Netherlandish and Spanish Altarpieces in the late *1400*s and Early *1500*s

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

The painters, although employed by the Spanish court, were either born and trained in the Low Countries or had been influenced by styles and techniques from that area. As court artists, they worked anonymously to glorify the monarchy and the Church. Until research establishes 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

Juan de Flandes ("Jan of Flanders") came from the north—and possibly trained in Ghent—but his entire reputation is based on work painted in Spain, where he served as court artist to Queen Isabella. These paintings, along with four in Madrid and probably others now lost, were once part of a single large altarpiece in the church of San Lázaro in Palencia. All would originally have been mounted in an elaborate wooden structure that rose high above the altar, filling the space around it—a Spanish style different from what Juan would have seen in the north. The primary figures are pressed close to the front of the picture plane and the recession of the landscape is simplified to increase legibility from a distance. Repetition of round mandorlas in several scenes gives rhythm and geometry to the overall surface, and vibrant colors intensify the luminous effect of the whole.

The Nativity, c. 1508/1519

The backgrounds in paintings by Juan de Flandes are often enlivened with charming narrative vignettes, characteristic of works from the Netherlandish city of Ghent. Here, a young shepherd is struck with awe and wonder as an angel appears in a brilliant globe of light to announce the birth of Christ, while his older companion continues to doze. In the manger an ox and ass eat from a straw-filled trough, an allusion to a passage in the Book of Isaiah in which Isaiah prophesized even livestock would recognize the infant Jesus as their master. An owl perched on the crumbling stable—the deteriorated state representing a transition to a new world order—may refer to the darkness dispelled by Christ's birth.

Oil on panel, painted surface: 110.5 x 79.3 cm
(43 ½ x 31 ¼ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.23

The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1508/1519

References in the Gospel of Matthew to the wise men who followed a miraculous star to the infant Jesus are minimal, but by the seventh century churchmen in the West had made them kings, set their number at three, and given them names—Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior. Juan de Flandes portrayed them as representatives of the three known continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The Bible does specify their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and these were often invested with various meanings. The chest of gold, which the kneeling magus offers, was traditionally given to kings. A second magus, richly dressed, gestures toward an incense burner in the form of a tower; frankincense, used to purify the temple, might symbolize Christ's divinity. The African magus holds the final gift: a bottle of myrrh. As an ointment used to anoint the dead, myrrh could refer to the sacrifice the divine infant would eventually make. Note the kings' attendants in the distance, another of Juan de Flandes' lively vignettes.

Oil on panel, painted surface: 124.7 x 79 cm
(49 ⅛ x 31 ⅛ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.24

The Baptism of Christ, c. 1508/1519

The Gospels relate that when Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan, he saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend toward him like a dove. God the Father then spoke, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Both appear within the round mandorlas that Juan painted in many of the surviving panels of his original altarpiece.

Oil on panel, painted surface: 124.2 x 79 cm
(49 ⅞ x 31 1⁄16 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.25

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, c. 1485/1500

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 of *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 this painting, 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. The Assumption of the Virgin theme usually displays an open sarcophagus, but it 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 Saint Lucy's Legend's most sumptuous and ambitious achievement.

Oil on panel, painted surface: 199.2 x 161.8 cm
(78 7⁄16 x 63 ¾ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.13

Renaissance Music

In addition to its radiant beauty and complicated theology, *Mary, Queen of Heaven* is an exceptionally important document in 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, so many instruments and choirs would seldom have been used simultaneously. In the group of angels surrounding the Virgin "loud" instruments such as horns and woodwinds would have overpowered the voices.

1 This angel plays the **tenor** or **alto shawm**, a precursor of the English horn.

2 This angel strums a **Gothic harp.**

3 This angel pumps the bellows of a **portative organ.**

4 This angel bows a **vielle**, an early form of the violin.

5 This angel plays a **soprano** or **treble shawm**, a forerunner of the oboe.

6 This angel plays a **lute.**

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

8 The gathering of musicians among the clouds most likely corresponds to fifteenth-century musical performances. The orchestra at the right comprises the "soft" instruments: three **recorders**, a **lute**, a **dulcimer** being struck by a light hammer, and a **harp.** To the left of the Trinity are two choruses. Each group has one music book, suggesting that their singing is antiphonal and polyphonic. The upper choir, composed of winged angels in white robes, may represent a children's chorus.

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.