

Netherlandish and Spanish Altarpieces in the Late 1400s and Early 1500s

All the paintings in this room were commissioned for Spanish churches or convents during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel. The king and queen, famous for their patronage of Christopher Columbus in 1492, also unified Spain and forged strong cultural ties with the Netherlands, roughly present-day Holland and Belgium.

The painters, although employed by the Spanish court, were either born and trained in the Netherlands or had been influenced by styles and techniques from the Low Countries. As court artists, they worked anonymously to glorify the monarchy and the Church. Until research can establish the identity of an artist, he is referred to as “The Master” of his best-known painting.

Juan de Flandes

Hispano-Flemish, active 1496–1519

The name by which Spanish documents refer to Juan de Flandes simply means “John or Jan of Flanders.” Juan is first recorded as working for Queen Isabel in 1496; two years later he is mentioned as her court artist. (In the adjacent Gallery 39 is *The Temptation of Christ*, a tiny panel that Juan painted around 1500/1504 for Isabel’s private altar.)

Juan de Flandes demonstrated a preference for clearly articulated space and refined color schemes. Characteristic of artists from the city of Ghent, he frequently enlivened the backgrounds of his pictures with charming narrative vignettes. His two paintings in this room, both of which depict such distant action, are parts of an altarpiece (six other panels of which survive) from the main chapel in the Church of San Lázaro, Palencia, in northern Castile.

The Nativity, about 1508/1519



Oil on panel, 1.105 x 0.793 m (43 1/2 x 31 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.23

Juan’s *Nativity*, as with many religious scenes, amplifies a biblical episode with theological references. The Gospel of Luke writes that the baby was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Here, however, the child is naked and lies on his mother’s robe upon the ground, implying that the Son of God was poorer than the humblest son of man. The ox and ass, eating from the straw-filled manger, are not mentioned together in Luke. The Book of Isaiah, however, states that these beasts knew their master and his crib. Since a grain storage crib relates directly to Luke’s feeding manger, early Christian scholars believed that Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled when even the livestock would recognize Jesus as their master.

Meanwhile, illuminating the starry night, concentric rings of divine light emanate from the angel appearing to the shepherds on the distant hilltop. Perched on the ruined stable, an owl may refer to the nocturnal darkness dispelled by the coming of Christ.

The Adoration of the Magi, about 1508–1519



Oil on panel, 1.247 x 0.790 m (49 1/8 x 31 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.24

The Adoration of the Magi depicts circles of translucent color surrounding the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, similar to the burst of radiance around the angel in Juan de Flandes’ *Nativity*. Here Juan por-

trayed the wise men as representatives of the three known continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. (When this altarpiece was created, it was still generally believed that Columbus had sailed to India.) Therefore, these wise men suggest the worship of all known human races.

The Gospel of Matthew does not mention the number of wise men but does specify three gifts. The kneeling European presents a chest of gold, traditionally given to a king. The turbaned magus from Asia holds an incense burner in the form of a tower; frankincense, used to purify the temple, symbolizes Christ’s divinity. But the Bible includes several divine kings such as David. The African waits to present the final, unique gift: a bottle of myrrh. As an ointment used to anoint the dead, myrrh signifies the divine king who died to redeem humanity from Original Sin. Juan de Flandes contrasted the dignity of this solemn foreground ceremony with the courtly pageantry of the kings’ attendants in the distance.

Master of the Catholic Kings

Hispano-Flemish, active late 15th century

Ferdinand and Isabel became known as the “Catholic Kings” because of their religious zeal, offering the Jews and Moors the choice of converting to Catholicism or being expelled from Spain. Two paintings in the National Gallery, which depict coats of arms of Ferdinand and Isabel, must have been commissioned by or for the monarchs. Along with six pictures now in other museums, they formed parts of an altarpiece probably painted for a church or convent in Valladolid in north central Spain. The high quality of the altarpiece and its probable royal patronage have given the painter the name Master of the Catholic Kings.

Christ among the Doctors, about 1495/1497



Oil on panel, 1.362 x 0.930 m (53 5/8 x 36 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.43

The last incident of Jesus’ childhood recorded in the Bible derives from Luke (2:41–52). Leaving Jerusalem after celebrating the Passover feast, Joseph and Mary discovered that Jesus was not in the caravan. Returning and searching for three days, they found the boy in scholarly dispute in the temple. *Christ among the Doctors* shows Joseph and Mary entering the synagogue at the right, while Jesus sits on a dais and thoughtfully places one forefinger on the other. The gesture, also used by the doctor in the foreground at the right, probably implies pointing out stages in a debate.

Deep space is skillfully indicated by contrasting the large scale of the foreground figures with the distant view of a town

glimpsed through the door behind Joseph and Mary. The stained-glass windows bear the heraldry of Ferdinand and Isabel as well as of Maximilian I of the Holy Roman Empire. The Spanish monarchs' daughter and son were married to the son and daughter respectively of the Holy Roman Emperor in 1496 and 1497. Thus the altarpiece may have commemorated these dynastic weddings.

The Marriage at Cana, about 1495/1497



Oil on panel, 1.371 x 0.927 m (54 x 36 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.42

Christ's first miracle, the transformation of water into wine, is described in John (2:1–12). Invited to a wedding in Galilee, Mary told her son that the family was too poor to afford wine. At the wedding table, Jesus raises his right hand in benediction, while Mary prays in recognition of the miracle. The governor of the feast looks skeptically into his cup, but the bride and groom lower their eyes in reverent acceptance of the divine gift.

The banquet hall combines elements from Netherlandish and Spanish culture. The trumpeters in the gallery, the wedding bed, the servants in the distant kitchen, and the northern European town seen through the door and window show a Flemish concern for documenting daily life. The harsh, angular features of some male figures, the rich brown and red tonalities, and the costumes and serving vessels, however, are more typical of Castile. Hanging from the rafters, shields bear coats of arms suggesting that this scene may be an allegory on the marriage in 1497 of Juan of Castile, son of the Catholic Kings, to Margaret of Austria, daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Master of the Saint Lucy Legend Netherlandish, active c. 1480–1510

The Master of the Saint Lucy Legend is named after an altarpiece, dated 1480 and in a church in Bruges, that depicts episodes from the life of Saint Lucy. The Flemish city of Bruges often appears as the setting for the master's paintings. His style is characterized by extraordinarily brilliant colors, intricately detailed textures and patterns, compressed space, and figures with oval faces that are restrained in expression. Several of his paintings have been found in Castile, suggesting that the Netherlandish artist may have spent part of his career in Spain.

Mary, Queen of Heaven, about 1485/1500

Oil on panel, 1.992 x 1.618 m (78 7/16 x 63 3/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.13



This unusually large painting depicts a mystic glorification of the Virgin. Hovering angels, garbed in silks and brocades of every conceivable hue, attend a central image of Mary and surround a smaller, upper vision of her heavenly throne. On either side of the Virgin's head, singing angels hold musical scores that can be read as the *Ave Regina Celorum*, a hymn beginning with the words "Hail, Queen of the Heavens." This splendid picture comes from the convent of Santa Clara near Burgos in north central Spain. Records suggest that the work was commissioned by an aristocratic constable of Castile whose daughter was abbess of the convent.

With a fusion of subjects, *Mary, Queen of Heaven* combines three sacred events from the legend of the Virgin. The Immaculate Conception, representing Mary's freedom from Original Sin, traditionally shows "a woman arrayed with the sun, and a moon under her feet" (Revelation 12:1). In the pic-

ture, sunbeams rendered in gold leaf blaze behind Mary's head and feet, and a crescent moon supports her.

Three days after Mary's death, seraphim bore her to heaven. In this Assumption of the Virgin theme, an open sarcophagus is usually displayed but is absent here. In place of the coffin is a serene and peaceful landscape that may refer to a commonly held idea that, at the Assumption, the world was cleansed by the Virgin's purity.

The third subject is the Coronation of the Virgin. Above her head, the clouds roll back to reveal heaven, with God the Father and Christ the Son holding a crown, above which hovers the dove of the Holy Spirit. Mary's coronation is only implied here, since she has not yet risen to join the Trinity. With its overlapping symbolism, spectacular flurry of ecclesiastical robes, and flutter of iridescent wings, *Mary, Queen of Heaven* is the Master of the Saint Lucy Legend's most sumptuous and ambitious achievement.

Detail of *Mary, Queen of Heaven*, showing the orchestra and choirs around the Trinity.



Renaissance Music

In addition to its radiant beauty and complicated theology, *Mary, Queen of Heaven* is an exceptionally important document for the history of music. The painting portrays Renaissance instruments with great accuracy, as they would have been played during fifteenth-century performances. In actual church services, however, this many orchestras and choirs would seldom have been used simultaneously. Eight instrumentalists surround the Virgin, for instance, while only four singers immediately flank her head. Since many of these instruments, such as the trumpet and woodwinds, would have been considered "loud," they would have overwhelmed the chorus.

On the left side, starting in the top corner, an angel in white blows a *tenor* or *alto shawm*, a precursor of the English horn. Beside him, an angel in wine red robes strums a *Gothic harp*. A brass *trumpet* is held by the figure in lilac blue, partially hidden behind the angel caressing Mary's shoulder. Dressed in pure yellow, another celestial musician pumps the bellows of a *portative organ*.

In the top corner of the right side, an angel bows a *vielle*, an early form of violin. Next to him is a figure playing a *soprano* or *treble shawm*, a distant forerunner of the oboe. Halfway down the right side, an angel in cherry red plucks a *lute*, while, behind him, another *shawm* or woodwind is partly concealed behind olive green wings.

The vocal quartet serenading Mary holds music with legible scores. The sheet to the left, which gives the painting its title, appears to be a variation on a motet, *Hail, Queen of the Heavens*, by Walter Frye (died 1474/1475), an English composer whose works were popular on the Continent. The sheet music to the right bears the word *Tenor*, which would be the voice that carries the melody.

Among the clouds in the topmost portion, the musicians do correspond to actual usage. The orchestra at the right comprises "soft" instruments: three *recorders*, a *lute*, a *dulcimer* being struck by light hammers, and a *harp*. Two choruses are on the left of the Trinity. Both groups have one book of music each, suggesting that their singing is antiphonal and polyphonic. The upper choir, composed of winged angels in white robes, may represent a children's chorus. Overall, this encyclopedic combination of vocalists and "loud" and "soft" instrumentalists is unique in fifteenth-century painting.

The paintings illustrated on this guide usually hang in this room, but installations may change.

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