Over the past twenty-five years, historians of church art have often stressed its liturgical meaning. More recent scholarship has expanded this contextual approach by locating religious belief, ritual, and art in a network of social, political, and economic issues. Today, the best scholarship is apt to look at church art not as the symbolic visual expression of timeless truth or ritual but as the vehicle for the often conflicting religious ideologies of various groups in a given historical setting. In The Altar and the Altarpiece, Barbara Lane rejects this multi-dimensional analysis in favor of a monolithic liturgical reading. Her main thesis is that the seemingly ordinary nationalism of fifteenth-century Flemish art conceals from modern viewers an ongoing liturgical symbolism and meaning. Taking the most popular Christological subjects of Flemish painting, (Madonna and Child, Nativity, Crucifixion, Descent, Lamentation, Last Supper, Gregorian Man of Sorrows), Lane explains their frequency on the grounds that they were easily interpreted liturgically by artist and viewer. Such thinking overlooks the fact that these themes were all, with the exception of the Last Supper and the Descent, common in fifteenth-century woodcuts and engravings, works clearly used in non-liturgical spaces for private purposes. Rather than admit Flemish art might have had a variety of settings and functions, Lane insists on a liturgical context for all Flemish art. Even the many small devotional paintings seen by most scholars as private devotional aids are said to have been commissioned for domestic altars, a theory that allows Lane to group them with church altarpieces: "No matter where they were located, ... these radiant panels had to explain the meaning of the church ceremonies they were commissioned to illustrate" (p. 9). Could Lane be unaware of the Bruges art market which sold hundreds of small, uncommissioned, devotional paintings for private, non-liturgical use? And what about the thousands of woodcuts and engravings? One even wonders if all the larger paintings she discusses were commissioned for altars. Admittedly documentary evidence is scarce, but surely this needs to be acknowledged and the discussion qualified accordingly. Unfortunately, Lane chains all religious art to the altar where it serves as a relentless, visual explanation of the Mass and of theological doctrine.

Compounding the problem is her insistence that fifteenth-century Flemish painting was different from earlier art only in its more naturalistic forms. forms that gave a new drama and vividness to the traditional function of art as liturgical explication. Strangely absent is any sense that fifteenth-century religious art might have been responding to new religious, social, and economic forces within and outside the church. Lane's Christianity, liturgy, and religious art all exist outside history in a world of "timeless theological truths" (pp. 8, 9). This language of timelessness, which reoccurs throughout the book, is part of an outmoded ekphrasis, an art historical rhetoric substituting evangelical praise for historical documentation and critical analysis. Typically, Lane's fifteenth-century North is an "age of overwhelming piety" in contrast to the modern skeptical world" (p. 1); its art displays an "overwhelming spiritual intensity" (p. 2); it is "vivid, dramatic" (p. 8), and its "enchanting panels" have a "jewel-like radiance" (p. 1). Seemingly harmless,
such comments continue the old myth of the late middle ages as a pious Golden Age free from the conflicts and doubts of modern life. In fact, it was a time of unprecedented fragmentation and skepticism, the latter often directed at the elaborate liturgy and altarpieces of church practice. Moderate reformers such as Jean Gerson, Thomas à Kempis, and Wessel Gansfort argued for restraints on externalized piety and stressed a non-material, non-liturgical, inner faith based on solitary meditation. More radical thinkers such as Wycliffe, Hus, and Nicolas of Dresden condemned the Church’s liturgical and aesthetic language as the garb of the Whore of Babylon, the sign of the anti-Christ, and proof that the post-Constantinian Church had become a corrupt theatre of worldly power. If the personal faith recommended by moderate reformers can be seen in the new, widespread taste for small devotional panels, prints, and triptychs featuring meditating donors,⁵ the radical critique finds parallels in the art of Bosch. His Haywain parodied corpus christi processions, eucharistic worship, and idolatry by using a pseudo-triptych depicting the emperor, pope, church hierarchy, and the Franciscan order, all blindly fighting for worldly gain on the path to hell. Spiritual intensity was there, but not the bland sort offered by Lane. As to the violent tensions of the day, whether popular interest in church ceremonies was rising or falling, whether communion was encouraged or discouraged, whether people received the eucharist daily or yearly, none of this is mentioned by Lane.

Much recent research indicates that this notion of an overpowering liturgical piety reaching into the sphere of domestic art either reverses the actual dynamic or distorts it by seeing only one part of a complex whole. The fifteenth century was, paradoxically, a time when unprecedented image worship and liturgical splendor coexisted with increasing doubts about the role of art and church ritual.⁶ In the Netherlands, lay groups such as the Devotio Moderna spread a piety of the solitary heart meditating on vernacular Scriptures and on accounts of the life of Christ. The Scriptures in turn were read by the new mercantile class not as the multi-levelled, philosophically complex text appealing to an intellectual clerical elite, but as a simple, useful collection of moral and spiritual examples. So too, fifteenth-century religious art came to espouse a practical, “domestic” piety, something Meyer Schapiro pointed out in 1945 in a famous article on the Mérode Altar. Not surprisingly, this article is absent from Lane’s discussion.⁷ The triumph of moral piety over theological abstraction and beautiful Madonnas came at the end of the fifteenth century in Bosch, and even more so in the later art of Bruegel. While eucharistic devotions remained important in the fifteenth century, their efficacy was increasingly related to the communicant’s piety. In Gansfort’s The Sacrament of the Eucharist, the sacrament was less a church ritual than a memory device for a private meditation on the historical Passion, a meditation recalling the soul to God at least as effectively as the mass itself. When we remember that people in the fifteenth century received communion, on average, only once a year, this in sharp contrast to early Christian and modern practice, it is perhaps easier to see why private mediation could have assumed for many laymen a priority over the liturgy.

Even if one agreed that early Flemish art was strongly liturgical, one would still want to know why, a question Lane never asks. Presumably there was some need to
spread liturgical dogma, some ignorance, resistance, or heresy to overcome. Once we see Flemish art as promoting rather than explaining the liturgy, the question why becomes more manageable. An answer might be found in the ever-increasing multiplicity and potential heterodoxy of fifteenth-century religious life, particularly the threat of lay groups armed with vernacular literature and the alternative, uncontrolled, domestic "liturgy" of private meditation. The new naturalism and emphatic liturgical symbolism of Gothic art has been explained, in part, as a response to the Albigensian heresy with its denial of the humanity of Christ, the real presence of the Host, the cult of the Virgin, and the role of the Church as intermediary. So too, the naturalism and liturgical emphasis of Italian and Flemish Baroque art countered the Protestant attack on church authority and the Catholic cult of ritual and image. Did fifteenth-century Flemish art emphasize liturgical symbolism to offset the potential heresy of lay devotion? And did church officials place the lay imagery of private meditation into a proper eucharistic context in its triptychs in hopes of controlling the spreading lay piety? It is one thing to say with Lane that early Flemish paintings explain the liturgy and "make timeless truths vivid." quite another to see these works as ideological expressions of church authority in a time of crisis. The primary message of the Ghent altar, after all, is that salvation comes only to those who accept the Church and its intermediating rituals, rituals upheld by a cozy hierarchy running from Christ through the Church elite to the Mayor of Ghent. Given the Virgin's equation with the Church from the twelfth century on, was not her cult also a method of strengthening ecclesiastical control at a time of spreading heresy and religious fragmentation? Is this one of the hidden or not so hidden messages of Rogier's Vienna and Philadelphia Crucifixions and his Prado Descent? Instead of Lane's one-way dynamic with liturgical spaces and symbolism overpowering those of the home, I see a give and take between conflicting spaces and practices, home and church, lay meditation and official ritual. Even within the home and the church, such tensions were always present, as preachers, wealthy patrons, and artists struggled to resolve the violent contradictions of an extravagant church hierarchy and a growing mercantile prosperity with the lay apostolic ideals of humility and poverty. Such contradictions were said to have driven Hugo van der Goes mad, and they are visible not only in his art but also in that of the Rohan Master, Campin, the Housebook Master, and Bosch. To say of Hugo's Berlin Nativity, "In this dramatic painting, the Infant Christ on the manger-altar is a visual explanation of the consecrated Host" (p. 57), is to drain it of any real drama and religious content. Rather than linking real and pictorial space in a reassuring illusionistic and liturgical continuum, Hugo's curtains fracture sacred and profane. The viewer is invited to see the holy setting not as the banal, everyday space which the naturalism of all early Flemish religious art risked, but as a mystically charged, highly unnatural setting whose potentially mundane appearances are shattered by rushing, skewed perspectives and disturbing antitheses of violent action and stilled inwardness, outer and inner. Rather than "visual explanation," the painting tries to shock the viewer into a beholding which is closer to revelation, thus the curtains pulled aside by troubled prophets.

Instead of immersing Flemish art in its turbulent history, Lane delivers a static
compilation of the motifs by which a “radiant” Flemish art offered “vivid” explanations of “timeless theology.” Her book is indeed more of a catalogue than a searching discussion, a plodding, often implausible description of liturgical motifs in architecture, interior furnishings, and gestures. The believable motifs are the most obvious, the churches or church-like structures, the corporal-like, swaddling clothes or shrouds in infancy and Passion themes, the paten-like, golden mandorlas under the Christ Child, the altar-like tables, mangers, or tombs, and the curtains which evoke those at the altar. On the implausible side, Lane transforms fifteenth-century bedrooms into ecclesiastical sanctuaries and tabernacle towers. Niche-like recesses become aumbries, and common, fifteenth-century Flemish wash basins turn into liturgical piscinas. (Oddly, she misses the only clear piscina found in one of her images of Christ, fig. 87.) Every table, tomb, or manger is said to resemble an altar, whether or not there is any visual similarity. All kneeling evokes the position of a worshipper before an altar, as if kneeling did not signify humility and prayer more generally. Even the statuesque, wooden volumes of van Eyck’s Madonnas are said to imply the “Throne of Solomon” and the altar, this despite the fact that every form in Jan’s mature work has such box-like volumes.

Had Lane confined herself to summarizing traditional observations of liturgical motifs, her book would have been a useful synthesis of past scholarship. But since much of that scholarship is hers, she is eager to go further. Unfortunately, her solution is to expand the liturgical approach into an all-consuming explanation. While this is admittedly new, as she frequently reminds her reader, the result is not the revitalization of an interpretative method. In the face of one implausible statement after another, the reader comes, wrongly, to doubt the whole enterprise. Had this method been integrated into a more complex discussion of the new religious art, its liturgical dimension could have indeed taken on new life. Instead, Lane presses on to discover liturgical symbolism and meaning everywhere, with little regard to logic or visual evidence. Her discussion frequently bogs down in speculation, unhistorical thinking (so that later works explain earlier ones), arbitrary handling of texts, and disregard for visual evidence (whereby works with obvious liturgical motifs and meaning somehow show the latter in works without these motifs). Many “new” ideas are so familiar, one wonders why they were included. Do we need to be told at length how Rogier’s Presentation in the Temple or Bouts’s Last Supper refer to the eucharist? Is it new to see the offering of the Host reflected in Rogier’s Descent from the Cross or any “Descent” from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century? It may have once been necessary to point it out in Rogier’s Descent, as Schiller did in 1968, but such observations have long been made for countless Descents. And isn’t it obvious that any altarpiece with a prominent Virgin also refers to the Church? One suspects such lengthy descriptions of conspicuous liturgical motifs were necessary to support her claim of an overwhelming liturgical dimension in all Flemish art, even in works where it seems “hidden” or “subtle,” (i.e., where it is absent).

In handling texts, Lane invariably relates Biblical passages inscribed on painting to the liturgical rites in which these passages were read. There is no sense that Scripture was also important outside of church, this at a time when the Bible was widely translated and read aloud at home and in lay groups. Literary sources are
also falsely opposed to naturalistic observation, as if artists had to choose between literary (or iconographic) traditions and the familiar, visible reality around them. Since James Marrow’s book on Passion iconography, we know the most vivid, “real” observations of Northern Renaissance art were often closely related to textual sources. Had Land compared Rogier’s Berlin Lamentation and Vienna Crucifixion to fourteenth-century handbooks, such as Ludolph of Saxony’s Vita Christi, and not the early thirteenth-century Meditations on the Life of Christ, she would have found a similar degree of visual and psychological detail. Ludolph spends pages describing Mary’s grief as she holds the dead Christ in her lap and mentions the mingling of tears and blood Lane credits Rogier with inventing (pp. 86, 93). The intensity of Rogier’s “tearful Virgin desperately clinging to Christ’s rigid body” (Lane) is not so different from Ludolph’s account where Mary embraces Christ with a violent passion, “nor could any one draw her off the body.”

Finally, early Christian and even Byzantine writers are used instead of those more relevant for the fifteenth century. In explaining how Bethlehem means “house of bread” and making the analogy between manger and altar, fodder and eucharist, Lane cites Gregory the Great (d. 604, p. 53.) She should have used a fifteenth-century source, or at least someone whose account of the Nativity was profoundly influential in that period, such as Bernard of Clairvaux. The latter repeatedly mentions the above cited explanation and analogy in his sermons on the incarnation.

There is also a strange inconsistency of basic assumptions. At times, Flemish art is said to respond to the overriding pressure of liturgical symbolism which is introduced, however inappropriately, into everyday settings. At other times, as in Hugo’s Berlin Nativity, realism is the dominant force. Rather than admitting that different, potentially incompatible impulses operated simultaneously in Flemish art. Lane uses whatever assumptions are convenient for the argument at hand. Thus she ends up contradicting herself and confusing the reader.

Above all, Lane fails to offer a searching examination of the new naturalism which could serve as a framework for its liturgical dimension. In Rogier’s Vienna Crucifixion, “the sweeping landscape that replaces the traditional gold ground serves merely as a backdrop for the sacred image in the foreground.” In fact, this landscape fleshes out an adequately detailed space which is both historical and contemporary in which the sacred past can speak to the present in a very different way from her gold-ground picture of the fourteenth century (fig. 51). Rogier’s cracked rocky grounds evokes the moment of Christ’s death when “the earth did quake and the rocks were rent” (Matthew 27:51). So too, the distant Flemish town represents Jerusalem, just as devotional handbooks advised readers to use contemporary locations as a memory field against which passion episodes could be projected with greater vividness and emotional impact. The weeping angels, the fainting Mary, the conspicuous display of the donor’s piety—none of this involves a sacramental reading and yet all are fundamental to the picture. As with the other works discussed, Lane reduces Rogier’s panel to “an illustration of the sacrifice . . . performed . . . at every mass (p. 82). More a disappointing synthesis than a fresh look at early Netherlandish painting. Lane’s
book is a desiccated example of neo-Panofskian method and a useful reminder of the need to move beyond to new questions and new thinking.

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Notes
1 See, for example, Jan Baptist Bedaux, “The Reality of Symbols: the Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait,” Simiolus, 16 (1986), 5-28, an article which corrects the outdated, overly theological and sacramental reading of my own reading. “Marriage as a Sacramental reflection of the Passion: The Mirror in Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Wedding.” Oud Holland, 98 (1984), 57-75.
3 Carlos Eire, War Against the Idols (Cambridge [UK], 1986), p.827.
4 Meyer Schapiro, “Muscipula Diaboli: The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece,” Art Bulletin, 27 (1945), 182-187. More recently, see Cynthia Hahn, “Joseph Will Perfect, Mary Enlighten, and Jesus Save Thee: The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Mérode Triptych.” Art Bulletin, 48 (1966), 54-66. While Lane does cite Coo’s social reading in a footnote, she avoids any comment, presumably because she has no answer to his ideas. Invariably, thinking that conflicts with her arguments is placed “out of sight, out of mind” in the footnotes, where the issues can be buried rather than addressed.
5 For the multiplicity and fragmentation of religious life already in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, see Caroline Walker Bynum, Jesus as Mother (Berkeley, 1982), p. 82-109.
6 See the excellent, beholder-oriented discussion of Northern Renaissance naturalism in James Marrow, “Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance,” Simiolus, 16 (1986), 150-169.
7 Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, Band 2 (Göttersch, 1968; English ed.: Greenwich, 1972, p. 168).
8 See James Marrow, Passion Iconography in Northern Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance (Kortrijk, 1979). Though this is the most important publication on Northern Renaissance art since Panofsky, it is not even mentioned in Lane.


This is an unusual book, and the title goes only half-way to explaining it. As Rita Guerlac explains, it was edited from a virtually complete draft left by the late James Hutton, to which she has added some footnotes (after some considerable research) and some translations from the Greek. It seems to have been virtually complete from 1960, and to have been made out of Hutton’s work on the Greek Anthology in France, spurred on by his own experience of the Second World War. So it does not read like a modern book of criticism, in constant dialogue with other critics and theories. The dialogue, instead, is that between Renaissance writers and their classical and medieval predecessors. The other side of that old-fashioned feel is its stunning classical erudition. Hutton was a Classics Professor who spent most of his career studying the impact of the Classics on the Renaissance, and he does so here with a kind of learning and linguistic range that one would say has virtually disappeared were it not for the evidence of his editor’s ability to follow him. Comparisons with Auerbach would not be out of place; though the range and the depth