In the last three quarters of the fifteenth century Spain, like the rest of Europe, was under the spell of Flemish art. The realism of the north had a strong appeal to Spanish taste, and the technical discoveries of Flemish painting and the new iconographies from Flanders and Germany were enthusiastically received. In the second half of the century in particular, tapestries, paintings, and sculptured altarpieces from Flanders were in great demand, as they were across the continent of Europe, and the designs of painters like Jan van Eyck and Roger van der Weyden became both a stimulus and a crutch to Spanish artists.

By 1427 Jan van Eyck had already visited Spain on a diplomatic mission for the Duke of Burgundy. Though he apparently did no painting there and is generally admitted to have had no immediate influence, he is thought to have painted a Fountain of Life for John II of Aragon and Navarre after his return to Flanders. It is certain that in 1444 a painting by him of Saint George was in Valencia and that in 1445 John II had given the convent of Miraflores a triptych by Roger van der Weyden, now in the Berlin Museum. In addition to works by great masters those by lesser hands were also in demand, for northern artists, including Germans, Dutchmen, and Flemings, had begun to migrate to Spain as early as the late fourteenth century. Among the first were Enrique Stancop, who was making stained glass in Valencia in 1376, and Nicolas de Bruselas, who in 1393 was active in Barcelona. The range of these artists included everything from works of purely Spanish character, like the facade of Miraflores by Simon de Colonia, to the northern Gothic misericords of Toledo cathedral by Roderigo Aleman. As was inevitable, Spanish influences were gradually absorbed and local motifs and techniques adopted. Some of the great figures like Gil de Siloe represented such an intermixture that scholars have been unable, with the dearth of documentary evidence, to determine whether they were northerners under Spanish influence or Spaniards who had absorbed Flemish traditions.

The carved Hispano-Flemish altarpiece recently acquired for The Cloisters shows this fusion of styles. It represents the mourning over the body of Christ and was originally the center of a large retable with painted wings. Its scale is unusual for such works, the painted walnut figures being half life size and the gilded frame itself standing almost seven feet. The Virgin and Christ flanked by Saint John and the Magdalen in the lower register are nearly three-dimensional, while the two half figures of mourning women above are in high relief. The group is surmounted by the cross in low relief against a background painting of Jerusalem.

The known history of the altarpiece is very scant indeed. It was published in the 1911 catalogue of the collection of Benoit Oppenheim in Frankfurt, where it was called Hispano-Flemish but with no remarks on its source. A friend of Oppenheim's has said that he bought it in Spain, and there ends its recorded history. Yet a great deal can be inferred from a technical examination of the piece.

It is clear that the altarpiece suffered several campaigns of alteration and change. Relatively early in its history it was damaged by a deluge of water carrying clay, probably from an abutting wall. The water descended from the top of the frame, down the background, and over the figures. Deposits of clay in the folds of several figures were found beneath the first repainting. Most of the azurite blue of the original color scheme was lost, and in the repainting a lighter blue, cinebar, and cobalt were used instead. Other repaints included the substitution of bright, light shades of green and red for the
darker colors of the original and the covering of all the gilded areas with paint. The background was completely painted over with gray, and later, after being patched with pages from a late eighteenth-century book, it was painted light blue. The wings must have been removed at an early date, for several layers of gesso and gilding fill the hinge miters. The two half figures have suffered the most. At one time they must have fallen, breaking off the hands and causing small damages to the headresses and other parts. The figures were subsequently replaced incorrectly, as the landscape, which served as a guide to their correct positions, had been painted over. All the repainting has now been removed, and even with the losses, particularly of azurite, the original brilliance of the altarpiece can again be visualized. The only restorations are the hands of Saint John, the right hand of the Magdalen, the strip at the base of the frame, and a few minor fills.

Before describing the altarpiece in detail it would be helpful to explain the system of producing a carved retable in Spain, which was rather complex in the fifteenth century. Instead of being the work of a single master it was made in a highly organized shop. The design was usually sketched by a trazador, who might be the overseer of the work, the chief sculptor, or an outside artist. Egas Cueman, for instance, carved the tomb of Bishop Gonzalo de Illescas from a design by a silversmith, Fray Juan de Segovia, and while he was chief architect of Toledo cathedral Master Hanequin drew the design for the Puerta de los Leones, which was carried out by other sculptors. The finished design was translated into sculpture by the escultores, or talladores, who must have included various grades of apprentices. The flesh tones were painted by the encarnadores, the brocades and costumes by the estofadores, and finally the gilding was added by the doradores. There is doubt as to whether this system was always followed, but in the Cloisters altarpiece there is definite evidence of different artists at work. Certainly the carving of the fretwork and columns of the frame was done by an inferior hand, and the apparent disregard for the applied patterns of the Virgin’s costume would indicate that the estofador was not as careful with his commission as his fellow workers. The landscape can doubtless be attributed to an artist other than the one responsible for painting the figures.

The sources of designs used by the trazadores were manifold, but, as in the north, the paintings of Roger van der Weyden, with their rich sculpturesque compositions, were frequently utilized. Occasionally one finds an exact reproduction in sculpture of a work by Roger, as in the two small groups in the Walters Art Gallery after his painting of the Deposition, now in the Prado. More often the designer would borrow a figure from one composition and combine it with a figure from another, or a gesture from one with the drapery of another. Our knowledge of this system and of the whereabouts of some of Roger’s great paintings leads us to the conclusion that details from the more famous pictures were widely dispersed through the means of artists’ sketches. Sketchbooks brought to Spain by northern painters and sculptors would have been stocked with the latest schemes of the contemporary masters, and the immediate repetition of these themes in Spain is not in the least surprising.

There are several Hispano-Flemish groups that illuminate this working method. The most famous perhaps is the wooden sculpture with the swooning Virgin supported by Saint John carved by Egas Cueman at Guadalupe. These two figures are literal copies of the Virgin and John in the Crucifixion by Roger in the Johnson Collection in the Philadelphia Museum. To them the sculptor added the figure of a mourning woman and the Magdalen kneeling alone at the foot of the cross. Another Rogeresque pastiche is the sculptured altarpiece with a Crucifixion at Santa Maria de Laredo (Santander) by an unknown Hispano-Fleming. The fainting Virgin of this group was taken from a painting by Roger that may have been a wing of the Prado Deposition. The painting is lost and is known only from a drawing, formerly in the collection of Professor F. Becker of Leipzig (see p. 262). The crucified Saviour was taken from the Crucifixion by Roger in the Johnson Collection, and the Saint John from still a third source.

The figure of John in the Cloisters altarpiece
Hispano-Flemish altarpiece of the mourning over the body of Christ, with Saint John and Mary Magdalen. Painted and gilded walnut. Made in Spain, end of the XV century. At The Cloisters
is a classic type of Roger’s. It is a variant of the one in the Johnson Crucifixion with the cape flying back over the shoulder, the prominent knee under the drapery, and the finely placed foot. The mourning woman on the right may be an adaptation of the seated woman in the Deposition in the Mauritshuis at The Hague or of the Prado Crucifixion by a follower of Roger. For the Magdalen and the mourner at the left I have found no close models, but the gesture of the Magdalen as she wipes her eyes with her veil is familiar from many of Roger’s compositions. The attitude is repeated in a small Hispano-Flemish sculpture in a private collection in Madrid (see p. 263).

The Pietà is unlike any we know by Roger, but it is not without ample precedent in northern art. A very similar group with the Virgin wear-
The facial modeling and the carving of the hair are examples of the unusual techniques used in the altarpiece.

ing a hood and wimple and Christ lying horizontal, his limp arm and legs framing the voluminous skirt of the Virgin, is painted in the Milan-Turin Hours. This type of Pietà, however, was exceedingly popular in the late fifteenth century in Spain, particularly in the region of Burgos. A comparable limestone group by Simon de Colonia occupies the tympanum of Miraflores, another is to be seen in the great alabaster altarpiece of Miraflores by Gil de Siloe, and a third behind the tomb of Juan de Padilla in the Provincial Museum at Burgos. The large series of blue copes in the treasury of Burgos cathedral, one of which was purchased in 1953 for The Cloisters, have hoods embroidered with similar Pietàs.

It is possible that the trazador of the altarpiece was not even the originator of the design. Com-
positions were constantly repeated: for example, the little Hispano-Flemish sculpture of the fainting Virgin and two figures copies an Antwerp group in the Berlin Museum (page 263), and the scheme was repeated in five other groups in northern Europe, three in Germany, one in Flanders, and one in Finland. Sometimes compositions were disseminated by prints made after paintings or sculptures, many of which were pastiches themselves. For instance, a print by the Master of the Bande-roles copies the Prado Deposition with the addition of crucified thieves from a different source. There is a German relief of a Pietà with mourning figures in the Berlin Museum (5930) showing the same general disposition of the figures and many costume details in common with the Cloisters altarpiece. Though the Magdalen is entirely different the relief shows that this group of six figures was no anomaly in the fifteen century.

Whatever the source of the design the sculptor of the Cloisters altarpiece must be credited with the powerful form of the group. The Pietà, which forms two arcs relating it closely to the ground, is framed between the long, vertical rectangles of John and the Magdalen. The angles of the arms, brows, and drapery draw the eye upward toward the cross and at the same time return it to the Pietà. This interplay of rhythms is wonderfully enriched by the alternation of the dark blues and greens of the paint with gold and white.

The workshop responsible for the altarpiece used several carving techniques that are both rare and effective. The rendering of hair is done in different ways for the male and female figures. The hair of John and Christ is not defined in a series of ridges, as in Flemish or German sculpture, but is treated as an impressionistic mass, with only major swirls indicated and a pattern of bumps or dots to give it a vibrant texture. The effect is enhanced by the shimmering of gold leaf through the brown glaze, a popular technique in Spain, particularly in the sixteenth century. The Magdalen and the mourning woman on the right have a border of waving hair around the forehead done in the usual manner. But behind this is carved a basket pattern, whose uneven surface, also gilded and glazed, has the same shimmering quality as that of the male figures. All the faces have strongly emphasized brows and exaggerated lips, which give the expressions a greater play of dark and light and allow them to be seen clearly at a distance. These lines are important in the composition and in the psychological impact of the group.

The pomegranate brocade patterns of the garments were not painted, as they commonly were in the north, but were applied in gold leaf over the paint. The patterns were first incised on sheets of gold leaf and then either cut up and laid on arbitrarily, as on the Virgin’s skirt, or put on in complete sections over large areas, as on the side panels. The costumes were further embellished with a series of small gold-leaf dots along the borders, and, similarly, gold stars were applied on the azurite blue ceiling.

Painted backgrounds were more popular in Spain than in Flanders, where the figures were conventionally set against carved tracery. The representation of Jerusalem in our altarpiece follows a pattern of generalization that was traditional in Flemish and Spanish paintings. The city could be located on a river, in a plain, or in the mountains. It could be northern with Gothic roofs or southern with tile roofs or completely exotic. But it was almost always domi-
nated by a single building representing the Temple of Solomon. This temple, destroyed in 70 or 71 A.D., was supposed to have stood on the site of the present Mosque of Omar. Any city in the background of a scene from the Passion with a single dominant tower, and that tower preferably domed and of several stories, would serve to represent Jerusalem to a fifteenth-century spectator. The large tower to the right of the cross in the Cloisters altarpiece is a type derived ultimately from Van Eyck, and parallels may be seen in Flemish and Spanish paintings of the late fifteenth century. The technique of the landscape itself is sketchy and the buildings rather dry. The bushes are painted with impressionistic dots, and the clouds are swept in with a few brush strokes. The towers recall the architecture painted by Francisco Chacon in his Pietà at Granada, and the landscape has analogies with that in the Via Dolorosa by the Burgos Master in Burgos cathedral.

The framework is typically Spanish, with thin spiral columns at the sides, a series of arches above, interlaced with leaves, and above them a blind tracery arcade. The three arches emphasize the major figures, though in many other altarpieces they have no relation to the sculpture. The panels at the bottom are missing, and the space has been filled with plain moldings. The use of brocade on the inner sides is rare. It reverses the more usual scheme in paintings of a rich brocade panel behind the central scene with landscape at each side. The effect in the altarpiece is that of looking at a landscape through a window framed in brocade, although this illusion is destroyed by the figures. The only near parallel is a painting in the Lazaro collection in Madrid by the Perea Master, with three saints against a gold ground flanked by two brocade curtains.

The altarpiece illustrates the thorough intermixing of Flemish and Spanish features, both in its design and in its craftsmanship. The individual figures are based on Flemish models, with the possible exception of the Pietà. The framework, the painted background, and the brocaded side walls, which form the setting, are purely Spanish. The same fusion is present in the workmanship. The handling of drapery, the finesse of such details as the Magdalen's gesture and the Virgin's sleeve, and the deckle edge of grass on the carved rocks are strong indications

**Below:** A XV century Flemish sculpture of the fainting Virgin with Saint John and the Magdalen and a similar group made in Spain. The composition was also copied elsewhere. Berlin Museum and a private collection, Madrid
that the sculptor, or one of the sculptors, was imbued with the traditions of the north. The Spanish qualities are shown in the treatment of lips and brows, the shorthand renderings of hair, and the columnar compression of Saint John and the Magdalen. The minor artists who worked on the altarpiece used Spanish techniques, like glazing over gold leaf, impressionistic handling of landscape, and application of sheets of patterned brocades. The powerful composition is treated in a vigorous, decorative manner and is a true synthesis of late fifteenth-century Spanish and Flemish ideas.

The date of the altarpiece can be placed between 1480 and 1500. The Rogereseque prototypes were already created in the 1450's and 60's, and though the restrained emotion and complexity of the composition are still strongly Flemish the broadening of the drapery rhythms is reminiscent of works at the end of the century. The background also is most closely related to paintings done in these last decades, like those of Chacon and the Burgos Master.

Both the Pietà and the background have affinities with works made in the region of Burgos, yet no other Hispano-Flemish sculpture of this scale and quality is known for comparison. Unless others are discovered, or the church that sold the altarpiece early in this century is located, the site of the interesting workshop of Spaniards and Flemings that made it will never be known.