

The Netherlands and France in the 1500s

This room is dominated by the three central panels of the Saint Anne Altarpiece. In fact, many paintings in this and adjoining galleries are disassembled parts of church altarpieces. Altarpieces began to appear in the twelfth century. After priests in the Latin church of western Europe began to stand in front of the altar when saying mass, a space was created on the altar for elaborate reliquaries or, lacking important relics to display, for a dramatic painted backdrop. Large assemblages of painted and gilded wooden panels, some more than twenty feet high, became the focus of church decoration. Altarpieces, and with them the art of painting on wooden panels, gained new prominence and began to attract the greatest artists.

Their form varied. In Italy and Spain, for example, an altarpiece commonly included a predella, a horizontal area below the central image where several small narrative scenes from the life of Christ or a saint could be illustrated. In northern Europe, the altar's central image was normally covered except on Sundays and feast days by hinged doors, which were decorated inside and out with many different scenes. In Germany especially, altars often included elaborate groups of painted and gilded wooden statues.

Altarpieces helped to explain basic tenets of faith, especially Christ's human incarnation and the role of the saints as intercessors for people's prayers. Many also focused on the eucharist, the central mystery of the mass, which took place on the altar, linking through their imagery the blood of Christ with the communion wine and its promise of redemption. After the Reformation in the early 1500s, altarpieces in some areas were destroyed by Protestant iconoclasts concerned about idolatry. But in Catholic regions altarpieces continued to be made, and their emotional appeal was an important tool of the Counter-Reformation.

Artist, Workshop, and Guild

Large altarpieces were important commissions. Financed by the church or by cities, professional guilds, lay religious confraternities, or wealthy individuals, they required the resources of an artist's entire workshop. The master artist determined the design, contracting with the patron about subject matter, symbolism, and the use of precious materials, such as the costly blue paints made of lapis lazuli. The master trained and was assisted by journeymen and apprentices, who often painted the backgrounds and secondary figures. In some busy workshops, much of the painting was carried out by these assistants. Specialists prepared the wood panels and frames and applied gold leaf. Other helpers included the master's young sons or, more rarely, his unmarried daughters.

Compensation and working conditions were determined by the rules of the painters' guilds. Guilds served social and charitable functions. More important, they regulated trade, set standards, and limited competition. In many cities only master artists could sell works for profit. The number of apprentices was limited both to ensure the quality of instruction and to avoid producing more artists than the community could support.



The Master of Saint Giles
Franco-Flemish, active c. 1500
The Baptism of Clovis, c. 1500

Clovis (d. 511) was the founder of the Merovingian dynasty and the first Christian king of France. The setting for his baptism can be recognized as Sainte-Chapelle, the royal chapel on the Ile-de-la-Cité in Paris. Among the witnesses is his wife, Clothilde, who was largely responsible for his conversion. In the companion work nearby, a bishop, perhaps Saint Remy, stands next to the cathedral of Notre-Dame. Because they refer specifically to Paris and the French royal line, these two panels (and several others now in London, including one of Saint Giles for which the artist is named) were probably once part of a single large altarpiece commissioned by someone connected to the French court. Their imagery underscores what the French monarchy considered to be its special relationship to God.

The companion work with the scene at Notre-Dame was painted, at least in part, by workshop assistants. Whether the master artist himself was a French painter trained in the north or a northerner who emigrated to France, his style has the detail and precision of Netherlandish painting. His assistants, on the other hand, display the simplified and more solid forms of French art. Compare, for example, the limestone blocks, which are textured and carefully differentiated in the baptism scene but which have a smoother, more uniform look in the other painting. The assistants tended to outline features and to contrast colors and shapes more abruptly.

Oil on panel, 63.3 x 46.7 cm (24 ⁷/₈ x 18 ³/₈ in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.15



The Master of Frankfurt
Netherlandish, c. 1460–active 1520s
Saint Anne with the Virgin and the Christ Child, c. 1511/1515

In this panel, the Virgin and her mother, Saint Anne, flank the infant Jesus. Images with Saint Anne became common in the fifteenth century as her popularity grew, and this arrangement is one of the two principal ways in which she was shown. The figure of God the Father appears in a gold ground above the baby's head, and the dove of the Holy Spirit hovers between them. The composition links the trinity—the father, the son, and the holy ghost—with the triad of mother, Mary, and child. The visual parallel enhances Anne's status and underlines Christ's dual nature as both human and divine. (The larger Saint Anne panel by Gerard David and workshop, also in this room, illustrates the other typical representation; there she is seated frontally, as if enthroned, with the Virgin and Child on her lap.)

The identity of the Master of Frankfurt remains undocumented. In his case the designation given him by modern scholars is misleading since it is now clear that he was not German but Netherlandish, probably working in Antwerp. Although we are not certain of his name we do have his fingerprints. He used his fingers to smudge the paint in the clouds, giving them extra texture. Another interesting aspect of his technique is his apparent use of a stencil to create the pattern in Saint Anne's red cloak. Notice how the design is uninterrupted across the folds of cloth.

Oil on panel, 73.5 x 57.5 cm (28 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 22 ³/₈ in.)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney K. Lafoon 1976.67.1



Gerard David
Netherlandish, c. 1460–1523
The Rest on the Flight into Egypt, c. 1510

Gerard David, the last great artist in Bruges, painted with the gentle mood and style of an earlier generation. In that sense he held to a tradition that was already being abandoned in more "modern" cities such as Antwerp. In other respects, however, especially in his innovative use of symbols and sensitive treatment of the landscape, David was quite progressive.

These qualities are apparent in this small panel of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. The quiet and peaceful scenery shares prominence with the tender image of the Virgin and Child, suggesting narrative elements of the story and amplifying their meaning. At the right, Joseph beats chestnuts from a tree. In northern Europe at this time, the chestnut was a staple in the diet. This image was familiar from manuscripts, which often illustrated their calendars with labors appropriate to each month, including nut gathering in October and November. David substituted the chestnut for the more exotic date palms that usually figure in the story. They were said to have bent to offer their fruit to the hungry family.

In the foreground, each carefully painted plant would have been recognized by contemporary viewers as a symbol that enhanced the meaning of the scene. Violets, for example, underscore the Virgin's humility. The plantain, which stanches blood, alludes to Christ's death, and the grapes Jesus holds suggest the wine of the communion.

Oil on panel, 44.3 x 44.9 cm (17 ⁷/₁₆ x 17 ¹/₁₆ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.43



Gerard David and Workshop

The Saint Anne Altarpiece, c. 1500/1520

Originally the center panel here, which shows Saint Anne seated with her daughter Mary and Jesus, was taller than the flanking ones of Saint Nicholas (left) and Anthony of Padua (right), and all three had arched tops. Probably they stood above a predella of six smaller scenes (now in other museums) that presented events in the life of the two male saints. Since this arrangement is typical for southern rather than northern Europe, the altarpiece was probably commissioned by a patron in Italy or Spain, where Netherlandish painting was extremely popular.

No master would have completed such a large commission alone. Today, new scientific techniques, especially infrared reflectography, which makes it possible to see the underdrawing hidden beneath the paint, are helping to discern the participation of workshop assistants. Here the basic composition in all three panels was drawn with sketchy parallel strokes, probably with charcoal or black chalk. In the central panel only there is additional underdrawing in ink or paint. This provides more detailed instructions and could indicate that David's assistants, who would have needed more guidance than the master himself, were responsible for the center panel. Presumably David painted much of the two wings himself. Notice how the underdrawing shows through the folds in Anne's robe as blue-gray hatching.

Oil on panel, center 236.1 x 97.5 cm (92 15/16 x 38 3/8 in.). Widener Collection 1942.9.17a–c



Bernard van Orley

Netherlandish, c. 1488–1541

The Marriage of the Virgin, c. 1513

This panel and *Christ among the Doctors* were commissioned by a Benedictine abbot who probably used them for private devotion. The back of one bears his coat of arms and the other might have originally had his portrait.

On the left is the marriage of the Virgin and Joseph (illustrated above), a story not found in the Bible but popular in late medieval religious literature. On the right (not illustrated), young Jesus confounds the doctors of learning with his uncanny knowledge. Van Orley's early works, including these, are distinguished by dramatic gestures and fascination with the changing colors of silks. Notice, for example, the shimmering iridescence of blue turning to gold and pink in the dress of the two men flanking young Jesus.

Though van Orley assimilated Renaissance style, it is not clear whether he actually traveled to Italy. Italian style moved north in a number of ways. The elaborate Renaissance porticoes here may have been influenced, for example, by the drawings of other northern artists. Or they may reflect the ceremonial structures erected for the triumphal entry of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V into Bruges. A few years after these panels were painted, van Orley himself received a series of influential designs by Raphael when he supervised the weaving in Brussels of Raphael's tapestries for the Sistine Chapel. Increasingly van Orley became known also as a designer of tapestries and stained glass.

Oil on panel, max 55.5 x 34 cm (21 7/8 x 13 3/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.48



Adriaen Isenbrant

Netherlandish, active 1510–1551

The Adoration of the Shepherds, probably 1520/1540

Isenbrant, called Gerard David's "disciple" by a commentator in the 1600s, lived in Bruges and was clearly influenced by its preeminent painter. Notice, for example, how the faces of the Virgin here and in David's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* have the same shadowy softness, oval shape, and small rounded chin. Note too how the basket in David's picture is found again as a cradle for the infant. Nevertheless, Isenbrant has also incorporated new elements popularized by artists in Antwerp, notably the Italianate architecture and the ambiguous way space recedes into the background.

The crumbling ruin, its ancient decoration slowly disappearing under creeping vines, suggests the decay of the old pagan religion. In the same vein, the figure of Moses at the top alludes to the transition from Old Testament law to the new era brought about by Christ's birth. The shepherds who gather around the infant are the first to celebrate Jesus' appearance on earth. The distant bonfires of a peasant festival celebrating the winter solstice help to fix the time of year. By placing the infant on an altarlike cradle next to a sheaf of wheat, the painting also stresses the association of the incarnation—Jesus' human birth—with the eucharist, the presence of his body and blood in the wafer and wine of the mass.

Oil on panel, 74.6 x 57 cm (29 7/16 x 22 7/16 in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1978.46.1



Corneille de Lyon

French, active 1534–1574

Portrait of a Man, c. 1540

Corneille was born in the Netherlands and possibly received his training in Antwerp, but by the 1530s he was in Lyons, where he became the dominant court portraitist of the French Renaissance. He was made a French citizen by Henry II and converted to Catholicism in 1546, presumably to preserve favor with his royal patrons.

In Lyons artists were free of many guild restrictions that controlled trade elsewhere. There were, for example, art sellers who acted independently of any master's workshop—true commercial galleries. Corneille himself seems to have had a studio where the public could buy workshop copies of his royal portraits. He also accepted commissions from families engaged in the city's busy printing and silk industries. Inventories show that even people of modest means owned paintings.

This man wears the dress of an academic or a Franciscan monk, but his identity is otherwise unknown. The vivid blue-green of the plain background and its contrast with the careful detail in the face lend intensity and presence to his portrait despite its small size. The minute brushstrokes that pick out individual hairs in the man's beard and the smooth finish of the surface are evidence of Corneille's training in the north. On the other hand, the rare frame, which is contemporary with the painting, reflects Italian Renaissance architecture. It is the blending of such northern and southern elements that characterizes French art in the mid-1500s.

Oil on panel, 16.5 x 14.3 cm (6 1/2 x 5 3/8 in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1965.8.1



François Clouet

French, 1522 or before 1572

A Lady in Her Bath, probably c. 1571

François Clouet, the son of a Netherlandish artist, became court painter to the French kings Francis I, Henry II, and Charles IX.

A number of bathing portraits depicting courtesans and mistresses of kings have survived from Renaissance France. However, the coolly elegant features of this woman make it impossible to identify her. In the past she has been linked with Diane de Poitiers, mistress of Henry II, but that identification has now been ruled out. It may be that she is meant to represent an ideal of beauty rather than an actual person.

Her pose recalls the *Mona Lisa*, which Leonardo da Vinci had taken with him when he moved to France toward the end of his life. Clouet was probably influenced by a drawing of the nude *Mona Lisa* and nude versions painted by Leonardo's followers. Many artists had come from Italy at the invitation of Francis I to decorate his chateau at Fontainebleau. Among the rooms he constructed was an elaborate bath—a rare luxury in northern Europe. Paintings in the dressing rooms feature nymphs and nude goddesses reveling at baths and fountains. They may have helped to inspire this type of bathing portrait. A combination of Italian influences and the meticulous detail of Netherlandish art is characteristic of both François Clouet in particular and the French Renaissance generally.

Oil on panel, 92.1 x 81.3 cm (36 1/4 x 32 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.13