

# **Northern Early Modern Diptychs and Triptychs**

## Terms:

diptych (and triptych)

grisaille

*fragmentary realism*

## **Introduction**

Craig Harbison claims the Renaissance that emerges in Italy hinges on an emulation of, and return to, classical forms (Greco-Roman).

***Italian painting example: Madonna and Child with Saints by Veneziano, 1445, tempera on panel***

In contrast, Italian images are :

- Symmetrical, iconic image
- Strong Greco-roman references in the architecture
- Simplified, clarified presentation

***Michelangelo on Flemish painting, from Harbison, pp 155-156***

## ***Merode Altarpiece***

Harbison further states that the Greco-Roman is an influence that “does not readily apply to much that was happening North of the Alps.” (pg. 8). Northern characteristics include:

- Highly illusionistic imagery tempered by “fragmentary realism” (Harbison)
- Complex religious symbolism employing often quotidian images and objects
- Strong use of contemporary, 15<sup>th</sup> c Northern European landscapes or townscapes in images about biblical events
- Patrons or contemporary individuals frequently appear in or near biblical events
- Love of particularized details

This last characteristic is inherently embedded in the Northern visual sensibility.

They also appeared in previous Northern European artistic eras and forms, including:

## ***Royal portal – Chartres Cathedral***

(1) Gothic (11- 12<sup>th</sup> ce) architecture and sculpture and

## Pages from *Tres Riches Heures of Duc de Berry* and *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*

(2) Books of Hours (14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> ce) with their rich and complex systems symbolic of imagery

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## Northern Diptychs

*Bibaut diptych, on panels, 1523, Master of the Magdalen Legend and unknown French artist*

### Why are diptychs hinged?

- When partly folded they could stand on a flat surface
- When entirely folded the images were protected
- The hinged diptych a simile to the book form
- Was a natural continuation of the Book of Hours form which was very popular in the North.
- Effective form for juxtaposing or pairing two themes (usually the Incarnation with the Passion or Crucifixion)
- The smaller scale of diptychs suggests private devotion at home, *but in fact*, they were small to be carried from domestic settings to use in the public sphere such as church.

### Diptychs and dextrality

The “principle of dextrality” in Netherlandish diptychs, places the position of highest status -- the ‘dexter’ side -- **on the left** from the viewer’s point of view. (Van der Velden)

This places the portrayed supplicant (or personages of lower status) to the left of the privileged figure (the viewer’s right)

This differs from the way other visual cultures have depicted status (Byzantine icons of the Virgin and Child and German carved altarpieces both considered status from the perspective of the *protagonists* depicted – not the viewer of the image)

### *View of Diptych folded*

#### ***Bibaut Diptych (aka Virgin and Child diptych), Master of the Magdalen and Anonymous French artist, 1523, oil on panels***

On the Left:

The left panels gilding and inscription (the date of Bibaut's death) are 'new'

On the Right:

- Willem van Bibaut wears a Carthusian monk's habit.
- The inscription on the frame identifies him as the head of his order .

This diptych was the result of an assemblage approach.

The two panels were painted at different times by different painters.

Integral or 'engaged' panels – means the frame and panel are one unit as were most panels at this time.

Conservators suggest that the left hand image (presumably of a similar Virgin and Child had been damaged. Thus a new painting of a devotional subject was made to complete the diptych.

Reverse of the Bibaut portrait panel:

- depicts the 5 wounds of Christ.
- The theme of the five wounds and holy blood was considered prophylactic against illness and death.
- Meditation on the crucifixion was a basic devotional practice for the Carthusian order.
- Bibaut seems to have had a particular devotion to the Five Wounds as well as the Holy Blood – both depicted here.

#### ***Maarten van Nieuwenhove diptych by Hans Memling, 1487, oil on panel***

Left panel:

- half length image of a divine persona modeled on formal and iconographic conventions of Byzantine icons.
- She faces frontally (superior status).
- She has the dexter position.

Right panel:

- Maarten has the sinister (right-hand) position.
- He is at a 3/4s position (lower status than Mary).
- Hands raised in prayer, rendered in close vicinity to the object of devotion.

### Establishing Space and proximity

Harbison raises the question of realism as he develops a specific understanding of Netherlandish realism:

*“The most admired feature of northern European 15<sup>th</sup> century painting was the visual realism that became the hall mark, first of Netherlandish art.... But to what extent is it justifiable to take this artistic realism literally? Was it meant to certify exactly the way something looked at a particular moment or was it, like today’s photography....essentially shaped by the artist?”*

Unlike icons and most devotional diptychs, which employ an abstract ahistorical background to suggest the spiritual nature of ‘seeing’ the divine subject, this one presents the scene in a 15<sup>th</sup> century domestic setting.

This image suggests that the Madonna is clearly in the room with Maarten. This is not merely a spiritual vision -- it is bodily....maybe.

- The convex mirror behind Mary suggests that they are in the same room – she seated, he kneeling.
- Minnewater, the lake in the background in Bruges, and behind that the local landscape
- The carpet extends across both panels.
- Maarten’s prayer book lies on the hem of the Virgin’s garment – suggesting his proximity to her.

Mary’s frontal position suggests she is directly across from us the viewer.

The cushion on which the infant sits casts a shadow on the lower frame

Memling creates the illusion of the viewer’s space continuing into Christ/Mary’s space and we are positioned at the table with both Mary and Maarten.

The Christ child is offered to the viewer through an open window.

## The New Adam and Eve

The apple Mary hands to Jesus suggests resonates with images of Eve handing Adam an apple.

### *Cranach A & E, Durer A & E and Notre Dame Paris A & E*

Mary and Christ, thus become the “New” Adam and Eve. The apple of The Fall becomes the Apple of Redemption.

The Garden motif continues in the pomegranate pattern in both the Virgin’s dress and the cushion upon which the Christ child sits.

### *Detail of stained glass emblems and motto*

The stained glass window behind the Virgin, continues the garden theme:

- four emblems of a hand emerging from a cloud to sow seeds in fertile ground,
- refers to “new garden” (1) the meaning of the van Nieuwenhove name, but also (2) to the Incarnation.

## References to Maarten and social ascendency

### *Detail of stained glass emblems and motto*

- the coat of arms of the van Nieuwenhove family
- Maarten’s motto, “Il Ya Cause” (Not without Cause) is prominently displayed

Usually mottos appeared on the verso, but because this painting doubled as both an

(1) image of devotion and an

(2) image of social ascendency, it appears on the front.

Other references:

St. George and

St. Christopher in the glass behind Mary;

St. Martin in the glass behind Maarten.

Maarten, then 23 years old, aspired to political position in the tradition of his father and brothers.

His garment suggests his preparation for, and aspiration to political office.

He ultimately served Bruges as mayor when he was 34.

### *Maarten van Nieuwenhove diptych by Hans Memling, 1487, oil on panel*

Complex interplay of both secular and devotional imagery and spheres.

According to Falkenburg:

*“The illusion of palpable reality in early Netherlandish devotional paintings only served to emphasize the fundamental discrepancy between the material and the spiritual worlds and to urge the devout mind to move beyond the realm of the visible and reach into the realm of imageless contemplation of the divine.*

*The viewer assimilates with the donor, sharing a space that is at once pictorial and imaginary, real and illusionary, externalized and internalized, material and immaterial, sacred and profane.”*

***The Merode Altarpiece (Triptych of the Annunciation) by Robert Campin. 1426, oil on panel, center panel 25 x 24”/wings 25 x 10”***

“fragmentary realism”

Another example of complex interplay of secular and sacred spaces.

Formal Elements First

***The Merode Altarpiece (Triptych of the Annunciation) by Robert Campin. 1426, oil***

Size and imagery of the diptych suggest it was probably made for a private chapel or altar – a piece the emerging middle class could afford.

Left panel:

- Two figures foreground
- One figure background
- All within a garden space, open gate in background

Center panel:

- 15<sup>th</sup> century domestic interior
- Mary reading near a bench, Angel appears
- No fire in the fire place
- Utilitarian objects in background –candle and lilies on table, basin, pot and towel in back
- Windows partially open, coat of arms in the glazing
- Perspective seems “off” to us

Right panel:

- Man – Joseph working in a wood shop
- Various tools of the trade scattered on table and floor
- View of a 15<sup>th</sup> ce Netherlandish cityscape out the window

Harbison refers to the art historical concept of “**disguised**” or “**hidden symbolism**” as a netherlandish strategy to clearly indicate that while the holy family may be presented as contemporary 15<sup>th</sup> century Northern Europeans, there were “disguised” symbols that clearly indicated the religious themes – still lives were one such strategy. (p. 52)

## Symbols, Signifiers and Signified

### **Right Panel: Joseph's workshop**

- Joseph is separated from the figures of the Annunciation
- he is more human than they, outside the pact between Christ and Mary.
- In medieval devotion he was seen as an exemplary human, born *with* Original Sin (unlike his wife), foster father to Christ, virtuous, hardworking man.

Mousetrap on the table, metaphorical allusion used by St. Augustine who wrote: "*The cross of the Lord was the devil's mousetrap; the bait by which he was caught was the Lord's death.*"

Medieval theologians similarly believed that the marriage of Joseph and Mary was a ploy that fooled the Devil; Joseph's role as father masked the reality of Jesus' divine nature.

Still life at J's feet:

- (1) embedded axe in log;
- (2) rod propped on long,
- (3) saw leaning on footstool.

These have been linked to the Old Testament book of Isaiah and St. Jerome's *Commentary on Isaiah* as objects used to trim, cut and shape unfruitful trees.

Unfruitful trees often appear in the bible testaments, both Old and New, as the stiff-necked or unrepentant, the unfaithful, who must be disciplined.

In the Old Testament, they are implements of God's wrath; in the New Testament they figure in parables by Christ as metaphor for the unrepentant and heretics: "*Even now, the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree therefore which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire.*" (Luke 3: 9)

These implements are symbolic in another way: the artisan as a metaphor for the Artisan of the World – God the Father, a concept laid out by St. Ambrose.

For Ambrose these implements are not the Old Testament tools of God's wrath,

they are the New Testament tools of salvation – the ways that even an unproductive tree, in the hands of a Divine Artisan can be cut, milled and used for other honorable purposes.

Therefore, the image of Joseph suggests rich and complex theologies of both the Old and New Testaments informed by a burgeoning cult of Joseph developing in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, portraying him as symbol of the Divine Artisan and Christ's True Father – God the Father.

Joseph is drilling holes in a small board: Originally identified as a strainer for a winepress (and therefore referencing the Eucharist)

More recent scholarship has suggested that the board is not a strainer, but a fire screen (similar to those in the central panel).

The fire screen symbolism suggests Joseph as a man who was capable of controlling the “fire” of lust.

The making of a fire screen is a symbol of Joseph’s chastity and

to a greater extent, refers to the ideal Christian marriage/family – one that is characterized by (1) fidelity, (2) sacrament, and (3) procreation.

The sacramental characteristic implies that sex was only for procreative utility, and good Christian marriages must remain, otherwise, chaste.

### ***Detail of hearth figure, clenching groin***

### **Center panel: The Annunciation.**

The unlit fireplace and the fire screen = quenched, controlled lust

The lilies = Mary’s virginity

#### Symbols of the Mass

Gabriel, the angel, wears an alb and stole in the manner of a deacon at a Solemn High Mass.

The towel = originally viewed as symbolic of Mary’s purity (born without original sin); more recently has been identified in combination with the (2) laver and (3) basin as objects used in the Mass.

### ***Detail of baby Jesus with cross***

Jesus flies into the room

(1) to give visual expression to the concept of the Incarnation (and his Priestly role in his own sacrifice – he carries his cross) and

(2) to suggest the importance of children/procreation to complete the Christian family.

(1) While Gabriel’s role in the Annunciation is clear, he also references (2) the medieval belief that angels visit couples who conceive children. And in this role, his presence suggests that one of the aims of this triptych was a votive or ex voto for the Ingelbrechts who wished to have children.

### **Left Panel: The Patrons/devotees**

The Ingelbrechts remain outside the home, looking as if in meditative vision at the Annunciation.

Their devotional exercises are visualized by the red roses

(the rose bush is a well-known Marian symbol – Mary the Rose without thorns).

Both have gathered ‘roses’ : the woman a rosary, the man a rosebud in his hat. symbolize a garland of prayerful thoughts in their hearts.

While we might read this as a kind of *hortus conclusis*, it is more properly identified with the Garden of paradise and the site of the first marriage of Adam and Eve.

The Garden of Paradise also refers to The Fall which is remedied by Mary and Jesus as the “New” Eve and Adam in the context of the Incarnation.

in the distance is a man standing, clutching his hat. Some historians believe this is a portrait of the artist. If so, it points to Harbison’s characterization of Northern artists as developing a new self-awareness.

### Summary

#### ***Full view of Merode altarpiece***

Thus, the altarpiece serves a number of functions:

- (1) devotional image on the Annunciation, and
- (2) models of a Christian marriage blessed by the birth of a child. It also refers to specific roles of wives and moreover, husbands in Christian marriages by examining the role and virtues of Joseph.
- (3) it may have also served as a particular supplication for, or ex voto in thanks for the conception of a child by the patrons.

*The Merode Altarpiece* is quintessentially Northern and early modern:

- Particular attention to detail, quotidian objects with symbolic power
- the contemporary setting for a religious narrative,
- the visionary quality (supported on the left by the inclusion of patron’s portraits on the left),
- the presence of the landscape (viewed out the window over Joseph’s head),
- fragmentary realism; a northern use of realism, perspective that *suggests* but does not *document* reality.

#### ***The Portinari Altarpiece, by Hugo Van Der Goes 1473-78, Uffizi Gallery, Florence Italy, 8.5 x 19 feet***

##### Historical and Formal Elements/Analysis

The patron, Italian Tommaso Portinari was a representative of the Medici family business in the Netherlands.

He commissioned an altarpiece for a church in Florence – a work to send back to the community he came from – as a symbol of his piety *and* his success.

### *View of exterior wings: grisaille painting of Annunciation*

The principle of dextrality is honored here, Mary on the left, the Incarnation taking place, following her assent

The use of a black-and-white painting was common among several northern artists who were making allusions to sculpture.

Sculpture was enjoying a revival in the previous generation and was expensive. But one could have a painting of a sculpture more affordably.

Placement of sculpture on the exterior is in direct opposition to the hierarchy of the German winged altarpieces we viewed a few weeks ago.

*St. Wolfgang altarpiece, exterior, interior*

### *View of exterior wings: grisaille painting of Annunciation*

As Harbison discusses, while the images appear to be references to stone sculpture, they lack the usual trappings of sculpture such as bases, raising the question about the realism of this image:

Is this a [a painting of] a sculpture or [a painting] of real figures frozen in motion?

Remember Harbison's question: To what extent shall we take realism: as documentation or shaped by the artist?

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### *View of full work interior panels*

- A strongly theatrical composition, perspective is manipulated so that the 'actors' in the rear are visible in a way they would not be on a real stage.
- The use of hierarchical scale indicates the status of each figure (the patrons being pious, yet human, are smaller than Mary and the saints).
- Scale may also be used to indicate meditation on the scene – the presence of the patron's family prompting the viewer in contemplation.

### *View of left wing and right wing*

#### **Left Panel:**

Tommaso and his sons Antonio and Pigello;

Saints Anthony and Thomas were patrons of Tommaso and Antonio

Pigello, was added late in the process and therefore is not represented by his patron saint in the manner Tommaso and Antonio are.

**Right panel:**

Maria Baroncelli (Tommaso's wife) and daughter Margherita

Ss. Mary Magdalen and Margaret patron saints of Maria and Margherita.

A fourth child is not represented at all as he was born in the year the altarpiece was completed.

The landscape is barren – wintry – melancholic and matching the feast of the birth of Christ as it might be experienced in the Netherlands.

**Center Panel:*****View of central panel***

The work illustrates the Nativity account in Luke 2:10 – 19. The artist takes liberties with the text:

- The Child is not wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.
  - Mary is portrayed as sad, accepting with Christ's birth some premonition (placed there by the artist) of the sacrifice that he will make for mankind.
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- Mary in prayer kneeling over the body of the infant Christ. The artist's source for this is the visions of St. Bridget (1360 – 70) which mention Mary specifically kneeling to adore the Christ child. (example of an artist familiar with current writings on religion)
  - Christ's low birth weight
  - The scene takes place in a wooden structure built off a Romanesque stone home
  - Joseph also in prayer on the left nearly off the panel
  - Angels in the foreground dressed in various kinds of priestly vestments
  - A still life in the lower center of the panel
  - Shepherds honoring the child
  - Livestock witnessing the miracle
  - A Northern cityscape in the distance
  - most images of the Nativity are represented as joyful; a divine and glorious event. This one is rather melancholy

**Symbolic Elements: Signifiers and the Signified*****View of still life -- detail*****Still Life**

Harbison refers to the art historical concept of “disguised” or “hidden symbolism” -- still lives were one such strategy.

- The ceramic jar with grape motif – grapes for wine = the Eucharistic wine
- The sheaf of wheat = the bread or body of Christ (also eucharistic)

- The glass vase symbolizes the “entry of the Christ Child into the Virgin’s womb without destroying her virginity the way light passes through the glass without breaking it”
- Lily = the passion, purity and Christ’s royalty
- Iris (also known as sword flower) = Simeon’s prophecy at presentation of Christ at the temple that her heart would be pierced
- Blue columbine = holy spirit and mary’s sorrow
- Violets = humility
- Red carnations (aka nail flowers) = the three nails of the cross

### ***View of central panel, entire***

These forms are a kind ‘painting within a painting’ addressing the theme of the larger work: the sacrificial objective of Christ’s Incarnation

### Angels and Vestments

#### ***Two details of angels***

Angels vestments are precisely those worn by the clergy of different ranks at the celebration of a new priest’s first Solemn High Mass.

Angel in lower right in red and gold vestment: embroidered with *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus* the first words of the prayer recited at the most sacred part of the mass.

Here the new priest is the infant Christ: his vestment is his human flesh received at the Incarnation. Here is his both priest and sacrificial victim – this addresses his willingness to redeem the sins of man.

### Demon

#### ***Detail of demon***

Very difficult to see, unless you are standing before this altarpiece: the demon with gryphon claws, gleaming eyes, and mouth agape, horrified that his dominance of men’s souls is coming to a kind of end.

The Devil is also witness to Christ’s Incarnation and birth. The insertion of this figure – which is unique among paintings of the Nativity – may have drawn from the *Golden Legend* which describes the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas):

*“Now we must define the diverse reasons for which the Incarnation of Our Lord was accomplished. It came to pass, first, for the confusion of demons....[in addition to “pardon from men’s sins”... “cure our weaknesses” ... “to humble our pride”.]”*

Here is another example of an artist with enough theological background and enough artistic imagination to develop, through art, a visualization of the theological concept.

## Summary

This is a unique work in the sense that we may be able to sense something of the artist's world view as well – though this is a fundamentally contemporary approach to works of art that we should be cautious of.

In 1475, or some years later, entered the Red Cloister as a lay brother.

Returning from a trip to Cologne, he fell into a state of suicidal gloom, declaring himself to be damned.

A German physician, who attended the community at the Cloister, reported that ‘a painter from Ghent was driven to melancholy by the attempt to equal the Ghent Altarpiece.’ This may refer to VdG.

VdG's close proximity to theological ideas would have made him an especially good candidate for making visual scriptural concepts. His melancholy may have led him, in the Portinari Altarpiece, to cast a particular pathos over the event of the Nativity.

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Madonna and Child with Saints by Veneziano, 1445, tempera on panel

**Bibaut Diptych by Master of the Magdalen and Anonymous French artist, 1523,  
oil on panels**

View of diptych interior panels

Verso of the Bibaut portrait panel: Five Wounds

**Maarten van Nieuwenhove diptych by Hans Memling, 1487, oil on panel**

Detail of stained glass emblems and motto

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