

The altarpiece, the prime Gothic art form

In the late thirteenth century, there was a burgeoning tendency to decorate altars not only with antependia or frontals but also with items placed near the back edge of the altar table. These objects made of gold, sculpted and painted stone or painted wood were called altarpieces, or in *retaules* Catalan because where they were placed (*retro tabula*). They soon became extraordinarily popular: they ended up absorbing all the images that used to be painted on frontals and murals because they were easier to see than the former and less complicated to make than the latter.

Starting in the late Middle Ages, the altarpiece became a piece of furniture situated on the main altar of all churches. At first they were shaped like a bench with a single image or a small central temple bearing the image of a saint with panels that could be unfolded. But after the mid-fourteenth century, altarpieces—especially those made of painted wood—grew significantly in width and height all over the Iberian Peninsula, which led them to occupy almost the entire apse in both the main and side altars.

Just like altar frontals and murals before them, altarpieces depict scenes from the lives of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the saints depending on the saint associated with each altar. The goal was to endow the altar with the appropriate symbolic dignity and to instruct and sermonise the congregation. There is often a Calvary, an obligatory point of reference in the mass, in the upper central part.

The advent of altarpieces generally dovetailed with the dawn of the Gothic style, which is broadly characterised by more naturalistic depictions of human figures, and for testing out perspective in scene design and including architectural motifs like pointed and trefoil arches and pinnacles. Artisans also gained more respect and fame during this period: we know many more names of the authors of Gothic than Romanesque works.

Gothic painting on wooden board

The earliest Gothic painting style, which has been documented since the late thirteenth century, is called linear because of the predominance of outlines defining the figures. Later on, they became more naturalistic with the adoption of the Italianate and the early International Gothic style, and they strove to depict perspective, which was even further accentuated with the introduction of the Flemish style in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Gilded

backgrounds, which are associated with the expression of the holy and the supernatural, did not begin to dwindle until almost 1500.

The Gothic painting collection at the Diocesan Museum of Urgell includes the altarpieces of the *Goigs de la Mare de Déu* (Joys of the Virgin Mary) from Abella de la Conca (last quarter of the fourteenth century) by Pere Serra, one of the most celebrated Italianate Gothic painters; the altarpiece of the Virgin Mary with Child, a hallmark of the early International Gothic style; and the compartment depicting the last sermon of Saint John the Baptist (mid-fifteenth century) attributed to Valentí Montoliu, a painter from Tarragona working in the late International Gothic style.