Rogier van der Weyden’s Escorial and Philadelphia Crucifixions and their relation to Fra Angelico at San Marco*

I Introduction
The two large paintings of the Crucifixion with the Virgin Mary and St. John in the Johnson Collection, Philadelphia (Fig. 1)¹ and in the Nuevos Musco in the Monastery of the Escorial (Fig. 2)² have long been noted within Rogier van der Weyden’s œuvre because of their exceptional coloration and the austere simplicity of their compositions. First, Rogier has reduced the often crowded scene of the Crucifixion to three figures in a stark setting. John and Mary stand on a rocky ground in a shallow space before a cut stone wall. While the skull and bone in the Philadelphia diptych imply that the desolate setting is the actual place of the Crucifixion, Mt. Golgotha, even these are omitted in the Escorial version. Secondly, Rogier’s usually vivid palette has been replaced by soft pastels and expanses of yellow ochre and grey which are juxtaposed with flat areas of red and gold. The draperies of Mary and John are a very pale blue and a pale rose, and the skin of Christ’s lifeless body is ashen. The wall behind them is a soft grey, and the ground a yellow ochre. In contrast to these grisaille-like figures and settings, however, the Philadelphia diptych includes two brilliant red cloths which hang on the wall below a gold sky. In the Escorial panel this gold sky has been eliminated, and the red cloth enlarged and projected forward above Christ’s head. In both versions, details of the narrative are suppressed, creating a quiet, timeless image which invites the viewer’s contemplation.

While scholars have noted the unusual palette and compositions of the works, a common reason for the remarkably similar treatment of these two works has not been explored. In addition, it is notable that, while the unusual form of the two works shows clearly that these two Crucifixions are exceptional within Rogier’s œuvre and are at least visually related to each other, on the basis of style, scholars correctly date them five to ten years apart. The Philadelphia diptych is now generally dated between 1450 and 1455, while the Escorial panel is generally considered a late work and has been dated by Panofsky about 1462.³ It is the intention of this study to discuss the reasons for the exceptional treatment of the two works, their sources, and their date.

II Earlier Theories
In earlier literature scholars have offered several explanations for Rogier’s unusual choice of coloration and composition. Because of the lack of decorative detail in the setting and the grisaille-like coloration of the figures, it was long ago suggested that Rogier was imitating sculpture.⁴ Indeed, during his career, particularly during his early career, Rogier repeatedly
demonstrated an interest in painting figures in relation to a sculptural setting. For instance, in his *Descent from the Cross* (Madrid, The Prado) the fully polychromed figures are viewed as though behind stone tracery, so that they stand illusionistically within an architectural niche. Similarly, Rogier executed three versions of the *Virgin and Child* (Lugano, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum; and Madrid, The Prado) which show Mary and Christ either seated or standing within fictive carved-stone niches. Finally, in the *Virgin Mary Triptych* (two versions extant, one now divided between Granada, Capilla Real and New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; the other in Berlin-Dahlem, Staatlichen Museen) and the *John the Baptist Triptych* (Berlin-Dahlem, Staatlichen Museen) the main figures are enframed by architectural portals, of which the ‘sculpted’ archivolts further elaborate the iconographic