

Ron Spronk, Catherine A. Metzger, and John Oliver Hand. *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*.

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Technical studies have become a central category of analysis in the field of art history. Renaissance paintings are now regularly examined with infrared reflectography, x-radiography, dendrochronology, and binocular microscopy in order to learn about their production, function, and afterlife. *Prayers and Portraits: Unfolding the Netherlandish Diptych*, published in conjunction with an exhibition held in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, contributes to this growing field by exploring diptychs and other paired paintings that were produced in the Netherlands during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

A diptych is formed when two images of the same size and shape are hinged together so that they may be opened and closed like a book. By contrast, pendant pictures are pairs of unattached paintings that were hung side-by-side, flat against the wall. *Prayers and Portraits*, written by John Oliver Hand, Catherine A. Metzger, and Ron Spronk, opens with two essays that introduce early Netherlandish diptychs and pendant paintings, then catalogues forty examples by such masters as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes, and Jan van Scorel, and finally concludes with an appendix summarizing the technical findings for each work. The beautifully illustrated catalogue is especially useful because diptych wings are printed on facing pages so that readers may approximate the experience of opening and closing them.

The volume is filled with exciting technical discoveries. The authors determine whether currently paired panels originally belonged together, unite separated panels of diptychs, distinguish diptychs from other paired paintings, and explore how technical studies can illuminate artistic processes, economic issues, and devotional practices. As the authors observe, diptychs presented unique challenges to painters. When two equally important religious scenes were joined, wings carried the same weight. But when a *Madonna and Child* faced a portrait, painters had to both differentiate and unite the wings. Contrasting backgrounds often distinguish the heavenly and earthly spheres, while a triangular interaction links them, as the supplicant appeals to the *mediatrix*, who in turn petitions the Christ child. The authors demonstrate how painters achieved this goal by minutely adjusting sight lines and gestures in the final stages of production, taking into account the diptych's expected usual angle of opening.

The catalogue also reveals the economic implications of technical studies. The portrait of the extraordinarily wealthy Philippe de Croÿ was painted by Rogier van der Weyden himself, whereas the less-prosperous Jean de Froimont had to accept the work of an assistant. Similarly, assistants produced panels of the Virgin and Child "on spec" for the art market. These were later joined with portraits, which, because they have to be individualized, show greater involvement of the master. Collaboration also occurred when one artist painted flesh tones and another gold

ground. Those commissioning the diptychs also participated in the production process. Maarten van Nieuwenhove asked that his coat of arms be added, and Margaret of Austria requested that her mother be given a more modest neckline.

Cultural historians have recently moved away from conceptualizing art as stationary. Recent studies demonstrate that sculptures of the Christ child were held, rocked, and dressed, and portrait miniatures were kissed, touched, and worn. Similarly, by studying hinges, nails, and hooks, the authors of *Prayers and Portraits* were able to determine that most diptychs served as objects that were not only displayed on tables, altars, and pillows, but also were transported, opened, closed, and held in the hand. As the authors observe, taking these movements into account illuminates devotional meaning. With the diptych closed, the portrait touches the image of the Madonna and Child, and, in this way, humanity communes most directly with the divine.

Generally well-written, the catalogue is occasionally repetitive: the term *diptych* is defined on four separate occasions. One longs for a discussion of right-left issues, and wonders whether canvas diptychs were ever produced. Feminist analysis is also ignored, although it is integral to this art form, since the Madonna was so often paired with a portrait of a man, or a husband with his wife. Furthermore, the term *donor* is repeatedly used, although many diptychs were never intended to be donated, but rather were designed for the supplicant's private devotion. Nonetheless the catalogue employs technical discoveries, careful observations, and sound reasoning to better understand a critically important category of Renaissance art.

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