Rogier van der Weyden’s *Saint John Triptych* for Miraflores and a Reconsideration of Salome

It has long been recognized that Rogier van der Weyden’s *Saint John Triptych* (c. 1454; fig. 1) closely resembles his earlier work dedicated to the Virgin, the *Mary Triptych* (c. 1437; fig. 2). They are the only two works in Rogier’s *œuvre* in which he employs the ‘arch motif’, presenting three narrative scenes beneath *troupe-l’œil* arches that simulate a church portal. Along the archivolts run supplementary scenes; statuettes of the evangelists, Peter and Paul, flank the arches of the *Mary Triptych* while statuettes of the apostles flank the arches of the *Saint John Triptych*. The two works are approximately the same size; each panel of the *Mary Triptych* measures 28 x 16 7/8 inches; each of the *Saint John Triptych* measures 30 1/4 x 19 inches. Their formal similarities raise the possibility that the two works were pendants, perhaps placed near each other in their original location. This cannot be proven by historical records, for while the *Mary Triptych* once belonged to the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores, near Burgos, Spain, there is no documentary evidence regarding the original site of the *Saint John Triptych*. I propose that Rogier intentionally aligned the *Saint John Triptych* visually and thematically with the *Mary Triptych* because he conceived of them as a pair and meant for them to be viewed together at Miraflores. Considering the two triptychs as complementary, I propose a reinterpretation of the right-hand panel of the *Saint John Triptych*, which shows the saint’s martyrdom, and suggest that Salome is meant to be understood as a positive figure. In certain writings of the Church Fathers and medieval devotional texts, Salome is said to represent the gentiles who accepted Christianity and who were therefore considered a forerunner of *Eclesia*, the Church. When the *Beheading of the Baptist* is compared to the corresponding panel of *Christ Appearing to His Mother* in the *Mary Triptych*, it becomes clear that Rogier has represented Salome as an antetype of the Church, personified by the Virgin. Salome’s identification as the forerunner of Ecclesia supports the overall theme of the *Saint John Triptych*: that the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, is the harbinger of the Christian era.

Historical evidence suggests that both the *Mary* and *Saint John Triptychs* were intended for the Carthusian monastery of Miraflores. Miraflores was built in 1402 under King Enrique III (r. 1390-1406) and functioned for forty years as a royal residence. Enrique III had requested the foundation of a Franciscan monastery upon his death, which occurred in 1406, but it was not until 1442 that his successor, King Juan II of Castile, complied with his wishes. Juan II (r. 1406-1454) ceded Miraflores not to the Franciscans, as Enrique III had intended, but, out of personal devotion to the Carthusian order, gave the palace to them with a dedication to Saint Francis. Monks quickly occupied Miraflores while work on the ecclesiastical and monastic buildings was begun. Rogier’s *Mary Triptych* was a gift to the new monastery from Juan II in 1445.
In October 1452, a fire destroyed a great deal of the original palace. The *Mary Triptych*, like other works of art, ecclesiastical vestments, and liturgical objects donated by the king, survived; its original location, however, cannot be determined. Plans were soon underway to rebuild the charterhouse with a new dedication to the Virgin Mary, a patron of the order and frequent dedicatee of Carthusian monasteries. Juan de Colonia, master architect at Burgos Cathedral, was hired to design and plan the new complex. The first stone was laid on May 11, 1454. Unfortunately, Juan died soon thereafter, on July 21. Work at Miraflores came to a halt under his successor, Enrique IV (r. 1454-1474) and was not completed until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Scholars have postulated that the *Saint John Triptych* was intended for Miraflores, a hypothesis that is compelling for several reasons. First, according to dendrochronological evidence, it dates to around 1454, that is, to the same time that the rebuilding of the monastery began. Since plans for a new, expanded church and cloister were actively underway, the time would have been ripe for Juan to commission new works of art for the monks’ use. Second, the work has a Spanish provenance. The *Saint John Triptych* has been convincingly identified with a triptych that was in the Carthusian monastery of Santa Maria de las Cuevas, Seville in the eighteenth century. In 1744 José Martín Rincón, a Carthusian monk from las Cuevas, described a ‘portable oratory’ showing the Baptist’s Birth, the Baptism, and his Beheading by Albrecht Dürer, which had been given to the foundation by Charles V; it is presumed this gift was made following Charles V’s documented visit to the monastery in 1526. The Spanish historian Antonio Ponz also saw the triptych at las Cuevas and noted in his description, first published in 1778, that ‘each one of the scenes is included within two pilasters and an arch’. Given this evidence, Dirk De Vos has suggested that the triptych originally stood at Miraflores, but that it was moved under the orders of Charles V to another Carthusian monastery, that is, to las Cuevas.