

SIMON DINNERSTIEN'S *FULBRIGHT TRIPTYCH*: RECASTING SACRED FORM AS
SECULAR MEDITATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effective use of the triptych format to tell a secular, and deeply personal, narrative in Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* (1971-1974), specifically focusing on the reappropriation of conventions and iconographic norms typical of Catholic Northern Renaissance triptychs to engage viewers in a deeply emotional and self-reflective viewing experience. Like its Northern Renaissance predecessors, *The Fulbright Triptych* inspired thoughtful meditation, transforming allusions to Catholic symbols, personal narrative, and its three-part format to shape an active viewer experience. Existing scholarship on Dinnerstein's triptych centers on the work's technical mastery and the artist's lived experience. This paper seeks to build on the existing scholarship. Specifically, it places the discussion of Dinnerstein's triptych into the wider scholarship on the triptych format, focusing on the work's visual connections to Early Netherlandish devotional paintings, its function as a modern, secular triptych, and its ability to emotionally engage viewers, eliminating the distance between the object and the viewer. The paper references both the works of previous scholarship on Northern Renaissance triptychs and *The Fulbright Triptych*, as well as two interviews conducted by this author with the artist which provided deeper insight into his processes and changing perspectives on the work in the intervening years. At its core, *The Fulbright Triptych* creates a three-point experience, connecting the artist's lived experience, the creation of his family and art, with the physical work in the gallery space, and finally, with the lives and values of the audience engaging with the piece. Like Early Northern Renaissance triptychs, Dinnerstein's masterwork

becomes a physical presence, a point for viewers to focus their thoughts and reflect on the lived experiences that create personal meaning.

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The Fulbright Triptych: A Secular Triptych

Introduction

As a viewer, finding a piece of art that deeply resonates is akin to hearing two tuning forks struck years, maybe centuries, apart, hanging in the liminal space between creation and the act of being witnessed, creating a synchronizing harmony, echoing across space and time. “You see me, I see you, together we are seen.” It is a moment paused in time, a sacred encounter where the piece requires the viewer to stop and observe. Simon Dinnerstein’s *Fulbright Triptych* (Fig. 1) is one such work, it demands the viewers attentive reflection.

I first encountered Dinnerstein’s triptych in 2018 when, on a whim, I visited the Nevada Museum of Art. Dinnerstein’s piece was the focal point around which the traveling exhibition, *The Lasting World: Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, hinged. Entering the museum’s Barbara and Tad Danz Gallery, time stood still as viewer and work confronted one another, sharing a moment suspended and apart from the surrounding world. At the time, I was two years removed from coursework for an unfinished master’s degree in art history, with a specific focus on the Late Middle Ages to Early Northern Renaissance, nothing so current as Dinnerstein’s work, and yet the work, its sitters, landscape, and maker’s tools, all called out, “You know me, I know you, we know something of one another.”

In the intervening years, seasons, jobs, and stages of life have all changed, but I continued to return to the work, revisiting its themes and thoughtful reinterpretation of age-old conventions. Upon reflection, the viewing was frozen in time’s amber, inviting ruminations over the technical reasons of why the piece struck such a deep and resonating chord. It would not be hyperbolic to say that the work had captured my imagination, its soft warm sounds echoing through my past

and into my present. A fact that inspired an email in appreciation of the work to Mr. Dinnerstein. The note was short, capturing both my personal fondness for the piece and a summary of some of my own interpretations of the triptych. That email, seemingly a small but poignant brush with fate when viewed in retrospect, led to a lengthy email correspondence, followed by two interviews with Dinnerstein, for which I was both humbled and delighted, and ultimately, resulted in the paper that follows.

Historiography

To ensure a comprehensive assessment of the *The Fulbright Triptych*, it is first necessary to contextualize this study within the wider art historical dialogue concerning the evolution of triptychs and devotional art over time, a scholarly pursuit which has seen many shifting perspectives and approaches over decades of academic inquiry. Earliest scholarship was limited to connoisseurship and attribution studies, focusing on vital foundational information tied to attribution and provenance, compositional and stylistic successes within each piece, and overall historic significance compared to comparative contemporary pieces within the field. Max J. Friedländer's work represents the peak of this school of thought, rigorously researching provenance and an artist's collective works to develop an understanding of a given piece within its context, comparing a given work to similar, contemporary pieces by other artists, as well as to the collective works of the producing artist.¹

Arguably the greatest advancement in the field studying the works of the early Church through the Northern Renaissance and beyond, was made by noted art historian Erwin Panofsky, who in his foundational 1927 essay, "*Imago pietatis*," proposed using a then revolutionary methodical approach to understanding and contextualize late medieval devotional art using "a

¹ Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, comments and notes by Nicole Veronee-Verhaegen (New York: Praeger, 1967).

‘genetic’ approach of iconographical types.”² Panofsky moved the discourse in the field away from connoisseurship and narrative descriptions, towards an understanding of a work’s function and impact on its viewers based on iconography and perceived proximity with the audience. Panofsky believed that devotional images held a certain internal power, in that they allowed for a “contemplative immersion [in that they] permit the subject’s soul to meld with the object.”³ It is important to note that Panofsky’s definition of devotional images was limited to works he classified as *Andachtsbild*, smaller pieces intended for individual prayer rather than group prayer, but scholarship beginning in the late 1950s, most notably Hans Aurenhammer,⁴ Sixten Ringbom,⁵ and contemporary art historian Ingrid Falque, push back on this narrow definition to include larger works and pieces that may have been intended for both personal and group prayer.⁶ This more inclusive approach is also supported by other current scholars, like Beth Williamson, who specializes in the study of medieval devotional art and practice. Williamson disputes a stark division between personal devotional images and works created for liturgical use. Instead, she proposes a continuum between art created for private and public use, stressing a piece’s intended function as a devotional object rather than a division built strictly based on the work’s envisioned setting, be it a smaller work created for a domestic setting or a large altarpiece commissioned for churches and cathedrals.⁷ That said, Panofsky’s astounding leap forward in interpretation is noteworthy, particularly when considering Northern Renaissance triptychs, in

² Ingrid Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects: State of Research ca. 1990–2020,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2024.16.1.1>

³ Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects,” 3.

⁴ Hans Aurenhammer, *Die Mariengnadenbilder Wiens und Niederösterreichs in der Barockzeit: Der Wandel ihrer Ikonographie und ihrer Verehrung* (Vienna: Im Selbstverlag des Österreichischen Museums für Volkskunde, 1956),

⁵ Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, 2nd ed., rev. and augm., with a postscript, 1983 (Doornspijk, The Netherlands: Davaco, 1984), 52–58.

⁶ Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects,” 6.

⁷ Beth Williamson, “Liturgical Image or Devotional Image? The London Madonna of the Firescreen,” in *Objects, Images, and the Word: Art in the Service of the Liturgy*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 299.

that his methodology, especially when considered through the wider, more inclusive lens of contemporary scholarship, allows for interpretation of various works in the religious and devotional context when they were created, highlighting the symbolic and theological weight inherent to a devotional image, as well as the immersive contemplative response for religious devotees who engaged with the objects.

Scholar Julien Chapuis noted that there was a period of academic writing, roughly from the 1950s to the early 1980s, where scholarship focused on what he considered a misguided vein of study that narrowed Panofsky's original work to center on unpacking supposed hidden symbolism within devotional images from the Northern Renaissance. This less fruitful line of study was abandoned by most scholars in the field by the early-to-mid 1980s onward to focus instead on function and viewer devotional engagement.⁸ A key text highlighting return to a more Panofskian methodical lens is James H. Marrow's 1979 book, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*. Marrow's work centers on the intersection of written and visual representations of the Passion of Christ. Marrow noted that "images, no less than texts, were essential instruments for stimulating devotion during the late Middle Ages," going on to stress that textual and visual representations were mutually reinforcing and were directly influenced by the existing, and increasingly more personal, devotional practices of the period.⁹ In his later writings, Marrow goes on to question the legitimacy of an iconographic based approach focused or disguised in assessing works from the Northern Renaissance. Instead, he acknowledges consistent forms for thematic representation of

⁸ Julien Chapuis, "Early Netherlandish Painting: Shifting Perspectives," in *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 11.

⁹ James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk, Belgium: Van Ghemmert Pub. Co., 1979), 28.

biblical stories, following patterns dating back to the eleventh century, as a mechanism to both convey church and cult doctrine and to characterize sacred concepts through “the use of metaphorical or symbolic imagery.”¹⁰ This approach marked a clear return to a focus on how devotional art effected viewers, specifically as tools for enhancing spiritual practice.

This transition towards personal devotion through prayerful meditation was continued through Craig Harbinson’s scholarship, notably his 1985 article, “Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting,” where he focused on the practice of personal piety and self-identification with holy figures in the Low Countries following in the widespread popularity of devotional text from the Middle Ages and the use of images to engender deep, personal, spiritual devotion. Harbinson noted the proliferation of handbooks crafted for personal devotion, rather than group prayer, in the fifteenth century that were intended to be accessible, and intimately personal, objects that engendered an active, rather than passive, devotional practice. Likewise, the contemporary art produced was deeply personal. According to Harbinson, devotional paintings and images, like the personal handbooks, were also crafted to help the laity form “a kind of personal mysticism which transcend[ed] traditional liturgical piety.”¹¹ By the early 1990s, scholarship completed the shift away from decoding hidden meaning behind iconography in early Netherlandish art to instead focus on viewer response, devotional practice, and the practical use of each piece within its physical space. This shift aligns with wider shifts within the field of art history, notably the rise of visual studies rooted in W. J. T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm, who respectively and simultaneously advocate a ‘pictorial turn’ and an ‘iconic turn.’ When put into conversation with one another, both concepts represented a paradigm shift,

¹⁰ James H. Marrow, “Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 16, no. 2/3 (1986): 150–169, 150-151.

¹¹ Craig Harbinson, “Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15, no. 2 (1985): 87–118, 87-88.

equal in importance to the ‘linguistic turn,’ where non-verbal pictorial images are deemed equally important as language in terms of the way people understand the world, and is therefore, an equally important field of study, equivalent to written media. Mitchell and Boehm’s collective work elevates the scholarly treatment of images as pertinent, and authoritative forms of knowledge and communication, with unique visual logic and cultural agency separate from linguistic models or rhetorical devices.¹² As a result of the pictorial and iconic turn, and the collective works of scholars like Marrow and Harbison, visual and devotional practice has emerged as a central focus of scholarship dedicated to devotional images produced during the medieval and early modern Low Countries.

According to Falque, between 1990 and 2020 scholarship tied to early Netherlandish paintings saw the development of two key methodologies building on the work of earlier scholarship: first, concerns clarifying the reciprocal connection between text and image, and the second, involves a growing emphasis on pictorial rhetoric. These shifts have been fruitful avenues of study in that they center the function of devotional paintings in deepening the spiritual lives of fifteenth and early sixteenth century devotees. Under this paradigm, these images can be understood as active tools for prayer and devotion that reinforced spiritual beliefs, rather than mere vehicles to simply feature hidden, symbolic iconography.¹³ The crucial link between text and image is notably addressed by scholar Reindert Falkenburg in his 1994 book, *The Fruit of Devotion: Mysticism and the imagery of love in Flemish paintings of the Virgin and Child, 1450-1550*. In the book, Falkenburg opts for a culturally informed approach that stresses a linked, three-fold interaction between practitioner, devotional texts, and image, specifically

¹² Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, “Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50, nos. 2–3 (2009): 103–21.

¹³ Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects.”

focusing on images of the Virgin and Child, flowers and fruit, and themes tied to the Holy Family in Early Netherlandish paintings.¹⁴ Jeffrey F. Hamburger is another scholar of note, who, like Falkenburg, emphasized the importance of images in devotional practice used in conjunction with written text and liturgical object so create a structure to guide prayer and meditation. Specifically, Hamburger's contribution to the field focused on how images were used to inform and guide devotional practices in German Dominican convents in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, specifically seeking to understand how images helped to shape the visual, and by extension, spiritual culture of female monasticism.¹⁵ Like other scholars before him, Hamburger's research stresses the active relationship between devotional images and, in the case of his research, the clergy who engaged with and commissioned the work, noting that this relationship adapted based on the prevailing and shifting attitudes towards visual imagery within the early Church.¹⁶ Both Falkenburg and Hamburger helped to further the study of devotional art by moving away from strict iconographic based interpretation to an understanding rooted in an images ability to deepen a viewer's spirituality by creating immersive devotional experiences.

In addition to advancements in considerations of devotional practice and the functional spiritual use around triptychs at the time in which they were produced, scholars have also spent much time and attention on the meaning imbued by the three-panel form itself. In 1959, German art historian, Klaus Lankheit, continued to build the scholarly discourse surrounding triptychs away from solely an iconographic assessment, to also include a focus on structural meaning inherent to the three-panel format. Most notably, Lankheit, building on an 1886 paper by Jakob

¹⁴ Reindert Leonard Falkenburg, *The Fruit of Devotion: Mysticism and the Imagery of Love in Flemish Paintings of the Virgin and Child, 1450–1550* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994), 12.

¹⁵ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998) 9.

¹⁶ Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary*, 111-112.

Burckhardt,¹⁷ proposed the hierarchical nature of the triptych, where the center panel represented the emotive and thematic center of a given triptych, supported by the subordination of the wings, coining the term “subordinating center.”¹⁸ By the late 1960s, scholars like Shirley Blume focused her work on the triptych form, noting that early Netherlandish Triptychs replicated and condensed the sculptural elements of Gothic cathedrals, transforming stone and marble into wooden panels and oil paints, yet maintaining the connection to its architectural origin.¹⁹ According to Blume, “The triptych functioned as an altar painting to concentrate, localize, and unify all the sacred references in the chapel or church,” she then furthers her argument to note that the complete meaning of any triptych can only be fully realized within the context of its architectural surroundings, without it, the understanding of the work would be incomplete.²⁰ Blume’s argumentation was strictly centered around the structural composition of triptychs. Building on Lankheit and Blume’s work, scholar Karl Schade stressed the importance of how triptychs functioned, specifically because of the subordinating center, as a focal point for personal prayer and devotion.²¹ It is at this point that scholarship shifted from analysis of the strictly visual qualities of early Netherlandish triptychs to refocus the discourse on their function, exploring how the imagery and format elicited spiritual responses from viewers.²²

¹⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *Vorträge*, 1844–1887, ed. Emil Dürr (Basel: B. Schwabe, 1919), 215–227, accessed July 6, 2026,

https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175034896954&__cf_chl_f_tk=wLPKSCYcanXX1KYgHHYvBFkrOh6VveWH.P1QhyR8l90-1783400693-1.0.1.1-kSvadZoqPalc95j38liTh8vkyAi3nTaOigoUICjqCFE&seq=17.

¹⁸ Klaus Lankheit, *Das Triptychon als Pathosformel* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1959), 11–16, cited in *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted*, 2.

¹⁹ Shirley Neilsen Blume, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage*, vol. 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520337480>.

²⁰ Blume, *Early Netherlandish Triptychs*, 7.

²¹ Karl Schade, *Andachtsbild: Die Geschichte eines kunsthistorischen Begriffs* (Weimar: VDG – Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 1996), Kindle edition.

²² Ingrid Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects: State of Research ca. 1990–2020,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2024.16.1.1>

The bulk of contemporary scholarship has moved away from a strict iconographical approach centered on decoding disguised symbolism within Early Netherlandish devotional works. That is not to say that iconology has been stripped from recent scholarship in its entirety. Instead, the discourse has widened to the analysis of “the languages of images, especially the pictorial rhetoric of paintings, by producing studies jointly analyzing iconographic motifs as well as formal and compositional elements.”²³ Today, much of the literature focuses on the technical aspects of the Early Netherlandish religious works, including triptychs, examining meaning through visual language, composition, and special organization throughout the work. The visual strategies of note include the examination of the use of boundaries and threshold and special complexity as a compositional device to guide viewers through a work, creating meaning and deepening the viewer’s spiritual engagement and devotional practice.²⁴ Alfred Alpers in analyzing how time was manipulated by late medieval and Renaissance painters, specifically the temporal rhetoric employed by Rogier van der Weyden in his *Saint Columba Altarpiece* (ca. 1450–1455), noted the importance of representational rhetoric in the fifteenth century religious imagery as a tool used to explain and persuade viewers of religious truths, while also opening a two way relationship between the art and the viewer. Of the *Saint Columba Altarpiece*, Acres observed that there is an important connection between the viewer and the altarpiece, creating “a number of unique perceptions as dynamic openings between sacred history and the unusually conscious situation of an observer looking back on it.”²⁵

Scholars Alfred Acres and Lynn Jacobs have pushed the discourse to also consider the importance of thresholds, both depicted and physical, as a source to draw meaning and

²³ Falque, "Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects," para. 29.

²⁴ Falque, "Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects," para. 29.

²⁵ Alfred Acres, “The Columba Altarpiece and the Time of the World,” *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 3 (September 1998): 422.

understanding when analyzing the devotional diptychs and triptychs. Acres, in analyzing the diptych form, notes the inherently tangible nature of the works, pieces that are crafted to be interactive: held, open, closed, and transported from place to place. In his observations, Acres stresses the importance of the middle space, between the panels a diptych, as a conveyor of deep meaning, in his essay, “The Middle of Diptychs.” In the essay, he specifically focuses on devotional diptychs featuring both Christ’s passion and infancy imagery, noting that the viewer plays a central role in wresting meaning through the act of comparing the iconography and narrative within both panels of a given diptych. Acres contends that viewers can fully understand the symbolic importance only when they contemplated the connection between the two panels through repeated meditation, stressing that the physical construction, most importantly the middle space created by the hinge, as a mechanism that deepened spiritual engagement by considering the void that resides between the panels.²⁶ In his analysis of Robert Campin’s diptych with *Trinity* and *Virgin and Child* (c.1430s), Acres argues that, through the act of holding and opening such objects, individuals were invited into a state of wonder, reflection and revelation through the immediacy of the images, held both between their hands and, simultaneously, held deep in prayerful thought.²⁷ While Acres focused on the resonant implications of boundaries within the diptych format, Lynn Jacobs focuses her work on the evocative nature of thresholds found within devotional triptychs. Jacobs analyzes how the inclusion of doorways and hinges can unlock a deeper understanding of a triptych’s formal elements, iconography, surrounding historical context, and most importantly, a given work’s

²⁶ Alfred Acres, “The Middle of Diptychs,” in *Push Me, Pull You: Imaginative and Emotional Interaction in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, vol. 1, ed. Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 595–621, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004215139_018

²⁷ Acres, “The Middle of Diptychs,” 607.

spiritual impact on the viewer.²⁸ According to Jacobs, the format itself is latent with sacred meaning, creating a space for active contemplation on the part of the viewer.²⁹

Much has been said about *The Fulbright Triptych* by art historians, critics and enthusiasts alike in response to their emotional reactions to the work, as well as thoughtful observations about Dinnerstein's technique and ability to use the medium to convey a profound personal narrative. But little has been said about the way the work interacts with and impacts the viewer. The work has not been placed by art historians within the wider dialogue about how triptychs function, specifically connecting the piece to Northern Renaissance devotional works that served as powerful inspirational antecedents to Dinnerstein's masterwork. Like its historic progenitors, *The Fulbright Triptych* inspires thoughtful, almost devotional, contemplation in its viewership, inviting them into a liminal space between the world of the gallery and the world, lost to time, when the work was created. This study aims to place the work within the wider discussion about the form and function of triptychs as devotional objects. The paper posits that, like its predecessors, *The Fulbright Triptych* fosters an intensely personal relationship between viewer and object, where the space between the artist, the art, and the viewer collapses across time, meeting together at the work's physical center, at the artist's drafting table.

The intensely memoiristic *Fulbright Triptych* was the result of happenstance and a chance inspiration when Simon Dinnerstein was studying in Europe on a Fulbright scholarship. As a result, it is difficult to place the work within a rigid, art historical category. Dinnerstein himself affirms that he continues to learn more about the work through reflection in the intervening years from its creation to the present, stating that he finds the work to be, in many ways, elusive,

²⁸ Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 15.

²⁹ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 2.

defying any strict categorization. The work's visual narrative spans his life, imbuing the piece with layers of personal understanding as his life experience grows.³⁰ And yet, despite being tailored so specifically to its creator, *The Fulbright Triptych* is accessible to, and resonates with, audiences because "all triptychs encourage storytelling. The three panels act as an unfolding of time, doors opening to deepening revelation."³¹ According to Dinnerstein, "there are multiple portals for entering the painting, because it exists on multiple levels of reality, abstraction, and conceptual interpretation."³² It is this unique melding of autobiographic detail on the part of the artist, and the interpretative liberty that the work allows its viewers based on the self-reflection the work engenders, that makes the work so compelling and drives the discussion that follows. The focus of this paper will be to unpack *The Fulbright Triptych's* function as a contemporary devotional, meditative, object through structural analysis, a broad discussion of its pictorial rhetoric, and most importantly, understand how the work creates a powerful, embodied experience for the viewer. A triptych's ability to tell stories for audiences lies firmly in its format, the drama unfolding in a visual narrative across its three panels. In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, its story unfolds for audiences by reappropriating traditionally Christian symbolism and a format typical of Northern Renaissance triptychs to create a wholly secular altarpiece, dedicated to concepts of personal discovery and artistic creation. Viewers access Dinnerstein's deeper themes through thoughtfully appropriated religious imagery and symbols incorporated throughout the masterwork.

³⁰ Megan Robbins, Conversation with Simon Dinnerstein. Personal, August 30, 2025.

³¹ Tom Healy, "The Difference Between Velvet and Velour," essay, in *The Lasting World Simon Dinnerstein and the Fulbright Triptych* (Brooklyn, New York: First Street Editions, 2017), 15–18, 16.

³² Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

The Fulbright Triptych both consciously and unconsciously manipulates the visual language and tools prevalent in Catholic Northern Renaissance triptychs to center a thoroughly personal and timeless story. In place of altars, reliquaries, saints, and iconography central to Biblical or Christian allegories, Dinnerstein substitutes a printmaker's worktable, his family members, and famous works of art, meticulously reproduced from all eras of human history. Utilizing the visual parlance of an early Christian faith, Dinnerstein tells a new story, his story. Rather than centering a faith-based worldview, he welcomes viewers into the world of the painting, a moment that reaches across time and space, to sanctify, and center, the process of artistic creation. At the heart of *The Fulbright Triptych* sits Dinnerstein's personal philosophy, the root of his artistic genesis, "the idea of making art [is] to create ...an emotional way of addressing life."³³ Like organized religion, Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych*, becomes a vector for viewers to process life and give meaning to the world. The work transforms into an altarpiece to artistry, artistic creation, and the experience of art as both creator and viewer.

The Creation of *The Fulbright Triptych*

Born in Brooklyn in 1943, Simon Dinnerstein began studying painting and drawing at the Brooklyn Museum of Art from 1964-1967. Dinnerstein's drawing and printmaking work quickly garnered recognition, earning him the McDowell Colony Fellowship in 1969.³⁴ A year later, he applied for a Fulbright Scholarship. While originally intent on studying with Antonio López García in Spain, fate had other plans. It was at this point in the selection process that Dinnerstein was asked to select a second possibility for the Fulbright Grant, he selected Germany to study printmaking, as well as the work of Albrech Dürer. While he was denied his first choice, he was

³³ Megan Robbins, Interview One with Simon Dinnerstein. February 24, 2025

³⁴ Simon Dinnerstein, "Chronology," Simon Dinnerstein.com, 2017, August 15, 2025, <https://www.simondinnerstein.com/chronology.html>.

granted the opportunity to pursue his second choice in Kassel, Germany. As a Jewish-American he had reservations about living in Germany in 1970 a mere twenty-five years after the Holocaust, yet despite his reservation, he accepted the fellowship to study the art of one of his heroes, calling Dürer, “the Prince of Art.”³⁵ Paradoxically, while studying Dürer’s masterworks and honing his own skills as a printmaker, Dinnerstein, in a moment of artistic inspiration, was moved to create the monumental *The Fulbright Triptych*. The way Dinnerstein describes the instant he conceived of the painting is filled with awe; he states, “I was standing [in our apartment] about eight or 10 feet back [from my drafting table]. And I saw the table and the windows and some of the pictures hung on the wall. It was not what you see in the painting, but it was there, in an early, inchoate state.” Dinnerstein went on to say, “I thought the scene that I imagined and viewed had all the constituents, the raw material that had the potential of producing a great painting. The problem was that I had not painted since art school. My work was wholly about drawings and prints.” Struck by a sudden, if at the time, rudimentary vision, soon he set about the creation of *The Fulbright Triptych*. As Dinnerstein began to plot out the piece, he said, “the idea struck [him] that the painting needed wings, which would have a human presence, on one side Renee and on the other side [Simon], surrounded by images which would reflect [their] visual counterparts and enthusiasms.”³⁶ Soon after, he conceived the idea for the project to be a triptych, Dinnerstein began work on this monumental undertaking.

Painted over a three-year period, between 1971 and 1974, *The Fulbright Triptych* is an imposing work, measuring an impressive 14 feet across by 6.67 feet tall. The highly autobiographical piece is not a “triptych” in the truest sense of the word, because its panels are

³⁵ Simon Dinnerstein, “An Interview with Simon Dinnerstein,” interview by Marshall Price, in *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, ed. Daniel Slager (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2011), 255-256.

³⁶ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

independent of one another rather than connected with hinges. The center panel, which replicates the artist's printmaking studio and the German town just beyond the workshop's windows, forms a perfect square at 6.67 feet tall by 6.67 feet tall. At its flanks sit the triptych's wings, exactly half the center panel's width, featuring the artist's wife, Renée, and baby daughter, Simone, to the left and a self-portrait of Dinnerstein to the right.

According to Dinnerstein, his plan for the triptych was such that "the wings would be somewhat warmer, the interior middle panel, somewhat cooler...the conversation [between the center and the wings], would create another temperature, the temperature of this communication from the middle out and from out to the middle."³⁷ As he planned the piece, he paid special attention to the temperature throughout, contrasting the central panel with the wings. Work on the triptych began in Dinnerstein's German apartment, by first mapping out the center panel. Unfortunately, his Fulbright scholarship was completed before the triptych's wings were mapped onto the panels. He left Germany with only the central panel, drawn directly onto the wood using a radiograph pen, the wings were unfinished.

In 1973, upon returning to the United States from Germany, Dinnerstein had completed two-thirds of the triptych's center panel but had not yet begun work on its wings. After shipping the central panel to New York and securing studio space on the third floor of a brownstone, Dinnerstein worked to find a new way to support his growing family while continuing his work on the triptych. Dinnerstein sought out a dealer to represent his work. He remembered the Staempfli Gallery, where Dinnerstein was first introduced to Antonio López García's work. Staempfli was a prestigious gallery located on 77th Street and Madison Avenue, on the second floor. Without an introduction or appointment and armed with a handful of carefully sequenced

³⁷ Dinnerstein, interview one.

photographs of the in-progress work and a maquette of the incomplete triptych, with the center panel flanked by an image of Renée and Simone on one side and an image of the artist on the other. Dinnerstein introduced himself to Phillip Bruno, Staempfli's partner, to secure the gallery's representation. According to Dinnerstein, when he approached the gallery, his aim was to present a body of work that demonstrated his personal philosophy, a point of view that was unique to his experience and process. Fortuitously, Phillip Bruno, whose job it was to screen unannounced artists, agreed to look at Dinnerstein's images after learning that Dinnerstein had been so affected by Lopez Garcia's works on display at the gallery five years prior. After reviewing the photographs, Bruno agreed to share the photo collection with George Staempfli. Soon after, both Bruno and Staempfli visited Dinnerstein's Brooklyn studio to view the work in person. In Dinnerstein's retelling of this momentous meeting, he said, "[The pair] looked at the painting for 20-30 minutes without saying anything. The silence was deafening and totally nerve wracking. One could hear a clock ticking. After this very long pause, George Staempfli lit up a little black cigar. He looked at me and said, in his mercurial and somewhat aristocratic voice, 'I think this is a great painting, and I would like to own it.' I was completely surprised... The odds on a gallery following this protocol are millions to one."³⁸

George Staempfli followed up his initial visit with a letter and contract in which he offered to purchase the triptych in its unfinished state through monthly payments over an approximate two-year period. Staempfli's contract was dependent upon two conditions, which were spelled out in his letter: first, that the work must physically fit in his New York gallery, and second, that Dinnerstein abandon the idea of creating the wings, stating that work was complete without them and that their inclusion would make the painting too big for any institution to buy except for a

³⁸ Dinnerstein, interview two.

museum, which at the time, Staempfli claimed, were not acquiring such large works.³⁹ While thrilled that he had secured a potential gallery to represent him, Dinnerstein was determined that the wings were necessary for the composition's success, stating, "It seemed to me that this [was] a much better painting with the wings. The wings would give the painting a human dimension, a mystery and complexity and, formally, a left-right emotive force."⁴⁰ Dinnerstein, at the risk of losing the gallery's representation, petitioned Staempfli for the addition of the wings, passionately arguing that the work was incomplete without them, "that the wings activated the work, elevating it to another level. It was the human presence in the wings that provided an extra complexity and resonance to the painting."⁴¹ With the addition of the panels, creating a triptych, the story would be fully realized. Dinnerstein argued that in the wings' absence, the painting would be a highly articulated depiction of an artist's studio. With the wings, a different, denser and more resonant, more mysterious story would be told. He felt fervently that the completed wings would not only complete the work's narrative cycle, but that they would also activate the viewers' experience as they traversed from one panel to the next, reflecting on the life that echoes through each panel.⁴² Initially, Staempfli balked at the idea of adding the two side panels to the composition, leaving Dinnerstein in a difficult position as to how to respond. He says, "In retrospect, I was utterly foolish to argue with Staempfli...but that being an artist is really entering a world of compromise."⁴³ Dinnerstein felt that to remove the panels was the equivalent of a playwright being asked by a producer to remove the first and third acts of a play, to instead tell only the middle of their story. His instinct is that such things happen all the time in the arts.

³⁹ Dinnerstein, interview one.

⁴⁰ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, "A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych," 33-34.

⁴¹ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

⁴² Dinnerstein and Jacobs, "A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych," 34.

⁴³ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

Despite Dinnerstein's desires to create the triptych in full, Staempfli only committed to purchasing the middle panel. Over the course of the following two years, Dinnerstein worked on the whole painting, uncertain if Staempfli would accept the triptych, beyond the middle panel, upon its completion. In the end, the gallery owner, after seeing the completed triptych in Dinnerstein's studio, to the artist's delight, made an offer to also purchase the side panels. Over many years, Dinnerstein wondered how, in this crucial meeting, the fate of the triptych hung by a thread, a moment set apart in his life as a *sui generis* unto itself.⁴⁴

Once complete, the work fully transformed from a straightforward, three-panel composition, into a three-panel exploration of family life, personal journey, and most centrally, the act of creating art as a holy pursuit. According to Dinnerstein, he took a great career risk in petitioning Staempfli to purchase the triptych in its entirety, at a time when his young family relied on his success as an artist. In the artist's retelling, a great deal hung in the balance, for the gallery purchasing an unfinished work by a young and unknown artist was unprecedented. For Dinnerstein and for the gallery, the process of acquiring the work was highly unorthodox, a moment in time that was guided not by standard operating procedures, but instead by fate. Ultimately, in hindsight, Dinnerstein remained stalwart in his decision to commit to the triptych format, feeling that the work would have suffered in the wings' absence.⁴⁵ While the central panel would certainly be eye-catching as a standalone work, the wings complete the work's narrative cycle, activating the viewer's experience as the eye moves from mother and daughter, to the central panel, to the artist himself, and back again.

Triptychs and Northern Renaissance Devotional Art: Form, Content, and Function

⁴⁴ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, August 14, 2026.

⁴⁵ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

To understand Dinnerstein's masterwork as a contemporary, nonreligious, meditative triptych, it is important to recall the purpose and practical functions of triptychs and other devotional paintings within the late medieval Catholic Church. According to noted art historian Lynn Jacobs, who specializes in Early Netherlandish triptychs, triptychs have historically functioned in five main ways. Their primary, and perhaps most ubiquitous function, was to serve as altarpieces. In this capacity, triptychs like Jon van Ghent's *Calvary* triptych (ca. 1467-69) or Hugo van der Goes' *Portinari Altarpiece* (ca. 1475-76) function as both the backdrops for masses and the holy sacraments, as well as the foci for personal prayer. Triptychs were also commissioned as epitaphs to place over tombs, or to be placed in churches as focal points for prayers for the souls of wealthy donors, a wonderful example can be seen in the exterior panels of Rogier van der Weyden's *Beaune Altarpiece* (ca. 1334-48) where the triptych's patrons are piously kneeling in prayer, while winged angels, holding their family crests, watch on approvingly. Finally, triptychs were commissioned either as reliquaries for private or personal devotion to a particular relic, or for personal devotion in nunneries, private homes, or secular settings. Joon van Cleve's *Annunciation* (1525) demonstrates this final use case perfectly, as Gabriel visits Mary in her room, announcing the coming of Christ, who in this case takes the form of a glowing dove, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, Mary's personal triptych sits atop a cabinet, one door ajar, in the painting's background.⁴⁶ Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych*, due to its massive scale and dynamic composition most closely functions as a kind of secular altarpiece, the dominant work within a gallery space, drawing viewers forward to step into the world of the work, to contemplate the artist and his family, and the artwork on the workbench at the triptych's center. In this way, the triptych imbues the gallery space itself with a sense of sacredness, much

⁴⁶ Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 15-19.

as an altarpiece does in a church. The work centers the visitor's experience, signaling that the gallery is, in some sense, hallowed ground and that the works displayed alongside the triptych are too worthy of reverence, an extension of the triptych's dedication to the sacrality of the creative process.

In connecting *The Fulbright Triptych* to its Northern Renaissance predecessors, it is also useful to keep in mind art historian Craig Harbison's scholarship on the use and manipulation of realism in Early Netherlandish paintings. Importantly, Harbison argues that "the fragmentary, emblematic, and propagandistic aspects of early Netherlandish realism are meant to be perceived and appreciated simultaneously...fact, symbol, and ideal all at once"⁴⁷ Netherlandish artist created a fragmented reality, pulling and replicating, from model-books to craft an ideal reality rather than a faithful reproduction of a specific city, room, or landscape.⁴⁸ In the event specific buildings or places were included within a work, they would be included not as a disguised symbol, but as an clear reference, creating an obvious and lived sense of place within the work, Harbison likened these inclusions to the well-trodden attributes of saints, their inclusion was intentional, a mechanism to shape the viewer's experience. In this view, Netherlandish realism was an orderly idealism that held dual meaning for its viewership. Prayerful observers could simultaneously place the perfectly rendered objects, places, and vistas within their contemporary context while also gleaning symbolic spiritual significance pulled from the convincing verisimilitudes of their everyday life replicated and carefully reassembled by the likes of van Eyck and Campin.

⁴⁷ Craig Harbison, "Fact, Symbol, Ideal: Roles for Realism in Early Netherlandish Painting," in *Petrus Christus: Renaissance Master of Bruges*, ed. Maryan W. Ainsworth (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 22-23, and 32.

⁴⁸ Harbison, "Fact, Symbol, Ideal," 24.

Building on Harbison's analysis, the scholarship of Bret L. Rothstein becomes especially important to consider in regard to the viewer's experience of Dinnerstein's triptych. Rothstein was particularly interested in the act of seeing as a key consideration in understanding the usage of Early Netherlandish paintings as spiritual tools for active devotion. Rothstein mainly focuses his argumentation on Petrus Christus' *A Goldsmith in His Shop* (ca. 1449) and Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin and Child* (ca. 1435), as prime examples justifying his claim. Like *The Fulbright Triptych*, Rothstein observes that both pieces "advanced the pursuit of holiness, [because] both paintings engage matters of skill and craftsmanship, form of visual interest in each painting are inextricably linked to and justified by larger, unmistakably, religious goals."⁴⁹ While Dinnerstein created a painting that celebrates the craft of printmaking, Rothstein notes, that Christus' work, similarly, is a painting that extols the virtues of another artform, namely metalwork, and van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin and Child* pays homage as much to the worship of the Virgin and Child as it does the medium of silverpoint.⁵⁰ In the paradigm presented by Rothstein, we gain a new understanding of how Early Netherlandish paintings functioned. These images were not simply astounding works of idealized realism, or convincing representations of religious narratives rife with symbolic meaning, rather they become urbane, cultured meditations on vision in and of itself. He then goes on to argue that it is through these meditations on the carefully crafted scenes that viewers could deepen their devotional practice, noting that the spiritual truths being captured by the carefully painted scenes were outside of the realm of physical sight, residing instead in the realm of spiritual sight. This key observation neatly aligns with contemporary theological writings and thought on the

⁴⁹ Bret L. Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

⁵⁰ Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality*, 4 and 7.

Christian tradition around the nature of revelation at the time and the immediacy of insight that can be translated through the act of seeing.⁵¹ In this way, the creation of such devotional works “was a unique and culturally charge way of knowing to which painters consciously and reflexively appealed in order to validate the practice of making pictures.”⁵² The works themselves become their own epiphanies, able to reveal truth through the physical act of seeing and experiencing them first hand.

Where Harbison centers devotional practice within idealized realism, and Rothstein deepened this connection by parsing the importance of sight as the vehicle to engage in devotional practice, Walter S. Melion’s work provides the connective tissue to more fully bridge the space between Harbison and Rothstein’s scholarship. According to Melion, Early Netherlandish religious paintings were considered vectors and instruments for spiritual formation. By “engaging the soul’s meditating function as *vinculum mundi*, [the soul that links the worldly with the divine through the chain of the world], [the painting awakens the soul], its pivotal position in the great chain between heaven and earth, temporal and spiritual experience.”⁵³ These images created a liminal space for viewers, engaging both their sensory and intellectual faculties. In this paradigm, the intentional act of engaged seeing could awaken both imagination and reason, which could in turn, catalyze the formation of deeper moral character and religious identity. Therefore, an image was valued not merely for the scene being portrayed, but more so, for its ability to mold the viewer’s soul. Melion calls this concept “soul formation,” noting that in engaging the viewer’s senses images had the power to also impact imagination, memory, and reason.⁵⁴ And while

⁵¹ Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality*, 13-19.

⁵² Rothstein, *Sight and Spirituality*, 19.

⁵³ Walter S. Melion, "Meditative Images and the Psychology of the Soul," introduction to *Image and Imagination of the Religious Self in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Reindert L. Falkenburg, Walter S. Melion, and Todd M. Richardson (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2007), 1.

⁵⁴ Melion, "Meditative Images and the Psychology of the Soul," 1-2.

Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* is a secular rather than religious devotional work, functionally, it too encourages the viewer to participate in the act of soul formation. *The Fulbright Triptych*, by virtue of its size, visual richness, and clear voice, invites lingering viewing and deep, reflective, thought. This suggests that contemporary non-religious imagery, like Dinnerstein's triptych, can similarly function to activate the soul, serving as its own *vinculum mundi*, awakening, challenging, and shaping the viewer's inner life, while simultaneously transforming the museum space, the space surrounding the viewer, into a quasi-sacral space, a space set apart from the outside world for personal meditation and reflection.

A triptych's format, a central panel flanked by hinged wings, both structures and generates meaning, requiring the artist to negotiate multiple boundaries within the work. Like its fifteenth-century predecessors, *The Fulbright Triptych* functions as a triptych because it is composed of three separate panels with visible divisions, or "thresholds," between them and because it emphasizes a strong center, sometimes called a "subordinating center," in which the middle panel holds the greatest importance and draws the surrounding parts into relation with it. Although Dinnerstein's triptych is not physically hinged, it nevertheless depends on thresholds: tension and release emerge both between the panels and among the objects scattered across them. Each reproduced painting or object becomes part of a mnemonic collection that, taken together, tells the story of an artist in three parts: husband and father in the left panel, artist and creator in the center, and, in the right panel, an individual man stripped of other titles, confronting the viewer directly, eye to eye.

The Creation of a Secular Altarpiece: Reappropriating Christian Iconography

The Fulbright Triptych is rooted in Dinnerstein's personal interpretation of artistic identity, specifically printmaking and familial imagery. Throughout the triptych, Dinnerstein replaces

traditional Catholic iconography with exacting reproductions of famous masterworks, as if enshrining past artwork into a modern paean to the practice of artmaking itself. Instead of the Virgin and Child, Dinnerstein offers his own wife and daughter for the viewers' meditations in the positions most occupied by saints and donors in earlier triptychs. Instead of an extended metaphor of Christ created as the sacrificial lamb, he offers his own creation at the work's center, a burnished engraved copper plate, surrounded by the tools of his trade. And instead of Joseph, patron saint of carpenters and adoptive father to the Christ child, he presents himself, as printmaker and father, a creator in his own right. In doing so, for both artist and the viewer, Dinnerstein transformed the historic, devotional structure of the triptych into a meditation on perception and identity, and artistic creation throughout time, painting in an established Christian visual dialect to discuss themes important to all viewers, regardless of religious persuasion. Dinnerstein replicates elements of the Early Northern Renaissance triptych tradition while simultaneously subverting traditional theology in favor of more human, but no less sacred, themes: family, identity, and the creation of art.

The sprawling work is littered with every day bric-a-brac and reproductions of great works of art, no doubt the collective inspiration for the artist inhabiting the wing. Each object, whether child's drawing, postcard, passport, or newspaper clipping, is elevated to sacred object within the triptych, not haphazard placeholders pinned to the corrugated studio wall, but rather punctuation marks where viewers are asked to pause and reflect on their individual significance in relation to the sitters and the work's wider themes. When reflecting on the positioning of reproductions of Renée's student's drawings mixed among museum worthy pieces, Dinerstein highlighted the slightly provocative nature of the compositional choice, stating, "The use of children's drawings standing right next to icons of Western art is, I thought at the time, very interesting, but I guess

secretly you could argue that it's a rebellious activity and maybe a transgressive act on my part."⁵⁵ Through this transgressive act, Dinnerstein celebrates creativity at all levels, from the works produced to grace the hallowed halls of great museums, to those created in elementary school classrooms. For example, the objects affixed to the wall in the left-hand panel, facing the work, are loosely tied to Renée, Dinnerstein's wife, either referencing her work as a teacher, like the flashcard with the lowercase letter "y" and her former students' writing exercises, or her role as mother, most notably the recreations of Dieric Bouts' *Mater Dolorosa* (c. 1480-1500), Jan van Eyck's *Madonna in a Church* (1437-1439), and the Aegean fertility figure. Conversely, the objects reproduced in the triptych's right wing references the artist's identity as father and husband, see the photograph of Dinnerstein with his family in a New York subway, and the photograph of Renée and their dog Lucky respectively. The center panel is devoted to the act of creation itself, the idyllic German landscape outside the windows, works of art the artist admired, and the printmaker's tools, reverently laid on the table, turned altar, surrounding Dinnerstein's golden engraving plate, the work's physical and thematic center.

Each object pays homage to Dinnerstein's skill, and by extension, the skill of the artists whose work he re-renders throughout the triptych. Each reproduction a clever bit of trompe-l'oeil, pulling viewers closer to the wooden panels' surfaces, into the imagined space between viewer and artwork, to marvel at the craftsmanship of each item scattered within the miscellany. Take for example three of the recreations of children's art from the left wing, Jean Miele's pen and paper drawing, Ian Lewis' watercolor, and Roberto Ortiz's crayon on paper drawing, each is paid the same level of care and attention by Dinnerstein as his recreations of world renowned

⁵⁵ Simon Dinnerstein, "An Interview with Simon Dinnerstein," interview by Marshall Price, in *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, ed. Daniel Slager ((Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2011), 252.

works, like Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Francis in Ecstasy* (1490-1500) and the detail of Jan van Eyck's *Eve* taken from his masterwork, *Ghent Altarpiece's* (1432) found in the center panel. Dinnerstein pays special attention to an exacting reproduction of medium and surface texture, capturing the uneven strokes of a Crayola crayon, the glossy sheen bouncing off a polaroid, and the painterly marks in Georges Seurat's works. Each reproduction, because of the care and exact rendering paid to every square inch, is a gentle argument from the artist to the viewer, inviting them to marvel at the artistic process and a life lived in pursuit of its creation.

Left Wing: Mother and Child Enthroned

One only needs to select a triptych featuring the Madonna and Child from the annals of art history's favorite jewels to note the obvious connections and foils presented in comparing Dinnerstein's portraits of his wife and baby daughter to its Christian predecessors. For comparison, consider Hans Memling's *St. John* altarpiece from 1479 (Fig. 2). The *St. John* altarpiece was commissioned for the Hospital of Saint John in Bruges, the interior wings featuring the Hospital's patron saints: Saint John the Baptist on the left-hand side and John the Evangelist on the right. The central panel features a scene of the Virgin enthroned with the Christ child on her lap, engaged in a *sacra conversazione* with the hospital's patron saints, Saint Catherine, Saint Barbara, and two accompanying angels. Dividing Memling's triptych in half, the left side of the central panel and left wing are dedicated to Saint John the Baptist's narrative arch throughout the background, culminating in his ultimate beheading in the foreground. While the right side of the central panel and right wing depict scenes from Evangelist's life, with the notable inclusion of one of the work's patrons and the Bruges' wine market, the hospital's main source of income, in the background of the central panel on the far right. The center panel then, becomes the work's focal point, where the Mary and Jesus hold court, the foci for penitents'

active devotional practice.⁵⁶ The *St. John* altarpiece is a masterclass in the use of thresholds, analogies to the roles of doors within Catholic ritual sacraments, specifically marriage and taking the vows of holy orders, which typically were held within doorways in during the late medieval and Renaissance periods in Northern Europe. In centering Virgin and Child, Memling upholds a pillar of early Church symbolism, Mary as the gate or door to paradise, the *porta paradisi*. By carrying and birthing Jesus, Mary reversed Eve's original sin, opening the gates to heaven that had once been locked. Simultaneously, images of Mary also served as analogies for the miracle of the Christ's conception, a miraculous virgin pregnancy symbolized by a *porta clausa*, or closed door.⁵⁷ In this way, Marian imagery was "paradoxical [and] liminal...Mary [served] as both mother and virgin, both human and the bearer of God...[thus, Mary was] an open door to salvation and a closed door of inviolate purity."⁵⁸ This same understanding of paradoxical liminality was extended to Christ imagery, where his body was interpreted by the faithful as "both dead and alive, human and divine, open and closed."⁵⁹

Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych* decenters overtly Marian imagery present in the *St. John* altarpiece, yet the depiction of mother and child is no less compelling. Rather than centering his Madonna and child, he places them in the left panel, their presence becoming a possible entry point into the work, greeting viewers as they move from left to right across the work, a different, and perhaps less daunting threshold. Although both donning shades of red, Memling's Madonna is clad in rich, billowing fabrics in shades of red, gold, and deep blue, Renée is at home in a black top, fashionable plaid skirt, and bare feet. While the allusions to Mother Mary are undeniable, beginning with her casual attire, Dinerstein's portrayal of his partner is at once

⁵⁶ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 172-177.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 5.

⁵⁸ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 5-6.

⁵⁹ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 6.

worldly and intimate. Her bare feet, grounded and very near the viewer's plane, speak volumes, alluding to the comfort one feels at the end of a long day, when shoes are removed at the door and time spent at home, together, lending a sense of general domesticity to the piece. Both women present their children to the viewers, sitting comfortably in their laps. Where Mary, in Memling's work and other similar traditional triptychs, serves a theological purpose in centering her virgin birth and the coming of Christ, Renée functions as the origin of not a religious truth but of the formation of a family. Renée is fully formed, as both mother and educator, her student's writing exercises scattered among the Marian and motherly images affixed to the wall just behind her head. Dinnerstein's art and creative process takes center stage in the work's middle panel, yet Renée's work is no less present, crayon, pencil, and schoolroom paints carefully as it is painstakingly replicated by the artist, all small trompe-l'œils done in oil-paints on wood panels.

Dinnerstein's depiction of his wife, Renée, and their daughter evoke traditional representations of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, while also maintaining their individual identities as modern, living beings rather than simply serving as stand-ins for weighty religious symbols. While on the one hand Dinnerstein deepens the allusion to Marian imagery by the surrounding objects, pictures, and reproductions, that are all directly connected to Renée's identity as mother, he also broadens her identity by connecting her with imagery that is tied to her work as an educator.⁶⁰ The left panel's thematic center is simultaneously maternal and scholarly, the images haloing Renée, framing her as contemporary Madonna. Take for example Dieric Bouts' *Mater Dolorosa* (1480-1500) just over Renée's head, Jan van Eyck's *Madonna in a Church* (1437-39) to the sitter's right, and the Aegean, or possibly Cycladic fertility figure to her

⁶⁰ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, "A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych," 31.

left, all images that point towards pieces of her identity as both mother and the grounding center of the Dinnerstein's family unit.⁶¹ At the same time, the artist also included reproductions of Renée's students' works, in the forms of writing exercises, poetry, and flashcards that all allude to her professional acumen as an educator. Notable, this depiction of mother and child would not have been possible had the work not been so tied to the artist's personal experience over the three years the work was created. Dinnerstein began the work while he and Renée lived together in Germany and was finished three years later, on the other side of the world in Brooklyn, where their daughter was born. It is in the first panel, in the inclusion of his daughter who was not yet conceived when the painting had begun, that Dinnerstein's personal growth across space and time is captured.⁶² During an interview, Simone herself noted this journey belonged to all three of the work's sitters, noting that, "The triptych was born at the same time I was, and it contains my parents' DNA just as much as I do. When I look at the triptych I see where I come from. And if I wanted to tell someone who I really am deep inside, I would just need to show them those three panels."⁶³ In observing the story presented by the work, the triptych's first panel sets the tone for how viewers interpret the work. In framing Renée and Simone as replicas of the Virgin and Child, Dinnerstein signals the viewer to understand that they are entering a sort of sacred space, but simultaneously, he has also presented those things he considers most sacred, the most highly valued elements of his life throughout the work's creation, beginning with his family.

Right Panel: Joseph in His Workshop

If Renée and Simone parallel the Virgin and Christ child within the triptych, the next clear allusion is that of the artist, Simon, and his Catholic counterpart, Joseph, adoptive father to Jesus

⁶¹ Boime, "Introduction: Simon Dinnerstein's Family Romance" 7-8.

⁶² Park, "The Fulbright Triptych."

⁶³ James Panero, "Simon Dinnerstein: The Fulbright Triptych & Selected Works," essay, in *The New Criterion* (New York, N.Y. Foundation for Cultural Review, 2011), 110.

and craftsman. In an interview, Dinnerstein noted that the images surrounding his portrait on the right wing were “images connected with art that had inspired [him.]”⁶⁴ A well-trodden convention in many triptych, Dinnerstein’s self-portrait confronts the viewer, drawing them in to converse with and reflect upon the work. In the panel, Dinnerstein’s painted likeness sits, hands clasped and assessing. He, like his wife, is dressed in accordance with the contemporary fashions: deep-blue, button-up shirt with a broad collar, paired with wide-whale blue corduroy pants and brown belt. Unlike Renée, the artist’s feet sport brown leather work boots. His hands resting in his lap, and his relaxed yet attentive posture, paired with his direct gaze, seem to be engaged in reciprocal viewing, observing the audiences of museum guests who flock to engage with his work. Aside from the works that brought the artist inspiration, like Jan van Eyck’s *Baudouin de Lannoy* (1437) just above Simon’s head or Degas’ *Woman with Chrysanthemums* (1865) just over his right shoulder, are items that connect the artist to his family, to the composition’s right wing: subway booth photographs taken of Simone and her parents in 1974, a child’s drawing by Andrea Wenderoth (age 6) depicting the Dinnerstein family, and a photograph of Renée and their dog, Lucky, taken in Roxbury, Vermont in 1968. In this way, the images circling the artist balance the identities on display within the work: printmaker, husband, and father.

The notion of Dinnerstein as a printmaker, as creator, brings us back to the Joseph archetype alluded to by the work’s formal presentation. A prime comparison is Robert Campin’s *Mérode Altarpiece* (1425) (Fig. 3). While Campin’s famous triptych is dwarfed by Dinnerstein’s, it is not monumental in scale, but rather a size suitable for private devotion, measuring approximately four feet across by two feet tall. The interior’s central panel depicts the Annunciation, flanked by

⁶⁴ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, “A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych,” 31.

an image of the work's donor on the left wing and Joseph, a relatively rare example of the saint being featured with such prominence, tinkering in his workshop on the right wing. The donor most likely had a strong devotion to Joseph, given the saint's prevalence within the work. A supposition supported by the growing primacy of the saint's cult throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries throughout Northern Europe as well as Joseph's popularity as a "model of familial virtue," making the work a potential votive request for children."⁶⁵ Within the *Mérode Altarpiece*, Joseph is separated from the Annunciation scene by a closed door, echoing a common trope in fifteenth century Annunciation plays where Joseph was typically depicted knocking outside of Mary's door as she is conversing with the visiting angel, by physically barring his entry into the space, the miracle of the divine conception is underscored.⁶⁶ Joseph's prominence within the triptych, however separate he may be from the scenes playing out across the other wing and central panel, cannot be understated. The story told in the triptych's wings tie the secular and the sacred worlds to one another. In his workshop, Joseph works to financially support his growing family through carpentry. "Notably the mousetrap on his worktable and in the display window, point to the spiritual implication of his physical activities: the mousetrap symbolizes Joseph's vital role in the salvific mission of Christ, disguising Christ's true father and thereby helping Christ's Incarnation and Passion succeed as a trap for the devil."⁶⁷ Furthermore, within the work, the Virgin and Joseph are portrayed as parallels to one another, their activities, reading and carpentry respectfully, and their relative positions within the home's interior, create a formal balance, each serving their respective roles within the family system.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Carolyn Wilson, *St. Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art. New Directions and Interpretations*. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2001.

⁶⁶ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 49.

⁶⁷ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 52.

⁶⁸ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 52.

In *The Fulbright Triptych*, Renée and Simon strike a similar counterbalance to one another. Each sitter holds the same visual weight within their respective panels, each also contributes to the development and security of their family through the pursuit of their personal passions, one a teacher, and the other a printmaker. The pair create a visual balance that echoes the saints and donors that occupy the wings of its earlier predecessors. While visual allusions to Renée's professional pursuits are limited to the work's left panel, conversely, evidence of Simon's profession takes center stage in the triptych's center panel, occupying the work's hierarchical center.

Central Panel: A Secular Altar, A Holy Space

The melding of Dinnerstein's identity, as both father and artist, is on full display when moving from the wings to the work's central, highly autobiographical, panel. The triptych's middle panel, although devoid of the artist and his family, is awash in his presence. His worktable, with its slightly upturned perspective, reverently presents the tools of his trade, burnisher, scraper, burin, scissors, engraving plate, pencils stubs, and leather pad, all arranged along a vertical grid, running parallel with the street edges outside the window. As art historian Albert Boime perceptively observed, "the entire central panel is built around the table with its clinical organization of the tools ... represent[ing] a taxonomic chart of the printmaker's profession... The painting's energy derives in part from the intrinsic rebelliousness of the project. Dinnerstein was awarded the Fulbright on the basis of a proposal having to do with printmaking project, and in the end the most important work he did with it ran counter to the proposal."⁶⁹ Instead of creating prints detailing his observations of the world, Dinnerstein, somewhat paradoxically, chose to create a large painting that explored the lived experiences of a

⁶⁹ Boime, "Introduction: Simon Dinnerstein's Family Romance," 4.

printmaker. While sent to study the works and techniques of one of his art idols, Dürer, Dinnerstein ultimately referred back to the preferred medium of another of his heroes, Antonio López García, with whom he originally aspired to work as his first choice during his Fulbright year.⁷⁰ While the objects on the table are those belonging to Dürer's trade, the medium they are lovingly captured in, belongs to López García, two artistic role models fated to shape one of Dinnerstein's most formidable works. By positioning the craft of printmaking at the triptych's physical center, atop Simon's worktable, it also becomes a function as *vinculum mundi*, awakening the soul of the viewer, inviting them into a space of contemplation as a secular altarpiece tied to vocational practice and finding personal generative purpose in wholly earthly pursuits. Through this lens, artmaking becomes a sacred activity, demanding the viewer's wrapped consideration.

Above the worktable, Dinnerstein unites the three panels of the work by once again peppering the wall space with reproductions of artwork that inspired his own creations and mementos steeped with personal meaning. At the triptych's center, Dinnerstein reproduced three items of note: the broken stopwatch (Fig. 4), discussed above, a reproduction of a letter Renée sent to Simon detailing a dream she had about giving birth (Fig. 5), and a small notecard with a quote from philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The quote reads, "And to the question which of our worlds will then be *the* world, there is no answer. For the answer would have to be given in a language, and a language must be rooted in some collection of forms of life, and ever particular form of life could be other than it is."⁷¹ The quote points towards Dinnerstein's thoughtful exploration of crafted realities. Where Wittgenstein's concerns

⁷⁰ Dinnerstein, interview one.

⁷¹ Dinnerstein Simon, "Close up of the Aerogramme in *The Fulbright Triptych* on the Central Panel," oil on panel, 1971-1974, (University Park, PA) in *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych* ed. by Daniel Slager. (Milkweed Editions, 2011), 38-40.

were limited to the use of words to craft a world, an invented reality, Dinnerstein's work invents a world constructed with oil paint, seemingly seeking meaning and personal truth through the creative act. Essentially, Dinnerstein's triptych inhabits a world separate from the world, where he captures, and sanctifies those things, people, and creative pursuits he venerates.

The printing plate, the center of the work, becomes the fulcrum around which the entire triptych circles around. Its meaning lives within the plate, a metonym for the power of personal choice and antonym in shaping a life and finding value in the people, values, and experiences we surround ourselves with day in and day out. Where Dinnerstein found purpose in his work, the printing plate, burnished in reflective gold leaf, becomes a space for viewers to pause and look, a respite for internal reflection, reminiscent of Craig Harbison's scholarship, in this way the triptych becomes a tool for meditation.⁷² Dinnerstein, through the triptych format, creates a small world for the viewer to enter and examine, to grapple with Wittgenstein's concept that every form of life can be other than it is. The taxonomic catalogue of Dinnerstein's prized belongings on the walls, his tools on the table, and his family standing witness, asks the viewer to do the same, to pause in the stillness and observe. That observation inevitably leads to the printer's plate at the center of it all. The reflective plate, its golden surface reflecting the gallery's light, becomes a mirror asking visitors to then enter into a space of similar internal reflection, questioning their own values, identifying the personal altars where they pour their own time, talent, and attention.

While the paint's tonal temperature may vary across the three panels, *The Fulbright Triptych*'s overall visual presentation is one of balance, centered around the middle panel, highlighting its thematic importance within the work. Dinnerstein aimed to create a balanced

⁷² Harbison, "Fact, Symbol, Ideal," 24.

visual weight across the work. Cutting the triptych down its center, *The Fulbright Triptych* has almost perfect bilateral symmetry within a relatively shallow viewing plane inside of the studio space. The monumental figures, sitting in their respective panels, ground the image at its far wings. Their elongated forms are slightly hieratic in their formal poses, occupying almost two-thirds of each wing. Where Renée's feet are bare and pressed together, balanced by Simone sitting on her lap, Simon is equally weighted, the perfect counterbalance, in the other wing, feet, in heavy boots, spread far apart. The figures' verticality pulls the eye upward into the hanging plants over each of the sitters' heads, leading into the paired windows in the central panel, then down towards the printing plate at the heart of the work. Dinnerstein places reproduced artworks, photographs, and student work in a steady, horizontal grid across the panels. This layout repeats evenly, much like the unified architectural backgrounds in Rogier van der Weyden's triptychs. This repetition is then consistent across the workbench, where the artist has lovingly laid out his tools. Taken in its totality, the long figures, the images that dot the walls, and the tools work in tandem to lend a sense of verticality across the triptych's massive horizontal surface. The printing plate, with its arching, round surface is the one exception within the piece that breaks Dinnerstein's grid-like pattern. This break in patterning isolates the plate from its surroundings, signaling its heightened symbolic importance to the audience. Furthermore, the plate occupies the triptych's most central space, traditionally reserved for Christ or a primary saint, adhering to the Northern Renaissance convention of establishing a heavily emphasized iconic center within a triptych.

Art historian Albert Boime observed Dinerstein's role within the work, as observer, author and narrator, stating, "Dinnerstein depicts himself at the far right at his drawing table [his wife and daughter at the triptych's other extreme] recalling the self-reference of Velazquez and Goya

in their royal group portraits. In this case, however, the subject is his own family and leaves no doubt that he is the choreographer of this Dance of Life and Death.” Boime goes on to note that to be “alone is [to be] conscious and aware, the ‘dreamer’ who sets the dream play in motion as he ‘narrates’ the text of his extended self-portrait.”⁷³ Under Boime’s construct, Dinnerstein created a fictitious space, where the most vital pieces of the artist’s life are held up to the scrutiny of the view. Dinnerstein noted a similar observation himself, stating, “The space for the people within my painting didn’t really exist in the room I was working in. The room in my painting was becoming some sort of fantasy room, having begun life as a naturalistic one.”⁷⁴ The division then, between artist and family, separated by the middle panel, where creation, in the form of art occurs, helps to underscore the notion that the man clad all in blue on the far right, worked to craft a space, an altarpiece, to elevate those individuals and pursuits he held most dear.

A Physical Altarpiece: Thresholds and Liminality

The work’s immense scale is such that its inhabitants are almost exact replicas of their living counterparts. When hung at eyelevel, all three sitters stare directly at the viewers, their serious, painted, gazes inviting the viewers to step into the world of the painting, to deeply and thoughtfully observe the painted space in the same way the stoic family seems to observe the gallery space inhabited by the onlookers. Just as Panofsky scholarship on devotional Netherlandish paintings noted, artwork that is tied to narrative descriptions, as *The Fulbright Triptych* is, it becomes a vehicle for introspection, where the viewership can interact with and unpack the work through the act of looking, through engagement, becoming a point where the subject’s soul, or deepest sense of self, connects with and is transformed by the work.⁷⁵ In the

⁷³ Albert Boime, “Introduction: Simon Dinnerstein’s Family Romance,” introduction, in *The Art of Simon Dinnerstein* (Fayetteville, London: The University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 11.

⁷⁴ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, “A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych,” 29.

⁷⁵ Falque, “Early Netherlandish Paintings as Devotional Objects,” 3.

case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, Dinnerstein presents his autobiography on the altar of public scrutiny. He frames his small family as a modern parallel to the Holy Family, but instead of offering religious benedictions, the work pauses time, its broken stopwatch suspended for but a moment, as the viewer transgresses the painted threshold into the couple's German apartment. In this way, the painting's occupants and the painting's viewers share a liminal space, caught in an imagined space between the sitter's painted reality in 1971 and the viewer's lived reality, in their present. Thus, through both its historic form and traditional composition, the work invites and creates a space for contemplation, where viewers enter into a space of personal, rather than sacred, mysticism.⁷⁶

Beyond the personal mementos, lovingly reproduced across *The Fulbright Triptych's* panels, it is important to read the work, considering the wings and center panels first individually and then in conjunction with one another. For when taken as a whole, viewers begin to grasp the work's ability to bridge old and new, melding traditionally Christian composition to explore a contemporary worldview. As observed by noted art historian Robert L. McGrath, the work is "as old technically and aesthetically as it is structurally and conceptually new."⁷⁷ Its monumental size and format are implicitly religious, however, "the hieratic connotations of a wider central panel [with] its rhetorical claim to authority, militates against the broader democratic ethos of our times. With characteristic modernist inversions...Dinnerstein locates the trinity of his holy family in the wings while privileging the instruments of the artist's passion in the center panel."⁷⁸ The work begins to unfold as the historic precedence are set then subverted, beginning with the

⁷⁶ Craig Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15, no. 2 (1985): 87–118, 87-88.

⁷⁷ Robert L. McGrath, "To See and Be Seen: The Fulbright Triptych of Simon Dinnerstein," essay, in *Simon Dinnerstein: Paintings and Drawings* (New York, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 12.

⁷⁸ McGrath, "To See and Be Seen," XVIII.

image of the artist's wife and child on the left, then the artist's portrait on the right, completing what writer Daniel Slager dubbed Dinnerstein's "secular trinity,"⁷⁹ and ending with his makeshift studio space within the central panel. When taken in its totality, its reappropriation of religious iconography, its formatting, and clever manipulation of space and time, Dinnerstein not only created a secular trinity within the work, he crafted a secular triptych, a work that does not compel religious devotion, but rather the contemplation of more earthy matters, namely finding purpose through everyday acts, through building a family and building a meaningful profession. In sharing his personal autobiographical, the artist creates a space for viewers to physically and mentally enter, crossing into the crafted thresholds in the work to enter into a liminal space for personal reflection, a space where art itself and its creation are made sacred.

Dinnerstein's reverence, his awe, for both the creative process and its results is evident in the triptych's composition, centering around the engraving plate. Reminiscent of the *Ghent Altarpiece's* (Fig. 6) many thresholds, by centering the plate and embellishing it with gold leaf, he transforms the printing plate into a passageway across time and space. The work, created in 1432 for the Cathedral of St. Bavo in Ghent, is a sheer feat in craftsmanship, containing a massive 12 panels with 26 scenes, where at its center stands the work's most heralded moment for viewer's contemplation, the Lamb of God, Christ, who was sent to take away the sins of the world.⁸⁰ Dinnerstein's printing plate, similarly, becomes an object of contemplation, one that transports viewers to a garden on the other side of the world, created a year before Dinnerstein had even conceived of the triptych itself. In this way, the plate takes on profound symbolic meaning for both artist and viewer. The centered printing plate links the artist to his family and

⁷⁹ Daniel Slager, "Introductions," in *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, ed. Daniel Slager (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2011), Page Number.

⁸⁰ Stephanie Porras, *Art of the Northern Renaissance: Courts, Commerce and Devotion* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2018), 48–51.

emerges as the charged, almost animate presence within the central panel, pulling on viewers to pause and contemplate. When describing the plate, Dinnerstein speaks to this generative idea, stating “the plate, which is almost like a birth form, like an egg. And it glows and, you know, vibrates with importance.”⁸¹ Dinnerstein goes on to say that “the copper plate also speaks to the issue of process in the fine arts or in art. One could argue that all of the vectors in the painting point to the birth of the plate.”⁸² As both evidence of a printmaker's labor and a reminder of the reason Simon and Renée uprooted their lives to move across the world for the Fulbright, the plate serves as a living memory of their community in the United States, the golden garden serving as a visual motif, balancing the orderly German gardens, visible just beyond the workshop windows.

Crafting a world that is in some way set apart from the world is underscored by the landscape that is just beyond the worktable's windows. Dinnerstein's German apartment was located on the building's third floor (Fig. 7), thus, the landscape outside of the windows is physically removed from the space occupied by Simon, Renée, and Simone, and by extension, the space occupied by the viewer. This convention of separating the action in a triptych's foreground was used to great effect in triptychs and other devotional panels during the Northern Renaissance to denote a separation between sanctified and profane spaces, creating a liminal third space shared by viewer and the work's occupants. For example, in Jan van Eyck's *Madonna with the Chancellor Rolin* (1435), the sumptuous apartment where Chancellor Rolin sits in prayer in front of a vision of the Virgin and Child sits in the immediate foreground, the holy vision feels like a true presence for both the Chancellor and those directing their prayer towards the work. Conversely, the panel's background is fully separated from the garden in the background by an arcade of

⁸¹ Dinnerstein, interview one.

⁸² Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

pillars flanking the monumental figures in the foreground. The same technique was employed by Rogier van der Weyde in his *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* (1435–1440), where the image of Mary enthroned with baby Jesus on her lap and Saint Luke are separated from the walled garden and sprawling landscape in the background by yet another row of pillars. In both examples, the heavenly is separated from the profane by physical barriers, both a part of the world and apart from the world beyond.⁸³ In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, the separation is heightened because the division is achieved not with an open set of columns but through a fully closed set of windows.

Returning to Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (1432) as another prime example to consider (Fig. 7) when comparing the use of thresholds to create a separation between the earthly and the profane. Technically a polyptych, van Eyck's monumental altarpiece includes twelve interior panels with various hinge points, but its basic structure functions as two stacked triptychs with a stressed center. The altarpiece's unique structure allows for multiple views of the interior, exterior, or a combination thereof, opening and closing alternating panels throughout the liturgical year. Begun by his brother, Hubert van Eyck, and completed by Jan the *Ghent Altarpiece* is the largest and most ambitious of Jan van Eyck's works, measuring nearly twelve feet across and seventeen feet high.⁸⁴ Citing art historian Lynn Jacobs, "the work has at its core a large network of thresholds...not only in images of opened doors or windows [but also] in the treatment of space."⁸⁵ She goes on to note that van Eyck employed the use of contrasting surface depths at different levels of the work to convey various realities or plans of existence between the holy and the profane. The exterior of the altarpiece has three main zones, arranged vertically:

⁸³ Robert L. McGrath, "To See and Be Seen: The Fulbright Triptych of Simon Dinnerstein," essay, in *Simon Dinnerstein: Paintings and Drawings* (New York, New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999), 12.

⁸⁴ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 67-69.

⁸⁵ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 67-69.

the topmost row, occupied by Old Testament prophets and sibyls, the middle register, depicts an Annunciation scene, and at the lowest row, the work's patrons and the churches patron saints, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. The top row, which is spatially depicted as the shallowest, represents the ancient world of the Old Testament, planted firmly in the past. The lowest row of the exterior, with slightly more visual depth, represents the donors, and by extension, the viewer's present. And the Annunciation scene, with slightly more visual depth, acts as a bridge between the exterior and interior of the massive altarpiece, both physically and religiously. Following Church doctrine, the Annunciation, which allows for the conception of Christ, opens the doors of heaven for humanity through his ultimate death and resurrection. Within the confines of the altarpiece, the internal space, which in contrast to the exterior is awash in vibrant colors and possesses a far greater visual depth, represents a wholly separate plane, leaving behind the world altogether and entering paradise.⁸⁶

Medieval and Northern Renaissance triptychs, at the time of their creation, were referred to as a "painting with doors," where the concept of a door and threshold were heavy with symbolic meaning. According to Jacobs, "an essential aspect of the triptych for its users...is the way in which its wings function like doors to create boundaries, or thresholds, between various zones of the triptych, that is, between center and sides of the open triptych, and between the outside and inside of the closed one."⁸⁷ The thresholds lend a sense of liminality, of in-betweenness, as an underpinning of most compositions. Most importantly, "the inclusion of wings reconfigures a painting into a structure that maps out boundaries between its different panels and between imagery that takes places in different times and spaces...the format thus uses doors to structure

⁸⁶ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 71-77.

⁸⁷ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 4.

imagery in ways analogous to the role of doors in ritual.”⁸⁸ With this context in mind, by defying his patron’s express wishes and choosing to complete the work’s wings, Dinnerstein activated deeper and more complex themes within the work, where the elements in each panel tell a story that spans time and space, linking various aspects of the artist’s lived experience, equating the creation of art to holy rituals. By extension, when hung at eyelevel, viewers are invited into the world of the painting, to cross the proverbial threshold and encounter the artist, his family, and the studio, in their own time and space, creating a further threshold beyond the painting’s borders into the viewers’ space.

By physically opening the *Ghent Altarpiece*’s doors, and ingress through its many thresholds, time and space ceased to be of this world, instead observant Catholics could grasp something otherworldly that was rendered with astonishingly worldly precision. The use of thresholds within the *Ghent Altarpiece* conveys religious dogma, open just behind the altar, in the presence of the transubstantiated eucharist, the interior paradise becomes manifest on earth, joining earthly and the sublime. In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, the outlook is steeped in slightly less grandeur but equally thought provoking, where Dinnerstein offers the viewers the perspective that the seemingly mundane can be elevated to something akin to the divine. Dinnerstein denies a predetermined strategy or a prescribed set of readable iconographies within the work, rather, he professes that his aim in creating the work was “connected to a sense of innocence or awe that [he] had at that time in [his] life.”⁸⁹ At the center of the triptych sits a prime example of this sense of awe, at the middle of the dining table turned workbench Dinnerstein placed a reproduction of the engraving plate for a burin engraving entitled *Angela’s*

⁸⁸ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 5.

⁸⁹ Simon Dinnerstein, “An Interview with Simon Dinnerstein,” interview by Marshall Price, in *The Suspension of Time: Reflections on Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych*, ed. Daniel Slager (Milkweed Editions, 2011), 251.

Garden, completed one year before he started the *Fulbright Triptych* in 1970. Burnished with gold leaf and shining at the center of the triptych, the round plate is slightly upturned, creating a reflective, oblong, egg-like contoured plate. It is simultaneously of this world, the hard-won product of Dinnerstein's labor, and divine, a shining Eden at the heart of the triptych.

When asked why Dinnerstein felt compelled by the triptych format, he shared that he, “had seen a number of triptychs during the year in Germany and [he felt that] the triptych form seemed ... like a book.”⁹⁰ He then went on to say that “elements in a triptych converse with each other through space and in [his work], they converse middle to right; middle to left, wings to the middle; wings to the landscape.”⁹¹ With Dinnerstein’s observation in mind, it becomes exceedingly clear that his triptych is, at its core, a work that narrates a visual story using the same techniques employed by the likes of Robert Campin or Hans Memling. In the hands of these masters, biblical narratives were transplanted from first century Bethlehem or Jerusalem to 15th century Europe. Campin’s *Merode Altarpiece* (Fig. 3) serves as a fitting example, where the Annunciation occurs inside what was then a contemporary Flemish interior. Following Dinnerstein’s pattern, Campin’s center panel captures the moment the angel Gabriel announces the coming of the Christ child, as Joseph assembles mouse traps in his workshop in the adjacent room on the right-hand panel, and the work’s donors observe the annunciation through the courtyard door to the left, the bustling Dutch city visible through the workshop windows and the open courtyard gate. All three panels and the cityscape beyond converging into a single, compelling narrative. The same is true of *The Fulbright Triptych*, where the center panel contains the work’s narrative climax, asking the viewer to consider art as a generative, almost sacred act of creation, at the artist’s workbench, an argument strengthened by the rising and falling

⁹⁰ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, "A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych," 31-32.

⁹¹ Dinnerstein and Jacobs, "A Conversation on The Fulbright Triptych," 31-42.

narrative action plotted within the work's wings, the artist to the right and his family to the left, the story set within their apartment nestled comfortably amid the orderly German homes visible through the workshop windows, similar to Campin's composition. Two stories told across a three-panel arch.

Another noteworthy connection between the *Mérode Altarpiece* and *The Fulbright Triptych* is the utilization of invented, or imagined spaces, suspending the action of the work in an in-between or liminal state, where the paused action in the wings seem to hold their breath in deference to the story staged in the works' central panels. In the *Mérode Altarpiece* "the donor and his wife are unquestionably outside the Annunciation chamber...kneeling in the garden. Yet they are not simply located in the everyday world: instead, they are situated between two doors...In other words, they are in a transitional space, which corresponds to the intermediate or liminal phase of a rite of passage - a requisite stage within ritual behaviors designed to bridge the chasm between the profane and the sacred."⁹² A liminal space is one of transformation, a moment suspended in amber whilst great change is undertaken. In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, a similar connection can be made by considering the broken stopwatch placed on the artist's workbench, just to the right of the panel's central vanishing point, in combination with the asynchronous inclusions that Dinnerstein scatters across the work. The broken stopwatch, with its runner frozen in suspended, "suggests that the painting is an attempt to 'freeze' or 'catch' a moment in space and time."⁹³ But, paradoxically, the work lives outside of time altogether. The view outside the window and the walls are faithful reproductions of Simon and Renée's apartment, the floorboards from his studio in Brooklyn years later, and Simone, born in the years intervening the artist's life in Germany and the United States, and the images lining the walls

⁹² Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 51.

⁹³ Boime, "Introduction: Simon Dinnerstein's Family Romance," 5.

were collected before and throughout the painting's creation.⁹⁴ If one considers the triptych as an extended portrait of the artist, mapping out his lived experience in the work's invented space, then it becomes a visual guide, documenting a transition from married couple to parents, from Fulbright scholar to working artist, from printmaker to painter.

Conclusion: Artistic Creation as Devotion

According to Dinnerstein, the creation of *The Fulbright Triptych* was the result of “mysterious synchronicities” scattered across the years and landscape of his life. In his early twenties, Dinnerstein attended a solo exhibition for Spanish painter Antonio López García in 1968 at the Staempfli Gallery in the New York's Upper East. He was motivated to see the show, the day before it left the gallery after reading a review in *The Times* which reproduced an image by the artist of a relief sculpture of a *Woman Sleeping*. At the time, Dinnerstein reported that it was the single best show of a contemporary artist he had experienced to date. The López García exhibit left such an impression on Dinnerstein that he applied to the Fulbright Scholarship to study under the artist in Madrid, Spain. While Dinnerstein was ultimately awarded the scholarship, he was denied the opportunity to study under the artist he idolized. Instead, due to his background as mainly a printmaker, Dinnerstein was offered his second choice: printmaking at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Kassel, Germany, as well as Albrecht Dürer's collected work. Because Dinnerstein is Jewish, the offer initially created a sense of unease. When interviewed, he noted, that he received the offer in “1970, which was just 25 years after the Second World War. So, it wasn't the same as going to Germany now. And it was not the same as going to Germany in 1948.” Despite this, he accepted the scholarship and soon the young couple uprooted their lives in New York and moved to Europe.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Dinnerstein, interview one.

⁹⁵ Dinnerstein, interview one.

The Fulbright Triptych, taken in its totality, becomes an extended self-portrait, offered up to the viewer as a mirror intended to prompt self-reflection. The internal space depicted in the triptych, the Dinnerstein's third-story apartment in Germany, grants a voyeuristic glimpse into the young couple's private space, centered around Simon's studio. This privileged view is nestled above the small village beyond the windows' thresholds, suggesting a deeply intimate refuge, totally separate from the world beyond, a transitional space for viewer and artist to exist in a moment somewhere between the viewer standing in their present and the artist, frozen in his apartment refuge, nestled above a German hamlet. The private sanctum, with the artist's possessions, family, and assembled cache of personal mementos, create a conversation between artist and viewer, where the painted Dinnerstein seems to say, "This is me, in my totality. What will you make of it?" A devotee of filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, Dinnerstein "is especially fascinated by the [his] investigation of various levels of self-identification, the intermingling of complementary viewpoints within one identity, and the fusion of dream and reality as part of identity."⁹⁶ This fascination is evident in the triptych, which blends the artist's lived reality, up until the work's completion in 1974, with the viewer's personal experience. A triptych, by nature of its construction, envelopes the viewer, wrapping them in the story illustrated within its panel.

When analyzing the triptych, poet and author, Tom Healy also zeroed in on the importance of fate in connection to the work. In his musings on *The Fulbright Triptych*, he highlighted some of the oddities within the piece, separating it from its Northern Renaissance predecessors, by focusing on the etymology of the words *weird* and *worthy* as two interconnected ideas that aptly define the work. He noted that "weird and worthy have the same root word in both English and

⁹⁶ Albert Boime, "Introduction: Simon Dinnerstein's Family Romance," Introduction, in *The Art of Simon Dinnerstein* (Fayetteville, London: The University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 1–21, 11.

German. Originally, to be weird was to have the power to control fate, to turn the world to our wishes... To be worthy, on the other hand, was to have learned how to turn ourselves toward the world, to see things clearly and to face our fates.”⁹⁷ In the case of *The Fulbright Triptych*, the work is both weird and worthy. According to art theorist and psychology professor Rudolf Arnheim, “great paintings have always been more than a mere reflection of reality. [*The Fulbright Triptych* captures a] kind of detachment from the immediacy of presence... This quality has sometimes been called “magical realism.””⁹⁸ Arnheim then goes on to note that, “the figures are sharply outlined, which moves them from the realm of reality to that of depiction.”⁹⁹ The triptych does not directly replicate the world, rather, it hints at it. “At first glance the realism of Simon’s work seems to imitate reality, but instead it playfully confounds it, offering meaning less in what is seen than what is supposed.”¹⁰⁰ When facing the work from a distance, a viewer would assume that Dinnerstein created a true representation of his and his wife’s apartment, a scene that existed at a specific moment in time. But, upon further inspection, it becomes clear that instead, he carefully controlled the image, melding pieces of his life, strategically cherry-picked from his lived experience over the three years of its creation. For example: the window and walls are faithful to the apartment in Germany, the floorboards, on the other hand, were lifted from the brownstone in New York, where the artist had a studio, where the painting was finished, and the daughter who was not yet born at the time of the painting’s inception, sits perched, comfortably, in her mother’s lap, like an early Christian saint, stoically

⁹⁷ Tom Healy, “The Difference Between Velvet and Velour,” essay, in *The Lasting World: Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych* (Brooklyn, New York: First Street Editions, 2017), 17.

⁹⁸ Tom Healy, “The Difference Between Velvet and Velour,” essay, in *The Lasting World: Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych* (Brooklyn, New York: First Street Editions, 2017), 10.

⁹⁹ Healy, “The Difference Between Velvet and Velour,” 10.

¹⁰⁰ Alex Barker, “Realism and Reality’s Wake,” essay, in *The Lasting World Simon Dinnerstein and the Fulbright Triptych* (Brooklyn, New York: First Street Editions, 2017), 12–13, 10.

staring at the viewer.¹⁰¹ Like an Early Netherlandish artist that shaped the reality within their panels to both shape a harmonious reality within the work for the viewers to inhabit and draw meaning from and to create an ideal space that elevated the experience of the work past a simple observation towards spiritual observation, Dinnerstein crafted a selective reality of his own.¹⁰² In this way, Dinnerstein both turned the world he created to his wishes, by constructing and controlling the composition, but also clearly understood and faced his own destiny, depicting the elements of his life that most powerfully shaped his personal fate.

Interestingly, Simone, as a young child, voiced concern around the space she and her mother's portraits inhabited within *The Fulbright Triptych* and the space her father's image occupied, noting the separation across panels. But, as she aged, she began to see the center panel as the story of the family told in a completed arch.¹⁰³ Picking up on the same idea, art critic James Panero noted that "the family dynamic of the *Triptych* can be read in countless ways... In one sense, the solitary artist appears cut off from his family by the studio."¹⁰⁴ Panero then goes on to note, that the artist is "alone on one side, his wife and child are on the other, and his studio separates the two sides."¹⁰⁵ But that, under another interpretation, "the family is not so much a distraction from the artist's work as a conclusion. For in the family arrangement, it's possible to see the echo of printmaking, with the printmaker's table representing human reproduction, and the stamp of the parents imprinted on the child."¹⁰⁶ Under this construct, the middle panel becomes a bridging device, where the act of printmaking, creating a work of art that is generative, ties the wings together, where the act of parenthood is also understood as creative.

¹⁰¹ Dinnerstein, interview one.

¹⁰² Harbison, "Fact, Symbol, Ideal," 32.

¹⁰³ Dinnerstein, interview two.

¹⁰⁴ Panero, "Simon Dinnerstein," 109.

¹⁰⁵ Panero, "Simon Dinnerstein," 109-110.

¹⁰⁶ Panero, "Simon Dinnerstein," 110.

This deep-seeded impulse to create activates the work, pulsing throughout the triptych. By 1971, Dinnerstein distinguished himself as an accomplished draftsman, creating a powerful series of family and friends in charcoal. At the time, his work suggested a natural progression from drawing toward printmaking, however, it did not suggest that painting would later become his preferred, and principal, medium.¹⁰⁷ Painting admittedly represented a left turn in Dinnerstein's artistic career, and a monumental painting, composed of three panels, all fixating on minute detail, symmetry, and visual storytelling, marks a notable leap into the proverbial deep end in terms of ambition. Yet, despite the apparent challenges, Dinnerstein was not deterred. Seeking to create art that was rooted in personal experience,¹⁰⁸ the notion of switching mediums seems to underscore the concept of personal journey, in and of itself, as if in real time the viewer can witness yet another transition for the artist, from printmaking to painting. The piece explores some pivotal transitions in the artist's life, namely from couple to family, from native New Yorker to temporary expat, from student artist to working artist in his own right. The transition from one medium to the next also tracks this process of becoming, yet another example of liminality within the work.

The triptych's creation was littered with coincidences. Beyond accepting his second choice for field of study when accepting the Fulbright Scholarship in Germany, the discovery of the apartment featured in the work was a stroke of luck and chance. When the family moved to Germany, Dinnerstein and his wife drew a 50-mile radius around Kassel and began their search for lodgings by driving in concentric circles, from one town to the next, until they found just the right space for Dinnerstein to work. After an exhaustive search, they stumbled on a modest

¹⁰⁷ James Panero, "Simon Dinnerstein: The Fulbright Triptych & Selected Works," in *The New Criterion* (New York, N.Y. Foundation for Cultural Review, 2011), 109.

¹⁰⁸ Dinnerstein, interview one.

building, with a vacancy on the third floor. Soon after, they signed the lease, and the Dinnersteins moved into the apartment. With a view of the panoramic landscape as Dinnerstein described, and his printmaking tools laid out before him, the idea for the triptych was assembled from the fragments of the artist's world. Per Dinnerstein, one day, he "was standing about eight or 10 feet back and saw the table and the windows and some of the pictures on the wall. It was not what you see in the painting, but [the painting] it was there, if inchoate."¹⁰⁹

In talking with the artist, it becomes exceedingly clear that the concept of fate weighs heavily on his personal interpretation of the triptych, as if, in his mind's eye, a proverbial Clotho spun the painting's threads carefully into existence. Fate is made manifest for the artist in retrospect as he thinks back on the triptych's creation. In his telling, without seeing the article in *The Times*, featuring Antonio López García's *Sleeping Woman*, which prompted the chance visit to the Staempfli Gallery in to view López García's exhibit, which in turn, prompted his application to the Fulbright program, that eventually took him to a small German town where Simon and his wife stumbled upon their apartment, whose view, as if touched by a Muse, hit the artist with a flash of creative inspiration, then the triptych could never have come into existence; a series of seemingly disparate events, scattered like seeds over several years of his life, almost miraculously, predetermined the work's creation.¹¹⁰ But Dinnerstein's sense of predestination does not mean he feels that he yielded wholly to blind destiny in the work's creation, far from it. Rather, upon deeper reflection, he feels that he allowed fate to carry him to the initial kernel of inspiration, and then relied on his training, eye, and life's journey to meticulously shape the work into its final iteration.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Dinnerstein, interview one.

¹¹⁰ Dinnerstein, interview one.

¹¹¹ Dinnerstein, interview two.

Beyond a collection meant to inspire the printmaker at his workbench, the assembled objects and images scattered throughout the triptych relay pieces of the artist's lived experience to the viewer. In his essay critiquing the *Fulbright Triptych*, Healy observes that all artists are exhibitionists out of necessity; by revealing their own needs through their work, they hold up a mirror for viewers to also consider their own personal needs in turn. To further his argument, he goes on to clarify that the etymology of the word *exhibere* means to *hold* something *out* for others to contemplate.¹¹² In the case of the triptych, Dinnerstein's possessions, clothing, tools, and family members are all transformed into extended visual symbols for the artist, put on display for viewers to consider one by one as they wander from one side of the work to the other. Like its religious predecessors, Dinnerstein's triptych relies on the viewer's ability to pull meaning from well-known symbols, but instead of established Christian iconography, Dinnerstein asks viewer to interpolate meaning from copies of world-famous paintings and the gathered tools laid across his worktable. Moreover, Dinnerstein observed, the viewer is finding meaning within the work and through self-reflection, on their terms, rather than in some prior ritual or notion.¹¹³

Accessibility is an aim central to Dinnerstein's broader artistic objective, professing that "a painting like [*The Fulbright Triptych*] should appeal to... art historians, certain professors, and the mailman delivering to the gallery."¹¹⁴ He then went on to explain that the issue with Modernism is that it is like a membership club, where a certain degree of wealth and presumed sophistication are prerequisites to engaging with fine art. It is this attention to accessibility that is so evident in his selection of the triptych format, a structure that by its very nature is inherently

¹¹² Tom Healy, "The Difference Between Velvet and Velour," essay, in *The Lasting World: Simon Dinnerstein and The Fulbright Triptych* (Brooklyn, New York: First Street Editions, 2017), 17-18.

¹¹³ Simon Dinnerstein, email message to the author, July 8, 2026.

¹¹⁴ Dinnerstein, interview one.

narrative and transporting, wings welcoming viewers to engage, transporting them through various thresholds, traveling deeper into the artist's space. Dinnerstein's thoughts on *The Fulbright Triptych*, and his wider understanding of the creative process, were summed up when he said, "For me, the power of the piece comes from this idea of personal journey and life story."¹¹⁵ *The Fulbright Triptych* captures this ethos, by manipulating the conventions and iconography of Northern Renaissance triptychs, Dinnerstein crafted a deeply intimate story built from his personal narrative, then welcomes viewers into the space he created to invite them to do the same, pause, reflect, and engage in a silent dialogue with the solemn artist in the wings.

Aptly described as a "*weltanschauung* portrait," by American poet and writer Tom Healy, the *Fulbright Triptych* outlines Dinnerstein's worldview, centering the people and the pursuits he holds most dear, namely the family he and his wife built and the creative processes, nestled comfortably among the retinue of his day-to-day life in Germany while on the Fulbright Scholarship. According to Healy, "to have *weltanschauung* is really to describe a way of looking that attempts to place yourself in the cosmos, after a long, searching, philosophical examination of the whole phenomenon of human existence."¹¹⁶ At its core, *weltanschauung* means a particular philosophy or view, a worldview of an individual or group. For viewers, the painting invites a similar examination as they move across its service from the workshop at its center, then from left to right face, from mother and child in the left-wing, to the artist himself on the right. In this way, Dinnerstein welcomes viewers to enter not only his home and workspace, but also, to contemplate the sum of his life from the mundane, used pencil stubs, collected postcards,

¹¹⁵ Dinnerstein, interview one.

¹¹⁶ Healy, "The Difference Between Velvet and Velour," 15.

and scraps of paper, to the extraordinary, his family and the hard-won products of his artistic labors.

Despite being steeped in the visual language of the Northern Renaissance, the work's true success lives in its accessibility, viewers can easily access the narrative told through Dinnerstein's lived experience. Entering the triptych's space is like entering into a conversation with the artist. In fact, it is typical for viewers to pause, and spend time with the work, transversing its surface from mother and child to father in his workshop, and back again (Fig. 9). The work, like its historic predecessors, demands viewers' attention, asking them to spend time contemplating the objects and people within its painted spaces. Through the act of looking, and standing at the work's physical thresholds, viewers enter into, what Jacobs would call a "sacred space".¹¹⁷ In this way, *The Fulbright Triptych* becomes not necessarily a vehicle for personal prayer in a religious sense, like its Northern Renaissance progenitors, but rather a moment for contemplation of the sacralization of art itself or for personal self-reflective meditation.¹¹⁸ As a viewer's eyes move across the mother and child, the artist, and the center workbench, they naturally rest, in a prolonged pause, on the shiny metal plate. This frozen moment in time, taken in part with its compositional format and stoic sitters, turns the artwork into a sort of holy object. The gallery becomes a hushed temple, and the work prompts reflections on the viewers lived experiences alongside the artist's lifelong work.

Within his sanctified triptych, Dinnerstein lays out his highest truths, with almost scientific precision, a taxonomic study in his most loved pursuits, his family and his art, for the viewer's examination. In return, he seems to ask for a shared conversation, a respectful internal dialogue

¹¹⁷ Jacobs, *Opening Doors*, 2.

¹¹⁸ Karl Schade, *Andachtsbild: Die Geschichte eines kunsthistorischen Begriffs* (Weimar: VDG – Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 1996), Kindle edition.

where the audience instinctually begins to assess and weigh the pieces of their lives that they too elevate to the status of sacred. While it is unlikely that every visitor has a deep seeded understanding of the visual and symbolic conventions of Northern Renaissance triptychs, all people possess personal lived experiences, they all have hopes and dreams, people that they love and rely on, and personal passions. This universality, in a shared sense of passion through lived experience, is the key to *The Fulbright Triptych*'s overall success as an impactful work of art. Without understanding an art historian's projection of the clear visual allusions to art historical reference to the Holy Family, the use of thresholds in traditional triptychs, or the exhalated space of a hierarchical center in terms of conveying religious truths, *The Fulbright Triptych* is successful because those principles are thoughtfully employed and are functionally concepts that viewers process without having to be armed with the knowledge in advance. Often, the most impactful pieces do not require an exceedingly robust understanding of art history but rather function successfully in its absence, additional knowledge simply helps to deepen ones' connection to an individual piece. *The Fulbright Triptych* does so to a tremendous degree due to its relatability and skillful utilization of the tried and tested triptych structure. Triptychs that served as altarpieces were sites for worshippers to focus their prayers, to convey dogma to the masses through easily decodable visual narratives, they were intuitive, *The Fulbright Triptych* functions similarly, but instead of being grounded in well-trodden religious narratives, it tells a fully secular, intensely personal story. The work's presence transforms the gallery itself into a sanctum for deeply personal meditation, the viewer is left to linger in a liminal space, hanging in a moment of time between their own lived experiences and those of the artist, captured in perpetuity, in paint and on panel.

Illustrations



Fig. 1. Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, oil on wood panels, 79.5 x 168 in. Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, Gift of the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art. University Park, PA.



Fig. 2. Hans Memling, *St. John Altarpiece*, c. 1479, oil on oak panel, 173.6 × 173.7 cm (central panel), 176 × 78.9 cm (each wing), overall dimensions 525.6 × 176 cm (opened). Memlingmuseum, Sint-Janshospitaal, Bruges.



Fig. 3. Detail of the children's artwork reproductions in the left panel of Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, oil on wood panels, 79.5 × 168 in. Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, Gift of the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA.



Fig. 4. Robert Campin, *Mérode Altarpiece*, 1425, oil on panel, 64.5 x 117.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

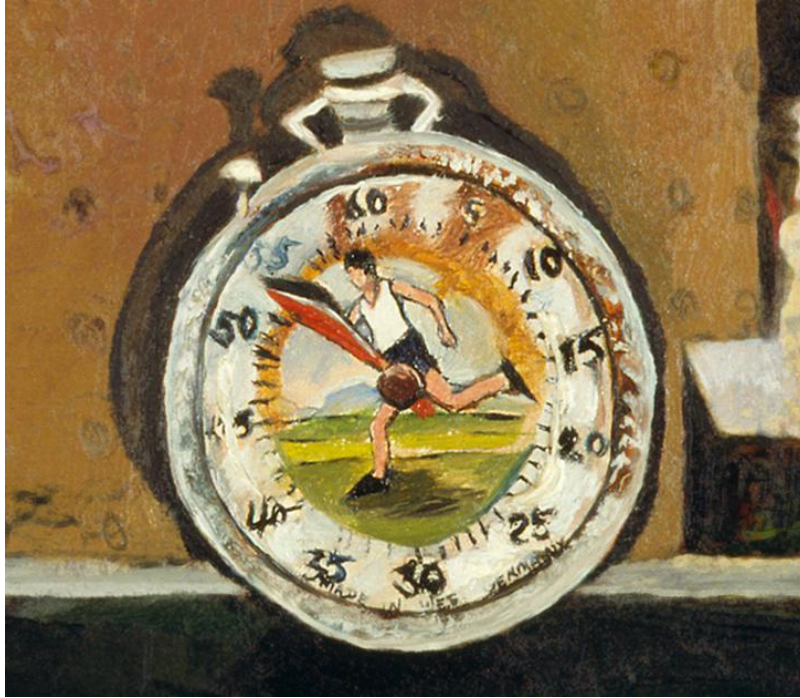


Fig. 5. Detail of the stopwatch in the central panel of Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, oil on wood panels, 79.5 × 168 in. Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, Gift of the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA.



Fig. 6. Detail of the Aérogramme in the central panel of Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, oil on wood panels, 79.5 × 168 in. Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, Gift of the Friends of the Palmer Museum of Art, University Park, PA.



Fig. 7. Jan van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece* interior, 1432, oil on panel, 375 x 260 cm. Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.



Fig. 8. Exterior of the Dinnerstein's third-floor apartment windows in Litchenau, Germany, where they lived from 1970–71. Courtesy of Simon Dinnerstein.



Fig. 9. Viewer observing Simon Dinnerstein, *The Fulbright Triptych*, 1971–74, at the Palmer Museum of Art. Courtesy of Simon Dinnerstein.

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