

## Rogier van der Weyden

### The Master of Passions

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T I L L - H O L G E R B O R C H E R T

The emergence of the innovative pictorial universe created in the early decades of the fifteenth century by the first generation of artists known either as the '*Flemish Primitives*' or as '*Early Netherlandish*' painters represents one of the most fascinating periods in art history. Between the 1420s and the 1430s, at latest, painters in the Low Countries had fundamentally transcended those symbolic and normative representations that had typified the visual arts during most of the Middle Ages, and for which the Romanticists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century had coined the somewhat unhistorical but generous term '*byzantine*'. Instead, they now began to employ in their paintings a pictorial language that even modern viewers can still perceive as congruent with their own understanding of realistic images.

Even though the panel paintings of the '*Flemish Primitives*' would still depict mostly religious scenes – biblical narratives and pivotal images survive in numbers that are in sharp contrast with known secular representations – the saints they showed were no longer transported from earthly reality into heavenly realms but were represented as quintessentially human figures with seemingly three-dimensional bodies and dynamically folded draperies made of sometimes ostentatiously costly textiles. Those saints no longer appeared against an abstract pattern or a transcendent golden background; instead they were increasingly shown within carefully thought-out landscapes that consisted of detailed renderings of hills and trees, cattle and castles, silhouettes of cities with towers and remote hermitages. By around 1430 the painters could also decide to depict biblical events or figures in interior settings placed within a '*mise-en-scène*' that was modelled on actual rooms familiar to the painters from their environments and which ultimately mirrored the living quarters of the painters' well-off patrons.

This marked shift towards the new pictorial realism must, of course, have been part of a gradual process that presumably lasted several decades and seems to have spread from the artistic milieu of the princely courts to the sphere of the urban elites; since only a small fraction of the Low Countries' artistic production of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries has survived, our understanding of this evolution remains – at best – fragmentary. However, across the pictorial media of this period – mostly known to us from

manuscript illumination and sculpture, from a few panel paintings, from rare examples of embroideries or extremely fragmentary murals made right across the Low Countries – it is possible to sense a growing awareness of realistic tendencies that at times foreshadow the artistic revolution that those '*Flemish Primitives*' who were, of course, neither Flemish nor Primitive, were about to realise in their work.

## Masters held in esteem

Considered from the historical perspective of the fifteenth century, two artists from the Low Countries clearly stand out within their own times: Jan van Eyck, originating from the Maas region in the East, and Rogier van der Weyden, who was born and brought up in the French city of Tournai in the county of Hainault (now in Belgium). Theirs were the only names mentioned in early texts written by erudite humanists such as Cyriacus d'Ancona, Filarete or Bartolomeus Facius working at the courts of the Italian Renaissance. Given their status as contemporary eyewitnesses, the Italians' accounts testify to the extraordinary esteem in which the two Netherlandish masters were held in countries far beyond the geographical and political borders of the ancient Low Countries. Ironic as it may seem, the courtly milieu in Italy that provided patronage to the great Masters of the Renaissance gives us the clearest evidence of admiration for Early Netherlandish art and appreciation of its innovative realism as early as around the middle of the fifteenth century.

By that time, works by both artists had been incorporated in the exquisite collections of the princely patrons or patrician families in Italy, where they were admired for their daring realism, the intrinsic glow of their colours and, above all, their skill in emulating nature in both their landscapes and their portraiture. The possession of Netherlandish panels was – in Italy – as much a means of subtly underlining the owners' prestige as was the ownership of distinguished artefacts from classical times, and they were traded as rare and desirable commodities.

If the contemporary sources from Italy saw Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in terms of similarity, it is necessary to underline the fact that their work reveals fundamental differences. Both in their lives and their works, Van Eyck and Rogier seem to emerge as almost contrasting personalities whose distinct artistic approaches differed considerably from each other. Their divergent pictorial strategies provided a challenge and an opportunity to Netherlandish artists of the following generations to create their own idiosyncratic combination of Eyckian and Rogerian prototypes as a means of ensuring artistic – and commercial – success.

On one side, Van Eyck grew up in the Maas region. His two brothers and a sister also seem to have worked as painters and it is possible that he was born

Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Polyptych of the Last Judgment*, 1443-1451. Panel 7,  
remounted on canvas, 127.8  
x 44.8 cm. Musée de l'Hôtel-  
Dieu, Beaune.



Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Portrait of a Lady*,  
1463-1464. Oak panel,  
37 x 27 cm. National Gal-  
lery of Art, Washington.



into a family of painters. For most if not all of his professional career he was employed at court and enjoyed the privileges that came with that. He was first recorded as painter to John of Bavaria at The Hague, then – after his patron’s death in 1425 – he almost immediately entered the service of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Jan van Eyck ranked among the ducal *valets de chambre*, working first in Lille – the administrative centre of the Burgundian Netherlands – before settling in Bruges, the thriving commercial capital of Flanders and North-Western Europe. It was in the last decade of his life– he died in 1441 – that all his surviving and uncontested works were painted. His Bruges’ studio continued in business for about a decade, producing a small number of works based on the deceased master’s models. After about 1450, evidence of Eyckian production comes to a seemingly sudden stop and his art seems not to have acquired a significant following.

On the other side, Rogier van der Weyden was the offspring of a knife-manufacturer and was born in Tournai around 1399/1400. His career developed in the context of urban corporations, though he also counted the court and its members among his clients. Rogier presumably received some early training as a painter, perhaps – though this is far from certain – with Robert Campin, one of Tournai's leading painters. Only in 1426 – when Rogier had just married Elizabeth Goffaert, the daughter of a Brussels shoemaker, must therefore have had the means to support a family, and most probably also had already finished his training as painter – is he documented as an 'apprentice' in Campin's studio, working alongside Jacques Daret – who had been training with Campin as early as 1418 – and two other painters. During this period Rogier van der Weyden was working in what must have been a highly collaborative studio environment. He presumably occupied a senior position in Campin's atelier in Tournai, and recent scholarship suggests the possibility that Rogier was, if not actually one of the studio's leading masters, rather prominently involved in the execution of works traditionally assigned to Robert Campin.

### **Prolific atelier in Brussels**

Rogier's collaboration with Campin seems to have ended by 1432, perhaps not coincidentally shortly after the latter was prosecuted for adultery and sentenced to exile – an offence for which, incidentally, he received a pardon. In that year both Rogier and Jacques Daret were granted master's status by Tournai's corporation of painters. Whether Rogier then started his own independent studio in Tournai remains questionable, since he seems to have moved away from the city rather quickly. He chose to relocate to Brussels, the home of his wife's family, sometime before 1435. In Brussels, capital of the Dukedom of Brabant that had only recently submitted to the rule of Philip the Good of Burgundy, he established a thriving and prolific atelier that lasted for about three decades.

Rogier seems to have been running a large and prolific studio that presumably consisted of several apprentices and journeymen throughout the rest of his life. After his death, in 1464, his style continued to dominate Brussels painting and his artistic inheritance was split between at least two major studios – that of Vrancke van der Stockt and that of the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine, who may perhaps be identical with Rogier's son Pieter van der Weyden – both of which continued to satisfy the demand for '*Rogerian*' painting, producing work very much in his manner for decades after his death.

There can be little doubt that after his move to Brussels Rogier van der Weyden quickly gained a considerable reputation as a painter: the City Council appointed him official painter to Brussels around 1435 and stipulated, shortly afterwards, that this office – most likely combined with a yearly honorarium – was not to be filled again after the master's death.

However significant this honorarium may have been, Rogier's economic circumstances were prosperous and, it would seem, mirrored his professional success as painter; a considerable part of his wealth may have stemmed from designs he made for the local tapestry industries. In any case, Rogier owned two neighbouring houses in Brussels. He and his family lived in the larger stone-built mansion at the Kantersteen which the painter had bought from a member of one of Brussels' patrician families, while the adjacent building

probably housed his studio and also provided living accommodation for his apprentices, journeymen and collaborators. Rogier also invested money in bonds both in Brussels and Tournai and, moreover, provided a profitable long-term loan to the Carthusian monastery of Scheut. Throughout his life, the painter gave generously to a variety of religious institutions in Brussels and elsewhere in Brabant.

In addition to his work for the city council – most notably he was commissioned to paint four monumental Justice panels for the town hall depicting the 'exempla' of Trajan and Herkinbald, created in the 1430s and 1440s and destroyed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – he also received commissions from corporations, guilds, and several private clients in and beyond Brussels. His foreign clients included German patricians and princes from Italy or Spain. He received major commissions from ranking members both of the Burgundian administration – most importantly, perhaps, he and his workshop produced the polyptych of *The Last Judgment* for Chancellor Rolin's foundation of the Hôtel-Dieu at Beaune – and of the Burgundian court, among them Ferry de Clugny, Philipp de Croÿ, and Jean Gros. Several of Rogier's portraits of members of the Burgundian Court – including likenesses of the Duke and his sons – survive, either in copies or as originals, as in the case of the portraits of Charles the Bold and Anthony, the Grand Bastard of Burgundy. Like Rogier's other portraits, they are usually assigned to a rather late date in his career. It would seem, then, that Rogier unofficially replaced Van Eyck as 'court portraitist' shortly after the latter's death, perhaps after designing the influential dedication miniature of the *Chroniques de Hainault* (Brussels Royal Library) with its famous representation of Philip the Good amid his courtly entourage, but declined – or was never offered – an official position at court.

## Alter ego's

Despite his contacts with socially high-ranking clients and benefactors, Rogier's lifestyle seems to have been one that befitted to his status as painter, that is to say that of a respected craftsman producing luxury goods. His economic situation allowed him to endow several charitable institutions in Brussels – 16<sup>th</sup> century historiographers still underline the fact that he gave generously to the poor; he was a member of religious confraternities in Brussels, a benefactor of the Carthusian order and made endowments to provide for himself and his family in the hereafter. His means were such as to enable his eldest son Cornelis to study at the University of Leuven and subsequently to enter the Carthusian monastery of Scheut.

There is little to indicate that Rogier travelled much beyond the Low Countries, and his remaining links with Tournai suggest he may have spent time there regularly. However, he did make a pilgrimage to Rome during the Holy Year of 1450, on which occasion he had the opportunity to visit the court of Lionello d'Este in Ferrara and to acquaint himself – probably in Milan, Florence and certainly Rome – with Italian works of art. His painting of the Entombment, once in the Medici collection and today in the Uffizi, bears witness to the fact that he studied Italian paintings carefully during this trip, since its composition – undoubtedly Rogier's own – reveals knowledge of a similar composition painted by Fra Angelico.



Jan van Eyck, by contrast, regularly travelled abroad on the orders of Philip the Good. Especially during the first decade of his service to the Burgundian Duke he undertook several *'secret journeys to certain distant lands'* and participated in the Burgundian embassy to Portugal in 1428/9. Unlike Rogier van der Weyden, Jan van Eyck's life and work are surrounded with mysteries. Not the least of these concerns the monumental Ghent Altarpiece, dated 1432 and the earliest work to be securely connected to Jan's name – but, of course, not his name alone. Generations of art historians and conservation scientists have attempted – without success – to distinguish Jan's part in the execution of the

Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Entombment*, 1463-1464.  
Oak panel, 110 x 96 cm. Gal-  
leria degli Uffizi, Florence.

famous polyptych – the ‘big bang’ of Early Netherlandish Painting – from that of his elder brother Hubert, whose principal authorship seems to be insinuated by the notorious Quatrain on the original frame and of whom we know no more than his name, his tombstone and that he died in Ghent in 1426.

Rogier, too, has been assigned an art-historical ‘alter ego’. Defining the precise relationship between Rogier and Campin is a similarly tricky problem, since no work survives that can be linked to Campin by either documentary evidence or tradition. Rogier’s oeuvre, on the other hand, has been assembled around two works for which circumstantial evidence proved Rogier’s authorship. The oeuvre that most art historians habitually assign to Campin’s name, however, consisted chiefly of two groups of paintings that have always been considered to bear a close stylistic resemblance to paintings attributed to Rogier while at the same time they reveal a style quite distinct from his own. Attributed to either the ‘Master of Flémalle’ – named after three panels in Frankfurt that allegedly once belonged to an ‘Abbey of Flémalle’ (an abbey that actually never existed) – or to the ‘Master of Mérode’ – named after a triptych from the Mérode Collection, now in New York – they were hypothetically linked to the name of Robert Campin

Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Descent from the Cross*,  
1430-1435. Oak panel.  
Detail: Jesus. Museo del  
Prado, Madrid.



Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Descent from the Cross*,  
1430-1435. Oak panel. Detail:  
Maria. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



only in 1902, when Georges Hulin de Loo identified the wings of the altarpiece of the Abbey of Sint Vaast in Arras and thereby rescued a documented work of 1434 by Jacques Daret from oblivion. Since Daret's panels from Sint Vaast display clear similarities to both the composition and style of the '*Mérode-Flémalle*' – paintings, as well as to the accepted oeuvre of Van der Weyden, the hypothesis of the identity of Campin with the anonymous 'Master of Flémalle/Mérode' became more and more attractive to scholars but has never been established absolutely. Several attempts have been made to solve the problem of the Master of Flémalle in regard to the early works by Rogier van der Weyden by either assigning Rogier's work to Campin or vice versa. All that can be said with certainty is that the artistic relationship between the two painters was more profound and lasted longer than art history has for a long time been willing to accept.

In Van Eyck's case, there is, of course, the mystery surrounding his alleged invention of oil painting. First mentioned by Giorgio Vasari, it was expanded to legendary proportions by the Netherlandish painter and historiographer Van Mander at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. While enlightened antiquarians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century found proof that this allegedly secret technique was, in fact, known and practiced whole centuries before Van Eyck's lifetime, his use of binding media and pigments is still being investigated and remains at the core of scientific research into his works.

## Emotional involvement

Only one work by Rogier van der Weyden was signed: the four Justice panels in Brussels Town Hall bore his name on the original frame. As regards Van Eyck, on the other hand, most of his panels are signed and dated where the original frame has survived. But despite this fortunate fact, there also is, undeniably, an air of mystery surrounding almost every painting by the Bruges painter that has survived to our own time. The sitters for his numerous portraits seem to be hiding some secret that bestows on their likeness an enigmatic quality that is typical of Van Eyck. His landscapes and church interiors defy all those fervent





Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Descent from the Cross*,  
1430-1435. Oak panel.  
Detail: Nicodemus. Museo  
del Prado, Madrid.

attempts at identification, just as the most enigmatic of all paintings of the time – the famous Arnolfini double portrait in the National Gallery in London – has defied and keeps defying all efforts to solve the riddle that viewers and scholars alike seem to sense when looking at it.

Rogier van der Weyden's paintings, in contrast, are not quite as enigmatic. His pictorial world, however, intrigues us in a rather different manner. Whereas Van Eyck apparently seeks to engage his viewers on an intellectual level, Van der Weyden seems significantly more concerned to ensure their strong emotional involvement. In his carefully composed religious pictures – especially those involving subjects from the Passion of Christ – the memorable postures and gestures of his figures serve as theatrical expressions of fundamentally emotional responses to the biblical events depicted. They were therefore able to provide the viewers with a matrix that assisted them in determining their own individual reactions to the events illustrated in the painting, and ultimately helped them establish the adequacy of their response; each for each, Rogier's figures could, in addition, trigger emotional effects on the part of the beholder that would allow his gradual apprehension of the significance of the pictorial representation and provoke feelings such as, for example, compassion or grief; in other words, the extrovert gestures and postures that Rogier kept assigning especially to supporting characters in his compositions could be understood as *repoussoir* figures that functioned not on a pictorial but on an emotional level.

Rogier's famous *Descent from the Cross*, made for the Guild of Crossbowmen of Leuven perhaps towards the end of the 1430s, and now in the Museo Nacional del Prado, is an intriguing example of Rogier's unique strength in depicting and thereby evoking emotions. The composition is conceived as an illusionary representation of a sculpted retable with polychromed sculptures set against a gilded background on which the shadows they cast can be seen. Rogier – not unlike Van Eyck – is deceiving his public along the lines of the '*paragone*', the competition of the arts known from antiquity. Rogier depicts the dead body of Christ at the centre of the composition. His rigid body is supported by Joseph of Arimathea, who grasps the corpse under its shoulders and supports it with his knee, and by Nicodemus who holds the knees and feet. The faces of both men

are focused on Christ, each of them displaying different expressions: Joseph of Arimathea seems to grieve quietly, whereas the tears on Nicodemus' face reveal his deep sorrow. To the right, Mary Magdalene's pose and gesture – a transformation of a conventional motif – physically demonstrate her immense suffering. The left side of the composition shows John the Evangelist and one of the Marys supporting the Virgin Mary in the unconscious state caused by her intense pain at the loss of her son. Her posture is designed to correspond to the position of the dead body of Christ, and Rogier thereby seems to depict the concept of Thomas Aquinas' *'imitatio Christi'*: in her empathic suffering, the Virgin Mary – with tears running down her face – becomes similar to Christ himself. This, arguably, is the ultimate idea behind Rogier's impressive composition, but each and every figure provides an example to the viewer on how to grieve for the death of Christ and how to act compassionately towards the Virgin and her sorrow.

This emphatic strategy can be found in many paintings attributed to Van der Weyden and his studio throughout his career. Most of them are representations of Christ's Passion and can be considered as consisting of various postures

Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Descent from the Cross*,  
1430-1435. Oak panel. Detail:  
Mary Magdalene. Museo del  
Prado, Madrid.



derived from the complex composition of the *Descent*. But Rogier used similar strategies of providing the viewer with models of adequate response in devotional images such as the Pietà or even in his depictions of biblical events such as the Birth of Christ (the Bladelin Altarpiece).

It is worthy of note that Rogier's compositions continued to serve as popular resources for painters of later generations until well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Almost always they show particular interest in those of his figures that appeared to be charged with emotional expression; and it could be argued that it was precisely this dimension of his artistic legacy that ensured his compositions' overwhelming success in painting and sculpture of the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century at a European level. ■

Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Mary Magdalene reading*,  
fragment from a *Sacra Conversazione*,  
c. 1445. Oak panel,  
62,2 x 54,4 cm. National Gallery,  
London.



Rogier van der Weyden,  
*Jean Wauquelin presenting  
his Chroniques de Hainault  
to Philip the Good*, c. 1447.  
Parchment, 15, 4 x 20 cm.  
(Miniature). Koninklijke  
Bibliotheek, Brussels.



#### FURTHER READING

The most comprehensive and recent studies on Van der Weyden were published in the catalogues of two truly remarkable exhibitions devoted to the artist, held in Frankfurt/Berlin and in Leuven.

Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander (ed), *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden*, Ostfildern (Hatje-Cantz) 2008 (catalogue accompanying the exhibitions in the Städelmuseum in Frankfurt and the Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / Preußischer Kulturbesitz).

Jan van der Stockt and Lorne Campbell (ed), *Rogier van der Weyden 1400-1464: De Passie van de Meester*, Leuven (Davidsfonds) 2009 (catalogue accompanying the exhibition in M-Museum Leuven).

In addition, it is useful to consult the most extensive catalogue raisonné on the artist, which contains a comprehensive bibliography on each painting attributed to (or associated with) Rogier:

Dirk de Vos, *Rogier van der Weyden*, Antwerp (Mercatorfonds 1999).

A good and useful survey of the written sources on Van der Weyden has been compiled by Elisabeth Dhanens:

Elisabeth Dhanens, *Rogier van der Weyden: Revisie van de documenten* Brussels (Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België) 1995.

The relationship between Van der Weyden and Campin remains a subject of heated debate among scholars. The following publications express somewhat dissident views and have met with much criticism from the academic world. They occasionally provide useful information and challenging interpretations of this complex problem:

Felix Thürlemann, *Robert Campin*, Munich, New York et al. (Prestel) 2002.

Albert Châtelet, *Robert Campin: de meester van Flémalle*, Antwerp (Mercatorfonds) 1996.