

Juan de Flandes's Saint Michael and Saint Francis

by COLIN EISLER

One of the most mysterious and persuasive artists active at the turn of the fifteenth century in Spain was Juan de Flandes, whose work is now represented in the Museum by a recently acquired painting of Saint Michael and Saint Francis. Nothing is known of Juan de Flandes before his name appears in 1496 when he was appointed painter to the court of Isabella of Castile, and it is his name alone that provides some documentation of his Netherlandish origin and artistic heritage. Appointed painter to the court in 1496, Juan de Flandes together with other northern European painters employed by the Queen was working on a series of exquisitely finished, miniaturelike panels depicting forty-seven scenes from the lives of Christ and Mary for her *oratorio* or private royal chapel. Now largely dispersed (one may be seen at the Detroit Institute of Arts), these paintings were probably first assembled in the characteristically Spanish form of the *retablo*, an altar in which many panels are grouped in screenlike fashion into a single architectural structure. Almost all of Juan's subsequent panel paintings were planned for such *retablos*, some of them incorporating sculpture. For this commission, which may have been his first in this format, Juan reduced the size of the individual panels to an intimate scale recalling that of manuscript illuminations. Indeed, the precision and delicacy of the earliest works he is

known to have executed in Spain suggest that his initial training in the north had been that of a manuscript illuminator. His years of apprenticeship may have been spent in Ghent, a center for the sophisticated, introspective art so frequently reflected in his work. A masterpiece by one of the leading artists from this area, Joos van Gent's Adoration of the Magi, executed at a time when Juan may himself have been active there, came to the Museum with the Blumenthal collection. A similar world of aristocratic melancholy, peopled by doll-like figures poised in elegantly arrested motion, their drapery disposed in tubular folds, is portrayed by Juan de Flandes. He continues Joos van Gent's use of a restrained palette, his color characterized by gray-tinged pastel shades, enlivened by the sparing use of surprisingly vivid, almost acid tonalities. Juan's calculated fusion of the courtly with the naïve stems from the general tendency toward a mannered style that prevailed as the fifteenth century drew to a close.

It may well be that by traveling and, very probably, working his way through France en route to Spain in the early 1490s, Juan de Flandes absorbed the French taste for a more sculptural definition of the form than was then popular in his native school. When he arrived in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century he brought with him a fusion of French and Netherlandish stylistic currents. When he combined these with certain decorative trends long popular in Spain, his art contributed to a new movement, paralleling the so-called International Style formed at the end of the fourteenth century.

Saint Michael and Saint Francis, by Juan de Flandes (active, Spain, 1496-1519). Height 36 7/8 inches
Mary Wetmore Shively Bequest Fund, 1959



SAINT MICHAEL

SAINT FRANCIS

Frequently drawing upon the talents of foreigners to provide works of art, just as they looked to them for geographical discoveries, the Spaniards hired many northern European and Italian artists and craftsmen to bring their skills to Spain, forming a somewhat provincial fusion of varying styles of contemporary European art cast in traditional Spanish forms like the elaborate *retablo*.

Juan de Flandes's artistic career in Spain offers several parallels to that of El Greco less than a century later. Both came to Spain with their art firmly rooted in foreign styles; both moved further and further away from the schools in which they were trained toward increasingly dramatic expressions of their own. Just as El Greco rejected the art of his Venetian apprenticeship in favor of a mystical, passionately austere revelation, Juan de Flandes gradually discarded his heritage of Netherlandish realism for a more abstract and emotional idiom. After working under royal patronage both artists withdrew to intellectual centers—Juan de Flandes to Salamanca and Palencia, El Greco to Toledo—where they remained until the end of their lives, leaving sons who followed their fathers' careers as painters.

It has been suggested that the art of Juan de Flandes may be divided into three phases. In the first he contributed to Queen Isabella's *retablo* between 1496 and 1504 works intimate in scale and still northern in their fidelity to the world of appearances. His years as court painter terminated upon the Queen's death in 1504. In his second period there is a marked increase in scale and a tendency toward simplification and monumentality. This may best be observed in the paintings ordered in 1509 for the great *retablo* of the cathedral at Palencia, his new home. Slightly later examples from the same period are eight panels painted for the church of San Lázaro in Palencia and now divided between the Prado and the National Gallery in Washington. In his third and final phase the characteristics of the preceding period are stressed almost as an end in themselves. The works of this closing period show irrationally large, rather bizarre figures expanding within a vacuumlike space, as may be seen in the Prado Visitation, also from San Lázaro, probably painted shortly before the

artist's death, which occurred in 1519 when his wife is listed as being widowed.

In the Museum's newly acquired panel, lettering in blue and red identifies the occupants of the niches as "Sant Miguel" and "Sant Francisco." Their names are written on representations of small pieces of vellum painted as though tacked on the golden wall. The two figures stand in their golden niches like momentarily animated statuettes: the calm, gentle Saint Michael almost reluctantly thrusts his cruciform lance through the muzzle of a capricious dragon at his feet, while Saint Francis, revealing the signs of the stigmata, is openmouthed, as though singing one of his beautiful canticles to Brother Sun. Armed only with a jeweled processional cross and a fanciful, gem-studded parade shield, Saint Michael wears the pale blue alb in which he is usually shown as the weigher of souls, rather than the body armor customarily buckled on for his combat with the devil. His festive, disarming appearance here stresses the purely ceremonial nature of the combat.

The crimson of the border surrounding the polished steel face of Saint Michael's shield is repeated at the top of his richly polychromed wings and in the claws of the dragon. This carefully contrived color distribution is paralleled by the graceful complementary curves of the archangel and the dragon, the whole creating an extraordinarily decorative balance of color and contour. Saint Michael's richly colored wings and lance project beyond the bounds of the archway above, while the dragon's tail and claws extend below, reaching across toward the adjacent niche.

The austere, ascetic representation of Saint Francis presents a perfect foil for the extravagant depiction of his neighbor. He is barefoot, with the gray habit of his order slashed and his hands raised, revealing the five wounds of Christ. Although shown in a moment of ecstasy, his hands still maintain a gesture of that courtly elegance so characteristic of Juan de Flandes. Placed entirely within the niche, Francis's outstretched hands and widespread feet define the limits of his space.

Our artist's approach to the presentation of form resembles that of the sculptors who were his contemporaries. Like them he worked over

the accidents and irregularities of surface to bring out the clarified form within. Our panel is reminiscent of the Netherlandish practice of grisaille painting in which the artist uses grayed tones to present figures in mock-sculptural form, thus contrasting his ability to represent the art of the sculptor with his ability to re-create the appearance of life itself.

The intricate realism of the view of battlements mirrored on the burnished convex steel face of Saint Michael's shield (page 132) is a literal reflection of Juan's Netherlandish heritage; it was a favorite pictorial device of Jan van Eyck and his followers. The reflected fortress may perhaps allude to Saint Michael's role as militant protector of the children of the Lord. Juan's *Christ Before Pilate*, a panel of the Palencia cathedral *retablo*, ordered in 1509, shows a shield identical in form to the one here.

Our painting measures 38 by 33 inches and is on a heavy wooden panel. The back is coated with a protective layer of hemp-reinforced gesso.

At the time the panel was in the Cook collection it still retained some later additions to the surface, probably the work of a restorer at the end of the nineteenth century. A curved capital had been painted on the top of the wall surface dividing the niches, converting this narrow area into a column, and a false ledge had been created by extending the floor of each niche out beyond the newly created column down the picture plane to a line immediately above the inscriptions. Painted on to give the panel a false impression of "completeness," these additions had been removed before the painting came to the Museum.

Directly beneath the area now covered by its modern carved gilt frame the surface of the panel is bordered on all four sides by a narrow band of blue paint, which was probably first intended to be covered by an elaborate architectural molding. The blue borders at the top and at the left, like the wood on which they are painted, are original. Those at the bottom and the right and

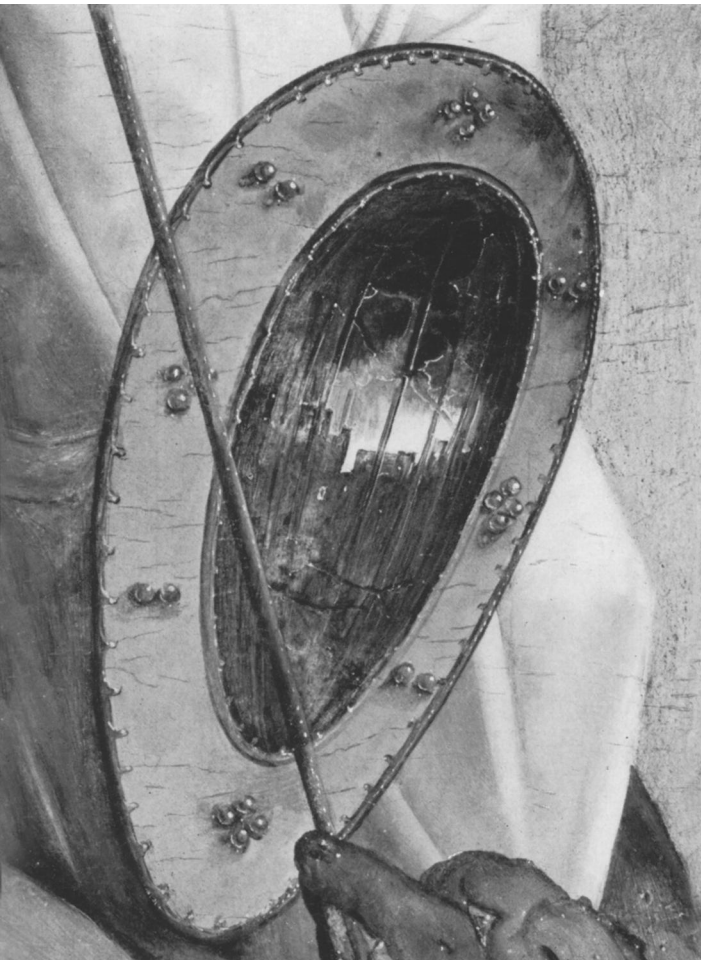
Adoration of the Magi, by Joos van Gent (active 1460-1480). Height 43 inches
Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941



their supporting strips, however, are recent additions, suggesting that our panel was in all probability sawn away from, or is the survivor of, a larger grouping of scenes and images. The back of the panel is reinforced by heavy battens resembling hand-hewn two-by-fours. These are secured to the panel by hand-forged nails which were hammered down through the front of the panel before it was covered by the artist with a preparatory layer of gesso. As these battens are also cut off sharply at the right, they afford additional evidence that the panel originally belonged to a larger complex. Perhaps it formed the upper left section of a painted series of saints in niches, bordering the narrative scenes or the sculptural figures of a *retablo*.

Nothing is known of the Museum's Saint Michael and Saint Francis before it was lent by the Cook collection to an exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1908 as a work of the early Spanish or Portuguese schools. In 1913, when shown at the Grafton Galleries, it was

Detail of Saint Michael's shield, from our panel



listed as "Early Spanish School, circa 1480." Émile Bertaux, who was the first to attribute the painting correctly, described it in 1914 as a recent purchase of Sir Frederick Cook, whose father founded the remarkably comprehensive collection at Doughty House. Unusually rich in Spanish paintings, this gallery included several works bought by Sir Francis Cook either in Spain or in Portugal, where he held the title of Visconde de Monserrate. Bertaux's attribution was accepted in the third volume of Maurice W. Brockwell's catalogue of the Cook pictures published in 1915, where our painting is illustrated and recorded.

After it entered the Cook collection the panel was studied by Professor Chandler Rathfon Post, who suggested the possibility that the image of Saint Michael was perhaps partially inspired by Schongauer's engraving of the same subject. Pointing to the gilded arcades as an indication of Juan's adoption of Spanish taste, Professor Post related the panel on the grounds of subject matter to the same artist's painting for the Old Cathedral of Salamanca. Another author has suggested that Saint Michael and Saint Francis might have formed part of the *retablo* in Queen Isabella's *oratorio*, basing this suggestion on the notion that the panel was small in size—he describes it as a *tablita*. It is, however, much larger than the forty-seven panels which formed the Queen's *retablo*, and the painting was certainly executed at a considerably later date.

Judging from its style, our Saint Michael and Saint Francis stems from the artist's middle period, and was probably executed during the years between the completion of his *retablo* for the Old Cathedral of Salamanca (opposite) and the commencement of that for the cathedral in Palencia.

The Old Cathedral *retablo* (recently restored and now in the Museo Diocesano) was originally placed in a niche housing the tomb of Diego Rodriguez. An adjacent niche dated 1504 provides the year in which the Old Cathedral *retablo* was painted, according to E. Haverkamp-Begemann, as both niches were constructed at the same time. A sculptural representation of Saint Michael appears at the top of the archway framing the *retablo* and the tomb. A second statue of the same saint is placed within the dated ad-



Old Cathedral retablo, Salamanca, by Juan de Flandes Museo Diocesano, Salamanca

jacent niche. The archangel is shown again at the center of the *retablo* painted by Juan de Flandes above the tomb, in a position similar to that of the sculptured figure in the next niche. Thus three images of Saint Michael are associated with the Rodriguez tomb.

The *retablo* represents Michael below a stormy

sky, fully armed and combating a large dragon, while the kneeling Saint Francis receives the stigmata in an open landscape at the right. Our Saint Michael and Saint Francis may have been painted at about the same time as the Old Cathedral *retablo*, to which it is very close in style. The same reflections of fortifications which ap-



pear on the shield of our Saint Michael are mirrored on the shield and armor of the archangel painted above Rodriguez's tomb. The differences in the characterization of the same saints may be attributed to their differing functions within the larger works for which they were planned. In the Museum's panel the far more restrained activity of both saints, confined within golden niches, suggests that they bordered a central series of narrative subjects. Our panel may have been located immediately above the lowermost pictorial register of a *retablo*, forming the left section of a series of saints standing in a gilded arcade.

In 1505 Juan de Flandes was commissioned to work on the important *retablo* for the chapel of the University of Salamanca. Plans for its manufacture, incorporating much polychromed sculpture as well as painting, had been drawn up several years earlier. Felipe de Borgoña and Juan de Ypres were at work on its sculpture and polychromy, while a third artist of northern European origin, Juan de Borgoña, was to paint the panels. By 1505 it had become clear that Juan de Borgoña was too much occupied with other commissions to come to Salamanca, and a committee was appointed to search for the most accomplished artist available to execute the necessary paintings. The committee selected Juan de Flandes, whose art may well have already been known in Salamanca if his Old Cathedral *retablo* may be dated about 1504. Diego Rodriguez, who had the preceding year chosen the same artist for the decorations of his future resting place, was a member of this group. His contract specified that within a year Juan was to paint eight scenes (*ystorias*) and three *imágenes*, or representations of sacred figures. In 1507 a new contract stated that he was to paint ten images for the *banco*, the lowermost register, of the *retablo*. Of these, only the Mary Magdalen, the Apollonia, and a fragment of a third have survived. Dr. Haverkamp-Begemann has suggested that the Museum's panel may have formed one part of this *retablo* for the chapel of the University of Salamanca. The rounded tops of the panels containing the two female saints (page

Detail showing architectural additions removed before the panel came to the Museum



ABOVE: *The head of Saint Michael, from the Metropolitan's Saint Michael and Saint Francis*

136) resemble the upper part of the niches on the Museum's painting. Like it they were executed in a semi-grisaille technique against monochromatic red and green backgrounds. The smooth and faintly masklike depictions of Saints Apollonia and Mary Magdalen resemble the face of our Saint Michael. Dr. Haverkamp-Begemann believes that the stylistic relation between our panel and the panels from the *retablo* of the University is further reinforced by the dimensions and the scale of the figures. Although it cannot yet be definitively proven that Saint Michael and Saint Francis was painted for the University *retablo* at Salamanca, the dates at which Juan de Flandes is recorded as employed on the project, together with the style and the format of the surviving fragments, certainly agree with those of our painting, which may be placed stylistically between 1505 and 1509.

Of all the saints, Michael is probably the one most frequently depicted in Spanish art. The militant archangel is identified in Daniel xii:1 as "the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people." His sculptured presence above the tomb in Salamanca and in the adjacent painting by Juan de Flandes may stem from the archangel's role at the time of the Last Judgment, as described in the offertory in the First Mass for the Dead. In this prayer Christ is implored to deliver the dead from hell, that "they may not fall into darkness; but may the holy standard-bearer Michael introduce them to the holy light." The golden background in our painting may be an allusion to such light, indicating an effulgence of divine illumination surrounding Michael in his victorious combat with the devil as recorded in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine (xii: 7-9): "And there was war in heaven; Michael and his angels fought the dragon; and

BELOW: *The head of Saint Michael, from the Old Cathedral retablo, Salamanca*



the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not, neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

While Michael is represented as looking down to earth, where he defeats the devil, Francis looks up toward heaven, the source of his dramatically displayed stigmata. Although far less frequently portrayed than the archangel, Saint Francis was much venerated in Spain, where he was thought to have made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint James at Compostela between the years 1213 and 1216. In the *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century compendium of the lives of the saints, Castile, where our painting was executed, is listed as the first center outside Italy distinguished by the miraculous worship of Saint Francis.

Juan de Flandes's saints represent opposite poles of Christian faith—Michael the heavenly

avenger and angelic protector of the knights of Christ, Francis the impulsively human mystic in love with God's creation. Although isolated by the accidents of time from the large ensemble in which they must originally have been, these figures present an unusually eloquent evocation of the art and faith of early sixteenth-century Castile, uniting the spirit of militant Catholicism, in whose name the Moors had recently been expelled and the New World discovered and conquered, with the contemplative, passionate mysticism of Saint Francis, both so characteristic of Spain.

The writer is very much indebted to Professor Chandler Rathfon Post, Don Manuel and Carmen Gómez-Moreno, and Elisa Bermejo for their generous answers to questions. Murray Pease's examination of the panel yielded valuable information. For placing an unpublished study of Juan de Flandes at the writer's disposal, warmest thanks to Dr. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann.

Saints Apollonia and Mary Magdalen (after restoration), by Juan de Flandes, painted for the Salamanca



DOCUMENTATION

The panel has been exhibited at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1908, No. 1, as early Spanish, or perhaps Portuguese, school. It was also shown at the Grafton Galleries in 1913, Cat. No. 16, as "Early Spanish School, circa 1480."

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University retablo

