A FLEMISH ALTARPIECE FROM SPAIN

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It is frequently not through the works of the greatest artists but rather through those of their followers that we come most closely in contact with the spirit of a particular period. Especially in our times, which seem to be more subject than most to pedantry and specialization in teaching and to fads in collecting, the minor master has been forgotten, and we have a tendency to worship names, regardless of quality.

The modest artists whose names have been for the most part forgotten are not concerned with the exalted aspects of genius. The principal elements of their work they take from their leaders: subject, composition, mode of representation. As far as these are concerned, they obey the rules. They show their independence, however, in details, such as costumes and accessories, in drawing, and in the use of color, which is always personal in every artist.

The followers of Giotto and the Cassone painters, many of them anonymous, give us an enchanted vision of life during the early Renaissance in Florence. The genre painters of seventeenth-century Holland and eighteenth-century France and the English landscape painters of the nineteenth, all of them neglected today except for a few well-known names, are most rewarding to anyone who is willing to take the trouble to look at them closely.

The large altarpiece of the Nativity, which has been newly installed at the entrance to the Treasure room of The Cloisters, is by one of these lesser known artists who worked in Flanders during the fifteenth century. Of the many paintings of this school in American collections, it is one of those which give the most vivid reflection of the period that produced it.

Before it was acquired for The Cloisters, the altarpiece was in the collection of the Earl of Southesk in Scotland, whose grandfather bought it in 1854 from the collection of John Dunn Gardner of Bottisham Hall (where it was called a work by Hans Memling). It is recorded by Passavant, the German art historian, in 1843 as having been bought from a convent in Segovia by a certain Frasinelli of Stuttgart, who had lived many years in Spain and who at the same time acquired the two wings of an altarpiece by Petrus Christus representing the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Last Judgment which now belong to what was formerly the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin (no. 529 A, B). Passavant reports that the Petrus Christus wings were said
to have been brought to Segovia from Burgos.

The presence of a Flemish painting such as this in the Castilian city of Segovia recalls circumstances which reflect some of the major historical trends of the fifteenth century and which, when understood, will bring the painting itself much closer to us.

Flanders at this time had passed through its early period of revolutions, when its great centers, such as Bruges, Ghent, and Liége, had fought to obtain their city charters from the counts of Flanders and other nobles. The relative independence they acquired through these charters had made it possible for them to develop their industry and their commerce to a degree far beyond any other country in northern Europe. When they were joined to Burgundy through the marriage of the duke to the heiress of the counts of Flanders, the country so formed was the richest in the north and was sought as an ally by France and England, both economically exhausted by war. Had Charles the Bold been less worthy of his name and a wiser statesman this combination might have become the re-creation of the Middle Kingdom of Lothaire, a wealthy and powerful state between France and Germany, capable perhaps of preventing many later wars.

Principally because of the cloth industry Flanders was a commercial center that attracted business men and merchants from all the countries of Europe. Olivier de la Marche, Georges Chastellain, and Froissart, the chroniclers of the time, describe the variety and the wealth these great cities displayed when receptions and parades were organized for the visits of the ducal court. Side by side with the nobles, the prelates, the town officials, and the guilds were the representatives of foreign interests, the agents of the Medici, of Venice, of the Hanseatic towns, and of the kings of Spain and Portugal.

At the festivities organized in honor of the marriage of Charles the Bold to Margaret of York in 1463, the Spanish merchants of Bruges took their place next to those of Florence and with a larger representation. This was a natural result of the friendly policy of Ferdinand and Isabella towards Flanders which was to culminate in the marriage of their daughter Joan to Philip the Fair. Flemish industry needed wool, and the power given by the Catholic kings to the Mesta, the great sheep-owners' guild, had made wool the chief product and article of export of Castile. The encouragement and protection given to Spanish shipping created a new and flourishing trade route to Flanders by sea, thus avoiding the dangers of travel through France, which was still a battlefield infested by roving mercenaries.

Thus the Spaniards carried wool to the weavers of Flanders and in exchange brought back all the products of Flemish industry, including paintings, sculpture, and other works of art. Many Flemish artists, among them Jan van Eyck, visited Spain, and the quantities of Flemish paintings in Spanish churches and museums are evidence of the taste for Flemish art formed at this time and continuing into the sixteenth century, when Flanders had lost its economic supremacy and had become one of the provinces of the Hapsburg empire. In the collections of the Metropolitan the panel representing Christ Appearing to His Mother by Rogier van der Weyden came from the cathedral of Granada, to which it had been presented by Queen Isabella. The Crucifixion and the Last Judgment by Hubert van Eyck were also purchased in Spain, and the great tapestries of the Nativity and the Redemption of Man from the workshop of Pieter van Aelst in Brussels, which may have belonged to Philip the Fair, came from the cathedral of Burgos.

Thus the origin of our altarpiece and its shipment to Segovia reflect the political and economic developments of the fifteenth century. Its subject matter and the way it is treated bring us into immediate contact with certain aspects of the life of the average man of the time.

The altarpiece is composed of several panels. On the central panel, which has the shape of an inverted T, is represented the Nativity, with the Prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl to the Emperor Augustus on the left and on the right the Vision of the Three Wise Men. Above is God the Father with two singing angels. The lower wings show the Visitation and the Adoration and the upper, two singing angels on each side. The wings were intended, when closed, to cover
Altarpiece painted about 1445 for Peter Bladelin by Rogier van der Weyden. In the Kaiser Friedrich collections. Photograph by Raymond & Raymond.
Altarpiece by an unknown Flemish painter, now installed at The Cloisters. Purchased with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.
the central panel, but the dimensions of the lower pair are not sufficient to do this, which is evidence that two outer wings are missing. The wings show on the outside: below, Saint John the Baptist on the left and Saint Catherine on the right; above—the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, with the Angel of the Lord on the left and Adam and Eve on the right.

If we examine the literature of the period, we find that this arrangement of scenes occurs in one of the most popular religious books of the fifteenth century, *The Meditations on the Life of Jesus Christ*. It was formerly attributed to Saint Bonaventura, the great Franciscan theologian of the thirteenth century, but is now believed to be by another Franciscan monk known as Thomas de Caulibus. It is addressed to a nun of the order of Saint Clare and consists of descriptions of scenes of the Life and Passion of our Lord. The book was widely read and was translated into almost every European language. The earliest English version was written by Nicholas Love, prior of the Carthusian monastery of Mount Grace de Ingelby, York, before 1410. In it the scenes are arranged in groups as subjects of contemplation for the seven days of the week. These meditations have a new point of view for the period. Instead of being dogmatic and symbolic, they express the emotions of a man who wishes to partake personally in everything that he describes and who feels the suffering of Christ with all the tenderness and sensitivity of a fellow human being.

Monday, the first day, begins with the Fall of Man, describes the events leading to the birth of Christ and ends with the Presentation in the Temple. With the exception of the Vision of the Wise Men and the Prophecy of the Sibyl, Monday deals with each one of the scenes in our altarpiece and, in addition to this, gives us a convincing clue to the subjects of the two missing panels. Since the only other scenes described are the Annunciation and the Presentation, it seems most likely that these also were part of our picture. This is further confirmed by the fact that these two scenes are frequently combined in one altarpiece with the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi, as, for instance, in the Munich triptych by Rogier van der Weyden (nos. 101-103) or the panels from the Carrand collection in the Bargello, Florence (nos. 29, 30) by a follower of the same artist.

By an extraordinary coincidence, one of the missing panels, which has been separated from our altarpiece for more than a hundred years, since it was already lost when Passavant's first description was written in 1843, has recently been identified by its style and measurements. It is the Annunciation, shown on page 281, formerly in the Cook collection, to which it came from Sir J. C. Robinson in 1879, when it was described as having come from Spain. It was exhibited at Agnew's in London in July, 1948.1

This leaves only the Presentation to be found and identified. What was painted on the outside of these two panels we can only guess—perhaps, two other saints, patrons of the Segovian convent; or two donors, a Spanish merchant of Bruges and his wife.

The two scenes flanking the Nativity and painted on the same panel are both allegories of the Annunciation, the Prophecy of the Sibyl representing the announcement of the birth of Christ to the Western world, the Vision of the Wise Men the announcement to the East. Though they are not in the *Meditations* they are found in other books widely known at the time. The three wise men kneeling before the vision of a “fair child” in a star who tells them to “haste on to Judea, where they will find the king they seek,” is described in the *Golden Legend*, the thirteenth-century compilation of the lives of the saints by Jacopo da Voragine, the archbishop of Genoa. This book was as popular during the Middle Ages as the *Meditations* and was used as a source of subject matter by the artists of all nations.

The small scene in which the three wise men are shown bathing—one of them, the oldest and in the other scenes the most elaborately dressed, stands in the water wearing only trunks and a combination crown and hat—is also referred to in the *Golden Legend*. The wise men are described as ascending a mountain called Victorialis, where they “dwelt three days and washed

1 For this fortunate discovery I am greatly indebted to Dr. W. Houben, who kindly sent me a photograph of the panel.
The Nativity, the central scene of the Cloisters altarpiece

themselves clean.” This unusual incident is not often represented in paintings; other examples of it are in the Bladelin altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden (Kaiser Friedrich, no. 535), illustrated on page 272, the Epiphany panel by Fernando Gallego (in the Toledo Museum) and the tapestry of the Nativity by Pieter van Aelst in The Cloisters, where the wise men are not bathing but simply washing their feet.

The prophecy of the sibyl to the emperor is
an example of the use of classical mythology to witness and confirm the great facts of Christianity. The story as told in the medieval guide to Rome, the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae*, is that the Emperor Augustus, wishing to know who would rule the world after his death, called the sibyl of Tibur, or Tivoli, to Rome. She revealed to him in the sky the vision of an altar on which was the Virgin holding a child; and, as he beheld this, a voice was heard saying, “Haec est ara coeli” (This is the altar of heaven). The emperor had these words inscribed on an altar dedicated to the future ruler of the world on the spot where the church of Saint Mary of the Capitol, known as the Ara Coeli, was built. According to early descriptions of the scene, Augustus was alone with the sibyl. In our picture, however, he is shown with three men who seem to be courtiers. They first appear in the mystery plays that were so popular throughout Europe during the fifteenth century. In the “Mystery of the Incarnation,” which was played in Rouen in 1474, they are referred to as his seneschal, his provost, and his constable.

The mystery or miracle plays were dramatic representations of scenes from the life of Christ. They originated in the liturgical dramas put on in churches, such as the Resurrection, which was sometimes played in front of the altar on Easter Day. However, from the beginning of the fifteenth century, poetical dramas made their appearance. These were written by laymen and used to bring the story of the Saviour close to the everyday life of the people. At a time when the human emotional approach of the *Meditations* was so highly appreciated, it was most impressive to see Jesus and his Mother actually living and suffering as human beings, even if on the stage. The mystery plays became tremendously popular, and through them people became familiar with many aspects of the life of Christ which they had not known before.

The basic sources for the plays were books such as the *Meditations* and the *Golden Legend*, which they sometimes followed in the most minute detail. But the authors and stage directors also had their own ideas. These sometimes concerned costume. Thus, the Virgin was shown in a simple light blue or even white gown up to the Nativity and then in the contemporary widow’s dress when the tragic part of the story began. Angels were represented wearing choir boys’ vestments, and we know from Fouquet’s miniature portraying a mystery play that angels were costumed in this manner. Sometimes characters were added as in the scene which concerns us. The costumes were chosen because they meant something to the audience, as for instance Italian brocades, which they saw worn by the noblemen of the ducal court, seemed appropriate for costumes of the wise men from the East or attendants of the emperor.

There can be no doubt that much of the iconography of late medieval painting has pictorial origins in the Near East; but it is also evident, as Émile Mâle has shown us in his admirable books on the subject, that the mystery plays which the artists saw with their own eyes had a powerful influence upon them. A miniature in a sixteenth-century manuscript (Bibliothèque Nationale, MS français 12536) shows the actual stage and scenery of a miracle play put on in Valenciennes in 1547. The different places or settings in which the action was to take place are all strung out across the long stage, one next to another: Nazareth, the temple, Jerusalem, etc. The actors thus removed from one “mansion” to another against a continuous background. If we look at our picture, the same is true: each scene takes place in an isolated setting, but the artist has taken pains to make it plain that there is one landscape background behind all of them.

Several scenes in our altarpiece are surprisingly close to the text of the *Meditations* and to the stage directions of the miracle plays. In the Annunciation the painter has represented not the arrival of the Angel, because then he is described as kneeling, but the moment when the Virgin kneels and, “holding up both her hands,” answers him, saying: “Lo, here is the handmaiden and the servant of my Lord.” In the Nativity two details follow the texts closely: the makeshift wooden fence which Joseph, “who was a master carpenter,” had made to protect the Virgin from the elements and the curious detail of the column against which the author of the *Meditations* says the Virgin braced her-
The Visitation; the Prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl to the Emperor Augustus. Left wing and left scene of main panel
self when the hour of midnight came. Here, the artist has shown two columns; sometimes, as in the Portinari altarpiece of Hugo van der Goes (Uffizi, Florence, no. 1525), there is only one, and it is given great prominence. Mary and Joseph kneel adoring the Child, and the angels sing just as directed in the mystery of the Nativity. The angel, “probably Gabriel,” announcing the glad tidings to the shepherds in the background, and the choir of angels singing joyfully in heaven are all described in the Meditations and were brought on to the stage in the mystery of the Incarnation. In the Adoration of the Magi, the Child, “to comfort them more and strengthen them in his love, gave them his hand to kiss.”

It is significant, also, that whereas the figures of Saint John and Saint Catherine which are represented as polychrome statues in niches on the outside panels, have haloes, the personages in the scenes have none. They were thought of as living human beings, just as they had been seen on the stage.

Having related the altarpiece to the historical conditions which produced it, it is now important to define the style of its author. One fact is immediately evident: he was a close follower of Rogier van der Weyden, and most probably worked in his studio. The central panel of our picture is a version, with variation, of the triptych on page 272, which Rogier painted for Peter Bladelin in about 1445 for his church in Middelburg. The general composition is the same, as are the subjects of the three scenes, although in each case the artist has made changes in the disposition of the figures and has an overall tendency to simplify.

In the Nativity the Virgin, Saint Joseph, the Child, and the angels are the same types and the costumes are similar, but in the Berlin picture the donor has been introduced, thus making a symmetrical composition with a kneeling figure on either side of the Virgin. The shed is seen from a different angle, the single column being isolated and given more importance. The distant landscape is different also.

The Vision of the Wise Men is the closest in resemblance, the chief difference being that whereas the bathing scene is tiny in scale and almost unnoticeable in the Bladelin triptych, it has been placed on the other side of Mount Victor in our picture and given more prominence. There are also minor changes in the costumes, types, and distant landscape.

The room from which the sibyl reveals the vision to the emperor has been turned around in our painting, where it is shown in perspective, the open windows being on the right and the bed across the end wall. The attendants stand behind the emperor instead of in front of him, and a new actor has been introduced in the shape of a small dog. Again, there are changes in the costumes.

The Visitation is based on the panel of the same subject by Rogier in the Museum of Turin (no. 312) with similar variations in the costumes, landscape, and architecture.

What most distinguishes our painting from that of Rogier van der Weyden is perhaps the interpretation of the content. Although our painter has some of the ascetic and nervous feeling of his master he is evidently not interested in expression, in inner emotion, in the same way. This is very noticeable in the Visitation. Rogier has given Saint Elizabeth an expression of anxious concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgin. There is a definite emotional concern as she leans forward and looks at the Virgi

This gives it a quality of reserve which recalls to some extent the similar feeling imparted by French painting of almost every period. It is emphasized by our artist’s tendency to simplify and somehow to refine the types, for instance, the angels, the Virgin, and the wise man with the turban, all of which are part of the repertoire of the Van der Weyden shop.

The drawing of our artist is one of his strong points. We can get an unusually vivid impression of it in passages such as Saint Catherine’s robes, the outline of the Child in the star, and several of the hands, where the original underdrawing is still visible owing to changes made while the painting was being completed. There,
The Vision of the Wise Men (above, the wise men bathing); the Adoration. Right scene of main panel and right wing.
we see that he had a free and vital sense of line for its own sake. He was not interested in modeled form as Rogier was, as the most superficial comparison with the Bladelin triptych will show. His figures, for instance the two kneeling wise men, have a flat, cut-out, silhouette-like look. He has difficulty in the modeling of the heads, which seem to have sharp, paper-like edges. The figures do not kneel on the ground; they seem applied against it, almost at the same level. Although the landscape on the horizon—the walled town behind the mountain, for instance—is beautifully treated in contrasting warm and cool tones, which give it a convincing feeling of atmosphere and distance, our artist makes no effort to give an impression of space. There is no middle ground in any of the scenes. The whole is thought of much more as a continuous pattern on the picture surface.

The use of color is also peculiar to our painter. It is strikingly different from the expressive color of Rogier van der Weyden. The color composition of the altarpiece is conceived as a whole, not as a series of scenes. It is an over-all, rhythmic pattern of blue, green, and red, with accents of white, centering on the Virgin’s robe.
in the Nativity. The color is put on with a most sensitive feeling for subtle differences in tone and intensity, particularly in the varying shades of white of the robes of the Virgin, the sibyl, the third wise man, and the angels, or in the different tones of red in the Adoration of the Magi. It has a more translucent, less enamel-like quality than is usual in the work of this time. This transparency of color, together with the sense of a two-dimensional surface and the over-all decorative color pattern, lead one to think that our painter may have been a designer of stained-glass windows.

To pick out and identify his hand among the many Van der Weyden followers is a task which will require further examination of the many paintings in European collections. Photographs are apt to be misleading in such a study. However, there are certain qualities of drawing and certain types which make it possible to form a group of paintings that appear to be related to ours.

A number of elements in our altarpiece are painted under the influence of works which have been attributed both to the master of Flémalle and the youthful Rogier van der Weyden. The Saint John goes back to the Saint John of the altarpiece of Heinrich von Werl in the Prado (no. 1352). The type of Joseph is the same as that in the Betrothal of the Virgin, also in the Prado (no. 1817A). The turbaned head of the youngest wise man as well as that of the heathen on whom Saint Catherine is standing, are based on a model similar to that from which the Adoration of the Magi in the Kaiser Friedrich collection (no. 538) was copied. The type of the second wise man also has the same origin. The type of head and crown of God the Father is similar to that of God the Father with the dead Christ in the Louvain Museum (no. 206). In each of these cases, the model has been used for type and costume, not in any way for technique or style.

The painting which most resembles ours in types and method of drawing seems to be the Presentation of the Virgin in the Chapter House of the Escorial. The type of Joachim corresponds with that of the oldest wise man in the Adoration; the Saint Anne resembles the Virgin in the same scene. The young girls reading in the temple are like the Virgin in our Visitation, and the angel leading the young Virgin up the steps resembles the singing angels above our Nativity. The type of Joseph is also there. A certain angularity in the poses of the figures and the lack of depth and modeling also remind one of our painting. The panels which Friedlander has grouped as the work of the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine and associated with the name of Pieter van der Weyden, the son of

![The Annunciation, one of the missing outer wings. Now in a private collection in England. Photograph courtesy of Agnew, London](https://example.com/annunciation.jpg)
Rogier, also have elements in common with our painting. The Saint Catherine kneeling before the Virgin in the Legend of Saint Catherine (formerly Kleinberger, Paris) resembles the Virgin in our altarpiece. One of the men is taken from the Bladelin triptych. There is a certain flat two-dimensional quality in the figures which is also similar to ours. However, apart from this picture, the others in this group seem to be the work of more than one hand, which is emphatically not true of our picture. Also, the drawing is tighter, with less vitality and less simplicity. To date, I have seen no paintings with exactly the combination of qualities to correspond with ours. The types and the modeling of Vranke van der Stoc are somewhat similar, but the drawing is less free and the color not applied with the same lightness of touch.

The author of the Cloisters altarpiece was an assistant or a pupil of Rogier van der Weyden who followed his master closely in subject matter and types but who had a definite style of his own, which he expressed in variations of his master's compositions and in details, such as the delightful and lively little dog next to the emperor who seems to want to play with us as we look at the picture, and the scene of the wise men bathing which is imaginative and amusing. His drawing and his color are very much his own. His fundamental conception of painting was quite different from Rogier's. He was not interested in expressing the emotional meaning of each scene, but rather in creating an over-all decorative pattern of harmonious shapes and sparkling colors, much in the nature of a stained-glass window. In all this, he recalls the medieval painter as we know him through the *Schedula diversarum artium* of Theophilus. To him subject matter was dogma, convention, but execution was his own realm where he could show all his own imagination and feeling. Judging from certain weaknesses in drawing and anatomy, one might suppose him to have been a young man who was painting in Rogier's studio between 1450 and 1460.

The condition of the painting is excellent—comparable to that of the Bladelin triptych, which is unusual in this respect. It is painted on panels of oak. The central panel is composed of three pieces, and there is evidence of some splitting in the past, but not along the original joints. A cradle has been applied to this in re-
cent years. The wings are painted on both sides. None of the panels are warped.

The painting was carried out according to the traditional method of the fifteenth century in northern Europe. A chalk gesso (calcium carbonate) ground was applied to the oak panel, and on this the basic drawing was made in a broad and free manner. This drawing now appears in several passages where the paint has become partially translucent, such as the Child in the star and several of the hands, showing that the artist did not hesitate to change his original drawing as he proceeded with the painting. On top of this drawing, the paint was probably applied in thin layers over particular areas, beginning with the middle tones, working to greater intensities in the shadows and towards white in the lights. Oil was used as a final glazing layer in the greens, but whether or not it replaced tempera for local modeling in the other colors, it is difficult to say. The same effect is obtainable with either medium. The state of preservation of the paint is a tribute to the soundness of the methods used by the artists of this period, especially when one considers the history of the picture and its many travels.

The exhibition of this large altarpiece in the setting of The Cloisters is a particularly welcome development in the installation of the Museum collections. All too frequently the painting of this period is represented in our museums by fragments of larger ensembles, which, hanging in a gallery separated from the other panels they were intended to be with and from anything else which might recall the period that produced them, can be appreciated purely as painting but no longer carry the message they were originally intended to convey.

In The Cloisters, where much of the atmosphere of the Middle Ages has been re-created, this altarpiece with all that it reflects of the spiritual and the practical life of those times, can represent to us in some measure what it meant to people when it was painted in Flanders and later when it hung for many years in the Spanish convent. It is to be hoped that in the future some of the miracle plays may be revived and staged at The Cloisters, thus adding another living element to complete this already remarkable collection.