

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY EXHIBITION PROBES THE MYSTERIES OF THE SAINT ANNE ALTARPIECE

WASHINGTON, DC -- For the first time since around 1902, the three panels of the National Gallery of Art's magnificently restored Saint Anne Altarpiece will be brought together with seven smaller panels, which might have been a part of the original altarpiece, for the exhibition The Saint Anne Altarpiece by Gerard David. The show will be open January 26 through May 10, 1992 in the West Building, Gallery 41A.

It is generally agreed that the six smallest panels, Three Miracles of Saint Nicholas from the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, and Three Miracles of Saint Anthony of Padua from the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, are part of the original altarpiece. Another painting that may have been part of this ensemble is The Lamentation at the Foot of the Cross from the Art Institute of Chicago.

"Thanks to the generosity of the participating museums, visitors will have an unparalleled opportunity to probe the mysteries surrounding this exquisite and fascinating work of art by Gerard David, one of the finest Netherlandish artists of the Renaissance," said J. Carter Brown, director, National Gallery of Art.

A striking combination of precision and power, the Saint Anne Altarpiece, when assembled, would have been one of the largest and most impressive of early Netherlandish altarpieces. It is also apparently unique in having an Italianate predella, a series of small panels arranged horizontally along the bottom of the altarpiece. Netherlandish predellas are somewhat rare and usually consist of a single image, often depicting an event from the life or passion of Christ.

"There are a number of fascinating issues that further warrant bringing these paintings together," said John Oliver Hand, curator of northern Renaissance painting, National Gallery of Art, who is the exhibition curator. "Since the frame no longer exists, there is a question as to what the initial arrangement of the altarpiece might have been and what this says about its original location. Also, the Saint Anne Altarpiece testifies to the lively interchange between the Netherlands and southern Europe."

There is no hard evidence that David ever traveled to Italy or Spain, but there is ample evidence that his works were valued beyond the borders of the Netherlands. He was born around 1460 in a town near Gouda, in the northern Netherlands and died in Bruges in 1523. He was a superb technician, composer, and colorist whose art was at once traditional and innovative. He was often progressive in his approach to iconography, rendering of mass and volume in space, and depiction of landscape.

The painstaking restoration of the National Gallery's Saint Anne Altarpiece was performed by Cathy A. Metzger, conservator, systematic catalogue, National Gallery of Art. The restoration involved the removal of layers of repainting and old varnish, as well as reconstruction of the arches depicted in the wing panels and continuation of the brocade pattern on the top of the middle panel. The top eight inches had been cut off the three panels before they entered the Widener Collection in 1907.

Dominating the National Gallery's center panel is Saint Anne, a monumental figure seated on a throne decorated with four naked putti. Her daughter, the Virgin Mary, is seated on her lap. Mary holds the Christ Child who turns the pages of a large, illuminated book. On the left wing stands the full-length figure of Saint Nicholas, one of the best-known and most popular of saints. On the right wing stands Saint Anthony of Padua, tonsured, barefoot, and wearing the humble robes of a member of the Franciscan order.

The three panels from Edinburgh depict scenes from the life and legend of Saint Nicholas. Similarly, the three panels from Toledo represent episodes from the legend of Saint Anthony of Padua. The panel from Chicago shows John the Evangelist, the Virgin, and Mary Magdalene grieving over the body of Christ.

Hypothetical reconstructions of the panels will be presented through photographs. Infrared reflectography of the underdrawings of the National Gallery's panels will help visitors understand how they were created. A brochure will accompany the exhibition. The National Gallery of Art in Washington is the only venue for this exhibition.