

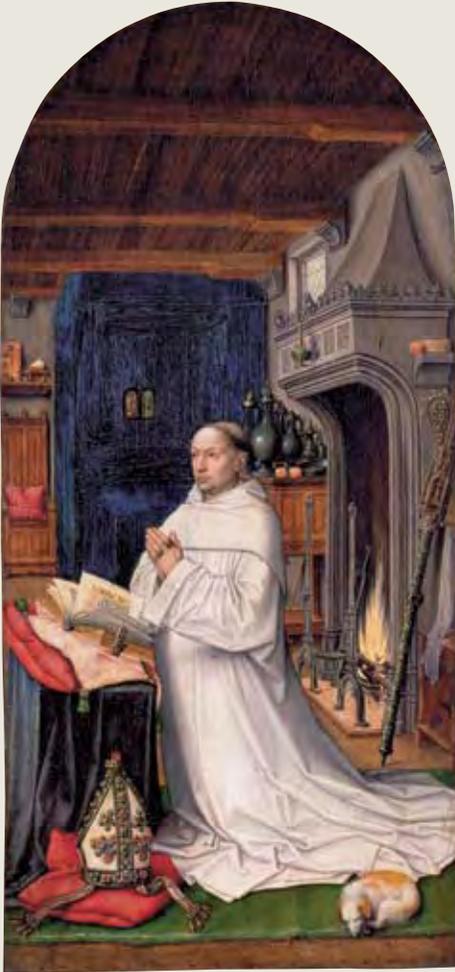


# PRAYERS AND PORTRAITS

Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych

National Gallery of Art, Washington | November 12, 2006 – February 4, 2007

THE EXHIBITION IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE HOMELAND FOUNDATION, INC.



1 Master of 1499, *Abbot Christiaan de Hondt*



Detail of fig. 1 showing a diptych hanging on the wall behind the kneeling figure of De Hondt

The term “Netherlandish” is applied to northern Renaissance art produced in the region that encompasses present-day Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg as well as Burgundy and other northern French provinces. For most of the fifteenth century this territory was ruled by the dukes of Burgundy, a cadet line of the Valois kings of France. In the decade following the death of Duke Charles the Bold in 1477, the Burgundian Netherlands became part of the Holy Roman Empire, which also included Austria, Germany, and Spain.

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries the power and influence of the Burgundian Netherlands far outweighed its relatively small

size. The courts of the dukes of Burgundy were among the richest in Europe, and young men from other areas were routinely sent there to be educated in noble and chivalrous behavior. Moreover, the region was a financial and mercantile hub of northern Europe. For most of the fifteenth century Bruges was a center for both banking and the production of luxury goods. In the early sixteenth century economic dominance shifted to Antwerp, home of a lively import-export trade and the *Bourse*, or financial exchange. Art also flourished, and the Netherlands, along with Italy, was one of the preeminent centers of painting in the Renaissance.



2 Jan van Eyck, *The Angel Gabriel with The Virgin Annunciate*

#### WHAT IS A DIPTYCH?

A diptych consists of two panels of the same size and shape that are framed and hinged so they can be opened and closed like a book, as seen in the Bibaut diptych, which depicts the Carthusian abbot Willem van Bibaut praying to the Virgin and Child (see COVER). The format has a long history, and antecedents can be found in classical Greek and Roman writing tablets as well as in the numerous hinged, carved ivory diptychs that survive from late Roman times through the Gothic era. The primary images are protected on the interior of the diptych and are revealed only when the ensemble is opened. The subject matter on the interior is usually religious but also includes secular portraits. The exteriors are often painted to look like marble or porphyry,

and they can also depict coats of arms or other images related to those inside.

Unfortunately, the components of diptychs are easily separated and their frames and hinges lost or altered. Indeed, only two diptychs in the exhibition, those by Memling and by Provoost (see FIGS. 7, 8 - 9), still definitely have both their original frames and hinges. Nonetheless, technical examination of diptych panels often reveals traces of now-lost hardware or framing elements, allowing for the reconstruction of diptychs that have been divided. This exhibition brings together halves of numerous diptychs that are now dispersed and residing in distant collections, and these are presented alongside diptychs that have remained intact over the centuries.

## HOW WERE DIPTYCHS USED?

Most surviving Netherlandish diptychs are small or modest in size. Those with religious subjects likely accompanied private devotion, primarily in a domestic setting, although use in the family chapel of a church is also possible. Images in manuscripts and paintings provide some information about ways they were displayed. The portrayal of Abbot Christiaan de Hondt (FIG. 1) by the Master of 1499 shows a diptych hanging on the back wall of the prelate's room. Yet because diptychs could be folded, many were probably kept in drawers or special containers until needed and then set upon a table or *prie-dieu* (a small desk for prayer), possibly on a cushion, or opened at an angle so that the diptych could stand upright.

## PRAYERS AND PRIVATE DEVOTION IN NORTHERN EUROPE

The popularity of diptychs in the Low Countries coincided with a change in religious practice there. A movement known as the Modern Devotion (*Devotio Moderna*) was founded in the Netherlands by two clerics, Geert Groote and Florens Radevrijns, in the late fourteenth century. Emphasizing private, personal devotion, they urged their followers to focus on Christ's humanity more than his divinity, to emulate his humility and empathize with his sufferings. Solitary meditation on Christ's Passion and redemption, on one's own death, the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell was essential. In



3 Jan Gossaert, *Virgin in the Church with Antonio Siciliano and Saint Anthony*



4 Robert Campin, *The Trinity with Virgin and Child*

the course of the fifteenth century the Modern Devotion found adherents throughout the Netherlands and Germany. Its precepts were further disseminated in texts such as *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, which reached an increasingly literate public. In this context small works of art such as diptychs that provided a focus for private worship enjoyed wide popularity. Clients included bankers, merchants, and other members of the middle class as well as nobles and clerics.

#### JAN VAN EYCK AND ROBERT CAMPIN

Among the earliest Netherlandish diptychs are those by Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin, rightly acclaimed as the founding fathers of Netherlandish painting. In *The Angel Gabriel* and *The Virgin Annunciate* (FIG. 2) Van Eyck created an astonishingly convincing painted illusion of sculpture. The outermost frame is fictive red marble or porphyry, while the inner



frame imitates a yellowish stone. The figures of Gabriel and Mary and the plinths on which they stand seem to be carved from a brownish yellow stone with the warmth and sheen of alabaster. Thanks to Van Eyck's mastery of light and shade, the statues appear to occupy a shallow space, and the edges of the plinths seem to project slightly beyond the edges of the frames. It is not known who commissioned this diptych, but the Annunciation, the moment when Gabriel announces the coming birth of Christ, was evidently an important part of the owner's personal devotion.

Van Eyck's influence on the next generation of Netherlandish painters is evident in Jan Gossaert's *Virgin in the Church*, which copies a major painting by Van Eyck now in Berlin. Gossaert's panel is paired with *Antonio Siciliano and Saint Anthony*, which portrays the donor with his patron saint (FIG. 3). Antonio Siciliano was secretary to the Duke of Milan, who sent him

on a diplomatic mission to the Netherlands in 1513. Because neither of the frames is original and all trace of hinges consequently lost, it is difficult to confirm that these two paintings formed a diptych. Possibly they were pendants, that is, a pair of paintings intended to be seen side by side.

The personal nature of diptychs is underscored in Campin's *Trinity with Virgin and Child* (FIG. 4). The combination of subjects is possibly unique in Netherlandish painting and probably reflects the owner's wishes. On the left wing God the Father, wearing a papal tiara, holds the lifeless body of Christ the Son, displaying the wounds in his side, hands, and feet. Together with the dove of the Holy Spirit on Christ's shoulder, these figures were meant to inspire the viewer to contemplate the mystery of the Trinity. The right wing depicts the Virgin and Child in a contemporary domestic interior.

Wearing a voluminous fur-lined robe, Mary holds the Christ child in her lap and extends her right hand toward the fire, perhaps to warm it or to make sure the fire is not too hot for her son. The ewer, basin, and white towel imply that the Child has had or will be given a bath, and at the same time they symbolize the Virgin's purity. This diptych thus juxtaposes Christ's divinity, death, and resurrection on the left panel with his human existence and his mother's tender care on the right.

#### ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN AND THE DEVOTIONAL PORTRAIT DIPTYCH

One of the most widespread types of Netherlandish diptych has an image of the Virgin and Child on one panel, often the left, with a portrait of a donor on the facing panel in a pose of supplication. It is generally agreed that this format was created by Rogier van der Weyden,



5 Rogier van der Weyden, *Virgin and Child with Philippe de Croÿ* (right panel before treatment)



6 Michel Sittow, *Virgin and Child with Diego de Guevara* (?)

who ranks with Jan van Eyck as one of the greatest artists of the fifteenth century. An outstanding example of the devotional portrait diptych is Rogier's *Virgin and Child with Philippe de Croÿ* (FIG. 5). Identified by inscriptions and the coat of arms on the reverse of his portrait, the sitter was then about twenty-seven years old and a rising star at the Burgundian court. Described by a contemporary chronicler as proud, eloquent, ambitious, and talented, Philippe de Croÿ distinguished himself in later life as both a diplomat and a warrior. Here he is shown in rapt adoration, holding a rosary. On the left wing the Virgin supports an energetic Christ child, who stands unsteadily on a richly textured red and gold cushion and leans forward to play with the clasps of an elegant leather-bound book, perhaps a Book of Hours (a book of prayers used in private worship at home). Philippe was a book lover and collector and would have delighted in an image of such a deluxe volume. Painted with superb precision and technical finesse, these works are filled with a sense of religious intensity.

Another exquisite devotional portrait diptych reunited in this exhibition (see also FIG. 5)

is Michel Sittow's *Virgin and Child* from Berlin and *Diego de Guevara* (?) in the National Gallery of Art's collection (FIG. 6). The Child gently reaches up to touch Mary's chin while holding in the other hand a goldfinch, an allusion to his future suffering and crown of thorns (because of the bird's supposed taste for thorny plants). The infant rests on an oriental carpet that covers a foreground parapet extending onto the right-hand panel, a feature that confirms the two pictures originally formed a pair. The donor has been identified on the basis of the Cross of the Order of Caltrava that appears partly obscured on his doublet just above his hand. In 1517 Diego de Guevara was appointed to a high position in the order by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. A Spaniard by birth, Guevara spent more than forty years in service at the Burgundian court and was entrusted with diplomatic missions to Spain and England. Perhaps because he is contemplating Christ's sacrifice and the Virgin's sorrow, his expression is imbued with an ineffable and restrained sadness that conveys the sitter's inner emotions to a degree rarely found in Netherlandish painting.



7 Hans Memling, *Virgin and Child with Maarten van Nieuwenhove*

A significant change in the devotional portrait diptych was achieved by Hans Memling in his *Virgin and Child with Maarten van Nieuwenhove* (FIG. 7). Instead of the dark, featureless background favored by Rogier van der Weyden and his followers, Memling depicted the holy figures and the donor in a spatially coherent room in Van Nieuwenhove's house. On the left panel the Virgin offers an apple to the Christ child, who looks toward the donor (identified by his coat of arms in the window behind her). A circular mirror on the back wall reflects the Virgin from the back and Van Nieuwenhove in profile, establishing that the two figures are together in the same room. On the right wing the elegantly attired donor is portrayed in an attitude of prayer. The oriental carpet on the parapet in front of him also appears on the left wing, a device that further unifies the two panels. Maarten van Nieuwenhove, only twenty-three years old when this diptych was created, was a member of a prominent family in Bruges, where he later served as burgomaster (mayor). His career ended prematurely in 1506 when he died at the age of thirty-six.



#### DIPTYCHS AND RELIGIOUS ORDERS

Well suited to solitary contemplation, diptychs were used by members of religious orders, including Carthusians, Franciscans, and Cistercians. One of the most unusual works in this category (FIG. 8) is by Jan Provoost, who was active in Bruges. The interior left wing depicts *Christ Carrying the Cross*: his hands are bound, and the crown of thorns pressed into his head causes rivulets of blood to run down his face. Behind the cross at the right the grotesque faces of his tormentors may reflect an awareness of Hieronymus Bosch, while at the left John the Evangelist and the Virgin can be glimpsed shedding tears. With a look of gentle but pained resignation, Christ turns toward the donor, a Franciscan whose age, fifty-four, is written on the frame. The monk looks fervently toward the savior, his fingers steeped in prayer. The imagery makes abundantly clear one of the major precepts of the Modern Devotion, for the monk seems to witness directly Christ's pain and humiliation as he goes to be crucified. As one of the two diptychs in the exhibition with its



8 Jan Provoost, *Christ Carrying the Cross with Portrait of a Fifty-four-year-old Franciscan*



9 *Imitation Porphyry and Skull in a Niche*, outer wings of fig. 8

original frames and hinges (see also FIG. 7), this work is also exceptional in having two painted reverses in excellent condition (FIG. 9): the reverse of the left wing is painted to resemble porphyry, while the reverse of the right wing bears the image of a skull in a niche, a reminder of the inevitability of death and the need for repentance.

#### FROM DIPTYCH TO PENDANT

Although religious images dominate this exhibition, purely secular subjects are also represented on Netherlandish diptychs. Technical examination of Bernard de Rijckere's portraits of the prosperous Antwerp merchant Adriaan van Santvoort and his family (FIG. 10) revealed



10 Bernard de Rijckere, *Adriaan van Santvoort and His Sons Guillaume and Adriaan with Anna van Hertsbeeke and Her Daughter Catharina and Son Jan Baptiste*

that the panels initially formed what can be called a folding stationary diptych. The original frames were once hinged together, and because the panels are relatively large and the back of the left one is unpainted, it is thought to have been attached to a wall, while the right panel—with the family's coats of arms painted on the reverse—folded over it. At some point, perhaps in the seventeenth century, the hinges were removed and the diptych was transformed into two pendants meant to be hung side by side.

For more than a century and a half the diptych was an essential component of Netherlandish art. The inner wings of diptychs often attained a remarkable unity through either a compositional device such as a setting that continued through both panels or the exchange of glances between holy figures and donors on adjoining panels. Artists realized that the juxtaposition

of images on the inner wings produced an intimate dialogue that was particularly conducive to prayer and contemplation. This relationship could be intensified by opening the diptych to a particular angle to enhance the communication between the figures on the two panels, whether it was Gabriel addressing the Virgin or a donor before the object of his or her devotion. To illustrate, the exhibition adopts this mode of display for a number of diptychs.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons for the decline in the popularity of the diptych format in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The aftermath of the Protestant Reformation and the political and religious turmoil that engulfed the Netherlands beginning in the 1560s were contributing factors. Whatever the cause, the religious climate was altered and the intimacy inherent in diptychs was displaced by the more doctrinaire public statements of Counter-Reformation altarpieces.

## PROGRAMS

### CONCERT IN HONOR OF THE EXHIBITION

Sunday, November 12, 2006, 6:30 pm  
West Building, West Garden Court

The Suspicious Cheese Lords (male vocal ensemble) will sing music by northern Renaissance composers. Concerts at the National Gallery of Art are open to the public, free of charge. First-come, first-seated admission begins at 6:00 pm.

### LECTURES

East Building Auditorium

Sunday, November 26, 2:00 pm

*Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych:*

*An Introduction to the Exhibition*

John Hand, curator of northern Renaissance paintings, National Gallery of Art  
Catherine A. Metzger, senior conservator of paintings, National Gallery of Art

Saturday, December 2, 2:00 – 5:00 pm

*An Inside Look at Netherlandish Diptychs*

Illustrated lectures by noted scholars of Netherlandish art, Al Acres, Carol J. Purtle, and Victor M. Schmidt. A panel discussion will follow.

### GALLERY TALKS

All Gallery talks will begin at the West Building Rotunda.

*Open Discussion: Early Netherlandish Painting in the National Gallery of Art*

October 26, 27, and 28 at 12:00 noon

October 29 and 31 at 1:00 pm

November 2 at 10:30 am

J. Russell Sale, senior lecturer,  
National Gallery of Art

*Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*

December 7, 8, and 9, 12:00 noon

December 12 and 14, 1:00 pm

J. Russell Sale

### LECTURE SERIES

*Early Netherlandish Painting*

East Building Auditorium, 10:15 am

J. Russell Sale

This series presents an overview of painting in the Low Countries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

October 5: *The Age of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden*

October 12: *Crosscurrents of Piety and Humanism in the Later 15th Century*

October 19: *The Rise of Genre Painting and Landscape*

October 26: *Nature, Reform, and the Lure of Italy in the Sixteenth Century*

### FAMILY WORKSHOP

*It Takes Two!*

Saturdays, January 13, 20, and 27

Morning workshop: 10:30 am to 12:30 pm

Afternoon workshop: 1:30 to 3:30 pm

ages 9 to 12

Registration begins January 3

Meet at West Building Lecture Hall

Parents and children will learn about portraiture and symbolism; then create their own diptychs to take home. Led by museum educator Nathalie Ryan.

Workshops are free, but preregistration is required. To register, fill out the online registration form at [www.nga.gov/kids](http://www.nga.gov/kids) or call 202.789.3030.

### TEACHER WORKSHOP

*Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*

Saturday, December 9, 2006

(Saturday, December 16, 2006, if repeated)

Emphasizing the fabrication and conservation of panel paintings, this program is particularly appropriate for chemistry and studio art teachers.

Fee: \$20. To register, call 202.842.6796.

## AUDIO GUIDE

An audio tour is available at the entrance to the exhibition for \$5. Narrated by National Gallery of Art director Earl A. Powell III, this tour includes commentary by John Oliver Hand, curator of northern Renaissance paintings, National Gallery of Art; Ron Spronk, associate curator for research, Straus Center for Conservation, Harvard University Art Museums; and Laura D. Gelfand, associate professor of art history, University of Akron. To reserve audio tours for groups, call 202.842.6592.

## ON THE WEB

<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/diptychinfo.htm>

## CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 352-page catalogue by John Oliver Hand and Catherine A. Metzger of the National Gallery of Art and Ron Spronk of the Straus Center for Conservation, Harvard University Art Museums. Produced by the publishing office of the National Gallery of Art and published in association with Yale University Press. Hardcover \$75.00.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday-Saturday 10:00 am – 5:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 am – 6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Art Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free, except as noted.

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, in association with the Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge.

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This brochure was written by John Oliver Hand, curator of northern Renaissance paintings, and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office. Copyright © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- COVER** Master of the Magdalen Legend, *Virgin and Child*, 1490/1500, and unknown French artist, *Willem van Bibaut*, 1523, Private Collection (no. 23)
- 1** Master of 1499, *Abbot Christiaan de Hondt*, 1499, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (no. 21), with detail
- 2** Jan van Eyck, *The Angel Gabriel with The Virgin Annunciate*, c. 1435/1437, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (no. 8)
- 3** Jan Gossaert, *Virgin in the Church with Antonio Siciliano and Saint Anthony*, c. 1513, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome (no. 13)
- 4** Robert Campin, *The Trinity with Virgin and Child*, c. 1433–1435, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (no. 6)
- 5** Rogier van der Weyden, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1460, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens; The Arabella D. Huntington Memorial Art Collection; with *Philippe de Croÿ*, c. 1460, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp (no. 38)
- 6** Michel Sittow, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1515/1518, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, Property of the Kaiser Friedrich-Museums-Vereins; with *Diego de Guevara* (?), c. 1515/1518, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection (no. 34)
- 7** Hans Memling, *Virgin and Child with Maarten van Nieuwenhove*, 1487, Municipal Museums, Bruges, Hospitaalmuseum Sint-Janshospitaal (no. 26)
- 8** Jan Provoost, *Christ Carrying the Cross with Portrait of a Fifty-four-year-old Franciscan*, 1522, Municipal Museums, Bruges, Hospitaalmuseum Sint-Janshospitaal (no. 31)
- 9** *Imitation Porphyry and Skull in a Niche*, reverses of fig. 8
- 10** Bernard de Rijckere, *Adriaan van Santvoort and His Sons Guillaume and Adriaan with Anna van Hertsbeeke and Her Daughter Catharina and Son Jan Baptiste*, 1563, Private Collection (no. 32)