
**Book review: 'Early
Netherlandish Triptychs: A
Study in Patronage' by Shirley
Neilsen Blum**

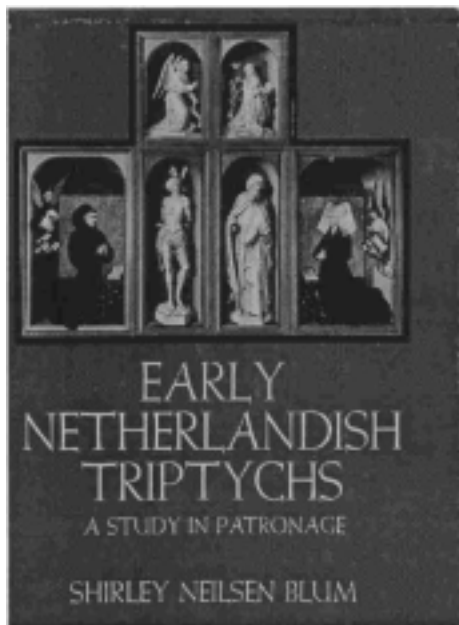
Matthew Gream¹
November 19992

*"Early Netherlandish Triptychs; A Study in
Patronage".*

Shirley Neilsen Blum, 1969.

*The Regents of the University of California,
ISBN 0 520 014448.*

176 pages + illustrations, 80 plates.



Shirley examines the emergence, evolution and dissolution of the triptych in the Netherlands during the 15th century. She does this in a detailed analysis of 11 major works spanning the century, with a particular focus on the changing role of the donor. Her argument is that past analysis investigated the artists and their style, but

failed to consider the broader historical context. Her detailed investigation itself illustrates a process of art historical activity that is a useful learning experience.

During the 15th century, a new active participation of donors occurred as the nameless patronage of the church was replaced by the sponsorship of men who were not of a clerical or royal background. These new men had demands that reflected their social prominence, and they had a desire to emulate the royal households. They were aggressive and viewed the work not as an anonymous gift given solely to the honour and glory of god, but as a gift that might visually and iconographically record their special part in the process.

The donor believed that through these works, he might gain favour in the sight of god and secure returns in the after world. The donor was not nameless or timid, so chose the location of the work, and at least confirmed the subject. Often, his portrait appears discreetly within the picture and usually on the same scale as the divine figures. Much of the work in this period was for religious surroundings such as private chapels or public churches.

The study investigates the triptych because the diptych is usually formulaic in construction, and so it is not possible to trace the influence of the donor. The triptych alone, with its interior and exterior images, illustrates the relationship between artist, donor, sacred subject and physical context. It was in the 15th century that the art of painting was freed from the manuscript, so new images were no longer supplementary or complementary to a text.

The triptych offered three areas for expression of the work: the primary image in the interior, the complement on the wings, and the image on the external panel. In reading the triptych, the exterior is contemplated first, then the iconography unfolds into the interior, so the viewer is visually led to the subject centre. This related to the works position at an altar in a devotional setting.

The triptych became anachronistic with the development of mathematical perspective due to the cumbersome organisation of perspective image and a surrounding movable physical arrangement. Eventually, it became a rarity, developed only in the hands of progressive painters.

¹ matthew.gream@pobox.com

² Redistribution or use of this work without the consent of the author is expressly denied.

The popularity of the triptych in the north is seen in the large number painted by the Netherlandish masters. Multiple examples can be shown for virtually every painter of the period. More than 100 were painted, but the donors and location of very few are known. In almost every circumstance, it functioned as an altar painting to consecrate, localise and unify all of the sacred references in the chapel or church. Without the knowledge of location, the total true meaning of the work cannot be fully understood, and this is a key part of the study.

The study considers works by Rogier van der Weyden, Oieric Bouts, Hugo van der Goes and Hans Memlinc. Prior to the detailed study, a brief overview of works by Campin and van Eyck is undertaken. Each study addresses a variety of information relating to the work, including technical construction and style, relationship to other works by the same artists, problems of representing the narrative in a devotional context, sources and prototypes for the work, subject matter modifications to fit the triptych media, relationships to style and works by other artists, patron and artists biographies, relationship of the work to its location, details of the location, background to each commission, and various other details. Illustrations are provided for each work, including additional material in the form of maps and diagrams of locations.

It is with Memlinc that the use of the triptych reaches an impasse. He simplified subject matter, reduced content to one major area, clarified imagery, increased repetition and made architecture more relevant. It was here that simple linear iconography and the consistent use of focalpoint perspective rendered the triptych unwieldy, both formally and symbolically. The donor's iconographic requirements became far less complicated, his role in the painting was no longer formative, and now he always appeared as a lesser devotee. .

Shirley's style is very discursive and open, with thorough analysis drawn from a wide body of material that is well documented. She does lack a degree of conceptual clarity and systematisation. Her language, at times, can be somewhat high brow, and laden with superlatives such as '... Goes creates such abrupt changes within the space that the rationalising effects of perspective are nullified... unlike Boats,

Goes does everything he can to overcome the force of perspectivallogic".

There are several ways in which the work could be drawn upon and improved. Most significantly, the informational content could be further worked into something that is more systematic and conceptual in structure. Shirley could, from this, perhaps reason further about her approaches and possibly rationalise and refine her findings.

It is relatively clear to see several major threads of concern through the work: 1) the role of the donor in the triptych, as a patron and a symbol, and the move from anonymous church sponsorship, through to purposeful and obvious donor sponsorship; 2) the development of perspective, which rendered obsolete the physical construction of the triptych, corresponding to the decline of the donor's influence; and 3) the dimensions of analysis of each work, through consideration of the work and its style, the subject and its sources, the creator and their works, the donor and their background, and the work and its location.
