

Fall 2018

A Shifting Devotion: Vision and Performance in Rogier van der Weyden's Deposition

Victoria Lauren Richthofen
Victoria.Kachel@Colorado.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses

 Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richthofen, Victoria Lauren, "A Shifting Devotion: Vision and Performance in Rogier van der Weyden's Deposition" (2018).
Undergraduate Honors Theses. 1761.
https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/1761

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.

A Shifting Devotion:
Vision and Performance in Rogier van der Weyden's *Deposition*

Victoria Lauren Richthofen

Department: Art History

Honors Thesis: Fall 2018

Defended October 19, 2018

Committee: Dr. Robert Nauman, Art History

Dr. Kirk Ambrose, Art History

Dr. Celine Dauverd, History

Advisor: Dr. Kirk Ambrose

Introduction: Critical Analysis of the *Deposition*

Rogier van der Weyden was born Rogier de le Pasture in Tournai, around 1399.¹ He was probably trained in painting and the arts from a young age, and eventually opened his own workshops in Tournai and Brussels, maintaining his principal workshop in Brussels. Rogier's workshop was renowned in its time, and Rogier was on personal terms with at least two cardinals, showing his prominence and success as an artist.² He is most well known for his large scale works of religious scenes, and one of the most notable of these is the *Deposition*, painted before 1443 for the Chapel of Our Lady Outside the Walls at Leuven, commissioned by the Great Crosbowmen's Guild.³ This chapel was torn down shortly after it was sold at auction in 1789, so very little is known about the exact floor plan, however, an engraving from 1615 shows the church as being a typical cruciform layout.⁴ We do know with certainty that Rogier was commissioned to make the main altarpiece for this particular church, and that the *Deposition* is the result of that. Despite the lack of certainty with how the work was originally displayed, we can consider the nature of it being an altarpiece and the way other cruciform churches display their altarpieces and take an educated guess. Likely, as with most churches of this period, the

¹ "He lived in Tournai and in Brussels, where his name was translated into Dutch as Rogier van der Weyden, and where he died on 18 June, 1464."

Lorne Campbell, "Rogier van der Weyden: his Life and Work" in *Rogier van der Weyden and the Kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula* ed. Lorne Campbell (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2015), 18.

² Campbell, "Rogier van der Weyden", 19-20

³ See Figure 1: Rogier van der Weyden, *Deposition* (or *Descent from the Cross*), before 1433. 220x262 cm. Oil on panel. Currently in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Amy Powell, "The Errant Image: Rogier van der Weyden's *Deposition From The Cross* and its Copies," *Art History* 29, no. 4 (2006): 540-541.

As well as

Lorne Campbell, "The Descent from the Cross" in *Rogier van der Weyden and the Kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula* ed. Lorne Campbell (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2015), 74.

⁴ Powell, "The Errant Image", 542.

main altarpiece (here the *Deposition*) sat at the far end of the nave, in the apse. Since this work is pre-Reformation, it is likely that it would have been the main work among many others in this chapel. The larger-than-life altarpiece must have made quite a visual impact with its gilded background and heavy, emotional imagery when seen in the narrow coldness of the candlelit church abbey.

Rogier's *Deposition* is one of the most influential works of the Early Modern period. Not only did it inspire at least three full-scale close copies, it influenced the way that artists depicted the Deposition scene for hundreds of years after it was finished.⁵ Rogier's fame and influence in general can be seen long after his death in the publication of an engraving by Cornelis Cort, published by Hieronymus Cock's highly influential print shop. This engraving, a copy of the *Deposition*, was published in 1565, 100 years after Rogier's death in 1464.⁶ These widely circulated prints as well as the major full-scale copies testify to the draw that the *Deposition* had to audiences, both at the time of its creation, and to later audiences as well.

Rogier's *Deposition* is significant because the overall composition can be seen to reflect changing attitudes towards religiousness, towards the Catholic Church, and towards ideas of personal devotion within these. In this thesis, I use the concepts of 'vision' and 'performance' to show how Rogier captures the shifting attitudes towards religious devotion in his masterwork.

The composition of the *Deposition* itself is dense. Most simply put, the altarpiece shows 10 figures against a flattened, bright gold picture plane. Jesus is shown dead, at the center of the composition, as Nicodemus (the man in red) and a servant retrieve his body from the cross.

⁵ Amy Powell, "The Errant Image", et. al

These copies were commissioned after the original was sold, leaving a sort of 'copy trail' behind it. Powell makes tracking and discussing the history of these many influential copies her main argument in this paper.

⁶ Powell, "The Errant Image", 550.

Jesus' posture mirrors the 'T' of the cross, which bears a sign that we can understand to mean INRI.⁷ The Virgin Mary swoons beneath Jesus, very significantly mirroring his posture and deathly expression. John the Evangelist and a woman who has been identified as Mary Salome catch the Virgin as she falls.⁸ To her left, Joseph of Arimathea supports Jesus' legs, visibly weeping and gazing mournfully down past Jesus and the Virgin to the Bones of Adam, whose skull rests beneath the Virgin's right hand.⁹ Mary Magdalene dramatically weeps over Jesus' feet, alluding to the story of washing Jesus' feet with tears. A man, probably also a servant, stands behind Mary Magdalene and John the Evangelist holding a jar, which could be a reference to the jar that the Magdalene holds in many images depicting her. To the far right stands Mary Cleophas, openly weeping into a cloth.¹⁰ These 10 figures are shoulder to shoulder in a tiny gold box.

On each top corner of this box sits an architectural decoration, a shape invented by Rogier, called a "round-topped ogee" that serves to bring the figures tightly to the front of the picture plane; if one looks closely, the Servant at the Top of the Cross' sleeve is visibly caught on this tracery.¹¹ Aside from the golden picture plane, there is no background; there is no attempt to create an illusion of depth of space. In the foreground we see a small glimpse of the land the cross rests upon, and a thin green strip of grass that unites all the figures in the same space. The figures crowd the space both towards and away from the viewer; Joseph of Arimathea's shoe juts

⁷ Hung above Jesus as he was crucified, INRI is usually taken to stand for "Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum", or "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews", among other linguistic interpretations.

⁸ Mary Salome is the Virgin Mary's sister, and is identified as being present at the Crucifixion in the gospels of Mark and Matthew. Mark 15:40 and Matthew 27:56

⁹ An allusion to original sin (and Jesus' repayment of that), the Bones of Adam are often represented in Passion scenes. According to legend, Golgotha was actually where Adam was eventually buried, which holds great significance to the Christian theology of Jesus as the Savior of Mankind (and pointing to the Fall of Man).

¹⁰ Mary Cleophas has also been seen as another sister of the Virgin Mary. Campbell, "The Descent from the Cross", 74.

¹¹ Campbell, "Rogier van der Weyden", 20

toward the front of the picture plane, and the Virgin Mary's legs and dress are elongated dramatically back towards the foot of the cross. The lack of negative space between the characters creates a deeply intimate scene. Although these figures are shown in larger than life scale, the viewer is very much a part of the same crowded, emotionally-charged space as the figures. The naturalistic intensity of their emotional expressions might seem to contradict the golden, amorphous background, but actually this background serves not only to shift all emphasis to the characters and their expressions, but also to invoke traditional imagery associated with the divine. Additionally, the altarpiece is highly active; there are few places for the eye to rest as it moves across the composition, and those resting places tend to be the faces of these figures, reminding the viewer again and again of the emotionally-charged, somber nature of this scene. All the characters, with the exception of John the Evangelist, cast their gazes either directly towards or fully away from the body, creating implied lines between the gazes of the characters first towards, and then away from, the body of Christ, in a back-and-forth, zig-zagging pattern across the composition.¹² This altarpiece depicts what is spiritually considered to be the darkest moment in the Christian worldview, and the expressions of each figure experiencing the horror of this moment in their individual ways artistically represents the pain and sorrow this moment evokes on a grander scale. Because of this emotional, spiritual, and compositional energy, the way the figures are grouped together in this tiny gilded space shapes the entirety of the composition.

The altarpiece manages to be incredibly active, yet very heavy. The dense drapery of the figure's costumes, most notably Joseph of Arimathea's elaborate robe, mask the forms of the

¹² See Figure 2

figure's bodies for the most part. The only figures that have their limbs and torsos modeled under their heavy clothes are the figures that are indicating movement.¹³ Instead, Rogier gives emphasis to their emotional expressions as a stopping point for the eye, as mentioned before. These emotional expressions vary from uncontrollable sobbing, as with Mary Cleophas, to a deeply felt sorrow, as John the Evangelist shows, or even to ghastly pallor, as seen in the servant who is at the top of the cross. Therefore, the heavy and elaborate costumes are a stylistic element that is quite typical of the period, yet here this also serves to bring the viewer back to the important, literally falling action of the scene.

In this regard, we can note also the heaviness of gravity in this work. It noticeably acts on the Virgin Mary as she swoons, and on Jesus' body as it is lowered from the cross. We can specifically see this gravity in the way that John the Evangelist catches the Virgin as she falls; her knees have given way beneath her, and she unconsciously leans her weight into John. Additionally, the servant at the top of the cross has his feet firmly planted, and his arm wraps around the front of the cross to steady himself. These heavy elements, of costuming and of the realistic gravity in the image, show that Rogier intended for this work to have an intense presence. While all these figures, as well as the altarpiece itself, are much taller than any viewer, they are firmly in the viewer's space and world as conveyed through these subtle compositional details. It is this placement in the viewer's space that gives the altarpiece a great portion of its emotional impact. We as viewers see the pain of these figures as grounded in our real world,

¹³ John the Evangelist's knees and waist are visibly bent, as he reaches to catch the Virgin Mary; Mary Magdalene's knees and torso are also bent as she dramatically weeps at the sight of the body. The Virgin's breast and hips are visibly contoured beneath her blue gown as she faints. All these characters show dynamic and quick movements. The rest of the figures are less modeled, and exhibit more static or subtle movements, such as Joseph of Amanethia cradling Jesus' feet (although his foot placement would indicate a very dramatic turning of the torso/hips), or Mary Cleophas weeping into her cloth, or the servant behind Mary Magdalene, who gazes at the body of Jesus.

rather than simply as representative. Additionally, the heaviness is quite important to the scene in that the inspiration for this work is the taking of Christ's body *down* from the cross; that Rogier portrays his body as being in the middle of this action gives the composition intense implied weight and directionality.

Of course, the portrayal of Christ's body is particularly noteworthy. Although at this point in the Passion story Jesus had already undergone severe beatings and mockings, Rogier does not show those wounds, only illustrating the wounds Jesus received on the cross. These five wounds, along with Christ's head crowned with thorns, are covered in blood that clearly flowed only while he still hung on the cross, as indicated by the direction of the bleeding, as well as that the wounds have begun to clot, or simply have ceased bleeding after death. Additionally, the blood from the wound in his side separates into blood and water, as referenced in John 19:34. The blood from this side wound has run down Christ's torso, over his hips and down his inner thigh, and can be seen through the slightly opaque cloth wrapped around his waist. Additionally, Christ's veins in his arms and legs are clearly visible. These naturalistic details of blood on the contours of the body and of visible veins are another nod towards Jesus' recent death, therefore emphasizing Christ's physical body, mortality, and sacrifice, all of which are central not only to this particular scene, but to Christian worldview on the whole.¹⁴

Rogier pays a lot of attention to the anatomy of the body; it is reasonably proportional and naturalistic, although not fully so, as Christ would be very tall, and his limbs are long in proportion to the body. However, it is his expression, with open mouth and teeth somewhat

¹⁴ Additionally, while in all other depictions of the Passion Rogier produced Christ was bearded, here he is shown with stubble grown in rather than a full beard. Campbell, "The Descent from the Cross", 74.

visible, eyes rolled back into his head, pinched brow and greenish pallor, that is most striking. This expression was not only for artistic impact, but for theological emphasis and importance as well. The idea that Jesus experienced death as a fully human, living man is at the absolute center of Christianity; Rogier needed to express the concept that Christ was fully holy, yet simultaneously fully alive and mortal. This concept has been addressed by every artist to ever portray Christ, and is generally referred to as the Mystery of the Incarnation. Because the *Deposition* shows a moment of intense darkness, where the world is mourning the death of Christ, Rogier shows Jesus as fully human and fully dead. There is no trace of his divinity in Rogier's depiction of Christ's body because theologically, Jesus experienced death as completely as any human experiences death. The gory details of this portrayal serve to cause empathy in the viewer and to remind them of the physicality of the sacrifice of the Passion. The audience would have been more than aware of this key tenet, and the evocative depiction of the end of Christ's suffering would have certainly been moving to its original audience, as a nod to the sacrifice of Christ on the levels of both doctrine and personal connection.

Throughout artistic portrayals of Christ over the centuries, there has been a push-pull of how naturalistically to portray Jesus' body. Some depictions of the Crucifixion focus on the suffering of Christ's physical body, such as the German *andachtsbilder* tradition, which was popular all through the period.¹⁵ Early modern audiences would have been familiar with a variety of representations of the suffering of Jesus that were not strictly limited to representations of

¹⁵ The *andachtsbilder* tradition usually depicts an imagined scene; a portrait of Christ, generally from the chest upwards, alive and suffering but with wounds he received after death (particularly the spear wound in his side). These images always show an image of Jesus experiencing bodily suffering, to emphasize the mortal sacrifice that is so central to Christian doctrine.

Henk van Os with Eugène Honée, Hans Nieuwdorp, Bernhard Ridderbos *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Biblical scenes. As shown in the *andachtsbilder* tradition, audiences of this time were receptive to and understood religious artistic works that took liberties in diverting from strict canon. In the Bible, there is no mention of the Virgin swooning when Jesus' body is removed from the cross. However, this concept of the Virgin swooning and its depiction would not have been unfamiliar to the original audience of the *Deposition*.

Shifting Ideas about Devotion in the North around 1400

In order to understand how ideas about Christianity and devotion were shifting at the time the *Deposition* was created, it is important to outline the religious atmosphere slightly prior to then. To do this, I will examine the works of two highly influential medieval religious authors, and analyse their works in relation to the *Deposition*. I will also discuss the *Devotio Moderna* movement to illustrate the contemporary religious atmosphere that the *Deposition* was created in, and I will discuss if and how these shifting attitudes are expressed in Rogier's composition.

Saint Bridget of Sweden

Saint Bridget (†1373) was one of the first majorly influential female mystics of the medieval period. St. Bridget recorded the visions she received from the Virgin Mary when she was young, and these resulted in the *Revelations*, which were broadly read as a major devotional text, despite the church disapproving of mystic/visionary texts on the whole.¹⁶ A large part of Bridget's *Revelations* concerned visions she had of the Passion, specifically of the Crucifixion. In these visions, Bridget recounts a great number of details about the Passion that were not

¹⁶ Bridget, of Sweden, Saint, *Revelations*, trans. William H. Neligan (New York: D.& J. Sadlier & Co., 1862), et al. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 48-50.

included in the Biblical texts, most notably paying special attention to the Virgin and her actions/emotions while she watched the Passion, again because it was the Virgin that gave Bridget these visions. Throughout Bridget's accounts of her visions, the Virgin Mary speaks directly to her, recounting her experience of the Passion as Bridget witnessed these experiences in visions simultaneously. There are several notable points within Bridget's *Revelations* that I would like to address, specifically, the emphasis placed on Jesus' physicality, on the Virgin's role during the Crucifixion, and on the way that Bridget's text emphasizes the meta-textual in a way that is very typical of the religiousness of the early modern period.

Firstly, it is worth discussing the emphasis placed on the physicality of Jesus and his suffering by the text. It returns again and again to very graphic descriptions of his wounds and bodily condition. For example, immediately after Jesus cries out, "my God, why have you forsaken me?", her revelation describes him dying with great emphasis on his body:

Then his eyes appeared half dead, his cheeks hollow, and his countenance mournful, his mouth open and his tongue bloodstained, his body collapsed as though he had nothing within, the humors being all drained; his whole body pale and languid from the loss and flow of blood.¹⁷

The emphasis on Christ's body that we see in this passage can be observed not only at this crucial moment of death, but throughout the *Revelations*. This emphasis on the physicality of Christ is, as mentioned previously, the most central tenet of Christianity (the mystery of the Incarnation). St. Bridget's *Revelations* show us how, for medieval Christians, the human, earthly experience of Jesus' suffering took a central role, and that that central role particularly involved a

¹⁷ St. Bridget, *Revelations*, 61

kind of profound empathy imparted by intense, gory details, as seen above. The earthly suffering of Jesus was noted time and time again, from what was a sacred source, to reinforce the sacrifice of Christ. This text offers some theological background as to Rogier's portrayal of Christ in death. While it is not possible to say if Rogier had access to these particular religious texts, the *Revelations'* popularity, as well as the general widespread popularity of saint's accounts of visions, can be used to illustrate some of the cultural atmosphere when the *Deposition* was created. These kinds of ultra-graphic saint's accounts were very influential throughout the medieval and into the early modern periods. Whether or not Rogier had access to St. Bridget's particular account is not the point here; rather, that these sorts of accounts were widely read and accepted is the most important takeaway. The wide popularization of these extra-canonical texts for at least a century before Rogier's *Deposition* (in the case of St. Bridget), undoubtedly influenced the production of images of the Passion, as is seen in the especially gory nature of many representations from this region and period. The heavy focus on the physical suffering of Christ in the popular, influential texts of the day is directly reflected in the visual tradition.

Additionally, it is important to note that St. Bridget's account is one that adds many details to the Passion scene that are not a part of the Gospels alone. These details mostly involve the Virgin, because again, she is the one who granted these visions to Bridget. The added details of the Virgin's actions and emotions, especially these in direct relation to the different traumas that Jesus undergoes as he is tortured and crucified, are emphasised by Bridget. Most notably in the context of the *Deposition*, Bridget discusses several times where the Virgin faints during the crucifixion, however, there is no mention of Mary fainting at the moment of the descent from the cross. While there *is* mention of Mary fainting in the Bible, Bridget's writing's expands on this

moment in great detail. What is mentioned in the gospels as small moment becomes through this saintly vision a major theological point.

Medieval Christianity saw a rise in interest in the role of the Virgin Mary, to the point where the so called “cult of the Virgin” is a widely addressed subject, and therefore too lengthy to thoroughly address here.¹⁸ However, it can be succinctly said that this interest focused in on the role of the Virgin as both Jesus’ earthly mother and spiritual queen of heaven; it was during this period that Mary became the all-important intercessor between the faithful and Christ. The Virgin’s relationship with her son was hugely important in both life and in heaven, and this relationship extended ideologically to the point that it was accepted that Mary felt what Jesus felt physically during the crucifixion. Bridget illustrates this holy, profound empathy very clearly for us in her *Revelations* when Mary speaks, immediately after Jesus died:

Then my hands dried up, my eyes were darkened, and my face became
corpse-like. My ears heard naught, naught could my mouth utter; my feet, too,
shook, and my body fell to the earth.¹⁹

We can also see this concept when the Virgin later says: “I stood nearer to his cross, and as what is nearer the heart, wounds more keenly, so the pain of it was keener to me than to others.”²⁰ In the first quote, we see an example of an instance where the Virgin *does* faint (that is, when she faints at the moment of Jesus’ death). However, here it is most important to note that she did not simply faint from seeing there horrors; Bridget makes it clear that what the Virgin experienced

¹⁸ See: Heal, Bridget, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500-1648* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex : The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976)

Origins of the cult of the Virgin Mary ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burns & Oates, 2008)

¹⁹ St. Bridget, *Revelations*, 79

²⁰ St. Bridget, *Revelations*, 80

on a bodily level was equatable to what her son was physically feeling, and that this relationship extended even into literal death. In the second quote, the Virgin emphasizes her proximity to Jesus in both her physical placement as well as her spiritual closeness. Not only was she closest to him when he died (according to Bridget's particular vision), but she was also closer to him in "heart", that is, on an ephemeral level that refers to both the emotional and spiritual bond that the Virgin and Jesus share.

These passages are of particular note to my study because of how Rogier portrays the Virgin in the *Deposition*. We have established that the Virgin's swoon at the moment of the descent from the cross was probably invented, to some extent, by Rogier, although the idea that the Virgin fainted several times during the Passion sequence was by no means a new concept. Regardless, Bridget's passage describing the countenance of Mary when Jesus died is remarkably accurate when applied to Rogier's *Deposition*. Mary's corpse-like pallor, unspeaking mouth, and of course, her dramatic action of fainting all directly echo Bridget's description of the Virgin at the death of her son. In addition to this death-like resemblance of profound empathy that the swooning Virgin exhibits in the *Deposition*, Rogier also places her in her traditional spot, right at the foot of the cross, for this scene. Here I would like to again emphasize that I am not arguing that Rogier had access to, or was using St. Bridget's *Revelations* when he composed the *Deposition*. Rather, I highlight that St. Bridget's writings are very typical of the medieval saintly vision tradition, and reflect a kind of popular, extra-canonical religiousness that was influential enough to find its way into almost every portrayal of the most major scenes of Christianity, even major commissioned works such as the *Deposition*.

Lastly, I want to discuss how St Bridget's *Revelations* are entirely typical, and therefore an excellent example of, the meta-textual and meta-spiritual nature that heavily marked Christianity most especially in the medieval and early modern periods. 'Metatextual' can be defined as a text that refers the reader back to itself; in other words, a text that is aware of its nature of being a text, and refers the reader to think about and interact with that nature. Metatextuality is one of the most defining aspects of medieval Christianity, especially in these personal devotional texts, such as St. Bridget's. Unlike the public mass, these saint's accounts were generally read privately, and they were meant to be read repeatedly, so as to gain a better understanding of their nature. Even within the same text, a certain major scene, most especially the nativity, or, as in the case of St. Bridget, the Passion, could be rehashed multiple times in different chapters. The emphasis on these important moments is a quiet metatextual nod to the usage of these devotional accounts. Clearly, it would make sense that Christians of that era would want to get in touch with the most important moments in their worldview, and so, those moments were most heavily emphasized. We can see this metatextuality in the *Revelations* at the close of the last chapter, where the Virgin addresses Bridget. saying:

But what pain, I, who stood by my Son, a Virgin and his Mother, then suffered, no one can imagine. Therefore, my daughter [Bridget], remember the passion of my Son, fly the instability of the world, *which is but as a vision*, and a flower that soon fadeth.²¹

This small passage yields an important point. Bridget has just spent many pages describing her holy visions, and then, at the closing, Mary tells Bridget that this world itself is "as a vision". In

²¹ St. Bridget, *Revelations*, 75. Emphasis added.

this particular instance, the meta-reference is not to the textual, but to the spiritual and the nature of life. The acknowledgement by the Queen of Heaven to the saint of the passing nature of this life was intended to cause the reader to think beyond their own mortality, by meditating on the spiritual. Even as the powerful and graphic account of Jesus' life and Passion moved the reader through the vision of the saint, the reader themselves is reminded by heavenly authority that their entire life is like a vision, that would soon fade, and that through this, the reader should turn their thoughts to the holy. The infinite power of heaven and the fleeting nature of life are juxtaposed in this small section, which serves to underscore the importance of this idea throughout the period.

However, ideas of the self-reflective, or the 'meta', are not limited whatsoever to devotional texts or personal objects. As I mention above, a self-reflective quality is one of the most glaring features of late medieval/early modern Christianity, and this certainly extends to the visual. I will return to this point later in this thesis, during my discussion of 'vision' in Rogier's *Deposition*.

Thomas à Kempis and the Modern-Day Devotion

Thomas à Kempis, also called Thomas of Kempen, was a main influencer in what is often called the *devotio moderna* movement. This movement, which I will refer to as the the Modern-Day Devout, or the New Devotion, was highly influential in Northern European Christianity, and focused on conversion, simplicity of lifestyle, and inward piety.²² Considered to

²² I take the term "Modern-Day Devout" from Van Engen's important work on the subject of the New Devotion movement. He argues that the term '*devotio moderna*' has too many connotations that remove meaning from the

be founded by Geert Grote, the Modern-Day Devout began to become widespread around 1400, and by 1430 when the *Deposition* was created, it would have been a well known and arguably popular movement, especially in Rogier's homeland, the Lowland countries.

The Modern-Day Devout was a groundbreaking religious movement that focused heavily on living a devout, Christian lifestyle in a communal setting while at the same time not being a strict religious order, such as a convent or monastery. As the title of Van Engen's study indicates, the people who were a part of this movement lived a simple life, and had a shared spirituality that focused on internal reflection. This focus on the internal is very important to note, as it is again typical of the meta-spiritual that categorizes so much of the early modern period. The followers of the New Devotion kept personalized scrapbooks, where they copied writings from the saints, as well as other religious passages that spoke to them personally. Each scrapbook was individual and different, and the exercise was designed to facilitate the previously mentioned personal, internal nature of worship that these followers strove for.²³

This movement has been termed the 'modern devotion' because of their focus on this inward reflection. Because of this focus, they placed restrictions on the use of theological writings and readings, which was a policy that was in direct reaction to the clerical practice of

actual history. "In this study, to try break the grip of those associations, I generally use the phrase "Modern-Day Devout" or occasionally the "New Devotion.""

On the focus of the Modern-Day Devout: "The Modern-Day Devout proposed an alternative community, not just a house for the widowed or needy (the role fulfilled by alms houses or beguines), also not a religious house with all that it entailed. This was to be a place where in peace and quiet one could cultivate an internal life, where you could have God ever before your eyes, "make progress in the virtues," take charge of your own spiritual life."⁸³

John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 10, 83.

²³ "In practice each of the Devout personalized these scrapbooks, their inner lives inscribed here, a text to which they could return again and again... "Frequently inspect your little book," Thomas of Kempen instructed, "so you may more clearly become aware of your internal progress and defects."

Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 279.

the time. Thomas à Kempis, among other leaders of the Modern-Day Devotion, felt that these theoretical writings were too distracting from a pure spirituality, and that theology was empty without the practice of Christian values and the love of God (things that could not be found in theological writings).²⁴ This movement was a direct reaction to the excesses, elitism, and the overly theologically focused nature of the Church.

However, as the scrapbooks demonstrate, the Modern-Day Devout were not against religious writings on principal. Thomas à Kempis' writings are a fantastic example of the type of internal spirituality that the Modern-Day Devout espoused. His most influential book, which was originally published as a series of 4 pamphlets, is entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. This book saw unprecedented popularity in its own time, not just within the followers of the New Devotion, but all across Northern Europe, and is still considered a major text of Christian devotion to this day. The first of these pamphlets was published by 1420, making the texts wholly contemporaneous with the *Deposition*, as they were certainly experiencing great popularity a decade after their initial publication. These texts, most especially the second book, encourage the reader to find the spiritual within themselves. Thomas says in this book that one should “learn to despise exterior Things, and give thy-self to the interior, and thou shalt see the Kingdom of God will come into thee” [sic].²⁵ Thomas reiterates this point a number of times in varying ways, in summary encouraging the reader to turn inward to find spiritual satisfaction in all aspects of life. Again, this emphasis on the internal is highly typical of the Modern-Day Devotion.

²⁴ Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 238-239. This wariness of theology is slightly caused by the fact that the Modern-Day Devout made a living making and selling books. Scholasticism was a ready temptation not only from within the communities, but from university and clergy institutions outside the New Devotion that essentially all competed for young men to join their orders. The Modern-Day Devout distinguished their order from these others by not focusing on the written, but rather, by focusing on the inner spirituality.

²⁵ Thomas à Kempis, *The Following of Christ in Four Books*, trans. Rev. Richard Challoner (London: J.P Coghlan, 1796). 57, Book II ch. I.

Within this context, it is noteworthy that the New Devotion was particularly influential and popular. Thomas à Kempis' writings, as well as others, circulated the ideas of the Modern-Day Devotion, and converts came from many walks of life to live in simple religious piety with other people. It goes almost without saying that the clergy official was not very pleased with this Modern-Day Devotion. The New Devotion characterizes everything we generally understand about early modern Christianity, and yet, seems to be overlooked in many histories, and this might be in part because these orders were subjected to various Inquisitions and condemnations.²⁶ Despite this, the movement was still quite popular in its day. Historians understand how ideas and power shift, and leave vacuums where new ideas and policy come from. I argue that the Modern-Day Devotion sprung from the fact that the Church was suffering in this period, for reasons that are too broad to go into here but are generally accepted.²⁷ People were not satisfied with the kind of external, public spirituality offered by the Church, and so when a religious movement that encouraged the opposite of what was endorsed by the Church arose, it had widespread appeal.

This appeal is illustrated not only by the Modern-Day Devotion and the writings of Thomas à Kempis, but also by the popularity of saints' accounts, such as St. Bridget's, which were also not strictly endorsed by the Church.²⁸ When taken together, and therefore in the context of the early modern era on the whole, we can see that there is an overt focus on the idea of inward contemplation and vision, especially as a reaction against the establishment of the

²⁶Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 84-117.

²⁷Carl A. Volz, *The church of the Middle Ages: Growth and Change from 600 to 1400* (Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1970) et al.

²⁸In fact, St. Bridget was put up for "Inquisition as well as canonization, nearly at the same time, and more than once," showing just how divided the official authority was on the matter. Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 85.

Church. The widespread popularity of this reactionary idea about how spirituality is best expressed and explored were reaching a notable peak right as Rogier created the *Deposition*.

Here, I would like to note that I use the example of the Modern-Day Devout movement not to illustrate the *Deposition* as specifically in the context of the movement; rather, I use the Modern-Day Devout as an illustration of one of many counter-establishment movements, that show that long before the Protestant reformation, there was unhappiness with, criticism of, and dissent from the Catholic Church, and to make the point that this particular movement was an influential force in the world when the *Deposition* was created. Rogier's work was created during the beginnings of the New Devotion movement, which, while often overlooked in broad-scope histories, is remarkably telling of this era. Through scholarly study of non-dominant forms of religion, we gather a more complete sense of what can be termed the spirit of the times. It is through understanding these specific examples that I want to bring the larger socio-religious contexts around the creation of Rogier's masterwork into focus. I am of the school of thought that no object is immune from the circumstances of its creation; that any given object will tell-tale of not only of its physical and compositional elements, but of the climate of the world at large at its creation. Therefore, my argument is *not* that the Modern-Day Devout, specifically, had an impact on Rogier's composition or even on his day-to-day life, but that the popularity of ideas, especially anti-establishment ideas (in this case, against the Church) come from a broad, culture-wide emotion and need. Rogier was from the Low Countries, where the ideas of the Modern-Day Devout were formed and most deeply popularized (and moreover were popularized contemporaneously to the creation of the *Deposition*); I therefore argue that these changes in the way people felt about devotion and spirituality would have been clear and apparent to Rogier,

and that this change can be directly observed in the composition of the *Deposition*. It is within this now established framework of the socio-religious/cultural atmosphere that Rogier was working in that I would like to analyse elements of ‘vision’ and of ‘performance’ in relation to his masterwork.

Vision in the *Deposition*

The idea of ‘vision’ is an especially complex one, particularly in regard to the high to late middle ages. St. Augustine, for example, is most well known for the three-fold vision he discusses; to him, vision is composed of the corporeal, intellectual, and spiritual visions.²⁹ However, in the context of the above, it is clear that by the early modern era, these ideas around vision, and therefore visuality, were changing significantly. In particular, to continue off the Augustinian model, lines between corporeal and spiritual vision were blurring. A fantastic example of this can be seen in Jeffrey Hamburger’s *The Visual and the Visionary* where he discusses examples of nuns having visions: “The fervent desire to see Christ’s body overcame most obstacles... On occasion, the enclosed woman “sees” the host through the wall, as if with x-ray vision. Other stories stress that the nun in question saw the corpus christi “with bodily eyes”... not with spiritual sight.”³⁰ These examples show a clear shift of the strict lines between the physical and the spiritual. The nuns in the example had visions of the spiritual with their earthly sight. Understanding how these lines were shifting and blurring is key to understanding early modern

²⁹ Bret L. Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

³⁰ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 93.

spirituality. This era represented a time where people were seeking change, and this change manifested in an entirely different way of seeing both the real and spiritual worlds, in an amorphous way that clearly extended to the viewing of devotional images, such as the *Deposition*.

Here, I would like to return to the *Deposition* itself. As I mentioned previously, the gazes of the characters are significant, and nearly every character is looking either directly towards or directly away from the body of Christ. The concept of vision is being used artistically by Rogier in this work as a paradoxical element. Here, the paradox comes from the averted nature of many of the gazes of the figures; the death is too terrible to behold, so they look away in their heavily emotional states, however, this moment is one that precludes, what is for Christians, the ultimate moment of triumph when Jesus rises from the dead. Therefore, the fact that Rogier portrays some of the figures with their gazes averted both heightens the emotional nature of the moment and theologically foreshadows the coming resurrection for the viewer. This paradox of the figure's sorrow is artistically compounded by the golden background. For medieval and early modern Christians, color symbolism was extremely important. Gold always represented something holy or heavenly, and the significance of this flat gold setting would not have been lost on its original audience.³¹ Gold was usually associated with visions of heavenly or otherworldly apparitions, exemplified in the consistent use of gold when depicting halos/auras, or, broadly speaking was used to indicate which part of a composition represented the sacred. Gold always indicated the divine. In the *Deposition*, Rogier sets the realness of death and human sorrow on an otherworldly

³¹ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 20.

stage, the flattened gold background reminding the religious audience that while the sacrifice of Jesus was human and literal, as the figures emote, it was also divine.

It is easy to see how ideas of vision work within this frame. As we saw in Saint Bridget's and Thomas à Kempis' writings, the notions of personal vision as piety was gaining ever-increasing popularity leading up to the creation of the *Deposition*. Whether it was a literal vision from the supernatural, such as St. Bridget's, or a more mundane form, such as in the New Devotion's scrapbook tradition, inner contemplation was becoming a very prominent way to interact with the divine. I argue that the figures in the *Deposition* could be said to not only be turning away from the horrors they are witnessing, but that this deliberate lack of visual connection within the composition was a nod to an inward piety as well. In what is the darkest moment in Christian worldview, the figures do not cry out to Heaven, or look upwards as if addressing God. Rather, they look down at the body, or close their eyes and weep.

The concept of 'vision' within the overall period has been extensively written about. In his very influential article *Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting*, Craig Harbison argues that visions are indistinguishable from "earthly reality" during the early modern period, and that when donors are represented, they are equally worthy of the visions as the saints, as they are in fact witnessing these same visions.³² The donors are always portrayed kneeling because it was important to show piety within spirituality, but nonetheless, they are witness to the exact same visions that the saints or other holy figures are witnessing.

³² Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15, No. 2 (1985), 100.

Harbison also says that this indicates that “there was simply a general trend of the times away from the notion of a spiritual elite, toward the desire that many members of society, by their "learned ignorance," participate in visionary experiences.”³³

While the *Deposition* does not have any donor figures in the composition, Harbison’s argument can be applied to Rogier’s work equally well. The previously mentioned compositional elements of the flattened background that pushes the figures forward, as well as the emotionally-charged nature of the work bring the figures into a shared space with the viewer. Harbison’s point that these visions are made manifest into visions of “earthly reality” for donors portrayed in Flemish works extends to the contemporaneous audience of the *Deposition*. This is particularly achieved through the overwhelming scale of the altarpiece. The larger than life figures dominate the physical space of the viewer, causing these images appear as visions simply because when the viewer stands in front of this work, it encapsulates the entire line of sight, including peripheral vision. The viewer is fully absorbed into the world of this scene where, in keeping with the stylistic tradition of the period, the non-holy figure witnessing the vision is much smaller in scale than the holy figures acting out the narrative moment. The audience of the *Deposition* holds the same privileges as donor figures do in other works, as Haribson mentions. In other words, it is follows logically that if devotional images of this period were created to be a tool for having real visions that fully absorb the viewer, then the composition inherently calls the viewer into the work as a real and living space, as in the *Deposition*. The viewer’s presence completes the composition; the devout paying devotion to the work is fundamentally built into the image’s existence, and therefore the physical presence of a viewer gives the work what is in

³³ Harbison, “Visions and Meditations”, 99-101.

essence a meta level of meaning, that is typical of the inwardly-focused shift that characterizes early modern devotion.

The physical element of hierarchical scale, taken in context with the increasing focus on personal devotion through visions, such as the visions given to Saint Bridget, show a cultural climate where the object was not simply representational of a vision, it was a tool to seeing that work as an actual vision. In other words, contemporary viewers of the *Deposition* would have known, either through cultural implicitly or through personal study, that this work was not simply representing a narrative holy scene, it was to be meditated upon by the viewer to simulate an actual holy vision, or put simply, it was to be used as an inwardly reflective, devotional image. As Harbison phrases it, “in this way, we can be certain that narrative images were meant to function in a devotional context.”³⁴ Additionally, there was heavy emphasis placed on having visual contact with the sacred in the late middle ages, especially in regards to the raising of the Host during mass. While these types of seeing are a separate and slightly contentious subject all to themselves, it is established that regardless of the mode of viewing, there was great importance placed on the act. As Thomas Lentz makes clear in his article “Rituals of Gazing in the Late Middle Ages”, “Image devotion and prayer were directed, above all, to the creation of interior spaces of vision as well as the change from one world to the next.”³⁵

In this regard, there is a distinct interaction between the viewer and the imagery in the *Deposition*. All of this is exemplary of late medieval spirituality. I argue that when taken

³⁴ Harbison, “Visions and Meditations”, 95.

³⁵ Thomas Lentz, “Rituals of Gazing in the Late Middle Ages” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (New Jersey: Department of Art and Archeology, Princeton University, 2006), 366.

altogether, this evidence points to an implicit fourth wall in devotional art. As I have previously established, the early modern spirituality focused with ever growing intensity on inward contemplation and visualization, and that the external image was a tool to help guide the viewer to a greater piety. In order for images to function this way, there must be an implicit relationship between the viewer and the characters in the work. It is not a static, ‘viewer witnesses scene’ relationship, rather, and especially in the case of the *Deposition*, the viewer is drawn into the actual space of the characters and plays a crucial part in constructing the scene. It is this narrative scene that constructs elements of performance, which I will address next.

Performance

Ideas and elements of vision clearly played an important role in not only the specific composition of the *Deposition*, but in the religious theory of the early modern period as well. Elements of performance relate very closely to elements of vision, as it is ideas of vision and of visual culture that prop up ideas of performance. We can establish a definition of ‘performance’ best by examining how this element is shown in the *Deposition*. In this regard, performance can be discussed as 1. relating to theatrical performance and cultural context, and 2. performance relating to compositional elements in the *Deposition*.

For the early modern person, religious theater was a commonplace thing. Religious theater had developed through a complex relationship with ancient theater; because ancient theater came from a culture that mocked Christians and Christianity, yet these same forms were also used by Christians in the medieval and early modern eras to endorse the triumph of

Christianity, there were mixed opinions from religious figures about whether or not theater should be accepted.³⁶ The Pagan roots of theater were widely acknowledged, which explains, according to Donnalee Dox, the prominence of religiously-themed plays, most notably Passion plays, that endorsed the triumph of Christianity. Passion plays focused on re-enacting the Crucifixion in great detail; many of these plays were over 25,000 lines long, and required anywhere from 2-7 days to perform. By the end of the 14th century, the vernacular Passion play was firmly established, long before the vernacular was used in the Mass or in other forms of official Church devotion.³⁷

This point of vernacular recitation is especially important to remember when considering how religious plays functioned in lay spirituality. At a time when most of the population was illiterate (that is, could not understand Latin), there was a distinct lack of religious devotional forms that were both church-approved and accessible to the general population. As previously discussed, this goes at least some of the way to explaining the popularity of alternative devotional lifestyles (Modern-Day Devout) and of the popularity of saint's accounts, (such as St. Bridget's).

However, it is also important to consider what kind of access a lay person, who would have had no ability to acquire and/or read the accounts of the saints, and who had no desire to join what was effectively a religious commune, would have had to devotional tools. For this fictive person, these tools would have amounted to either church sanctioned visual productions (here, the *Deposition*), or to religious forms of entertainment, such as Passion plays. Because of

³⁶ Donnalee Dox, *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought : Augustine to the Fourteenth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004) 43.

³⁷ "Passion play." *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*: Oxford University Press, 2010. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193-e-3020>.

their common goal of communication with the lay person, these forms are comparable in their presentation of scenes or, put shortly, their performativity.

The Church in the early modern era was caught between declining power and popularity, and the inaccessibility and strictness of doctrine. Passion plays were an intersection of doctrine and accessibility to early modern people; these plays gave people a clear demonstration and intelligible narration of Christian doctrine. This is significant because while religious theater was not condoned by the Church, and was later the heavily subject to iconoclastic attacks, it was very well-received in its time, and this popularity speaks to the gap that lay religious people might have felt in their understanding of their own doctrine.

It is also important to note that these forms, especially the theater, diverged from strict canonical representations. While pinpointing these exact divergences is not within the scope of my work here, that the length of the average Passion play of 25,000 lines is simple yet sufficient evidence to say that liberties were taken from a strict Biblical reading of the Passion. Ironically, the forms that were most easily accessible to the lay early modern person were most often not in strict keeping with the Bible, exemplified by the saint's accounts and other devotional trends of this era. This era was also saturated in a *visual* culture that, while Christian in name, rarely kept only to what is written in the Bible, as demonstrated not only in the aforementioned lavish theater productions, but also in visual traditions as dramatic as the *Andachtsbilder* or Christ in the Winepress.

In addition to these visual traditions that take clear liberties with their representation of theological concepts, these diversions from canon can be seen in a number of subtle ways within the *Deposition*. Strictly speaking, there is no mention of the Virgin fainting at the moment Jesus

is removed from the cross. Additionally, while different gospels make mention of the various Marys that are present, Rogier chose to portray four different Marys, (The Virgin, Salome, The Magdalene and Cleophas) rather than the traditional three Marys (usually The Virgin, The Magdalene, and Cleophas, as mentioned in the gospels). Additionally, most of the figures are clothed in contemporaneous, Northern European style clothes. This modern-day costuming is one of the defining elements of the period, and here serves the purpose to draw the viewer into the work by setting the sacrifice of Christ in a setting that was more familiar to viewers. These are all examples of subtle yet deliberate deviations from the canon that were included for a reason, and I argue that these can be called performative elements because their inclusion all shares the common factor of bringing the scene closer to the viewer emotionally and culturally. If vision is the devotional goal of the *Deposition*, then performance is the means through which that is achieved. In addition, these elements can be called performative because they have been added into or changed from the original Biblical story, to intentionally emphasize a particularly important doctrinal point as well. The characters in these examples, much like actors on a stage, perform variations on the original so that the audience better grasps, or feels more deeply, the idea portrayed. This is especially important in an early modern society that lacked literacy as we understand it today, as well as access to canon doctrine. Visual representations were powerful tools that diverged from the canon in order to better convey the *message*, rather than the *doctrine* of Christian spirituality to a population that had little access to the later to begin with.

Both visual productions and religious theater productions are elements of the same visual culture that brought lay people closer to their religion. As Michael O'Connell phrases it in his book *The Idolatrous Eye: Inconoclastm and Theater in Early-Modern England*, "Media are

notoriously inseparable from the ideological messages they convey, and early-modern theater was not only visual and iconic but tied to a two-century history of religious use.”³⁸ Therefore, because both religious theater and artistic productions, such as the *Deposition*, were used to educate lay people about Christian doctrine, we can evaluate artistic works in the context of their performativity. In light of these larger socio-religious contexts, the performative nature of the *Deposition* can be analyzed through a compositional lens.

The performative aspect of the *Deposition* comes partly from the scale, as previously discussed in relation to vision. Not only does the scale draw the viewer in as a part of the composition, it presents the events of the Passion on a larger than life stage, that is comparable to a literal stage. The figures are dominant in a brightly lit space that invites the viewer in, yet ignores their presence; in this way, it is like a literal theatrical stage, even to the point of being a nod to Passion plays. The Passion was such a common theme that presentations of it, be it on a stage or in an altarpiece, were inherently dramaticized. Here, Rogier uses scale to draw a visually implied comparison between a life-size theatrical stage, and the larger-than-life heavenly setting he places his work into.

Because audiences were used to seeing the same themes played out over and over again, and because of the socio-cultural context around this scene, the particular movements of the figures within the *Deposition* would have read as performative. The saturation of the visual culture with representations of the Passion or crucifixion would have caused the audience to be sensitive to even small changes in the usual iconography; therefore, the changes themselves are purposeful and for the viewer to respond to. In the particular case of the *Deposition*, Rogier

³⁸ Michael O’Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye : Inconoclastm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 63.

emphasizes the theological connection between the Virgin and Jesus by varying from canon in a way that shapes the entire composition. The character of Mary is, in essence, performing her entire relationship to her son (and his death) in a single dramatic movement. Since visual works were devotional tools, this motion would have been understood to be not only a reaction to the heightened emotion of the moment, but also of the deeper relationship between the Virgin and Jesus. In this regard, Rogier's portrayal of the Virgin is one where she performs her spiritual significance and relationship to the central figure of Christianity, Jesus.

In addition to the scale and movement of the figures, the stacking of the space in the *Deposition* into a very frontal cluster causes the scene not only to appear in the viewer's space, but to have a stage-like presence. This presence is most defined by the particular grouping of the figures. The lack of naturalistic background makes the unusually close grouping visually appealing; that is, the closeness of the figures to the front of the picture plane comes across as reasonable to the viewer because of the lack of background. Most notable in the arrangement of figures here is the way that their gazes and postures are directed towards the viewer. They all face their bodies towards the front of the picture plane to the point where almost every figure has their shoulders nearly squared with the face of the image. This grouping is also particularly reminiscent of a theatrical production. The characters take front and center prominence, so that the viewer does not miss any of the action of the scene, in addition to being drawn into the image, as previously mentioned.

The characters are arranged in a compositionally deliberate way that highlights the action of the scene. They are performing for the viewer, and we can say this is a significant, separate element from vision because the postures and movements of the figures shape the composition in

a way that is deeper than pure artistic invention. Their performance is what guides the viewer to understanding the theological aspect of the work; it is the altarpiece using an external performance to demonstrate the important tenets of Christianity, and to guide the viewer towards an inward devotion.

To summarize, the figures perform a self-aware reenactment of the Passion, not dissimilar to Passion plays in both function and form. This self-awareness can be backed up by again returning to early modern modes of seeing, as well as theories of representation. As I have established, these were in flux towards the inward at the time the *Deposition* was created, yet within the image, we can observe an undeniable expression of both inward and performative, external piety. These theories of seeing centered around the understanding that images were only a representation of the thing itself, a point that iconoclasts honed in on years later.³⁹ Therefore, it is in keeping with the socio-cultural modes of seeing at the time to say that the performative aspect of the *Deposition* is a self aware, and that this performance equally encouraged external and internal devotion; external through the nature of it being a main altarpiece in a church (a site of performative devotion in and of itself), and internal devotion through the very of-the-times focus on inward piety and personal visions. The altarpiece was a tool created to showcase was is, in essence, a performance of this religious scene, on a grand and fully absorbing scale, so that the viewer might have an otherworldly vision with both literal and spiritual sights.

³⁹ Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 36-38.

Conclusion

Rogier shows us in his masterwork distinct nods towards shifting ideas around devotion and spirituality, while also creating an image that shaped not only the way the Deposition scene is portrayed in art, but emphasized an extremely important theological point in his portrayal. The *Deposition* is an incredible example of the way that objects subtly reflect the ideas of their time, and here Rogier's work reflects the shift from a tradition that emphasized the separateness of types of vision to one that blended them (as seen in St. Bridget's writings), while also including nods towards what was, in his time, radical new thoughts about inward devotion, such as those that came from the Modern-Day Devout movement, that filled the void left by a distant and inaccessible doctrine. Rogier's composition illustrates a shifting point in the way that early modern people saw their own doctrine and religion; the summary example being the posture of the fainting Virgin acting as much more than a simple narrative element because it highlights a theological relationship between her and Jesus while also underscoring ideas of internal, holy empathy and of the visionary. Overall, the *Deposition* allows us to observe the turning point the world felt at the beginning of the early modern era, as reflected in the multifaceted yet definitive composition of the *Descent from the Cross*, a composition which shaped the way artists produced images of the crucifixion for generations to come.

List of Figures



Figure 1:

Rogier van der Weyden, *Deposition* (or *Descent from the Cross*), before 1433. 220x262 cm. Oil on panel. Currently in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

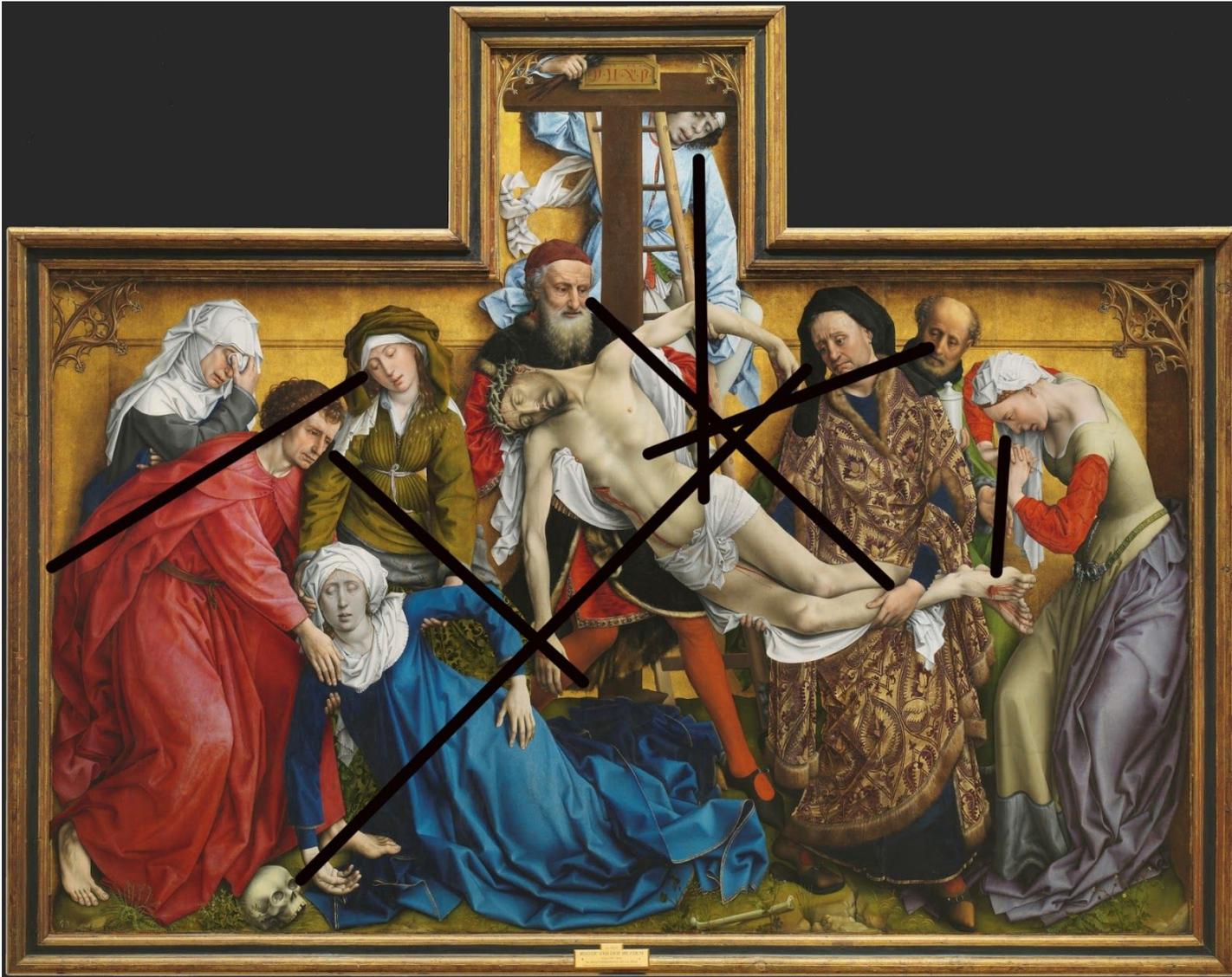


Figure 2: Lines of sight in the *Deposition*

Bibliography

- Acres, Alfred. "Rogier van der Weyden's Painted Texts." *Artibus et Historiae* 21, no. 41 (2000): 75-109.
- à Kempis, Thomas. *The Following of Christ in Four Books*, translated by Rev. Richard Challoner. London: J.P Coghlan, 1796.
- Barasch, Moshe. "The Crying Face." *Artibus et Historiae* 8, no. 15 (1987): 21-36.
- Bridget of Sweden, Saint. *Revelations of St. Bridget, on the Life and Passion of Our Lord, and the Life of His Blessed Mother*. Translated by William H. Neligan. New York: D.& J. Sadlier & Co., 1862.
- Buskirk, Jessica. "Hugo van der Goes's Adoration of the Shepherds: Between Ascetic Idealism and Urban Networks in Late Medieval Flanders." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 6, no 1. (Winter 2014): 1-40
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 2011.
- Dox, Donnalee. *The Idea of the Theater in Latin Christian Thought: Augustine to the Fourteenth Century*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Hamburger, Jeffrey F. *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany*. New York: Zone Books, 1998.
- Hanley, Stephen. "Optical Symbolism as Optical Description: A Case Study of Canon Van der Paele." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 1-20.
- Harbison, Craig. "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15, no. 2 (1985): 87-118.
- Heal, Bridget. *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500-1648*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Heffernan, Carol F. "The Revelations of St Bridget of Sweden in Fifteenth-Century England." *Neophilologus*, (2017): 337-339.
- Hellerstedt, Kahren Jones. "The Blind Man and His Guide in Netherlandish Painting." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 13, no. 3 (1983): 163-181.
- Hofman, Rijcklof. "The Early Reception of the Devotio Moderna Among the Crutched Friars." *Church History and Religious Culture* 93 (2013): 505-534.

- Kessler, Herbert L. *Seeing Medieval Art*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004.
- King, Pamela M. "The Early English Passion Play." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 43, Early English Drama (2013): 69-86.
- King, Pamela M. "The End of the World in Medieval English Religious Drama." *Literature & Theology* 26, no. 4, (2012): 384-399.
- Kupfer, Marcia. *The Passion Story: from Visual Representation to Social Drama*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.
- Lane, Barbara G. "Sacred versus Profane in Early Netherlandish Painting." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 18, no. 3 (1988): 106-115.
- Marrow, James H. *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: a Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative*. Kortrijk, Belgium: Van Ghemmert Pub. Co., 1979.
- Marrow, James H. "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 16, no. 2 (1986): 150-169.
- Maunder, Chris. *Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Burns & Oates, 2008
- "Medieval Theatre in Europe." *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*: Oxford University Press, 2010.
<http://www.oxfordreference.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193-e-2570>.
- The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché. Princeton, New Jersey: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University in association with Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Normore, Christina. "Navigating the World of Meaning." *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (January 2012): 19-34.
- "Passion play." *The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance*: Oxford University Press, 2010.
<http://www.oxfordreference.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199574193.001.0001/acref-9780199574193-e-3020>.
- Powell, Amy. "The Errant Image: Rogier van der Weyden's Deposition from the Cross and its Copies." *Art History* 29, no. 4 (Sep. 2006): 540-562.
- Rogier van der Weyden and the Kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula*. edited by Lorne Campbell. Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2015.

- Rothstein, Bret L. *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Scheepsma, Wybren. *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: the 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim, and Their Writings*. Translated by David F. Johnson. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2004.
- Scribner, Bob. "Popular Piety and Modes of Visual Perception in Late-Medieval and Reformation Germany." *The Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 4 (Dec. 1989): 448-469.
- Van Engen, John. *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life : The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Van Os, Henk with Eugène Honée, Hans Nieuwdorp, Bernhard Ridderbos. *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500*. Translated by Michael Hoyle Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Volz, Carl A. *The Church of the Middle Ages: Growth and Change from 600 to 1400*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970.
- Voragine, Jacobus de. *The Golden Legend : Readings on the Saints*. Princeton University Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=871891>.
- Warner, Marina. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Wheatley, Edward. *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Wise, Elliott D. "Cycles of Memory and Circular Compassion in a Germanic Passion Diptych." *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 1-30.
- Yelle, Robert A. *Semiotics of Religion: Signs of the Sacred in History*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2012.