

A Parkville Frame Gallery Newsletter “Supplement”

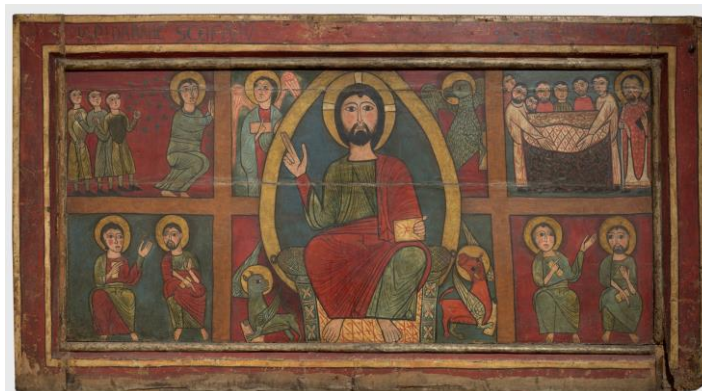
2024 Newsletter Supplement #24-1

Subject: The Retable and the Reredos

Background

In [Newsletter #22-1](#) we looked at religious icons. We learned that religious imagery in the form of icons, sculpture, and other manifestations of artwork has been used over much of the history of the Christian church. We know that religious imagery played an important and sometimes controversial role in the church, and at times that imagery was even subjected to partial or total destruction by iconoclasts. Then in [Newsletter #23-3](#) we took a brief look at the polyptych known as the [Ghent Altarpiece](#). We also saw *The Crucifixion*, a triptych from the mid-1450’s painted by Paolo Uccello and used for the private devotion of a nun in her cell at the Brigidine convent of Santa Maria del Paradiso near Florence, Italy. And finally, in our [2023 Easter Edition of Top Picks](#) we saw several paintings with a religious theme. Please join me now as we continue to explore how art objects have been, and are currently being used as religious imagery in the Christian church.

If we look back to the Pre-10th century timeframe, we see that the earliest pieces of furniture in western churches were altars. The front of those early altars, which is known as the *frontal* or *antependium*, contained pictures showing stories from the bible, such as seen in the [Guils Frontal](#) shown below. Later, more sophisticated altarpieces such as the [San Zaccaria Altarpiece](#) (1505), by the Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini evolved.



The Guils Frontal (Late 13th Century)
Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Over time artwork was increasingly used in a variety of ways to display religious imagery. We will see that religious images were presented as part of a **Retable** or a **Reredos**. These terms may be unfamiliar and are sometimes confused. So, what is a retable and a reredos exactly? Let's start with the retable and then move to the reredos.

The Retable

A retable is a decorative panel or screen that is placed on or behind the altar in a Christian church. It often features religious imagery or scenes from the Bible. The retable is meant to enhance the visual experience of the worship service. A retable differs from a reredos in that a reredos is a larger and more elaborate structure that serves as a backdrop for the altar itself. A reredos may include multiple panels, sculptures, or other decorative elements, and is often designed to be the focal point of the entire church, not just the altar. A retable from the Norwich Cathedral in England is shown below. Note that it is sitting on top of an altar, in this case in a chapel versus the nave of the church.



Despenser Retable, c.1380-90, Norwich Cathedral, England

Henry le Despenser (c.1341-1406), was an English nobleman and the Bishop of Norwich, England, who commissioned the so-called [Despenser Retable](#) in 1382. Bishop Despenser was a member of a clutch of Norman-French siblings who fought under various banners in England, France, and Italy, and a cleric from his early youth. He became bishop of Norwich at the age of twenty-nine. Eleven years later he led an army of men against the rebels of the Peasants' Revolt, who had occupied Norwich, putting down this arm of the rebellion with great brutality. It has been suggested that he commissioned the retable as a thank-you offering for his success against the rebels, although the retable cannot be dated accurately enough to confirm this suggestion. It is equally possible that Despenser was offering it for his own salvation, and/or commending the donors who had contributed to his cathedral and to the retable for its High Altar. This would explain the number of coats of arms which originally figured on the frame along with his own armorial bearings, including those of Sir Stephen Hales, Sir Thomas Morieux, and the Howard family.

The Reredos

A reredos is a decorative wall or screen typically made of wood or stone located above and behind the high altar in a church or cathedral. The reredos is structurally separate from the altar. The term reredos is sometimes confused with the term retable. While a reredos generally forms or covers the wall behind an altar, a retable is typically placed either on the altar or immediately behind, and sometimes attached to the altar. Many churches have both a retable and a reredos; however, that may not always be the case. The retable may have become part of the reredos when an altar was moved away from the wall. For altars that are against the wall, the retable often sits on top of the altar, at the back, particularly when there is no reredos, in which case a curtain or something similar is used instead of a reredos.



A Reredos

Santa Maria Reina de la Familia, Ciudad Cayalá, Guatemala

Note: If you are interested in learning more about sacred architecture, I recommend the [Journal of the Institute for Sacred Architecture](#) (two issues annually--\$9.95). A picture of the church *Santa Maria Reina de la Familia in Ciudad Cayalá, Guatemala*, appears on the cover of the Journal's 2023 Issue #44. Additional pictures of this church, to include its reredos appear in Issue #44 on page 38, and [Here](#)

I also strongly recommend these two courses offered by The Great Courses: [The Cathedral](#) course number 7868, twenty-four, 30-minute lectures, and [The World's Greatest Churches](#), course number 7842. Professor William R. Cook, Ph.D., will take you captive with his knowledge, presentation style, and enthusiasm -- trust me!

The Art Advisor