

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

Washington, D. C. December 14, 1967. Two paintings commissioned by Queen Isabella of Spain in the 1490's were reunited this week in the collection of the National Gallery of Art. Director John Walker announced that The Assumption of the Virgin by Miguel Sithium, a 1965 acquisition, has been joined by The Temptation of Christ by Juan de Flandes.

The paintings were executed between 1498 and 1504 as part of a famous religious cycle--the so-called "oratory" series--by Isabella's two most talented court painters for her private chapel, or oratory. The Washington panels will henceforth be viewed together in a specially-constructed double frame.

In making the announcement Mr. Walker said: "Since 1965 when the Gallery had the good fortune to acquire the panel by Sithium from the 'oratory' we have been seeking a second panel by Juan de Flandes, the only other artist who is known to have worked on this polyptych."

Queen Isabella's little altar pictures have been admired for centuries, he explained. In 1521 when Dürer visited Margaret of Austria's collection, the artist wrote in his notebook, "I saw about 40 little panels in oil color, such as I

have never seen for precision and excellence." Van Eyck's great Arnolfini panel seemed to elicit less enthusiasm from Dürer than did the "oratory" panels.

Originally consisting of at least 47 scenes, the altar paintings were inventoried and sold off after Isabella's death in 1504. Her daughter-in-law, Margaret of Austria, acquired 32 of the pictures, including The Temptation of Christ and The Assumption of the Virgin, upon the advice of her treasurer Diego de Guevara. Guevara was a connoisseur of painting and very likely is the subject of the National Gallery's portrait, A Knight of the Order of Calatrava by Sithium which is exhibited alongside the two small pictures.

Little is known about Juan de Flandes. His name first appears in 1496 when he entered the service of Queen Isabella to whom he was appointed court painter two years later. His Spanish nickname--for his true name is unknown--refers to the style of his painting. The influence of the Flemish painter Gerard David is so strong in his work that when The Temptation of Christ was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1908 it was attributed to David.

Juan de Flandes traveled to Palencia where he was commissioned in 1509 to paint the panels of the Life of the Virgin for the high altar of San Lázaro. Four of these panels, the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Baptism of Christ, are now in the National Gallery of Art.

The Temptation of Christ was purchased through the Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.

Black-and-white photographs and color transparencies are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. 20565, Area Code 202, 737-4215.