

= Beaune Altarpiece =

The Beaune Altarpiece (c . 1445 ? 50) , often called The Last Judgement , is a large polyptych altarpiece by the Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden . It was painted in oil on oak panels , with parts later transferred to canvas . It consists of fifteen paintings on nine panels ; six are painted on both sides . It retains some of its original frames .

Six outer panels (or shutters) are hinged , when folded they show an exterior view of saints and the donors . The inner panels contain scenes from the Last Judgement and are arranged across two registers . The large central panel that spans both registers shows Christ seated on a rainbow in judgement , with his feet resting on a golden globe . Below him the Archangel Michael holds scales as he weighs souls . The panel on Christ 's far right shows the gates of Heaven , that to his far left the entrance to Hell . The panels of the lower register form a continuous landscape , with figures depicted moving from the central panel to their final destinations after receiving judgement .

The altarpiece was commissioned in 1443 for the Hospices de Beaune by Nicolas Rolin , Chancellor of the Duchy of Burgundy , and his wife Guigone de Salins , who is buried in front of the altarpiece 's original location in the hospice . It is one of van der Weyden 's most ambitious works , equal to his Prado Deposition and lost Justice of Trajan and Herkinbald . It remains in the hospice today , although not in its original position . It is in poor condition and was moved in the 20th century to shield it from sunlight and better protect it from the almost 300 @, @ 000 visitors it receives annually . It has suffered from extensive paint loss , the wearing and darkening of its colours , and an accumulation of dirt . In addition , a heavy layer of over @-@ paint was applied during restoration . The two painted sides of the outer panels have been separated so both can be shown simultaneously ; traditionally , the shutters would have been opened only on selected Sundays or church holidays .

= = Commission and hospice = =

Nicolas Rolin was appointed Chancellor of Burgundy by Philip the Good in 1422 , a position he held for the next 33 years . His tenure with the duke made him a wealthy man , and he donated a large portion of his fortune for the foundation of the Hôtel @-@ Dieu in Beaune . It is not known why he decided to build in Beaune rather than in his birthplace of Autun . He may have chosen Beaune because it lacked a hospital and an outbreak of the plague decimated the population between 1438 and 1440 . Furthermore , when in 1435 the Treaty of Arras failed to bring a cessation to the longstanding hostility and animosity between Burgundy and France , the town suffered brutal ravages and famine from écorcheurs (marauding bands) who roamed the countryside during the late 1430s and early 1440s . The hospice was built after Rolin gained permission from Pope Eugene IV in 1441 , and it was eventually consecrated on 31 December 1452 . In conjunction , Rolin established the religious order of " Les s?urs hospitalières de Beaune " . Rolin dedicated the hospice to St Anthony Abbot , who was commonly associated with sickness and healing during the Middle Ages .

In the hospice 's founding charter , signed in August 1443 , Rolin wrote that " disregarding all human concerns and in the interest of my salvation , desiring by a favourable trade to exchange for celestial goods temporal ones , that I might from divine goodness render those goods which are perishable for ones which are eternal ... in gratitude for the goods which the Lord , source of all wealth , has heaped upon me , from now on and for always , I found a hospital . " In the late 1450s , only a few years before he died , he added a provision to the hospital charter stipulating that the Mass for the Dead be offered twice daily . Rolin 's wife , Guigone de Salins , played a major role in the foundation , as probably did his nephew Jan Rolin . De Salins lived and served at the hospice until her own death in 1470 .

Documents regarding the artwork 's commissioning survive and , unusually for a Netherlandish altarpiece , the artist , patron , place of installation and date of completion are all known . It was intended as the centrepiece for the chapel , and Rolin approached van der Weyden around 1443 , when the hospital was founded . The altarpiece was ready by 1451 , the year the chapel was

consecrated . Painted in van der Weyden 's Brussels workshop ? most likely with the aid of apprentices ? the completed panels were then transported to the hospice . The altarpiece is first mentioned in a 1501 inventory , when it was positioned on the high altar .

The polyptych was commissioned to provide both comfort and warning to the dying . It was intended to remind them of their faith , and direct their last thoughts towards the divine . This is evident in its positioning in the chapel , within view of the patients ' beds . Rolin specified that 30 beds be placed within sight of the altarpiece for those too ill to walk , where it was visible to them through a pierced screen . There were usually only two patients per bed , luxurious at a time when six to fifteen in a large bed was more common . Medical care was expensive and primitive in the 15th century ; the spiritual care of patients was as important as the treatment of physical ailments .

Saints Sebastian and Anthony represent healing . Both were associated with bubonic plague , and intended to reassure the dying as intercessors with the divine . St Michael developed a cult following in 15th @-@ century France , most likely because he was thought to have appeared to Joan of Arc . He was seen as a guardian of the dead , a crucial role given the disasters wrought by plague in the region . There was a severe outbreak in 1441 ? 42 , just before Rolin founded the hospital . Pilgrimage to Mont Saint @-@ Michel , Normandy reached a peak around this time . According to Barbara Lane , patients were unlikely to survive their stay , yet St Michael offered consolation as they could " gaze on his figure immediately above the altar of the chapel every time the altarpiece was opened . Like Saints Anthony and Sebastian on the exterior of the polyptych , the archangel offered ... hope that they would overcome their physical ills . "

= = Description = =

The altarpiece is composed of fifteen separate paintings on nine panels , six of which are painted on both sides . The closed view comprises two upper and four lower panels on the outside of the shutters . The upper panels are separately hinged and able to close independently of the others . When all the shutters are opened , the viewer is exposed to the expansive " Last Judgement " interior panels . These document the possible spiritual fates of the viewers : that they might reach Heaven or Hell , salvation or damnation ; stark alternatives appropriate for a hospice . The exterior panels serve as a funerary monument for the donors . Art historian Lynn Jacobs believes that the " dual function of the work accounts for the choice of the theme of the Last Judgement on its interior "

The work clearly distinguishes between figures of the divine , earthly and hellish realms . Perhaps following Jan van Eyck 's c . 1432 Ghent Altarpiece , the polyptych wings form an inverted T @-@ shape . When the shutters are closed the panels resemble an upside @-@ down cross , a form common in 15th @-@ century carved retables : an elevated central panel allowed additional space for a narrative scene , to depict a heavenly vista , a single large figure , or a crucifixion with space for the cross to extend above the other panels , an innovation seen in van der Weyden 's Descent from the Cross . This shape echoes typical configuration of Gothic churches , where the naves often extended past the aisles into the apse or choir . The imagery of the outer panels is set in the earthly realm with the donors , and saints painted in grisaille to imitate sculpture .

= = = Inner panels = = =

According to Jacobs , the treatment of the panels as a whole with van der Weyden 's " elimination of thresholds is quite remarkable and indeed astonishing in the history of the triptych . " As with his Braque Triptych , the background landscape extends across each panel of the lower register . The celestial sphere , towards which the saved move , is dramatically presented with a " radiant gold background , spanning almost the entire width of the altarpiece " .

Motifs and arrangements of figures extend along the lower panels from one to the next , to the extent that the separations between panels are ignored with the intersections cutting figures in two . This is particularly evident on the lower register where each panel division intersects figures , so that parts of figures are painted on two adjoining panels ; whereas Christ and St Michael are enclosed

within the single central panel , giving emphasis to the iconography .

The lower register presents Earth , with its exits to Heaven and Hell . The imposing figure of Christ above indicates the " reign of heaven is about to begin . " The distinction between the earthly and heavenly realms creates a sense of order . Christ , raised high above the altarpiece , " exudes calm and control " , and creates a sense of balance and movement throughout the other panels .

The manner with which van der Weyden presents the resurrection of the dead across the five lower panels is reminiscent of a Gothic tympanum , specifically that at Autun Cathedral . Rolin would have been familiar with the Autun Cathedral entrances , which may have motivated his decision to commission a Last Judgement for the hospice from van der Weyden .

Rolin was aware of the liturgy associated with the Mass for the Dead , and would have known Last Judgement scenes associated with the Mass from 15th @-@ century illuminated manuscripts , such as the full @-@ page Last Judgement in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves which shows Christ placed in a similar position , sitting above as the dead rise from the ground .

= = = Upper register = = =

Jesus sits in judgement in the upper centre panel . He holds a lily in his right hand and a sword in his left , and sits on a rainbow extending across two panels , while his feet rest on a sphere . His right hand is raised in the act of blessing , his left hand lowered . These positions indicate the act of judgement ; he is deciding if souls are to be sent to Heaven or Hell , his gestures echoing the direction and positioning of the scales held by the Archangel Michael beneath him . His palms are open , revealing the wounds sustained when they were nailed to the cross , while his cope gapes in places making visible the injury caused by the lance , which pours deep @-@ red blood . Christ 's face is identical to the representation in van der Weyden 's Braque Triptych , completed just a few years later in 1452 . Christ , placed so high in the pictorial space and spanning both registers , orchestrates the entirety of the inner panels . Whereas earlier Last Judgements might have seemed chaotic , here Christ brings a sense of order .

The two upper register wings on either side of Jesus show a pair of angels holding the instruments of the Passion . These include a lance , crown of thorns and a stick with a sponge soaked in vinegar . The angels are dressed in white liturgical vestments .

The Archangel Michael , the embodiment and conduit of divine justice , is positioned directly below Christ , the only figure to reach both Heaven and Earth . He wears a dispassionate expression as he holds a set of scales to weigh souls . Unusually for Christian art , the damned outweigh the blessed ; Michael 's scales have only one soul in each pan , yet the left pan tips below the right . Michael is given unusual prominence in a " Last Judgement " for the period , and his powerful presence emphasises the work 's function in a hospice and its preoccupation with the liturgy of death . His feet are positioned as if he is stepping forward , almost about to move out of the canvas and he looks directly at the viewer , giving the illusion of judging not only the souls in the painting but also the viewers . Michael , like Sebastian and Anthony , was a plague saint and would have been visible to inmates through the openings of the pierced screen as they lay in their beds . Michael is painted with iconographic elements associated with paintings of the Last Judgement , and is by far the most beautifully and colourfully painted figure ; he is dressed in a red cope with woven golden fabrics over a shining white alb , which dominates the lower panels , " hypnotically attracting the viewer 's glance " according to Lane . He is surrounded by four cherubs , playing trumpets to call the dead to their final destination . Michael 's role in the Last Judgement is emphasised through van der Weyden 's use of colour : Michael 's gleaming white alb contrasts with the cherub 's red vestments , set against a blue sky directly below heaven 's golden clouds .

Beneath Michael , souls scurry left and right . The saved walk in single file towards the gates of Heaven where they are greeted by a saint ; the damned arrive at the mouth of Hell and fall en masse headlong into damnation . The souls balanced in the scales are naked . The blessed look towards Christ , the banished look downwards . Both groups are tilted in the direction of Christ 's hands . Reinforcing this , inscriptions around the groupings read VIRTUTES (Virtues) and PECCATA (sins) .

= = = Lower register = = =

The Virgin Mary , John the Baptist , the twelve Apostles and an assortment of dignitaries are positioned at either side of Michael in a Deësis . The apostles are seated in a semicircle ; Peter , dressed in red , is on the far left , and Paul , dressed in green , is on the far right . The seven haloed dignitaries , dressed in contemporary clothing , are unidentified but include a king , a pope , a bishop , a monk , and three women . Rather than general representative types , they are portraits of specific unidentified individuals , according to Shirley Blum .

The dead rise from their graves around Michael 's feet ; some emerge to walk towards Heaven , others towards Hell . They are tiny compared to Christ and the saints . Lorne Campbell notes that these panels display a deeply pessimistic view of humanity , with the damned far outnumbering the saved , especially compared to Stefan Lochner 's Cologne panel , where the saved crowd the entrance to Heaven . The dead undergo a gradual transformation as they move from panel to panel . The souls rising at Michael 's feet show little expression , becoming more animated as they move to either side ; horror and desperation become especially visible on the faces of the damned as they move towards Hell . On the left , the saved all have , according to Jacobs , " the same beatific expressions " , but their postures gradually change from facing Christ and Michael to looking towards Heaven 's gate , notably with the couple below Mary ? the man turns the woman 's gaze away from Michael , towards Heaven . This contrasts with another couple on the opposite panel who face Hell ; the woman is hunched over as the man raises his hand in vain to beseech God for mercy .

Heaven is represented by an entrance to the Heavenly City , which is in a contemporary Gothic style illuminated by long , thin rays of light . The saved approach clasping their hands in prayer , and are greeted at the entrance by an angel . Only a few souls pass through the heavenly gates at a time . The imagery of a church as an earthly representation of Heaven was popularised in the 13th century by theologians such as Durandus ; the gate to Heaven in this work resembles the entrance to the Beaune hospice . The way to Heaven is shown clearly as a gilded church ? the saved ascend a set of steps , turn right , and disappear from sight . It is fully enclosed in a single panel , whereas Hell extends onto the adjoining panel , perhaps hinting that sin contaminates all around it .

Van der Weyden depicts Hell as a gloomy , crowded place of both close and distant fires , and steep rock faces . The damned tumble helplessly into it , screaming and crying . The sinners descend into Hell with heads mostly bowed , dragging each other along as they go . Traditionally , a Last Judgement painting would depict the damned tormented by malevolent spirits ; yet here the souls are left alone , the only evidence that they are tormented is in their expressions . The hellscape is painted so as to instil terror , but without devils . Erwin Panofsky was the first to pick up on this absence , and proposed that van der Weyden had opted to convey torment in an inward manner , rather than through elaborate descriptions of devils and fiends . He wrote , " The fate of each human being ... inevitably follows from his own past , and the absence of any outside instigator of evil makes us realize that the chief torture of the Damned is not so much physical pain as a perpetual and intolerably sharpened consciousness of their state " . According to Bernhard Ridderbos , van der Weyden accentuated the theme by " restricting the number of the dead and treating them almost as individuals . As the damned approach the abyss of hell they become more and more compressed . "

= = = Exterior panels = = =

The exterior consists of the two donor wings , a pair of saints , and two panels with Gabriel presenting himself to Mary . The donors are on the outer wings , kneeling in front of prayer books . Four imitation statues in grisaille make up the inner panels . The lower two depict Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony . Sebastian was the saint of plagues and an intercessory against epidemics , Anthony the patron saint of skin diseases and ergotism , known in medieval times as St Anthony 's Fire . The two saints had strong associations with the Burgundian court as well : Philip the Good

was born on St Anthony 's day , he had an illegitimate son named Anthony , and two of Rolin 's sons were named Anthony . St Sebastian was the patron saint of Philip the Good 's chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece , of which Rolin was a member .

The two small upper register panels show a rather traditional Annunciation scene , with the usual dove representing the Holy Spirit near Mary . The two sets of panels , unlike those on the interior , are compositionally very different . The figures occupy distinctly separate niches and the colour schemes of the grisaille saints and donors contrast sharply .

Like many mid 15th century polyptychs , the exterior panels borrow heavily from the Ghent Altarpiece , which was completed in 1432 . The combination of naturalistic donor portraits with grisaille imitation statues of saints is borrowed from that work , as is the treatment of the Annunciation . Van der Weyden used iconography in the Beaune exterior panels not found in his other works , which suggests Rolin may have commissioned the altarpiece to follow van Eyck 's example . Van der Weyden was not inclined merely to imitate though , and arranged the panels and figures in a concentrated and compact format . Jacobs writes that " the exterior presents the most consistent pictorial rendering of trompe l 'oeil sculpture to date " . Gabriel 's scroll and Mary 's lily appear to be made of stone ; the figures cast shadows against the back of their niches , creating a sense of depth which adds to the illusion .

The exterior panels are drab , according to Blum , who writes that on Rolin 's panel the most colourful figure is the red angel , which , with its gold helmet and keys , " emerges like an apparition " . Rolin and de Salins can be identified by the coats of arms held by the angels ; husband and wife kneel at cloth covered prie dieux (portable altars) displaying their emblems . Although De Salins was reputedly pious and charitable , and even perhaps the impetus for the building of the hospice , she is placed on the exterior right , traditionally thought of as an inferior position corresponding to Hell , linking her to Eve , original sin and the Fall of man .

Van Eyck had earlier portrayed Rolin in the c . 1435 Madonna of Chancellor Rolin , and the patron is recognizable from that work ; both portraits show similar lips , a large chin and somewhat pointed ears . In van Eyck 's portrait , Rolin is presented as perhaps pompous and arrogant ; here ? ten years later ? he appears more thoughtful and concerned with humility . Campbell notes wryly that van der Weyden may have been able to disguise the sitter 's ugliness and age , and that the unusual shape of his mouth may have been downplayed . He writes that while " van Eyck impassively recorded , van der Weyden imposed a stylised and highly personal vision of the subject " . Van Eyck 's depiction was most likely the more accurate ; van der Weyden embellished , mainly by lengthening the nose , enlarging the eyes and raising the eyebrows .

= = Inscriptions = =

The panels contain quotations in Latin from several biblical texts . They appear either as lettering seemingly sewn into the edges of the figures ' clothes (mostly hidden in the folds) , or directly on the surface of the central inner panel . The latter occur in four instances ; two pairs of text float on either side of Christ , two around Michael . Beneath the lily , in white paint are the words of Christ : VENITE BENEDICTI PATRIS MEI POSSIDETE PARATUM VOBIS REGNUM A CONSTITUTIONE MUNDI (" Come ye blessed of my father , inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world ") . The text beneath the sword reads : DISCEDITE A ME MALEDICTI IN IGNEM AETERNUM QUI PARATUS EST DIABOLO ET ANGELIS EJUS (" Depart from me ye cursed , into everlasting fire , prepared for the devil and his angels ") .

The inscriptions follow the 14th century convention of showing figures , imagery and motifs associated with the saved to Christ 's right , and those of the damned to his left . The words beneath the lily (the benedicti) read upwards towards Heaven , their curves leaning in towards Christ . The text to the left (the maledicti) flows in the opposite direction ; from the highest point downwards . The inscriptions to Christ 's right are decorated in light colours , to the extent that they are usually difficult to discern in reproductions . The lettering opposite faces downwards , and is applied with black paint .

= = Condition = =

A number of panels are in poor condition , owing variously to darkening of the colours , accumulated dirt , and poor decisions during early restorations . The altarpiece stayed in the chapel from the time of its installation until the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution , when it was hidden in the attic for decades . When it was brought out , the nude souls ? thought to be offensive ? were painted over with clothing and flames ; it was moved to a different room , hung 3 metres (10 ft) from the ground , and portions were whitewashed . In 1836 , the Commission of Antiquities retrieved it and began plans to have it restored . Four decades later it underwent major restoration ? between 1875 and 1878 ? when many of these additions were removed , but not without significant damage to the original paintwork , such as the loss of pigment to the wall @-@ hangings in the donor panels , which were originally red and gold . In general , the central inside panels are better preserved than the interior and exterior wings . De Salins ' panel is damaged ; its colours have darkened with age ; originally the niche was a light blue (today it is light green) and the shield held by the angel was painted in blue .

The panels were laterally divided so that both sides could be displayed simultaneously , and a number of the panels were transferred to canvas .