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First Exhibition to Focus on Netherlandish Diptychs Premieres at the National Gallery of Art, Washington November 12, 2006–February 4, 2007



left: Master of the Magdalen Legend
Netherlandish, active c. 1475/1480 - 1525/1530
Virgin and Child, 1523,
oil on panel, 24.4 x 14.5 cm (9 5/8 x 5 11/16 in.)
right: Unknown Artist, *Willem van Bibaut*, 1523,
oil on panel, 24.6 x 14.3 cm (9 11/16 x 5 5/8 in.), Private Collection

Washington, DC — For the first time an exhibition will focus on Netherlandish diptychs, featuring some of the most beautiful and intriguing paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries. Premiering at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from November 12, 2006, through February 4, 2007, **Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych** includes 89 paintings, presenting 37 complete diptychs or pairs of paintings, reuniting some panels that have been separated for centuries, with

22 pairs on loan in the United States for the first time. Often small and depicting religious images as well as portraits of donors, the diptychs were painted by such Renaissance masters such as Jan van Eyck, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling, and Rogier van der Weyden. After closing in Washington, the exhibition will travel to the only other venue worldwide: the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, from March 3 through May 27, 2007.

The diptych was a popular art form in a dynamic hub of art and commerce that includes areas that are now known as parts of present-day Flanders, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and France. Diptychs consist of two hinged panels that open and close like a book. A large part of the diptych's appeal lies in the compelling relationship between the two paintings. Often the subject of one painting represented scenes from the Life of Christ, while the donor's portrait appeared on the facing panel.

Since 1997 curators and conservators have been investigating the mysteries surrounding these fragile objects, uncovering evidence about how they were made and their origins. The findings will be presented in the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue and programs.

"We are delighted to provide our visitors with a rare opportunity to discover and learn about this fascinating art form," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "This unprecedented exhibition would not be possible without the generosity of many lenders, both individual collectors and museums from around the world, as well as a generous grant from the Getty Foundation which supported much of the technical investigations."

Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych was 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.

Exhibition Support

The exhibition was made possible by the Homeland Foundation, Inc.

Additional support is provided by the Flemish government.

The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

The Exhibition

Prayers and Portraits will showcase approximately 89 paintings of various sizes and subjects, some painted on both front and back, by more than 25 artists. Included are diptychs and pendants (unattached hanging pairs) as well as one single painting. The diptych format made its first known appearance in ancient Greece around 600 B.C. when writing tablets had two hinged leaves. By the early Christian period (200-500 A.D.) the ivory diptych depicted political and religious subjects. The growing popularity of diptychs coincided with a late 14th-century religious movement known as the *Devotio Moderna*, whose followers meditated on the humanity of Christ rather than his divinity.

The exhibition begins with Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint George and the Dragon* from the National Gallery of Art and *Virgin and Child* from the Museo-Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid, both painted vc. 1432/1435. They represent one of the exciting discoveries made during the technical examination. Infrared photography revealed the works were originally the front and back of the same panel, confirmed by a matching crack in the wood when the paintings are placed back to back.

Other highlights include Robert Campin's *Christ Blessing with the Virgin in Prayer* (c. 1425-1430), which, although not itself a diptych, influenced the development of the format, as seen in many of the works in the exhibition. In the last years of his life Rogier van der Weyden, once an apprentice to Campin, painted some of his most important works—devotional diptychs that pair an image of the Virgin and Child and a pious male portrait. One of the finest of this type is the *Virgin and Child* from the Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, and *Philippe de Croÿ* from the Koninklijk Museum, Antwerp, both painted c. 1460.

Michel Sittow's diptych panels *Virgin and Child* from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and *Diego de Guevara* (?) from the National Gallery of Art, both painted c. 1515/1518, will be rejoined for the exhibition; there is no record of the last time these panels were displayed together. Hans Memling, who spent time in the workshop of Rogier van der

Weyden, used elements such as a continuous setting across both panels, as seen in *Saint John the Baptist* from the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, and *Saint Veronica* from the National Gallery of Art, both painted c. 1475/1483.

One of the largest surviving portrait diptychs from the 16th century depicts the Antwerp merchant Adriaan van Santvoort and his family, painted in 1563 by Bernard de Rijckere. Now existing as pendants, these panels were originally a folding stationary diptych. The right wing depicting Sandvoort's wife, Anna van Hertsbeeke, could be folded closed to display the family crest painted on the reverse. Separation of the diptych into two pendant portraits probably dates to the 17th century when the folding portrait diptych lost popularity.

Technical Examinations

A Collaborative Research Grant from the Getty Foundation enabled the exhibition team to examine and document 25 pairs of paintings and 14 single panels that were once thought to have been part of diptychs as well as one single panel. Techniques used in the investigation include x-radiography, dendrochronological (tree ring) analyses, infrared reflectography, both visible and infrared high resolution digital photography, and binocular microscopy. A complete technical appendix is published in the exhibition catalogue.

Curators and Publications

The exhibition curators are John Oliver Hand, curator of northern Renaissance paintings, National Gallery of Art; Catherine A. Metzger, senior conservator of paintings, National Gallery of Art; and Ron Spronk, associate curator for research, the Straus Center for Conservation, Harvard University Art Museums.

Published by the National Gallery of Art in association with Yale University Press, the lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogue is the first ever devoted to the topic of Netherlandish diptychs. The catalogue covers a wide range of themes including painting techniques, workshop practice, and the 15th- and 16th-century art market in Netherlands. The catalogue will be available beginning November 2006 from the National Gallery of Art Web site at www.nga.gov (<http://www.nga.gov/index.htm>) or by

phone at (202) 842-6002 or (800) 697-9350 (\$75.00 hardcover, 352 pages, 238 color and 90 black-and-white illustrations) and distributed internationally.

The Collaborative Research Grant from the Getty Foundation also enabled the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, to host two roundtable discussions where a select group of scholars addressed a variety of issues pertaining to diptychs. The findings are featured in ***Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych***, edited by Hand and Spronk and published by Yale University Press, with contributions by Marina Belozerskaya, Till-Holger Borchert, Lorne Campbell, Reindert Falkenburg, Ivan Gaskell, Laura D. Gelfand, Peter Klein, Maximiliaan P. J. Martens, Carol J. Purtle, Victor M. Schmidt, Hugo van der Velden, H  l  ne Verougstraete, and Yvonne Yiu. Topics addressed include practical and social uses of the diptych; the history and origins of the format; and the devotional function of the diptychs in the context of contemporary texts and religious practices in northern Europe. The publication will be available November 2006 from the National Gallery of Art Web site at www.nga.gov (<http://www.nga.gov/index.htm>) or by phone at (202) 842-6002 or (800) 697-9350 (\$40.00 softcover, 256 pages, 14 color and 95 black-and-white illustrations).

The National Gallery of Art is planning a full program of related lectures, tours, and concerts. (See [Related Activities Press Release](http://www.nga.gov/press/exh/203/related.shtm)) (<http://www.nga.gov/press/exh/203/related.shtm>) .

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: pressinfo@nga.gov

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov