Chapter 3

The Aesthetics of Immersion: The Reception of the Retable by the Worshipers

This chapter will consider the viewer's reception of the carved, polychromed and gilded retables. The elaborate architectural framework, the profusion of anecdotal detail, and the exaggeration of both gestures and facial expressions endow the altarpieces to be considered next with a certain agency or, in John Paoletti's words, “sacral presence.”¹ Just as the words and gestures of the priest excited the worshiper’s memory of the Passion, the stories represented on the retables breathed life into the liturgy. Following a close examination of the altarpieces, our focus will shift to the “aesthetics of immersion.” In contrast to the symbolic form of the Mass, which gave the Real Presence of Christ latitude in both temporal and spatial terms, the Passion retable delivered the biblical past in the present tense in a vivid and memorable fashion. In a certain way, the late medieval altarpiece participated in what Friedemann Kreuder dubs the genuinely theatrical composition of medieval culture.² It is the retable's ability to establish an intimacy between Christ’s suffering and the worshiper that constitutes its special character.

The Life of the Virgin Retable

The unassuming parish church of St.-Roch at Ternant located in the Nièvre today houses two beautiful altarpieces from the fifteenth century.³ The earlier

³ The two retables escaped both the Reformation and the Revolution and were protected by the Monuments historiques in 1881. The church was constructed c. 1820 reusing some of the materials from the medieval church on the site. The restoration of both retables is delineated in Serge Bernard and Fabrice Cairo, “Les Retables de Ternant,” http://www.ventsdumorvan.org/pdfs/pdfs/vdm-0315.pdf. The earliest work done on the Virgin retable was to replace its hinges in 1931, followed by work on the painted panels, a cleaning in 1970–1971, restoration of the shutters in 1980. The last repairs were completed in 1998.
of the two works, which is dated to c. 1444, is dedicated to the Virgin and was commissioned by Philippe de Ternant and his wife, Isabeau de Roye, both of whom are represented on the painted panels that form the outermost shutters of the inverted T-shaped altarpiece (Fig. 6). The painted and gilded wood of the inner triptych is flanked and crowned by painted panels that were originally on wood, but were transferred to canvas in the 1940s. Unlike the Passion retable that is displayed directly behind this work, the polychromy of the Virgin altarpiece was in very poor condition before its restoration.

The contemporary viewer, however, sees only the skillful blending of painted and carved vignettes that comprise this altarpiece, a work that is believed to have originated in Brussels sometime after 1430 and have been dedicated to the Virgin for the chapel of the château of Philippe de Ternant and his wife in 1444. The story begins on the painted shutters with the donors: to the right, Isabeau de Roye kneels with her patron saint, Catherine of Alexandria, and to the left, Philippe de Ternant is presented by his patron saint, John the Baptist (Fig. 6). The donors occupy an oratory-like space characterized by ecclesiastical furnishings: Philippe is diagonally placed before an altar displaying an inverted T-shaped retable of which the central scene, the Crucifixion, is visible. One may just make out a medallion with the Ternant coat of arms in the chamber that precedes the donor’s position on the prie-dieu before the altar. Philippe, chamberlain of Philippe le Bon, wears a colorful surcoat bearing his coat of arms over his armor and prominently displays the coveted and recently-awarded Toison d’or collar. Philippe’s helmet and gauntlets lie on the ground before him, reverently, if blindly, addressing the Virgin in the subsequent panel. The tilted floor, Gothic arches, and finite ends of the crowning roof (with banners of both donors), announce the status of both this panel and that of its pendant as the outer wings of this altarpiece.

---

4 The conservator, Judith Kagan, estimated that 80% of the original polychromy of the Passion retable was preserved, whereas the Virgin retable was in very poor condition in 1933. See Judith Kagan, Aubert Gérard, and Anne Gérard-Bendélé. “Le retable de la Passion de Ternant,” in Retables brabançons des XVᵉ et XVIᵉ siècles. Actes du colloque du musée du Louvre, edited by Sophie Guillot de Suduiraut (Paris: Documentation Française, 2002), 229–272, esp. 244–248.


6 The proportions of this retable are 1.58 m high × 3.15 m long. This is relatively small compared to other Brabançon altarpieces.