the *Bladelin* (91 × 169 cm.) or the Vienna triptychs (101 × 140 cm.). The fact remains that even in a more publically ostentatious work like the *Columba altarpiece*, the private devotional life of the donor is quite specifically included.

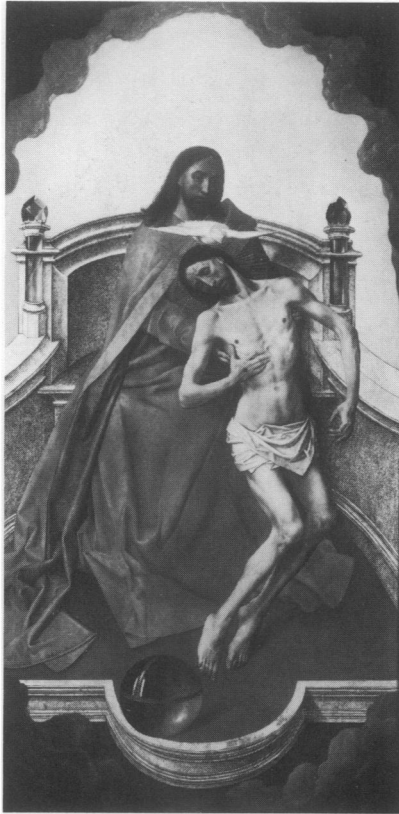


12 Roger van der Weyden, *Triptych with the Crucifixion*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

13 Roger van der Weyden, *Columba altarpiece*. Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek







14 Hugo van der Goes, *Sir Edward Bonkil adoring the Trinity*. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland



15 Hans Memling, *Martin van Nieuwenhove praying to the Virgin*. Bruges, Hospital of St John

be a straightforward narrative with a donor somehow tacked on turns out to be not so much the narrative itself as someone's particular version or vision of it.<sup>26</sup>

Stress has already been placed on the importance of individual lay piety in the fifteenth century. In this context it is worth pointing out that from a survey of well over a thousand fifteenth-century paintings (the Friedländer corpus), the number of lay donors in or attached to religious narratives is more than two and a-half times that of clerical figures. Thus the idea of meditating on Christ's life was a form of devotion particularly attractive to the public at large.<sup>27</sup> Paintings may have demonstrated how wealthy a patron was; we should also consider that, just as much if not more, they showed something about the donors' public religious posture.

It must be emphasized that in early Flemish paintings there is often little clear demarcation between what is earthly, pure and simple, and what is visionary. Visions are rarely set off against stylized cloud formations, and angels almost never trumpet long and loud to alert us to an oncoming supernatural occurrence. For all that, Hugo van der Goes's *Bonkil diptych* (fig. 14) is no more visionary than Hans Memling's *Nieuwenhove diptych* (fig. 15). Nor, in terms of a single panel, does the Roger School painting of the queen of France's vision of the Virgin of the Apocalypse (fig. 16) represent a more imaginative devotional experience than van Eyck's van der Paele panel (fig. 17). The point is that none of the humans involved in these particular works, Edward Bonkil, Martin van Nieuwenhove, Jean of France and George van der Paele, could in any sense have pretended to be great visionaries. We are not witnessing a rare ecstatic experience prepared for by a lifetime of monastic withdrawal and sensory deprivation. There was simply a general trend of the times away from the notion of a spiritual elite, toward the desire that many members of



16 School of Roger van der Weyden, *Jean de France praying to the Virgin*. Chantilly, Musée Condé

society, by their "learned ignorance," participate in visionary experiences. The popularization of devotional concepts, and the notion that these paintings represent the ordinary mental images which accompany meditation, go a long way toward explaining the frequent lack of conveniently cloud-fringed visions. It may be incon-

<sup>26</sup> Some acknowledgment needs to be made of the fact that, in the past, scholars have claimed that symbolic *Andachtsbilder* alone could serve as devotional images. See, for instance, Erwin Panofsky, "Imago Pietatis," *Ein Beitrag zur Typengeschichte des 'Schmerzensmanns' und der 'Maria Mediatrix'*, *Festschrift für Max J. Friedländer zum 60. Geburtstag*, Leipzig 1927, pp. 261–308; also Ingrid Haug, "Erscheinungen Christi," *Reallexikon zur Deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 5, Stuttgart 1967, col. 1354. This view has been corrected by Sixten Ringbom, notably in his *Icon to narrative*, Åbo 1965, pp. 53–57.

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the disproportionate number of narrative scenes with lay donors, the number of surviving paintings of the Virgin with lay patrons is three times greater than that with representatives of the clergy. Without knowing a great deal more about the nature of these lay commissions or the overall numbers of clergy and laity at the time, it is difficult to draw conclusions from such statistics. The fact that clerically dominated works are more likely to have been destroyed by sixteenth-century iconoclasts should also be considered. We are still left with a remarkably large number of private patrons in Flanders who wished to have themselves shown piously participating in religious imagery.



17 Jan van Eyck, *Canon George van der Paele praying to the Virgin*. Bruges, Groeningemuseum

venient to us, but the absence of such stylized markers indicates an important religious goal of the times.

There is another rather general stumbling block to our understanding of Flemish visionary art. This is the idea that paintings like the *Van der Paele Madonna* are to be interpreted as anticipations of the future; in other words that they supposedly represent the pious hopes that the donor has for his eternal life, that he may inhabit the heavenly throne room of the Virgin. It is difficult and unnecessary to exclude this possibility absolutely, especially in a case like this, where the painting might eventually have served as a funerary monument for Canon van der Paele.<sup>28</sup> Yet other ways of viewing such a painting may be equally, if not more, relevant. The belief that a particular individual can immediately inculcate a meditative process which involves visions now, not just at

some future date, can transform images of wishful thinking into present-day reality.

In the case of a painting like the *Van der Paele Madonna* sufficient attention has not been given to the numerous inconsistencies within the image. Canon van der Paele, like Chancellor Rolin (fig. 5) has apparently just been reading from his open prayer-book. Taking a moment to reflect on what he has read, the canon, again like the chancellor, looks up, conveniently removing the eyeglasses which he needs for his earthly vision. What he sees before him is not, of course, merely earthly, nor does he see it, strictly speaking, except in his mind's eye. We know that van Eyck fussed with the canon's eyes quite a bit in order to capture the particularly distant quality they have. The gaze, then, is crucial in conveying a visionary quality to this, as well as to numerous other

<sup>28</sup> See Rudolf Turner, "Bemerkungen zur Madonna des Kanonikus van der Paele," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 42 (1979), pp. 83-91. However, as A. Viaene, "Het grafpaneel van Kanunnik van der Paele voltooid in 1436 door Jan van Eyck," *Biekorf* 66 (1965), pp. 257-64, pointed out, it is most likely that van der Paele kept the panel in his

residence during his lifetime to stimulate his earthly devotions. For this work see also A. J. de Bisthoven, *Musée Communal des Beaux Arts, Bruges (Les Primitifs Flamands, I. corpus de la peinture 1)*, 3rd. ed., Brussels 1983, p. 204.

early Flemish paintings (see figs. 9, 12, 13).<sup>29</sup> The donors' glassy stares clearly indicate some psychic as well as physical disjunction between the different figures in the painting; we are not witnessing a single consistent level of existence. Quite simply, the disconnected gazes tell us first and foremost that we are viewing a contemporary figure and the (surrounding) results of his or her meditations, that is, his or her vision. What we most often see in these cases is not a physical fact, not a hope for the future, but the product of devotional imagination.

Gazes which somehow miss each other, which show especially that the human participant is not directly or physically experiencing the depicted scene, combine with prayer books and beads to indicate the devotional and only partially earthly nature of the event. That the donor of Roger's *Columba altarpiece* (fig. 13) fingers his rosary as he stares off quietly at nothing is significant. (It is also important that he kneels behind a tumbledown wall, isolated in a separate space. But more about that later.) Books and beads such as these certify the methodical nature of the contemporary patron's meditations. The majority of donors are shown kneeling with hands uplifted together in a generally prayerful and devout attitude. The addition of beads and books gives the special impetus of fervent earthly practice to what might otherwise seem cast off rather casually. Also, the Virgin or Child, or both, are often shown fingering prayer-book or beads; no doubt they are meant in such cases to act as models for the viewer's devotional exercises, to urge us on to carry out our own meditations in front of the image (figs. 22, 24 and 29).

Admittedly, it is difficult to dismiss absolutely the idea that paintings of a donor kneeling before an enthroned Madonna are visions of the hereafter. In such works do we not to some extent find a vivid anticipation of a heavenly state where blessed individuals perpetually

adore the Virgin, using the same forms, prayers and beads, that they had previously employed on earth? Perhaps it seems somewhat mundane to claim that these men and women are simply saying their prayers. But are these individuals bent solely on predicting their own salvation and heavenly reception? Would they not perhaps see more clearly, less through a glass, if they actually were admitted to the heavenly throne room? Are they not essentially hoping that they are as devout right now as the painter shows them to be?

A glance at images of undeniable heavenly states is helpful in this case. In the first place, it must be said that totally otherworldly visions are quite rare in fifteenth-century Flemish art. Some are connected with the Last Judgment, others with the Coronation of the Virgin.<sup>30</sup> The most famous such image is that contained on the interior of the Ghent altarpiece. None of these paintings, however, includes obvious contemporary figures, and everyone in them pays full attention; there are no sidelong or glassy stares. A fragmentary work by Colijn de Coter shows the extremely rare presence of contemporary figures in what is certainly a vision of the hereafter: Philip the Handsome kneels with Christ while Joanna the Mad is posed with the Virgin (fig. 18).<sup>31</sup> In this case, all are fully and, especially, visually involved in the scene. In a wholly otherworldly scene contemporaries join directly in the heavenly adoration. When a figure is accepted, is undeniably a part of another realm, we do not find the kind of psychic disjunction which is present in almost all early Flemish devotional works.

Religious panel paintings in fifteenth-century Flanders are by and large meant to be viewed as the mental visions of contemporaries; this is true whether the painting is a narrative or a more traditionally-conceived hieratic image such as the Virgin Enthroned, or a devotional image like the Man of Sorrows. This fact emerges all the more clearly when we glance at manuscript illu-

<sup>29</sup> For van der Paele's gaze, see Jules Desneux, "Underdrawings and pentimenti in the pictures of Jan van Eyck," *Art Bulletin* 40 (1958), p. 15. See also Benjamin, *Empathetic relation*, cit. (note 1), pp. 217 and 226-31. For the gaze in Roger's *Bladelin altarpiece* see also Günter Bandmann, "Höhle und Säule auf Darstellungen Mariens mit dem Kinde," *Festschrift für Gert von der Osten*, Cologne 1970, pp. 130-48. A sensitive reading of the *Rolin Madonna* is given by James Snyder, "Jan van Eyck and the Madonna of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin," *Oud Holland* 82 (1967), pp. 163-71; Christine Hasenmueller McCorkel, "The role of the suspended crown in Jan van Eyck's Madonna and the Chancellor Rolin," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976), pp. 516-20,

seems contrived by comparison.

<sup>30</sup> Relevant examples include the Last Judgments by van Eyck (New York, Metropolitan Museum) and Roger (Beaune, Hôtel Dieu), and the *Coronation* by the Master of 1499 (London, Buckingham Palace).

<sup>31</sup> This work has been studied from a traditional iconographic point of view by Hélène Adhémar, "Une hypothèse vérifiée grâce au Laboratoire du Louvre: le Christ et la Vierge de Miséricorde aux donateurs de Colijn de Coter," *Bulletin du Laboratoire du Musée du Louvre* (supplement to *Revue des Arts*) 2 (1957), pp. 48-56.



18 Colijn de Coter, *Christ with Philip the Handsome and The Virgin with Joanna the Mad* (fragments). Paris, Louvre

mination. Almost all manuscripts contain the kind of image which is most analogous to the panel paintings that have been discussed above. The patron kneels praying, sometimes in the margin or initial, book or beads at hand, while the object, or result, of the prayers is shown in the main miniature. The connection with active devotional life is cemented by the presence on the same page of the text which started the whole thing going. In a scene illustrating the same text that is inscribed on the hem of the Virgin's robe in the *Rolin Madonna*, Catherine of Cleves kneels before a vision of the Virgin standing before the sun and on the moon, holding the writing Christ Child (fig. 19).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps even more telling, Mary

of Burgundy, in the most famous image from her Book of Hours, reads a prayer which seems in turn to be illustrated in a background scene. There Mary is granted a vision of the Virgin (fig. 20).<sup>33</sup> In such book illustrations the connection between image and practical devotional life is intimate and unavoidable.

What happens when someone says his or her devotions, reads from a prayer-book, pursues the systematic meditations recommended by contemporary authors? They have a kind of vision, or, to put it another way, they are meant to visualize the object of their devotions, the subject of their paintings. Images record these experiences, or perhaps more importantly they engender,

<sup>32</sup> John Plummer, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, New York 1966. The text on the Virgin's hem in the *Rolin Madonna* is given an elaborate interpretation by Anne Hagopian van Buren, "The canon-

ical office in Renaissance painting, pt. 2: more about the *Rolin Madonna*," *Art Bulletin* 60 (1978), pp. 617-33.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Harthan, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 112.



19 Master of Catherine of Cleves, *Catherine of Cleves praying to the Virgin*. New York, Guennol Collection, *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, fol. 1v

or even prescribe them, just as Books of Hours do. There is a type of small devotional triptych which has on its wings not figural scenes but the texts of particularly popular, sometimes indulgenced prayers; surviving ex-

34 The inscription on the Lazo-Galdiano triptych (fig. 21) is as follows: (left wing:) O o[m]nipotens d[omi]ne / Jhesu cristi creator / et Redemptor nost[ri] / p[ro]pter Amari tudinem / Sanctissime et / Amarissime / Passionis tue / qua[m] pro nobis / miseris peccatorib[us] / sustinuisti maxime; (right wing:) in ora crucis qua[n]do / Sanctissima a[n]i[m]a / tua egressa est / De benedictissimo / corpore tuo miserere / Anime mee / In egressu suo / et perduc / cam i[n] vitam / eternam Amen.

As pointed out by Ringbom, *op. cit.* (note 26), pp. 26 and 125, this prayer is based on the third in the set of seven prayers of St Gregory which were often found in contemporary Books of Hours. The prayers are reprinted in V. Leroquais, *Les Livres d'Heures manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, vol. 2, Paris 1927, p. 346, from Bibl. Nat. ms. lat. 1363, fol. 122.

As transcribed by Martin Davies, *Early Netherlandish school*, (London National Gallery Catalogues), London 1968, p. 47, the inscription



20 Master of Mary of Burgundy, *Mary of Burgundy praying*. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, *Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, ms. 1857, fol. 14v

amples show the *Descent from the Cross* and the *Virgin and Child* flanked on each side by long inscriptions (figs. 21 and 22).<sup>34</sup> Other works have prayers at least begun on banderoles floating near the donor's praying hand.<sup>35</sup> In

on the London triptych is as follows: (left wing:) Aue / Sanctissima / Maria m[ri] / Dei Regina / Celi porta / Paradisi / Domina / M[un]di pura / Singularis / tu es Virgo / Tu sine pec[ca]to / Concepta / concepisti / J[esu]m sine / ōni macula; (right wing:) Tu / Peperisti, / Creatorem / et salvatorem / Mundi / In quo non / Dubito / libera me / Ab omni / malo Et / Ora pro / Peccato / Meo / Amen.

For these works see also Sixten Ringbom, "Maria in sole and the Virgin of the Rosary," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 25 (1962), pp. 326-30.

35 A good example is in the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University. It is discussed in Colin Eisler, *New England museums (Les Primitifs Flamands I: Corpus de la peinture 4)*, Brussels 1961, p. 18. The prayer here is taken from vespers of the *Commune Festorum Beatae Mariae Virginis*.





21 Studio of Quentin Massys after Roger van der Weyden, *Deposition with prayer wings*. Madrid, Museo Lazaro-Galdiano

22 Studio of Gerard David (?) after Hugo van der Goes, *Virgin and Child with prayer wings*. London, National Gallery





23 Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari altarpiece*, interior. Florence, Uffizi

such cases the relation between image and private piety is again inevitable. Surely we are not wrong in assuming that this was a typical situation: even if other paintings were not literally provided with prayers, they were still primarily meant to be devotional aids or adjuncts.

The presence of texts on the wings of devotional triptychs introduces the more general issue of the way the different parts of a triptych or diptych reinforce the work's visionary nature. In cases such as Roger's *Bladelin altarpiece* (fig. 9), for instance, we find that the theme of the interior of the triptych is indeed *visions*. All three panels show visions, from Augustus and the Magi on the wings to the donor in the central panel. Similar arrangements are found into the early sixteenth century.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Roger's work, this focus is particularly relevant since scholars have never been able to agree what single literary text the work was based on. Indeed, in this case it does not seem to be a question of a unified text for the stories represented, but of a unified theme for this kind of painting—visions.

<sup>36</sup> A triptych in Antwerp attributed to Aertgen van Leyden apparently shows Henry III of Nassau as Augustus; see J. Bruyn, "Twee St Antonius panelen en andere werken van Aertgen van Leyden," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 11 (1960), pp. 99–100. Bruyn's view is disputed by J.D. Bangs, *Cornelis Engebrechtsz. 's Leiden*, Assen 1979, 131–32. Another relevant visionary triptych, now in Bruges, is attributed to the Master of St Sang (Friedländer, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 9, pt. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1973, pl. 197, nr. 195).

Frequently, the central panel of a triptych will portray the vision of the donors, who are in turn confined to the wings, a well-known case of this being Hugo van der Goes's *Portinari altarpiece* (fig. 23). Donors are physically separated from their visions in devotional diptychs too, such as those by Roger (fig. 24) and Hans Memling (fig. 15). In more recent times the donor panel has often been separated from that of the Virgin: when the paintings left the original family context the connection of that particular individual with the vision was no longer especially meaningful.<sup>37</sup> In Roger's diptychs the distinction between donor's and deity's realms is more striking than in Memling's work. The meditative experience in Roger's paintings certainly seems more exalted, that in Memling's images more down-to-earth and affective. Memling no doubt represents something of a popularization of concepts found in Roger.

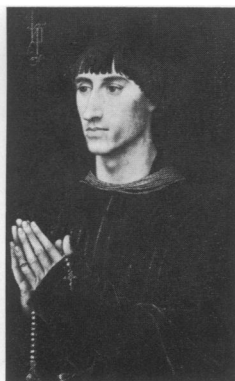
In terms of the devotional use of separate panels, it can also be observed that those experiencing the vision are often on the outside of the triptych, while the vision

<sup>37</sup> Some works show a Virgin panel by the master's hand which was presumably kept in the shop waiting for a donor to buy it. When that happened, an assistant was given the job of executing the praying donor's portrait. An example is found in a work by the St Ursula master now in Antwerp (Friedländer, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 6, pt. 1, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 140, nr. 116).





25 Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of the two Sts John*. Bruges, Hospital of St John



24 Roger van der Weyden, *Madonna and Child adored by Philippe de Croy*. San Marino, Huntington Collection (*Madonna*) and Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (*Philippe de Croy*)

38 Shirley Neilsen Blum, *Early Netherlandish triptychs: a study in patronage*, Berkeley 1969, esp. ch. 10, pp. 93–94, 97–114.

39 See, for instance, Paul Philippot, “Les grisailles et les degrés de réalité de l’image dans la peinture flamande des xve et xvie siècles,” *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 15 (1966), pp. 225–42.

itself is displayed across the interior. Several triptychs by Memling, the *St John altarpiece* in Bruges (fig. 25) and the *Gdansk Last Judgment triptych*, have been criticized for showing on their exteriors the donors merely “praying to a crack.”<sup>38</sup> In fact, Memling here shows more clearly the relation between exterior and interior of the triptych which was only implied by Jan van Eyck or Roger van der Weyden. In their works the donors on the outside are most often provided with an immediate object for their prayers. Yet the interior panorama in the Ghent altarpiece or Beune *Last Judgment* was surely the target of these mortals’ pious meditations; that is the vision in their mind’s eye. Memling has brought us closer to seeing the different “levels of reality” which the exterior and interior of a triptych may represent;<sup>39</sup> he has implied more strongly than earlier artists that it is the donors’ prayers which bridge the gap or crack leading to the visionary heart of the triptych.

One type of fifteenth-century Flemish painting found most often on the exteriors of triptychs is surely not visionary, although it may clearly be connected with devotional practices: grisaille imitations of sculpture.



Sculpture is often considered the chief devotional medium of the preceding centuries, supplanted only in the fifteenth by the great flowering of panel painting. In Flemish paintings, pieces of sculpture remain quite firmly planted as the recipients of prayers and thanksgiving. This is certainly the way they function in works like the Ghent altarpiece and Roger's Beaune *Last Judgment*. Sculpture may be the object of, or an adjunct to, a meditative exercise; but it is clearly not the result of this process. It does not so readily mediate between an earthly practice and a spiritual insight. It remains a part of the material world; movement into a visionary realm must leave the cold stone or lifeless wood behind. In this sense sculpture on the outside of a triptych changing to painting on the inside clearly suggests a transition from earthly to supernatural vision. This idea in turn raises the intricate question of just how it is that a panel painting, which is still a material object, can in fact be an immaterial or transcendent vision at all. This is a crucial issue, for it is a panel painting's ability to undercut its own materiality, to obliterate a clear seen/unseen distinction

that finally makes it, in fifteenth-century Flanders, such a fully utilized and successful equation for lay visions.

Space in early Flemish art should not generally be characterized by such adjectives as objective, rational, three-dimensional and continuous. There are important ways in which these northern artists seem consciously unwilling to be hemmed in by the abstract calculation which lies behind the use of these words. This refusal seems to show a significant awareness of the subjective quality of vision, of the ways that it can be and is unavoidably bent to ulterior motives and, in many cases, to meditative purposes. The building-block theory of the inevitable, almost irrevocable conquest of space tends to substitute an abstract notion of progress for the self-consciousness of the artist and his public. That is a substitution which fifteenth-century artists in Flanders would probably not have accepted. Visual accuracy and aesthetic purpose are combined with, even tempered by, the great consideration given to religious and emotional effectiveness.

Northern paintings such as van Eyck's *Rolin Madonna* (fig. 5) or Roger's *St John altarpiece* (fig. 26) show space being experienced in stages, bit by bit, from one vantage point to another. When we look over the parapet in the middle ground of the *Rolin Madonna*, we seem to see with the eyes of the man with the red turban and his friend: if we really maintained a single, constant viewpoint from well inside the foreground building, we would not be able to see all the nearby landscape portrayed in the painting. Shifting, fragmentary, puzzle-like pieces of space populate northern fifteenth-century paintings. Vast panoramas are cut into digestible slices, even in the late fifteenth century, as in Hans Memling's *Passion of Christ* in Munich.

It is very difficult to claim that space exists in northern art independently of who occupies it, and just how it is occupied, and who views it and just how it is viewed. In this quite general sense, space in early Flemish painting seems an appropriate vessel to contain subjective devotional imagery. The surface realism is not allowed to petrify religious inspiration. There are also many other smaller visual clues which can be taken as the painters' attempts to reinforce the pious personas of the patrons. The question is: how can an artist create a feeling for the sacred or visionary which is to some extent set apart from the mundane concerns of everyday living and yet draw the ordinary lay spectator into that special realm,



26 Roger van der Weyden, *St John altarpiece*. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

giving him or her a toehold, something at least partly comparable to the earthly life which they might eventually transcend?

A consideration of frames or framing devices should help illustrate both the fascination and the equivocation inherent in this topic. Frames, especially those crafted by the artist himself, are clearly an important feature of Flemish art. Whether or not there are relevant fourteenth-century prototypes in Italy,<sup>40</sup> it is in Jan van Eyck's work that the precious enclosing frame for a panel painting first really flowers in the north. Manuscripts had always provided important images with decorative, sometimes even architectural borders. Van Eyck extended that tradition to a new medium, adding the almost legal data of signature, date and motto to formalize the transfer. Other artists added tracery in the corners (fig. 27); some paintings were even embedded in reliquary cases (fig. 28). In many such examples the

message was similar: the painting was a precious, isolated object, like a relic; it was encased or enclosed by traceried, marbled frames which were meant at least partly to certify its holiness.<sup>41</sup> The space depicted in such a painting was not, therefore, allowed to spill over that frame, draining away the sacred life so carefully guarded. Other kinds of framing devices, not just literal three-dimensional frames, also gave this impression. Arches and niches surrounded or set off the holy figure or event envisioned or experienced (figs. 29 and 26). Stark gray walls, rich cloths of honor, many with canopies overhead, sought to define and delimit a sacred area (fig. 30).<sup>42</sup> In all these ways space was experienced in fragmentary terms. Something sacred had to be cut out, distinguished from all the rest. Stylized gold grounds crop up consistently throughout the century (fig. 1, 30). These, too, suggest the need to limit, to focus on religious archetype and essence.

<sup>40</sup> See Monika Cammerer-George, "Eine Italienische Wurzel in der Rahmen-idee Jan van Eycks," *Kunstgeschichtliche Studien für Kurt Bauch zum 70. Geburtstag von seinen Schülern*, Munich 1967, pp. 69–76.

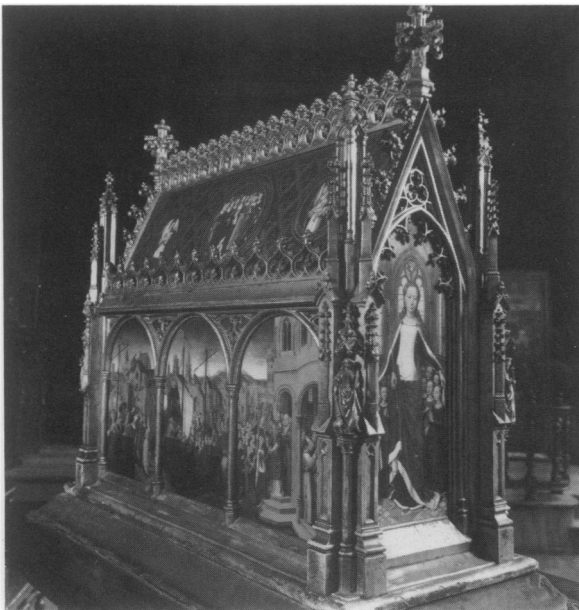
<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, Colin Eisler, review of Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to narrative*, *Art Bulletin* 51 (1969), p. 187.

<sup>42</sup> For Roger van der Weyden's spatial manipulation see especially Shirley Neilsen Blum, "Symbolic invention in the art of Roger van der Weyden," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 46 (1977), pp. 103–22.



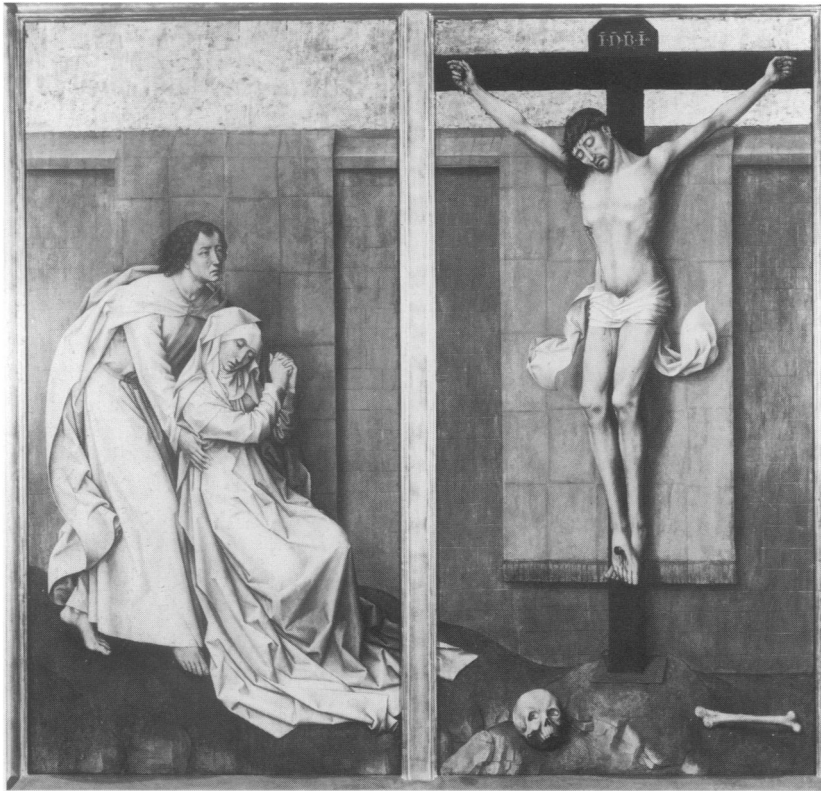
27 Roger van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*. Madrid, Prado

28 Hans Memling, *Shrine of St Ursula*. Bruges, Hospital of St John



29 Roger van der Weyden, *Madonna in a niche* ("Madonna Durand"). Madrid, Prado





30 Roger van der Weyden, *Crucifixion* (diptych). Philadelphia, Johnson Collection

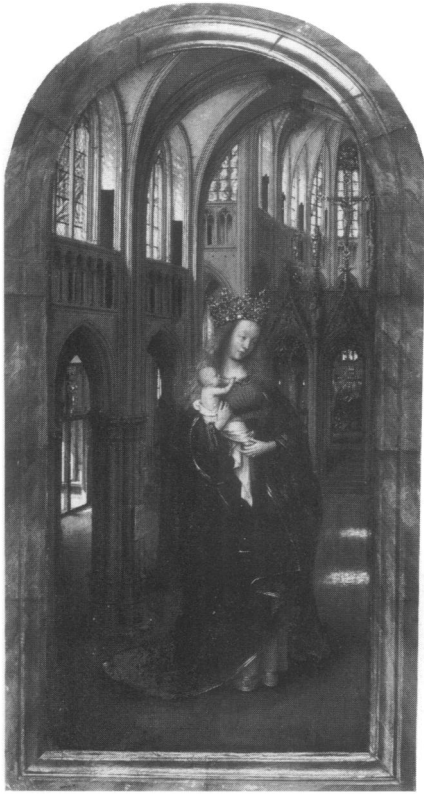
Several relevant features in the Flemish treatment of space and the relation of objects in it are found in interior scenes. Perspective can actually be used to flatten space: the progression into space can be acute enough to emphasize two-dimensional pattern over and above three-dimensional diminution.<sup>43</sup> Diminution can be applied selectively, even within a relatively comfortable progression into space. Or, to put it another way, hierarchical scale can reassert the primacy of devotional purpose and expression. Some of the most subtle as well as prominent fifteenth-century Flemish paintings incorporate hierarchical size differences: van Eyck's Berlin *Madonna* (fig. 31), Hugo's *Portinari altarpiece* (fig. 23) and Berlin *Nativity*. Rational order, scientific systems of proportion are ignored in order to stress what Joseph's

discarded patters in the *Portinari* symbolize as well: in these paintings we witness a sacred, visionary world.

In the landscape, the world outside the carefully controlled perimeters of a chapel or private chamber, it would seem that an experience of space would almost inevitably be looser, less easy somehow to denote as sanctified or visionary. Yet northern artists developed a number of intriguing devices by which to indicate if necessary the sanctity or visionary nature of their painted exterior environments. A large crevice or gap can sometimes be seen running across the front of the pictorial space, making it difficult if not impossible for us to step across into the painting (fig. 30). Some scholars have gone further, suggesting that such a crevice represents the sin which can isolate our mortal world of exis-

43 For the relationship between flattened perspective schemes and devotional imagery, especially in the work of Petrus Christus, see Joel Upton, "Devotional imagery and style in the Washington *Nativity* by

Petrus Christus," *Studies in the History of Art*, Washington (National Gallery of Art) 7 (1975), pp. 48-79.

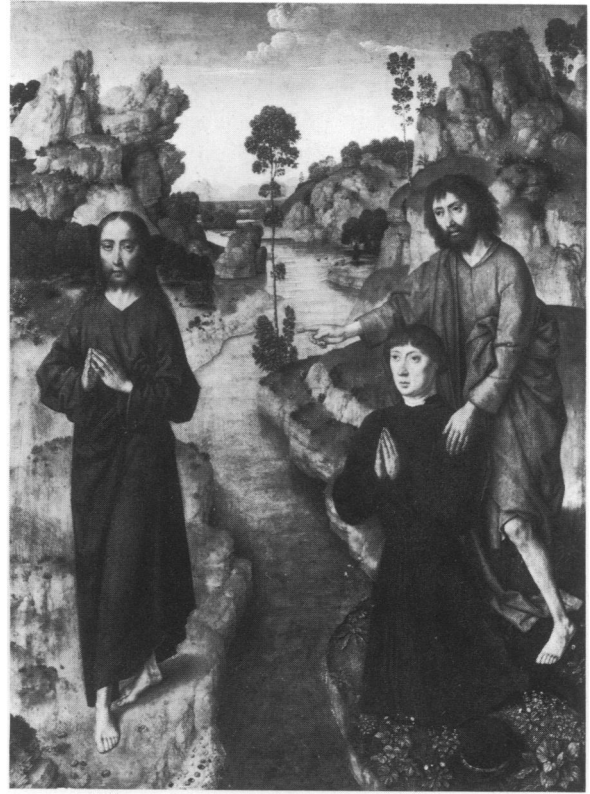


31 Jan van Eyck, *Virgin in the church*. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

tence from the eternal or divine.<sup>44</sup> Such a crack or even a river can at times separate the donors from the holy figures in an image (figs. 12 and 32).<sup>45</sup> At other times, the sacred elements can be lifted up onto a plateau, "highlands in the Lowlands," as it has been nicely put.<sup>46</sup> Here again the clear intention seems to be to separate the vision and yet not totally to disconnect it. The spectator's access to the holy ground may be neither clear nor easy, but one has surely not been cut utterly adrift, without a prayer. Roger's Vienna donors are fully absorbed in their plea to enter mentally the sacred space of Christ's suffering.

<sup>44</sup> Charles de Tolnay, "Remarques sur la Sainte Anne de Leonard," *La Revue des Arts* 6 (1956), pp. 161-66; Blum, op. cit. (note 38), pp. 118-19.

<sup>45</sup> The Bouts painting (fig. 32) has been studied by Frans Baudouin, "L'Ecce Agnus Dei' de Dieric Bouts," *Les Arts Plastiques* 1948, nr. 3/4, pp. 141-45. Baudouin provides a sensitive analysis of the work in the context of the devotional purposes of fifteenth-century Flemish painting.



32 Dirk Bouts, *Christ with St John the Baptist and a donor*. Munich, Wittelsbacher Ausgleichfonds, on loan to the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek

Finally, in terms of the creation and manipulation of space, there is the important consideration of light. Conscientious surveys of Italian altarpieces and frescoes consistently demonstrate that it is only the revolutionary exception where the actual external light source is not employed by the artist in his painted image. Elaborate but unwritten rules were apparently followed in Italian churches and chapels to ensure both consistency and continuity between actual and painted illumination.<sup>47</sup> We certainly cannot exclude the possibility that some, even many, northern paintings were hung so that ordinary sunlight, striking them, would in some way agree

<sup>46</sup> Millard Meiss, "'Highlands' in the Lowlands: Jan van Eyck, the Master of Flémalle and the Franco-Italian tradition," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, 57 (1961), pp. 237-314.

<sup>47</sup> Cecil Gould, "On the direction of light in Italian Renaissance frescoes and altarpieces," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, 97 (1981), pp. 21-25.



with the direction of the painted illumination.<sup>48</sup> This would still seem more a reinforcement of what the image itself contained, rather than a precise linking of imaginary and earthly reality. For confirmation of this we must look at the images themselves. Whether, for instance, one accepts a complex symbolic reading of the light effects in van Eyck's *Madonna* paintings (figs. 17 and 31) or not,<sup>49</sup> one must admit that the illumination in these paintings is more internal and reflected than external and directed. This observation can be extended throughout the century. Light in northern painting is more space-enhancing than space-delimiting. It comes through windows, bouncing off countless rich and textured surfaces. It plays over objects and through spaces. The strong directional light source clearly shining from one point outside and almost invariably in front of the image is simply not often found. Nor are the objective external guide or the set relation between the image and the world prominent features in northern works.

Fifteenth-century Flemish painting draws us into a crystalline, softly illuminated world. Such enticing reflected light effects bring to mind shiny surfaces, which in northern painting are at their most refined in the case of convex mirrors. Mirrors which compress and throw back to us the incredible richness of the visible world dot the history of fifteenth-century Flemish art.<sup>50</sup> In a way, many of the convex mirrors employed in Flemish paintings complete the space, sealing it off from ordinary human commerce. They do not show us the world at large but rather a calculated and magical understanding of it. Northern space, and the light reflections which permeate it, bring us closer to the devotional purposes which in many cases the artist wanted his work to have. Space exists and yet is constantly manipulated. Light

attracts and yet retains its distance and its mystery.

We cannot deny that fifteenth-century Flemish painting appears to be and is in many ways very realistic. But at the same time, environments are often molded to, and sanctified for, meditative purposes. There seems to be an unavoidably expressive approach to space in these paintings. This attitude indicates something different from what we normally expect to find in a straightforward realistic art. Space is segmented, isolated in various ways, ways which change from one artist to another. Some artists may flatten it, some may drastically limit or enclose it. Chiefly through the use of rich and varied light effects, almost all northern artists indicate its scintillating and mysterious qualities. This is a concept of space, then, that would have formed a sensitive complement to religious images focusing on private devotion and meditation.

The idea that lay visionary experience was basic to the production of much religious art in the fifteenth century in Flanders is difficult to substantiate absolutely. The problems one has supporting this notion are related to the inherently equivocal qualities of visionary art, especially as found at that time. How does one make meditative practices available to a lay populace? How can we admire all that surrounds us in the visible world and yet see it transformed and indicative of spiritual things? How can a material image, imitating the visible world, still manage to transport us to an "unseen" realm? How does a painting both clarify the difference between what is real and what supernatural, and show us some often still mysterious connection between the two? A painting can be a record of a specific exercise or visionary experience; thus it can seem to recreate, for instance, a vision

<sup>48</sup> Of the eight surviving fifteenth-century altarpieces whose original location, and hence original light conditions, are known with certainty, only one, the Ghent altarpiece, shows a clear relation between the light in the painting and the actual external source of illumination. (The eight altarpieces were studied by Blum, *op. cit.* (note 38). Most of the light in the Ghent altarpiece comes from the right as it does in the actual chapel in St Bavo's. At the same time light shining from the left has been introduced into the back of the *Annunciation* scene on the exterior of the great retable. Van Buren, *op. cit.* (note 32), p. 633, gives one of the few interpretations of an early Flemish panel which attempts to link it directly to the space in which it was supposedly displayed. Among other things, such an interpretation ignores the miniaturism of these works, a factor stressed by Julius Held in his

review of Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish painting*, *Art Bulletin* 37 (1955), p. 207.

<sup>49</sup> For elaborate readings of Eyckian light symbolism see Panofsky, *op. cit.* (note 20), *passim*, and esp. pp. 147-48; also Millard Meiss, "Light as form and symbol in some fifteenth-century paintings," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), pp. 175-81. For northern light in general see E. H. Gombrich, "Light, form and texture in fifteenth-century painting north and south of the Alps," *The heritage of Apelles*, London 1976, pp. 19-35.

<sup>50</sup> Examples include the Arnolfini portrait by van Eyck (London, National Gallery), the Werl altar wing by Robert Campin (Madrid, Prado), *St Eligius* by Petrus Christus (New York, Metropolitan), and the Martin van Nieuwenhove diptych by Hans Memling (Bruges; fig. 15).

of St Bridget. The image can also be the starting point, the stimulus to the viewer to move into a more imaginative, purely devotional realm, focusing, for instance, on some particular feeling which Christ supposedly experienced. It is difficult to distinguish closely between these different usages because it is not always clear which is promoted or reflected in contemporary art. In fact we are faced here with a crucial ambiguity in fifteenth-century thinking, for which some historical perspective is needed.

Throughout the middle ages the relation between images and private prayer or devotion was a problematic one.<sup>51</sup> The supreme, especially monastic, ideal was always imageless devotion, meditation beyond the realm of corporeal inducements and deceits. But from a very early date, even the monastic elite occasionally allowed the visual image to play a part. St Gregory himself sanctioned the use of images in devotion provided the devout did not kneel before or worship the image itself. Rather, one was to remember the meaning of the events depicted, to pass a reverence for the image along to the prototype for which it stood. In addition, it was felt to be legitimate that an image could evoke a powerful emotion in the viewer, as well as teach a holy story. This last point was especially valid for the unlettered. Thus even within monastic confines images played a part: they could initially accompany meditation; they were not to be the result or focus of it.

There were occasional attempts during the medieval period to cleanse religious contemplation of such imaginary vanities. St Bernard of Clairvaux was a prominent and vociferous spokesman of the need for overcoming even mental images. Bernard allowed that the fact that God assumed carnal form meant that material images were not totally wrong-headed. But, for Bernard, God became man and allowed images in order to win over those incapable of otherwise loving or understanding him. It was a last resort, clearly to be shunned by the true seeker of God. Bernard's imageless ideal, his attempt, in a way, to be blind to the beauties of the world was clearly an elusive goal, witness the stunning artistic achievements of his own order, the Cistercians. Even in

monastic circles, a milder interpretation of Bernard's prescriptions reigned: the image-dependent stage was often seen as a natural preparation for imageless devotion. The great mystic Heinrich Suso had, for instance, an image on parchment which he admittedly used to start his meditations.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore even before the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the spiritual elite did not maintain a hard-and-fast distinction between corporeal and spiritual images. The formative power of images was certainly recognized, if not openly promoted. The psychological concept of the image as an inspiration for empathetic meditation became increasingly widespread in the fourteenth century. Indeed the *Andachtsbild* occupied a central place in mysticism at that time. By the beginning of the fifteenth century the spread of a more broad-based religion left the Bernardine ideal isolated and impractical. The fine distinctions between different uses for images paled in the light of the overwhelming needs of the vast majority of the populace. At this point the most that could be expected, in a sense, was to warn of outright abuse. That was the position that a cleric like the Parisian chancellor Jean Gerson took.<sup>53</sup> Hardly a champion of images, Gerson nonetheless gave a modified blessing to what was clearly a quite prevalent practice. He disapproved of exorbitantly indulgenced images and especially of any form of idolatry. He deplored the fact that some people preferred to worship at certain images because they were more beautiful (and more effective?) than others. Surely Gerson had only a very limited sympathy with images: we must always learn, he said, "to transcend with our minds from these visible things to the invisible, from the corporeal to the spiritual." Excessive imagination before images would be vain and impious; yet paintings did, for Gerson, serve a legitimate devotional purpose. He gave not a ringing defense of the power of painting, but a plea to use it with discretion.

If Gerson recommended care in the use of images, popular practice often seems to have lost track of the finer points in the discussion. Images had sometimes preposterous indulgences attached to them: worshippers supposedly could have been relieved of 11,000

<sup>51</sup> For what follows see especially Ringbom, *op. cit.* (note 1) and *op. cit.* (note 26), and Marrow, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 28–31.

<sup>52</sup> This incident is recounted in the earliest *Leben Susos*, reprinted in Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften* (ed. Karl Bihlmeyer), Stuttgart

1907 (reprint Frankfurt 1961), p. 103. See the discussion in Ringbom, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Gerson's attitude to art is most carefully analyzed by Ringbom, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 164–65.



years in purgatorial fires for saying a prayer to an image of the Virgin before the sun.<sup>54</sup> Books of Hours commonly recommended the saying of prayers to images, not specifying whether the “image” was to be a painting or a mental picture. At least a nominal part of even clerical meditations, images can be seen to have played an increasing role in the process of making a somewhat difficult body of monastic devotional practice accessible to the lay person in the fifteenth century. Officially, art was recognized as an incentive, an aid to meditation; very quickly, in the popular consciousness at least, it became identical with the contemplative process itself. Contemplating something came to mean its visualization.

Great visionaries and mystics were themselves quite dependent on images. And not only did people like Bridget, Catherine of Siena and an ignorant English youth named Orm, start from contemporary paintings, they ended up having their visions in the way they had seen them in art.<sup>55</sup> This might seem proof enough that visions or meditations could quite easily be taken to be synonymous with images. St Bridget’s visions of the life of Christ were modeled on paintings she had seen. It is certain that many fifteenth-century lay men and women, whether knowingly or not, used images in much the same way, trying to envision stories or ideas in ways they had seen them portrayed.

There were also important stories about the miraculous, “visionary” power of images. Legends common at the time concerned images which came to life. St Catherine of Alexandria worshipped before an image of the Virgin and Child and was thereafter visited by the holy pair just as she had previously viewed them in the painting (fig. 33). Fifteenth-century texts promised the devout certain specific visions (that is, visualizations of certain scenes) if the proper prayers were said.<sup>56</sup> Over and over again the formative power of images was acknowledged; vivid images were repeatedly seen as the result of proper devotional attitudes.



33 Master of the Legend of St Catherine, *Scenes from the life of St Catherine*. Geneva, private collection

Clearly, by the fifteenth century paintings were taken as essential instruments for stimulating popular religious devotion. The reciprocal relation between image and meditation was recognized and exploited. It is in fact very easy to ignore the crucial qualification always placed on this practice. A physical image was not to be an object of devotion in and of itself. That would, quite simply, be idolatry. Even for the lay person, this was a

<sup>54</sup> See Ringbom, op. cit. (note 34).

<sup>55</sup> For St Bridget see Panofsky, op. cit. (note 20), p. 46; for Catherine of Siena, Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the black death*, New York 1964, pp. 105ff; and for Orm, Hugh Farmer, “The vision of Orm,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 75 (1957), pp. 72-82.

<sup>56</sup> One often repeated prayer promising visions is quoted by Lero-quaïs, op. cit. (note 34), p. 95: “Cette oraison doit on dire chascun samedi en lonneur de nostre Dame. Ung homme religieux et chanoine

regulier estoit qui eut nom Arnoul, lequel estoit moult bien ame de Dieu et de sa benoite mère, car nuit et iour les serroit, tant que une nuit la douce vierge Marie lui apparut en advision et lui monstra une moult belle oraison qui est de grant devocion et lui dist: Arnoul recoy ceste oraison et la monstre et fay apprendre a tant de gens que tu pourras. Et tous ceulx qui la diront devotement en lonneur de moy chascun samedi, moult grant ioye leur en adviendra, car ils me verront cinq foys devant leur mort, en leur mort en leur ayde et confort.”



34 Master of the Legend of St Ursula, *Veneration of the relics of the eleven thousand virgin martyrs*. Bruges, Groeningemuseum

fate to be guarded against. The artist had to be aware of the danger of pious souls worshipping his images rather than the sacred beings or stories for which they stood. The problem was, if one can say it this way, both to affirm and deny the image at the same time, to affirm its power but at least to some extent to deny its mere physicality. While the image was clearly being elevated, its power had also to be kept in check. One could not depend simply on a material object for a spiritual truth. It

is no accident that Gerson's promotion of art contained as much warning as praise.

A telling example of this paradoxical situation is found in the case of the Modern Devotion. This movement is almost always taken to have been instrumental in promoting not only popular piety but many developments in devotional art as well. Even the humble Dutch style of the late fifteenth century has been traced to the humble Brethren of the Common Life.<sup>57</sup> While it is quite clear that the movement known as the Modern Devotion did much to stimulate popular piety and devotional practices, it is not at all clear that this involved the direct production of great numbers of art works. In fact, painting was for the most part outside the range of thought of the leaders of the *devotio moderna*. And if they had paid attention to it, they probably would have judged it a work of pride, which is, we know, how they regarded the elaborate new tower of Utrecht Cathedral.<sup>58</sup>

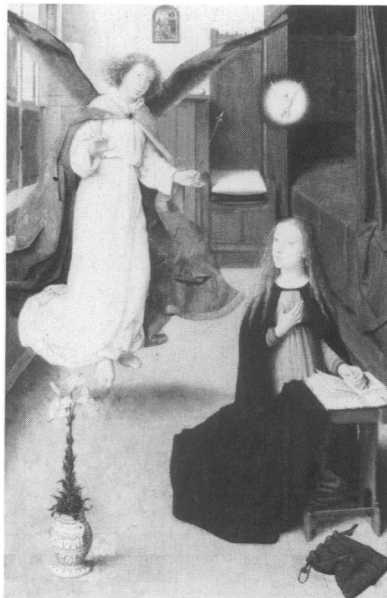
Once again one is faced with the "imageless ideal." The monasteries of the Windesheim congregation produced manuscripts which were for the most part unillustrated. Several fifteenth-century writers of the movement, Jan Mombaer and Henry Herp, regarded images as one of the main hindrances to a contemplative life. It is in this way not possible to see the Modern Devotion as the explicit promotor of a great new outburst of popular devotional art.<sup>59</sup> The attitude of the movement to art was at times hostile, and certainly always somewhat equivocal. Yet devotional art did flower at the same time that popular piety was being revitalized by, among others, the Modern Devotion. It would be wrong to conclude that the *devotio moderna* was uniformly or extremely actively opposed to art. The truth is probably nearer to the situation found with Jean Gerson. Not wishing to try to combat a widespread practice, the religious leaders would have sought to make people wary of its dangers and limitations. Imagery was not utterly prohibited; but its uses were restricted. Its power was acknowledged in part by being circumscribed.

<sup>57</sup> The encouragement of art by the Modern Devotion has been stressed by L. M. J. Delaissé, *A century of Dutch manuscript illumination*, Berkeley 1968, pp. 8–12; Sandra Hindman, "Fifteenth-century Dutch Bible illustrations and the *Historia scholastica*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 37 (1974), pp. 131–44; idem, *Text and image in fifteenth-century illustrated Dutch Bibles*, Leiden 1977,

esp. ch. 4; and Benjamin, op. cit. (note 1). See also Smits, op. cit. (note 24).

<sup>58</sup> See Huizinga, op. cit. (note 8), p. 260.

<sup>59</sup> This has been stressed by Ringbom, op. cit. (note 34), p. 327; and especially by James Marrow, "Dutch illumination and the *Devotio Moderna*," *Medium Aevum* 42 (1973), pp. 251–58.



35 Attributed to Gerard David, *Annunciation*.  
Detroit, Institute of Arts

Is there some way that features of contemporary painting can be said to reflect this situation? How are early Flemish paintings exploited as a most evocative means of expression and simultaneously hemmed in by being subject to external demands and prescriptions? Many fifteenth-century panels do seem both to assert their material richness and to suggest the need to transcend this very earthly beauty. One way to get at painters' feelings about the materiality of their works is to notice the way paintings are portrayed in paintings. Here a rather striking fact emerges. In the Friedländer corpus of over 1,000 fifteenth-century Flemish paintings, only about five show a painting displayed in a public space (fig. 34)<sup>60</sup> and only four paintings (all small devotional works) are found portrayed in private quar-

ters (fig. 35).<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, within Flemish paintings there are more than three times that many pieces of sculpture portrayed and worshipped in churches and houses alike (see fig. 2). Especially at the beginning of the century sculpture may simply have been more prevalent in such locations than painting. But as this increasingly became an age of great altar paintings it seems noteworthy that this fact was not recorded in the paintings themselves. No fifteenth-century panel known to me has within it a fully articulated triptych such as the painters were constantly producing. Only a handful show smaller devotional paintings. Practical guide-books, like Books of Hours, do occasionally show a patron worshipping a painted image, even a complex narrative scene, at an altar. I do not think it is an accident that these "how-to" illustrations are confined to books.<sup>62</sup>

In the fifteenth century it seems that such things might indicate what could be called a desire to underemphasize the sheer physical presence of the painting. Sculptures were undeniably material objects; they are thus repeatedly painted as such. Paintings were not forcefully presented to the viewer in the same way, within other images. Could this indicate some lack of ease on the painters' part with the material qualities of the panels?

We can recall here those paintings where donors are present, praying or worshipping in a narrative or devotional scene (figs. 5 and 13, for instance). They are not worshipping images but having visions. No fear, then, of the charges of idolatry that might arise if the painter had painted them kneeling before their own altarpieces. Unfortunately we cannot take this, or the lack of paintings within paintings, as being proof that fifteenth-century artists sought to protect their paintings from charges of idolatry, to undermine in some ways the very earthly qualities of the works which they otherwise seemed to promote. But it is noteworthy that fifteenth-century

60 These are works by or attributed to Roger van der Weyden (Friedländer, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1967, pl. 106, nr. 83); the Master of St Barbara (ibid., vol. 4, Leiden & Brussels 1969, pl. 61, nr. 64); Colijn de Coter (ibid., vol. 4, Leiden & Brussels 1969, pl. 98, nr. 106); the Ursula Master (ibid., vol. 6, pt. 1, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 137, nr. 113); and the Master of the Baroncelli Portraits (ibid., vol. 6, pt. 1, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 149, nr. 138).

61 These are works by or attributed to the Master of 1499 (Friedländer, op. cit. (note 14), vol. 4, Leiden & Brussels 1969, pl. 44, nr. 37); Master of the St Catherine Legend (ibid., vol. 4, Leiden & Brussels 1969, pl. 50, nr. 47); Gerard David (ibid., vol. 6, pt. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 189, nr. 175); and the Master of St Augustine (ibid., vol. 6, pt. 2, Leiden & Brussels 1971, pl. 241, Supp. nr. 244).

62 See the miniature attributed to Gerard Horenbout (Vatican Library, Vat. lat. 3769, fol. 66v) discussed and reproduced by Ringbom, op. cit. (note 26), p. 56, fig. 14.



36 Roger van der Weyden workshop, *Miraflores altarpiece*. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie

Flemish painters passed over a rather splendid opportunity to show forth the material fact of their great altarpiece tradition. While a painting cannot of course embody the imageless ideal, it can, in this way, indicate a wariness of image worship and a concomitant stress on devotional imagination.

It also seems possible that the very medium of oil painting had a somewhat visionary, dematerialized quality for contemporaries. In this sense it would have been seen as similar to stained glass. It certainly was not mere chance that panel painters took up the challenge of the glass artists and developed the ever-expanding potential of light and color. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that some paintings, like Roger's *Mary altarpiece* (fig. 36) and Memling's *Ursula shrine* (fig. 28), were meant to be viewed as stained glass windows captured on panels, their translucence embodied in the magical medium of oil glazes.<sup>63</sup>

This kind of speculation ultimately leads to the supposition that many fifteenth-century paintings, whether including special clues or not, were meant to be seen as

visions themselves. Paintings are thus not limited to recording someone else's vision, that person standing by, in or near the image itself, certifying its correctness. The oil medium could be taken to be magical, capable of materializing and yet dematerializing objects before the spectator's eyes, rendering the world as glowing as a stained glass window. A painting then quite literally stands as a vision, the spectator's vision, not a material object limited and recorded as such. At least part of the motivation for not recording paintings in paintings perhaps lies here: these things are finally not just paintings. In many fifteenth-century Flemish paintings, then, the pious viewer witnesses the moment of a miracle. The confrontation with the image, while referring to the material world, does not stop there. The image is not just a physical object, an object of worship. It is the embodiment of the process of meditation itself (see, for instance, figs. 27 and 31).

The image stimulates and records devotional activity. But the supreme devotional ideal remains immaterial, imageless. The process of meditation for most people

<sup>63</sup> The notion that Roger's *Mary altarpiece* resembles a series of stained glass windows was first suggested to me by Charlotte Schnur.

must somehow weave its way between the extremes. This is the kind of thing Nicolas of Cusa holds out to his monastic colleagues. Cusa begins his short treatise called the *Vision of God* with a painting of the Holy Face. It is this image which forms the *Leitmotiv* of his book, as well as the initial and repeated object of the monks' gazes.<sup>64</sup> Confrontation with the image produces profound and prolonged meditations, contact with the seen leads to the unseen. The image, again, is a record and a guide, a way to see the world in a new light. Like the oil glaze technique, the method is something of a mystery. Like the alchemical process with which oil painting was sometimes compared, such devotional practices are not totally susceptible to rational explanation. The painting, as well as our ability to explain it, remains somewhat equivocal. Does that mean we have failed? Or that the art itself has succeeded in suggesting the intriguing ambiguity of these lay visionary experiences?

It would be nice to end this discussion on such a lofty note. Certainly artists often strove to suggest this, and

donors either requested or responded favorably to it. Yet we must also remember finally the mythical quality of these images, their escapism, their often frustrating lack of social consciousness. Hugo van der Goes's Portinari peasants are a very rare excursion into truly humble piety. The piety we witness in Flemish panels is broad-based yet one-sided, self-satisfied, at least for the moment. The Reformation will prick that bubble, as it did many smaller conceits as well. For the time being we must allow the vast majority of fifteenth-century Flemish patrons their retreat into the realm of pious visions and meditations. Their rather straightforward piety will probably in many cases frustrate present-day scholars' efforts to read into Flemish religious art complex theological meaning, but they will continue to intrigue us with their insistence on tying their devotional experience to the visible world.

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<sup>64</sup> Nicholaus Cusanus, *The vision of God* (trans. E. G. Salter), New York 1960.