

Medieval Altarpieces in the Iberian Peninsula

Aspects of Form, Placement, and Iconography¹

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In the Iberian Peninsula (roughly comprising Spain and Portugal), a type of altarpiece came into being during the late Middle Ages that differed in several ways from altar-retables in other European countries. This altarpiece had three distinctive features. First, many altarpieces covered the entire chancel wall over its full width, rising up from floor level to the space between the vaults. This great size required an architectural structure, which can be regarded as the second basic feature of the Iberian altarpiece. The symmetrical division of its surface into vertical lanes and horizontal registers implied the third distinctive feature, which was the large number of scenes and figures. With a view to a more profound understanding of the nature and the causes of this Iberian phenomenon, this study follows three lines of investigation. For a clear definition of the subject, the first chapter presents a survey of the morphological development of medieval altarpieces in Iberia, from its outset to the end of the Gothic era. The second chapter analyses the retable in its spatial environment, with a special interest in the connection between its form and its location in the interior of the church. The primary focus is on the aspect of visibility, which is to a great extent determined by the arrangement of the canon's choir. The third and final chapter offers an analysis of the iconography of the mediaeval altarpiece, examining the background of its liturgical and extra-liturgical function.

The retable was introduced into Spanish church-furnishing at a relatively early stage, probably in the first half of the eleventh century. The custom of equipping the altar with a permanent panel showing painted or sculpted images originated in a broader context of altar decorations dating back to early Christianity. Altar stones were usually painted or sculpted, or were fitted at their front side with an antependium. Altars were sometimes hooded with canopies or baldaquins, whereas others were attached to relic shrines, cult images and other sacred objects. Also, the walls flanking the altar in the chancel were sometimes covered with a painted pictorial programme. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Spanish altarpieces were in keeping with examples in contemporary France. Analogous to retables in that country, many altarpieces in the Iberian

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Peninsula possessed a dominant horizontal character and consisted of only one register with imagery. In the course of the fourteenth century, French influence was gradually superseded by Italian. This change occurred for the first time in Catalonia, a region with firm connections with Tuscany, followed shortly by other parts of the Iberian Peninsula. In spite of an ongoing enrichment of its structure and the addition of a predella as well as secondary registers, the Spanish altarpiece generally preserved a modest size that hardly surpassed the dimensions of antependia.

This development underwent a sudden change during the second half of the fourteenth century. In Catalonia, favoured by a period of economic and political prosperity, several areas saw the production of painted panel-retables with a height and width of no less than 4 to 6 metres. In thriving commercial cities such as Barcelona, Girona, and Manresa, the demand for large altarpieces sharply increased, not only for high altars, but also for side-altars. Especially striking is the increase in height, so that many retables present a predominantly vertical aspect. The surface of these altarpieces was usually divided into a large number of compartments, distributed over a symmetrical system of lanes and registers. Shortly afterwards, carved stone altarpieces experienced a similar development, especially in and around Lleida in western Catalonia. The incorporation in the retable of the tabernacle for the reservation of the host, a practice that became customary elsewhere in Europe only in the sixteenth century, was innovative at the time. It is remarkable that these altarpieces – painted as well as carved or sculpted – stylistically continued the Italianizing development, yet strongly differed from their sources of inspiration in size and number of images. During the second half of the fourteenth century, a symbiosis of a foreign style borrowed from abroad and an indigenous structure originating in Spain itself took shape. These features preceded the developments in the late Middle Ages.

During the transition to the so-called 'International Style' around 1400, the Catalan type of altarpiece was adopted in other parts of Spain as well, especially in Valencia and Aragon. The size of the retables further increased, as did the number of scenes. Additionally, a more naturalistic depiction of persons and events was pursued. Towards the middle of the fifteenth century, the central-Spanish kingdom of Castile developed into the driving force of the Spanish economy, caused to a great extent by raw wool exports to the southern Netherlands. Mainly as a result of the first voyages of discovery along the shores of Africa, the Portuguese also grew to be a prominent commercial nation. These favourable economic circumstances were reflected in the art of retables. Analogous to the developments in international trade, stylistic inspiration also shifted from Italy to Flanders and the Rhineland. A considerable contribution was made by queen Isabella of Castile, who had a distinct preference for Flemish art. In Castile and Portugal between 1470 and 1520, a series of enormous altarpieces were erected, covering the entire absidal wall under a great number of sections and compartments. Nordic style was moulded into a structure that

derived from the Catalan type, marked by a great size, a strong emphasis on verticality and a large number of scenes. In contrast to Catalonia, however, these altarpieces were usually carved in wood, in keeping with retables in Central and Northern Europe.

The transitional phase between the Gothic and Renaissance styles can be characterized as ‘the Golden Age of altarpieces’ – especially in Castile and Portugal. The style of the Renaissance penetrated gradually into Iberian retable-art during the first decades of the sixteenth century. Around 1500, the first influence of the new stylistic language was felt in retable-painting, followed shortly afterwards by sculpture. A striking feature is the protracted preservation of the traditional late-gothic structure in lanes and registers alongside a series of modern stylistic elements. Style and structure therefore seem once more to have behaved as independent entities, a circumstance that almost assumed the status of a constant (*invariante castizo*, F. Chueca Goitia) over the centuries. In spite of external similarities with English ‘Altar Screens’ as to size, and with some German and Flemish triptychs as to narrative force, the Spanish altarpiece should nevertheless be regarded as a wholly autochthonous variant, Spain’s most original contribution to European altar-decoration. Towards the year 1500 the late-gothic altarpiece even seems to perform as an artistic archetype, as several related genres in ecclesiastical art – e.g., church façades, great iron screens closing off choirs and chapels, stone chancel-walls, monumental tombs, embroidered tapestries, and organs – show a striking similarity to the internal structure of contemporary altarpieces.

In order to provide the background of this type of Iberian altarpiece, the second chapter focuses on its context, in which the spatial situation of the high altar is a matter of great importance. In contrast to most other European countries, in Spain the presbytery and the canon’s choir were physically separated by the crossing. The often short eastern limb of the church-building only accommodated the celebration of the Mass, whereas the choir stalls were situated in a separate area in the easternmost bays of the central nave. Both ‘choirs’ were usually bounded towards the crossing by a large iron screen and were connected by a narrow fenced corridor. The earliest known example of this physical separation between the presbytery and the canon’s choir dates from around 1200, when a certain Maestro Mateo inserted a set of choir stalls in the eastern part of the nave of Santiago de Compostela’s Romanesque cathedral. This arrangement was adopted during the following centuries in most cathedrals in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, in mosques that were converted into cathedrals (such as Toledo, Seville and Saragossa), as well as in newly erected gothic churches (such as Barcelona, Girona, Salamanca). As a result of its wide-spread character, one can speak in terms of ‘the Spanish model’, especially since in most exceptions to the rule (e.g., Burgos, Avila, Palencia, Cuenca), the stalls were still moved in the course of the sixteenth century. In churches of a smaller size, such as parish churches and the churches of the mendicants, it became customary in the late

Middle Ages to install the choir stalls in a gallery above the westernmost part of the nave.

The setting of the canon's choir in Spanish churches had far-reaching consequences for the celebration of the Mass. The most important effect of both previously-mentioned models was free access for laymen to the crossing, which stretched out right in front of the high altar. While elsewhere in Europe the presbytery and the canon's choir tended to constitute a closed *Sancta Sanctorum*, separated from the space for the laity by high-rising walls, in Spain the layman could place himself in the space between the two choirs (*entre los dos coros*). In Spanish cathedrals a cross-shaped liturgical arrangement took shape. It was formed by the central clerical domains on the axis of the church-building – the presbytery and the canon's choir – and the transept, which in fact served as the congregational nave of the church. The crossing therefore displayed itself pre-eminently as a crossroads of activities; it was accessible for all church-users and was enclosed between the most important liturgical poles. In the crossing the lesson and the sermon were usually delivered, the communion or the kiss of peace was distributed, and during Holy Week the Easter Sepulchre was set up. The most important consequence of the Spanish interior arrangement was the fact that laymen could clearly discern the ritual of the Mass at the high altar and were only impeded from physical access by an openwork screen. The result of it all was a strong concentration on the high altar, where the joint Mass for the clergy and the laymen was celebrated. The qualities of the altarpiece as a backdrop for ritual, preaching and devotion could therefore be optimally made use of.

In the dynamics between the liturgical arrangement of the church and the development of Spanish altarpieces, several aspects can be highlighted. In a number of cases (such as Santiago de Compostela, Saragossa, Toledo, and Seville) retables were erected at the same time or shortly after the realization of the choir stalls. In other cases (Avila and Palencia) the transfer of the canon's choir to the nave and the making of an altarpiece were both part of the same campaign. In this process of action and reaction, the striving for an optical equilibrium between the canon's choir – containing richly carved stalls and surrounded by a monumental wall – and the presbytery seems to have been at stake. A correspondence with respect to content between both choirs can also be determined: while the Old Testament played an important role in the imagery of the choir stalls, the altarpiece usually showed scenes from the New Testament. This typological anticipation can be conceived in a spatial sense as well: proceeding to the high altar the canon's choir as it were announced the message of the altarpiece. The retable at the high altar displayed itself as the finishing point in a series of elements that were placed at right angles to the axis of the church – the western façade, the choir-wall, the choir-screen and the presbytery-screen. These elements create a unique rhythm that forces itself upon the believer as a *crescendo*. It is further remarkable that in cases where the canon's choir was not situated in the nave according to the Spanish model

(mainly in Portugal), the altarpiece experienced a very modest development for a long time.

In spite of its wide distribution, the altarpiece only exceptionally possessed a concrete liturgical function, for example when the tabernacle for the consecrated hosts was incorporated. In other cases the function of the retable was in fact reduced to being a vessel for images. In the third chapter, attention is focused on the imagery, i.e., the message of the altarpiece. The straightforward language of images was one of the means of communication that was at the disposal of the church for the transmission of Christian belief. This ‘figurative discourse’ was one component in the combined play with the word (‘verbal discourse’) and the liturgical act (‘ritual discourse’). Although mediaeval imagery of Spanish retables was largely in keeping with general patterns in Europe, some proper accents can also be marked. The Eucharistic message was particularly strong in retable-imagery in the Crown of Aragon, especially in and around the city of Valencia. In that kingdom the altarpiece-with-tabernacle had already developed into the standard by around 1400, and in the course of the fifteenth century the so-called *expositor* came into fashion, a small glass window designed for the exposition of the host. Saint’s images added a primarily devotional element to the iconography of altarpieces. The Holy Virgin enjoyed a huge popularity, as did a number of saints with a national or regional identity and saints with a militant character. A final aspect that was displayed particularly well in the large Spanish retable was the force of narration. Many altarpieces bore a strongly narrative programme, in which a number of more than fifty scenes was not exceptional.

The pictorial programme of many retables refers in a direct or an indirect manner to the principal liturgical and extra-liturgical activities that took place in its immediate surroundings and moreover reflects the motivation of the commissioner. Thus, the altarpieces served as a backdrop during the celebration of the Eucharist, an expressive décor that explicitly or implicitly alluded to the sacrament and its meaning. For the preacher, the altarpiece – an easily visible piece of furniture bearing evocative religious images aimed at immediate identification – formed an obvious point of reference. As an object of private devotion (*Andachtsbild*), the altarpiece could serve as a pictorial counterpart to meditative texts on the Passion of Christ. Church authorities could use altar-retables as vessels for *propaganda fidei*, conditioning and channelling their message by a deliberate choice in favour or against certain themes and motives. Many late-mediaeval altarpieces evidence the firmly rooted mistrust of the Jewish and Muslim communities, and the supporters of an ecclesiastic Reform *in capite et membris* found in the retable a suitable means of spreading their message. Moreover, the altarpiece offered individual commissioners excellent opportunities to show off personal wealth, as well as to underscore private piety. Thus, the present study has tried to show how the form, the place and the message of mediaeval altarpieces in Spain and Portugal reflect both religious and profane usage of mediaeval church buildings.

