EN ROUTE TO THE AVE:
ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN’S MIRAFLORES ALTARPIECE
AND THE NASCENT ROSARY

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ABSTRACT

Rogier van der Weyden’s *Miraflores Altarpiece* (c. 1440) was painted and installed in the Carthusian Monastery of Miraflores in Castile during a period when early rosary meditation cycles were gaining popularity, particularly amongst Carthusians and their supporters. This historical context, which has not been explored before, offers a rationale for the innovative iconographic content and structure of the work, as well as for the ways in which it had meaning for its earliest viewers. Like early rosary meditations, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* combines diverse meditational cycles including life of Christ and the Virgin narratives with the tripartite division of the Marian Psalter. The altarpiece has much in common with the form of the rosary that became standard during the sixteenth century, which indicates that this format of the rosary had much earlier roots than had been thought previously. The *Miraflores Altarpiece* contributes to our understanding of the way visual media participated in the rosary tradition, and the ways in which that tradition developed and changed over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the assistance of others. I am deeply grateful to the faculty of the Tyler School of Art, Temple University for their inspirational and rigorous teaching, and for their generosity of time. I am particularly indebted to Dr. Ashley West, whose enthusiastic and engaging lectures on Netherlandish painting began me on this path, and whose generous ongoing support and guidance saw me to the end of it, even when it led across the Atlantic. I would also especially like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Bolman not only for her excellent teaching, but also for her faith in my abilities, and for kindly agreeing to be my second reader during her sabbatical. The engaging lectures and seminars of Doctors Tracey Cooper, Alan Braddock, Marcia Hall, Susanna Gold, and Gerald Silk all contributed to the content or methodology of this work.

Thanks are owed to Peggy Nash for her support checking references that I could no longer access, and to Rebecca Leete for her encouragement and helpful proof reading of the text.

Special thanks are due to my children, Jemima and Hugo. Their understanding and encouragement went well beyond their years.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Simon Sinclair, to whom this thesis is dedicated. Without him this work would never have been done.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1445 King Juan II of Castile gave a fixed-wing triptych altarpiece to the Carthusian monastery he had founded at Miraflores in Spain. Known as the Miraflores Altarpiece (Figure 1), it is one of only three works directly attributed to Rogier van der Weyden (c.1400-1464). The monastery’s records are lost, but Antonio Ponz made a copy in 1783 which states: “… King Juan gave an oratory most precious and holy, depicting three stories: namely, the Nativity of Jesus, his Descent from the Cross, which is elsewhere called the Fifth Sorrow, and his Appearance to his mother after his Resurrection… painted by the Great and Famous Master Roget of Flanders.” The meaning of the altarpiece has been examined in light of this attribution and the work’s subsequent history at the monastery of Miraflores. Both its iconography and the ways in which it engendered meaning have received attention, but there has not yet been a

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1 For a recent summary of scholarship on the provenance of the Miraflores Altarpiece see Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander, eds. The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden (Frankfurt: Städel Museum, 2009), 317-327.

2 The other two are the Deposition and Escorial Crucifixion. None of these attributions are based on contemporary sources, and none of his works are signed. All other artist identifications are based on stylistic comparison. Ibid, 68-9; and Lorne Campbell, Van der Weyden (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 6.

thorough consideration of the altarpiece with reference to the rosary tradition with which it shares many salient features.

In this study I shall argue that the subject, composition, and function of the Miraflores Altarpiece engage with Marian devotions that were beginning to develop into the rosary. The rosary is now understood as a meditative prayer cycle in which Ave Marías, Paternosters and other prayers are repeated while recalling the fifteen Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. The beads used for keeping track of these prayers are also known as the rosary. In the early 1400s, different traditions of sequential meditations on the life and Passion of Christ and his mother were first being combined with the practice of reciting Aves, particularly in Carthusian monasteries. These devotions, which had yet to be standardized into the rosary as it is now known, offer insight into the rationale for the images we see in the Miraflores Altarpiece, as well as the ways in which it may have functioned as a devotional work.

It is curious that Ponz’s source identifies the central panel of the Miraflores Altarpiece with the fifth of the Virgin Mary’s Sorrows, a sequence that was an established but not yet codified focus of devotions in the fifteenth century, while making no mention of other Marian devotions that might be associated with the other two panels. Unlike the hierarchy of images revealed through more usual moveable-winged

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4 Ten Aves, one Paternoster are said for each mystery. In 2002, Pope John Paul II introduced the Luminous Mysteries, resulting in 20 Mysteries in total.

5 The development of the rosary is discussed at length in Chapters Two and Four. On the early combination of Aves with sequential meditations see, for example, Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: the Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 1-3.

6 On the Sorrows of the Virgin Mary see Carol Schuler, “The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin: Popular Culture and Cultic Imagery in Pre-Reformation Europe,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 21 (1992): 5-28, especially 5-17. The association of the image with the Sorrows of the Virgin may have been
Netherlandish altarpieces at this time, all three panels of the Miraflores Altarpiece appear simultaneously, are equal in size and are treated within a unified framing device.⁷ We are confronted with an altarpiece that is as innovative in its selection of images as it is in their presentation as a coherent visual unit.

In the Miraflores Altarpiece three major scenes - the Adoration of the Infant Christ, Lamentation, and Appearance of the Risen Christ to his Mother - are set in illusionistic church portals on which eighteen grisaille vignettes relate sequential episodes from the lives of the Virgin and Christ connected to the central images.⁸ The episodes read counter-clockwise down from the apex on the left and up on the right of the arches, so that the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Christ are quite literally framed and encircled by the Virgin’s experience of them (Figures 2-4). Each panel combines intense intimacy of the Virgin and Christ with layers of intricate and detailed visual elements. As Dirk de Vos points out, this layering generates both visual depth and extreme proximity.⁹ Closest to the viewer are the elements that tell the story of salvation history through the Virgin’s eyes. The angels with their crowns and banderoles spelling out the Virgin’s

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⁸ These eighteen scenes are, in the first panel: the Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Adoration of Shepherds, Adoration of Magi and Presentation at the Temple. In the second panel: Christ taking leave of his mother, Mary receiving news of Christ’s arrest, the Carrying of the Cross, Elevation of the Cross, Christ Crucified, Entombment. In the third panel: The three Mary’s recount the resurrection, the Ascension of Christ, Pentecost, Annunciation of the Virgin’s death, Domitian, Coronation of the Virgin. Identified by Erwin Panofsky in Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), 260.

virtues are superimposed on the apex of each portal above the main figures. The figures are situated ambiguously within, before and beyond the portals with their grisaille vignettes, resting partly in the space of the deeper barrel vaulted porches. Past these porches, the space recedes into a rib-vaulted chapel in the Infancy panel, and into deep landscapes in the Lamentation and Resurrection panels. It is in these background spaces that typological figures appear (on the capitals of columns in the porches), and where Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection occur. The space, time and imagery of each panel are self-contained, yet together they form a visual triumvirate recounting a coherent story, supported by the four evangelists, as well as the privileged apostles Peter and Paul, who are present as grisaille figures on the archivolts. Although the triptych in some sense relates three chapters of a continuous narrative, the viewer is invited by the details and formal properties to pause for a long while before each panel individually.

The Marian-centered nature of the altarpiece’s iconography as well as its devotional character have long been recognized, but they have never been examined in light of the developing rosary tradition at the time it was painted.10 Little is made of Ponz’s correlation between the Lamentation and the Sorrows of the Virgin, and the grisaille archivolt scenes in this panel do not correspond with the other episodes associated with this devotional sequence.11 In his discussion of the third panel, Erwin Panofsky does mention the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries, which form the structure of the later rosary, but he does not make this connection specific to the program


11 Schuler has shown different episodes of five, seven and up to 150 sorrows in a variety of sources, but they generally include Simeon’s prophecy and the loss of Christ in the Temple, neither of which are in the *Miraflores Altarpiece. Seven Sorrows*, 15-17.
of images, nor does he note that both the term ‘Mystery’ and the division of the rosary into three distinct themes did not occur until well after Rogier van der Weyden painted the triptych. Iconographic interpretations have rather focused on doctrinal, sacramental and liturgical Marian themes important to the historical context of the altarpiece’s commission. Edwin Hall and Horst Uhr interpret the crowns and banderoles as a deliberate polemic in the ongoing doctrinal debate about the Virgin’s worthiness of the triple-crown reward for virgins, martyrs and doctors of the church. Anne Fuchs treats the altarpiece as a portrayal of the recent triumph over challenges to papal authority in the church: the Virgin is Ecclesia with her virtues of suffering and ultimate triumph. Barbara Lane offers a sacramental reading, stressing the Virgin as the gateway to heaven and altar of Christ, giving the triptych a chiefly Eucharistic and paschal interpretation. James Breckenridge, on the other hand, has argued that its Spanish location is crucial to understanding the innovative imagery of resurrected Christ appearing to his mother, never before seen in Netherlandish art.

Many studies have been dominated by the relationship between the Miraflores Altarpiece and Rogier van der Weyden’s later Saint John Altarpiece (c. 1454), which probably hung as a pendant to the earlier work near Juan II’s tomb at the monastery.


16 “Et prima vidit,” 9-32.
The structural, formal and iconographical similarities between these altarpieces are considerable and have led scholars to decipher them in relation to one another. Victoria Reed, Lane and Fuchs draw parallels between corresponding panels in the altarpieces to show how doctrinal, liturgical and sacramental themes are developed across them and interact with the specific interests of King Juan, the Carthusians and the monastery site. Reed argues that Rogier van der Weyden conceived of the two altarpieces as a pair, and Lane goes as far as to claim that the altarpieces’ arch motifs are “thematically dependent upon each other, and neither is complete alone.”

Such a variety of meanings underscores the esoteric and multivalent nature of the work’s symbolism, and the richness of interpretation that it can support. However, analyses that rely heavily on its presumed later pendant and its subsequent context can distract us from the range of meaning and symbolism in the earlier work that has no place in the Saint John Altarpiece triptych. Bracketing these readings that are dependent on the existence of the later Saint John Altarpiece allows for a productive shift in scholarly focus on the Miraflores Altarpiece to address the reasons behind its unusual selection and arrangement of complex imagery, as well as its mechanisms of meaning that have yet to be fully examined. At stake here is an understanding of the integration of the Miraflores Altarpiece within its own historical context and an appreciation of Rogier van der

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17 Kemperdick and Sander, Master of Flémalle, 325 and 358.
18 Fuchs reads the two altarpieces as the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist interceding for the deceased king at his tomb, “Altarpieces in Context,” 71; Lane pairs the altarpieces with Eucharistic and Baptismal meanings, “Altarpieces Reconsidered” 671; Victoria Reed interprets Salome in the later triptych as a prefigurement of Ecclesia in the earlier one. “Rogier Van der Weyden’s Saint John Triptych for Miraflores and the Reconsideration of Salome,” Oud Holland Jaargang 115 (2001/2002):1-14.
19 Reed, “Salome,” 1; Lane, “Altarpieces Reconsidered,” 671.
Weyden’s masterful artistry in creating something that supported its earliest functions, yet remained irreducible to them.

The formal and iconographic coherence of the work is unprecedented and displays the inventiveness often associated with Rogier van der Weyden.\(^{20}\) Several studies have shown that formal differences between the *Miraflores* and *Saint John Altarpieces* indicate dissimilarity in the ways in which these two works generated meaning, suggesting that while the *Miraflores Altarpiece* invites meditative devotions, the *Saint John Altarpiece* is closer to narrative. This point was made by Karl Birkmeyer in his study of the arch motifs, and again by Dirk de Vos, and by Alfred Acres regarding the role of text within Rogier van der Weyden’s works.\(^ {21}\) Among others, Erwin Panofsky and Reindert Falkenburg have shown that the grisaille vignettes, and their relationship with the central figures, are designed to aid viewers’ memory and imagination in meditative devotions.\(^ {22}\) By showing links between Rogier van der Weyden’s painting and devotional literature and practice, these studies have aided our understanding of the ways in which the altarpiece generated meaning for its viewers not as narrative, but rather as a means to engender empathy and to invite personal, unlimited meditations.

\(^ {20}\) Numerous studies evaluate Rogier van der Weyden’s style as highly innovative, particularly in the ways it invites meditative viewing, including Craig Harbison, “Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting,” *Art Bulletin* 66 (1984): 588-602.


The *Miraflores Altarpiece* has been studied within this context of meditative devotions, but little has been done to identify Marian devotions that may have been enacted in association with it. As yet, there has been no satisfactory explanation within the continuum of Marian devotions for the unprecedented combination of the Adoration, Lamentation and Appearance of Christ to his Mother, for the grisaille portal sculptures presenting sequential images relating to those main themes and for the foregrounding of the Virgin’s experience. Within the context of the work’s inherent multivalency, the nascent rosary traditions are able to shine light on the selection of images and the ways in which the altarpiece functioned, in other words, *how* it generated meaning.\(^{23}\)

The first half of the fifteenth century was a significant period for the development of the rosary, when independent traditions of reciting *Aves* and contemplating episodes from the life of Christ were merging.\(^{24}\) Contrary to the legend that the Virgin Mary gave the rosary to Saint Dominic in 1214, reciting *Aves* in association with specific meditative foci did not become widespread until the early 1400s.\(^{25}\) Dominic of Prussia (1384-1460), a Carthusian monk in Trier, wrote the earliest widely disseminated series of meditations on the life of Christ attached to reciting *Aves*.\(^{26}\) Before this, two different, though not


\(^{25}\) For an account of the legend of Dominic see Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 8-9.

\(^{26}\) These were written 1409-15 but not printed until 1458. Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 16-17.
mutually exclusive, traditions had been followed: one of reciting the Ave as an abbreviated Psalter and a reiteration of the Annunciation to please the Virgin in order to obtain beneficial outcomes (such as miracles or aid); and another that involved meditating on the life of Christ and increasingly the Virgin Mary, with the goal of imitating her virtues and compassion, and ultimately, Christ himself.27 This latter tradition had its roots in the mystics of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and was part of the practices of the devotio moderna followed in monasteries and among the laity, where spiritual renewal was promoted through meditation on Christ’s Passion in order to imitate him, particularly by cultivating empathy towards him.28 Many of these meditations explored the experiences of the Virgin Mary, whose own passion mirrored Christ’s, thus inspiring and exemplifying compassion.29 These two traditions—reciting Aves and contemplating the life of Christ and the Virgin—were both connected to multiple themes, motifs and devotions associated with the Virgin Mary, including the enumeration of her sorrows and joys, celebrations of her virtues, her role as throne, altar, Ecclesia, bride and mother of Christ, and her association with roses, beads, gardens and garland imagery.

Rosary devotions integrated many of these diverse elements. By the late sixteenth century the rosary had become standardized, but its earlier form was characterized by a deliberate breadth and lack of codification. Rosary Confraternities, established from the 1470s, were

27 Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 12.


instrumental in popularizing the rosary by promoting it among the poor and unlettered and by encouraging members to use any one of innumerable methods for praying it.\textsuperscript{30}

The \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} predates key treatises and manuals concerning the rosary that participated in this diversity and that gradually codified the standard episodes and their division into joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries.\textsuperscript{31} The triptych also lacks overt visual references associated with the later devotion, such as roses and beads. However, I argue that its arrangement in terms of the later rosary seems remarkably prescient. A comparison with an engraved picture rosary by Franciscus Domenech from about forty years after the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} was painted illustrates this close connection (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{32} At first glance the medium and arrangement of images in the \textit{Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary} appear very different from Rogier van der Weyden’s painting, especially the lower half of the engraving with saints, a Marian legend, the Virgin and Child in a mandorla, beads, chaplets and roses. However, there is significant overlap between the works, as can be seen from Table One.


\textsuperscript{31}The first printed rosary book and the first known division of the rosary into the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries were both in 1475. In 1569 Pope Pious V approved the rosary in the structure close to that still in use today. Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 25, 33 and 68.

\textsuperscript{32}This engraving was likely to have been used by members of the burgeoning rosary confraternities to aid their devotions. For a discussion of the engraving see Bauman, \textit{A Rosary Picture}, 137-41; and Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 57-58.
Table One. Comparison of Episodes in the Upper Registers of Francesco Domenech’s *Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary*, the Archivolt Scenes in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, and the Standard Rosary

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<td>Visitation</td>
<td>Visitation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nativity</td>
<td>Nativity</td>
<td>Nativity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoration of Shepherds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoration of Magi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Panel/Chaplet</td>
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<td>Gethsemane</td>
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<td>Virgin receiving news of Christ’s arrest</td>
<td>Flogging of Christ</td>
<td>Flogging of Christ</td>
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<td>Carrying the cross</td>
<td>Carrying the Cross</td>
<td>Carrying the Cross</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elevation of the cross</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Crucifixion</td>
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<td>Three Marys recount the Resurrection</td>
<td>Resurrection</td>
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<td>Ascension</td>
<td>Ascension</td>
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<td>Pentecost</td>
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<td>Annunciation of the Virgin’s Death</td>
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<td>Dormition</td>
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<td>Coronation of the Virgin</td>
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The top three registers of scenes in the engraving are divided into the same themes as those in the archivolts of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*: the infancy and childhood of Christ, the Passion of Christ, and the Resurrection and post-Resurrection events. Only seven of the thirty-three scenes do not appear in both works, and these pertain to Rogier van der Weyden’s filtering of the cycle through the Virgin’s experience of it. Table One also shows the correlations between these works and the rosary as it came to be codified through the sixteenth century. These overlaps will be discussed in Chapters Two and Four. Sequential vignettes of the life of Christ had appeared before Rogier van der Weyden, but to my knowledge, they had never been divided in the precise tripartite manner of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. These divisions were integral to the emerging rosary tradition and reappeared in later rosary devotions expressed in images and texts. The purpose of this study is to understand the correlations between Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece and later rosary meditation sequences, and the roots common to both of them.

The sequential arrangement of the life of Christ and the Virgin in the arch motifs framing each of the three main images in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, along with the emphasis on the Virgin Mary, suggest a relationship with the tradition of transformative meditative devotions on the life of the Virgin that were being combined with saying the *Ave* at the time the work was painted. The altarpiece’s tripartite structure and arrangement of episodes call to mind the structure of the Marian Psalter, which was a popular vehicle for reciting *Aves* in the early fifteenth century. Re-examining the *Miraflores Altarpiece* in this devotional context provides insight into its iconographical

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program and into the ways in which it might have functioned as a *vita Christi*-like meditation. This study represents a fresh look at Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece in light of the growing body of research into the ways in which devotional art functioned to promote and visualize affective meditations on the life of Christ, particularly in the Carthusian setting.

An important consideration is the difference between the ways early fifteenth century viewers interacted with works like the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, and those later in the century who viewed paintings and visual rosary manuals like Domenech’s. Understanding the disparities between the ways these works functioned or generated meaning may account for the visual differences between Rogier van der Weyden’s work and later rosary imagery. It was imagery relating to the Virgin’s intercession and its rewards, rather than inner transformation through meditation, that became more prominent in the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, especially through rosary confraternities and the granting of indulgences. This shift in emphasis, and the standardization of the rosary itself, seems to be at variance with the multivalent and open-ended nature of Marian-centered artistic tools for meditating on the life of Christ, including in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. At the heart of this investigation, then, is an examination of the extent to which the visual arts were agents in the development of the rosary and its subsequent standardization. The relationship between image and text is important to this enquiry: Both Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece and the early pictorial rosaries share themes with several contemporary texts but cannot be exclusively
associated with any one of them, nor can they be understood as secondary to them.  
Studying the *Miraflores Altarpiece* in association with the rosary increases our understanding of the way text, image and other expressions of devotional thought interacted with each other.

My approach thus combines a source-based iconographical study with interpretations of how the altarpiece generated meaning for those viewing it. Inherent in this are questions about its immediate context for viewing and how its meaning was constructed or altered by its subsequent beholders.  
Since we cannot know for certain who exactly commissioned the altarpiece or how its earliest viewers understood and interacted with the work, I offer informed conjectures based on the way similar imagery and Marian-centered devotions operated at the time.  
The shared symbolism and functions of the *Miraflores* and *Saint John* altarpieces, and their subsequent copies, indicate changing interpretations of the earlier triptych. This study does not re-examine the question of interrelated meanings between the triptychs, but rather asks what these

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36 The monastery records copied by Ponz claim it was given to Juan by Pope Martin V and later given by Juan to the Monastery. Recent dating has shown that this is not possible; Kemperdick and Sander, *Master of Flémalle*, 320. Fuchs argues it was a gift to Juan II from Pope Eugenius IV and later given to Miraflores. A letter from Pope Eugenius IV dated 28th March 1428 conceded, “the privilege to Juan II of possessing a portable altar end there hearing mass before dawn.” “Altarpieces in Context,” 69-70. If so, it would have been commissioned as a place for liturgy and private devotions. Alternatively, it may have been commissioned by Juan precisely for the Miraflores monastery, as argued by Reed, “Salome,” 9.
changes can tell us about the dynamic generation of meaning in the visual arts during the early Northern Renaissance.

In Chapter Two I shall re-examine the program of images in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* in light of Marian devotions associated with the emerging rosary and their artistic presence in the period leading up to the 1440s. Chapter Three builds on this iconographical analysis to explore how Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece functioned as a devotional artwork, promoting and exemplifying meditative practices. Like other devotional works of the time, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* thematizes vision. Magnetized sightlines connect the Virgin to Christ, and Rogier van der Weyden’s formal strategies, such as descriptive realism, layering of space, and playful simulation of different materials in paint, draw the viewer through hierarchies of seeing just as meditative practices lead from physical sight to internal visualization and the ultimate sightless contemplation of Christ. In addition, the structure of the altarpiece provides a mnemonic framework to support these meditative journeys. Our ability to read multiple meanings...

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in the altarpiece suggests that it was constructed to allow viewers latitude in interpretation and meditation on its themes, which was an important characteristic shared by Carthusian practice and early rosary meditations.

Chapter Four considers the relationship between the *Miraflores Altarpiece* and later rosary imagery. Rogier van der Weyden’s work apparently did not have a subsequent history within the rosary tradition, but rather acquired new, and to an extent fixed, meanings in association with the *Saint John Altarpiece*. I suggest that the reasons for its separation from the rosary tradition lie precisely in the inherent multivalency of Rogier van der Weyden’s earlier work and of the early rosary. I consider the extent to which the properties that promote multivalent meditative viewing in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* are found in later rosary-related art works, as well as the impact of rosary confraternities and the granting of indulgences on the later dominance of visual cues such as roses, beads, and the Virgin’s intercession—imagery lacking in Rogier van der Weyden’s work but found shortly thereafter in the lower half of Domenech’s engraving. While art had a key role in standardizing the early open-ended, meditative devotions of the rosary, the inherent multivalency of Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece enabled the generation of new meanings more pertinent to the context and time in which it was viewed at Miraflores, especially after the death of King Juan. It is hoped that this study will contribute in new ways to our understanding of Rogier van der Weyden’s skill in creating a work so capable of proliferating meaning, as well as to the development of rosary devotions and their broader artistic expression.

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CHAPTER TWO

COMMON ROOTS: THE CONTENT OF THE ALTARPIECE

AND THE NASCENT ROSARY

The remarkable overlap between the content of the Miraflores Altarpiece and the rosary as it came to be structured tempt us to see the altarpiece as a rosary before its time; the little portal sculptures could be understood to function as beads on the rosary counting the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious Mysteries. A correlation between the rosary and the altarpiece is all the more significant because no contemporary image or textual source had the same collection or arrangement of images as those painted by Rogier van der Weyden. Such *eisegesis*, or reading in of meaning, can be both detrimental and helpful in uncovering meaning in the work: the challenge is to avoid relating it in an anachronistic and teleological way to later correlates of its iconography, whilst recognizing that the altarpiece participated innovatively in the expression of fluid artistic and devotional practices, some of which became integral to the rosary of the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

This chapter focuses on the content and arrangement of figures in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* to explore the devotional and artistic precedents that inform our understanding of the work, and of the rosary as it developed. The content of the altarpiece cannot be disentangled from the ways in which it engendered meaning through artistic devices and through interacting with viewers, but these factors will receive greater attention in
Chapter Three. Two broad routes of devotion converged in the rosary: the recitation of Aves, particularly in association with the Marian Psalter, and meditations on the life of Christ and the Virgin. After the 1470s, the rosary took the prayers and structure from the former practice, and the sustained thematic content from the latter. Mary Winston-Allen’s work identifying sources of later rosary meditations from pictorial sequences of other devotional cycles, such as the life of Christ or the Sorrows of the Virgin, is useful for our understanding the Miraflores Altarpiece: the early interaction between these cycles and the Marian Psalter provide a rationale for the altarpiece’s structure and iconography. Of chief importance are the work’s precise selection of episodes from the life of Christ and the Virgin, the sequential nature of those episodes, and the tripartite division of their themes. I will first examine the development of life of Christ narratives and other devotional cycles that later were integrated through the rosary and show how these are fundamental to the Miraflores Altarpiece. Next, I will lay out the development of the Marian Psalter and its importance for the rosary, and show how the structure of the Psalter is embedded within the Miraflores Altarpiece. Finally, I will demonstrate how the altarpiece can be understood as an example of the visual merging of the Marian Psalter and life of Christ traditions, akin to the rosary in its earliest forms, and the structure into which it later became standardized.

Life of Christ Meditations

Meditations on the life of Christ and the Virgin were integral to late medieval piety long before they were connected to the Marian Psalter and the rosary. Affective

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40 Winston-Allen’s work is largely based on German sources. Stories of the Rose, 33-47.
narrative accounts of the life, and especially the Passion, of Christ arose out of a renewed interest in Christ’s humanity, and in the power of emotion, rather than intellect, to bring one closer to knowing and imitating the divine. Rather than meditating on abstract ideas, early thirteenth-century Latin texts, like those pseudonymously attributed to Bernard, Anselm and Bede, encouraged readers systematically to visualize the events of Christ’s life as if witnessing them for themselves. Embellishments of the gospel narratives were designed to stimulate pathos and thus the desire to imitate Christ in his compassion. Pseudo Bonaventura’s *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (c. late thirteenth to early fourteenth century) and Ludolph the Carthusian of Saxony’s *Vita Christi* from a century later promoted affective devotion to Christ through those sections of his life ‘most apt to touch the heart,’ including his birth and Passion.

With the concomitant rise in Marian devotions, Mary provided both an accessible route for examining the Passion in painful human terms, as well as an unfailing model of a compassionate response to Christ. For example, Pseudo-Anselm’s *Dialogus beatae Mariae et Anselmi de passio Domini* (late thirteenth century) was written as if Anselm were interviewing the Virgin, probing for every nuance of her experience of the Passion. By the late thirteenth century, affective descriptions of Mary’s sorrows were

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44 Marrow, *Passion Iconography*, 11-12.
familiar through a wide variety of sources, including Passion Plays, sermons, hymns, treatises and art. Mary had become an independent object of veneration, celebrated for her co-passio, and thus co-redemptio role.45

These trends in narrative meditations pertained to several bodies of medieval thought: to mystical theology and its speculative, intellectual interest in the power of emotion to help one rise through meditative stages to achieve a face to face union with God; to the affective devotion to Christ promoted by the Franciscans and Dominicans among the laity; and to the practical piety of imitating Christ that was promoted by the devotio moderna in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.46 The devotio moderna’s vernacular guides to meditation were packed with anecdotal details emphasizing the extent of Christ’s suffering. These texts, along with translations of Latin and German Passion tracts, encouraged a subjective approach to piety, synthesizing and reusing prior sources to suit individual meditations.47 Devotions to lists of affective episodes or qualities, such as the wounds of Christ or the Joys or Sorrows of the Virgin, were also popular aids to meditative concentration.48 Prayer books, books of hours, and other


46 On the devotio moderna see Jan van Engen, Introduction to Devotio Moderna, Basic Writings (Paulist Press, Mahwah, New York, 1988), 7-61.

47 Marrow argues that many of these details are drawn from typological fulfillments, and that metaphors of suffering entered the image as if historical stages of the Passion. Passion Iconography, 22-23; and Leclercq, Vanderbroucke, and Bouyer, Spirituality, 431-3. Jeremy Cato describes the extent to which Carthusians were responsible for editing, copying and circulating meditative texts, particularly amongst the ruling classes; “Statesmen and Contemplatives in the Early Fifteenth Century,” in Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages, edited by Julian Luxford (Tournhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 2008), 107-114.

48 For an examination of numerical cycles and the significance of numbers themselves consult Monica Sekules, Medieval Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 126-136 and Falkenburg, Joachim Patinir, 40. On the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin see Schuler, “Seven Sorrows,” 15-17. Schuler also mentions the importance of numerical devotions in texts like the Speculum humanae salvationis. On devotions to the
devotional literature, including *Biblia pauperum* and the *Speculum humanae salvationis*, provided the reader with a matrix of proliferating cross-references between Old and New Testament types, prophecies, doctrines, and moral teachings all of which contributed to personal meditations.

Visual images were not secondary to text in this meditative tradition; in many cases concepts appeared in visual form before their literary counterparts.49 The image, either physically represented or mentally conjured, was central to meditative visualization.50 Devotees were encouraged through art and written guides to visualize ‘vivid moments’ that made Christ and his mother living, immediate presences.51 Narrative art was not merely a didactic vehicle in the way Gregory the Great had justified art as pictorial text for the illiterate to ‘read’ the Bible; it was also an effective aid to meditation. *Andachtsbilder* like the Man of Sorrows, Pietà, or *Virgo lactans*, combined the formal intensity of earlier icons (close-up, frontal figures isolated from space, time and human involvement) with narrative details from the human experience of the Incarnation, principally through Christ or his mother.52 By isolating intense moments of pain or love from the story of Christ’s life, *Andachtsbilder* evoked an emotional response

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49 Ringbom cites the example of the image of the heart of Christ that ‘served as the inspiration of the literary analogy instead of being the result of it.’ *Icon to Narrative*, 19.

50 The ways in which images generated meaning in the meditative context will be discussed in Chapter Three. Images were also an independent means of gaining intercession, indulgences or grace; Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 23-30.


52 Important texts for understanding the narrative image as a tool for meditation include Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, and Marrow, *Passion Iconography*. For Gregory’s justification of images, see; St Gregory, Ep, XI:13, cited in Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 11.
from the viewer. Their abbreviated format, with figures or objects removed from temporal settings and summarized through symbols, prompted subjective mental visualization of the stories behind the image and contemplation of a matrix of devotional, doctrinal and moral concepts.53

An example of imagery that promotes this kind of emotive and compassionate personal engagement with the life of Christ is found in The Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures panel from Cologne, c. 1380-90 (Figure 7).54 Christ’s life is retold through a sequence of small images leading the viewer from the Incarnation and Infancy through the Passion, Resurrection and Glories in Heaven, culminating in the Last Judgment. One image, four times larger than the others, combines popular Andachtsbilder, such as the Man of Sorrows and the Instruments of the Passion. This set of images provides ample material for the viewer to pause, recall, and meditate on every detail and nuance of the suffering of Christ found in multiple texts, art works, hymns, devotional lists and passion plays. Winston-Allen has shown that this type of sequential imagery was integrated into the developing rosary tradition. What was new for this tradition was the combination of these meditative cycles with the practice of reciting repetitive Aves. Before discussing the way in which these two traditions merged either for the rosary or the altarpiece, it is important to note first how the Miraflores Altarpiece can be understood as a life of Christ and the Virgin meditative sequence.

53 For a discussion of the nature and role of Andachtsbilder see Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, 53-71; and Falkenburg, Joachim Patinir, 22-33.

54 This example is discussed by Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 38-9.
Life of Christ and the Virgin Meditations in *the Miraflores Altarpiece*

Rogier van der Weyden’s *oeuvre* as a whole is steeped in the texts and art of late medieval piety, and the *Miraflores Altarpiece* is no exception. Christ’s Appearance to his Mother in the third panel of the altarpiece recalls the potent retelling of the extra-biblical story from Pseudo-Bonaventura’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c.1300)). Details in Rogier van der Weyden’s painting evoke written descriptions of the emotional meeting while Mary is sorrowfully praying: “… sweet tears shedding, lo suddenly Our Lord Jesus came and appeared to her, and all in white clothes with a glad and lovely cheer, greeting her with these words: ‘Hail, holy Mother…’” The story also appears in *The Revelations of Saint Brigit of Sweden* (d. 1373) and Ludolph of Saxony’s *Vita Christi*. Rogier van der Weyden does not follow any single text for his images. Christ wears red, not white, and the setting and poses conflate Spanish and Flemish traditions of the story in a novel way. The triple-crown motif further indicates that Rogier van der Weyden was familiar with Ludolph of Saxony’s works. Clear visual parallels between the Virgin adoring her infant and cradling her dead son recall

55 The links between Rogier van der Weyden’s works and medieval devotional texts are summarized by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Picturing Devotion: Rogier’s Saint Luke Drawing of the Virgin,” *Rogier van der Weyden St Luke Drawing the Virgin: Selected Essays in Context*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 1997), 8-10. Some of the key life of Christ German texts, such as *Meditationes vitae Christi* and Ludolph of Saxony’s *Vita Christi* were translated and published in the Netherlands at the time the *Miraflores Altarpiece* was painted. Marrow, *Passion Iconography*, 22.


58 The point about the cloak is made by Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Art*, 263. Breckenridge argues that Rogier van der Weyden assimilated this version with a Spanish permutation that explains the additional details of the book, the window, and the *nole mi tangere* imagery. “Et Prima Vidit,”18-24.

devotional writings where the Virgin makes those connections explicit. The grisaille capitals of the interior rooms in each panel display typological precedents typically found in texts like the *Speculum humanae salvationis* and meditation guides. The ways in which the *Miraflores Altarpiece* foregrounds the Virgin’s experience, and especially her *co-passio*, demonstrate Rogier van der Weyden’s familiarity with texts like Pseudo-Anselm’s *Dialogus beatae Mariae et Anselmi de passio Domini*.

Rogier van der Weyden’s naturalistic depiction of blood and tears is far more serene than the harrowing blood-drenched images evoked by Passion tracts, and seen in the Crucified Christ panel in the *Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures* altarpiece. However, one of the grisailles on the archivolts in the Lamentation panel recalls the kind of narrative embellishments derived from Old Testament prophecy and typology that Marrow argues lie at the root of brutal anecdotes in Passion tracts. The third grisaille of Christ Carrying the Cross, which has not been singled out before, includes a soldier pressing at Christ’s bent back with a rod (Figure 8). The evident weight of the Cross and the way in which Christ is harried by the soldier are visual details that are found also in popular Passion woodcuts and are evoked by Pseudo-Bonaventura, Ludolph of Saxony and vernacular German and Netherlandish Passion tracts.

I cite these references to texts and images not because Rogier van der Weyden is dependent on them, but because they demonstrate that the *Miraflores Altarpiece* participated in a rich visual and literary panoply of late medieval devotional piety.

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60 Panofsky, *Netherlandish Art*, 261, note 3.

61 Marrow, *Passion Iconography*, 80-94, and 149.
painter’s redaction of sources in the altarpiece evinces his deep understanding of the
syncretistic and subjective nature of texts like meditation guides. No single source can be
found to explain the choice of images in the individual panels, nor their combination as a
triptych. Leclercq writes that Ludolph of Saxony’s *Vita Christi* itself owes much to
former sources which are brought together to enable the reader to “taste the delights of
Christian piety” and to furnish “preachers with a variety of themes.” The same could be
said of the early rosary texts, and of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, which employs every
detail to evoke stories, doctrines and beliefs in a dynamic matrix of meanings.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* is not simply a loose anthology of devotional ideas;
rather, it is remarkably coherent in form and content, even in its productive elasticity.
While every detail, from the porphyry columns, to the color of — or embroidery on — a
cloak, or the way in which a hem falls, might evoke complex cross references, the
principle structure of the altarpiece is emphatically narrative in the same way that Passion
tracts and images of the life of Christ led one through a consecutive sequence of events.
The narrative was utilized not primarily to tell a story, but rather to aid concentration and
memory, and to provoke emotional responses; the affective and emotive details help to
vivify the events of his life, death and resurrection. The earliest rosary meditations joined
to the Marian Psalter in the fourteenth century adopted these narrative qualities, but, as I
shall discuss shortly, few were single sequential narratives, and it was not until the

62 Leclercq, Vanderbroucke, and Bouyer, *Spirituality*, 458. Before 1425 Ludolph of Saxony’s writings
themselves were only known in the Netherlands in a synthesized version.

63 This multivalency and cross-referencing has been brought to light by the many previous studies of the
altarpiece, but not in connection with the rosary tradition. Similar arguments are made by Robert Sukale
regarding the *Saint John Altarpiece; Rogier van der Weyden. Die Johannestafel. Das Bild als stumme
Predigt* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995).
1470s—several decades after the *Miraflores Altarpiece* was created—that they began to be divided into three separate but consecutive cycles of events. The Marian Psalter structure was used for meditating upon many different and disparate topics and cycles. The rosary continued to be a flexible method for meditating well into the sixteenth century, even after single, consecutive life of Christ meditations had become widely known from the 1480s.

It is worth examining the *Miraflores Altarpiece* arch motif grisailles and their relation to the principle figures in more detail, because the close connection between them will help us understand the significance of the altarpiece within the developing rosary tradition. The selection of images and the degree to which they are organized and arranged goes beyond contemporary textual and visual sources on the life of Christ and the Virgin, including early rosary meditations. Panel paintings like the *Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures* altarpiece contain a similar flow of events, but Rogier van der Weyden’s use of the arch motif allows him to present them with a new level of coherence and clarity. The degree of the artist’s innovative clarity was made evident through Karl Birkmeyer’s comparison of this arch motif with that in Robert Campin’s *The Marriage of the Virgin* from the early 1430s, which also has rows of baldachined illusionistic vignettes (Figure 9). Unlike Campin’s arch, which is within the painted space and has typological scenes that are viewed at an oblique angle, Rogier van der Weyden’s grisailles are face-on and offer highly visible consecutive scenes that are contemporary with the main enframed images.

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64 This connection is pointed out in “Arch Motif,” 10-12.
Although we should not get sidetracked by the multivalency of the arch motif here, it should be noted that even while Rogier van der Weyden has used it to convey an unusually clear narrative, the device has numerous levels of symbolic complexity. While Campin’s oblique grisailles subordinate symbolism to naturalistic perspective, Rogier van der Weyden’s revert to a more overt display of symbolism rooted in architectural sculpted portals.\(^{65}\) Thus, his narrative clarity is accompanied by the rich liminal symbolism associated with the site and function of real portals.\(^{66}\) With this potent arch device it is difficult to disentangle content from mechanisms of meaning.

The unusual narrative clarity of the grisailles is carried over into the principle figure groups. Another of Rogier van der Weyden’s works that couples a monumental Virgin with grisaille vignettes on an illusionistic arch is the *Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche*, known as the *Thyssen Madonna* (c.1433) (Figure 10).\(^{67}\) In this work the Virgin occupies the niche as if she were a breathing polychromed statue. On the lintel above, seven grisailles show scenes associated with the Joys of the Virgin, culminating in her Coronation on the keystone. The main *Virgo Lactans* is separated from the chronology of these smaller images and remains the eternal young Mother of Christ,

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 10-14. The ways in which Rogier van der Weyden used Netherlandish realism will be addressed in more depth in Chapter Three.

\(^{66}\) On the multivalent meaning of church portals see Linda Seidel, “The Moissac Portal and the Rhetoric of Appropriation,” *Studien zur Geschichte der europäischen Skulptur im 12./13. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Henrich Verlag, 1994) vol. 1 287-302. Even if Rogier van der Weyden’s source for his arch motif is a return to older portal sculptures it does not explain his selection of episodes. Actual Gothic cathedral portals did sometimes include sequences of episodes from the life of Christ or the Virgin. For instance, in the north transept of Chartres Cathedral, the tympanum relief of the *Coronation of the Virgin* rests on lintel reliefs of the *Dormition* and *Assumption of the Virgin*. However, the rest of the iconographical program carried through the archivolt and jamb sculptures conveys the genealogy of Christ and of Mary, and typological precursors to Christ.

\(^{67}\) The work is discussed in DeVos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, 172-3; and Birkmeyer, “Notes on The Two Earliest Paintings By Rogier ven der Weyden,” *Art Bulletin* 44 (1962): 329-331.
Queen of Heaven. Conversely, in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* the central figures are less sculptural and are integrated with the events displayed around them. For instance, the grisailles must be read in a circular motion around them from the top down on the left and up on the right hand side. The central scenes do not easily fit into the chronology of the grisailles, but they are given a shared narrative context by their juxtaposition, and by belonging to the same moment in space and time. The Virgin ages across the three panels in line with the events in the grisailles. Contextual details appear in the principle scenes to link them to the grisailles (Figures 11-12). This attention to context is all the more pertinent, as Rainald Grosshans’ study of the under-drawing showed that the original conception for the third panel was of a garden surrounded by a crenellated wall with a gate, which would have removed the figures altogether from their narrative. The grisaille and polychromed figures in the altarpiece as it was finished are instead all integrated into the consecutive narrative. That over-all narrative reads in the same direction as Western text, from left to right.

Many of the same episodes from the Joys of the Virgin in the *The Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche* are featured in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, but their chronological rearrangement into the life of the Virgin, and their integration with the principle figures, is fundamentally different. Panofsky argued that the grisaille vignettes

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68 Panofsky explains the symbolism of the arrangement of the grisailles around then image as a downward to heavenward motion akin to that of the Incarnation to Resurrection; *Netherlandish Art*, 261.

69 Among these details is the crucifix on a miniature Golgotha in the second panel, and the Resurrection and approach of the women to the tomb in the landscape of the third panel. It may also be the case for the first panel, where the presence of Joseph evokes the Nativity.

were narrative devices that enabled the principle themes to be treated with ‘sublime succinctness,’ as if they were *Andachtsbilder*. However, Falkenburg’s analysis of both the grisailles and principle figures as *Andachtsbilder* is more convincing, because both types of images are simultaneously descriptive narrative, and distilled from space and time. The principle scenes condense themes that run through each of the associated grisailles, but they also can be understood as part of that narrative flow. The three themes might equally be identified as the Virgin’s virtues, which are celebrated on the banderoles; as the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection; or as the joys, sorrows and glorious rewards of the Virgin. As I will show in Chapter Three, both the grisailles and principle images share characteristics that aid meditative visualization of the life and Passion of Christ, evoke empathy and remind pious beholders of a wide range of interwoven theological and mystical ideas.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* affords an unusually cogent version of the kind of sequences of episodes found in the life of Christ and the Virgin meditations that were so popular at the time Rogier van der Weyden painted. Not only is each panel a coherent digression on a specific flow of episodes in the Virgin’s experience of the life of Christ, but the episodes flow across three panels. This tripartite division, which provides a complete cycle of the key stages in salvation history, was innovative. The historical context of the altarpiece’s creation and earliest viewing experience sheds light on this

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73 Despite Acres claim that the banderole texts “explain the altarpiece as lucidly as possible,” it is not clear that these are the principle themes behind the panels and their tripartite division, especially in light of their late addition on top of finished layers of paint. “Painted Texts,” 92 and Hall and Uhr’s study of the triple-crown motif, “Aureole and Fructus,” 259-60.
development, because it was during this time that the tripartite structure of the Marian Psalter was being merged with life of Christ meditations.

The Marian Psalter

Repetitions of the Ave prayer in the form “Ave Maria, gracia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus,” or partial versions of it, had been recited since the eleventh century. The Marian Psalter, which substituted the Ave prayer for recitations of the 150 Psalms of the Divine Office, developed over the twelfth century when devotion to the Virgin grew in popularity. Shortened forms of the Office had at this time already replaced the Psalms with Paternosters, which were counted on Paternoster beads because of the importance of reciting them completely. The Marian Psalter took different forms: sometimes the Aves were said in antiphons that unveiled the meaning of each Psalm in terms of Christ or the Virgin, in other versions the Ave was recited before 150 rhymed verses in praise of the virtues of the Virgin, and in still others, the Ave

74 The Ave combines the words of the Angel and of Elizabeth when greeting Mary from Luke 1: 28 and 42. It was first introduced to the liturgy in the seventh century, but was hardly known or recited outside this context in the Western church until the eleventh century, when it became widely known through the Little Office of the Virgin Mary, one of a number of supplementary prayer cycles chanted in addition to the Divine Office which spread to the laity. The name of Jesus was added to the prayer in the fourteenth century (according to Winston-Allen) or c. 1261 (according to Miller). The final clause, beginning, ‘Holy Mary, Mother of God…’ was added in the fifteenth century, and became generally accepted in the sixteenth. Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 2, 13-14; Miller, Prayers and Beads, 11-12; Thurston, “Rosary,” 411; and “The Origins of the Hail Mary,” The Month 121 (1913): 164-6; Leclercq, Vanderbroucke, and Bouyer, Spirituality, 492-3. For an interpretation of the prayer from the earliest Church see Ann van Dijk, “The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery,” Art Bulletin 81 (1999): 420-436.


76 For example Cistercian and Carthusian conversi recited 150 Paternosters. Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 14, and 112. Beads had been used to count prayers long before this in both Christianity and other religions. On the history of beads see Ibid, 112; and Thurston, “Rosary,” 406-8.
replaced both the psalms and verses altogether. Psalms, or substituted prayers including the *Ave*, were said as acts of devotion or penance, often in three groups of fifty. Thus, three groups of fifty *Aves*, each designated a ‘chaplet,’ were recited in imitation of the Divine Office, for penance, and as an act of devotion to the Virgin. Beads used to count *Aves* continued to be called *Paternoster* beads, but other Marian associations with the rose and stories about spoken *Aves* turning miraculously into roses that were woven into a garland or crown gave rise to the name ‘*Rosenkranz,*’ or crown of roses. Some Marian Psalters described themselves as ‘rosaries’ well before the term was used for the devotion from the 1470s.

*Marienlegenden*, which proliferated from the twelfth century, indicate how widespread the recitation of *Aves* was among monks, clergy and the laity. These stories, along with popular hymns and songs, tell of miracles through the Virgin’s intercession based on her pleasure at hearing the prayers in their entirety.

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77 For a concise summary of these variations see Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 15; and Thurston, “The Rosary,” 408-10.

78 Thurston, “Rosary,” 407. The Psalms were known as The Three Fifties.

79 The word ‘chaplet’ is from the French ‘*chape,*’ meaning ‘head covering,’ and thus crown or garland. Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 3.


82 For example, a legend in the English poem ‘*How our Levedi Saute was first founde,*’ (1310) recounts the story of a monk whose prayers weave a dress for the Virgin which lacked sleeves because he failed to recite all three chaplets. Thurston, “Rosary,” 408 and 417.
Psalter remained a popular devotion when the *Miraflores Altarpiece* was installed in the Carthusian monastery in Castile and was well established amongst the poor in the region. Records of a young peasant girl’s visions of the Virgin Mary in Cubas, near Madrid in 1449, relate that she was known for reciting the Marian Psalter when keeping her pigs.\(^{83}\) The Carthusian order is particularly connected with experiments with the Marian Psalter: The Carthusian Hendrick Egher van Kalkar is credited with adding *Paternosters* to the recitations and spreading this practice to England.\(^{84}\)

The Marian Psalter was not the rosary itself, which emerged when life of Christ meditations were explicitly associated with the *Ave* prayer.\(^{85}\) However, the Marian Psalter’s structure of three additive units of *Aves* to make a complete cycle is also found in the statutes of the earliest rosary confraternities, where members are instructed to pray three rosaries, or chaplets, of fifty *Aves* each week.\(^{86}\) It was also the form of the rosary that Pope Pius V officially sanctioned in 1569.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{85}\) As Winston-Allen puts it the rosary emerged when, “the prayer shows a shift away from emphasis on forms of courtesy and ritual service toward a more meaningful spiritual exercise that reviewed the progressive stations of the story of redemption.” *Stories of the Rose*, 136.

\(^{86}\) The first confraternity at Douai, 1468-70, was called the Confraternity of the Psalter of the Glorious Virgin Mary. Five *Paternosters* were also said with each chaplet. Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, xi; Thurston, *The Fifteen Mysteries*, 624; Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 66-7, 72 and 136-7.

The Marian Psalter in the Miraflores Altarpiece

The structure of the Marian Psalter can help us understand the layout of the Miraflores Altarpiece. Just as three distinct chaplets of fifty Aves must be recited for a complete Psalter, the triptych presents three distinct and iconographically self-sufficient panels that are simultaneously part of a trio of equal, interdependent and consecutive parts. The meaning of the triptych panels is only complete when they are viewed in their entirety.

The triptych format of the Miraflores Altarpiece is very unusual for its time in that three equally-sized panels are firmly fixed together with no one panel elevated over the others. It was much more common in the Netherlands for retablers to have moving wings where one or two sets of shutters closed over a central body, concealing or revealing it according to the liturgical calendar. The moving wings worked with the hierarchical order of interior over exterior, of central over wing panels, and of left wings over right. It has been argued that Rogier van der Weyden used the fixed-panel format for the Miraflores Altarpiece to meet the wishes of a Spanish patron; subsequent fixed-wing triptych altarpieces by Netherlandish painters were for Spanish commissions.

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89 Left wings as the viewer looks are on the heraldic right of the figures looking out from the central panel, and are thus on the superior side. See Kemperdick, “I Tableau,” 118.

90 For its fixed wing structure as evidence of a Spanish commission, see Kemperdick and Sander, Master of Flémalle, 320; and De Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 232, especially note 15. De Vos discusses subsequent Spanish commissions of fixed wing altarpieces, although none follow the three panels of the Miraflores Altarpiece. Works that use the fixed wing format, or the arch motif include Petrus Christus, (Nativity, 1450,
However, Rogier van der Weyden’s three-panel arrangement is unlike Spanish antecedents, where central panels were elevated above others through a hierarchy of scale or rank of figures depicted (Figure 13). A similar hierarchy of panels is found in other kinds of fixed altarpieces created by the painter, such as the *Altar of the Seven Sacraments* (1445-50) (Figure 14), whose inverted T-shape gives priority to the raised centre of the altarpiece. According to Kemperdick, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* is therefore not a true triptych.  

Although we need not get delayed by terminology here, the altarpiece is a conundrum: it is simultaneously one and three. This structure is itself a clue to the altarpiece’s association with the Marian Psalter.

The painted frames and architectural motifs on the altarpiece underscore its immobility and additive unity; the three are to be viewed as one piece just as the three chaplets or ‘fifties’ must be recited for a complete Psalter.  

The original outer frame was painted the same brown as the spandrels of the arches, so that the real frame would have blended with the painted portals, creating the illusion of three openings in a single continuous surface.  

In their form, iconographic unity, and the way they mark the

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91 Examples including this one are pointed out by Kemperdick, “I Tableau,” 124-125.

92 Assuming it was not covered by a temporary curtain on a rod, which was part of the standard furnishings of an altar. The same is the case for the *Saint John Altarpiece*. Ibid., 126.

93 The simulated material of the portals is also ambiguous, seeming at once to be wood and stone. This is unlike the later *Saint John Altarpiece*, where the portals are clearly meant to resemble masonry. Kemperdick and Sander, *Master of Flémalle*, 318.
In the threshold of sacred space the triple arch is reminiscent of a Gothic cathedral portal. The archways are emphatically unified by their architectural precision, their repetitive, identical numbers and forms of grisailles, and their harmonic use of color. Yet the portals created by the arches lead into three self-contained spaces that are not contiguous.

The arch motif is thus a vehicle to enable the panels to work as discrete units: the arch episodes and principle figure group of each panel amplify and extrapolate from a single theme. The altarpiece provides a clear, sequential tripartite division of the story of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection through the experience of the Virgin. Once again, it is clear that the framing devices and arch motifs are integral to the meaning of the work and the ways in which it can generate multivalency. One element of their polysemy is that they create a three-in-one format that resonates with the same structure of prayer found in the Marian Psalter.

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94 On the triple arches as Gothic portal, see De Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 226-8. Kemperdick alternatively argues the three arches are more reminiscent of a rood screen; Master of Flémalle, 318. On the symbolism of the porches as Porta paradisi, and thus reitering the Virgin as gateway or window into Heaven, see Carol Purtle, The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 6-8, and on its interpretation in the Miraflores Altarpiece see Lane, “Saint John Altarpiece,” 671.

95 On the architectural precision of the archways see De Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 226. Each of the portals has its own vanishing point, ibid, 230. This is different from the Saint John Altarpiece, Lane, “Saint John Altarpiece,” 671.

96 Birmeyer writes that the whole double framing system is integral to the work, not an addition to a complete painting. “Arch Motif,” 13.

97 The triple-crown motif has thus far been the rationale for the tripartite division, but the crowns and banderoles that spell out the virtues of the Virgin were painted on top of the finished paint layers, suggesting they were not planned from the start. While the Virtues of the Virgin are unequivocally pertinent to the meaning of the work, they are only part of a matrix of ideas conveyed through the three-way division. This one-in-threeness runs deeper than the triple crowns, and quite literally so in the paint. On the triple-crown motif see Hall and Uhr, “Aureole and Fructus,” 259-260; and more recently, Acres, “Painted Texts,” 92. On alterations that were made by the artist in response to the expressive possibilities of the changing image rather than the translation of a pre-arranged program, see John Ward, “Disguised Symbolism as Enactive Symbolism in van Eyck’s Paintings,” Artibus et Historiae 15 (1994): 9-53.
The history of the rosary amply demonstrates how flexible the Psalter was as a vehicle for meditating on the life of Christ and the Virgin. As a result, there is evidence of a wide variety of formats with different numbers of - and topics for – meditations. Such diversity allows us to see the Marian Psalter structure in the altarpiece despite numerical disparities between the two.98

**Merging the Marian Psalter with the Meditations on the Life of Christ**

Since the eleventh century there had been a close association between reciting Aves and mentally dwelling upon the life and virtues of the Virgin Mary. Marian Psalters included unconnected litanies of praise of the Virgin or enumerations of her sufferings and joys. Themes were sometimes attached to individual chaplets. For example, in one Marienlegend the Virgin asks that the first set of fifty Aves be said in honor of the Annunciation, the second of the Nativity, and the third of the Assumption and Glory in Heaven.99 However, there is scant evidence of sustained, point by point meditations before the early fourteenth century, at which time vernacular as well as Latin versions, appeared in simultaneous but unconnected sites.100

A manuscript from around 1300 used by Cistercian nuns in Saint Thomas on the Kyll had ninety-eight vita Christi meditations inserted into Latin prayers. A Middle High German Marian Psalter containing thirty-eight verses inserted into a litany of praise for

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98 The numbers ten, fifty and 150 are usually associated with the Marian Psalter, whereas the altarpiece has six grisaille vignettes and one polychromed image in each panel.

99 The English manuscript (1310) in which this story appears also offers themed anthems associated with the Aves. Thurston, “Rosary,” 417, and “Carthusians,” 515; and Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 16.

100 Winston-Allen discussed the emergence of these various texts, *Stories of the Rose*, 16-22.
the Virgin dates from the same period.\textsuperscript{101} The first widely known sequence of meditations was written between 1409 and 1415 by the Carthusian Dominic of Prussia. His meditations attached a series of fifty clauses or tags to the \textit{Ave} prayer, through which were recounted the sequence of events in Christ’s life, beginning with the Incarnation and concluding with the Ascension and Glory.\textsuperscript{102} For example, after the first \textit{Ave} prayer ending in ‘\textit{and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ,}’ he inserted: “\textit{whom, at the angel’s word, thou didst conceive of the Holy Ghost, Amen.}”\textsuperscript{103} Dominic’s \textit{Liber experimentiarum} was published in 1458, but his teaching had spread before this among the Carthusians, who used the meditations to help reform other monastic houses as part of the Observant movement. A German translation was made before 1434.\textsuperscript{104} Dominic’s meditations are considered the earliest ‘rosary’ to be widely recited, and were included in manuals of the rosary confraternities from the 1470s.\textsuperscript{105}

All of the meditations connected to reciting \textit{Aves} from the early fourteenth century follow their own independent structures and contain different episodes and

\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid.}, and Miller, \textit{Beads and Prayers}, x.


\textsuperscript{103} Dominic attributed this method of prayer both to his Prior, Adolphus of Essen, whom he claimed had seen the rosary said this way in a vision of the heavenly court, and also to Mechthild of Hackebirn (1241-99), who recorded a vision of a tree upon the leaves of which were written the life of Christ point by point in gold letters. Adolphus von Essen’s own tracts advocated Domonic’s method of meditation. Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 17; Thurston, “Carthusians,” 516-7.

\textsuperscript{104} Dominic, Adolphus and fellow brother Johannes Rode are credited with taking the meditations to Benedictine monasteries, and to Carthusian foundations in Cologne, Spire, Worms and Strasbourg. More than 1,000 copies of the prayer exercise were distributed. The German translation was for Margaret of Bavaria; Thurston, “Carthusians,” 518-9; Miller, \textit{Beads and Prayers}, 15-16; Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 77.

\textsuperscript{105} Notably, Dominic’s fifty meditations were counted as one chaplet of the rosary, not three, that is, they were to be meditated upon while reciting fifty, not 150 \textit{Aves}. 

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numbers of meditations. They also have different devotional emphases. None follows precisely any of the contemporary works on the life of Christ or the Virgin. These early connections of the Marian Psalter with meditations attest to the subjective experimentation with prayer that was inherent in late medieval piety, and that continued through the early history of the rosary.

The versatility and creative potential of collecting and amalgamating themes for meditation is apparent in the bewildering number of new types of Marian Psalters and of meditations associated with reciting the Ave that appeared through the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially in association with the rosary confraternities. The first confraternity, established in 1468-70 by the Dominican Alanus De Rupe, offered flexible and varied meditations for members to recite with three sets, or chaplets, of Aves. The chaplets did not necessarily flow in consecutive or related themes. Although the number of Aves to be said remained the same as the Marian Psalter, any number of meditations could be contemplated with them. Confraternity statutes, and the rosary manuals and treatises written from the 1470s onwards, combine the Psalter with a variety of established meditation cycles, such as the wounds of Christ, his limbs or those of his...
Mother, the Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin, the Virtues, and narratives of Christ’s life.\textsuperscript{108} One rosary manual offered six possible versions of the prayer in addition to encouraging members to pray in any method that pleased them.\textsuperscript{109} The first division of rosary chaplets of meditations into clearly joyful, sorrowful and glorious themes did not occur until 1475 when Michael Francisi, a professor of theology at Cologne University promoted the confraternity and used the structure as a simplified method of saying the rosary.\textsuperscript{110} There is no evidence of this division of the rosary, or Marian Psalter themes, before this time. The same division appeared in the earliest picture text of the rosary in the early 1480s, known as the \textit{Ulm Picture Text}, in the manual \textit{Unser lieben frauen Psalter} in Ulm, in which three sets of five medallions are framed by ten roses (Figure 15).\textsuperscript{111} This illustrated rosary, along with Francisco Domenech’s engraving of the \textit{Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosary} (Figure 6) and a similar engraving made in Florence, was widely-circulated in the early 1480s.

\textsuperscript{108} Falkenburg cites the example of a Middle Dutch poem from the fifteenth century, the \textit{Vanden seven bloemen} in which twelve stanzas invoke the names of twelve flowers symbolizing the person and virtues of the Virgin Mary, each closing with an \textit{Ave Maria. Fruit of Devotion}, 47-9.

\textsuperscript{109} This text was \textit{About Our Lady’s Psalter and Rosary of Our Lady}, reprinted seven times 1483-1502. On the diversity of printed texts see Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 24-6.

\textsuperscript{110} Based on lectures given by Francisi in 1475. Francisi did not identify the fifteen episodes later specific to these divisions. The first edition was entitled, \textit{Sexitur determinatio quodlibetalis facta colonie}, and the second in 1480 as \textit{Quodlibet de veritate fraternitatis rosarii seu psalterii beatae Mariae virginis}. Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 67.

\textsuperscript{111} In some early versions the three sets were hand tinted white, red and gold. The \textit{Ulm Picture Text} will receive further analysis in Chapter Four. On the publication and contents of this manual, see Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 33-4.
The *Miraflores Altarpiece* as a Merging of the Marian Psalter with Life of the Virgin Meditations

The same experimental and syncretistic approach to devotion in the early rosary is also found in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. When the altarpiece was painted, recitation of the *Ave* as a vehicle for meditating on the life of Christ and of his mother would have been a familiar idea, especially among Carthusians and their supporters.\(^{112}\) We cannot demonstrate that Rogier van der Weyden or his patron was acquainted with any one textual source of these meditations, but this was a fertile time of experimentation with different redactions of already established Marian devotions and beliefs. The emphatic three-in-one panels of the altarpiece provide a credible formal structure to arrange images from the life of Christ and the Virgin, or other devotional cycles according to the familiar Marian Psalter. Importantly, Rogier van der Weyden’s chronological and thematic arrangement of the various devotional cycles and life of Christ narratives into a single work predates Francisi’s Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious divisions and the *Ulm Picture Text* by about forty years.

Winston-Allen has identified the sources of the early rosary from woodcuts and devotional panels, including the *Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures* altarpiece.\(^{113}\)


\(^{113}\) *Stories of the Rose*, 33-46. The Seven Sorrows as a discrete devotion emerged at about the same time as the rosary, and Schuler has shown how it took its devotional form and the structure of its confraternities from the rosary confraternities. *The Seven Sorrows*, 17-20.
Table Two shows that episodes from these earlier sequences, including the Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin, entered both the rosary and the *Miraflores Altarpiece*.114

As the table shows, the Sorrows of the Virgin in their many forms were among those sources.115 Antonio Ponz’s citation from the Miraflores Monastery records shows that the monastic chronicler from the fifteenth or sixteenth century readily recognized the Lamentation scene in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* as the fifth Sorrow.116 A woodcut of the *Five Sorrows of the Virgin* from 1440-50 provides a stimulating comparison for the *Miraflores Altarpiece* (Figure 16).117 The central *Andachtsbild* of the woodcut shows Christ on the Cross surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, above a seated Virgin with a sword piercing her heart, which had long been associated with the *Mater Dolorosa*.118 Four images surround the central strip and are connected to it by theme. The central Lamentation Panel in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* would be most similar to the woodcut content, where grisailles surround a principle image of the Virgin’s sorrow. However, as I already have discussed, Rogier van der Weyden’s central image is not an extracted *Andachtsbild*; rather, it is connected to the chronology of the other images in

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114 The episodes from the Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin in Table Two are derived from the *The Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche*, *The Five Sorrows of the Virgin* woodcut, the joys listed by Hirn in *The Sacred Shrine*, 268 and the typical images illuminating Hours of the Passion researched by Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 38. The table highlights those episodes found in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*.


116 See Chapter One 1 note 3. The original date of the monastic records cited by Ponz is not clear.

117 This image is cited in Schuler, “Seven Sorrows,” 16-17. To my knowledge, it has not been examined alongside the *Miraflores Altarpiece* before.

the panel, and to the overarching chronology of the altarpiece. The disparity between the particular episodes in the woodcut and those selected by Rogier van der Weyden for the Miraflores panel in part can be explained by the progression of narrative episodes across the altarpiece. Simeon’s Prophecy and the loss of Christ in the temple are not included by him, because they would have been out of narrative sequence for the work as a whole. Similarly we saw that many of the Joys of the Virgin displayed in the Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche were spread over the first and third panels of the triptych. These disparities also point to the fluidity of devotions like the Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin at the time. Rogier van der Weyden uniquely selected and rearranged these fluid devotional sequences to create a continuous vista of the Infancy, Passion and Resurrection from the Virgin’s perspective.

119 There was wide variation in the content and numbers of sorrows and joys listed with the tradition, from five to 150, with five or seven being most popular. There is also deviation between those found in text and those in illustration, and those episodes illustrated in the Hours of the Virgin. Schuler, “Seven Sorrows,” 16-17.

120 Of further note in this woodcut is the relocation of the surrounding episodes into arched spaces. The arches do not have the same breadth of function as in the Miraflores Altarpiece, but their presence and the way in which they lead into vaulted chapel-like areas in which occur the events from Christ’s life, is very similar to the way Rogier van der Weyden relocated his principle figures from the naturalistic, historically resonant settings visible through the windows, to chapel-like interiors.
Table Two. Comparison of Episodes in the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, the *Ulm Picture Text*, the *Joys And Sorrows of the Virgin*, the *Life Of Christ In Twenty Seven Pictures*, and the *Rosary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Miraflores Altarpiece</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ulm Picture Text</strong></th>
<th><strong>Joys of the Virgin, Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche</strong></th>
<th><strong>Joys of the Virgin Derived from Yrjo Hirn, Sacred Shrine, 269.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Five Sorrows of the Virgin woodcut</strong></th>
<th><strong>Illuminations of Hours of the Passion.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Life of Christ in Twenty Seven Pictures</strong>¹²¹</th>
<th><strong>The Rosary</strong></th>
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<td>Infancy Panel</td>
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<td>Adoration of Shepherds</td>
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<td>Flight into Egypt</td>
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<td>Presentation in the Temple</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christ teaching in the Temple</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loss of Christ in the Temple</td>
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</table>

¹²¹ The order of these episodes is not clear in the panel.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table Two. (continued)</th>
<th>Miraflores Altarpiece</th>
<th>Ulm Picture Text</th>
<th>Joys of the Virgin Enthroned</th>
<th>Joys of the Virgin Virgin and Child</th>
<th>Five Sorrows of the Virgin woodcut</th>
<th>Illuminations of Hours of the Passion</th>
<th>Life of Christ in Twenty Seven Pictures</th>
<th>The Rosary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Entry into Jerusalem, Last Supper</td>
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<td>Christ taking leave of his mother</td>
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<td>Gethsemane</td>
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<td>Judas’ Betrayal</td>
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<td>Virgin receiving news of Christ’s arrest</td>
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<td>Christ before Pilate</td>
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<td>Flogging of Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mocking of Christ/Crowning with thorns</td>
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<td>Carrying the cross</td>
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<td>Elevation of the cross</td>
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<td>Deposition/Lamentation</td>
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<td>Descent into Hell</td>
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<td>Table Two. (continued)</td>
<td>Miraflores Altarpiece Resurrection Panel</td>
<td>Ulm Picture Text</td>
<td>Joys of the Virgin, Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche</td>
<td>Joys of the Virgin</td>
<td>Five Sorrows of the Virgin woodcut</td>
<td>Illuminations of Hours of the Passion.</td>
<td>Life of Christ in Twenty Seven Pictures</td>
<td>The Rosary</td>
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<td>Resurrection</td>
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<td>Christ meeting Mary</td>
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<td>Magdalene, Women at Tomb</td>
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<td>Three Marys recount the Resurrection</td>
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<td>Annunciation of the Virgin’s Death</td>
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<td>Coronation of the Virgin</td>
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122 Seen in the rear of the panel rather than the grisaille vignettes.
Combinations of series of images like the Joys and Sorrows had been occurring independently of the rosary tradition, for instance in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century woodcuts, as well as in books of hours.\footnote{Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 41.} It was usual for images of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection to be artistically represented together in works like the \textit{Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures}. The \textit{Bad Wildungen Altarpiece} (1403-4), by Conrad von Soest, also displays images from the Nativity, Passion and final Ascension side by side, but Passion and Resurrection imagery are both spread over the second and third panels (Figure 17). The \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} is a rare example of their clear tripartite division presented side by side and seen simultaneously. Table Two makes it clear that Rogier van der Weyden’s division of episodes into these three unified panels is closely allied with the first pictorial division of the three themes in the \textit{Ulm Picture text} from 1483 (Figure 15). If we allow for a difference in focus between the \textit{Ulm Picture Text}, which follows the life of Christ, and the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}, which views it through the experience of the Virgin, then it will be seen that there is remarkable overlap between episodes selected in each work: the only notable differences are that the woodcut contains the image of Christ teaching in the Temple and has the Last Judgment, rather than the Coronation of the Virgin.

Despite the enormous variety of meditations proposed by rosary manuals through the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the form presented in the \textit{Ulm Picture Text} became the most widely used, and, except for the Last Judgment scene, eventually gave shape to the official rosary sanctioned in 1569. Winston-Allen argues that one of the reasons for its powerful influence among the confraternities, who successfully recruited
poor and unlettered members, was that image rosaries were significantly tighter in their chronologies and narrative coherence than in previous juxtapositions of the Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin. The image rosaries offered an easy to follow narrative. Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece achieved this same chronological and narrative clarity much earlier than these printed rosary images. Furthermore, unlike other altarpieces in which panels were arranged hierarchically, the narrative flow of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* unfolds from left to right, in a way instantly familiar to readers of Western text.

It is at this point that one is tempted to find anachronistic parallels between the rosary and the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. The temptation is even stronger when we consider Rogier van der Weyden’s inclusion of the Coronation scene in the third panel, rather than the Last Judgment. Early textual rosaries and the *Ulm Picture Text* end with the Last Judgment. Domenech’s rosary engraving is the first known incidence of the Coronation as the final mystery. After this image the Coronation gained popularity and began to replace the Last Judgment in texts, eventually becoming standard in the rosary. How is it that Rogier van der Weyden came to divide his altarpiece into joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, and to include the Coronation as the focus of the last episode?

As Thurston pointed out, the flow of joyous, sorrowful and glorious themes is integral to Christian salvation history, and “meets us in many forms in medieval writers.” The story of salvation lends itself to a tripartite division, especially within the

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125 Ibid., 53-64.

126 Thurston, “Carthusians,” 516.
affective devotional framework of the period: Christ’s Incarnation, Birth and Passion are the most human and touching parts of his life, while the Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost vindicate his divinity, and the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin show the indispensible role played by his Mother in the Redemption.\footnote{Christ’s ministry does not typically receive as much attention. On the lack of images relating to his ministry in books of hours see Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 46-7.} By using this tripartite division to structure the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}, Rogier van der Weyden has shown his deep understanding of written and visual expressions of late medieval piety, rather than an uncanny ability to pre-empt later ideas. The Coronation was one of the episodes from the Joys of the Virgin, as is seen in Rogier van der Weyden’s \textit{The Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche}. Relocating it into the section dealing with the glorious events for the Virgin seems a reasonable thing to do, and perhaps only strikes us as pertinent because of the later rosary.

Avoiding \textit{eisegesis} then, the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} does attest to a much wider expression of devotional tendencies than extant written or visual sources have thus far shown. The clear and emphatic division of three themes, the organized sequence of consecutive events, and the focus on the Virgin’s experience of the joys, sorrows and glories of Christ’s life occurred before the rosary made them popular from the late 1470s, and especially the 1480s, onwards. The surprising overlap between the contents of the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} and later rosary imagery suggests common roots, not shared trajectories. Beyond content, those common sources also shed light on the ways in which the altarpiece and later works related to the rosary functioned to generate meaning. It is to these mechanisms of meaning that we now turn.
CHAPTER THREE

THE MIRAFLORES ALTARPiece AS A TOOL
FOR EARLY ROSARY MEDITATIONS

The clear sequence and arrangement of imagery in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* made it highly suitable to function as a work that supported meditation. The remarkable correlation between the altarpiece and early rosary meditation cycles lead us to ponder whether Rogier van der Weyden painted the triptych as a guide to meditation, akin to written texts like those of Dominic of Prussia, and later images, like the *Ulm Picture Text* (Figure 15). However, recent studies have offered better insight into the different ways audiences interacted with text and image that dealt with meditative devotions.  

Although the specific circumstances of the commission of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* remain uncertain it is helpful to surmise the interests and visual knowledge demanded of its presumed earliest observers. Whether the altarpiece was made for King Juan’s

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129 Rather than become entrapped by questions of artistic intentionality, my approach here is close to Anne Hedeman’s. Hedeman disregards questions of intentionality by inquiring about what a work might have meant to early viewers in a particular viewing context. “Roger van der Weyden's Escorial Crucifixion and Carthusian Devotional Practices,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, eds. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie
personal use and later donated to the monastery, or made specifically for the monastery, it
was capable of functioning as a potent aid to the early rosary meditations that were
especially circulating amongst the Carthusians at the time it was installed in
Miraflores.\(^{130}\) The work is, to use Alfred Acres’ phrase, “crafted with extraordinary
attention to the necessary role of an observer in the formation of meaning.”\(^{131}\) The
complex and coherent content of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, along with its capacity for
proliferating interpretations, invite us to follow a middle path that acknowledges the
presence of Rogier van der Weyden as author, but does not assume a closed program of
meaning.\(^ {132}\)

It was not only the work’s memorable and affecting content that made it a
powerful meditative tool. Layered amidst the iconography -or ‘topics’- that could be used
meditatively are ruminations on the usefulness and the limitations of the painted image in
meditation, and on the nature of meditation itself as a tool for personal transformation.

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\(^{130}\) Brubaker (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 191-203, especially 192. The commission of the
altarpiece remains a mystery, as in Chapter One, note 32.

\(^{131}\) On other occasions in which Rogier van der Weyden seems to have painted for the proclivities of a
presumed Carthusian audience, serving monastic expectations and sophisticated knowledge of images for
meditation, see Jolly, “Rogier van der Weyden’s Escorial and Philadelphia Crucifixions,” 113-26; Reed,

\(^{132}\) The notion of intent or of fixed meaning has been sidelined by developments in interpretative
methodologies that point more to the ways in which meaning is generated through the interactions of the
work with its viewers. Summaries of this transition are found in Jeffrey Hamburger, *Introduction to The
Mind’s Eye, Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, edited by Hamburger, and Anne-Marie
Firescreens: The Problem of “Disguised Symbolism” in Early Netherlandish Painting,” in *The Master of
Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden* eds., Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander, Frankfurt, Städel
Museum. 2009), 133-147; and Brendan Cassidy, *Introduction to Iconography at the Crossroads*, edited by
discussion also include James Marrow, “Symbol and Meaning,”150-169, especially 163; and “Art and
Experience,”101-117; John Ward argues that the iconographical significance of a work cannot be separated
The Marian Psalter-like arrangement of the altarpiece could serve as an effective mnemonic device to sustain rosary meditations like those of Dominic of Prussia and myriad other private meditations; the composition also could function to tutor its viewers in the art of memory and meditation more generally.

The Carthusians, among the most ascetic of all monastic orders, promoted the early rosary as part of the Observant movement to reform failing monastic orders and to meet the needs of the laity who sought guidance for their private devotions. The prayers and meditations of the rosary were a means of spiritual renewal through personal transformation into the imitation of Christ. The Carthusians were skilled practitioners of meditative practice and therefore offer us a valuable window into the ways in which the altarpiece may have functioned in association with early rosary meditations and in the broader context of affective devotions. It is not simply a matter of what the monks might have seen in Rogier van der Weyden’s painting, but how they looked at it, and how the painting could operate as a visual tool.

The Carthusians as Viewers of the Miraflores Altarpiece

Once the Miraflores Altarpiece entered the monastery, it would have been seen almost exclusively by male monks there. Carthusian statutes severely restricted visitor access to their charterhouses, and forbade women from entering. The precise earliest


134 The significance of a largely male-only audience deserves greater attention. Juan’s daughter, Isabella, entered the monastery in 1483, according to Fuchs, “Altarpieces in Context,” 65. Statutes regarding visitors to charterhouses are discussed by Sherry Lindquist, Agency, Visuality and Society at the Chartreuse de Champmol (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2008), 24-6. Julian Luxford discusses the wide range of sources available on Carthusian Statutes in Introduction to Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in
locations of the Miraflores Altarpiece are unknown, but it is likely to have been housed in
the chapel where monks would come together three times a day for communal prayers.\textsuperscript{135}
The altarpiece would have been visible during these prolonged periods of silent prayer,
subbued liturgy, Gregorian chant and readings that punctuated a day spent otherwise
alone in a self-contained cell surrounded by a walled garden. The Little Office of the
Virgin, with its repetitive Aves, along with the rest of the divine office and other
devotions, possibly including the rosary, was said in the cell. Each cell had two stories of
space designated for eating, sleeping, working and praying. The oratory was sometimes
called the Ave because of the prayers recited by monks there (Figure 18).\textsuperscript{136} If the
altarpiece were in the chapel, it is unlikely that monks would have recited the Marian
Psalter with private meditations before it, but it could have operated on numerous levels
to support those devotions when said alone. In this case, the monks would have had to
remember the altarpiece and recall it mentally in their cells. As we shall see, the
altarpiece lent itself to this sort of memorization.

The Carthusians participated in the intense study of meditation itself that occurred
during the medieval period. In the early fifteenth century, much of the work carried out
by Carthusians in their cells was scribal activity; copying, translating and editing Latin

\textit{the Late Middle Ages, ” Ed. Julian Luxford (Tournhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 2008). 4-9. See also the
Carthusian website, \url{www.chartreuse.info}, and the Miraflores charterhouse website \url{www.cartuja.org}.}

\textsuperscript{135} The first certain location is in the sacristy of the monastery church in 1800. The original charterhouse
burnt down within a few years of its installation. De Vos, \textit{Rogier van der Weyden}, 227. On the daily life of
Carthusians, which has remained largely unchanged since the fifteenth century, see \url{www.chartreuse.info}.

\textsuperscript{136} Matins and Lauds typically lasted three-to-four hours. Monks participated in other restricted community
times each week. See the website on monastic daily schedules: \url{www.chartreuse.info}; and Ezekiel Lotz,
“Secret Rooms: Private Spaces for Private Prayer in Late Medieval Burgundy and the Netherlands,” in \textit{Studies in Carthusian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages,” Ed. Julian Luxford (Tournhout, Belgium:
Brepolis, 2008), 168-9. The designation ‘Ave’ for the cell is based on a discussion with Brother Ephraim
Dunne, OP.
and vernacular meditative texts. Many of these texts were used within the *devotio moderna*, whose founder Geerte Grote spent three years in a Carthusian monastery, learning their approach to solitary meditation and to the imitation of the life of Christ.\(^{137}\)

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* therefore participated in a milieu soaked in the teaching and practice of meditation by monks whose *raison d’être* was to meditate alone as a means to transcendent communion with God, and to the imitation of Christ.

As expert practitioners of meditation, the monks would have been familiar with the role art could play in meditations. Paintings and sculptures were used in Carthusian devotions and were located in communal areas of charterhouses, as well as the oratory areas of each monk’s cell.\(^{138}\)

Although lavish decorations were discouraged, art used in devotion was not considered at odds with the order’s statutes regarding austerity and poverty. The Carthusian reputation for spiritual purity stemmed from strict adherence to the ideals of the contemplative monastic life laid down by its founder in the eleventh century.\(^{139}\)

The vocation was one of pure and continuous prayer in solitude. The cloister isolated monks from the secular world, and the cells, in which monks spent most of their time, isolated them from each other; but the ultimate goal of solitude was sought spiritually, and was described as keeping one's soul away from any and all things not of

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\(^{138}\) Today the charterhouse at Miraflores has several large altarpieces. Images and information about the *cartuja* can be found on their website, ‘Fe y arte,’ [www.cartuja.org](http://www.cartuja.org). Lindquist describes the extent to which each monk’s cell in Chartreuse de Champmol in Dijon was decorated with devotional images, and shows that Carthusians had some control over the art and architecture funded by their patrons. *Agency, Visuality and Society*, 19-84, and 85-120.

\(^{139}\) On the nature and veracity of this reputation, see Luxford, *Studies in Carthusian Monasticism*, 1-9.
God. Poverty was a means to this end of solitary prayer, so the value and ostentation of art was justified if it aided contemplation, rather than distracting from it.¹⁴⁰

The use of art had been defended by Gregory the Great (d. 604) who justified it as a bible for the illiterate, an aid to memory, and as a way to stir the emotions, all of which helped the viewer towards imitating the example of Christ or the saints depicted. Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece would have been a costly, rare and visually seductive object with its intricate Northern oil-painted realism, but as will become clear, the composition of the painting almost exemplifies Gregory the Great’s justification of art. Rather than distracting the monks from their meditative path, the Miraflores Altarpiece unequivocally aided them along it.

**Vision and Visualization in Meditation**

At the heart of medieval meditation, including that associated with the early rosary, was the concept of physical vision and inner visualization.¹⁴¹ As discussed in chapter Two, life of Christ narratives described in detail the events of the life of Christ or his mother and encouraged the practitioner to imagine they were witnessing those events for themselves. Texts like Dominic’s *Lieber experimentiarum* and images like the *Miraflores Altarpiece* were not mere story-telling, but rather memorable and affective tools to enable visualization. In brief, visualization was not simply a matter of witnessing


events, but of gaining deeper knowledge and understanding of things seen, and of transforming oneself into the image of Christ. Visual representations of the events were considered powerful aids to visualization, especially if, like the Miraflores Altarpiece, they stimulated an empathetic response in the viewer. However, physical images also posed a danger if they distracted the viewer from the point of the exercise, or deluded him or her into mistaking the physical representation for the real thing. The ways in which Rogier van der Weyden avoided these pitfalls will be discussed below, but first what was meant by meditatively looking at an image deserves closer attention.

Vision per se was considered the prime sense for knowing the world, but it was not understood as the passive reception of stimuli. Rather, seeing was a performative, or active, process of translating sensory information into internal retrievable knowledge about the world. What was seen with the eye was a symbol or sign that pointed to a higher reality. Following a Platonic model, carnal seeing led to inner visualization of things seen as archetypes, that is, as universal qualities stripped of their accidents of form. Information from the physical world passed from the eye (as well as the other exterior senses) to create impressions on the interior senses or chambers of the brain, where it was collated, assessed, manipulated, stored and then retrieved, through mental

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142 Theories about what actually constituted ‘seeing’ had shifted from models of extramission (where the eye sent out visual rays to light upon objects) towards intromission (where the image sent forth rays that entered the eye), but both models of seeing were ‘active,’ not passive models. Important studies in the implications of vision and visualization for late medieval art history include; Robert Nelson, Introduction to Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw, ed. Robert Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-21, especially 1-4 and Michael Camille, “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practices of Seeing,” in the same volume, 197-223, especially 206-14; Rothstein, Sight and Spirituality, 20-48, and “Vision, Cognition and Self-reflection in Rogier van der Weyden’s Bladelin Triptych.” Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 64 (2001): 37-55; Cynthia Hahn, “Visio Dei,” 171-5.

143 Hahn describes religious imagery as transcendental signifiers, “Visio Dei,” 177-181.
visualization. The visible world, including painted images, provided material from which the viewer could extract universal qualities, and through these gain knowledge of God, the invisible creator. Sensory vision is therefore paradoxically essential to seeing the unseen, but in the end had to be abandoned if one were truly to know God. Carnal sight simply fell short of revealing God.

When meditation guides and sermons instructed the pious to look at an image, it was not always clear whether they meant physical pictures or those imagined in the mind. Meditation was understood to be an anagogical process by which one gradually ascended from carnal sight to interior knowledge of God, and towards uniting the soul with him in pure contemplation. Direct, face-to-face knowledge of God had been lost at the Fall, but had been promised to the blessed at the end of time. Meditating with physical images was a first step towards transforming carnal sight into mental images, or visualizations, but the ultimate goal was to reach a pure and abstract understanding of God without the aid of any images – physical or imagined. It was recognized that not

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145 Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, 21.

146 Augustine had taught that through the Fall, humanity lost the ability to see except in a physical sense, and asserted three levels of vision; corporeal, spiritual and intellectual, which was the highest form because it did not reply upon physical sight. See for example, Marrow, Passion Iconography, 7-23, Hahn, “Visio Dei,” 171-87; Kessler, “Turning a Blind Eye,” 415;and Rothstein, Sight and Spirituality, 27.

147 Bernard of Clairveaux and Geerte Grote both preached against reliance on physical images and mental visualizations in order to know the unseeable God, and instead promoted imageless devotions. Grote, warned followers of the devotio moderna that, “a simple man will believe that he can sense the very corporeal presence of Christ, or seem to see him with his eyes or hear him with his ears, or touch some saint he has imagined,” “A Treatise on Four classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: A Sermon on the Lord’s Nativity,” trans., John van Engen, Devotio Moderna, 100. See also Rebecca Zorach, “Meditation, Idolatry, Mathematics: The Printed Image in Europe around 1500,” in The Idol in the Age of Art, Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World, eds. Michael Cole and Rebecca Zorach (Franham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 316-340, especially 320.
everyone was capable of imageless contemplation, and that face-to-face knowledge of
God was only possible at the end of time, but everyone could strive towards it and
towards imitating Christ by progressing from physical images to inner visualizations.148
Even the most intellectualized concepts of meditation that arose during the Medieval
Period maintained that emotion was the most powerful means by which to achieve
transcendent understanding and imitation of Christ. Walter Melion describes visualization
as the means by which the soul’s role as vinculum mundi was engaged.149 Visualization
was mnemonic, reminding one of the image of God made flesh. It was also restorative,
prompting one’s imitation of the image of God and enabling one to assess one’s progress
towards it. Thomas Lentes points out that the notion that one becomes what one sees
persisted in the late medieval period, so that the inner person could be purified by gazing
upon the image of God. Images could imprint on the viewer.150

It had long been understood in the Christian context that affective art had the
power to move one from physical to spiritual sight. The painted image gave the ineffable
a sense of nearness and vividness, something that was especially apparent through the ars
nova, the ‘new art’ associated with the mastery of oil paint and naturalism. Affective
images attracted the eye and thus the attention from worldly distractions to heavenly

148 Leclerq and Vanderbroucke discuss the difference between the German mystics who sought to
understand what was meant by contemplation on an intellectual basis, and those like the Franciscans who
promoted emulation of Christ’s virtues and the power of the affect, and especially love, to draw one
towards God. Spirituality, 283-343 and 373-406. Winston-Allen acknowledges that not everyone was
capable of imageless devotion, and that vivid text or image narratives on the life of Christ were important
aids towards the imitation of Christ. Spirituality, 283-343 and 373-406. Winston-Allen acknowledges that not everyone was
capable of imageless devotion, and that vivid text or image narratives on the life of Christ were important


150 “As Far as the Eye Can See,” 362. Cynthia Hahn explains the earlier medieval notion of ‘imprinting’ of
images on the person in “Seeing and Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saint’s
things. Where the eye led, desire would follow. The power of art to stimulate transformation of the self is evident from many accounts of mystical visions and conversions that were believed to have occurred during prayer before physical images. Paintings could show those who had not had visions what the saints could see.  

Gestures and rituals performed before images helped traverse the gap between physical and internal vision. Prayer books instructed the pious on the correct gestures, prayers and postures while standing before images, as if bringing viewers into direct relationship with the figures represented. Physical gestures engaged the whole body and crowded out distractions. On a practical level, bowing and tilting the head was believed to open the flap between chambers of the brain to allow sensory impressions to pass more easily between them, physically assisting the mental process of visualization and the ‘re-collection’ of images.  

Through gesture, one demonstrated an internal state or desire, while at the same time facilitating that desire. For instance, genuflecting whilst saying an *Ave* was a demonstration of the honor one felt for the Virgin, as well as a physical obeisance to

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151 Kessler cites several writings from the fifth century through the Late Middle Ages on the value of art to draw the viewer from worldly to Heavenly things, and particularly on the power of affective art, “Turning a Blind Eye,” 415, and 429-432.


154 See for example Camille, “Before the Gaze,” 214.
her. Anne van Dijk traced the long tradition of devotees reciting the *Ave* before images of the Annunciation, as if to repeat the angelic salutation to the Virgin herself. Through this action, the viewer re-enacted the moment of the Incarnation, and typologically identified themselves with figures from sacred history. Interestingly, the enigmatic arrangement of the grisaille vignettes around each archway of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* may be related to this combination of looking at an image while reciting the *Ave* and genuflecting. If the little episodes are read chronologically in narrative sequence, the head and eye must follow a genuflection-like movement from the top, down the left hand side, and back up again on the right. Alanus de Rupe’s guides to praying the rosary written in the 1460s recommended repeating the *Ave* before an image of the Virgin. Repeating the *Ave* with the rosary meditations engaged the hands with beads, the ears with the sound of the words, the body with genuflections and the outer and inner eye with detailed visions of the Virgin’s virtues and life. Such embodied prayers conflated sacred history with the viewer’s moment in time.

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155 Gestures associated with repetitive prayers, with or without artistic images, were understood to have transformative power themselves. The Carthusian Hugh of Barma recommended repeating Paternosters along with beseeching postures in order to petition God to raise the soul on its anagogical path to union with him. Leclerq, Vanderbroucke, and Bouyer, *Sprituality,* 457. Genuflections and prostrations were performed as penance and as expressions of devotion in association with the psalms and recitation of the *Ave* prayer. Thurston, “Genuflections and Aves;” 546 -559.


157 This explanation of meaning based on the image’s function and interaction with the audience is different, but not necessarily exclusive to Panofsky’s suggestion that the arrangement is iconographically significant and depicts the downward movement from Heaven to Earth and back again in the Incarnation through the Resurrection. *Netherlandish Art,* 261.

158 Following Carthusian practices, he recommended lingering over every member of the Virgin or Christ’s body: ‘Thou must say one Hail Mary for the hair of our lord that was torn for thee, one for the crown of thorns…’ Alanus de Rupe, *Apolecticu,* cited in Thurston, “The Rosary”, 623.
Performing gestures before images compounded the potential danger that was inherent in paintings and sculptures: namely, that viewers would confuse the physical image with the thing it signified, and thus stray into idolatry. For those who looked at physical images while meditating, the fundamental paradox of the image’s usefulness, yet its inadequacy to represent unseen God, was a spiritual battle.\(^{159}\) Works rendered in the ars nova were particularly problematic because of their mimetic qualities and the almost invisible hand of their creators, who tended to cover all traces of brushstroke. When painters like Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin and Rogier van der Weyden produced vivid, closely observed images of sacred figures posed in familiar, contemporary locations, they offered the viewer an intense and moving vision of the closeness of God Incarnate. The palpable and often glistening fleshiness of Christ was portrayed as dwelling amongst everyday objects, however hidden or obvious their symbolism might have been. Oil paints brushed on with tiny strokes concealed the hand of the artist so that the images almost seemed to have appeared by magic. Viewers risked confusing them with images made without human agency, like the imprint of Christ’s face on the veil of Veronica. Such ‘true icons,’ were treated as authentic images of the face of Christ and demanded reverence accordingly. To be useful in meditation viewers had to learn how to see painted images ‘correctly’ in order to avoid the charge of idolatry.

**The Miraflores Altarpiece and the Paradox of the Painted Image**

Like other early Netherlandish painters, Rogier van der Weyden addressed this problem of the painted image as both an aid and a distraction to meditation by holding the paradox in tension. One of the ways the *Miraflores Altarpiece* retains this tension is

\(^{159}\) Kessler uses this term in ‘Turning a Blind Eye,’ 432-5.
through the visual interplay of reality and illusion. The illusionistic naturalism of the work draws the eye in, attracting through the familiar, recognizable, and stunningly mimetic. The accurate representation of realistic details, such as the stubble on Joseph’s chin or the way the light catches the open wound in Christ’s side, achieve the sort of vivid image that the pious were encouraged to ‘see’ and dwell upon during their meditations on the life of Christ. Such realism in the Virgin’s tears and Christ’s limp hand could readily engage the devotee’s attention and evoke an emotional response. The way in which the arches and frames closely resemble stone and wood confuse painted space with reality; Christ’s feet and the hem of the Virgin’s robes in the second and third panels seem to tumble out of the painting into the space of the viewer. Geerte Grote warned followers of the devotio moderna that when looking upon images like these, which might erroneously lead to the belief that one was actually in the presence of Christ, it was good to “juxtapose something contrary to Christ’s presence that may serve to recall us mentally for a moment.” Rogier van der Weyden integrates this caution visually in his work by using the illusionistic archways as a framing device to delineate emphatically the edge of the painting, separating it from the viewer’s reality. The mimetic painting technique thus serves to declare the work as a created, non-real object.

A similar paradox occurs in Rogier van der Weyden’s grisaille figures on the arches and column capitals. When painters mimicked other art forms, like statuary, they drew attention to their skills as painters, and thus to their paintings as creations. No matter how illusionistic relief carvings appear, they remain two dimensional. Rogier van

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der Weyden’s grisailles confuse the portrayal of substances more than other painters: although they are stone-colored, the figures are modeled to move and interact as if fleshly.\textsuperscript{161} This confusion highlights Rogier van der Weyden’s virtuosity, but also serves to warn the viewer of the limitations of painted images: they are not what they seem, and viewers must progress from the images they see to their own internal visualizations.

Another way Rogier van der Weyden addresses the paradox of the painted image is through his particular approach to realism and symbolism. Unlike the compositions of Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin, rendered as meticulous analyses of objects and excessive details, Rogier van der Weyden’s works tend to evince his cautious approach to non-essential or distracting details by focusing less on a world of objects and more on poignant human interaction and emotion.\textsuperscript{162} Craig Harbison argued that Rogier van der Weyden’s symbolism is overt rather than hidden in quotidian details, so that sacred symbolism is mystically merged with images of the physical world.\textsuperscript{163} The palette is muted and the space is compressed and contrived. There are far fewer surface details and textures than in Jan van Eyck’s \textit{Lucca Madonna}, for example, who is seated in a similarly isolated space (Figure 19). Van Eyck’s Madonna is enveloped in rich, tangible fabrics.

\textsuperscript{161} Kemperdick points out this feature of Rogier van der Weyden’s grisailles in comparison with Jan van Eyck’s clearer distinction of illusionistic media. “I Tableaux,” 122-3.

\textsuperscript{162} There is a large body of literature examining different artist’s approaches to Netherlandish realism and symbolism. For example, Harbison contrasts Rogier van der Weyden’s approach with Jan van Eyck’s realism, which exposes eternal truths through the visible world, and with Robert Campin’s realism, which is concerned with portraying the physical world with almost accidental symbolism. “Realism and Symbolism,” 508-602. Panofsky describes Rogier van der Weyden’s works as “at once physically barer and spiritually richer than Van Eyck’s,” in \textit{Early Netherlandish Painting}, 248-50. The different approaches of artists to Northern Realism is also discussed by Acres, “Luke, Rolin and Seeing Relationships,” Rogier van der Weyden St Luke Drawing the Virgin: Selected Essays in Context, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; 23-37 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 1997), 23-4.

\textsuperscript{163} “Realism and Symbolism,” 595-6.
and even the few items in the room around her are portrayed with painstaking attention to the natural fall of light on their surfaces. The sparse chapel-like rooms housing the Miraflores figures, on the other hand, do not seem worldly spaces like the familiar, homely interior of this panel, and even less like Robert Campin’s setting for the Annunciation in the Mérode Altarpiece (Figure 20). Rogier van der Weyden’s figures are neither still, heavenly icons, nor actively embroiled in the earthly world; they are somewhere in between, like breathing polychromed statue tableaux.\(^{164}\) Harbison fittingly described Rogier van der Weyde’s figures as ‘archetypal,’ which suggests the artist has already extrapolated a higher form of vision from the carnal world.\(^{165}\) Paradoxically — or perhaps instructively— Rogier van der Weyden re-presents these archetypes in paint for the carnal vision of the viewers. By looking at his figures the viewer can create his or her own abstracted visualization and ease ever closer to knowing the un-seeable God.

Rogier van der Weyden’s works invite the viewer to derive layers of meaning from his painted images in order to recognize both the usefulness and redundancy of the painted image in meditations. He uses the paradox of the mimetic qualities of the paint to thematize the process of transformative meditation made possible through proper meditation and insight. The interplay between seeming reality and painted illusionism stimulates the viewer to reflect on the untrustworthiness of the eye and the possibility of deceptive appearances. What is seen with the eyes—the appearance of things—is a sign that might point to higher truths if ‘read’ correctly. The Virgin’s white, red and blue robes, for example, draw on the traditional color symbolism of purity, passion and

\(^{164}\) Their ambiguity is all the more pronounced in comparison with the Virgin and Child Enthroned in a Niche, whose statuesque form fills a niche, not a living space.

\(^{165}\) “Realism and Symbolism,” 589.
faithfulness, as well as resonating with accounts of mystical visions of the Virgin. One must use, but then leave behind, physical sight to nurture inner visualizations. It is only through prolonged observation that the true meaning of the painting can be ‘seen,’ just as prolonged meditation was thought to lead to gradual, or anagogical, understanding. When looking upon the *Miraflores Altarpiece* with this concentration—the kind demonstrated, in fact, by the Virgin gazing at Christ in the altarpiece —viewers could experience the realization that one visual passage or detail signifies another. The revelatory joy of reaching new levels of understanding provides a momentary glimpse into the joy associated with meditation, when one reaches deeper knowledge of God or is transformed closer into his image. The performance of viewing enacts the anagogical movements from sensible reality to seeing God face to face. For example, the framing device can be understood as a frame for the panels; as a decorated portal into the space occupied by the figures; as a place to store episodes for a serial meditation on the life of the Virgin; as a boundary between sacred and profane space; as an interplay between reality and illusionism, and so on. The altarpiece is inherently multivalent, so, like meditation itself, it has the capacity to invite ever deeper ruminations on the potential meanings that might be drawn from it.

Interpretative gaps in the work draw attention to the limitations of painting, while also serving to highlight painting’s usefulness to stimulate subjective visualizations. These gaps are created by unexpected visuals, such as an unusual setting for a figure or

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166 Such visions were important sources for the details of life of Christ meditations. For example, Pseudo Boniventura and Brigit of Sweden both note the color of the Virgin’s robes in their accounts of the resurrection of Christ. Breckenridge, “Et prima vidit,” 17-18.

living figures made of inanimate stone. The gap between what is painted and what is expected requires the viewer to generate meaning in the work. The delay in understanding that is created by these gaps mimics the gradual revelation of spiritual meaning in the visible world and creates a sense of the experience of transcending sensory sight.168 Some of the interpretative gaps in the Miraflores Altarpiece have been identified; for instance, Alfred Acres notes that the discrepancy between the painted banderole texts and their biblical sources coaxes the viewer into unexpected paths of attention and speculation.169 Reindert Falkenburg suggests that the sketchiness of the grisailles and the succinctness of all of the other images encourage the viewer to fill in the absent details with their own mental visualizations.170 By looking at this painting, viewers are forced into meditative-like thinking. Their emotions are stirred, their intellect is engaged, and their private visualizations are stimulated. Transforming what one saw in the painting into inner visualizations was a step towards transforming oneself into those things seen with the inner eye, namely, the love, compassion and faith of the Virgin, and ultimately, of Christ.

By holding the paradox of the painted image in tension, the Miraflores Altarpiece invited viewers to ruminate on the power and limitations of the crafted image in meditation, even while they used its content to guide those meditations.

168 Ward argues that subjects and configurations are designed to delay recognition of their symbolic character ‘in order to create an expressive effect of revelation and transcendence during the process of meditation,’ ibid.

169 The original biblical texts do not relate to the Virgin at all. He reworks their original future tense to create a temporal flow through the three panels. The first is in the future, the second the present and the third the past. Acres, Painted Texts, 76, 91-103.

Modeling Vision and Visuality in the Miraflores Altarpiece

Like other Northern painters, Rogier van der Weyden thematizes meditative vision by modeling it in his figures. As already mentioned, Mary is particularly potent in this respect. In each principle figure group her gaze is engrossed, fixed, prolonged and emotional. Seeing involves the Virgin’s whole body in postures and gestures that connect her exclusively to Christ and demonstrate her humility in his presence. She gleans every nuance of the physical reality of Christ before her from which she can derive greater understanding of his unseen divinity. Mary sees affective images of her son, but she understands what lies beyond the carnal eye: the Incarnation, Sacrifice and Resurrection of Christ unraveling through a single divine plan. The viewer of the altarpiece is invited to emulate the gaze and emotional response of Christ’s mother, but more than that, to see what the Virgin can see, that is, to recognize God Incarnate in the image of a helpless baby or lifeless body. This understanding is encouraged by the interpretative gaps in the work, for example, the parallel poses of Christ in the first two panels, and the close physical and compositional relationship of all three panels. Those who prolonged their attention, like the Virgin, could spy visual details to aid their anagogical journey towards deeper understanding of the divine plan. The typological scenes, painted texts, colors of the robes, and the grisailles components all prompt the viewer to cross-reference the images with prior knowledge, and to analyze, combine and re-imagine them in order to reach the same higher insight into the Divine that is exhibited by the Virgin.

171 Rothstein describes similar modeling in the Bladelin Triptych; Sight and Spirituality, 21-48 and “Vision, Cognition and Self-Reflection,” 37-42.

172 Cynthia Hahn discusses the shift from the early medieval glance towards the later lingering gaze, and its importance for transforming the viewer; “Visio Dei,” 183.
The third panel of the Miraflores Altarpiece toys with these levels of sight and insight with the distant image of the Resurrection of Christ through the window, which the viewer can see, but the Virgin does not (Figure 12). According to Pseudo-Bonaventura’s commentary, Mary believes her son will rise, despite the lack of visual evidence. This virtue of faith brings her face-to-face with God in two separate manifestations: her encounter with her risen son and her heavenly Coronation, which is drawn to our attention by the fingers on Christ’s left hand that point towards the coronation scene in the archway. The viewer’s privileged perspective on the Resurrection scene at the rear allows him or her literally to ‘see’ that Christ is risen. He or she experiences the pleasure of having greater insight, which in itself spurs the desire for that insight. Yet because the image is painted rather than real, and because the Virgin exemplifies insight that did not depend upon seeing the actual Resurrection, the viewer is reminded of the need to persevere in faith like the Virgin, if he or she wants to progress beyond carnal sight. The iconography conflates the Appearance of Christ to his Mother with the Noli me tangere, which further warns against relying on carnal sight. The viewer, like the Virgin, cannot hold onto Christ’s physical presence. The contrast between Mary’s hands tightly gripped around the body of her son in the second panel and

173 Pseudo-Bonaventura’s account of the Appearance of Christ to his Mother describes her sorrowful prayers full of faith in the Resurrection before her son’s arrival. Breckenridge, “Et prima vidit,” 17.

174 Acres points out that this deep space suggests that the central point of the Virgin and Christ extends back and also forward to encompass the viewer, achieving a co-extensive space for them within the event. “Luke, Rolin and Seeing Relationships,” 27-28.

175 The Miraflores Altarpiece might be compared to the Bladelin Triptych in its exploration of different modes of revelation (direct, second and third order) as a means to seeing the divine. See Rothstein, Sight and Spirituality, 27-29, and “Vision, Cognition and Self-reflection,” 37-52.

176 Birkmeyer argues that Rogier van der Weyden has used iconography familiar to both events, “Et prima vidit,” 22-23.
their openness here in the third underscores the inadequacy of the external senses to grasp true significance.

In all three panels the Virgin is locked in a reciprocal gaze with Christ. She is not looking in order to gain information about him, but to become like him.\textsuperscript{177} Although there is no exchange of looks between the viewer and the Virgin in the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece}, Mary exemplifies for imitation this manner of looking upon the image of God. Christ sees her and she has become like Christ. Her Christ-like virtues are displayed in the banderoles and crowns and in her humble postures in the main scenes and the grisailles. Through her compassion for Christ she shares in his Passion and sacrifice, visualized for the viewer in the physical and emotional proximity of mother and son, and carefully rendered in the grisaille episodes.\textsuperscript{178} The viewer is called to mirror Mary as she mirrors Christ.

The layered nature of sight and insight is modeled by the other two figures in the scene, as well. Saint John and Joseph of Arimathea flank the mourning Virgin and look at her rather than at Christ, just as the altarpiece as a whole draws attention to the life of the Virgin as the accessible path to higher understanding.

Yet another discourse on sight and divine seeing is modeled in the figure of old Joseph in the first panel. His eyes are curiously closed. Among the numerous potential

\textsuperscript{177} Thomas Lentes has pointed out that prayer guides encouraged communication between viewer and image. For example, one guide instructs the pious to stand or kneel before an image, recite a psalm, and then say, “Lord and my Saviour, see my sadness… and cleanse me of my sins…” Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Preußischer Kulturenbesitz, Ms. Germ. Oct. 17 f. 16v, cited in Lentes, “As far as the eye can see,” 362.

meanings for this feature are reflections on the hierarchy of sight.\textsuperscript{179} It may remind viewers of Joseph’s need for angelic messages through his dreams in order to see beyond the physical evidence of his betrothed’s unexplained pregnancy. That Joseph’s eyes are shut even where the physical presence of Christ is to be seen could have been interpreted as a warning to viewers to turn a blind eye to physical sight and instead cultivate interior visualizations.

By thematizing the issue of looking, seeing and not seeing, Rogier van der Weyden has handed the viewer a challenge: observers are offered exemplars of successful vision and visualization from which to learn and to measure their own progress in the craft. Yet the greater challenge is to transform what they see in paint into interior visualizations, and eventually it is hoped, into sightless understanding of the Divine that transforms them into his image.

Creating Space for Transformation: The Miraflores Altarpiece and the Carthusian Theology of the Cell

The monks who viewed the Miraflores Altarpiece may have sought to transform themselves not only into an imitation of the painted Virgin or Christ, but also into an imitation of the spaces those figures occupy. Here again, the way in which the space is painted invites viewers to use the physical image as a tool to help them progress towards inner visualization. The porches and little chapels may have operated as symbolic representations of the cell-like space in which Carthusians sought to meet Christ through scribal and meditative activities. Falkenburg has shown that meditation guides and

\textsuperscript{179} For example, Panofsky reads the sleeping Joseph as a precursor to the Virgin’s solitude in the Lamentation, \textit{Netherlandish Art}, 261. On the hierarchies of vision and revelation see note 177.
sermons encouraged individuals to imagine preparing their soul as a place to meet Christ, as one would a garden or bridal chamber.180 These texts and their visual analogues offered intricate descriptions of the bridal chamber or garden drawn from the Song of Songs as metaphors for the virtues, beliefs and qualities an individual needed to cultivate in order to transform his or her soul. Life-like rooms filled with realistically depicted household objects of the sort found in Campin’s Mérode Altarpiece, for example, therefore operated as painterly visualizations of the ‘household for the soul’ stimulating the patron to visualize his or her own soul as a worthy meeting place for Christ.

Rogier van der Weyden’s Miraflores Altarpiece is notably sparser than Campin’s interior, but the particular space it represented could have resonated with the Carthusian viewer’s cells, and with the desire to internalize that space as a place to meet Christ. A monk’s life was defined by architecture that was purpose-built to assist their vocation of solitary prayer and supported by a theology of the cell. This theology called for an increasing internalization of space, so that the cell represented both the physical location of a monk’s internal striving and the symbol of the spiritual solitude after which the monk strove.181 Like a Carthusian cell, the Miraflores spaces are stripped bare of almost all extraneous detail and ornament (Figure 21). Every detail that is included in the painting evokes a range of doctrines, virtues and qualities desired by the monks who viewed it. The spare chapel-like spaces rendered by Rogier van der Weyden are shaped in a way that would be familiar to the daily life of a Carthusian monk, in which every part of their environment supported their spiritual journey. Distinct areas divide the religious


figures from the rest of the room, just as the cell is divided into oratory, workspace and living space. The simple wooden bench visible in the third panel, and suggested in the first two, is reminiscent of the *prie-dieu* in the monk’s oratory, and the window resembles the kind that would overlook their walled garden. The book in the Lamentation scene is consistent with objects and activities found in a monastic cell, where monks studied and transcribed texts.\textsuperscript{182} The banderoles of text above the arches in Rogier van der Weyden’s painting are evocative of the literary excerpts found in charterhouses over the portals of individual cells.\textsuperscript{183}

When looking at the spaces in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* monks could have been reminded of their physical cell as a place to encounter Christ. In accordance with their theology of the cell the monks could have used the image as a mnemonic to help transform their inner selves into a cell-like space to meet Christ. The distance between the chapel, where the *Miraflores Altarpiece* was seen, and the individual monastic cells, where it was remembered, could then have mirrored a monks’ internal journey from carnal to spiritual vision and from the physical spaces of the charterhouse that incrementally isolated him, to the ultimate interior isolation of the self in contemplation of the Divine.

The Carthusians were not the only viewers who could have drawn this meaning from the painted spaces of the altarpiece. Geerte Grote adapted aspects of the theology of the cell for lay people, as the internalization of private physical space into an intimate

\textsuperscript{182} On the layout of the monk’s cell; \textit{ibid.}, 168-9; and the Carthusian Order, \texttt{www.chartreuse.info}.

region of the heart permeated the *devotio moderna*\(^{184}\). Whether the viewer was a Carthusian or not, the sanctified, quiet, intimate spaces evoked by the *Miraflores Altarpiece* could have functioned as surrogates and stimulants for the viewer’s own visualizations and transformation of his or her inner self as an intimate, private space in which to meet Christ.

The developing rosary participated in this broad tradition of meditating before images. As I will show in the next chapter, early rosary imagery shared many of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*’s mechanisms by which viewers could hold in tension the usefulness and redundancy of the image as a tool for meditation. Image rosaries, like the altarpiece, supported the viewer’s progression towards inner visualization and transformation of the self into the image of God. Before turning to this common ground, one further significant function of the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, which is also shared with the later rosary, deserves to be articulated: that of its role as a mnemonic tool.

*The Miraflores Altarpiece as Mnemotechnic*

We already have seen that Rogier van der Weyden ensured his altarpiece met the Gregorian criteria for the use of art: the work conveys a clear, coherent and emotionally appealing account of episodes from the life of the Virgin and has examples of virtuous characters for viewers to emulate. We also have seen that the work’s significance for the viewer went beyond its content to the manner of representation, and the ways it invited viewer interaction with itself as a visual source. In this final section, I will examine the

\(^{184}\) For example, Margaret of York and Isabelle of Portugal both had private spaces for prayer built to imitate the Carthusian cell, and Denis the Carthusian’s *De vita et regimine principissae* written for Isabella describes the private space for devotion and prayer in terms that could mean a physical or interior space. Lotz, “Secret Rooms,” 164-6 and 170-2.
architectural structure of the Miraflores Altarpiece as a memory theatre.\textsuperscript{185} It is this mnemonic quality that makes the Miraflores Altarpiece such an effective and flexible tool to support Marian Psalter style rosary meditations, as well as many other private meditative devotions. It is also the quality that would have enabled the altarpiece to support the Marian devotions performed by monks at Miraflores in their cells, away from the Chapel where the altarpiece probably hung.

One of the reasons why the Marian Psalter was merged with meditations on the life of Christ was that the two devotions supported each other: the narrative meditations ensured those reciting repetitive Aves remained focused, and the Psalter structure enabled effective division of meditations into three chaplets of manageable and memorable themes. However, the mnemonic function of the rosary, and the Miraflores Altarpiece, operated at more complex levels than simply recalling and staying focused on a linear series of ideas.

Meditation relied on memory, which, like vision and visualization, was not a passive storehouse of information, but rather an active and creative process of storage and productive retrieval.\textsuperscript{186} To remember was to visualize, which, as already discussed, was the means by which one could be transformed into the image of God. As Mary

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\textsuperscript{185} Mary Carruthers describes the craft of creating mental pictures of architecture whose role is not representation, but rather to support the procedure of thought. These images are neither allegorical nor illustrative. “Moving Images in the Mind’s Eye,” in The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages, eds., Jeffry Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 287-305.

Carruthers, Ann Moss and others have shown, visualizing in order to remember something had been cultivated as part of the training in rhetorical skills since the time of the ancient Greeks, and had become a habit of mind. Early monastic writers integrated rhetorical invention with meditative practice, and termed meditation ‘memory of God.’

By the later Middle Ages, sermon writing had become a leading application for memory systems and helped shape broader rhetorical practice, including the popularity of commonplace-books in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries.

The rhetorical art of invention involved recalling ‘nuggets’ of material and integrating them flexibly and creatively into a variety of new contexts. These ‘nuggets’ or commonplaces were brief quotations, examples and other illustrative material that carried the authority of their original authors or of their wide acceptance as repeated aphorisms. The persuasiveness of an argument relied upon recalling at will such commonplaces and using them to amplify new themes. In order to memorize commonplaces, orators were trained to store them in real or imagined mnemonic frameworks, often in the form of building structures. Once an item’s place on such a structure, or locus in rhetorical terms, was learned, it could be retrieved—literally re-collected from the memory—easily and flexibly. Such mnemonic habits of mind

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188 Carruthers and Ziolkowski, Medieval Craft of Memory, 2.

189 Ann Moss described the development of these collections of sayings and exempla in Printed Commonplace-Books, 43-45.

190 Ibid., 11.

191 The idea is that one can ‘enter’ into the material at any point without losing one’s way. Written collections of commonplaces in commonplace books organized them according to topics, often associated with related virtues. Carruthers, “Moving Images,” 290; Moss, Printed Commonplace-Books, 7-10.
shaped meditative practice, in that one could follow these principles of storage and retrieval to create chains of topics that endlessly amplified, and extrapolated from, themes. It allowed practitioners to ruminate on ideas, construct new meaning with them, and pursue the anagogical process towards higher understanding.192

Many of the principles shaping medieval concepts of memory can be seen in the Miraflores Altarpiece. It is at once Rogier van der Weyden’s own mnemonic system for recalling topics for meditating on the life of the Virgin and also a flexible architectural mnemonic structure for viewers to use to create endless new meditations. Like the imaginary edifices visualized for storing memories, the altarpiece material is divided into an architectural framework of arches that provide a clear and systematic locus for each item, or visual fragment, so that it could be stored safely and easily retrieved as desired. The arch framing device creates a memory theater that almost compels the viewer to engage with the grisailles as stored fragments.193 According to late medieval notions of cognition, a thing seen was understood to be more indelibly imprinted on the mind—literally stored as a sense impression—than a thing heard or read.194 The act of seeing it was itself part of a mnemonic process. The altarpiece thus aids memory both by the subjects it depicts and by the way they are arranged.


193 Falkenburg interprets both the grisailles and the principle images on the altarpiece as ‘succinct.’ Joachim Patinir, 38.

Each image stored within the architecture is emotionally laden, just as Aristotle had taught that every memory was composed of an image and an emotional resonance. It had long been recognized that affect was a powerful force capable of imprinting images on the memory.\textsuperscript{195} The fragments, or ‘nuggets,’ are organized into memorable sequences that are arranged so that one image would be associated with another, or with a summary image. The principle figures encapsulate the key themes of the triptych, which are subdivided into further topics through the archivolt sculptures and the typological columns.\textsuperscript{196} The arrangement is similar to the way sermon manuals recommended preachers visualize the wings and feathers of a seraph to organize and subdivide the topics of their sermons (Figure 22).\textsuperscript{197} The altarpiece panels follow the rhetorical principle that no more than what could be taken in with a single glance should be placed in such frameworks, and that topics should be limited to seven, plus or minus two. The altarpiece has six vignettes around each principle image. Rogier van der Weyden’s unusual frontal placement of these vignettes resonates with the way the seraph-wing imagery of sermon guides turned the feathers of wings to an unnatural degree so that they would be visible and legible, which were prerequisites for effective memory.\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{195} Carruthers and Ziolkowski, \textit{Medieval Craft of Memory}, 8.

\textsuperscript{196} As I argued in Chapter Two, the principle themes could be interpreted different ways, as, for example, the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Christ, or the purity, faith and perseverance of the Virgin. Such flexibility is further evidence of the operation of the altarpiece as a mnemonic tool of the rhetorical model.


\textsuperscript{198} Carruthers and Ziolkowski, \textit{Medieval Craft of Memory}, 12-13, and 83-88.
Texts and guides instructed readers to visualize architectural frameworks as storehouses of words or images, but such a framework is actually given visual form for the viewer of Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece. The *Miraflores* archways create distinct, memorable loci, or places, for each image in a clear and coherent sequence, but having learned that sequence, the viewer can free each fragment and access it any number of ways: forwards, backwards, and in multiple cross-references. The many different interpretations that have been made of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* demonstrate that, like a commonplace-book, it contains material that is transposable, not fixed to a single use.

Every detail of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* could be interpreted as ‘citing’ an earlier source such as the Bible, Church Fathers, mystics’ visions, or earlier artistic representations. As I argued in Chapter Two, Rogier van der Weyden is not relying on texts, or simply reiterating them, but is citing authoritative commonplaces that are found in both text and image and then quite literally re-framing them in a new context. An example of the artist’s skill in reusing these commonplaces is evident from the adapted text used in the banderoles. The subject and tense of the words are changed from their biblical sources, and their meaning is reapplied to the virtues of the Virgin.

The viewer’s own inventive skill is necessary for the work to be a tool for meditation. To use rhetorical terms, viewers are invited to roam like Seneca’s honey bees through the ‘flowers’ of Rogier van der Weyden’s images, and to use their own

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199 Amy Powell might argue that these commonplaces, whether textural or visual, derive their authority, and indeed their meaning, precisely from their repetition “A Point ‘Ceaselessly Pushed Back,’” 707-728.

‘excretions,’ or memory, to construct their own ‘honeycomb’ for new meditations.\textsuperscript{201} The flexibility and multivalency of the altarpiece is similar to that of devotional texts like Ludolph the Carthusian’s \textit{Life of Christ}, which drew together myriad sources from which meditations and sermons could be drawn, and to early meditations connected to the Marian Psalter. Written rosary guides similarly promoted the wandering nature of meditations at the time.

As a mnemonic tool the altarpiece could have operated on at least three levels. First, its clear sequential layout of images aided the recollection of a specific narrative sequence of meditations on the Virgin’s life. As with the texts of Dominic the Carthusian and Alanus de Rupe, the images of the altarpiece offer a sequence of emotionally potent topics to help maintain the viewer’s concentration and their striving towards imitation of the Virgin and of Christ while reciting the Marian Psalter. Perhaps the mnemonic architecture would have assisted monks in their recollection of the sequences as they followed Marian Psalter meditations in their cells, away from the altarpiece. Second, the altarpiece could have operated as a sort of commonplace book from which the monks could derive their own material for meditations. It may have served as a source for sermons, aided them in the meditation guides they edited and transcribed in their cells, or served as a rich source of material for the monks’ subjective, solitary meditations. Third, the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} was a tutor or exercise in the craft of memory. The altarpiece documents Rogier van der Weyden’s own process of memory as a source for artistic invention. It promotes the principles of subjective recollection by demonstrating how

\textsuperscript{201} Moss describes Seneca’s honey bee model, and later developments of it in \textit{Printed Commonplace-Books}, 12.
topics could be stored for flexible, creative retrieval. Through this practice, and through the iconographic material itself, the altarpiece invites viewer participation in the creation of meaning. It presses him or her towards inventive recollection of the life and virtues of the Virgin. These three levels all supported the altarpiece’s role in devotional meditations principally because they aided private imagination and visualization, the pre-requisites of spiritual growth suitable certainly for Carthusian monks.

By examining the altarpiece as an aid to meditative devotions, and particularly as an aid to praying the rosary meditations, far more layers of meaning can be generated than those proposed by a closed doctrinal, liturgical, sacramental or social interpretation. There is a strong case for understanding the altarpiece’s iconography and structure in terms of the new, rapidly spreading practice of reciting the Marian Psalter while meditating on the life of the Virgin. At the heart of these types of meditations were personal imagination, and a flexible, personalized approach to the subject of one’s meditations. The images of the altarpiece support endless interpretations through the topics represented, their arrangement in visual loci, their substance as paint, and most of all, their relationship with the individual viewer. Rogier van der Weyden crafted a work that could remind its viewer what to think about, and how to think. If one spent time looking at the altarpiece, one could experience a taste of the transformative power of meditative thought. The Carthusians promoted the rosary because of its potential to aid the spiritual reform of failing monastic houses, and to support individuals in their private devotions. The Miraflores Altarpiece is a rare example of art from the 1440s that shared in the meditations of the rosary and its restorative potential.
CHAPTER FOUR

BEYOND MIRAFLORES: ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN’S ALTARPIECE IN THE CONTEXT OF LATER ROSARY IMAGERY

Thus far I have examined the characteristics of the Miraflores Altarpiece that demonstrate how it participated in the rosary traditions that were developing during the first half of the fifteenth century. When the Miraflores Altarpiece entered the Carthusian monastery in the mid-1440s it was to a large extent isolated from other, more widely viewed images used in rosary and other Life of Christ devotions across Germany and the Netherlands.202 This chapter is concerned with the relationship between the Miraflores Altarpiece and works from the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century that attended more overtly to the history of the rosary, its prayers and their benefits as promoted by the confraternities. Rather than embarking on an exhaustive study of rosary art, I will draw on select examples of later rosary imagery in order to show why the Miraflores Altarpiece is important in this context, and why there are visual differences between it and other later works.

We have already seen that the Miraflores Altarpiece shares much of the content and structure of later rosary imagery, yet it does not have many of the salient characteristics of these works made for members of rosary confraternities. The altarpiece’s lack of rosary iconography, its relative seclusion, and the rich layers of

202 Based on its limited influence, it was apparently not widely known outside Spain. De Vos, Rogier van der Weyden, 232.
meaning it can support might account for why Rogier van der Weyden’s triptych has thus far not been examined in association with the rosary, but rather, has been interpreted in terms of the monastery, other works there (especially the *Saint John Altarpiece*) and the interests of King Juan.  

We can use our understanding of the rosary as a religious practice to help us understand the function and meaning of certain images, but it is equally important to approach the issue from the other direction and to ask how those images enable us to understand the rosary. The rosary as it is now understood as a definite entity, in which *Ave* and *Paternoster* prayers are repeated along with the fifteen joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries, emerged through the teachings and practices of the rosary confraternities. The first confraternity set up by Alanus de Rupe in 1468-70 was followed in 1475 by the more famous confraternity of Cologne, established by Jacob Sprenger. From there rosary confraternities spread quickly throughout Europe. By 1479 membership had already numbered five-hundred thousand, and had the support of the papacy and secular rulers. By 1488 there were brotherhoods in Germany, France, the

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203 I refer to the studies by Fuchs, “Altarpieces in Context”; Lane, “Altarpieces Reconsidered”; and Reed, “Salome.”


205 Membership figures were recorded by Michael Francisi as part of his defense of the confraternities in 1479, and are cited by Thurston in “The Fifteen Mysteries,” 622. Papal legate Alexander Forli approved the Cologne confraternity in 1476, and Sixtus IV granted an indulgence to members in 1478. Frederick III became a member of the Cologne Confraternity in 1475. Jacob Sprenger urged the Cologne confraternity to pray the rosary when the city was threatened by the Burgundians, and following Cologne’s victory the rosary received enthusiastic support. See Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 19-20, and Schuler, “The Seven Sorrows,” 17-18.
Netherlands, Italy and Spain, thanks to the promotion of the rosary within the Dominican order.\textsuperscript{206}

The brotherhoods were extraordinarily successful at establishing what had been disparate meditations loosely connected to the Marian Psalter into a widespread devotion, even though the exact form of those meditations remained flexible and non-codified until well into the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{207} The rosary absorbed many different Marian devotions and traditions with diverse iconographies. Valuable indulgences were granted to those who prayed it, and the meditative focus of the rosary was, to some extent, eclipsed by the other perceived benefits of rosary confraternity membership. Rosary imagery from the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries was not a reflection of new established ideas and practices, but rather should be viewed as one of the most important means by which those ideas and practices were actively generated, promulgated and embedded. The ways viewers interacted with images helped shape the devotion itself. The question of how far the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} shares its content and function with later confraternity rosary works, especially those in print media, is constructive for understanding the process of the development and formalization of the rosary and its iconography, and at the same time expanding our understanding of the ways in which the altarpiece may have had meaning for its viewers.

\textsuperscript{206} The Dominicans were given direct control over the confraternities in 1569. Miller, \textit{Beads and Prayers}, 28.

\textsuperscript{207} On the persistence of a lack of codification long after Papal approval of the rosary in terms of the fifteen mysteries see Thurston, “The Rosary,” 631. The name ‘rosary’ was initially disputed. Alanus de Rupe rejected the term because of its secular connotations, but it had been used by Dominic of Prussia for his meditations and was defended by Michael Francisi. It was used by Jacob Sprenger in his handbook. On the issue of the name see Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 81-109, especially 81 and 107-9.
Specific and Non-Specific Rosary Imagery

Rosary imagery began to appear in printed confraternity guides and statutes, and was commissioned by confraternity members and patrons of Dominican foundations.208 Among its distinct iconography was the figure of Saint Dominic preaching or disseminating the rosary, for example, in *The Legend of the Rosary* (c.1478) by Geertgen tot Sint Jans (Figure 23), now only known through copies, and Albrecht Durer’s *Feast of the Rose Garland* (1506) (Figure 24).209 Alanus de Rupe was the first to tell the now discredited legend that the rosary was given in 1214 to Saint Dominic, the founder of the Dominican Order.210

Many of the earlier Marian traditions that were absorbed into the rosary appear in the lower section of Francisco Domenech’s *Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary* (Figure 6), the top section of which was discussed in Chapter One.211 The Virgin of the Rosary is framed by a mandorla of roses, which as in other versions of the image, conflates the iconography of Marian traditions, such as the Coronation of the Virgin and

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209 Winston-Allen, discusses the commission and iconography of both these works in *Stories of the Rose*, 70-1 and 149. For a more detailed discussion on the lost work by Geertgen Tot Sint Jans see Grete Ring, “Attempt to Reconstruct a Lost Geertgen Composition,” *Burlington Magazine* 94 (1952): 147.

210 He claimed in 1460 that in a vision the Virgin Mary had commissioned him to preach the rosary she had given to Saint Dominic, and to found rosary confraternities. He further claimed the prayer itself had been instituted by the Virgin in her own lifetime. A series of articles by Thurston published in *The Month*, 1901, show how the historicity of these traditions has been comprehensively disputed. See also, Thurston, “The Fifteen Mysteries,” 621; Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 21.

211 The iconography of Domenech’s engraving is discussed by Bauman, “A Rosary Picture,” 138-139.
Maria in Sole.212 Mary stands on or above a carpet of flowers, evoking the Virgin’s long association with the rose and rose garden.213 The Ave prayer was associated with the rose through thirteenth-century miracle legends, one of which is portrayed to the left of the Virgin in Domenech’s engraving. The knight, also sometimes identified as the Monk, kneels to recite Aves, unaware of would-be attackers behind him. He is also unable to see what his assailants can see which stops them in their tracks: his words are turning to roses and are plucked from his mouth by the Virgin.214

The knight and several figures in the engraving hold rosary beads, and a large set of beads creates a second halo around the Virgin and Child.215 Beads had been used to count Christian prayers since the early days of the Church. By the mid-fifteenth century Paternoster beads used to keep track of the prayers said in place of the Divine Office, were also used to count prayers in meditations on the Passion of Christ.216 The beads were associated with the rosary from its earliest phases. The numbers of beads, like the

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213 Rose and rose garden imagery was extrapolated from the Song of Songs. It had been expressed since the Early Church Fathers, and was greatly elaborated in hymns, litanies, legends and prayers from the twelfth century. In the early fifteenth century, Dominic of Prussia’s fellow Carthusian, Adolphus von Essen, wrote an extended allegory on the subject entitled, Unser Frauen Marien Rosengertlin. The imagery also featured in secular poetry and classical references. Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 88-109; Falkenburg, Fruit of Devotion, 8-12, 41, and 46-50; Bridget Heal, The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23-63.

214 In written versions of the tale the roses are woven into garlands. Bauman gives a full account of this legend, “A Rosary Picture,” 139-141.

215 The figures are identified, and surprisingly the Dominican is not Saint Dominic, but Vincent Ferrer, who had been based at the University of Barcelona where the engraving was made. Bauman, “A Rosary Picture,” 139.

216 The term rosary is now synonymous with the beads, but at this stage they were still known as paternoster beads. On rosary beads see Thurston, “The Rosary,” 404-6; Miller, Beads and Prayers, 91, 102-3; Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 111-118.
numbers of rosary meditations, varied widely, and the now familiar and standard form of 150 rosary beads divided into fifteen decades only became popular in the last quarter of the sixteenth-century.

The miracle in the engraving shows another important feature of rosary imagery: the power of the rosary to save souls and lives. Confraternities promoted the rosary’s power to protect members from all kinds of harm. Douai confraternity statutes claimed the Virgin’s protection from, “arson, lightning and thunder, brigands, thieves, murderers, and from all the assaults of enemies from hell.”\textsuperscript{217} Pope Innocent VIII appears to the heraldic right of the Virgin in Domenech’s engraving and a phylactery is inscribed \textit{indulgentia} in reference to the indulgences granted to those praying the rosary.

The \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece} lacks all of this iconography associated with the later rosary; Saint Dominic, the Virgin of the Rosary, roses, beads, and the power of the rosary to save. The original background to the third panel, which would have placed the Virgin in a walled garden, was changed to the chapel space we now see.\textsuperscript{218} It is important to remember that devotional art in its broadest sense had a well-established role in rosary meditations, before and after the 1470s, regardless of whether it contained overt rosary iconography. As already noted, Alanus de Rupe encouraged those praying the rosary to have before them an image of the Mother and Child as an aid to their meditations.\textsuperscript{219} Panels, altarpieces, sculpture, objects and printed images in the form of single


\textsuperscript{218} See Chapter Two, page 28.

Andachtsbilder or serial images like those of the Passion of Christ or Joys and Sorrows of the Virgin could be used by those praying the rosary to aid their imaginative visualizations, largely because the subject of rosary meditations was non-specific, flexible and open-ended, and incorporated existing Marian and life of Christ devotions.²²⁰ As I have already shown, the Miraflores Altarpiece was ideally structured to support these kinds of elastic meditations.

Written Guidance for Confraternities

Perhaps it was because images were so adaptable to a variety of uses that overt rosary imagery, and image guides to praying the rosary, did not appear until after written versions. Much of the distinct rosary iconography was drawn from stories and teachings in rosary guide books. The guides written from the mid-1470s for the confraternities rapidly increased the momentum and popularity of rosary-related text.²²¹ These publications offered a variety of meditations, including Dominic’s earlier meditations and exempla drawn from the rich diversity of Marian devotions. Only some of the suggested meditations were narrative sequences, others included popular topics like the wounds of Christ, or the Joys of the Virgin. Winston-Allen has found that books printed between 1475 and 1550 offered “a bewildering array of rosaries, forms with 200, 165, 150, 93, 63, 33, 12, and as few as 5 meditations… Ave acrostics, Marian litanies, general meditations,

²²⁰ For example, the Sorrows of the Virgin (Figure 16), and the Life of Christ in Twenty-Seven Pictures (Figure 7), as discussed in Chapter Two.

²²¹ Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 25. The first printed rosary book (excluding Dominic the Carthusian’s Liber experientiarium) was Unser lyeben frowen Rosenkrantz und wie er von ersten offkumen, 1475.
and narrative types.”\textsuperscript{222} The market for these guides was generated by the unprecedented popularity of rosary confraternities.

Part of the rosary confraternities’ success was due to their open, autonomous structure that was free and easy to join. They particularly recruited the poor.\textsuperscript{223} As a result, confraternity members were likely to have been largely illiterate and had less time and training in meditation than the monks who promoted the rosary to them. Members were required to recite the full rosary of 150 \textit{Aves}, but the times, manner and contents of their meditations were not prescribed. It is understandable that narrative meditation cycles became the most popular form of the rosary, just as they had in the \textit{devotio moderna} in the Netherlands, because they could be readily understood and remembered and because they engaged the emotions. It is also not surprising that when a pictorial version of this narrative style meditation was first published, it became the most popular form of all the rosary devotions. An image version was accessible to any language or literacy level. For example, a Netherlandish rosary guide from 1484 encouraged confraternity members who could not read to look at the illustrations while repeating the \textit{Ave} and think about the life and Passion of Christ.\textsuperscript{224} Nevertheless, the reasons for the popularity of the pictorial narrative life of Christ meditation are more complex than a simple matter of accessibility. As we have seen in the case of the \textit{Miraflores Altarpiece},

\textsuperscript{222}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{223} Jacob Sprenger’s statutes declared the confraternity should enable the poorest to become equals with the rich. On lay membership of the confraternities, and especially the predominance of women, and members from lower classes and rural areas where levels of education were extremely low, see; Winston-Allen, \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 31-2, and 117-19; Miller, \textit{Beads and Prayers}, 21; also Schuler, “The Seven Sorrows,” 18.

the ways in which viewers interact meditatively with images could generate multifaceted meaning.

**Early Rosary Woodcuts**

Three woodcut sheets known as the *Ulm Picture Text* appeared in an edition of *Unser lieben Frauen Psalter* in 1483, and are the first known image rosary to be published (Figure 15).\(^{225}\) The woodcuts were not referred to in the text, and were separated in the book from the other, textual rosary meditations and *exempla*.\(^{226}\) Brief instructions on how to use the images, however, were included in the 1489 version of *Unser lieben Frauen Psalter*:

> Now these pictures which are printed on these three leaves, show you how you must say the Psalter of Mary. Notice that on the first leaf stand five pictures; these you may look at and meditate upon while you are saying the psalter; or else you may study the picture before you begin to say the psalter…. You must say one Pater noster and ten Ave Marias for one picture...\(^{227}\)

These instructions suggest that it was anticipated the viewer would already know what it meant to ‘meditate’ before an image. The text simply explains the number of prayers to be said, and expects the image to speak for itself in terms of what was to be meditated on and how it was to be done.

\(^{225}\) Published in Ulm by Conrad Dinkmut, with at least seven editions before 1503. Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 33.


\(^{227}\) Cited by Thurston, “Fifteen Mysteries,” 625-7. I disagree with Thurston’s analysis that these instructions were necessary because of the reader’s lack of familiarity with images in meditations.
Viewers would have been familiar with series of images through altarpieces like those discussed in Chapter Two and through church decoration and passion plays, but woodcuts were particularly important in popularizing such series. Woodcuts occupied a complex place in mid-to-late fifteenth-century devotional imagery. As Peter Parshall points out, woodcuts were not like other artistic media that were valued for their style, precious materials, competitive patronage and socio-economic consequence. Rather, woodcuts were cheap, anonymous, intended to be replicated and broadly disseminated, and were valued chiefly for their subject matter, or their transcendent significance as versatile objects. The vast majority of early woodcuts were single devotional images, but in the mid-century there was a marked rise in narrative interest and serial imagery. By the 1460s woodcuts were being designed to illustrate printed books directly, as with the *Speculum humanae salvationis*. Prints of the same woodcuts appeared within texts and as loose sheets, and sometimes with hand-written or printed prayers. Many early woodcuts were pasted by their owners into manuscripts, although they were not

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necessarily related to the text. Images pasted into books show that woodcuts appealed not only to illiterate users, who must have appreciated their low cost and legibility of the simple line, but also to a wealthy literate and Latinate audience with sophisticated understanding of the use of images in meditative visualizations. For example, in 1445 the prioress of an Augustinian convent, Anna Jäck hand copied a Life of Christ manuscript in which the reader was exhorted to ‘now see’ the episodes from Christ’s life, and combined it with forty-five images presenting those episodes. The images were collected together from various sources, eighteen of which were woodcuts taken from other series or individual Andachtsbilder. Unlike this collection of images, the Ulm Picture Text formed a complete discrete series, but was disassociated from the text of the book in which it appeared.

So what did it mean for rosary confraternity members to meditate before the serial images of the Ulm Picture Text? Was it so very different from the ways in which Carthusian monks would have viewed the Miraflores Altarpiece, which, as I discussed in Chapter Two, shares many of the same episodes from the life of Christ and the Virgin, and arranges them into a similar tripartite division? Undoubtedly, not all viewers were adept at accessing complex layers of meanings in devotional art, but the potential for multivalency is apparent in woodcuts, as it is in oil panels. The graphic images of the

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231 They were also pasted onto walls, objects and even clothing. Parshall, “Early Woodcuts and the Reception of the Primitive,” 2, and Richard Field, “Early Woodcuts,” 28. Field rightly calls for greater understanding of the relationship between these images and the texts.

232 Recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that woodcuts were in any sense primitive, ‘folk art’ or intended for a mass, illiterate audience. Schmidt, “The Multiple Image,” 41-43.

233 The other images were miniatures and all images were derived from different sources, artists, styles and cycles. Ibid., 45.
Ulm Picture Text may be simple and linear compared to the illusionistic realism, color, depth of space and surface detail of the Miraflores Altarpiece, but the images use many of the same mechanisms to enable the viewer to generate meaning, and thus to aid inventive meditative visualization.

The fifteen images of the Ulm Picture Text are framed by a chaplet of ten roses, which operates as a multivalent mnemonic structure just as the arch motif does in the Miraflores Altarpiece. The rose chaplet frame serves the same sacred/profane liminal function as the frames in the Miraflores Altarpiece, and even shows the same foot or hem transgressing that boundary, hinting at the power of prayerful meditation to traverse this separation (Figure 25). The chaplets visualize the number of prayers to be said while meditating on each picture and refer to a multitude of meanings within the rich polysemy of the rose including the unblemished Virgin, Bride of Christ, Christ’s wounds, the tree of Jesse, the Incarnation, miracles of Aves turning into roses, and the protection of the Virgin who receives them. Hand tinted woodcuts afforded the prints similar color symbolism to that of the rich oil paints of the altarpiece.234 The rose chaplets provide a clear structure to aid the individual’s internal visualization of the episodes, so that having seen them with their physical eyes they can ‘place’ their memories and recollect them in any number of directions. The layout encourages flexible cross-referencing within and between each set of five images. The images are arranged to be read in three separate

234 White roses for the infancy scenes, red for the Passion and gold for the final set added new layers of multivalency through their association with Christ’s blood, the Virgin’s purity and the cycles of liturgical dress. Tinted woodcuts are discussed in Winston-Allen, Stories of the Rose, 32. The statutes of the Cologne confraternity from 1477 had already mentioned a red rose for the blood of Christ inserted between each group of ten white roses, representing Aves, but did not specify what to meditate upon. Miller, Beads and Prayers, 22. Marrow describes how this layering of meaning, including color symbolism, emerged through illuminated manuscripts and the Golden Biblia pauperum in “Art and Experience,” 109-114.
consecutive groups.\footnote{The images are joined together implicitly by the act of viewing them in the printed book rather than by formal simultaneous arrangement as in Rogier van der Weyden’s triple arch.} If read chronologically, the roundels on each page lead the eye in a five dot configuration from top left to top right, from bottom left to bottom right, and then back up to the central image.\footnote{That is, a 1-2, 5, 3-4 arrangement.} This up-down-up journey of the eye is close to Rogier van der Weyden’s arrangement of the arch vignettes on the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, so that the act of looking at both sets of images in a chronological order enacts the movement of the head in the genuflection of each *Ave* said. Looking then becomes a physical act that engages the whole body, including the anatomy of the brain as it was then understood, with the tilting of the head literally lifting open the flap between ventricles in the mind to aid visualization.\footnote{As discussed in Chapter Three, page 58.}

Despite the obvious differences of medium, Rogier van der Weyden’s oil panel and the *Ulm Picture Text* were both capable of supporting open-ended imaginative meditative visualizations and personal transformation into the Image of Christ. Rebecca Zorach argues that printed images might have had an advantage over painted ones in supporting meditative visualizations, as they were easier to distinguish from reality, and were already closer to the abstracted form that individuals sought to perceive through inner visualization of the physical world.\footnote{She argues that this was the reason why prints did not fall victim to iconoclasm the way oil paintings did. “Meditation, Idolatry, Mathematics,” 316-9.} Unlike oil painting, where brush strokes are blended to invisibility and the image appears to be magically present, in woodcuts the act
of fabrication was evident in the stylized lines and in materiality of replication; there is no danger of confusing the image with reality.

There is external evidence that the *Ulm Picture Text* did indeed generate the same sort of open-ended meditational journeys as the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. Two glosses written on the images first by Sixt Buchsbaum in 1492, and second by Johannes Lambsheym in 1495, demonstrate creative reading of the rosary images.\(^{239}\) The first gloss was in the form of a song where the lyrics related to each image in turn, and described the action-packed narrative in greater detail than the pictures show. The song is a dialogue between the figures, and it emphasizes the role of Mary much more than the images do. Buchsbaum draws on numerous devotional texts for these narrative embellishments, evoking the idea that he wandered (like a bee) through his own memories of commonplaces, using the mnemonic structure of the woodcuts as a foundation for a much greater edifice of recollected thoughts. These abbreviated images incited an emotional and empathetic response, and the recollection and visualization of a compelling and coherent narrative. Despite lacking Rogier van der Weyden’s mimetic illusionism, the printed images have enabled this viewer to transform what he sees carnally into internal visualizations of the Divine. Buchsbaum’s gloss was reprinted many times and appeared in various texts until the end of the sixteenth century, from which we must infer that it was widely known and popular, and may have helped viewers to interact imaginatively with the nascent rosary imagery. Its popularity as a song reminds us that illiterate users could learn how to meditate before art through a variety of non-textual means, including hymns, liturgy, sermons, festivals and word of mouth.

\(^{239}\) These glosses are discussed by Winston-Allen as examples of how image influenced text, and to illustrate that the image texts were interpreted in different ways. *Stories of the Rose*, 47-52.
The second gloss on the *Ulm Picture Text* suggests a very different reading. Johannes Lambsheym’s *Libellus perutilis* assigns different identities to the figures from those assumed by Buchsbaum, and rearranges the medallions in a different (and non-chronological) narrative order. Both of the glosses demonstrate that viewers interacted independently and creatively with the images, similar to the way they were guided to treat textual suggestions for meditation. Any number of variations was possible. The glosses indicate that the picture text was not read didactically for its content, but that viewers were able to generate multivalency through its subject, style and formal structure.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that the qualities of the *Ulm Picture Text* as a woodcut led to the generation of meaning that is opposed to the flexible polysemy I have been describing. Instead, it lent itself to increasing standardization, and to a shift in the focus of the rosary from meditation for personal transformation to observance of a ritual for its perceived benefits.

**Rosary Woodcuts and the Standardization of the Devotion**

As I noted above, the picture format of the rosary, with its accessible, emotive and familiar narrative of the life of Christ divided into joyful, sorrowful, and glorious episodes became the most popular version of the rosary. It was adopted and promoted within the confraternities by the Dominican order.240 There was no standard written gloss on the picture rosary but, significantly, subsequent picture guides remained very close to the *Ulm Picture Text*, as we saw, for example, in Domenech’s engraving made shortly.

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240 The Dominicans favored this rosary structure because it was attributed, probably inaccurately, to Alanus de Rupe. Thurston, “The Fifteen Mysteries,” 629. Winston-Allen claims it is the most widely used version based on her study of German sources. *Stories of the Rose*, 34.
after it. The layout of later versions changed, and additional iconography was introduced, especially relating to legends of the rosary, but the picture texts followed more or less the same fifteen episodes divided into joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries. This distinguishes image rosaries from textual guides, which continued to offer very different methods and topics for rosary meditations. It also quite literally sets them apart from text, as image was neither dependent on, nor subordinate to, text in any way. The rosary remained a flexible, non-standardized method for meditating through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the structure and most of the episodes that were first popularized through the *Ulm Picture Text* became the most enduring - and eventually the standard - form of the rosary, thanks in no small part to the dissemination and repetition of prints and printed guides.

Standardization does not preclude multivalency, as the glosses by Buchsbaum and Lambsheym confirm. Pictures in their repetition were effective means for remembering, focusing on, and generating an emotional response to the life of Christ. The *Miraflores Altarpiece* confirms this point, since Carthusian monks could gaze upon the same work year upon year in their chapel, and retreat to their cells with it imprinted in their minds in order to embark on their own numerous and varied meditative wanderings. However, unlike oil paintings, woodcuts from the mid-century had been designed to be replicated and used in different contexts. Their content was more important than their style, and so

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241 The woodcuts have the Last Judgement whereas the engraving has the Coronation of the Virgin. On the emergence of the coronation as the standard scene, and the reiteration of these images divided into the three mysteries, see Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 54-64.

242 Alternative versions were tolerated until the eighteenth century. Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 34.
they tended towards standardization to enable widespread use.243 It has been noted that woodcuts marked the start of taxonomy, of the codification and replication of information.244 If the majority of confraternity members were only able to ‘read’ an image form of the rosary, and the way it was replicated followed the wider trend in woodcuts towards standardization and the privilege of content over style, the case for the standardization of the rosary itself into this image-driven structure is compelling.

It is beyond the scope of this discussion to explore the broader trend towards standardization of devotions like the rosary in the sixteenth century, but it is worth noting that in the post-Reformation context the trend towards more standardized meditations is apparent in Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, and in the promotion of the imitatio Christi by the Jesuits. According to Karl Enekel and Walter Melion this later meditative scheme was different from the “infinitely generative” monastic spiritual exercises, and instead attempted “discursively to conform the meditans… to a doctrinal norm, even while defending his right freely to engage in meditation as a private process of self-conformation to Christ.”245 While the Miraflores Altarpiece could support ‘infinitely generative’ meditations, standardized images of the same episodes in later rosary imagery notably lack that rich multivalency.

A fitting work to compare with the Miraflores Altarpiece on this point is a painted panel by Rogier van der Weyden’s grandson, Goswijn van der Weyden. The Fifteen

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243 Schmidt describes this process in relation to the Gulden puchlein group of images from Germany in the 1540s, “The Multiple Image,” 47.

244 As discussed in Field, “Early Woodcuts,” 31.

245 Introduction to “Refashioning the Self,” 4.
Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary (c. 1515-20) is closely based on Domenech’s engraving of the same name (Figure 26). Like the engraving, the lower section deals with iconography specific to the legends of the rosary, while the upper registers follow almost exactly the standard episodes from the Ulm woodcuts, which are themselves very close to the grisailles in the Miraflores Altarpiece. In Goswijn van der Weyden’s panel, those episodes lack the properties in the Miraflores Altarpiece and Ulm Picture Text that invited the viewer to participate in the generation of inventive and transformative visualizations. For example, they lack framing devices that in the earlier works could operate as mnemonic and liminal structures. The episodes are arranged in a straightforward chronological order that leaves less room for creative interpretation or cross-referencing. The eye is led along a closed, standard route. There are no transgressions between sacred and viewer space. Goswijn van der Weyden was painting in another time and for another period eye. His contrapposto figures in their single-point perspective settings of classical architecture or landscapes retain the affective narrative embellishments of Rogier van der Weyden’s grisaille vignettes, but leave less to the imagination. Goswijn van der Weyden’s panel is not a ‘simple’ work, and has plenty of details that will engage and delight the eye and the mind; yet its overall meaning is anchored to one form of the rosary. It lacks the potential to support boundlessly multivalent meditations. In contrast, it has been impossible to pin the Miraflores Altarpiece down to any single meaning. Such multivalency in the triptych attests both to

246 Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Guy Bauman has argued that it was commissioned for the Burgundian family for a Dominican church they founded in Brussels in the fifteenth century. The Ducal palace and grounds are painted as the background to the lower panel. Although there was no rosary confraternity in the city until later, the patrons must have been familiar with the rosary as the Dominicans promoted it. “A Rosary Picture,” 138-9.
the richness of Rogier van der Weyden’s artistry, as well as to the sophisticated visual literacy of its original viewers.

**Rosary Art and Mathematical Piety**

While the *Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary* lacks those qualities that support infinitely generative meditations, the *Miraflores Altarpiece* lacks the iconography in the lower half of Goswijn van der Weyden’s panel that is quintessential to later rosary art. The lower register of the *Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary* encapsulates the power of the rosary to procure divine blessing and protection. Saint Dominic leads a line of church and state rulers who all enumerate and direct their prayers to the Virgin of the Rosary. The figure of the pope reminds viewers of the indulgences granted to those who pray the rosary, and the secular ruler is representative of many cities that were believed to have been saved from a threat when citizens prayed the rosary.\(^{247}\) The Virgin stands beneath an arch of roses in the form of rosary beads. Five sets of ten white roses are separated by one red rose for the *Aves* and *Paternosters* of a rosary chaplet. The infant Christ grasps the final rose and raises his hand in blessing over the Knight who is saved from his attackers (the same figure as in the miracle of the *Aves* described in Domenech’s engraving). In sum, the words of the *Ave* honor the Virgin, who intercedes for the one who prays, Christ willingly obliges, and the petitioner is saved.

\(^{247}\) Indulgences were first attributed to saying the rosary in the Douai statutes, but these were not authenticated. The first authenticated indulgence was granted by papal Legate Alexander of Forli in 1476. Sixtus IV granted an indulgence of seven years and seven quarantines to those reciting the rosary in 1478. The indulgence importantly extended the benefits to those already in purgatory, who could also be posthumously co-opted as members of the confraternity. Further indulgences were added by Innocent VIII and by clergy at a local level. On the importance of indulgences for confraternity members see; Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*, 122 and 137; Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 23; Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 23-29. On the identity of the pope in the panel as either Sixtus IV or Innocent VIII see Bauman, “A Rosary Picture,” 139 and 142. On the power of the rosary to save cities see note 206. Later examples of victories attributed to the rosary are mentioned in Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 28-30.
This imagery presents the rosary as a sort of ‘mathematical piety,’ because one could calculate rewards based on the number of prayers recited. The relationship of the viewer with this type of art, and the relationship of these images with the rosary itself, is different from the imagery discussed thus far in relation to the rosary as a tool for personal transformation through meditative visualizations. I have argued that works like the *Miraflores Altarpiece* and the *Ulm Picture Text* helped to shape the rosary as a devotional practice by the ways in which viewers interacted with their content, structure and visual format. Viewers came to such works to find a starting point for their visualizations, and to be guided in meditation, but eventually to progress beyond the images as one might leave behind a crutch when learning to walk. The iconography of the later *Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary* functions differently. Rather than pointing beyond itself to inner vision and the cultivation of Christ-like virtues, the standardized imagery of the upper register is not a dispensable crutch, but rather the permanent and defining feature of the devotion. Meanwhile, the iconography in the lower register reiterates the concept that the act of saying the rosary and of looking at certain images while doing so, earned calculable benefits in this life and the next. This was the case even though indulgences were associated with rosary prayers and not with the image of the Virgin of the Rosary.248 The reasons for this association again lie in the medium of woodcuts.

Woodcut images had been a potent vehicle for promulgating and embedding the idea that performing a religious observance, including looking at religious images while

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reciting prayers, earned indulgences. Pope Innocent III had granted an indulgence in 1216 for those praying before an image of the *vera icon* Holy Face of Christ, but in the mid- to late fifteenth century printed blockbooks included devotional images, such as the Gregorian Man and Sorrows, *Arma Christi* and *Maria in Sole*, and promised indulgences on a grand scale to those who recited *Aves* or *Paternosters* before them. Woodcuts of the Virgin of the Rosary appeared alongside these other images and their promises in blockbooks and altarpieces. Sixten Ringbom notes that, unlike those images to which indulgences were posthumously granted, the Virgin of the Rosary came about *because* of the indulgences already attached to praying the rosary. Likewise, rosary iconography post-dated written accounts of the miracles and legends associated with it. However, it is not a simple case of art reflecting belief. Rather, beliefs about the importance of viewing certain images that had been reiterated repeatedly through popular woodcuts helped shape subsequent images and the ways in which they were viewed. Because of expectations already established in viewers who looked at images in the context of reciting set prayers, the new image of the Virgin of the Rosary was created and received within a context of those previously-held notions. Indulgences had already been awarded to those saying the rosary, but the image of the Virgin of the Rosary, which gained widespread recognition through woodcut images, helped embed and popularize the rosary as a form of mathematical piety.

I am suggesting that viewers of woodcut images generated meaning via the medium as well as the content. As woodcuts, and then as engraved and painted images

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249 Ringbom describes the latter half of the fifteenth century as the heyday for indulgences of excessive values granted for saying a prayer before a woodcut image. *Ibid.*, 23-4.
like Goswijn van der Weyden’s panel, the Virgin of the Rosary helped shape the meaning of the devotion, and of the role of images within it. Rather than primarily gazing at an image while saying the rosary to aid inner visualization and transformation of the self into the image of Christ, looking could be a means to obtain benefits in this life or the next. Even though rosary images themselves were not associated with indulgences, their iconography emphasized that saying the rosary conferred such rewards. Looking at rosary-related images like the *Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary* could therefore have become embroiled in the observance of a ritual in order to earn its benefits, even though it was not officially declared so. The standardization of images and of the devotion itself seems all the more attractive if this ‘mathematical piety’ were to be properly observed.

It is important to note that these changes in the practice of rosary devotions were a shift in emphasis rather than in fundamentals. Some preachers continued to assert that spiritual renewal was the primary reward for praying the rosary, even when others emphasized the accrual of intercession and indulgences. The dual role of the rosary as a means to accrue divine aid and to cultivate virtues was inherent to the devotion from its earliest forms, because it combined the recitation of the Marian Psalter, traditionally said as a penance or to please or honor the Virgin, with meditations on the life of Christ as a

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250 The ostensible disconnect between meditative and ‘mathematical’ piety in the rosary is perhaps due to a post-Reformation perspective. In light of justification by grace through faith, reformers accepted the Virgin as an excellent example of virtue, piety and the receipt of God’s grace, who was worthy of emulation, but not of petitioning. The reformers rejected the notion that an individual was capable of doing anything to secure their own salvation, and especially not at the intercession of a saint. On the changing role of the Virgin and saints in the Reformation see Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-23, and 47-63; Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 134-5. See also Miller, *Beads and Prayers*, 22-3.

means of personal transformation.\textsuperscript{252} Both elements were part of the rich value of devotions like the rosary to offer comfort from anxieties in this life or the next. However, through the confraternities the benefits of saying the rosary in terms of indulgences or the Virgin’s intercession received greater attention than spiritual rewards.\textsuperscript{253} Members of confraternities shared in the benefits of all prayers said, so that even the poorest or those already in purgatory, were assured of the powerful intercession of thousands of fellow brethren. There were rosary-related woodcuts that explicitly demonstrated the indulgences and rewards granted to the living and the dead through the rosary. For instance, \textit{Der Spiegel hochloblicher Bruderschaft des Rosenkrantz Marie} (Figure 27), made around the same time as Goswijn van der Weyden’s panel in 1515, shows those already in Purgatory being rescued from the flames through the intercession of the Virgin, who receives the rosaries of the crowds as chaplets of roses carried to heaven by angels. The \textit{Fifteen Mysteries of the Virgin of the Rosary} offers the viewer a visual summary of the dual role of the rosary. Both the upper and lower registers invite the viewer to reflect on the compassion of Christ for humanity, and to strive to be worthy of it through imitating him and through performing religious observances. Yet because the upper register images lack those qualities that invite creative, transformational

\textsuperscript{252} Winston-Allen explores the co-existence of quantative and meditative approaches to praying the rosary. She demonstrates that texts predating the confraternities claimed indulgences granted for repeating Christ’s name for those praying the \textit{Ave} because the words of the prayer included Christ’s name. She also shows that \textit{exempla} written to support Dominic of Prussia’s \textit{Liber experimentarium} stress the importance of the rosary to cultivate virtues and to gain forgiveness of sins. \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 133-152. Schuler argues that the Virgin’s co-passio made her a powerful figure to emulate, as well as to petition, particularly with late medieval anxieties about purgatory; “The Seven Sorrows,” 14.

\textsuperscript{253} Winston-Allen found many more \textit{exempla} that emphasized the benefits of praying the rosary in the Ulm handbook which drew from Alanus de Rupe’s teachings, than in those supporting the \textit{Liber experimentarium}. However, the rosary remained an important method for spiritual renewal in the confraternities, and some preachers criticised the new emphasis on indulgences. \textit{Stories of the Rose}, 77-80 and 124, 129 and 136. The issue is also covered briefly by Miller, \textit{Beads and Prayers}, 27.
meditations, the role of the devotion as a means to imitate Christ is diminished and
eclipsed by that of its role in the earning of calculable rewards. Looking at the
standardized images of rosary-related art while saying the rosary could now function to
assure the viewer that he or she is performing the necessary ritual in order to gain those
rewards.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* is able to show us three key things aspects of later
rosary art and its related devotions. First, the rosary as a meditation on the joyful,
sorrowful and glorious episodes form the life of Christ and the Virgin began much earlier
than the rosary confraternities, yet its codification into this form depended on the greater
audience reach and replication of woodcut and print media. Second, that the ways in
which earlier works like the *Miraflores Altarpiece* could support spiritual growth through
meditation continued to be meaningful, even when the medium changed to woodcut, and
when the audience included diverse levels of visual literacy and aptitude for meditation.
That shared mechanisms of meaning are found in the altarpiece and in the Ulm woodcuts
is further evidence to challenge any assumptions that woodcuts, or their audiences, were
crude or primitive. Third, the new prevalence of rosary-related iconography in later
rosary art demonstrates a shift in emphasis in the rosary as a devotion and the role of
imagery in it from the early fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Meditation on the
life of Christ and the Virgin continued to be fundamental to the rosary, but so, too, were
indulgences and guarantees of the Virgin’s intercession, for which the Virgin of the
Rosary, beads, roses, and chaplets had become familiar signifiers. The ways in which
rosary art functioned, and the meanings viewers drew to and from it, were therefore
different from those they brought to and from the *Miraflores Altarpiece*, and Rogier van der Weyden’s work stands as a touchstone from which to observe those changes.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The breadth of interpretation that can be supported by Rogier van der Weyden’s Miraflores Altarpiece meant that it was ideally suited to the sort of flexible meditations on the life of Christ that were merging with the recitation of the Marian Psalter when it was installed in the Miraflores monastery in 1445. Yet its multivalency set it apart from later standardized rosary imagery. Even while Rogier van der Weyden’s masterful painting continued to generate new significance for its viewers, within a decade its long-term meaning was to a large extent fixed by its location in the monastery and its status there as an object apparently paired with the Saint. John Altarpiece (c. 1454). Both of these altarpieces ultimately functioned as agents of King Juan’s political and personal identity and dynastic power. As the works of a renowned Flemish painter, donated by Juan to the Carthusian monastery he founded, the altarpieces testified to the king’s taste, stature and spiritual welfare, especially if they hung at his monument there. When Queen Isabella had copies of the two Rogierian altarpieces made for her, she treated both works as a complete pair. She probably also used them as funerary monuments, thus investing them with dynastic meaning, as well.

However, as I have argued, by leaving aside these later interpretations and returning to the circumstances of the creation of the Miraflores Altarpiece and its earliest

viewing experience, we gain a better understanding of it as part of the new and growing interest in combining the Marian Psalter with affective meditations on the life of Christ and the Virgin. In parallel with textual examples of the way these two traditions were merged, Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece condensed several Marian devotions, including the Virgin’s Joys, Sorrows, virtues and co-passio with Christ, into one work following the tripartite structure of the Marian Psalter. Yet, unlike text, the visual qualities of the altarpiece supercharged the multivalent potency of the narrative, such that it sustains more than a single method, or a single stirring retelling of Christ’s Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection. On one level the altarpiece provided a clear, accessible series of episodes to lead the viewer through an affective meditative cycle while he or she recited the Aves of the Psalter. The arrangement of the grisaille vignettes, when followed sequentially according to the narrative may even have activated the physical movement associated with genuflections that accompanied each Ave. On another level, the clear layout of images and their division into three themes operated as a mnemonic tool to support the viewer in the rhetorical art of invention that was so important for meditation. Rather than leading the viewer on a linear narrative path, the altarpiece offered a matrix of ideas and a system for storing, retrieving and creatively revisualizing an enormous lexicon of topics. In line with medieval meditational practice, the viewer could generate infinite meanings on his or her anagogical journey towards knowing God.

On yet another level, the formal properties of the paint, and the way in which Rogier van der Weyden employed illusionistic realism, helped the viewer to interact appropriately with images as they meditated. The altarpiece stimulated an emotional response and enabled the visualization of events portrayed as if witnessing them first
hand, yet at the same time, the paint drew attention to its own limitations. If the viewer engaged in the sort of meditative visualization modeled by the Virgin in the altarpiece, he or she would recognize how important physical sight was, but that in the end it could not achieve the deep understanding of God that came from inner sight. The process of gazing upon the painting, recalling it and recognizing its limitations provided a foretaste of that deeper knowledge and of the transformation of oneself into the image of Christ.

Just as the early rosary sheds light on the meanings of the altarpiece, the altarpiece has contributed to our understanding of the rosary itself. Rogier van der Weyden’s work exemplifies the flexible, open-ended nature of meditations as they were combined with repetitive prayer in the early fifteenth century. The early rosary itself was not a codified set of meditations, but rather a method for keeping track of repetitive prayers and for using those prayers as a vehicle to meditate on the life of Christ. The words and gestures of the Ave and Paternosters counted on beads were a mnemonic tool, creating places for the storage and creative retrieval of topics for meditation. The purpose of those meditations – both their method and content - was to please the Virgin, and through her example and intercession, gain a deeper understanding of God into whose image the pious sought to be transformed. Because the altarpiece was given to the Carthusians, who were at the forefront of promoting the rosary as a means to spiritual renewal, the ways in which Rogier van der Weyden’s work first functioned gives us insight into the potentialities of the rosary in the first half of the fifteenth century. Later woodcut image guides to the rosary do appear to have shared many of the ways in which the Miraflores Altarpiece could support such rosary devotions, but soon developed a more limiting standardization of imagery of their own that stood in contrast to the
infinitely generative character of Rogier van der Weyden’s triptych. Although the altarpiece can be understood as one manifestation of the devotions that were ‘en route’ to the rosary, there was no teleological imperative in the development of this devotional practice.

Under the Dominicans, the focus of the rosary shifted from primarily being a meditative tool for spiritual renewal to being a guaranteed route to the Virgin’s intercession and to indulgences. By the late fifteenth century visual media widely published in woodcuts and printed illustrated pamphlets for the rosary of the confraternities also changed and helped to shape the new focus of the devotion and codify what had been a flexible collection of meditations into a standardized form. The visual arts were powerful elements in both the emergence of the rosary devotion and the process of its subsequent standardization.

It is understandable why the Miraflores Altarpiece has not hitherto been considered in relation to the rosary, because it does not share either the standardized iconography or the mechanisms of meaning of this later imagery. However, the historical significance of Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece becomes apparent when it is compared with this imagery. Much scholarly effort has been expended, and in vain, trying to identify the earliest known version of the rosary as it came to be defined.255 The Dominicans and confraternity members readily accepted Alanus de Rupe’s claim that the rosary had first been given to Saint Dominic, and that the tripartite arrangement of the fifteen mysteries of the rosary came from his teachings. Historians have been unable to substantiate either of these assumptions or to ascertain the earliest version or source of

the rosary’s structure, although several sources have been identified for parts of it. However, rather than attempt to find a single point of origin—an empty diversion—my study demonstrates that the extensive overlap between the content and arrangement of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* and the later rosary suggests that Rogier van der Weyden’s triptych should be considered an important precursor to the rosary.

The *Miraflores Altarpiece* is not the missing link in this historical investigation, but does show us that experiments in the three-themed division of the life of Christ and the Virgin into joyful, sorrowful and glorious events, and its subdivision into discrete episodes, occurred thirty to forty years earlier than current records indicate. Instead of interpreting earlier works as sources for the rosary, and instead of an unproductive hunt for a single point of origin, my study asserts that it is more helpful to recognize that similar beliefs and practices were expressed in a variety of ways simultaneously, and that images played a crucial role in those beliefs and practices. The tripartite structure for the life of Christ and the Virgin meditations was evidently a viable and successful one, as Rogier van der Weyden’s altarpiece, the Ulm woodcuts and a variety of other examples show.

The degree of innovation with which Rogier van der Weyden reshaped previously diverse topics and themes into a single, coherent composition in the *Miraflores Altarpiece* may initially strike us as extraordinarily sophisticated. Indeed it is, yet only insofar as the work exemplifies contemporary fluency with rhetorical invention and with creative affective meditations. The viewer is similarly required to interact on sophisticated levels with the work in order to activate its meanings, including meanings not necessarily intended by the artist. Later standardized rosary imagery was less capable
of inviting this kind of multivalency. Perhaps this work of art evinces a change in the
interpretative aptitude of the audience, as devotional practices shifted from
intellectualized and open-ended concepts of meditation towards affective and to an extent
proscribed imitation of Christ as practiced by the Jesuits from the mid sixteenth-century.
Whether or not Rogier van der Weyden painted his altarpiece specifically for the
Carthusians at Miraflores, their expertise in the art of medieval meditation made them its
ideal audience.

More work is needed to understand the role of imagery in rosary traditions up to
the 1470s. The Miraflores Altarpiece is surely not the only work that touched upon early
combinations of the Marian Psalter with meditations. A re-examination of other examples
with the rosary tradition in mind may shed light on the content, structure and function of
those works, especially if they are not approached as precise sources for the later rosary,
but rather as expressions of current practice. The history of the rosary from the 1470s has
already identified the dynamic role played by images and artists in shaping beliefs and
practices. The Miraflores Altarpiece indicates a need to press the time line backwards in
order better to grasp the relationship between visual media and the rosary tradition, and
the artists and viewers who helped shape them.
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