

Diptychs and Triptychs

by Phil Gebhardt

What are *diptychs* and *trptychs*?

The word *diptych* comes from the Greek *di* meaning *two* and *ptyche* meaning *fold*. A diptych is an object with two flat plates attached with a hinge, so it can be displayed as a single piece of art. The example most familiar to most people is made of two frames, each frame enclosing a single photograph. The photographs are generally related — for example, they could be a husband and wife or they could be two brothers. However, the relationship is not always close or obvious. For practical reasons, the two images in a diptych are usually the same size and shape. In the Middle Ages, diptychs were small, portable works for personal use. Similarly, the word *trptych* comes from the Greek *tri* meaning *three*. A triptych is an object with three flat plates attached using hinges. This sometimes made them portable; in other cases, the purpose of the hinges was to be able to cover the centre panel of the triptych using the two outer panels. Originally, one purpose of the hinges may have been to allow the panels to be angled and thereby allow the artwork to be freestanding, eliminating the need for a support such as a wall. While it would be possible to make all three sections the same size, often in paintings by the Old Masters, the centre section was larger than the outer sections. This was probably a practicality, so the outer sections could be closed to cover the centre section. Sometimes the outer sections were curved at the top and narrower than the central section. You can sometimes see this in stained glass windows in a church. In the Middle Ages, large altarpieces tended to be in the form of triptychs. These days, neither diptychs nor triptychs need to be hinged; they can simply be related images mounted on a flat surface.

The purpose of a triptych

Diptychs and triptychs have the advantage over single images that they can tell a more complete story. They can make connections and links that are not possible in a single photograph.

For example, I have a class photograph of me at 9 years old. I also have a class photograph of my son when he was 9 years old. I now have a class photograph of my grandson who is 9 years old. The three images could form a triptych although the first and last photographs were taken 60 years apart.

Often these days, houses in a subdivision look similar, if not identical, and they are constructed on identical sized lots. A triptych could show three different looks for a garden based on three identical houses.

A triptych can become an ethically evaluative piece of art by showing the plight of three groups of people: 1. women who have to resort to prostitution in order to

survive; 2. men who have suffered a workplace injury and can no longer work to support their families; and 3. children who live in squalor and poverty, but have no control over their circumstances. These people could be related; it could be the story of a single family. Alternatively, each photograph could be representative of a group of people who struggle to survive.

Why just two and three?

While ancient artwork was probably limited to diptychs (so they were portable) and triptychs (for the relationship to the Trinity), there is no reason not to produce larger works such as a tetraptych — a work with four images such as a landscape photographed from the same vantage point in spring, summer, autumn and winter. Why not a dodecaptych? — a panel with twelve images that shows a scene photographed throughout all twelve months of the year.

Complex pieces are called polyptychs and can have very complex compositional layouts.