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Moving Images

Note: the altarpiece is to be opened only on the festivals of the Nativity, Easter, Pentecost, and the two days following, Ascension, Trinity, All Saints, Epiphany, Corpus Christi, the Dedication of the Convent's Church, and all festivals of the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the day of a festival it is to be closed straight after second Vespers. Twice every year it is to be cleaned. And there are not to be large lights on the altar, on account of the smoke: two small wall candles are enough and any others should be placed away from the altar.

Instructions by Andreas Stoss, son of the sculptor Veit Stoss and Prior of the Carmelite house in Nuremberg, on how his father's work was to be displayed¹

16

A high proportion of the works of art made in northern Europe at this period were designed to move, in one way or another. Their static presentation today, fixed to walls in galleries or in cases in museums, often obscures this fundamental aspect of their nature, and takes us far from the drama and meaning inherent in the process of their manipulation, whether it was opening and closing the wings of a triptych, hoisting a figure of the ascending Christ into the roof of a church, or revealing an image by removing it from its bag or box and turning it around to examine both its faces. Revelation, concealment, materiality, physical contact, and its potential power were all vital aspects of the way the images we are concerned with in this book were used and viewed.

Tableaux: Manipulation, Contemplation, Protection

We begin our exploration of moving objects with a category of mostly small-scale and intricate works termed 'tableaux' which became fashionable at the courts of France in the second half of the fourteenth century. These tableaux are found in large numbers in the inventories of the French kings and dukes—Charles V owned around 110; Jean de Berry had around 80. They came in a wide range of media: gold, silver, enamel, ivory, amber, parchment, panel, mother of pearl, embroidery, or combinations of these materials, often incorporating jewels, pearls and even cameos, their unifying characteristic being their relatively flat form. They were usually, but not always, rectangular in shape, and most were either double-sided or had multiple wings, anything from two to as many as thirteen (an object owned by Charles V),² which could open, close, or fold in various ways. Some had hinges, others pins or plaques: one, owned by Louis of Anjou, is described as having 'six small square parts that are held together with hinges, which fold and assemble all together one on top of the other in the form of a square book'.³ Often they were extremely compact, designated as 'very small' and designed to be carried on the person (specified in the inventories as 'a porter sur soy' or similar); some were hung

Veit Stoss, Altarpiece
of the Death of the Virgin,
in process of being opened.



**155 Parisian goldsmith
c.1380**

Reliquary called the *Libretto*, gold, enamel, pearls, rubies, and parchment, c.1380.

The silver stand is not original, and it presents the object in a fixed position, and open; originally it was designed to be kept folded shut, in a case, and carried on one's person.

**156 Parisian goldsmith
c.1380**

Reverse of 155.

The inscription on the reverse, in French, states that Charles V had given this reliquary and these relics, which it lists, to Louis of Anjou, his eldest brother; they include some of the most prestigious available—the blood of Christ, fragments of the crown of thorns, the true cross, the nails and lance of the Crucifixion.

above beds where they provided protection while the owner slept. This taste for small folding objects was not in itself new in the late fourteenth century: small-scale ivory, metalwork and painted diptychs and triptychs go back to antiquity and were popular in Byzantium and trecento Italy, but none of these predecessors developed the complexity of form, combinations of media, and compactness seen in the objects made in Paris c.1400.

The *Libretto* of Louis of Anjou, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence [155, 156], is perhaps the most elaborate of these small-scale folding objects to have survived, and the one with the best evidence concerning its use.⁴ Made of gold, its brilliant design allows for the incorporation of precious stones, enamel, painted parchment and fragments of no fewer than eighty Passion and other relics, all in a remarkably compact form. When closed, it measures just 7.5 × 6.3 centimetres, the wings opening up, concertina-fashion, into a series of seven panels with a total length of 24.4 centimetres. On the reverse an inscription describes the object as a gift from Charles V of France to his brother Louis of Anjou, and names the most important of the relics it contains.

Opening the wings is only the first stage in the manipulation of this tab-leau. The next step involves sliding the central section, with an image of the Crucifixion made of parchment stuck onto gold, upwards, revealing the most important of the relics, pieces of the cross, spear, nails, and crown of thorns (the last owned in its entirety by the French kings and a potent symbol of their God-given power), all set in enamelled compartments in the shape of the objects from which they come. On the reverse of the Crucifixion is another image, also on parchment, showing two figures—presumably Louis and his wife—kneeling in prayer before the Trinity. Combining paintings



with metalwork like this allowed for more imagery and in a wider colour range or at a larger scale than was possible in enamel, without added weight, and was not exceptional for this type of object: Charles V owned a (large) gold tableau, probably a diptych, painted inside with illuminations of the Crucifixion on one side and the Virgin, St John, and St Andrew on the other, which was given to him by Jean de Berry,⁵ while in 1377 Philip the Bold paid the king's goldsmith Jean du Vivier (who may indeed have been the maker of the *Libretto* and its other versions) 330 francs for the gold, jewels, and facture of a gold tableau, to which, for 20 francs, the king's painter Jean d'Orléans added several unspecified 'histories' (images).⁶

In the *Libretto* the portraits of Louis and his wife are only visible when the parchment plaque is raised, and then only from the back of the object, juxtaposed with the donatory inscription below, which in turn is set on the reverse of the gold panel in which the Passion relics it refers to are set. The placement of text, image, and relics was thus carefully considered and a determining factor in its design. When the parchment plaque with the portraits is closed, the praying figures are physically set against the most precious of the relics in the central panel, again a far from arbitrary juxtaposition: an image of yourself in literal contact with these powerful objects provided protection through that proximity.

For maximum effect, the object itself was also designed to be kept close to its owner. This can be deduced from its size and form, but its precise talismanic function is made clear from the evidence concerning two other lost but identical or near-identical objects made at the same time, also at the request of Charles V, for other members of his family. Their story can only be told by jumping forward to Charles V's great-great-grandson, Charles VIII, and





157 Anonymous Italian

Drawing of *Libretto* made for Charles V and lost by Charles VIII at Fornoue in 1495, pen and ink. Drawn below the object shown open are the enamelled exterior wings, shown closed.

158 Parisian goldsmith c.1390–1400

Man of Sorrows with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist; above, the *Coronation of the Virgin*, gold, *baisse-taille* enamel, and *émail en ronde bosse*, c.1400.

The clever design and folding form of this triptych allowed for an immensely rich, intricate, and devotionally fulfilling iconography, depicting in one object just 12 cm high the Man of Sorrows, the relics of the Passion (cross, crown of thorns, lance, nails), Saints Catherine and John the Baptist, the mourning Virgin and St John the Evangelist, the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin, the Holy Face, and no fewer than eleven angels.

his capture in battle by Milanese forces on 5 July 1495 at Fornoue. There he lost his version of the *Libretto*, later recorded in a sixteenth-century drawing [157], and described as a precious small folding gold tableau, containing relics. According to his page, the king ‘always carried it with him, and when he fought it kept him safe’.⁷ Yet another matching object is recorded in the possession of the Burgundian dukes: this too had been made at the request of Charles V. The similarity of these objects to each other, and their association with the king, must have enhanced their power and meaning. The Burgundian version, which Charles V had given to his youngest brother, Philip the Bold, was so important that it is singularly mentioned in his will, where we are told that it contained ‘all the relics of the Sainte Chapelle of the Palace, and the relics of the church of *monseigneur* Saint Denis’, and it is stated that it must continue down the Burgundian line and never be broken up or separated from the duke’s person. They must ‘hold it and keep it all together, *sans en rien oster*, nor dividing it’.⁸ It was possibly the tableau for which a leather box was made in 1420–1 for Philip the Bold’s grandson, Philip the Good, described as ‘for putting the tableau which my lord carries with him always’.⁹ It is certainly recorded in the collection of his son, Charles the Bold, but was lost by him also, not insignificantly, in battle, this time at Grandson where it was captured along with other treasures (see 46) by the Swiss.¹⁰ We have no record of a fourth object for the fourth brother—Jean de Berry—but it seems likely that one once existed. The *Libretto* and its siblings were powerful objects, containing the full complement of relics from the royal foundations of Sainte-Chapelle and Saint-Denis, but in micro-form, designed to be worn, passed down through the blood line, and evidently (if mistakenly) considered efficacious for protection in battle.

The combination of Passion imagery and portraits in the *Libretto* expands its potential function beyond that of a talisman to an aid to devotion and contemplation. Its use required physical interaction through manipulation of its elements, its imagery never entirely visible at once or from any one side. Its form makes apparent the importance of stages of viewing, of revealing and concealing, while its materials, too, are appropriate to its function. Only gold was suitable to encase such relics and the materials get progressively richer towards the last revealed view, the central section, for which the





**159 Parisian goldsmith
c.1390–1400**

Reverse of **158**, with the Assumption of the Virgin and the Holy Face in *pointillé* decoration on gold.

pearls, jewels, and enamel were reserved. These visual and material contrasts between an object closed, then opened, then turned around, are well illustrated in another small folding work made in Paris around 1400 [**158**, **159**].¹¹ This too contained relics and is of diminutive size (12.7 × 12.5 centimetres when open) but was designed to be stood, not worn, although its use also involved physical manipulation and movement. Its quality and iconography suggest that originally it was also made for a royal French patron. It is entirely of gold, but its various visual fields are distinguished by different ways of working the metal. Closed it shows Saints Catherine and John the Baptist (favourite saints of French royalty), in a monochrome blue-grey enamel, with the Coronation of the Virgin in unenamelled gold above; as it opens [**158**], we move to full colour *basse taille* (literally ‘low worked’) enamelled plaques on the interior wings, with, in the centre, a deep relief image in *émail en ronde bosse* (enamel in the round) of the Dead Christ as the Man of Sorrows, wearing his crown of thorns, supported by an angel. These figures are worked with the two most distinctive elements of that method, the translucent *rouge clair* enamel on the angel’s robe, setting off the opaque white enamel on Christ’s body. The flat reverse [**159**] has a plaque which opens to view the (now lost) relic kept inside: this and the surface around it are decorated with some of the most elaborate and refined *pointillé* (fine punchwork decoration) work of the period, depicting both the iconic image of the Holy Face (on the plaque) and, around it, the Assumption of the Virgin with angels carrying her body upwards to a waiting figure of Christ enthroned. Only by moving the object in the light do the images created in this most subtle of techniques reveal themselves properly.

160 Circle of Rogier van der Weyden

Portrait of Guillaume Fillastre (?), front and back, reverse showing holly and motto, oil on Baltic oak.

The juxtaposition of the holly with Fillastre’s motto, ‘I hate that which bites’, possibly refers to the holly’s wish not to be eaten, and by allusion to the ability of the sitter to survive and ward off attack, as does the holly.



**161 Parisian painter
c.1400**

The *Small Round Pietà*,
paint and gilding on walnut,
c.1400.



In images that did not fold, the working of both sides, front and back, was also very common; like folding objects, these were designed to be handled and manipulated, if in a different way. We find fictive marbling, coats of arms, or emblems on the reverse of many independent panel paintings, both portraits and devotional works. The reverse of a portrait possibly showing Guillaume Fillastre, advisor to the Dukes of Burgundy and later Bishop of Tournai [160], has an illusionistic depiction of holly, clearly a pun on the sitter's motto, 'Je he ce que mord', inscribed on the top of the frame on the reverse and on the bottom of the frame on the front, translatable as 'I hate that which bites.'¹² The idea of handling something which at first glance appears uncomfortably sharp was possibly an intended effect—it certainly seems to have been behind the dramatic treatment of the back of the *Small Round Pietà* [161, 162], a painting of around 1400 and again, from its imagery and form, likely to have been made for the ambit of the French kings or dukes, probably in Paris.¹³ The front of this panel is beautifully worked and richly gilded with a stamped gold background. On the reverse, however, the visual effect is very different and momentarily disconcerting, since on turning it over one is faced with a blood-red object on which the crown of thorns and the three nails of Christ's Crucifixion are illusionistically painted. There is no frame on this side of the panel to hold it by, so the impression of touching the actual crown with its dangerously sharp thorns, or an object on which it sits, is vividly conveyed: this work marries form and imagery beautifully—a rectangular panel could not achieve the same effect.

Round paintings survive in relatively large numbers from Paris c.1400, and are also well represented in inventories of the period: three of Philip the Bold's thirteen painted panels, and three of Charles V's twenty-three painted panels, were in this format. There was no apparent functional reason to shape panels in this manner—unlike in Italy where the tondo form was used, for example, for ceremonial trays presented on the birth of a child. Moreover, the circular form was popular for works in all sorts of media, including gold, mother of pearl, and ivory [163], and was also used for diptychs as well as

**162 Parisian painter
c.1400**

Reverse of **161**.

Crown of thorns and nails.



single panels. In the inventory of Jean de Berry, for example, listed amongst 'diverse tableaux' at his chateau of Mehun-sur-Yèvre, we find 'another round tableau of ivory, in two pieces, decorated with silver at the edges, with on one side a *pitie* of Our Lord [a Man of Sorrows] with two angels holding a lance and a cross, and on the other Our Lady in tears, with St John and St Catherine on either side' (**163** is an object of a similar type), which comes directly after a panel painting with a very similar form, described as a 'round *tableaux* of wood, in two pieces, in one of these is an image of Our Lady suckling her child and two angels on each side; in the other is St John the Evangelist writing on a scroll'.¹⁴ Some of these round objects were mirrored on one side, but not always or necessarily, and this function does not explain the popularity of this form. Rather, it seems probable that handling (and wearing) objects shaped in this manner, the potential for a different sort of manipulation that they provided, which required turning the object around, along with the visual plays and challenges of fitting imagery into this form, appealed greatly to both artists and patrons. We should not, however, be tempted to see panels simply as cheap substitutes, which merely imitated the form of works in other media—these patrons did not need to watch their spending, and the relative values ascribed to paintings and small gold tableaux in the inventories are often surprisingly close. Instead the choice of paint over gold must be related to what could be achieved in each medium—panels could be larger, lighter objects for a start (enamelling could only be done to a relatively small scale, and ivory and mother of pearl, unless pieces were joined, could only be as large as their organic source). Panels could also produce illusionistic effects that would aid their impact as a devotional tool, as we have seen fully exploited on the reverse of the *Small Round Pietà*.



163 Parisian c.1400

Last Judgement,
polychromed ivory set into
silver gilt, c.1400.

There seems to have been a fashion for extensively painted, small ivory roundels showing richly crowded scenes around 1400; this coincided with a fashion for painted round panels like **161**.

Works like the *Libretto*, the *Chocques Triptych*, and the *Small Round Pietà* were not on constant display, but were brought out to be examined at appropriate moments of private meditation, in one's bedchamber, study, or private chapel. Such practices are alluded to in documentary sources and in images of men and women at prayer [**191**]: Philip the Bold had a panel painting

164 Juan de Flandes

Christ appearing to the Virgin with the Redeemed of the Old Testament, oil on oak, c.1500, part of the *Retablo* of Isabella of Castile.

This and **165** are from an original set of forty-seven panels, of which twenty-seven survive. Some have traces of painted gold frames around their edges, visible here, suggesting they were intended to be kept loose, without frames, brought out from their cupboard to be used in a variety of potential combinations, providing great flexibility in how the narratives of Christ's life and Passion might be juxtaposed.



165 Michel Sittow

Assumption of the Virgin, oil on oak, c.1500, part of the *Retablo* of Isabella of Castile.

On Isabella's death in 1503, the forty-seven panels were dispersed; thirty-two were acquired by Margaret of Austria, in whose collection Dürer saw them in 1520, and recorded in his diary that 'the like of which for precision and excellence I have never beheld'. Margaret had this panel made into a diptych with another from the series showing the Ascension, apparently because both were 'by the hand of Michel Sittow' (possibly identified as such by Sittow himself who was at that point in Margaret's service).



showing the apostles and St Anthony made by Jean Malouel in 1398–9 which was ‘put every day in front of him in his oratory’, a phrase which might imply movement from storage to place of worship.¹⁵ Equally, items stored might be visited where they were kept, to be examined, admired, and contemplated: we are told how Charles V, after his afternoon rest, retired to his private rooms to ‘peruse *joyaux* and other treasures’; in his study at Vincennes, one such location, Charles had over 500 items available to him, which included reliquaries, jewels, cameos, boxes, mirrors, prayer beads, an astrolabe, and many tableaux.¹⁶

Storage tended to involve specially made containers or covers which were both protective and often beautifully decorated with heraldry or other imagery. Charles V’s tableaux and other small precious objects were mostly in bags or boxes, kept in turn within larger trunks in his studies, chambers, and oratories in his palaces at Melun, the Louvre, and Vincennes. One of these trunks, made of cypress wood, contained around 130 of his most precious or intimate *joyaux*, and was described as being ‘kept continually with him, and of which he carries the key’.¹⁷ These bags and boxes might be of leather, felt, velvet [167], embroidery, metal, or wood: Charles VI’s version of the *Libretto* was kept in a case embroidered with fleurs-de-lis, with a metal locking device and a gold chain from which it could hang;¹⁸ one of Philip the Bold’s paintings, a round diptych of the Man of Sorrows made by Jean d’Orléans, was in a felt bag decorated with the ducal arms.¹⁹ Three of Jean de Berry’s paintings, all single-panel images of the Virgin and, it would seem, of a large scale, had curtains in front of them, apparently attached as integral to the objects, providing a more practical solution to the need to protect an image which could not fit in a box or bag and which did not have wings.²⁰ This practice of keeping paintings and other images in containers or covered in some manner, rather than hanging them on walls on constant display, continued throughout our period, at least for smaller scale devotional works: a series of forty-seven small panel paintings made by Juan de Flandes and Michel Sittow for Isabella of Castile were kept by her in a cupboard, and presumably brought out in various combinations for contemplation and prayer. Their imagery extends the standard Passion cycle considerably, including several highly unusual scenes such as *Christ appearing to the Virgin with the Redeemed of the Old Testament* [164]. When Margaret of Austria acquired thirty-two of them after Isabella’s death in 1504 she kept them in a specially made wooden box in a cupboard in her bedroom for eleven years, but two, by Michel Sittow with related iconography of the Ascension of Christ and the Assumption of the Virgin [165], she had made into a diptych, demonstrating an appreciation and recognition both of a particular artist’s hand and the way in which religious scenes could be juxtaposed to expand and enrich their meaning.²¹

Few of these containers have survived, though we do have some original moulded leather boxes, often decorated with the arms and devices of the owner, which were made for more awkwardly shaped objects or those which required more rigid protection such as metalwork, including plate, and sculpture. What might be the original red velvet bag in which a portrait

166 Nicolas Froment

Diptych of Jean de Matheron. Interior: portraits of René of Anjou and Jeanne de Laval. Exterior: mottos and devices of Jean de Matheron, oil on poplar, c. 1480.

This small diptych was probably a gift from René of Anjou to Jean de Matheron; the artist, Nicolas Froment, worked on other projects for that king; but it is Matheron's device, a jewelled crown set over a stalk of lilies, which is set on the reverse of both panels, used to denote ownership rather than to indicate the identity of the sitters.



167

Velvet bag in which **166** was kept.

diptych of René of Anjou and his wife [**166**] was kept can be seen in **167**; this diptych was made for a French diplomat at René's court, Jean de Matheron (d. 1495).²² These boxes and bags could provide a method of denoting ownership, whilst serving as a very practical way of protecting the work, especially if it was to travel with its owner. They also remind us that viewing and using objects of this type involved rituals of revealing and concealing, opening and closing, even when the object itself contained no moving parts.

Winged Altarpieces: Revelation and Concealment

The curtains, boxes, and bags made for objects like Matheron's diptych had a primarily protective function. Indeed, the need to protect images and the materials they are made of may be one of the reasons why folding forms became and remained so popular across northern Europe throughout our period, from small devotional images like the *Libretto* to monumental carved and painted high altarpieces like the 13-metre tall example by Veit Stoss in Krakow (see

image heading this chapter). Having wings to close around your altarpiece, in particular, was an effective way to ensure its interior, with its delicate gilding and expensive pigments, remained undamaged and protected from the effects of light and candle smoke. This is clearly the aim of the instructions from Andreas Stoss, Prior of the Carmelite house in Nuremberg, and son of the sculptor-painter Veit Stoss, concerning how the triptych his father made for the Carmelite church at Nuremberg was to be displayed, quoted at the head of this chapter. The relatively well-preserved interiors (and comparably damaged exteriors) of many triptychs suggest that most were routinely kept shut, and that the wings' protective role worked exceedingly well.

The choice of the winged format for altarpieces was of course not just about protection: these often highly elaborate and most central of church fittings had to do many different jobs. They had to mark the dedication of the altar by including an image of that saint and to serve as a focus for the celebration of mass and other rituals. They might also play a devotional role, contemplated at less formal moments than mass by those who could approach them outside those times; some were more accessible and visible than others, depending on their placement in the church, behind or in front of the rood screen, in a chapel with locked gates or open access. They may also have had to commemorate the founders of the altar—be they a group like a guild or confraternity [13, 169, 170] or an individual [56], who may have been buried in proximity to it (as was Tommaso Portinari, 66, 67). The winged format proved remarkably successful in catering to these varied needs, since it presented such a multiplicity of visual fields: the wings, outside or inside, were ideal for donor portraits [67], allowing for an appropriate division between earthly and sacred figures. Moreover, the addition of wings tripled the area available for imagery in comparison with a single panel, providing space for introductory iconography, like the Annunciation [171] or standing saints, often on the exterior, sometimes combined with extensive narrative scenes (particularly in altarpieces with two sets of wings, 169), and leading to iconic or Eucharistic imagery on the interior [172, 173]. However, perhaps most of all, an altarpiece with movable parts presented the opportunity for intense dramatic display, as the wings were opened and the inner, most precious area was revealed [169, 170].

Precisely when this might occur was dictated, as far as we can tell (and as Andreas Stoss indicates), by the liturgical calendar and the celebration of particular feast days. Altarpieces would have been routinely closed throughout Lent, a period when many sculpted images, most notably crucifixes, were covered, either with plain white cloths or by blocking off the whole of the choir with a vast textile hanging, as was often the practice in Austria, Switzerland, and some areas of Germany.²³ During the rest of the year, the frequency with which altarpieces were opened might depend on the type of altar (whether it was a high altar, in the centre of the choir, or side altar against the rood screen, a pillar, or in a side chapel, see 168), and on local practices and venerations, although they might have been opened for other reasons, such as for display to visiting dignitaries. Dürer on his journey round the Netherlands and lower Rhine paid to have some of the most notable examples, like the Ghent Altarpiece and the Dombild in Cologne, opened [3, 14].²⁴ A sense of the likely rhythm of revelation of the interiors of these works can be gleaned from surviving sexton's handbooks (*Mesnerpflichtbuchs*), which exist, for example,