

On the Monumental Altarpiece of the Life of Christ and the Virgin Made for Pedro López de Ayala

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Imagining that Spanish chapel where
This altarpiece had stood five hundred years,
Hearing a ringing sanctuary bell
Hurrying the family to their morning mass,
I see them dip their fingertips in water,
Cross themselves, and kneel on a cold stone floor.

I breathe the fragrant smoke of incense drifting
From a clinking thurible swung back and forth,
And as familiar words are spoken, feel
Them marvel at the altar's painted scenes,
Anticipating bread being chewed and wine
Being sipped—the taste of body and of blood.

And now I see five centuries later as
This massive altarpiece is disassembled,
Bought by a businessman-turned-art-collector:
Men hammer nails to seal ten wooden crates,
Winching those crates into a steamship's hold
Bound for Chicago via sea and rail.

Yet as I stand before this altarpiece—
A treasure of our art museum for
A hundred years and expertly restored,
The gallery hushed, everything controlled—
I wonder: Did they ever worship in
That Spanish chapel after this was sold?