

Accessing the Divine: Private Devotional Diptychs and Triptychs of Fifteenth-Century Flanders

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Introduction

A man kneels in private in his home with a book open before him and his hands held together in a gesture of prayer. His eyes look forward and focus solely on the other two figures in the room. They are not his family members, friends, or even acquaintances. Instead, he looks directly into the eyes of the Virgin Mary and her infant son Jesus Christ.

Rather than some mystical union or divine apparition, this scene occurs on two small painted panels, hinged together in the center. The work, the *Diptych Of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling from 1487 (Figure 1) aided the patron's private devotion. As Maarten actively contemplated this image, he knelt in front of this unique little object in a perfect imitation of his portrait's posture. This very behavior in fact occurred in homes across the Low Countries for nearly two centuries. Men commissioned artists to paint a personal diptych to aid their spiritual activity within their homes. Diptychs in fifteenth-century Flanders provided their owners with a unique and private means of accessing the divine; the works became instructional objects of meditation and fulfilled lay desires for a more personal means of devotion in a time of church corruption and uncertainty.

As the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* indicates, a devotional diptych consisted of two panels of painted images usually on wood, hinged together. One half featured some divine image for contemplation, almost always of the Virgin Mary and the infant Christ. The other wing contained an image of the owner at devout prayer. These patron portraits were extremely realistic and presented an idealized depiction of a focused meditation. Because the works contained such verisimilitude they became achievable models of behavior. An owner could gaze at a realistic image of himself as he performed the same behavior as his portrait. Realism then became an aspect of their functionality.

The structure of the diptychs also contributed to their function. The two wings allowed the religious subject of meditation and the worldly owner to be displayed in the same setting, yet not totally united. The physical break between the two wings allowed the portrait to appeal directly to Mary and Jesus rather than through an intercessory saint. Furthermore these were small objects. Their diminutive size reveals that owners used diptychs in private. Even allowing for the possibility that total privacy was not available, the size inherently prevented many simultaneous users.

The panels were opened and closed at will, with either one or both of the wings opening outward. Some diptychs had reverse images painted on the outer wings of the panels, usually coats of arms or some other type of identifying feature. The reverse image was visible when the diptych was closed and inactive. Thus a single reverse image reveals which wing was swung open to reveal the two inner scenes. The ability to open and close the diptych gave a patron an extreme amount of control over how and when it was viewed. He could chose who was allowed to gaze at this intimate scene or restrict its viewing to simply himself.

As their size and structure indicates, diptychs functioned to provide their owners with a more personal means of prayer and objects fulfilled contemporary lay desires for a closer relationship with God. In a time of church corruption, diptychs allowed men to pray without the supervision of the ordained clergy. The rise in popularity of Books of Hours and lay movements like the *Devotio Moderna* characterize the religious climate in which the diptych emerged. Diptychs first appeared in royal courts around 1400 and spread to the aristocracy and middle classes. Artists and their workshops produced the works by developing prototypes and adapting each commission only slightly. In fact, copies of recognizable master artist prototypes became ways for lesser artists to increase the prestige of their works.

These personal objects were so popular because they brought the divine into a patron's home. Through opening the wings and meditating before the images on the panels, a patron could encounter Mary and Jesus in a private devotional experience. As the genre developed, artists sought new ways to illustrate this divine access. No artist was more successful at presenting these devout encounters than Hans Memling. By expanding upon the works of Rogier Van Der Weyden, Memling brought the devotional diptych to new heights. Those lucky patrons who commissioned works from the master owned highly personalized, realistic, and functioning diptychs.

Chapter 1:

The Foundations: Books of Hours and Lay Attitudes

In fourteenth- and fifteenth- century Flanders, diptychs functioned to provide their owners with a more personal means of prayer. They were spiritual objects, but not cult images. They could bring about a divine vision yet were located within the private homes of their patrons. Contemporary lay religious attitudes reveal that men and women were in fact searching for a more private relationship with the divine. Books of Hours represented the earliest expressions of these desires, but the diptychs that grew out of this literary tradition offered an even more private and independent form of devotion.

Books of Hours, like the later diptychs, were devotional aids for laypersons. These books guided meditation and prayer in an imitation of clerical practice.¹ From around 1300 to the sixteenth century, men and women used Books of Hours to recite different prayer cycles, the most common of which was the Hours of the Virgin.² The Hours of the Virgin focused on the life of Mary, beginning with Christ's conception and culminating in her coronation.³ Because they were used privately within the home, Books of Hours allowed secular Christians to depend

¹ Timothy B. Husband, *The Art of Illumination: The Limbourg Brothers and the Belles Heures of Jean, Duc de Berry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

² Andrea Pearson, *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art, 1350- 1530: Experience, Authority, Resistance*, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World Series (Great Britain: Biddles Ltd, 2005), 3.

³ *Ibid.*

less on the clergy and practice a more independent form of devotion.⁴ Concurrently, the rise of the middle class and increase of wealth made personal objects more widespread because people could afford such luxuries.⁵ Although modeled from clerical practices, Books of Hours were not as rigid or strict as their clerical counterparts.⁶ The average lay person did not have the same amount of time to devote to prayer as an ordained member of the clergy and lay Books of Hours lessened the time demand, while still providing a guide to devotion. The books could be adapted to the patron, city, and region of their intended use.⁷ They were completely personalized objects, which only helped to increase their popularity.⁸

As Books of Hours became status symbols among the wealthy, owners wanted more and more splendid objects. The most expensive manuscripts began to include images to illustrate the text.⁹ In fact the earliest known diptych style portrait occurs in the *Breviary of Catherine of Valois* from before 1346 (Figure 2).¹⁰ Catherine kneels, in supplication with the aid of intercessory figures before Mary and Christ, yet the spine of the book separates two images. These images in the text added an instructional element to the books because they illustrated proper behavior for the reader.¹¹ When Catherine of Valois used her breviary, this image demonstrated the correct posture for pious devotion.

A later example, *The Tres Belle Heures of Jean de France* or the *Brussels Hours*, also features a diptych style patron portrait (Figure 3).¹² It provides an exceptional example of the

⁴ Husband, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Laura D. Gelfand, "The Devotional Portrait Diptych and the Manuscript Tradition," In *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, Edited by John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk, With a Foreword by Thomas W. Lentz (Cambridge MA: Harvard Art Museums in association with Yale University Press, 2006), 53.

¹¹ Husband, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

luxury and beauty of Books of Hours. The book, by an unknown artist, dates from before 1402.¹³ The patron, Jean de France, kneels on one page with the intercessory figures of Saints Andrew and John the Baptist.¹⁴ He looks towards the opposite page, which depicts a nursing Mary seated on an elaborate throne. The two pages have different backgrounds, yet the checkered floor continues between them, unifying the scene. Mary gazes in Jean's direction, while the infant Christ seems to look directly out at the reader. As in the earlier *Breviary of Catherine of Valois* (Figure 2), the spine separates the patron from Mary and Christ. However the luxurious colors and realistic portrait mark the *Brussels Hours* (Figure 3) as a true forerunner for devotional diptychs. Eventually these types of winged images separated completely from the text and the diptych form emerged. Not surprisingly given their roots in Books of Hours, most diptychs promoted devotion to the Virgin Mary.

Books of Hours reflected secular desires for a more individual spirituality. Simultaneous to the spread of Books of Hours, a lay movement known as the *Devotio Moderna* swept throughout the same region. Before we can understand how diptychs were used, we must examine the beliefs and practices of this movement. An examination of the *Devotio Moderna*, also known as the Modern Devout and the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, reveals the attitudes of larger lay society in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Flanders, which laid the foundations for the rise of the diptych. Begun in 1374 by Geert Grote, members sought a return to the spiritual fervor of the early Christians. Men and women joined together in common houses in towns across the Low Countries and lived a unique lifestyle of retreat. Their liminal existence, as laypersons resolving but not vowing to live a spiritual lifestyle, demonstrates the popular desire for a more independent religious experience. Though most people were not

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

members of the *Devotio Moderna*, citizens lived side by side with the brothers and sisters and attended the same churches. Their beliefs were known throughout the region.¹⁵

Members of the movement constantly defended its religious tax exemption in the cities to both town officials and ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁶ In fact its leaders often worked closely and collaboratively with town officials, resolving matters of property exchange and tax-exempt status.¹⁷ The brothers and sisters lived in the heart of towns across the region, and had to leave their homes to attend mass.¹⁸ Furthermore, the brothers hosted “collations” every Sunday, and townspeople were invited and encouraged to attend.¹⁹ The “collations” were essentially sermons, but the brothers had to refrain from calling them such because not all men within the movement were ordained to preach.²⁰ The *Devotio Moderna* also ran schools for young men in many towns. In various ways, people throughout the Low Countries came to know the movement’s beliefs. Many laypersons and clergy supported the movement, and the cause even found an advocate in Jean Gerson.

On October 12, 1396 Jean Gerson became dean of Saint Donation in Bruges. He acquired residence in the dean’s quarters and, though he resided mainly in Paris, he did partially live there.²¹ Especially during the papal schism, Bruges was a refuge for Gerson. In June 1399, Gerson left his position as professor of theology and lived in Bruges until September 1400.²² His personal documents reveal he that was having difficulty determining if his position as

¹⁵ John Van Engen, “Introduction,” in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 12. Van Engen’s book about the *Devotio Moderna* includes translations of surviving primary documents from the movement. The introduction gives a history of the movement and a short summary of each translation.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 79- 80. McGuire’s book details Gerson’s life and provided an excellent summary of his time in Bruges.

²² *Ibid.*, 95-97.

chancellor was detrimental to his salvation.²³ Gerson vacillated between Paris and Bruges for the next decade. However, in 1411 his frequent and prolonged absences led the canons to remove him from his office as dean.²⁴

Gerson's tenure in Bruges provides an important example of the *Devotio Moderna's* spread across the region. He studied the work of prominent brothers of the movement and was influenced by their ideas.²⁵ At the Council of Constance in 1415, when Dominican Friar Mathew Grabow attacked the *Devotio Moderna* for their communal lifestyle and accused the movement of acquiring new members under the "pretense of piety," Gerson sympathized with and supported the movement.²⁶ He led an open discussion between twelve "masters of theology" rejecting Grabow's claims in favor of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.²⁷ In a letter from April 1423, he specifically praised one branch of the *Devotio Moderna* in Holland for their work as copyists.²⁸ Such is the nature of this lay religious movement; although the brothers and sisters lived communal lives of retreat, they did not withdraw from their cities and towns. Men and women outside of the movement were absolutely exposed to their ideas.

Above all, the *Devotio Moderna* sought for a return to true inner piety. Brothers and Sisters called for a more personal form of spirituality, and the practices within the houses answered this call. Meditation was their primary means of prayer, and the devout were encouraged to focus on subjects that were personally appealing.²⁹ The movement allowed its

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 172-3. Van Engen's book provides an in depth history of the *Devotio Moderna*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ McGuire, 316.

²⁹ "On the Life and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Other Devotional Exercises" in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by John Van Engen, with a preface by Heiko A. Oberman (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 190.

members to truly tailor their prayer to the individual. A sermon by the movement's founder, Geert Grote, specifically addressed how images could aid the practices of the faithful. The areas of diptych use and the region of influence of the *Devotio Moderna* are almost exactly the same; it seems difficult to imagine a scenario in which these works were not influenced by the movement.

Geert Grote stopped preaching in 1383 and died in 1384, but the New Devotion would practice his ideas until 1563.³⁰ A surviving account of one sermon, location and date unknown, expressly reveals his attitude towards images and meditation. Grote's sermon reveals his philosophical approach to personal image devotion. It outlines in detail how images could and should be used. Using images was not the ultimate form of meditation, but Grote understood their use as a kind of preliminary step to train the mind.³¹ If used carefully, images could bring one to a higher level of true piety.³² John Van Engen explains that Grote's stance on using images in meditation while seeking a deep connection with God became characteristic of the entire movement.³³

Grote opens with a discussion of the "fourth class" of objects for meditation. The first class of objects for meditation is scripture. Grote briefly mentions that the second and third classes, "special revelations to saints" and "conjecture from the doctors," are of little to no use.³⁴ By contrast, he speaks at length on the fourth class, which includes sensory objects of meditation. Grote advises that the objects in this class-- images, forms, words, and sounds-- are all useful meditational aids.

³⁰ Van Engen, "Introduction," 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁴ Geert Grote, "A Treatise on Four Classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: A Sermon on the Lord's Nativity," in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by John Van Engen, with a preface by Heiko A. Oberman (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 117-118.

He understands meditation as crucial to successful prayer: "Every exercise of the mind arises from meditation and finds its completion there."³⁵ Images are not inherently spiritual, but they facilitate meditation because they can help a person reach a higher spiritual ground. Grote explains, "They are to be accepted not because they are believed true as such but rather because our feeble imaginations are thereby helped, our childish minds more potently and suitably nourished with the milk of Christ and more surely brought to his love."³⁶ Indeed he argues that although contemplation of the Scripture alone is the most desirable, many are simply incapable of this without first learning how to meditate and pray properly through the use of an image.³⁷ Meditating without a visual aid "is most difficult...except for some person truly elevated and abstracted towards higher things."³⁸ He characterizes images as a necessary component for devotion.

Grote bases his argument for the use of images in the scripture. Because humans are sensory creatures, we think and pray in sensory terms. Biblical descriptions of God set this precedent:

Scripture describes him with a stomach, head, and other members, and as using various tools; and throughout it imposes the corporeal upon the spiritual, form upon the formless.... And why this? Most certainly and most beneficently to nourish us children in our inner sight and mind with his milk.³⁹

Biblical texts explain the divine in understandable sensory terms, otherwise humans would be unable to relate to the content. In the same way, an image can act as a guide to direct prayer:

"...just as the external eye cannot fix upon or see anything but solid and delineated objects, so

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

the inner imagination requires something placed before it that is solid and delineated.”⁴⁰ Grote explains specifically why images promote proper devotion:

We are always in a position to place ourselves before him and to construe his face as well as the figure and stature of the saints; to take up conversation, seek counsel, and put questions to him and the saints; to offer ourselves to them as obedient domestic servants; and while faithful in this our service and obedience also to seek help and our desires; indeed almost to live in the same house with Christ and Mary....⁴¹

The image allows a supplicant to more fully imagine the divine as though actually present.

Grote continues to explain that although one must not accept an image as reality, this fourth class of objects for meditation has extremely beneficial effects: “Nor is there any falsehood in them so long as the mind does not cling to them but rather presumes them to be only something helpful and imagined-- much as we take up wooden images to further our meditations, using them to render the deeds more present.”⁴² He carefully discourages idolatry without discounting images completely.

As Grote expands upon the use of images, he warns that one should always keep something more concrete in mind when meditating. Otherwise, it can be too easy to get carried away by an image. He explains:

But when a person places himself imaginatively in the presence of Christ and his deeds, it is good at times to juxtapose something contrary to Christ’s presence that may serve to recall us mentally for a moment, lest we become deceived in our actual sight by some image. For just as we endow Christ’s divinity with forms and figures, deeds and instruments, so we need not fear to ascribe to his humanity and human deeds in our minds things more and other than, though never anything contrary to, what has been written. Indeed we should dare to bring it all into our own presence and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

time, as though we saw him and his deeds and heard him speaking.⁴³

Although Grote encourages and promotes using visual aids, he also understands them as a preliminary step. However, he repeatedly implies that reaching any sort of higher spirituality would be impossible without images: "...we should not withdraw from images and the imagined in our new birth until Christ and spiritual understanding have again taken shape within us, until we are spiritual beings judging all things spiritually."⁴⁴ He later expands upon this idea:

The species of light, colors, figures, and places cling tenaciously to the mind, for they are fundamental to all spiritual and intellectual cognition, preparing and leading the way, because nearly all intellectual and spiritual cognition arises out of an earlier sensible cognition. But these must be left behind as we approach our end, like ships coming into shore.⁴⁵

The more striking an image, the more devout prayer it incites.

Grote further explains that some images are more suiting to meditation than others:

"...those images that stick more tenaciously to the mind also imprint all the more forcefully the spiritual realities signified through them."⁴⁶ Considering Grote's discouragement of meditating on "special revelations to saints" and "conjecture from the doctors," his position on images is truly remarkable. Grote must have delivered his sermon sometime before 1374, when he was banned from preaching after attacking the local clergy.⁴⁷ He also mentions using wooden objects in his own spiritual practices revealing that even before the *Devotio Moderna* swept through the Low Countries, the faithful were turning to images in prayer.

Another defining characteristic of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life was their emphasis on individual spirituality. Men and women were encouraged to choose subjects of

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁷ Van Engen, "Introduction," 38.

meditation that were personally appealing rather than to follow a prescribed guide. Furthermore, following Grote's example, the movement held that exterior appearance during prayer should function as both an indicator and a stimulator of devout interior reflection. In a personal treatise written around the time of his conversion, entitled "Resolutions and Intentions But Not Vows," Grote explains the importance of proper posture during mass. He writes, "These exterior exercises are meant to induce their mental counterparts, and are therefore in vain if there is no correspondence."⁴⁸ He cites bowing as a specific example of physical behavior reflecting interior contemplation:

Such humbling adoration and inclination of the body, honorable to God and fitting for the mind, aids devotion in every way. The best, as you know, is to bow the head over the lower arm. For servants must especially show reverence to their Lord in his presence. Bowing is marvelously suited to the devotion of the mind, because of the analogous movement of the imagination.⁴⁹

Although Grote's explanation concerns behavior during mass, the idea spread to practice within the houses of the devout.

Grote made his resolutions and abandoned his church offices because he craved the zeal of the early Christians: "religion which has now grown decrepit was then in its vigor and at its peak."⁵⁰ He became extremely wary of the institution of the church, including corrupt clergy.

One of the resolutions expresses his concerns:

Never advise or tell or help anyone (unless he be a most devout person) to take holy orders. First, because of the teachings pertinent to the office, on what they must be, and would not be... second, because of simony, which commonly interjects itself; and third, because of the sorry state of the Church.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Geert Grote, "Resolutions and Intentions But Not Vows," in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 71.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

Because it was a movement comprised of laypersons, followers could express their faith without letting vows to the church adversely affect their spirituality.

Life inside of the houses of the Devotio Moderna centered on a communal existence in which members lived in harmony together. Men and women had to commit all personal belongings to the house upon joining. As such, diptychs would not have been appropriate within the houses because of their highly individual nature. Rather, they demonstrate the extent of the movement's influence outside of the houses. Not every man or woman could leave their family and surrender their possessions to join a house of the Common Life. However they could, through the use of a diptych, strive for the same personal piety found within the houses.

Jean Gerson's attitude towards the Devotio Moderna proves that their attitudes and practices were well known in Bruges in the fifteenth century. At that time, Bruges was a rich and powerful city, filled with master artists like Jan Van Eyck, Rogier Van der Weyden and Hans Memling. The diptychs produced by these artists shortly after Gerson's tenure in Bruges promoted the meditational and devotional attitudes of the Devotio Moderna. The works were physical manifestations of the lay desires for a closer relationship with God that were not limited to the followers of Geert Grote. In fact, the ubiquitous presence of these diptychs shows that these desires were actually expressed throughout society.

Grote's sermon emphasizes that meditation allows one "almost to live in the same house with Christ and Mary."⁵² As privately owned and used objects, diptychs truly allowed a patron to bring the divine into his own home. These personal objects provided their owners with a totally new form of access to Christ and Mary. Men no longer needed to leave their houses to

⁵² Grote, "A Treatise on Four Classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: A Sermon on the Lord's Nativity," 101-102.

practice their spirituality in a church. Rather, one simply opened up the wings of a diptych and looked upon an image of himself performing the very same action that he was currently enacting. The movement's emphasis on individual piety manifested in the private nature of a diptych. Rather than contemplating an altarpiece in a church, the diptych represented a personal image to accompany private meditation.

Grote's resolutions demonstrate how laypersons understood external demeanor as influencing and shaping mental activity. As images depicting prayer posture, diptychs functioned as a secondary source of this external expression. They became instructional tools demonstrating how to pray correctly. The objects promoted the belief that this contact with the divine was achievable if a patron behaved according to their example. Furthermore, Grote's position on the "images that stick more tenaciously to the mind" relates to the realism of the diptychs.⁵³ A diptych's realistic portrait heightened the impact upon the viewer. Although diptychs were popular among a wealthy elite class, most people did not encounter images on a constant basis. Owning a diptych and being able to use it and reflect upon it at will was extremely thrilling for patrons.

For the faithful meditating before diptychs, the works functioned by presenting an image that the mind could grasp on to and expand upon. However, as Grote argues, images were not to be understood as reality. The winged diptych structure inherently protected against this risk. While the combination of the divine and patron panels certainly promoted the benefits of proper meditation, its structure also constantly reminded the patron that this meditation could never bring about a total union. The domestic setting was another manifestation of this idea, as it placed the scene in a familiar and thus achievable context but also firmly grounded the vision to

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.

this world. Diptychs did not encourage a mystical experience, but rather a calm union with the divine.

The Devotio Moderna was characterized by a general mistrust of the clergy. Because diptychs were used in the home, away from the influence of the church, they also expressed this inherent mistrust of a corrupt church. Furthermore, very few diptychs survive depicting clergy members. Generally these objects were made for, and used strictly by laypersons. The Devotio Moderna sprang from Grote's personal resolutions and theories about individual spirituality, and the patrons of these diptychs, even though they were not official Brothers of the Common Life, nevertheless held the same ideas. The diptych became a means of asserting independence from the church and practicing the more personal piety promoted by the Devotio Moderna.

Books of Hours and lay movements like the Devotio Moderna set the stage for the rise of the diptych. They laid the foundation for these images to become widely used throughout the region. An examination of these trends allows us to fully understand their role in the diptych's rise to prominence. The widespread use of Books of Hours and the popular lay attitudes as expressed by the Devotio Moderna allowed diptychs to become such popular objects of meditation in fourteenth- and fifteenth- century Flanders.

Chapter II:

The Rise of the Diptych: Mass Production and Patron Networks

Diptychs first appeared around the year 1400 in royal courts. The *Wilton Diptych* featuring Richard II, from around 1397 is one of the earliest examples (Figure 4). Richard II used the diptych by an anonymous artist for his private devotions.¹ As a royal object, the diptych features luxurious gilded panels with expensive pigments like ultramarine.² The wings each measure only 47.5 by 29.5 cm.³ The left wing depicts Richard II, dressed in rich and expensive garments, who kneels on the bare ground with a forest in the background. Behind the king stand Saints John the Baptist, Edward the Confessor and Edmund as intercessors.⁴ Their arms present the king to the image on the right wing of the diptych.

The right wing depicts Mary standing in a rich field of flowers, surrounded by angelic attendants. She faces the king and holds the infant Jesus towards him, who in turn reaches out in blessing. Mary and her attendants all wear rich blue robes while Jesus is wrapped in a gold cloth. Both wings feature rich gold backgrounds. The *Wilton Diptych* also includes reverse images, including a gorged white hart on the left reverse and the royal court of arms of England

¹ Dillian Gordon, *The Wilton Diptych*, With an Essay by Caroline M. Barron and Contributions by Ashok Roy and Martin Wyld, Making and Meaning, Exhibition Catalog (London: National Gallery, 1993), 11.

² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

and France on the reverse of the right wing (Figure 5).⁵ Unlike the images in later diptychs, intercessors present the king for the Virgin and Christ's consideration. Perhaps this was meant to portray the king as especially humble.

On the continent, the Burgundian dukes were especially fond of diptychs. Philip the Good brought them and other devotional aids to mass with him.⁶ An illumination by Jean le Tavernier in fact shows the duke kneeling in front of an open book with a diptych hanging before him on the wall (Figure 6).⁷ A seventeenth-century copy of another manuscript illumination depicts *Pope Clement VI Offering a Diptych to the Future Jean Le Bon* (Figure 7).⁸ These illuminations provide crucial evidence for diptych use among the nobility. Following in the footsteps of Books of Hours, the genre spread from the royalty to the aristocracy and eventually became widespread throughout the upper middle class.⁹

Except in very rare cases, ownership was largely restricted to men, and women are largely absent from diptychs. Andrea Pearson argues that diptychs featured predominantly male patrons because of their semi-public nature.¹⁰ Because other viewers could have seen diptychs, Pearson places the works in the public and thus masculine sphere.¹¹ The works became expressions of masculinity.¹² Her argument is further supported by female portrayals in Books of Hours. Books of Hours were more private and thus more appropriately feminine, because

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gelfand, 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ John O. Hand, *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, Exhibition Catalog (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in association with Harvard University Press and Yale University Press, 2006), 56-8. For an excellent catalog featuring a number of diptychs see Hand. The large number of included works allows for excellent comparisons and the book was one of the most important sources in my research.

⁹ Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 4.

¹⁰ Andrea Pearson, "Personal Worship, Gender, and the Devotional Portrait Diptych," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Special Edition: Gender in Early Modern Europe, 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

other visitors to the home would not have seen them.¹³ Diptychs, while also kept in private homes, could be opened and displayed for visitors and guests as a prized possessions.

Despite their personal and private nature, diptychs were in fact produced in workshops. Commerce across the region was regulated by various guilds and organizations and the art market also fell under guild restriction.¹⁴ An artist was allowed only one shop to sell their works.¹⁵ Accordingly, most artists used the street level of their home as their shop and the upper floors for their private residence.¹⁶ Often artists lived near each other, thus creating a district.¹⁷ Living in such close quarters certainly exposed the artists to one another's works.

Similarities between works by different artists further reveal that artists looked at each other's works, saw what was successful and used those influences to their commercial advantage. Obviously if no one but the artist and patron knew what each diptych held, there would have been much more discrepancy between the works. Yet only three real variations between the religious images exist: the Virgin in a church, the Virgin against a solid background, and the Virgin in the domestic space. These similarities again support the theory that diptychs were not totally private. Patrons certainly valued the expertise of master painters and the prestige associated with owning their works.

Jan Van Eyck's *Berlin Madonna*, from 1437-39 (Figure 8), one panel of a now incomplete diptych, aptly demonstrates how artists copied the Virgin in the church motif.¹⁸ A large figure of Mary stands in a Gothic church, holding the infant Jesus in her arms. She looks towards the right of the composition and the now absent right wing that would have contained an

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ For a survey of Hans Memling's complete works and career see Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, translated by Ted Alkins (Antwerp: Fond Mercator Paribas, 1994), 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hand, 146.

image of a kneeling patron. Light floods in from beautiful stained glass windows all around the church. A crucifix in the background hangs above a group of clergy, who consult open books. The panel was located in Bruges in 1500, and patrons must have wanted a similar copy for themselves.¹⁹ Two other diptychs reveal how this panel was well known to other artists and copied by them. In fact, Van Eyck's fame almost certainly contributed to these other versions. Lesser artists tried to associate themselves with his work by copying it.

The influence of Van Eyck's *Berlin Madonna* panel is most apparent in a diptych by the Master of 1499 (Figure 9) and another by Jan Gossaert from 1513 (Figure 11).²⁰ The diptych by the Master of 1499, known as the *Diptych of Abbot Christiaan de Hondt*, features an extremely close copy of Van Eyck's panel (Figure 8). As in the *Berlin Madonna*, a large figure of the Virgin stands in a Gothic cathedral (Figure 9). Mary holds the infant Christ who holds onto his mother in exactly the same manner as Van Eyck's infant Christ. She looks towards the right wing and the cathedral setting also includes a hanging crucifix and a group of clergy.

Despite these similarities, the work lacks the skill and warmth of the original. Light does not stream in from the windows but rather permeates the scene, and the Gothic architecture does not seem to be as precisely painted. The floor appears more elaborate, a vase of flowers now sits in the lower bottom corner and the colors of Mary's garments have been reversed. In the original she wears a red gown with a blue outer cloth; in the later work the gown is blue and the outer cloth is red. A small frame also hangs from the column closest to the viewer featuring some written message. Nevertheless, the Master of 1499 clearly used Van Eyck's work as a source and deviated from it only a little. The Master of 1499 attempted to quote Van Eyck liberally.

¹⁹ Yvonne Yiu, In *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, Edited by John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk, With a Foreword by Thomas W. Lentz (Cambridge MA: Harvard Art Museums in association with Yale University Press, 2006), 112.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 111.

Because the patron panel that joined the *Berlin Madonna* (Figure 8) no longer survives, it is impossible to know how closely the donor panel featuring Abbot Christiaan de Hondt (Figure 9) echoes the original. In the right wing a man in white clerical vestments kneels in a luxurious domestic setting. The patron, Christian de Hondt, served as abbot at Ter Duinen, a Cistercian monastery outside of Bruges from 1495 to 1509.²¹ He folds his hands in prayer, has an open book in front of him, and contemplates Mary and the child with the utmost concentration. A small dog curls on the rug next to the abbot, and a fireplace glows in the background. Most notably, a small devotional diptych hangs on the back wall of the room. One wing depicts the crucifixion, while the other depicts an unidentifiable figure.²² The rounded wings mirror exactly the diptych's own structure.

The Master of 1499's diptych remains an important work not only because it demonstrates how artists copied one another but because it features a reverse image of another praying figure on the outside wing (Figure 10). Robrecht de Clercq, a subsequent abbot of Ter Duinen, had a kneeling image of himself added to the reverse of the right wing during the sixteenth century.²³ Rather than commission a new diptych, De Clercq appropriated this one for himself. While adding a new portrait was unusual, this addition nevertheless demonstrates how diptychs could be passed down for use by subsequent generations.²⁴

The later *Diptych of Antonio Siciliano and Saint Anthony* by Jan Gossaert from 1513 (Figure 11) also contains a close copy of Van Eyck's original composition.²⁵ We see the now familiar large Marian figure. She stands in the gothic church with the infant Christ and looks towards the patron image on the right wing. A crucifix hangs in the background and the group of

²¹ Hand, 140.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Yiu, 111.

clergy is still present. However this copy deviates more from Van Eyck's original (Figure 8) than the Master of 1499's copy (Figure 9). The church setting and Mary's figure (Figure 11), now clad only in blue, seem heavier and more solid than either earlier work. Gossaert also painted an additional set of columns along the right edge of the left wing, and the perspective is much more narrow. Her downward gaze seems to be skewed and she does not look at the patron, who kneels in rich clothing with his hands folded in prayer. A horse tied to a tree in the background suggests that this scene occurs while Antonio Siciliano travels. His namesake saint stands behind him with an open book and prayer beads and presents Antonio to the Virgin. Gossaert also inserted the owner's coat of arms in the greenery.

Antonio Siciliano was an important figure; he served as secretary and chamberlain to Duke Maximilian Sforza of Milan.²⁶ Sforza sent Siciliano to the court of Margaret of Austria in 1513, and probably commissioned the work on that visit.²⁷ The outdoor scene paired with Mary in a church certainly strikes the viewer. Because diptychs were so portable, perhaps Siciliano wanted the work to accompany him on his many travels while performing duties for Sforza. As the right wing depicts, the diptych would have allowed Siciliano to take a break from riding, tie up his horse and pray for a few moments in private reflection. The church setting then becomes a figment of the imagination, a manifestation of Siciliano's desires to be at church rather than on the road.

Especially because so many panels feature Mary and Jesus in a domestic or unarticulated setting, the Virgin in the Church motif seems specifically appropriate for these two patrons. Christiaan de Hondt served as abbot, so an ecclesiastical setting seems obviously suitable. Siciliano was an Italian visiting the Netherlands on official business that required travelling long

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

distances. The luxurious and beautiful church building would have provided comfort for Siciliano on his grueling travels. The source for these later works, the *Berlin Madonna* (Figure 8) could have been attached to any number of patron images. In fact, artists and their workshops painted prototypes for the divine panel in a diptych and then customized the patron panel to a buyer's specifications. This ability to customize one of the wings made the diptych personal to the owner. A developed divine model facilitated the mass production; once the religious subject became formulaic only the patron panel had to be completed.

Three diptychs by Roger Van Der Weyden present his standard approach to both the Virgin and patron portraits. Van der Weyden in fact invented this type of diptych, in which the half-length portraits filled the panels to create an intimate connection between the owner, Mary and Christ.²⁸ In *Diptych of Jean de Gros* (Figure 12) from 1455- 60, the patron sits against a dark blue background. He wears rich clothing and folds his hands in a devout gesture. His eyes focus totally and completely on the Virgin Mary and child. Everything else seems to fade away for the sitter in the dark background. On the left wing of the panel, Mary and an infant Christ also sit against a dark background. Mary offers her left breast to the baby. Mary and Jesus' halos radiate light and illuminate the patron's face on the other wing. Van der Weyden painted both Mary and de Gros in half-length portraits.

Jesus reclines and his entire body seems laid out for our display. His little hands and feet positioned openly towards de Gros remind the viewer that they will one day feature the wounds of the stigmata. Jesus left hand seems to attempt a blessing gesture, but it remains incomplete. Van der Weyden painted the gazes of the figures to move the viewer's eyes across the panel in a triangular fashion. Mary looks down at the patron whose eyes lead back to Christ. Christ gazes

²⁸ Dirk De Vos, *Rogier Van Der Weyden: The Complete Works* (New York : Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 111.

up at his mother who leads us back to the patron. In this way the diptych kept the eyes active, stimulating the active meditation that Jean de Gros enacted before it. This connection of gazes allowed de Gros to make the mystical leap across the hinge and reach Mary and Jesus. Though placed on separate panels, their eye contact shows that the figures are aware of each other, and that De Gros' correct meditation has earned him this attention from the Virgin.

Jean de Gros worked for Duke Charles the Bold, Philip the Good's son, in a variety of positions, including secretary of state and comptroller general.²⁹ Despite or perhaps because of this success, de Gros was extremely disliked and many suspected him of misusing his positions for personal gain.³⁰ He owned a large, luxurious house in Bruges and supported the Church of Saint James there.³¹ However ill health forced de Gros to abandon his official positions in 1478.³² He was a member of the Order of the Golden Fleece and served as acting treasurer between 1478 and 1484.³³

The reverses of the wings (Figure 13) feature the coat of arms of the de Gros family, but other identifying details are absent. Furthermore, for all of his enormous wealth and power, de Gros appears in rich, yet not ostentatious clothing (Figure 12). He does not appear in all the trappings of luxury and wears only one ring on his pinky finger. For someone of de Gros' wealth and status such a depiction showed his humility before the Virgin. Jean de Gros wanted this diptych to present him in humble supplication. As a private devotional object, this image was especially appropriate.

In the second diptych by Rogier Van der Weyden, the *Diptych of Philippe de Croy*, date unknown (Figure 14), we see a very similar scene. Philippe de Croy's half portrait appears

²⁹ Hand, 246.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

against a dark background as he kneels in prayer before the Virgin and Child on the left panel. De Croy wears rich clothing and jewelry to denote his status and wealth. His hands grasp prayer beads, and the top of his sword can be seen in the bottom of the panel.³⁴ On the left wing, Mary's half-length portrait appears before a rich gold background. She holds the young Christ in front of her body, towards de Croy. Mary and the patron gaze at each other directly. Christ plays with and unlatches a book in an extremely lifelike depiction of a squirming baby. For his part Philippe holds prayer beads and focuses totally on the Virgin and child before him. The images suggest that through a prayer book, prayer beads, and the diptych itself, de Croy gains this special access to Mary and Jesus. The reverse of the patron wing features the de Croy family coat of arms (Figure 15).

Patrons knew each other and may have recommended painters to their friends. Philippe de Croy, like the other men who owned these diptychs, was a man of status and importance. He worked in the Burgundian court as chamberlain to Duke Philip the Good.³⁵ He held military positions under Charles the Bold as well.³⁶ Like Jean de Gros, de Croy belonged to the Order of the Golden Fleece.³⁷ He attended the marriage of Maximilian I to Mary of Burgundy and again served as chamberlain under Maximilian.³⁸ De Gros and de Croy almost certainly knew each other. They were nearly the same age, and both worked for and had close ties with the Dukes of Burgundy. Perhaps the men were even friends. The connections between de Gros and de Croy become even more important when considering the similarities of their diptychs. Did one man suggest Rogier Van Der Weyden to the other after using his own diptych successfully? Did one see the other's diptych in a semi-public setting and want a copy for himself?

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Certainly, the Virgin Mary and patron portraits in the two diptychs look almost exactly the same. This is not to say that the two are identical. One important difference in the de Croy work (Figure 14) is Jesus' book, which can perhaps be explained by de Croy's love for collecting rare and luxurious manuscripts.³⁹ The *Diptych of Philippe de Croy* is also much more luxurious than that of Jean de Gros. Technical analysis further reveals that the patron panel was at one time glazed with silver leaf to complement the Virgin's gold panel.⁴⁰ Nevertheless the political and personal connections between the two men cannot be ignored when considering the similarities between these two privately owned objects.

The third diptych by Rogier Van der Weyden confirms the mentality of workshop production. The *Diptych of Jean de Froimont*, also date unknown (Figure 16), provides further evidence for Rogier van der Weyden's formulaic approach to personal diptychs. A half-length portrait of Jean de Froimont appears before the now familiar dark background. Like de Gros and de Croy, de Froimont kneels in a prayer posture and focuses on the Virgin and Child in the other panel. This Virgin, while physically similar, does not gaze back at the patron but rather faces directly outward and looks down at her child. She brings her own hands together in a prayer gesture and De Froimont's likeness contemplates her in imitation. When the patron used this diptych he had both his own portrait and the Virgin's to inspire his behavior. As in the de Gros and de Croy works, Memling paints a reverse image. The reverse of the patron wing depicts a grisaille of Saint Lawrence and a banner displaying the patron's name (Figure 17).

This commission further underscores the importance of patron networks. Jean de Froimont belonged to an important family and worked for Duke Charles the Bold as a

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

councilor.⁴¹ In 1450, Jean de Froimont worked for Jean de Croy, Philippe de Croy's father.⁴² Jean and Philippe became close friends, and Philippe even named de Froimont as a guardian for his children and as an executor of his will.⁴³ Such a close relationship indicates that the ownership of these two diptychs was anything but coincidental. The connections between Jean de Gros, Philippe de Croy and Jean de Froimont suggest that these men discussed the effectiveness of diptychs and the quality of the artist who made them. The objects became status symbols within a group of elite upper class men. Rather than trying to outdo one another with the most luxurious diptych, each patron seemed to want exactly the same thing.

Rogier Van Der Weyden's works demonstrate how an artist's basic formula for a diptych could in fact change very little between commissions. Each patron is depicted in a half-length portrait against a dark background in each work. They fold their hands in prayer and gaze solemnly at the Virgin and infant Christ. Van der Weyden seems to paint the exact same Virgin Mary in slightly different positions. She also rests against a solid background. The *Diptych of Jean de Froimont* (Figure 16) and the *Diptych of Jean de Gros* (Figure 12) both feature images of a nursing Mary. She exposes her right breast and offers it to the baby in both panels. Such a depiction of the Madonna was an established intercessory image.⁴⁴ As Christ does not actively nurse, she offers her breast to both de Froimont and de Gros as well.⁴⁵ Mary's intercessory role was of primary importance in these works. The patrons probably recited the Hours of the Virgin before the diptychs. Rogier Van Der Weyden thus painted Mary actively interceding for the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Barbara G. Lane, *The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1984), 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

owners. Her exposed breast reveals that their prayers were successful and she will intercede on their behalf.

The dark backgrounds in the works ensure that all other distractions are removed, allowing a devout supplicant to focus solely on his own likeness and the religious figures. Because the patron occupies this unarticulated setting, the realism of the works becomes more important and powerful. The absence of a multitude of identifiers demanded that Van der Weyden depict these men with the utmost verisimilitude. In order to work and facilitate proper meditation, the owner had to relate to and identify with his painted likeness. Certainly Van der Weyden's extremely careful and realistic depictions helped the owners of his diptychs reach the divine.

Van der Weyden painted each diptych to enact a proper meditation that brought the patron a close experience of the Madonna and child. The similarities between these diptychs reveal that they were in fact manifestations of popular lay desires at the time. While a diptych was personalized with donor portraits and other identifying details like coats of arms, the divine panels looked strikingly similar. Artists developed a prototype and adapted it to individual patrons. These objects functioned in a similar manner for each patron.

Chapter III:

Hans Memling: The *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove*

As the works of Jan Van Eyck, the Master of 1499, Jan Gossaert and Rogier Van der Weyden demonstrate, diptychs were widespread and formulaic. Yet these similarities provided each individual patron with a closer meditational experience and more personal connection with God. A close examination of two superb works by Hans Memling reveals how diptychs provided their owners with divine access. Notably, both works are the only portrait diptychs by Memling that survive intact.¹

The earliest details of Hans Memling's life are uncertain, however some basic information can be pieced together. Memling was born sometime between 1430 and 1440 in Selingenstadt, in present day Germany.² Both of his parents, occupations unknown, died probably of the plague in 1451.³ He was educated for at least some period of time at the Benedictine monastery in his hometown, which provided the future master with early exposure to paintings, illuminated manuscripts and other visual treasures.⁴

¹ Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 279.

² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

Memling most likely went to Cologne in 1452, where he encountered the work of Stephen Lochner and other German painters.⁵ He then passed through Brussels and trained under Rogier Van der Weyden in some capacity, but the details of this training are uncertain. Nevertheless Memling's work would remain very closely influenced by the older master.⁶ After Memling's arrival in Bruges around 1465 the details of his life become more certain.⁷

In Memling's time, Bruges was a rich and important city, the banking center of the north, and filled with potential clients.⁸ Hans Memling became an official citizen of Bruges on January 30, 1465, and he quickly established himself as a painter to this wealthy class through a number of highly realistic portraits.⁹ He bought a house in the artists' district of Sint-Jorisstraat and lived there for the remainder of his life, but did not immediately become a member of the painters' guild and never registered as a master painter.¹⁰ Nevertheless he quickly rose to prominence in Bruges and acquired wealthy patrons and important commissions.¹¹

Memling made valuable connections within the city that provided him with important patrons and commissions. He was a member of the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Snow at the Church of Our Lady.¹² This confraternity boasted almost a thousand members including Charles the Bold and his mother, Isabel of Portugal, and the bishop of Tournai.¹³ Through these connections and an established reputation, Memling ran a large workshop that produced an

⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid*.

impressive number of works throughout his life.¹⁴ He died in August of 1494 and was buried in St. Giles' church.¹⁵

Though small in size, the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* (Figure 18) remains one of Memling's most important and monumental work. It survived as a testament to Memling's skill and the divine access provided by a personal diptych. Memling carefully depicted each element of the scene to heighten the viewer's devout experience. The diptych survived in its original frame, which provides the useful details of the donor name, age, and date of completion.¹⁶ Hans Memling completed the work in 1487 and it remained in the Van Nieuwenhove family until 1665 when the last descendent died without any heirs.¹⁷ Today the work is located in Bruges at Memlingmuseum in Sint-Janshospitaal.¹⁸

The diptych, following the typical format, consists of one panel depicting the divine subject of contemplation paired with a panel depicting the worldly patron. The left panel presents the viewer with the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus. Mary faces the viewer directly, but gazes downward. Her right hand wraps around Jesus' stomach, displaying his body, while her left hand holds an apple in front of the child, who reaches for it. Jesus rests on a richly patterned pillow, with another decorative cloth below. A small portion of Mary's red veil seems to hang over the edge of the frame and intrude into the viewer's space.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 279. The oak panels each measure 44.7 x 33.5, with the frame the wings are each 52 x 41.5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49, 68, 282. At some point the diptych moves to St. Julian's Hospice, which is closely connected to the Van Nieuwenhove family, and later to St. John's Hospital in Bruges.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 279. The family had a chapel at the Church of Our Lady in Bruges; Maarten's parents, his brother and sister-in-law, wife and Maarten himself are all buried in the chapel. Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 131, suggests that the diptych could have been displayed in the chapel at some point while still in the family's possession. This possible location would yet again alter the objects' functionality. Such a public location certainly diminishes the privacy of an object. Perhaps the diptych was moved to serve as a public display of the family's piety rather than to actively aid personal devotion.

A set of slightly open shutters behind Mary reveals a green outdoor scene. The arched glass above the opening serves to identify the patron. The glass displays the Van Nieuwenhove family crest and motto, “There’s cause [in it].”¹⁹ Four roundels surround the coat of arms (Figure 19), each depicting a hand planting seeds in freshly tilled earth.²⁰ They depict both sunshine and rain to show that these new seeds will in fact grow lush and green.²¹ These roundels illustrate the meaning of Maarten’s surname, which means ‘new garden.’²² A convex mirror (Figure 20) also hangs in the background. The mirror reflects an image of the entire scene to the viewer, revealing that Mary sits on some sort of stone stool and that Mary, Maarten and Jesus all occupy the same room. Just as in the foreground, Maarten kneels to her left and looks upon her in profile. The reflection also depicts a book propped open next to Mary, but she does not use it. The window behind Mary’s left shoulder features an open green area, river, and city backdrop. The roundels above this window depict Saint George and Saint Christopher.²³

Memling paints the right wing of the diptych (Figure 18) according to a different perspective. The wall behind the patron provides clues about how to angle the right wing with the left when the diptych stands open. Maarten does not face the viewer head on, but rather angles his body towards Mary. He is richly dressed and a book rests open in front of him on the same surface that appears before Mary. A portion of Mary’s red cloak extends into this wing of the diptych and rests under the book. Martin seems to be kneeling, and only his torso is visible.

¹⁹ Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 113. “Il ya cause.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 114-115. Pearson cites the roundels as further evidence for her argument of the diptych as depicting bodily restraint.

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

²³ *Ibid.*, 102. Pearson argues that the diptych carefully promotes “uncompromised physical control.” She cites the inclusion of Saints Martin, George and Christopher as iconographical evidence, proposing that the three figures were collectively praised for their “bodily fortitude.” While possible, this suggestion seems far-fetched and forced.

He folds his hands in prayer and totally focuses on Mary and Jesus. The outdoor scene continues in the windows on this wall, and stained glass behind Van Nieuwenhove features Saint Martin.²⁴

Maarten Van Nieuwenhove, one of four children, belonged to a prominent Bruges family. He was born in November of 1463 to Michael Van Nieuwenhove and Margaret van der Scheure.²⁵ Notably, the Van Nieuwenhove family had a private chapel at the Church of Our Lady, where Memling belonged to his confraternity.²⁶ Maarten's father enjoyed a successful career as a prominent official for thirty years, and served as city councilor, treasurer, district head, and alderman of Bruges.²⁷ An older cousin of Maarten's also served as a city councilor. Maarten's older brother, Jan, also experienced success as a public official, and served as city councilor, mayor and water manager for Flanders.²⁸ Not to be outdone by his father, cousin and brother, Maarten would also go on to work as a public official. He served as a city councilor in both 1492 and 1494; in 1495 and 1498 he was the district head, and in 1497 he was the mayor of Bruges.²⁹ Sadly his career was cut short when he died at age 37 in 1500.³⁰

In the 1480s Bruges underwent a period of political turbulence and uncertainty. Charles the Bold died in 1477 in battle with the Swiss during the siege of Nancy.³¹ His daughter, Mary of Burgundy, rose to the throne but had to fight revolts throughout the empire.³² She married the son of the German emperor, Maximilian in 1477 but died only a few years later in 1482.³³ The citizens of the empire refused to submit to Maximilian's rule, and more violent revolts took place

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Maximiliaan P. J. Martens, "Some Reflections on the Social Functions of Diptychs," in *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, ed. by John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk, With a Foreward by Thomas W. Lentz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums in association with Yale University Press, 2006), 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 126.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 41.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

throughout the region.³⁴ Given their prominence in government, the Van Nieuwenhove family was especially affected by the upheaval. Maarten's cousin was imprisoned in 1481 for suspected treason against the archduke.³⁵ He was then temporarily exiled in 1485 and left Bruges permanently in 1490.³⁶ Maarten Van Nieuwenhove's brother, Jan, was one of many men tortured and executed during the Bruges revolt against Maximilian in 1488.³⁷ Memling produced this diptych for Maarten against this backdrop of political turmoil and uncertainty.

At the time of the diptych's commission in 1487, Van Nieuwenhove was 23 years old, unmarried and without public office.³⁸ Yet Memling depicted a pious, well-dressed man. His rich clothing denotes his upper class status, and the book indicates both his piety and literacy. Maarten had not yet risen to prominence yet the frame below his portrait proudly reveals his age. As an unestablished member of an important family, the diptych became an extremely important object of both self-promotion and self-assurance for Maarten.

These diptychs, despite their small size and intimate functions were not always totally private, and visitors and guests to Maarten's home probably saw the diptych. Furthermore, because Memling was an established artist in Bruges the object became an object of pride. X-rays of the diptych reveal that Memling in fact added the coat of arms of the Van Nieuwenhove family (Figure 19), painting over a rectangular window.³⁹ The political setting at the time must certainly have influenced this late change.

By 1487, the family's position had already been affected by revolts against Maximilian. Because Maarten had not yet taken office, he was able to present himself as the new hope for the

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Martens, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 50.

³⁸ Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 91, 126.

³⁹ Hand, 182.

family. If displayed publicly the diptych would have communicated an extremely positive impression of the young man, capable and dedicated. Just as the hands plant seeds in the freshly tilled ground in the stained glass roundels behind Mary, Maarten became the new hope for the Van Nieuwenhovés. He presented himself as an untarnished representative for the family. Maarten's father had been dead for some time, his brother's fate was closely tied to Maximilian's and his cousin had been exiled; Memling depicted Maarten to represent the "new garden" of his name. His rich clothing and focused demeanor convey a sense of maturity and determination.

In this way, diptychs served as subtle advertisements for their owners. Their main function was absolutely to aid devotion yet they could also send messages to outside viewers. Most notably, Maarten appears capable because he prays successfully and has been granted his divine encounter. In Bruges in 1487, an image of successful pious prayer conveyed secular capability. Through a combination of features, Hans Memling crafted a functioning object of devotion for Maarten Van Nieuwenhove that also communicated a message of Maarten's political aspirations.

Against the backdrop of political turmoil, the devotional use of the diptych must have given Maarten moments of true retreat from the pressures of the outside world. For a precious time he could withdraw from the distractions of his violent city. Just as the members of the *Devotio Moderna* could retreat into their homes within the cities so could the patrons of diptychs find temporary sanctuary in their private meditations. In various ways, Hans Memling illustrates Maarten Van Nieuwenhove's access to the divine through the use of his private diptych.

The mirror (Figure 20) plays a key role in depicting this holy encounter. The barrier between Mary and Maarten reveals that the viewer looks onto this scene through a window. This

window is in fact the diptych itself, and the hinge has become the middle pane. Thus the diptych literally allowed Maarten to open his diptych and gaze upon the divine as though looking through a window. Even after Maarten's death, the mirror ensures that the donor remains perpetually praying. Furthermore, the reflection verifies that what Memling has shown to the viewer is actually happening. Maarten's proper devotion and prayer allowed him to reach this higher state of meditation that places the Virgin and child directly before his eyes. Maarten would have kneeled before the diptych, probably with a book, and imitated exactly what he saw his own likeness doing. In the same way, the mirror then reflects Maarten's actual behavior. The mirror serves as confirmation that his mediation can actually work and provide access to the divine. In private use, Maarten would have found motivation when reflecting upon his image. Memling's work provided the young man with an object of aspiration.

Memling further suggests Van Nieuwenhove's ability to reach Mary and Christ through meditation through several features in the diptych (Figure 18). The Oriental rug on the raised surface before the two kneeling adults continues across both panels.⁴⁰ Mary's red veil functions in a similar manner and drapes onto the patron wing. The veil especially suggests that through his prayer and meditation, Maarten was granted this divine encounter. While the mirror's reflection certainly shows the figures occupying the same space, they are still separated by a barrier. By contrast the veil is a concrete and physical intrusion. Furthermore, the veil supports Maarten's book, marking it as an essential component in Maarten's successful meditation.

Mary's veil and the pillow underneath Christ are the only elements in the diptych that intrude into the viewer's space. Indeed both the pillow and the red cloth seem to hang over the frame and emerge from the painted wing. What does this intrusion represent? The overhanging objects reinforce the accessibility provided by the diptych. The veil and pillow are painted with

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

such realism that they could very well be concrete objects entering into the viewer's space. When Maarten used the diptych he saw the veil reaching both into the space of his painted portrait and into his own actual space. Memling's depiction of the veil and pillow demonstrated Maarten's complete access to Mary and the infant Christ when he meditated before the diptych.

While diptychs certainly grew out of Books of Hours they did not replace their literary counterparts. Instead, the two could be used simultaneously. Though the book rests open, Maarten does not seem to be actively using it and rather focuses completely on the divine figures. Geert Grote's sermon reveals that laypersons could in fact abandon the use of a book altogether and focus solely on an image to aid their devotion. Many features work together to make the diptych such an appropriate aid to private prayer. The *Devotio Moderna* promoted this type of personal relationship with God, and diptychs filled a necessary void in bringing meditational images to the masses. Their presence in the home was a means of asserting some independence from the church. While Books of Hours contained church approved literature, the church could not in any way regulate how a person meditated without a book and with a diptych alone.

Chapter IV:

Hans Memling: *The Diptych with a Young Man Kneeling Before the Virgin and Child* and the
Triptych of Benedetto Portinari

As the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* (Figure 18) makes clear, Hans Memling was a master at depicting the divine as accessible in personal devotional diptychs. Memling's *Diptych with a Young Man Kneeling Before the Virgin and Child*, from between 1485 to 1490 (Figure 21), offers further evidence of this.¹ The young male patron, Mary, and infant Jesus all occupy the same domestic space. The left panel features a half-length Marian portrait, as she holds her child before her body, displaying him for the viewer. Dirk De Vos suggests that the pillow underneath the infant Jesus probably protruded into the viewer's space; unfortunately the original frame for that wing has been lost.² Mary's right hand offers the baby a piece of fruit, which he reaches for with his right hand. Christ turns his head and gazes directly at the patron, while Mary looks down at Jesus, seemingly unaware of the young man. A mirror hangs on the wall behind Mary, reflecting the scene to the viewer. The continuous window, although divided by the hinge, further reveals that these figures all occupy the same space.

¹ H el ene Verougstraete, In *Essays in Context: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, Edited by John Oliver Hand and Ron Spronk, With a Foreward by Thomas W. Lentz (Cambridge MA: Harvard Art Museums in association with Yale University Press, 2006), 159.

² De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 220.

In the patron panel Memling painted a typical owner portrait. A young man kneels and gazes devoutly at Mary and Christ. He has been using a devotional book, but focuses totally on his divine visitors. He holds his hands in a gesture of prayer. A piece of furniture with a vase of flowers on top of it stands on the wall behind the young man. The patron's book and left elbow actually extend outside of the painted scene into the viewer's space. The book's latch falls out onto the frame of the diptych. The reverse of the patron wing depicts St. Anthony of Padua in grisaille (Figure 23).³ More importantly, the reverse image reveals that the patron wing, like Maarten's portrait, was the wing that was opened and shut.⁴ This reverse image would have been on display when the diptych was not being used.

The divine panel (Figure 21) is very similar to the Van Nieuwenhove work, yet Memling makes one important addition. Christ plays with a white cloth, which wraps realistically around his chubby baby leg. This seemingly playful gesture alludes to the burial shroud that will cover the crucified Christ. Such a subtle reference allowed Memling to maintain his formulaic approach to the divine panels of diptychs yet insert further meaning into the panel. It also demonstrates the influence of the earlier Van der Weyden panels. In both the *Diptych of Philippe de Croy* (Figure 14) and the *Diptych of Jean de Froimont* (Figure 16), the divine wing features a white cloth wrapping around the infant Christ. The baby in the de Froimont panel seems to have been especially influential; Memling replicated Christ's tiny grasp on the white cloth in his later diptych (Figure 21).⁵

As in the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* (Figure 18), the mirror hanging behind Mary reflects a particularly interesting image back to the viewer. Memling again painted a convex mirror (Figure 22) that provides further information about the scene between the two

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Verougstraete, 159.

⁵ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 220.

panels.⁶ The reflection reveals the entire structure of the window, with upper panes of stained glass.⁷ The window is especially reminiscent of the architecture in the Van Nieuwenhove work. However, rather than reflecting the young man and Mary, the mirror reveals two other figures present in the room.⁸ De Vos identifies these figures as two children: a girl in a yellow bonnet and a boy wearing a red hat.⁹ He further argues that Mary's red cloak reflects back from the far right of the mirror, placing these figures behind Mary.¹⁰ De Vos' assertions seem a little too bold. One young face is reflected clearly, however it becomes difficult to assign a gender. Identifying a second figure seems impossible. Nevertheless, the presence of this child (or children) demand further consideration.

The viewer would remain completely unaware of these extra figures were it not for the mirror's reflection. De Vos suggests that perhaps the boy and girl are younger siblings under the patron's care.¹¹ Perhaps their youth made a true portrait inappropriate, so Memling instead painted only a reflection, or instead they could also be the sitter's children. Perhaps they are young, deceased loved ones. Their reflection in the divine panel would have provided a truly comforting image for the patron; his family is safe under the heavenly protection and care of Mary. In either case, their absence from the main scene is truly puzzling. Although the identities and purpose of these extra figures remains illusive, their presence confirms that this diptych was highly personalized to the sitter's needs and preferences.

The physical intrusions of the book and the patron's elbow serve instructional purposes. Through the use of the very book depicted the patron reached the same divine encounter

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

experienced by his portrait. Similarly, gesture and posture become important factors for this successful meditation. The portrait's body language demonstrates the appropriate physical behavior to bring about a divine encounter. As such, this patron panel exhibits the influence of the *Devotio Moderna's* emphasis on external behavior in popular lay devotion exceptionally well.

Following Rogier van der Weyden's lead, Memling customized his formulaic approach for the devotional diptych for each commission. The diptych functioned for this young man in the same way as did Maarten Van Nieuwenhove's, to provide a personal and private means of devout expression. Unique details increased the realism and thus the functionality of the works. The more lifelike the image, the easier it was for a patron to use it for focused meditation.

Memling completed the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* (Figure 24) in 1487, the same year that he completed the devotional image for Van Nieuwenhove (Figure 18).¹² The triptych's small size indicates that it was also for personal use.¹³ The two works, especially the Marian panels, are extremely similar. The wings are also almost exactly the same size, which suggests that perhaps Memling used the same pattern for both.¹⁴ Today the outer wings of the triptych (Figure 24) are in the Uffizi in Florence, while the center panel is in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin.¹⁵ However the unified background between the panels leaves no doubt that the panels once formed a private devotional triptych.

The *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* further demonstrates how Memling both personalized commissions and presented the divine as totally accessible. The left panel features a

¹² Hand, 182.

¹³ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 286. The wings measure 45.5 by 34.5, 41.5 by 31.5, and 45 by 34 cm.

¹⁴ Hand, 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

portrait of Saint Benedict, the patron's namesake saint, indentified by name. He holds an open book in front of his body and studies it carefully. His left hand also holds a curved staff. A crucifixion hangs on the wall behind St. Benedict. The central panel depicts Memling's typical Marian portrait, and she looks almost exactly like the Mary from the two diptychs (Figures 18 and 21). She holds Christ in front of her body and gazes downwards, while in her left hand she holds a piece of fruit in front of the baby. Christ reclines on a beautiful pillow and looks towards the patron portrait. His left hand reaches for the fruit while his right hand rises in a blessing. The patron wing on the right features the now familiar half portrait. Benedetto kneels in elegant garments before a raised surface, with his hands joined in prayer. A book rests open before him and he gazes in concentration at Mary and Jesus. The figures all occupy the same space, some sort of loggia or other domestic interior. Arches open upon a continuous landscape scene that connects the three wings.

Like Maarten Van Nieuwenhove, Benedetto Portinari belonged to an important family in Bruges. His uncle, Tommaso Portinari, managed the Bruges branch of the Medici bank between 1465 and 1478.¹⁶ Tommaso worked closely with the Burgundian court and lent large sums of money there.¹⁷ His close ties with Charles the Bold earned him the right to collect taxes on all of the wool imported into the Low Countries.¹⁸ The elder Portinari also commissioned works from Memling.¹⁹ Two wings of a devotional triptych from around 1470 depict Tommaso and his wife, Maria Baroncelli at prayer (Figure 25).²⁰ The central panel, now lost, probably featured an image of the Virgin Mary similar to Memling's other Marian panels.²¹ Tommaso also

¹⁶ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100..

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30..

²¹ *Ibid.*

commissioned *Scenes from the Passion of the Christ* from around 1470 (Figure 26).²² The narrative scene probably functioned as a public altarpiece in St. James Church in Bruges, which received large donations from both Portinari and Charles the Bold.²³ Notably donor portraits of Benedetto and his wife appear kneeling in each corner. These portraits are strikingly similar to the donor portraits in what is perhaps Tommaso's most famous commission, the *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo Van der Goes (Figure 27).

Tommaso Portinari's work in Bruges paved the way for his nephew Benedetto to rise to similar prominence. Benedetto and his brother Folco began to act officially on Tommaso's behalf in 1496, when their uncle left Bruges permanently and returned to Italy.²⁴ However in 1487, when Memling completed the work for Benedetto, the patron was unmarried, in his early twenties, and had not yet taken over the family's interests.²⁵ Benedetto lived with his uncle Tommaso in a luxurious Bruges mansion and most probably used the triptych there (Figure 24).²⁶

Notably, the Marian wing and the patron wing close together like a diptych, with the St. Benedict panel closing on top of both.²⁷ Perhaps the sitter's Italian roots can explain the differences between this work and the diptychs. Memling depicted the figures in a loggia setting with rounded arches and columns, rather than in a domestic Flemish interior. Italian devotions tended to be more public than private, as evidence by important public commissions including Memling's *Scenes from the Passion of the Christ* for Tommaso Portinari (Figure 26). The inclusion of the kneeling donor portraits demonstrated Tommaso's piety to the viewers in St.

²² *Ibid.*, 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Ibid., 50.

²⁷ Verougstraete, 169.

James Church. Yet in the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari*, Tommaso's Italian nephew has adopted a Northern style of pictorial devotion.

David Wilkins establishes that private triptychs in Italy were used predominantly by women.²⁸ Perhaps Tommaso's residence in Bruges changed his devotional practices. Public displays of piety, typical of Italy, would not have been appropriate in Bruges, so Tommaso had to adapt. Furthermore, he was trying to establish himself as an important figure, like his uncle. A devotional triptych by Hans Memling would have sent a message of importance to any possible viewers. Like the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* (Figure 18), the triptych presents an image of capability and piety.

Despite the physical differences between Memling's diptychs (Figures 18 and 21) and the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* (Figure 24), the similarities between the images reveal that the artist took the same approach to presenting the divine as accessible. Benedetto's portrait served as a model for concentrated, pious devotion. His proper mediation and use of the book allows him to occupy the same space as the Virgin and child. Furthermore, St. Benedict does not seem to intercede actively on Benedetto's behalf. The saint's total focus on his book serves as a model for Portinari's own behavior. Memling thus used portraits of both the owner and his patron saint as instructional models for Benedetto.

The images in these works were not only behavioral examples but also objects of devotion and contemplation. An iconographic study reveals how Memling's works communicated much more to their users than simply a domestic scene of a divine apparition. Contemporary beliefs associated Mary with the church, and Christ with the Eucharist. Just as Mary carried Christ in her womb, so too did the Church hold the Eucharistic feast within it.

²⁸ David Wilkins, "Opening the Doors to Devotion: Trecento Triptychs and Suggestions Concerning Images and Domestic Practice in Florence," in *Italian Panel Paintings of the Duecento and Trecento, Studies in the History of Art 61*, Edited by Victor Schmidt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 371-93.

Christ's body and blood was celebrated at the altar, and the altarpiece below it shared in this focus. Because Mary carried Christ in the same way that the altar offers the Eucharist, her womb was associated with the tabernacle.²⁹ Many medieval tabernacles were designed as elaborate towers, and images of Mary often placed her in a tower setting in allusions to these structures and the associations between the tabernacle and Mary's womb.³⁰

Barbara Lane suggests that Hans Memling's *Madonna and Child with Angels* features towers in the landscape to recall their association with Mary and tabernacles (Figure 28).³¹ In the work the Virgin Mary sits on an elaborate throne. She holds the infant Jesus on her lap with her right hand, while her left hand holds a book open. She devotes her attention to the book, even as Jesus' left hand ruffles the pages in a childlike gesture. Jesus turns his body toward an angel kneeling on Mary's right, who extends a fruit to the baby. Another angelic figure kneels on Mary's left and plays a harp. The open window behind the group of figures reveals that the scene occurs elevated above the landscape, perhaps placing it within a tower.³²

Similarly, the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* (Figure 24) also features a tower in the background. The work, although obviously not a diptych, was nevertheless used for private prayer. The figures occupy some sort of elevated space above the background, with a tower rising behind Mary. Memling also painted a tower in the background of *The Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* (Figure 18). A tower rises in the window behind the patron, directly under the glass portrait of Saint Martin. In these works, Memling thus alludes to Mary as tabernacle through towers painted in the background.

²⁹ Lane, 21, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

The allusions to Mary as altar and tabernacle support the possibility that the diptychs and the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* (Figure 24) functioned as surrogate altarpieces within the home, allowing their owners to worship at personal, miniature altars in privacy. Because of their domestic setting, the supplicant prays without guidance from the church. In fact, the backgrounds of the two diptychs (Figures 29 and 30) both feature hazy church spires. Memling thus underscored the very fact that Maarten and the young man prayed in their own homes, rather than inside of a church. These objects became a supplement for church worship. While attending mass and receiving the sacraments remained necessary, for the first time men were able to perform their own sort of adoration. As such, diptychs became a means of escaping the control of the church. For now, rather than having to go to a cathedral to view and meditate upon images that eliminated of the divine, men could commission private images the need for official clerical guidance.

The New Testament's fulfillment of the Old Testament's promise cast Mary as a new Eve figure and Christ as a new Adam to redeem original sin. In each divine panel in the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove*, the *Diptych of a Young Man Kneeling Before*, and the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari* (Figures 18, 21, and 24), Memling reflect this idea as Mary holds out fruit before Jesus who reaches for it but does not grab it completely. These exchanges of fruit between mother and Son are enactments of Mary's role as the new Eve. She hands the fruit to Jesus as the new Adam, reminding the patrons of Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

While the fruit imagery certainly alludes to the role of Christ and Mary as the new Adam and Eve, it further establishes the works as private altarpieces through Eucharistic imagery. In each work, Mary displays Jesus towards the viewer as he rests on an elaborate pillow. The rich table coverings replicate the altar decorations. The fruit's message of consumption now refers to

the consumption of the body of Christ, and the infant on the beautiful pillow comes to symbolize the Eucharist. Robert L. Falkenburg argues that the consumption motif became a key component in the use of devotional images.³³ The works provided an unprecedented form of private, symbolic Eucharistic devotion for their users.

Although the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* and the *Diptych with a Young Man Kneeling Before the Virgin and Child* are the only diptychs by Memling which have survived intact, a large number of individual panels indicate that the artist produced a multitude of these diptychs. Works like the *Portrait of a Young Man At Prayer* (Figure 31) and the *Virgin and Child* (Figure 32) probably originally functioned as diptych wings.³⁴ Memling used the same formulaic approach in these works: a half-length patron kneels in a gesture prayer before a book, while Mary hands a fruit to an infant Jesus reclining on a pillow.

Hans Memling developed his standard style of diptychs by elaborating upon the work of his former teacher, Rogier van der Weyden.³⁵ Memling placed the figures in a defined space, rather than against an unarticulated dark background. He increased the functionality of the objects by depicting these encounters in recognizable settings. Maarten Van Nieuwenhove opened his diptych (Figure 18) and meditated upon a painted scene set in his own home. Memling intentionally painted the landscape backgrounds to match the patron's real home within Bruges.³⁶ The identifying details within these diptychs, like the coat of arms, further

³³ Robert L. Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion: Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child. 1450- 1550*, Translated from the Dutch by Sammy Herman (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994), 6.

³⁴ De Vos, *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, 196, 258.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20. De Vos argues that rather than training as a official apprentice, Memling worked for Rogier as a "journeyman," an independent artist passing through Brussels for a short period of time.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

personalized the work. As these diptychs developed to become patron specific, they also became more relatable.

Memling also changed Mary's gaze from the Van der Weyden panels. In both the *Diptych of Jean de Gros* and the *Diptych of Philippe de Croy* (Figures 12 and 14), Mary looks directly at the patrons. Rogier Van der Weyden's Virgins respond to and acknowledge the devotions of their patrons. The dark backgrounds in Van der Weyden's work, while somewhat unifying the two wings, demanded some connecting feature between the two panels, and in the de Gros and de Croy diptychs it is the gaze between Mary and the patrons that unites the wings. In the *Diptych of Jean de Froimont* (Figure 16), Mary's gesture serves as an object of connection with de Froimont. Van der Weyden connected these panels through the prayer posture, rather than gaze.

But none of the Marian portraits in Memling's works react to their patrons at all. The unified setting allowed Memling to get away with removing this important connection between the two panels. Whereas Van der Weyden's dark backgrounds do not confirm that the patron actually achieves this divine experience, the unified domestic setting in Memling's works leaves no doubt about the settings of the encounters. Mary no longer needs to acknowledge a patron's devotion because the setting confirms for the viewer that the prayers have worked and the viewer has attained a personal audience with the Virgin and Christ. These connections between image and location of use would have helped to direct the patron's devotions. Memling painted images that prevented the owner's mind from wandering as much as possible. His realistic portraits occupy identifiable spaces and use real, identifiable objects, and Memling's addition of the open prayer book added an important instructional element to the works. He painted the objects that would be used simultaneously with the diptych. The verisimilitude of the wings allowed a user

to accept the diptych's scene as true; this believability certainly functioned to bring about a more devout, private meditational experience.

The relationship between the painted images and the behavior enacted before the diptych presents yet another topic for consideration. These diptychs were much like the effect of placing two mirrors opposite one another: the reflection bounces back between the two mirrors. In the same way, a diptych reflected back to an active user his current behavior, while also serving as a model for that behavior. The images functioned as both example and illustration. In the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* and the *Diptych with a Young Man Kneeling Before the Virgin and Child* (Figures 18 and 21) painted mirrors complicate this relationship even further, reflecting yet another layer of devotion.

The complicated relationship between image and behavior lies at the heart of the diptych. Fundamentally, these objects guided and instructed patrons in their private meditations. The realistic images heightened the private meditations of men across the Low Countries for nearly two centuries. These surviving works by Hans Memling illustrate how diptychs provided their owners with access to the divine.

Conclusion

Diptychs were not static portraits but rather functioning objects.¹ They demanded active viewer participation and contemplation. Yet, the diptych represents a very specific genre that developed because of the religious climate in the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. When this climate changed by the middle of the sixteenth century, diptychs fell out of favor as the Reformation took hold.² The images survived as artistic evidence of the precursors to the Protestant conception of individual piety.

Books of Hours and lay movements like the *Devotio Moderna* were the preliminary expressions of the lay attitudes that gave rise to this unique art form. Artists like Jan van Eyck and Rogier Van der Weyden established the diptych as a genre, and the format became more widespread and mass-produced as other artists followed suit. Hans Memling's works remain the ultimate examples of these unique objects. He painted each commission with a variety of features to emphasize the divine encounter between patron, Mary, and Christ.

Men and women sought closer, personal connections to God, outside the control of a corrupt church. For men, a devotional portrait diptych functioned as a private object of

¹ Wilkins, 371-93.

² Pearson, *Envisioning Gender*, 4.

meditation to fulfill these desires. When people stopped using diptychs to achieve a more personal form of prayer, their function changed into prized family heirlooms, mementos of past pious relatives. Now, diptychs painted by the great masters and other lesser-known artists sit in museums across the globe and undergo a different kind of viewership. However we must remind ourselves that these objects, while beautiful and expertly crafted, originally served to bring their owners to a closer relationship with God. In their attempt to access the divine, diptychs provided their patrons with a more devout and private religious experience.

Illustrations

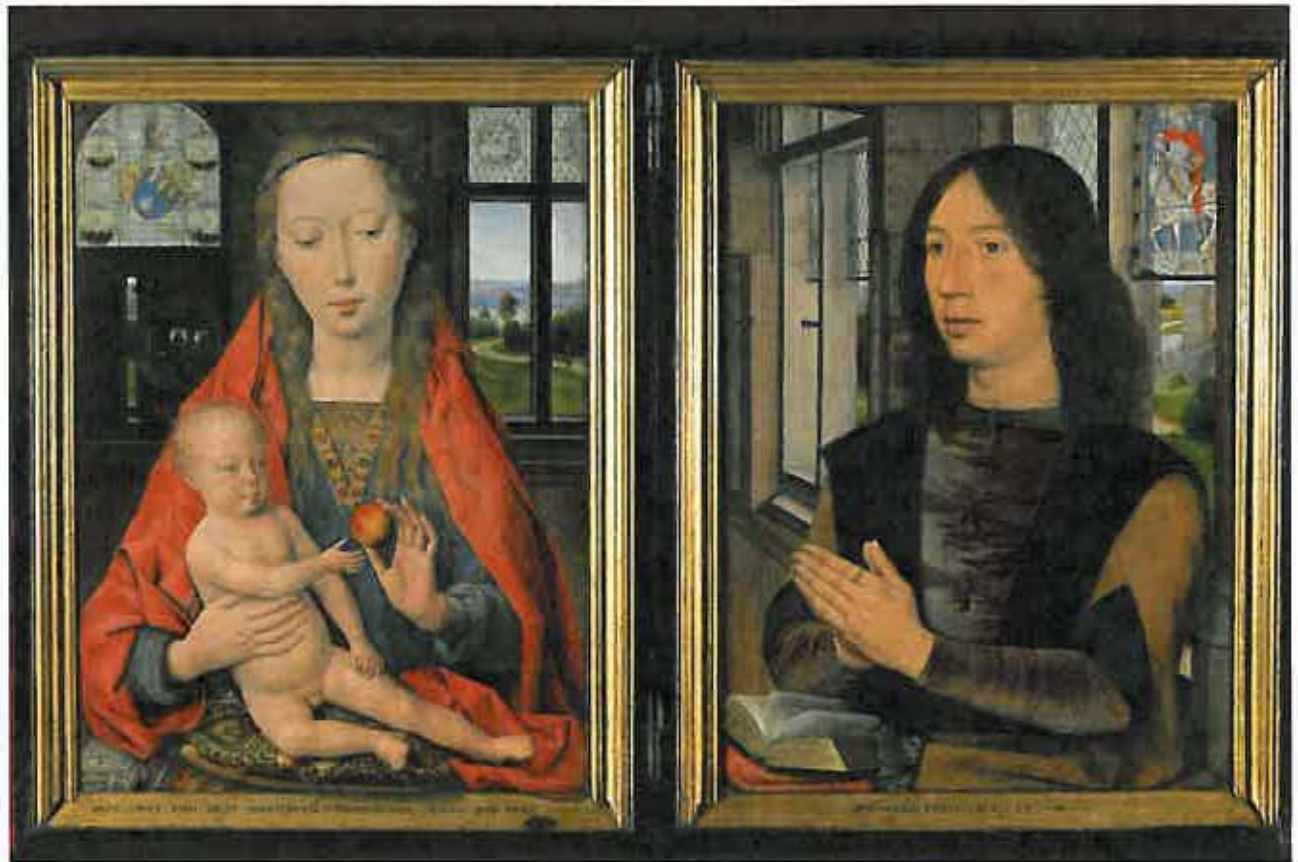


Figure 1. The *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling, 1487

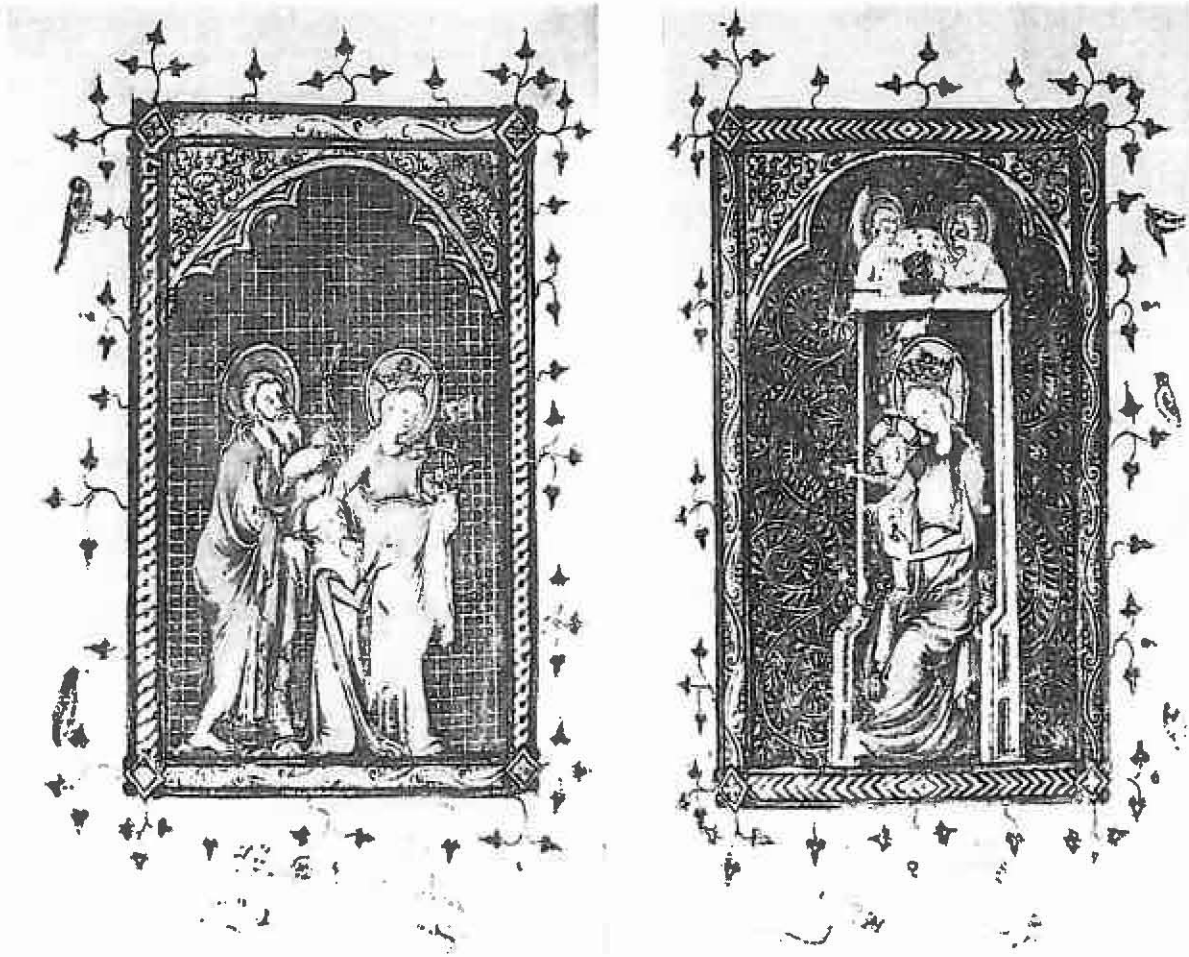


Figure 2. The *Breviary of Catherine of Valois*



Figure 3. *Très Belle Heures of Jean de France*

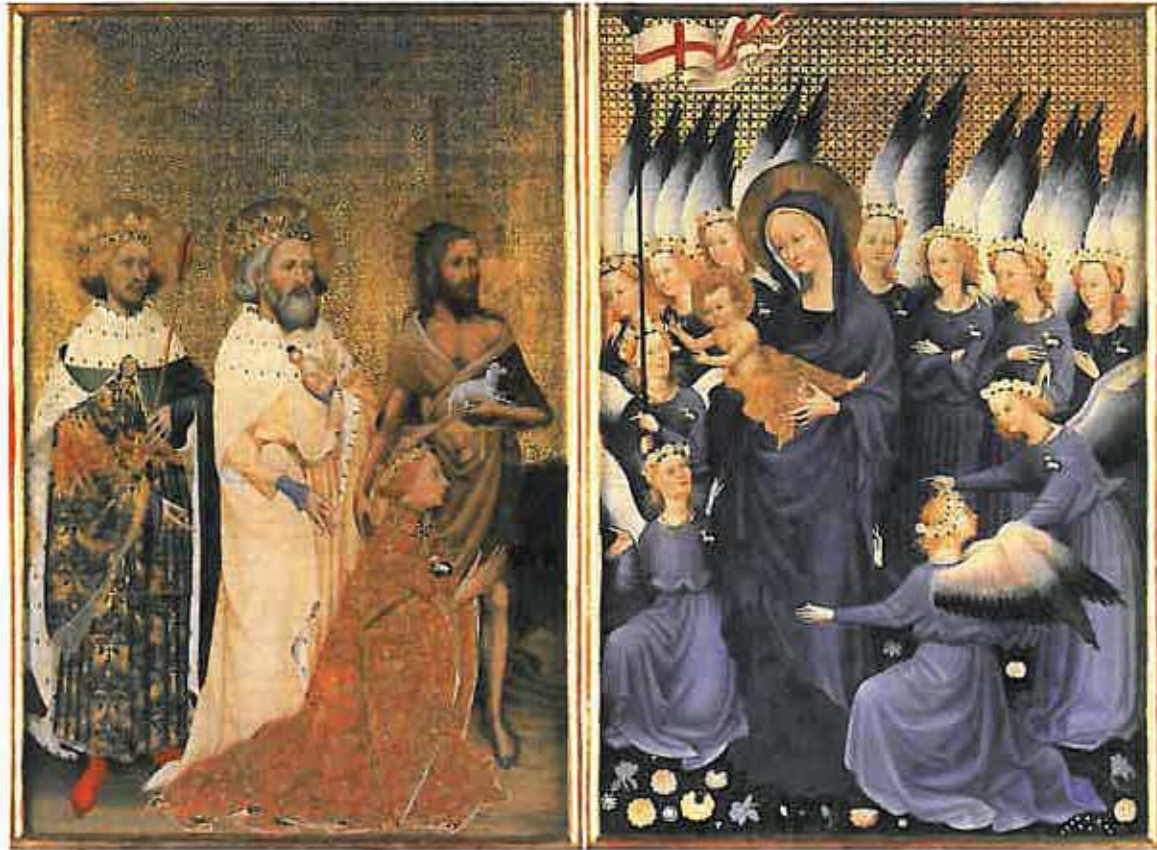


Figure 4. The *Wilton Diptych*, interior wings



Figure 5. The *Wilton Diptych*, reverse wings



Figure 6. Philip the Good by Jean le Tavernier



Figure 7. *Pope Clement VI Offering a Diptych to the Future Jean le Bon*, by François - Roger de Gaignieres, seventeenth- century copy of an earlier manuscript illumination



Figure 8. *Berlin Madonna* by Jan Van Eyck



Figure 9. The *Diptych of Christiaan de Hondt* by the Master of 1499



Figure 10. The *Diptych of Christiaan de Hondt* reverse wing of Robrecht de Clercq by the Master of 1499



Figure 11. The *Diptych of Antonio Siciliano* by Jan Glassier, 1513



Figure 12. The *Diptych of Jean de Gros* by Rogier Van der Weyden, 1455- 60

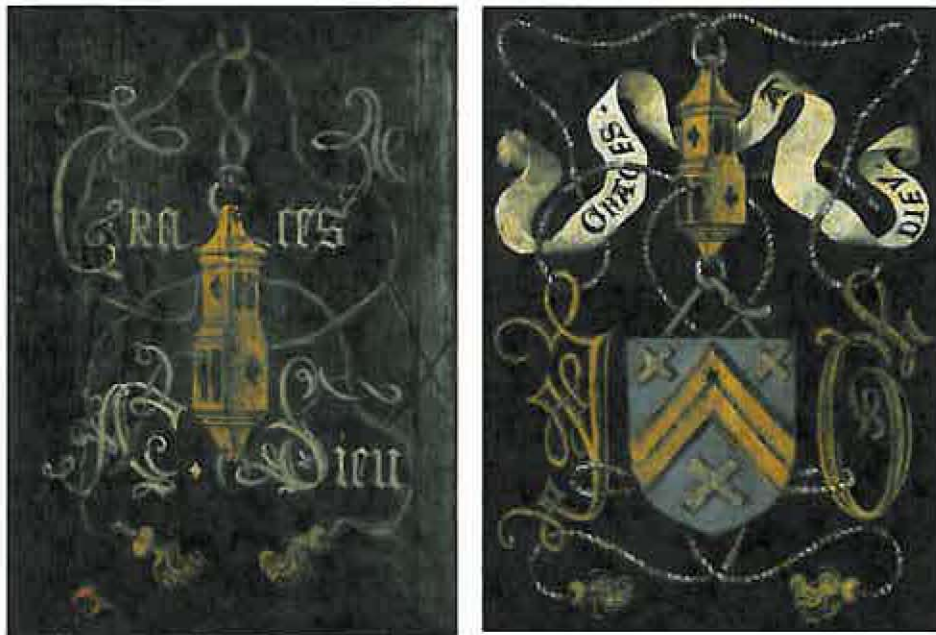


Figure 13. De Gros coat of arms, reverse of The *Diptych of Jean de Gros* by Rogier Van der Weyden, 1455- 60



Figure 14. The *Diptych of Philippe de Croy* by Rogier Van der Weyden



Figure 15. De Croy coat of arms, reverse of *The Diptych of Philippe de Croy* by Rogier Van der Weyden



Figure 16. The *Diptych of Jon de Froimont*, by Rogier Van der Weyden



Figure 17. St. Laurence grisaille, reverse of *The Diptych of Jon de Froimont* by Rogier Van der Weyden

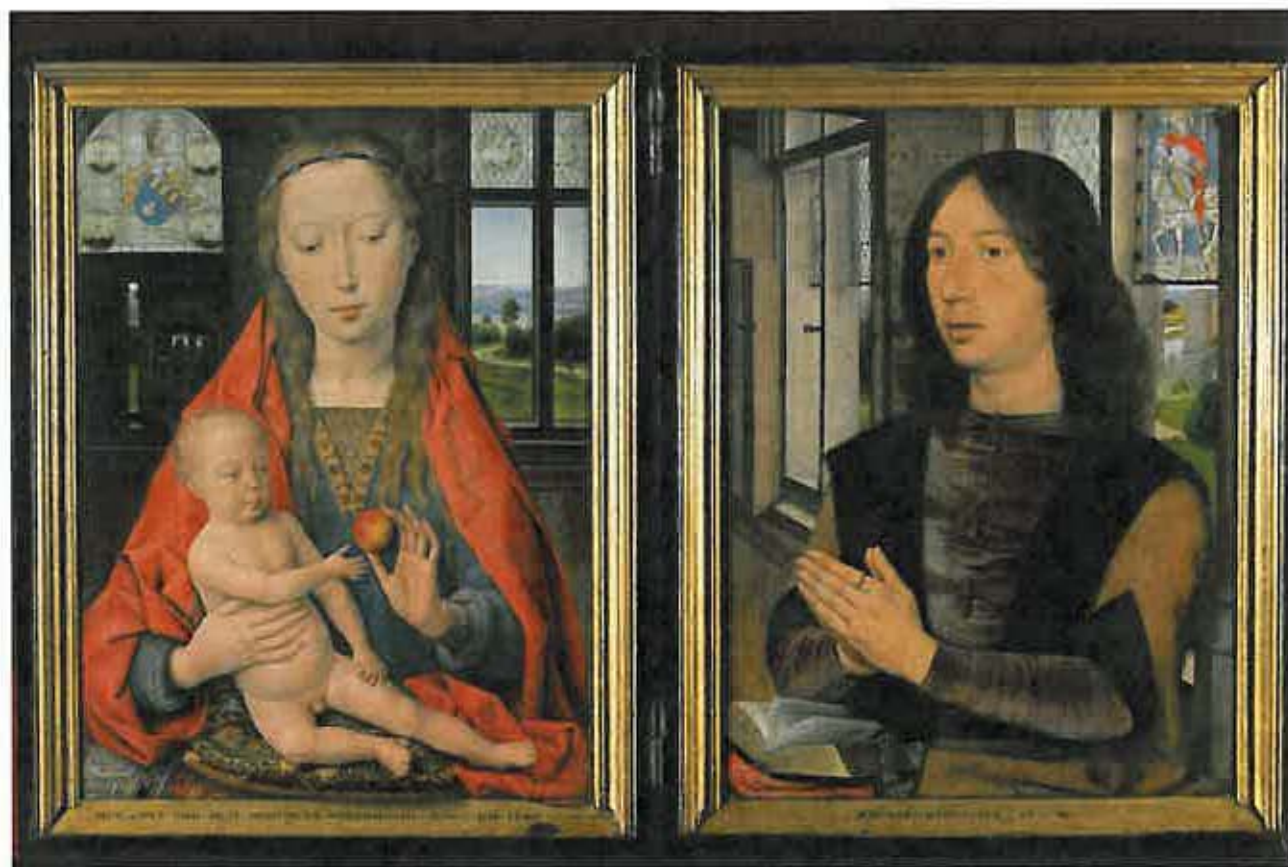


Figure 18. The *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling, 1487



Figure 19. Van Nieuwenhove Coat of Arms detail, *The Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling, 1487



Figure 20. Mirror detail, the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling



Figure 21. The *Diptych of a Young Man Kneeling Before a Virgin* by Hans Memling, 1485-90



Figure 22. Mirror detail, the *Diptych of a Young Man Kneeling Before a Virgin* by Hans Memling



Figure 23. St. Anthony, Reverse wing, the *Diptych of a Young Man Kneeling Before a Virgin* by Hans Memling



Figure 24. *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari*, Hans Memling, 1487



Figure 25. *Tommaso Portinari and Maria Baroncelli* by Hans Memling, wings from an incomplete triptych



Figure 26. *Scenes from the Passion of the Christ* by Hans Memling, 1470, commission for Tommaso Portinari



Figure 27. *Portinari Altarpiece* by Hugo Van der Goes



Figure 28. *Madonna and Child with Angels* by Hans Memling



Figure 29. Church spire detail, the *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenhove* by Hans Memling

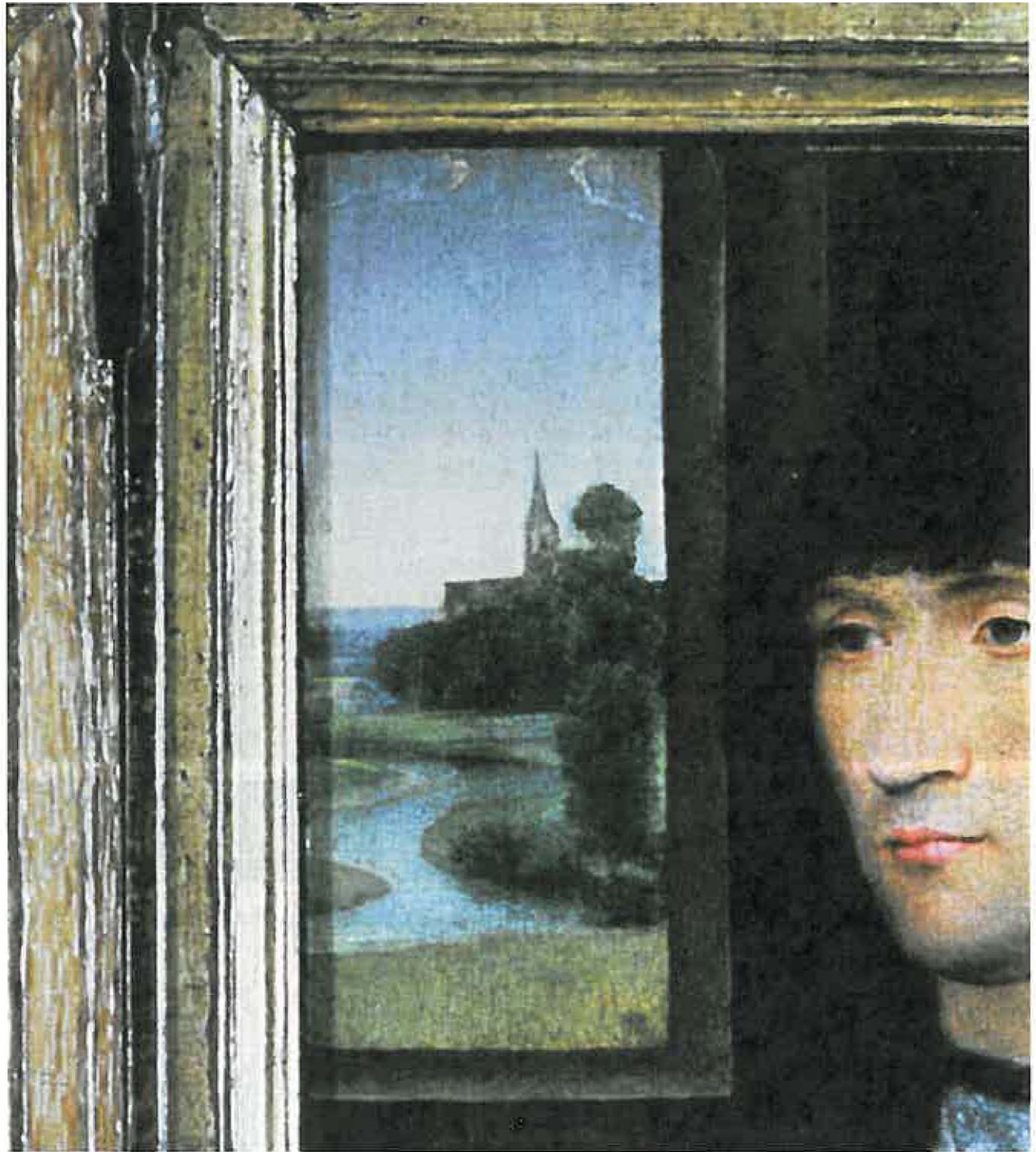


Figure 30. Church spire detail, the *Diptych of a Young Man Kneeling Before a Virgin* by Hans Memling



Figure 31. *Portrait of a Young Man at Prayer* by Hans Memling



Figure 32. *Virgin and Child* by Hans Memling

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