The Early Netherlandish altarpiece is all too often looked at from an aesthetic perspective, as a thing of beauty, hanging upon a museum wall. This is a notion that in no way can or should be disputed- however the flaw that is found here is the placement of a religious work in a secular environment. In a museum, we find an excessive amount of objectivity, that is to say a lacking of the highly religious perceptions to which the altarpiece was crafted to appeal. We must look at these works in the context of their intended homes in the Church in order to fully comprehend their intentions and functions, and thus garner a proper perspective from which to examine them. How were altarpieces used in the church? Why were they so prevalent during this time period? Aside from their aesthetic appeal, these altarpieces played a more influential role in the church environment. They actually served to facilitate church practices, particularly for the congregation. The prominent locale inherent to altarpieces permitted them an influential role in the mass that went far beyond that of a backdrop.\(^1\) Therefore the artists’ intentions to actively engage the average mass-goer are evident both implicitly and explicitly in the carved altarpiece.

Such Early Netherlandish Altarpieces prevailed just moments prior to the Protestant Reformation. Despite the humanist movements of the Renaissance that seemed to secularize society, Catholicism prevailed, and perhaps was better

understood due to humanist attempts to further comprehension of humankind and his creator. Historically, this was a time wrought with indulgences and exploitation of Church power. Nearby, in Italy, masters such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Da Vinci were churning out expensive and excessive works of art and architecture, predominantly at the request of Catholic leaders, particularly Popes. Through the evidence left in the form of art, it is clear that the Church, although the greatest patron of the arts at this time, had a very manipulative presence during the Early Renaissance. So how are we to perceive Early Netherlandish religious art, given this context of corruption within the Church? Well first, we must understand why such corruption was able to perpetuate. The sale of indulgences, for example, was presented as an insurance of salvation for the buyer, an item that was at a premium in this time period. In an era of shorter life spans, the faithful were especially concerned with life after death. Salvation (a popular theme for altarpieces) was on the mind of all Renaissance Catholics. This preoccupation with salvation became a key factor for not only indulgence-selling priests and the like, but also in ecclesiastical artistic representations such as altarpieces.

Although the theology behind salvation has stayed constant through the centuries, the understanding of it has certainly changed over time. Just prior to the Protestant Reformation, salvation was defined as, “The process of passing from the condition of sin as a child of the first Adam to a condition of adopted sonship in Christ.”

indulgences mentioned previously). During this time period, it was believed that Salvation “was acquired through a combination of faith and good works, the latter taking many forms...” The hope was to eliminate as much time in purgatory as possible by completing these “good works.”

Artistic representations quickly became a means for fulfilling both these requirements for salvation. They served as a sort of “insurance policy” for salvation. Small devotional pieces, books of hours, altarpieces and other religious imagery provided the owner with artwork that not only facilitated their prayer and hence their faith, but also contributed to the “good works” necessary for salvation.

The more religious art one purchased or commissioned, the smaller amount of time they would have to spend in purgatory- or so it was believed. Hence, noblemen and women often left behind indications of ownership of personal devotional altarpieces and religious books, all tailored to themselves, in order to declare their devotion to God and thus ensure salvation. We find evidence of this practice in the form of donor portraits, often accompanying portraits of religious figures, or even on the back of altarpieces. For example, the closed view of the Ghent Altarpiece depicts donors Joos Vijd and Elizabeth Borluut on the exterior panels of the lower register (Fig. 4).

Each is kneeling in prayer, besides grisaille statues of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist. Their piety is clear through van Eyck's thoughtful representation, which places them in adoration of the statues. Here we

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4 Ibid.
find an explicit example of artistic representations used as a means of portraying one’s faithfulness and achieving “good works.”

In addition, these works served as a reminder to pray for the deceased. This was yet another means to eliminate time in purgatory. Individuals would construct elaborate tombs and memorial pieces in order to remind the living to pray for them, that they might pass through Purgatory quickly.6 Thus, such works of art served not only as religious patronage, but also as a commemoration for the deceased. Nevertheless, the ever-present concern about the afterlife influenced a large body of art and spurred the vast production of religious works.

Finally, the significance of the Eucharist developed in the context of this salvation concerned setting, thus enhancing its importance in the Early Renaissance Church and ecclesiastical artwork. Beginning around 1300, the Eucharist was considered the “strongest link to Christ, surest promise of salvation.”7 Through the celebration of the Eucharist, we remember how Christ died upon the cross to save us from our sinfulness. Thus this Sacrament is tied to Christ’s suffering- a reminder of the nature of his human form. As a result, he is perceived in this instance as most relatable to man. As Miri Rubin explains in Corpus Christi, “Christ’s wounds were hailed as the essence of Christ’s humanity which was addressed in the mass and thus entered the imagery of host salutations.”8 Here we are presented with a key component of the visual representation of Christ as a human, susceptible to pain, suffering, and the entire gamut of human emotions. This is vital to the engagement

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6 “Looking at the Renaissance.”
8 Ibid., 303.
of the congregation in the mass, in providing an emotional connection between
Catholicism and the faithful. Such elements are often presented aesthetically in
altarpieces such as the *Descent from the Cross*, among other forms of art, in order to
facilitate a connection in the framework of the celebration of the mass.

Overall, it can be concluded that the Church was possibly the most influential
factor on art of the Renaissance. Religious representations proliferated at this time
for people of any and all socioeconomic statuses. Although the cost of such
commissions favored the wealthy, the poor were nevertheless able to interact with
works, oftentimes within the church setting. This dominating influence of the
Church in the realm of art was a result of the vast wealth of the Church, the promise
of salvation, and the functional necessity of theological representations. The first
two can be gleaned from the previous discussion of Catholicism during this time
period, however it is the latter that this paper will focus on. Why did religious
artwork, specifically altarpieces, prevail? And why are they any different than other
religious representations? The liturgical influence upon altarpieces is clear,
however the deeper functionality in the mass setting is what sets these works apart.

The elements of altarpieces that facilitate church practices are plenty. We
could point to the relatable scenes, the promise of salvation, the assistance in
imagining abstract concepts, or even the didactic nature of repeated themes to
substantiate this argument. However the common “T”-shaped format, the reflection
of mass parts and the folding nature are arguably the most compelling examples of
how altarpieces functioned in this manner. The format of altarpieces is for the most
part, an implicit means of constructing a work that will bolster the congregation’s
faith and following of mass conventions. Alternatively, the reflection of the mass parts in the depictions can be either implicit or explicit, thus appealing more to the congregation, while simultaneously bearing symbolic meaning. Finally, the folding nature of altarpieces serves a distinct liturgical purpose through the correspondence between the mass and the differing paintings. In order to illustrate these main factors, we will look at two altarpieces by Rogier van der Weyden, the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* and the *Descent from the Cross*, and Jan and Hubert van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (Fig. 1-4). Although all three have the potential to demonstrate the format, the reflection of mass parts, and the folding nature, the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* will be used to examine the first, while the *Descent from the Cross* will be used for the second, and the *Ghent Altarpiece* for the third. As a result, the various facets of each technique will be narrowly examined in the context of these individual altarpieces.

The “T”-shaped format often comprising Early Netherlandish altarpieces has a far greater significance than one would suspect at first glance. This shape is by no means an arbitrary elective, but rather one that visually promotes the ecclesiastical intentions of the depictions within. Both the verticality inherent in this form and the central focus produced create a setting that is conducive to the most important biblical representations to mass practices. However the efficacy of the “T”-shape does not stop there: it has symbolic implications as well. It can be argued that not only does the “T” correlate with traditional church architecture, but it also

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corresponds with the “T” of “Te igitur”, the phrase that begins the canon of the mass. Thus, the “T” – shape dictates the symbolic meaning of the altarpiece and outlines a composition that is capable of presenting narrative scenes in the most compelling manner possible.

Rogier van der Weyden’s Seven Sacraments Altarpiece is a textbook example of this traditional format (Fig. 2). It is comprised of three segments, each containing depictions of the seven sacraments being administered to members of the congregation in a cathedral. However despite the realistic nature of the majority of the imagery, the central portion portrays an anachronistic representation of the Crucifixion, complete with the Virgin mourning at the base of the cross. However the efficacy of this altarpiece not only corresponds with the nature of the theme of the seven Sacraments, but also with the elements of the “T”-shape.

To begin with the simplest component of the format, the central place of emphasis in altarpieces achieves with shape what other artists often achieve using internal compositional elements. The inversion of the “T” allows the eye to be directed inwards, to the center- where else can it go? This in a way holds the viewer captive, using the tendency to focus on the center to construct a more persuasive work. We see this technique at work in the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece, in which the Crucifixion scene is placed in the center of the work, despite being completely out of time and place. Rogier van der Weyden simply places this main scene in the central crossing, with the knowledge that it will be the immediate focal point. Lynn

10 Ibid., 37.
Jacobs validates this claim, explaining that “Rather than presenting a monotonous row of scenes, “T”-shaped carved altarpieces focus attention on a key moment, such as the Crucifixion.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus we also find that it is not only this central emphasis that promotes the “key moment" but also the visual variety that tells the eye that one scene is different, is more pronounced, should be examined more closely. This emphasis allows the congregation to focus on not just the center, but more importantly the biblical scenes found there, hence stimulating their faith.

The verticality of this shape serves a similar purpose to that of the centrality. The necessity for a more vertically inclined portion of an altarpiece comes from the nature of the most significant and repeated scenes in the Church—the Passion of Christ and the Last Judgment. Extra space is needed for the cross to extend upwards above the people gathered in the depictions of the Crucifixion. Whereas the Last Judgment representations call for a Christ in the Heavens, again requiring him to soar above the people being judged. This may not seem like a compelling enough reason for the standard of altarpieces to become “T”-shaped, however when we look at the number of Passion and Last Judgment altarpieces (the Passion Altarpiece at Geel, van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece, van der Weyden’s Last Judgment altarpiece, to name a few) it becomes clear why this became a trusted format (Fig. 3). The religious notion of salvation of these two themes is crucial in the Church (leading to their frequent depictions). Thus the presence of elevated portions within altarpieces serves a vital role in conveying essential moments and individuals of the faith to the congregation.

\textsuperscript{12} Jacobs, “Inverted ’T’-Shape,” 36.
The symbolic significance of the “T”-shape is also valuable, as it correlates closely with the church as a structure and a place of worship. Lynn Jacobs proposes that the form intentionally reflects the architectural plan of Gothic churches, specifically that of the cross. This element, although evident in all altarpieces, including the Descent from the Cross, is accentuated in the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece through the architectural representations in the images (Fig. 1, 2). Jacobs explains, “Rogier here precisely correlated the elements of the “T”-shape with the parts of the church portrayed on the panels: the nave fills the elevated center and the aisles appear in the lower side sections.” Hence not only is the relation to church architecture iconographic, but it is also explicit. Nevertheless, the mimicking of a church crossing would not go unnoticed by the congregation due to the carved frames in such Netherlandish altarpieces. This portion of the work hearkens to the decorative relief of traditional Gothic architecture, thus stressing the connection between the two, allowing for a visual association for the viewer. Additionally, we find the hierarchy of the Church reflected in the verticality of the altarpiece, speaking to yet another symbolic function of the “T”-shape. In the Catholic faith we find the Trinity at the top of the hierarchy of religious figures, beneath which we might identify the Virgin, John the Baptist and perhaps even Mary Magdalene, among others. Yet the Trinity in itself evokes a fluid hierarchy as well, generally perceived with the Father at the top, the Son at the bottom, and the Holy Spirit somewhere in between. Here, the shape of the altarpiece hearkens to the vertically associated characters of the Christian faith.

14 Ibid., 37
Yet another iconographic element of the “T”-shape is its relationship with the “T” of “Te igitur”. Historically, the “T” of this phrase was transformed into Jesus’ cross in medieval manuscript illumination, thus making a visual correlation with an ecclesiastical text. However this imagery can also be applied to “T”-shaped altarpieces, so that the “T” evokes the “Te igitur” of the church canon. Here we find an explicit connection between the format of the altarpiece and church practices. The relationship between the two provides an aesthetic representation that facilitates a connection within the art and the mass itself. In van der Weyden’s Seven Sacraments Altarpiece, the reflection of the “T” of “Te igitur” as the frame is placed in comparison with the central crucifix (the original imagery evoked from the “T”) (Fig. 2). Similarly to the architectural depictions highlighting the architectural symbolism in the format, the crucifix enhances the iconographic “T” of the “Te igitur”. That being said, with or without this additional connection, the “T”-shape nevertheless evokes this starting phrase of the mass, thus fusing the altarpiece with its setting.

Equally, if not more important than the shape of the altarpiece is the representation that it holds. The subjects of Early Netherlandish altarpieces, although repetitive at times, had theological significance. Specifically, the reflection of mass parts within the context of altarpieces functioned so that people could relate their visual and emotional experiences in the church to the visual representations found there. The most apparent instances found in altarpieces are without a doubt explicit representations of the mass parts. However these are not the only

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15 *Lane, The Altar and the Altarpiece, 84.*
examples. We often find symbolic depictions of elements of the mass (especially the Eucharist), metaphorical imagery, and even emotional appeals to the congregation. These means of reflecting the celebration of the mass can be found in both the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, and perhaps more prominently in the *Descent from the Cross* (Fig. 1, 2). These two display how this bond with church orthodoxy can be either implicit or explicit, while engaging the congregation in participation of the very conventions that are being portrayed.

Rogier van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross* bears the “T”-shape so frequently used to emphasize passion scenes similar to that depicted (Fig. 1). Just as in the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece*, the shape creates a vertical form conducive to depicting a cross, a central focus that highlights Jesus’ salvific role, and a shape that not only hearkens to church architecture, but also mimics the “T” of the “Te igitur” that starts the mass (Fig. 2). However this work extends the utility of the altarpiece by focusing on a more narrative image of the wounded Jesus being taken down from the cross. Here we find a group of people carrying the limp body of Jesus down from the cross, with one person clutching his arm, and another supporting his ankles. Beneath him is the Virgin Mary in mourning, in a bodily position that mimics that of her son. The connection between the two both physically and spiritually is apparent here, as the artist manifests their distress (his bodily, hers emotional) using the same bodily composition. Thus both the subject and the composition of this altarpiece reflect the mass in unique ways.

The symbolic nature of altarpieces can be observed in various elements (including the “T”-shape of course!). Symbolism however, is especially important in
the reflection of the mass parts in pictorial representations that allow the
congregation to see the significance of what they attend each Sunday. In the *Descent from the Cross*, van der Weyden portrays Christ as the host that the congregation receives in the Sacrament of the Eucharist (Fig. 1). Barbara Lane explains this notion, stating, “His raised body clearly corresponds to the Host that is elevated above the altar during the consecration.”16 Thus the raised, central position of the body of Jesus closely corresponds to the Priest’s raising of the host, above the altar in the most prominent location of the church, the central nave. Here we find the inherent power of symbolism - that the daily bread, an abstract notion even for the most faithful, can be represented with the imagery of Jesus. Our imaginations are thus supported so as to encourage and facilitate church practices by the means offered by the altarpiece.17

However our interpretation of Christ’s positioning does not stop there. We also find him as a metaphor, paralleling the rite of the Eucharist. In the image depicted in the *Descent from the Cross*, the faithful are receiving the body of Christ from the cross itself (Fig. 1). Similarly, during the Sacrament of Eucharist, the congregation receives the body and blood of Christ. Thus, the depiction on the altarpiece is a visual translation of the church practice. As Ludolphus declares, “Indeed, it is even better to take the body of Christ from the altar itself than from the altar of the cross. Truly, the latter received him in their arms and hands, but the former take him into their mouths and hearts.”18 Thus, the Eucharist takes place

16 Ibid., 90.
17 Ibid., 79.
18 Ibid., 90-91.
due to Jesus’ salvific act, however in this instance there exists a converse relationship in which the depictions of this act are in fact mimicking the Sacrament. Here again we find that the image stimulates the imagination of the congregation, helping them to visualize conceptual dogmas of the church.

Despite the metaphorical nature of this depiction, we cannot be so eager as to ignore the value of the image itself. The theme that we find of communicants taking the body of Christ down from the cross has close ties to the notion of salvation that dictates church tenets and the mass parts themselves. Jesus’ sacrifice is the act that Christians believe allows them the promise of salvation. From this act stems the Eucharistic rite, in which the congregation receives the body and blood of Christ as a remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper. Hence, depictions of Passion scenes such as that of the Descent from the Cross might function as, “a sort of didactic clerical programme designed to augment the power and rituals of the Church.”19 These explicit representations of biblical derivatives of mass parts should not be overlooked. Van der Weyden’s choice to depict this particular scene was certainly not arbitrary (nor was it for any other Netherlandish altarpiece artist). Its association with the Eucharist makes it an intelligent choice, one that is not merely a backdrop for the mass, but more intentional and at times didactic.

Furthermore, the scenes chosen for altarpieces oftentimes appealed to the emotions of the congregation. Yes, they might be edifying in nature, yet without the emotional connection provided by visual representations, an individual could not

possibly fully comprehend the gravity of the events of their faith. We must love Christ as if we knew him personally, and in order to do so, events such as the Passion must elicit a response from us, must cause us distress, so that we might grow in faith with a profound understanding of the events of Christ’s life. If our emotions reflect that of someone who may have been witness to Christ’s life and death, we are better capable of comprehending Catholic teachings. Hence, depictions found on altarpieces must facilitate this emotional response, by allowing us to visualize the events of the bible, and place ourselves within the painting and thus biblical stories. According to Miri Rubin, "The suffering of the human Christ was the image most amenable to personal identifications." The Descent from the Cross, for example, makes use of this quality as Van der Weyden clearly portrays the tenuous emotions of the scene both using the expressions of the individuals and the body language, as previously discussed (Fig. 1). The Virgin is the most compelling character here, clearly in anguish over the death of her son, an emotion that is displayed in her facial features and in her distraught body language that mimics Jesus’. We are able to sympathize with her response bearing witness to the Deposition, as the artist has depicted them. Hence, the emotional reactions cultivated through such altarpieces facilitate the faith of the congregation by using the sentiments of the portrayed scenes to move the viewer.

The Ghent Altarpiece too fashions a connection between the congregation and the depicted scenes (Fig. 3-4). As Susan Jones explains, “The astonishing realism of the altarpiece rests not only in the fidelity with which figures, plants, and

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20 Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi, 302.
animals are represented in a convincing space, but also in its ability to forge a sense of continuity between the pictorial and the real world.” However the Ghent Altarpiece explicitly represents the ability of an altarpiece to change these convincing representations to correspond with the liturgy of the Church, predominantly through the folding nature. This element of the altarpiece provides the artist with both an interior and an exterior to adorn with paintings. However in the Church, it plays a more influential role by relating to the liturgical calendar. Various biblical scenes can be displayed depending on the season, for instance a Passion scene might be displayed during Easter, while a Nativity scene might be displayed during Christmas. The versatility of these altarpieces allowed them to effectively convey relevant biblical renderings and thus properly facilitate the current celebration of the mass.

In the case of the Ghent Altarpiece, Jan and Hubert van Eyck chose to portray a carved altarpiece that corresponded with the liturgy for All Saint’s Day on the interior (Fig. 3). Within the work we find representations of God’s redemptive mysteries, along with other symbols that relate to the mass. The layout of Christ, the Virgin and John the Baptist parallel representations of the Last Judgment, placing the three in their hierarchical positions. The artists also depict Adam and Eve on either side of the choirs of angels, recalling them as the first man and woman, who created original sin. In the lower register of the altarpiece, we find a broad scene of individuals worshipping a lamb, symbolizing the Sacrament of the

22 Ibid.
Eucharist. Thus here we find a literal and didactic interpretation of the mass. Just like van der Weyden’s two altarpieces, the *Ghent Altarpiece* reflects upon the salvific underpinnings of the mass, cultivating for the congregation a visual representation of the abstract notion of salvation.

The exterior portion of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is also formatted in two registers segmented by panels, the bottom of which represents niches (Fig. 4). The upper register depicts the Annunciation, divided amongst two panels. On the one side is the Archangel Gabriel, and on the other is the Virgin Mary, accompanied by a dove that is representative of the Holy Spirit. The lower register, as mentioned previously, contains the two donors beside statues of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist. Finally, the lunettes above the registers present depictions of the prophesies of the coming of Christ, including Zechariah, Micah, Erythraean, and Cumaean. These depictions fulfill the reverse function of the salvific interior- they present to the congregation the scenes from before Jesus was born, anticipating his religious significance. This perspective shows us the first of the mysteries of Christ- his conception. Thus the contrast between the opened and closed altarpiece is that of awaiting Jesus’ birth in comparison with the salvific consequences of his death. Like the Passion, the Annunciation is a key segment of Catholic dogma. It makes all else in the faith possible, and provides us with a messiah. Perhaps Jesus’ salvific death had greater implications, however the Annunciation was the necessary precursor to all that he did. Hence, the Annunciation is a commonly represented scene in Renaissance era religious art, including altarpieces.
The folding nature of Early Netherlandish altarpieces served a liturgical function beyond the facilitation of the mass for the congregation. The disparate portrayals on the interior and exterior of an altarpiece allowed for an artistic and visual means of representation that corresponds with the church calendar. The imagery oftentimes would refer to key biblical events such as the Passion or the Nativity, thus providing unique altarpieces for each part of the year, such as Easter and Christmas. In this respect, the altarpiece could better achieve one of its main functions according to Barbara Lane—the ability to illustrate the meaning of “the daily liturgical ceremonies for the congregation.”

Such didactic purposes appealed to not only the congregation, but also followed traditional church adornment. Ornament of the church is constantly changing according to the various celebrations throughout the year. We even find the priests donning distinct colors for assorted feast days during the Advent and Lenten seasons. The multifaceted altarpieces seek to achieve a similar task, of presenting to the congregation a visual reminder of the significance of the celebration of the mass that is tailored to the liturgy.

The theological significance of Early Netherlandish altarpieces is easy to miss in a museum setting. Despite the at times sacred sentiment associated with museums, we are talking about a completely disparate type of sacredness. These altarpieces served a strictly ecclesiastical purpose in the context in which they were created. Therefore, when we place them within the confines of museum, we are not only eliminating their purpose, but also masking their significance. The secular nature of the museum renders the altarpiece little more than a religious painting.

23 Lane, The Altar and the Altarpiece, 8.
valued only for its aesthetics. We must remind ourselves of the intrinsic nature of
the altarpiece; of its didactic and symbolic purposes, of its supplemental value in the
mass, of its devotional roles. When placed in the proper spatial and ecclesiastical
context, it is possible for us to better comprehend its intended functionality and its
religious significance.

The Catholic teachings and beliefs from the Renaissance surrounding
salvation initiated the creation of art not only as a didactic tool, but also as a means
to achieve “good works.” These altarpieces fulfilled both functions as prominent
works within the rituals of the mass. The influence of the key aspects of
Catholicism, such as the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Passion, dictated the
imagery portrayed, and their correspondence with the mass created a sort of visual
storytelling for the congregation. Meanwhile the desire for Salvation led to the
proliferation of these altarpieces, particularly in the Netherlandish region. Such
influences of Catholicism on altarpieces and other forms of art were commonplace
during this period of the Church’s domineering presence. The prominent role of
Catholicism must not be overlooked if we are to fully understand the utility of Early
Netherlandish altarpieces.

Early Netherlandish altarpieces fill far more than simply an aesthetic role in
the context of the Church. Perhaps Barbara Lane summarizes their virtue best,
explaining, “they portray timeless theological truths in terms of the worshipper’s
own everyday experience.”\(^{24}\) Certainly, these altarpieces provide a means of
visualizing and comprehending the mass for the congregation. Both the inherent

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 8.
iconographic and visual merits of the “T”-shape format of altarpieces such as the Descent from the Cross and the Seven Sacraments Altarpiece provide a method of representation that promotes the faith of those in the church. These two works nonetheless provide examples of the reflection of the mass parts themselves as a didactic technique in facilitating ecclesiastical practices. Whether the depiction is symbolic, metaphorical, explicit or all three, the result is nevertheless additional comprehension or at the very least, visualization of the mass. Thus, we should attribute to Early Netherlandish altarpieces the function of facilitating church practices. These are inherently religious objects, and they certainly operated as such. The concrete choices made in their construction clearly indicate an intention to reach the congregation and bolster their faith. So now it is our job to work our imaginations a bit (unfortunately without the visual assistance a Netherlandish congregation might have). We must perceive these altarpieces as if they were in their natural habitats. We must eliminate the whitewashed walls and the surrounding period-appropriate paintings, in order to see them according to their intended location and purpose. Not as wall art, but rather as compelling and didactic items that served a definitive function in the Church.


Images

Figure 1: Van der Weyden, Rogier. “Descent from the Cross.” Oil. 1435. Museo nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 2: Van der Weyden, Rogier. “Seven Sacraments Altarpiece.” Oil. 1445-1450. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.
Figure 3: Van Eyck, Jan and Hubert. “Ghent Altarpiece.” Oil and tempera. 1432. Cathedral of Saint Bavo, Ghent.

Figure 4: Van Eyck, Jan and Hubert. “Ghent Altarpiece.” Oil and tempera. 1432. Cathedral of Saint Bavo, Ghent. (Exterior).