

What was the Castilian Tabernacle-Altarpiece in the Met Cloisters? Proposals for its Function and Context

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A set of three Castilian panel paintings of the late 13th century is usually on display in the Met Cloisters in New York. These paintings, of unknown provenance, have long been recognized as part of a tabernacle-altarpiece or tabernacle shrine, but in spite of this and their relatively good condition, they have attracted little attention in studies on Gothic painting in Castile. Recent scholarship on tabernacle shrines provides a new basis for their research. By analyzing the panels' most unique feature (the depiction of small-scale scenes offering a cycle of the Passion, visible when the altarpiece was closed), and through comparison with other contemporary works, this article proposes a possible context and use for this important example of early Gothic painting in Castile.

KEYWORDS: Castile, Gothic painting, tabernacle-altarpiece, Wildenstein altarpiece, *Andachtsbild*

Artworks that enter the art market are often subject to circumstances that complicate their study. Provenance is often missing or obscured, while their appearance is manipulated to enhance their aesthetic appeal. If they eventually enter museum collections, they are at least available to the general public and for scholarly scrutiny. This article offers a fresh consideration of one such artwork, a set of three Castilian panel paintings from the late 13th century showing scenes of the Passion, long on display in the Met Cloisters in New York (Fig. 1).

TRACING THE HISTORY OF THE PANELS

The panels entered the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on two different occasions. Two were purchased in 1955 (inv. nos 55.62a and 55.62b), while the remaining one was bequeathed by Carl Otto von Kienbusch upon his death in 1976 (inv. no. 1977.94). They had anyway been known to scholars since 1941 and 1938, respectively, when they were first published by Chandler Rathfon Post in his encyclopaedic *A History of Spanish Painting*. Post realized that they all originally belonged to the same ensemble, a sort of altarpiece or shrine with movable wings.¹

In 1941 the two panels were in the possession of the Paris-established antiques house Wildenstein & Co., which had a branch in New York. Post reports that these panels were previously owned by the well-known Parisian collector Victor Martin Le Roy



FIG. 1. Three Castilian panel paintings of the late 13th century showing scenes of the Passion (the Wildenstein altarpiece). Tempera on panel, 1051 × 397 mm, 1054 × 416 mm, and 1499 × 267 mm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. nos 55.62a, 55.62b, and 1977.94)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, CCO

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78. About the one in Seville Cathedral, see E. Steingraber, 'Ein Reliquienaltar König Philipps V. und Königin Johanna von Frankreich', *Pantheon*, 33/2 (1975), 91–99; M. J. Sanz, 'Notas sobre el relicario de Felipe V de Francia y Juana de Borgoña de la catedral de Sevilla', *Goya*, 229–30 (1992), 50–55. About the one in the Morgan Library and Museum, see M. Tomasi, 'Luxe et devotion au XVe siècle : autour du tabernacle de Thomas Basin', *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 156/2 (2012), 999–1026; <https://www.themorgan.org/objects/item/93252> (accessed 6 January 2023). About the one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see M. B. Freeman, 'A Shrine for a Queen', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 21/10 (1963), 327–39; D. Gaborit-Chopin, 'The Reliquary of Elizabeth of Hungary at The Cloisters', in *The Cloisters: Studies in Honor of the Fiftieth Anniversary*, ed. E. C. Parker (New York 1992), 327–53; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470310> (accessed 6 January 2023).

79. On the left wing, *Annunciation*, *Visitation*, *Nativity of Christ* and *Adoration of the Magi*. On the right wing, *Massacre of the Innocents*, *Flight into Egypt*, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* and *Christ among the Doctors*.

80. Of the four enamelled silver-gilt tabernacles known to this date this is the only one displaying the infancy of Christ on the interior and the Passion on the exterior. That in Seville Cathedral shows the kneeling donors accompanied by candle-bearing angels on the interior and heraldry on the exterior, the Morgan example shows apostles on the interior and the *Last Judgement* on the exterior, and the Met one shows the infancy of Christ, apostles, saints, and musician angels on the interior and apostles, saints, and musician angels on the exterior.

81. Significantly, the only praying nun depicted in the Altenberg altarpiece is included in the scene of the *Appearance of Christ to St Mary Magdalen*, see above, note 66.

82. Angela de Foligno, *Complete Works*, trans. P. Lachance (Mahwah 1993), 134. See also C. Jäggi, 'Dialogar con Dios: el uso de las imágenes en los conventos femeninos de dominicas en la Teutonia bajomedieval', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 44 (2014), 241–76, at 261.

83. For Astudillo, see Ch. R. Post, *A History of Spanish Painting, Volume VI: The Valencian School in the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass. 1935), part 2, 504–05; Cook and Gudiol Ricart, *Ars Hispaniae*, VI, 272; Gutiérrez Baños, *Aportación*, II, 48–52 (no. 10), figs 162–63. For the Magdalen altarpieces from Astudillo and Nuremberg specifically, see F. M. Morillo Rodríguez and F. Gutiérrez Baños, *Retablo de Astudillo I (retablos-tabernáculo de la Baja Edad Media en la Corona de Castilla, 4/38)* (Valladolid 2021), available at <http://uvadoc.uva.es/handle/10324/46013>. For Nuremberg, see Kemperdick, 'Tabernacle-altarpieces in Central Europe', 137, fig. 11.

84. Jäggi, 'Dialogar con Dios', 248.

85. C. Jäggi, *Frauenklöster im Spätmittelalter. Die Kirchen der Klarissen und Dominikanerinnen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert* (Petersberg 2006), 247–333.

86. Jäggi, 'Dialogar con Dios', 241–76.

87. Alfonso X el Sabio *Cantigas de Santa María*, ed. W. Mettmann, 3 vols (Madrid 1986–89), III, 102–03 (no. 303) and 232–33 (no. 361).

88. Scarcely too big in the case of Vileña. For the Virgin and Child of Cañas (1.68 m height), see C. Fernández-Ladreda Aguadé, 'Virgen de Cañas', in *Alfonso X el Sabio* (Murcia 2009), 330–31. For the Virgin and Child of Vileña (1.25 m height), see Martínez Martínez, *La imaginería gótica burgalesa*, 286–87 (no. 67), where the indicated 0.75 m height is a mistake, as kindly communicated by the author. There is an additional 13th-century Virgin and Child in Cañas, but its measures are not available.

89. The presence of royal heraldry—ubiquitous in 13th- and 14th-century Castile and León—does not necessarily imply royal patronage.

90. M. de Castro, 'Monasterios hispánicos de clarisas desde el siglo XIII al XVI', *Archivo Ibero-Americano*, 193–94 (1989), 79–122.

91. *Arrest of Christ*, *Flagellation*, and *Road to the Calvary* (left wing, from top to bottom). *Descent from the Cross*, *Entombment*, and *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (right wing, from top to bottom). Five of the six scenes are coincident with those on the Wildenstein altarpiece, and the remaining one (*Road to the Calvary*) has been hypothetically proposed for the missing left panel of the left wing. For the *Passion triptych* from Quejana, see A. Velasco González, 'Un tríptico flamenco de hacia 1400 procedente del monasterio de San Juan Bautista de Quejana (Álava, España)', *Temas medievales*, 29/1 (2021), 1–39.