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THE PRESENTATION OF THE CHASUBLE TO SAN ILDEFONSO:
AN EXPLORATION OF ITS ORIGINS

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The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso: an Exploration of its Origins

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The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso is a 15th-century Spanish altarpiece panel that has been part of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture’s permanent collection since 1957. However, it was donated with little information about the artist who created it, the circumstances of its commission, the area of Spain where it originated, or its provenance from the time of its creation to the time of its donation to the University of Montana. Without research into these questions, this unique piece has not been exhibited as often as it deserves. I have explored these questions as well as analyzed the content of the altarpiece panel in the hopes of providing a fuller understanding of the piece and an appreciation of what it represents. The altarpiece depicts a significant event in the narrative of San Ildefonso, an important figure in Marian devotion in Spain. I have come to the conclusion that the altarpiece was created in Castille in the Hispano-Flemish style in the late 15th century. It was a modest commission and likely was used in a side chapel. It was eventually purchased by Antonio Gorostiza of Bilbao, Spain in the early 20th century. It was sold on the New York art market in the 1920’s or early 1930’s to Raymonde Erszanski. At the suggestion of friend and art dealer, Victor Hammer, she donated the altarpiece panel to the University of Montana as part of a large donation of various art objects from several donors. With a greater understanding of the altarpiece panel’s content, its origins, and its provenance, the panel can provide insight into the artistic and devotional practices of 15th-century Castille, Spain.
Figure 1. Castilian School, *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso*, late 15th century, tempera on panel, 26 x 27 inches, Missoula, MT: Montana Museum of Art and Culture.
Introduction

Since it was donated in 1958, *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* has remained a valuable, but enigmatic piece in the permanent collection of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture at the University of Montana (MMAC). The museum had scant documentation on this 15th-century Spanish altarpiece panel, little more than donation paperwork. These records indicated, inaccurately, that the subject matter of this devotional painting was Saint Gregory. Nothing was known about its provenance beyond the name and New York address of its previous owner, the donor Miss Raymonde Erszanski. The paperwork identified the artist as Spanish, but which artist or which school of artists was responsible for it was unknown. Without research into these questions, the panel has not been exhibited as often as it might have been. As an avid student of medieval art, it is a rare and exciting opportunity to embark on research into a piece such as this one. It has taken more than several months to uncover what I can about this obscure piece in the hopes of filling in some of the gaps in our knowledge about it. I hope that, by providing a deeper understanding of the panel and its history, it can be exhibited to the public and provide an enriching glimpse into 15th-century Spanish culture.

The Spanish altarpiece panel, in its present form, is vastly different from how it would have been viewed by its original audience. The panel was most likely one of several painted panels set into a carved frame to form a larger retable. It is likely that the frame resembled Gothic architecture and was painted or gilded. Spanish retablos were displayed behind an altar, either the main high altar in a church or a small altar in one of the side chapels. Without the other panels and the frame, it may be missing a large portion of its original context. However,
there is still much that can be learned from this single, displaced panel.

**Subject Matter**

In the 1957 appraisal documents and donation inventory, the altarpiece is described as a Spanish altarpiece by the Master of Saint Gregory.¹ This artist is named for the supposed subject of this altarpiece, Saint Gregory and the Virgin Mary. However, as Chandler Post affirmed in his *A History of Spanish Painting*, it is beyond doubt that the saint depicted is San Ildefonso.²

San Ildefonso is a little known saint beyond the borders of Spain. Within the Spanish empire, he has enjoyed a devoted following that is closely connected with Marian worship. His popularity in Spanish territories and comparative obscurity elsewhere is due to the fact that he was a local saint. San Ildefonso was a Visigothic abbot of the Agali monastery near Toledo in the 7th century.³ He was elevated to the status of Archbishop of Toledo in 658. During his lifetime, Ildefonso was known for his devotion to and learned writings about the Virgin Mary. In particular, he wrote a treatise, *Libellus de virginitate Sanctae Mariae contra tres infidels*, more

¹ K. Ross Toole to Dr. Gordon B. Castles, 5 August 1958, Box 57, Folder “Gifts-Art and Museum Gifts in Collaboration with State Historical Museum,” *Office of the President Papers*, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana.


³ He is known as San Ildefonso in Spain, but is also referred to by the Latin versions of his name, Ildephonsus or Ildefonsus


synonymorum conscriptus a beato Ildefonso, Toletanae sedis episcopo,⁴ arguing that she was perpetually virginal. This book marked a victory in the heated debate that raged between the Jewish and Christian communities during Ildefonso’s lifetime over the sanctity of the Virgin Mary. Ildefonso was also credited with moving the Virgin Mary’s feast day from March, a day that coincided with the Annunciation but that also fell during Lent, to December 18th, a day that was more closely associated with the Nativity and a time of celebration.⁵

It was on this new feast day in honor of the Virgin Mary that San Ildefonso’s best known miracle occurred. As he entered the cathedral to celebrate mass, he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary who, in gratitude for his work on her behalf, gave him a gift.⁶ In earlier versions of the saint’s legend, Mary gave him “a little gift taken from my son’s treasury.”⁷ In later retellings, the gift was specifically described as a chasuble, a ceremonial robe worn by a member of the clergy while conducting mass.⁸ Another miraculous episode from various versions of the life of the saint occurred while San Ildefonso prayed at the tomb of St. Leocadia on her feast day. According to the stories, she emerged and praised him for his actions on behalf of the Virgin

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⁶ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
Mary. In turn, he asked her to act as an intercessor to God on behalf of her homeland and the king. As she returned to her tomb, the saint took a knife and cut off a portion of her veil to keep as a relic. San Ildefonso’s various biographers have debated which miraculous episode occurred first with no definitive answer forthcoming.⁹

San Ildefonso died in 667. His significance rose in the mid 13th century, in part because he was the namesake of the current king of Castile and León, Alfonso X. Additionally, his remains, which had been moved to Zamora for safekeeping during the Muslim occupation, were rediscovered when the Zamora Cathedral underwent renovations. His body was reburied in 1260 and pilgrims reported miracles after visiting the site of his new tomb, further increasing his renown.¹⁰ It is not surprising, then, to find depictions of the saint in religious artwork from this time forward.

Indeed, images of San Ildefonso were increasingly prevalent in Spanish religious artwork throughout the 15th century for many other reasons as well. Only a couple of centuries earlier, Toledo archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada was entrusted with leading the ‘Spanish Crusade’ against the Moorish occupation of Spain. As Islamic mosques were replaced by Christian churches, there was a revival of interest in early Christian martyrs. As mentioned above, the rediscovery of Ildefonso’s relics played a part in his renewed worship. Reverence of the Virgin Mary also increased during this time and many of the conquered mosques were rededicated to

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⁹ Dunham, The History of Spain and Portugal, 294-295.
As Mary became more central to Spanish Christian worship, her swelling ranks of followers promoted doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception. Here again, San Ildefonso was brought to the forefront as one of the first authors of this concept. He wrote that Mary was conceived immaculately, without original sin, within her mother’s womb. He further claimed that she, along with her son Jesus, was equally responsible for the redemption of humankind.\textsuperscript{11} This idea of Mary as Co-Redeemer or Co-Redemptrix eventually came to be seen as heretical, yet it persists amongst Mary’s devotees to this day.\textsuperscript{12} The diffusion of Ildefonso’s doctrines resulted in a parallel increase in popularity for the saint and his writings. Ildefonso initially wrote in response to a debate that raged between the Christian and Jewish communities during his own life. The Christians held the Jewish people responsible for the death of their savior, Jesus. Mary, as a Jewish woman, became the focus of much antagonism on both sides. A 5\textsuperscript{th}-century Jewish refutation of the Gospels, the \textit{Toledoth Yeshu}, claimed that Jesus was the result of an adulterous deception of Mary by her neighbor. Ildefonso’s treatise was originally written as a rebuttal to these claims.\textsuperscript{13}

When increasingly anti-Semitic sentiments spread throughout Spain in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, culminating in the Alhambra Decree of 1492 which exiled all Jewish peoples from Spain,\textsuperscript{13}

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Ildefonso’s treatise against Jewish criticisms became newly relevant.\textsuperscript{14} Another historic event a few years before the Alhambra Decree reinforced the importance of Ildefonso’s philosophies. While his concept of the Virgin Mary’s Immaculate Conception had been popular for centuries, the Catholic Church in Rome had not officially endorsed it. In 1480, Pope Sixtus IV condoned the Feast of the Immaculate Conception and declared that, since it wasn’t specifically refuted by the Church, it was permitted. While it was not a full acceptance of the Immaculate Conception, it was nonetheless a milestone for the cult of the Virgin Mary and San Ildefonso.\textsuperscript{15} Not only did Ildefonso’s cult grow alongside Marian worship, it was inseparable from it. Indeed, Ildefonso’s significance was based solely on her status within the church. Any depiction of the saint is at its heart an extension of the Virgin Mary’s cult.

\textit{The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso} contains the two primary figures of the Virgin Mary and a kneeling saint, as well as a trio of monks on the left balanced by a trio of angels on the right. A single angel flies above the scene, carrying a banner the reads “O domina mea, dominatrix mea, dominans mihi” (My Lady, my ruler, who rules me)\textsuperscript{16}. The source of the confusion over the saint’s identity likely stemmed from the setting; the saint is shown at mass, with the chalice of the Eucharist waiting on the altar behind him. The Mass of Saint Gregory, showing Pope Gregory or Gregory the Great experiencing a vision while conducting mass, was a popular motif in 15\textsuperscript{th}-century religious art. It depicted a vision of Christ rather than the Virgin.


\textsuperscript{15} Rubin, \textit{Mother of God}, 303 – 304.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 93, 444.
Mary.\textsuperscript{17} It is also clear that, in this altarpiece, Mary is preparing to put a garment over the head of the kneeling saint, which is consistent with the most commonly depicted aspect of San Ildefonso’s hagiography: the receipt of a miraculous chasuble from the Virgin Mary.

If these details were not enough to definitively identify the saint, the text on the banner carried by the flying angel is a quote from the opening prayer to Mary in San Ildefonso’s well-known treatise.\textsuperscript{18} While the saint is not readily identifiable to the contemporary audience, a learned individual from 15\textsuperscript{th}-century Spain would have recognized both the narrative and the quote shown in the altarpiece.

The altarpiece panel in the MMAC collection is, in many ways, a typical depiction of the saint for the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries. While there are two earlier portrait style depictions of San Ildefonso,\textsuperscript{19} the vast majority of depictions of the saint show the scene in which he receives the chasuble from the Virgin. Of these, most include an audience of angels and saints (see Figures 2 - 5). Like the altarpieces in figures 2-5, the MMAC panel includes angels and the Virgin Mary.

In most depictions, Mary is either in the act of handing the chasuble to Ildefonso, as in the altarpiece by Fernando Gallego (Figure 4), or placing it over his head, as in the altarpieces by Comontes and the Master of St. Ildefonso (Figures 3 and 5). The MMAC altarpiece shows

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\textsuperscript{18} Rubin, Mother of God, 93, 444.


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Figure 2. School of Hans Memling, *Apparition of the Virgin to Saint Ildefonso*, 1495, paint on panel, 70.08 x 35.43 inches, collection of Émile Pacully, in *Collection Émile Pacully: Tableaux Anciens et Modernes des Écoles Allemande, Espagnole, Flamande, Française, Hollandaise, Italiennne, etc.*, by Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 1903, page 56.


Figure 5. Master of St. Ildefonso, *The Imposition of the Chasuble of Saint Ildefonso*, mid 15th cent., 90.55 x 65.75 inches, paint on panel, The Louvre.
Mary opening the chasuble and placing it over his head. Some versions depict the angels assisting in this process or delivering the chasuble while Mary supervises. An altarpiece panel attributed to followers of Hans Memling is a good example of this type (Figure 4). In the MMAC panel, the angels merely look on while Mary prepares to dress the saint in her gift. All of the representations of this scene clearly take place in the context of a church or chapel, sometimes with an altar or lavish church architecture in the background. In the altarpiece by the Master of St. Ildefonso, Mary represents the church symbolically; the Gothic architecture of her throne reinforces her identification with the church.

The MMAC piece is more literal in its retelling of San Ildefonso’s story than most of these panels. The altar appears in the background with the chalice ready for Holy Communion, two missals open for use in the liturgy. Altarboys enter from the left carrying candles and incense. The implication is that the saint was interrupted while conducting mass. In all of the altarpieces, the setting for the miraculous event depicted is an important aspect in the visual interpretation of the saint’s story.

Despite these commonalities, The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso contains some unique elements that do not appear in other versions of this scene. Specifically, this is the only version that includes monks. Indeed, the only unnamed figures who appear regularly in other depictions of the saint receiving the chasuble are angels. It is also somewhat unusual that Mary is only accompanied by angels. In the Gallego, Louvre, and Comontes panels (Figures 2, 3, and 5), saints are readily identifiable as part of Mary’s retinue (i.e. Saint Catherine holding

a book and a sword in the upper right of Figure 3\textsuperscript{21} or Saint Agnes holding a plate with her breasts upon it in the upper right background of Figure 5). These three altarpiece panels seem to combine the San Ildefonso narrative with the \textit{sacra conversazione} type. The MMAC panel is not a \textit{sacra conversazione}; no saints or martyrs accompany Mary and no patron looks on from the periphery. While the monks on the left serve to balance the angels on the right, creating a more symmetrical composition, they do not increase the reverential potential of the piece the way additional saints might. As a result, the focus is entirely on Ildefonso and Mary without the distraction of others. Perhaps this is why the artist or patron has chosen to fill the edges of this piece entirely with minor, nameless figures.

Another unusual aspect of the MMAC altarpiece panel is the opening shown in the right wall through which Mary and her host of angels enter the church. Unlike other altarpieces that simply show her, already having appeared before San Ildefonso, this artist has chosen to depict the means by which she and her angels descend from heaven and enter the church. The angels are still in the process of walking down the stairway from heaven. Mary’s robes draped over the threshold indicate that she has just stepped from the stairway herself. The right wall is missing, creating an entryway for Mary and her attendant angels to enter the church. The incongruous opening in the wall shows a countryside in the background, mundane but lovingly painted. One wonders if the convention of the missing wall was employed primarily to give the artist an opportunity to insert the lovely landscape into the piece. This strangely mechanical depiction of Mary’s entrance into the church and into San Ildefonso’s vision is without any known antecedents.

\textsuperscript{21} Post, \textit{The Hispano-Flemish Style}, vol. 4 part 1, 89.
It bears mentioning that many of the other panels dedicated to San Ildefonso were painted in oil. *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* was painted using tempera paint, an older and cheaper medium. The relative lack of important figures in the piece other than the essential players in the scene, the Virgin Mary and San Ildefonso, also seems to indicate that this was not a high-end commission.

Despite conflicting information about the identity of the saint depicted in the MMAC altarpiece in its donation paperwork, there is no doubt that the Spanish altarpiece depicts San Ildefonso. Given its Spanish origins, the time period in which it was created, and the narrative details shown in the altarpiece panel, it is clear that the scene illustrates San Ildefonso receiving his miraculous chasuble from the Virgin Mary. *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* has clear parallels with other Spanish altarpieces dedicated to the saint from the same time period. Yet, it is also unique in its depiction of monks participating in the mass and in the portrayal of Mary's arrival into the space of the church via a heavenly staircase. Its focus on pure narrative and its humble origins make it unusual.

**Questions of Attribution**

Initially, it was believed that *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* had not been subject to in-depth analysis by an expert in the field of Spanish religious art of the late Gothic or early Renaissance eras. By fortuitous coincidence, the altarpiece was analyzed by Chandler Rathfon Post and included in his encyclopedic *History of Spanish Painting*. While Post concluded that the altarpiece may have been painted by Jorge Inglés,\(^2\) this attribution is problematic and relies entirely on stylistic assumptions.

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\(^2\) Post, *The Hispano-Flemish Style*, vol. 4 part 1, 75-76.
Post made a tentative argument for Jorge Inglés as the painter of the MMAC altarpiece panel. Jorge Inglés was active in Spain between 1544 and 1585. He was an illuminator as well as a painter. His artwork shows Flemish influence, particularly that of Rogier van der Weyden. However, his surname seems to indicate that he was originally from England or of English descent. Post pointed out similarities between the angels in the MMAC panel and the angels in Inglés’ *Altarpiece of the Gozos de Santa Maria* (see Figures 6 and 7). There are certainly some similarities in the angels’ wings, the shapes of the faces, and in the folds of their garments. Post also compared the garments of San Ildefonso and those of the patron of the Inglés altarpiece (see Figures 8 and 9). The folds of the respective garments share the same stiff, geometrically rendered fabric.

![Figure 6. Castillian School, detail of angels from The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso, late 15th century, tempera on panel, 26 x 27 inches, Missoula, MT: Montana Museum of Art and Culture.](image)

![Figure 7. Jorge Inglés, detail of angels from the Altarpiece of the Gozos de Santa Maria, 1455, oil on panel, 197.67 x 182.23 inches, on loan at the Prado from the private collection of Íñigo de Arteaga, 19th Duque del Infantado.](image)

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24 Post, *The Hispano-Flemish Style*, vol. 4 part 1, 75-76.
Post discussed parallels between the physiognomies of various figures in Inglés’ work and the figures in the MMAC panel. He compared the face of Ildefonso in the MMAC altarpiece to the faces in both the Gozos altarpiece and another Inglés altarpiece, the Retablo de San Jerónimo at the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid. Post drew attention to the faces of the saints in the predella of the Gozos altarpiece. The face of Saint Jerome seems closest to that of San Ildefonso (see Figure 10). In the Retablo de San Jerónimo, Post specifically mentioned the face of the priest conducting communion for Saint Jerome (see Figure 11). All three faces are wide with prominent cheekbones, heavy lidded eyes, and turned down mouths. Post’s other claim, that Inglés painted his faces with the same detail commonly seen in
manuscript illuminations, can also be verified on examination of all three faces.\textsuperscript{25}

Figure 10. Jorge Inglés, detail of San Jerome from the Altarpiece of the Gazos de Santa María, 1455, oil on panel, 197.67 x 182.23 inches, on loan at the Prado from the private collection of Íñigo de Arteago, 19th Duque del Infantado.

Figure 11. Jorge Inglés, detail of the priest conducting Communion from the Retablo de San Jerónimo, 1465, oil on panel, 129.92 x 86.61 inches, Valladolid: Museo Nacional de Escultura.

Finally, Post pointed out some common compositional conventions that have been observed in Jorge Inglés’ known works and in The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso. First, he observed the use of hieratic scale in the MMAC altarpiece panel. The monks are disproportionately smaller than San Ildefonso and the Virgin Mary, indicating their lesser significance in relation to the primary figures. Inglés also used this convention in the central panel of the Retablo de San Jerónimo. The monks sitting on Saint Jerome’s right are less than one third the size of the saint. The other convention that Post pointed out was Inglés’ tendency to insert landscapes into the background of his paintings. He pointed out the correspondence in style between the landscapes commonly found in the backgrounds of his paintings and the one seen behind the angels in the MMAC panel\textsuperscript{26} (see Figure 12). There is, indeed, a similarly wispy quality to the clouds and distant buildings in one of the panels of the Retablo de San Jerónimo (see Figure 13). In both images, layers of green and yellow ochre produce folds in the

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
landscape and the sky and far horizon are hazy. Despite the different mediums used in the MMAC altarpiece and in Inglés’ other works, tempera and oil respectively, it seems that Post makes a strong argument for stylistic similarities between *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* and known works by Jorge Inglés.

Pilar Silva, expert at the Prado in Spanish painting from this era, reinforced Post’s stylistic analysis. Silva listed several stylistic characteristics typical of the faces that Inglés painted, all of which can be observed in *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso*. As mentioned previously, Inglés tended to paint faces that are wider than they are long and that have prominent cheekbones. This is certainly true of the figure of San Ildefonso. The heavy-lidded eyes and well-defined eye sockets of the figures in the MMAC altarpiece are also typical of Inglés. This, combined with Inglés’ use of dark lines at the corners of the mouths, produce a melancholy expression that characterizes the faces of his figures.

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27 Pilar Silva, “Commented works: The Altarpiece of the Gozos de Santa María, by Jorge Ingles (1455),” Museo del Prado video, 10:56, posted September 6, 2012,
Yet, not everyone agrees with Post’s attribution. J. J. Martín González, in his entry on Jorge Inglés for the Grove Dictionary of Art, says that it “is a doubtful attribution.” Although González does not disclose his reasons for this statement, it is readily apparent that the MMAC altarpiece panel lacks the careful skill and finish of the other works that Post compared it to. The figures are more awkward and less smoothly modeled. The details are delineated with line-work that does not appear in Inglés’ known works. The MMAC altarpiece was painted with tempera while Inglés other paintings were done in oil. Given these differences, it is more likely that the MMAC altarpiece panel was completed by a student of Inglés or by an artist who was influenced by his works.

At this stage, it is impossible to definitively identify the artist of The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso. Still, I have encountered some paintings that bear striking similarities with the piece. The MMAC altarpiece bears some resemblance to the works of Jaume Huguet. Huguet (1415 – 1492) is considered a Catalan artist. However, he is believed to have spent some of his early years in Saragozza. He began his career in Tarragona, but moved to Barcelona in 1448. He soon became the most sought after painter of altarpiece panels in the city. His large studio, with numerous assistants and collaborators, established his distinctive style in the Catalonian region during his lifetime and for some years after his death. One piece attributed to Jaume Huguet’s circle, The Pilgrims’ Mass in Madrid, shares


certain stylistic elements with the MMAC altarpiece (see Figure 14). The priest conducting the mass bears a strong resemblance to San Ildefonso. They both have well defined cheek bones, a downturned mouth, and heavy-lidded eyes with marked shadows above. The folds on the priests’ and monks’ robes have the same repetitive rectilinear geometries. There is a

Figure 14. Circle of Jaume Huguet, *Pilgrims’ Mass*, 1450-1500, tempera and gold on panel, 32.68 x 28.35 inches, Madrid: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.
similar emphasis on the lips. The small figure to the right of the altar in the Huguet altarpiece appears to be rendered in hierarchic scale, much like the monks in the MMAC panel. The landscape in the background of the crucifixion scene that hangs above the altar in the Huguet painting resembles the landscape behind the angels in the MMAC piece. In both panels, there is a noticeable use of outlining to highlight details and shading accomplished with hatching. It is possible that the painter of the MMAC altarpiece was part of Huguet’s circle, perhaps even an artist who helped in the creation of the *Pilgrims’ Mass*.

Another altarpiece by an anonymous artist with notable visual parallels to the MMAC altarpiece panel resides in the Episcopal Palace in Palencia (see Figure 15). Again, the facial type of the saint depicted is similar to Ildefonso. The folds of the garments are also similar. Both panels are framed by a pair of simple columns. The altars share a similar construction with a niche on the side for storing liturgical objects. Both altars have similar spatial constructions, with the tops tilted toward the viewer so that the objects on the altar can be easily seen. The chalices, candles, and books on the altars are nearly interchangeable (see Figures 16 and 17).

The two paintings share a similar use of line. The ermine worn around the neck of the figure to the left of Saint Gregory is painted in much the same manner as the ermine border on the Virgin Mary’s dress in the MMAC panel. Finally, the border on the robes of the kneeling figures in both altarpieces exhibit the same oddity: the border does not continue around the entire bottom of the robe, but instead has a single, decorative square of embroidery. In the case of Ildefonso, it is a simple square of red. Saint Gregory appears to have a gilt square while his candle-bearing altar-boy has a square of intricately swirling pattern.

**Regional Styles in 15th-Century Spain**

It is important to point out that many of the stylistic elements that Post and others have highlighted in *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* can be partially attributed to regional styles. The MMAC altarpiece panel falls squarely into the Hispano-Flemish tradition that was prominent throughout northern Spain, and Catalonia and Valencia to a lesser extent. The Hispano-Flemish tradition began in the 1450’s and tapered off in the late 16th, early 17th
centuries, as Italian Renaissance styles had by then taken become prevalent. Interest in Flemish art began with marked growth in prosperity and trade in western Spain with the Lowlands. Luxury goods from the Southern Netherlands were in high demand, including altarpieces to decorate newly expanded churches, chapels, hospitals, and private oratories. The influx of artwork from the Netherlands, combined with Queen Isabella’s expressed preference for Flemish art during her long reign (1474 - 1504), inevitably stimulated some measure of imitation among Spanish artists. The Hispano-Flemish style was born out of the blending of local Spanish art traditions with art practices from the Southern Netherlands.

*The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* bears several hallmarks of the Hispano-Flemish style. The carefully rendered landscape in the background is typical of Hispano-Flemish painting. The use of naturalistic and even individualistic depictions of people, such as can be seen in San Ildefonso’s face, is another new development. There was an interest in capturing the emotional experience of devotion in facial expressions, which can be observed in Ildefonso’s face. The careful rendering of fabric in the MMAC panel—the folds of the robes, the fringes on the altar clothes, the brocade pattern on the cloth covering the altar frontal, Mary’s sheer collar and ermine trim—all demonstrate a connection to the painting style of the Southern Netherlands.

One of the most easily recognizable features of Hispano-Flemish artwork is the Flemish angel. They are relatively common and easily recognizable. These angels abound in Hispano-Flemish painting, notably in the center panel of Jorge Inglés’ *Altarpiece of the Gozos de Santa*

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30 Post, *The Hispano-Flemish Style*, vol. 4 part 1, 3.
31 Kroesen, *Staging the Liturgy*, 89-93, 401.
32 Ibid., 98-99.
Maria.\textsuperscript{33} The angel in the upper left corner of the MMAC panel shares the same common characteristics as Rogier van der Weyden’s angels (see Figures 18 and 19). It has exotic wings, now obscured by wear, and carefully articulated folds in the robe and bears a curling scroll of text.

![Figure 18. Castillian School, detail of messenger angel from The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso, late 15th century, tempera on panel, 26 x 27 inches, Missoula, MT: Montana Museum of Art and Culture.](image1)

![Figure 19. Rogier van der Weyden, Detail of angel from The Seven Sacraments, 1440-1445, oil on oak panels, 48.35 x 28.87 inches, Atwerp: The Royal Museum of Fine Arts.](image2)

The following illustration of a painting executed by an unknown Spanish painter, believed to be a copy of a lost Jan Van Eyck,\textsuperscript{34} may provide a further connection between the MMAC altarpiece and Flemish art (see Figure 21). Similarities between this Spanish copy and a Madonna and Child by Van Eyck that is now in the National Gallery in Melbourne indicate that it is a copy of a Flemish painting rather than a Spanish original. A German motto on the wall next


\textsuperscript{34} Post, \textit{The Hispano-Flemish Style}, vol. 4 part 1, 18-20.
to Mary adds further evidence that it is based on a Flemish painting. As can be seen in Figures 20 and 21, the depictions of the Virgin Mary in both panels are alike in several ways. The angle of the head is nearly identical. The eyebrows share the same thin, delicate arch. The eyes are rendered with the same barely open, heavy lids and have the same lower lid shape. While Mary in the MMAC panel has a larger nose, the shape and modeling of it are very similar. Both Marys have a small mouth and round chin. They wear the same transparent v-shaped collar. The arms of both women are in nearly the same position, despite the fact that they hold different things. The close similarities between the two images lead me to suspect

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that the artist who painted the MMAC altarpiece saw either this Spanish version or the original lost Van Eyck painting. It is far more likely that the artist saw this Spanish copy. Sadly, there is virtually no information about the provenance of the Spanish Van Eyck copy, so one cannot determine where the artist of the MMAC altarpiece panel might have seen it. It is now in Covarrubias in Castile and León, a region steeped in the Hispano-Flemish tradition and not far from where the MMAC panel probably originated.

While it may not be possible to definitively attribute the MMAC panel to a specific artist, I would argue that it is almost certainly from the region of Castile. As mentioned above, the Hispano-Flemish style evident in the panel was prevalent throughout Castile. Sobre argues that no other region in Spain adopted the Flemish style more thoroughly or consistently; at times, Castilian painting is virtually indistinguishable from Flemish painting.\(^{36}\) In addition, representations of San Ildefonso were much more common in this part of Spain than elsewhere.\(^{37}\) After all, the sites most closely associated with the saint’s cult, Toledo and Zamora, were both part of the medieval kingdom of Castile. Much of the artwork that I have already discussed and that compares most closely with the MMAC altarpiece panel originated in Castile. According to Kroesen, Jorge Inglés was one of the first Castilian artists to work in the Hispano-Flemish style.\(^{38}\) While the *Pilgrim’s Mass* by a follower of Huguet (Figure 14) did not come from Castile, the anonymous *Mass of Saint Gregory* did\(^{39}\) and, as noted above, the copy of a Madonna originally by Van Eyck is also in Castile (Figures 15 and 21, respectively).\(^{40}\)

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\(^{36}\) Sobre, *Behind the Altar Table*, 243-245.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 203.

\(^{38}\) Kroesen, *Staging the Liturgy*, 102.

\(^{39}\) Sobre, *Behind the Altar Table*, 173.

\(^{40}\) Post, *The Hispano-Flemish Style*, vol. 4 part 1, 18.
The most obvious Castilian characteristic in the MMAC altarpiece panel is its narrative quality. Altarpiece panels were either narrative or icon-like effigy panels depicting a full or partial length view of Christ, Mary, or the saint in question. Both panel types are common throughout Spain. However, Castile placed the greatest emphasis on narrative panels. While this panel was likely part of a larger ensemble of panels making up a full retable, the care taken in its rendering suggests that, wherever it was painted, narrative was valued. Castilian narrative panels derived from Netherlandish narrative paintings and altarpieces, but differed significantly in their narrative simplicity. While Flemish paintings often incorporated complex layers of symbolic meaning, Castilian paintings focused on narrative clarity. The MMAC panel exemplifies this narrative clarity to the point of literalness. The architecture, altar with all of its carefully rendered objects, and the altar boys all serve to tell the viewer that the events took place during mass. Mary’s miraculous arrival on the scene is shown by the unlikely opening in the wall and by the stairway, still being descended by the entourage of angels. The viewer is left without a doubt that Mary has come from heaven to appear before San Ildefonso. Mary holds the chasuble and is in the process of putting it over the Ildefonso’s head, suggesting the miraculous nature of the gift that she is bestowing on the saint. Every detail derives from the hagiography of San Ildefonso.

The insertion of realistically rendered landscapes into narrative altarpiece panels is one of the hallmarks of Castilian painting. Valencian artists also included Flemish landscapes in their backgrounds, but Catalanian, Aragonian, and Andalusian artists tended to emphasize an

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41 Sobre, Behind the Altar Table, 250.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 246, 248, 251.
abundance of pattern in their backgrounds rather than convincing vistas and, where they did incorporate landscapes, the effect was undermined by an overall sense of flatness. The landscapes in the background of other Castilian panels bear a close resemblance to the landscape in the background of *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso*. The backgrounds of the Burgos-based Master of Saint Nicolas (Figure 23) are extremely similar to that in the MMAC painting. The trees are painted with the same spindly trunks and limbs and

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Figure 22: Castilian School, detail of landscape from *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso*, late 15th century, tempera on panel, 26 x 27 inches, Missoula, MT: Montana Museum of Art and Culture.

Figure 23. Master of Saint Nicholas, detail of landscape from *Decent from the Cross*, second half of the 15th century, oil on panel, Madrid: Museo Arqueológico Nacional (photo by H. Rafael Chacón).

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44 Ibid., 208, 210-11, 243, 259.
their sparse leaves are painted using the same light daubing technique. The roofs of the buildings in both panels have a swooping concave cone shape that tapers to a tall, sharp point. The windows are long, thin daubs of paint. While the figures in the Master of Saint Nicholas altarpieces differ markedly in style from those in the MMAC altarpiece, the landscape backgrounds appear as though they could have been painted by the same hand. After all, it was not uncommon for painters to collaborate with their peers or to make use of assistants.

Castilian painters were also more likely to create cohesive interior spaces in their paintings. While they did not utilize one-point perspective, there is often a sense of depth in their artwork. The tendency to fill the painting surface with pattern common to Aragonese, Catalanian, and Andalusian painting often undermined any attempt at convincing space. In addition, panels painted in Aragon often utilized competing perspectival systems. The artist might paint floor tiles as though they were seen from above, making their pattern easily discernable, yet paint the figure standing on the tiles in the same plane as the viewer. Panels painted in Valencia were generally so vertical that the artist had no space to create an illusion of depth. The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso utilizes the lines in the ceiling and the floor to create a sense of depth behind Ildefonso and Mary. The effect is somewhat undermined by the tilted top of the altar and the grey tiles to the left of the altar as well as other inconsistencies in perspective. Yet, these idiosyncrasies do not overwhelm the overall sense of depth. The patterns present in the altar cloth, Mary’s damaged brocade, and the staircase railing conform to the architecture of the space rather than overpowering it.

46 Ibid., 206, 211, 243, 259.
47 Ibid., 210-11.
The use of gilding, common throughout Spain, also served to visually flatten painted scenes. Flemish art eschewed gilded backgrounds and halos for this reason. Castilian painting differs from Flemish art in its use of gilding. However, gilding generally had a more limited application in Castilian art than in artwork from other parts of Spain. In Castile, gilding tended to be limited to halos, brocade fabrics, and baldaquin cloths. Castilian artists also rarely used the highly textured *embutido* technique. *Embutido*, or raised patterns of gesso covered with gilding, was most popular in the Kingdom of Aragon, but was also common in Catalonia and Andalusia. The MMAC altarpiece panel contains modest gilding focused exclusively on the heavenly figures and on sacred objects. Ildefonso and Mary have halos, but they do not appear to have their names carved into the halos as is often found in Castilian works. Given the amount of wear on the gilded sections, it is possible they once did. A thin line incised just inside each halo attests to the use of some incised decoration, but the lines are mostly lost.

Another particularly Castilian characteristic of the MMAC altarpiece is the care taken in rendering minute details, specifically in the objects included in the scene. The items placed on the altar behind San Ildefonso are rendered with painstaking clarity. The books are painted with such care that, when viewed from arm’s length, they appear to have actual text inscribed on their pages. The attention given to each rumpled fold and each strand of fringe in the fabrics is also characteristic of this focus on detail. Sadly, the brocade pattern that decorated Mary’s dress has worn off, but it is still partially visible on her sleeve.

A visual analysis of altarpiece panels produced in the Hispano-Flemish style can give

48 Ibid., 246, 248.
49 Ibid., 238, 257-258.
50 Ibid., 255.
some indication of the approximate date that this altarpiece was produced. It is certainly in the
Hispano-Flemish tradition, which means that it must have been painted sometime after the
style first arose in the 1450’s.\textsuperscript{51} Surveys of Spanish painting, such as Post’s History of Spanish
Painting and José Gudiol Ricart’s Pintura Gótico for the exhaustive Ars Hispaniae, show a rapid
progression in altarpiece panel painting techniques. Early Hispano-Flemish works lacked a
unified perspective and the forms were less smoothly modeled. However by 1500, most
eamples of Hispano-Flemish painting exhibited finely detailed and realistically rendered
shapes and textures and utilized a cohesive perspectival system. MMAC’s altarpiece most
closely resembles paintings from around the 1470’s.\textsuperscript{52}

There are no clear stylistic divisions between the various regions and schools of painting
in Spain. A great deal of cross-pollination occurred. Additionally, the outside influences of
French International Gothic, Italian renaissance, and Flemish styles merged to various degrees
across Spain. Islamic artwork engendered a love for intricate, layered pattern. Individual artists
and patrons borrowed from these rich artistic traditions according to the project in question.

The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso has characteristics of many of these
traditions, but it conforms to typical 15\textsuperscript{th}-century Castilian practices far more closely than any
other region. Its subject matter, its synthesis of Flemish style, the sense of depth in the
landscape and architectural elements, the care taken with detail and surfaces, and its modest

\textsuperscript{51} Post, The Hispano-Flemish Style, vol. 4 part 1, 3.
\textsuperscript{52} Post, The Hispano-Flemish Style, vol. 4 part 1.
Chandler Rathfon Post, The Hispano-Flemish Style in North-Western Spain, vol. 4 part 2 of A
José Gudiol Ricart, Pintura Gótico, vol. 9 of Ars Hispaniae: Historia Universal del Arte
use of pattern and gilding suggest a Castilian origin.

**Provenance**

The story of how *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* came to be at a University in Montana is likely a long one. However, we know only a fraction of it. We know more now than before I began my research, however. What is certain, is that the altarpiece panel was donated to the University in 1957 as part of a large, diverse collection of objects. It was the only object that she donated. But the story is more complicated than that.

The donation was arranged by the Montana Historical Society’s current director, K. Ross Toole. Toole had been working with Armand Hammer, owner of Hammer Galleries of New York, to borrow a collection of Charlie Russell artwork for an exhibition at the Montana Historical Society museum. When Toole began to search for potential art donors to augment the Montana Historical Society’s collection, Victor Hammer, Armand’s brother, offered to make inquiries among his friends for donations. However, Toole ran into financial issues with taxes. Museums were not qualified to receive the thirty percent deduction that educational institutions were eligible for. Toole proposed that the University of Montana in Missoula

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53 K. Ross Toole to Dr. Gordon B. Castles, *Office of the President Papers.*
54 “Appraisal of the Property of Miss Raymonde Erszanski,” *Office of the President Papers.*
57 The documents use the name “Montana State University of Missoula.” During this time, the University of Montana was known as Montana State University. It should not be
receive the donation instead, with the agreement that the Montana Historical Society had full borrowing privileges for the items donated. In this round-about manner, the University of Montana was ultimately the recipient of a substantial donation of items from various donors who were connected with Hammer Galleries in New York.58

This was not the only time that Hammer Galleries and Erszanski made a charitable art donation to a public institution. A few years later, in 1962, Hammer Galleries, Victor Hammer, and Erszanski all contributed to an art auction to benefit the Fine Arts Museum of New Mexico. The museum intended to use the funds to expand their art collection. Victor Hammer also volunteered to serve as auctioneer for the event. Erszanski donated three items for the auction. All three pieces were modern French paintings.59 It is clear that she did not solely collect Medieval, Spanish, or religious artwork, but had diverse tastes. It is also evident that both Hammer Galleries and Erszanski had philanthropic leanings that led them to participate in the donation to the University of Montana in 1958.

The nature of Erszanski’s relationship with Hammer Galleries is not entirely certain, but some details are known. She had the Spanish altarpiece appraised by Victor Hammer shortly before it was donated. Interestingly, it was listed in the appraisal documents as by the Master of Saint Gregory, likely the original source of confusion over its subject matter.60 It seems probable that Erszanski had other artwork appraised by Victor Hammer or Hammer Galleries

58 K. Ross Toole to Dr. Gordon B. Castles, Office of the President Papers.
60 “Appraisal of the Property of Miss Raymonde Erszanski,” Office of the President Papers.
and that she also purchased artwork for her collection from them. In a letter to President Carl McFarland of the University of Montana, Victor Hammer stated that he was encouraging various friends to donate artwork to the university.\textsuperscript{61} Erszanski was presumably one of these friends. It is unlikely that she had any personal connection to the State of Montana. I propose instead that all the donations were made by personal friends of Victor Hammer.

How Erszanski acquired \textit{The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso} remains in question. Post, in his encyclopedic survey of Spanish art, provided a clue. He stated that he saw the altarpiece for sale in New York. He also stated that it had been in the Gorostiza art collection in Bilbao.\textsuperscript{62} In the same volume, Post mentioned another altarpiece associated with the Gorostiza collection, specifically Antonio Gorostiza of Bilbao, \textit{Scenes from the Life of Saint Ursula}.\textsuperscript{63} I believe we can safely assume that this Antonio Gorostiza was the former owner of Miss Erszanski’s Spanish altarpiece. It is unfortunate that Post did not mention the art dealer who listed the altarpiece for sale. Nor do we know whether Erszanski purchased the panel from the Gorostiza collection or whether there were intervening transfers of ownership. We can only guess at when Post saw the altarpiece. His \textit{A History of Spanish Painting} was published in 1933, but it might conceivably have taken him years to complete the series of books.

Antonio Gorostiza owned several Spanish religious paintings. Along with the altarpiece of Saint Ursula, he purchased \textit{The Penitent Saint Jerome} by Luis Tristán de Escamilla (17th

\textsuperscript{61} Victor J. Hammer to Carl MacFarland, \textit{Historical Society Director’s Records, 1951-2003}.  
\textsuperscript{62} Post, \textit{The Hispano-Flemish Style}, vol. 4 part 1, 75-76.  
\textsuperscript{63} Post, \textit{The Hispano-Flemish Style}, vol. 4 part 2, 564-565.
century), in 1908. He eventually sold it sometime between 1926 and 1930. He acquired *The Flight into Egypt* by El Greco in 1904 and sold it in 1926. Perhaps he included *The Flight into Egypt* among the El Greco paintings he loaned to the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao for their inaugural exhibition in 1914. We do not know the purchase and sale dates of the Saint Ursula altarpiece.

The short inventory of artwork listed here documents significant facts about Antonio Gorostiza’s art collection. First, Gorostiza collected religious works by Spanish artists. Second, he was actively collecting these paintings in the first decade of the 20th century and sold several of them around 1926. This sale date matches the approximate time when Post encountered the MMAC altarpiece in New York. Perhaps the purchase date for the Ildefonso panel was correspondingly similar to that of these other works.

Here, we enter the realm of supposition. I found no documentation establishing when *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* was added to the Gorostiza collection or its origins. Originally, the panel was most likely part of a larger retable. These retables were

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either made for display behind the high altar of the church, *retablos mayores*, or for one of the side chapels. If it was originally part of a *retablo mayor*, it would indicate that it had been made for a church dedicated to San Ildefonso, as saints were rarely incorporated into *retablos mayores* otherwise. 68 However, due to its small size and subject matter, it was more likely commissioned for a side chapel. It may have been paid for by a nobleman, a group of individuals such as a guild or monastery, or as was most common, a member of the wealthy classes. 69 Whoever paid for this panel and the retable it was once a part of demonstrated their religious faith and dedication to the community by their patronage.

**In Closing**

It is my hope that the information I have uncovered about the subject matter, creation, and provenance of *The Presentation of the Chasuble to San Ildefonso* will serve to enrich the public’s experience of this rare work of art. The panel was meant to be understood as an instructive story about a revered saint, Ildefonso of Toledo. Without knowledge of the saint’s hagiography, a portion of the panel’s significance is lost. While I have arrived at no definitive conclusions about the artist or group of artists responsible for this altarpiece, I have supplied some possible identities or sources of influence for the artist. I can say with confidence that, whoever the painter was, he lived and worked in Castile in the Hispano-Flemish tradition. Our understanding of this Spanish altarpiece’s story has expanded. When I began my research, it was known only that the panel had been donated by Raymonde Erszanski of New York City. Now, we know how the altarpiece panel came to cross the Atlantic to be sold on the New York

68 Kroesen, *Staging the Liturgy*, 309.
69 Sobre, *Behind the Altar Table*, 27-29.
art market and that it came to Montana as evidence of the philanthropic largesse of a few individuals. Perhaps the information that I have been able to unearth will lead to further discoveries about this still enigmatic piece.
Bibliography


