

Portrait of the Artist as a Posthumous Work in Progress

Van Eyck and the Politics of Posterity



Jan Van Eyck,
Portrait of a Man
(*Self Portrait?*). 1433.
Panel, 26 x 19 cm.
National Gallery, London
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[J E N N Y G R A H A M]

247

'My Son took large Notes of what he saw in Holland, and Flanders', wrote Jonathan Richardson, the leading English art connoisseur of his day, in 1722, *'but little more than a Summary Account is given of These. To have done otherwise than we have done would have been too great a Drudgery for Us, and too Tiresome for our Readers, and our Book would rather have been of that sort that one recurs to Occasionally only, than what is to be read Through with Pleasure.'* While Richardson's ambivalence towards Netherlandish art was common among those from outside the Low Countries in the age of the Grand Tour, with its focus on Rome, it is hard to imagine the landscape of European old master art being so described today, without its Northern lights. Van Eyck, Vermeer, Rubens and Rembrandt are household names, global commodities, globetrotters even, when the latest international exhibition demands it, yet, as Richardson's remarks demonstrate,

their artistic celebrity was not always assured. Indeed, the posthumous rise to fame of the earliest of these artists, the Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck (d.1441), who was celebrated during and after his lifetime but, like Vermeer, only reborn a hero in the nineteenth century, paints a particularly vivid picture of the shifting nature of artistic status. Above all, Van Eyck's story reminds us that often canonical greats are not born but made, refashioned not simply to suit changing taste, but specific cultural politics. It took the interventions of Napoleon, the Treaty of Versailles and Hitler, for example, to bring Van Eyck to worldwide attention. His was a name remade not only by changing artistic fashions, but by the politics of nation-building during the emergence of modern Europe.

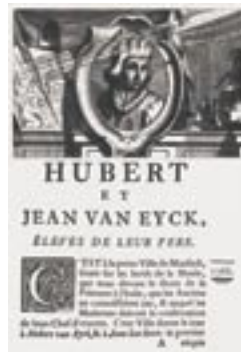
Today, Van Eyck is seen as the artist who bridged the gap between the medieval and the modern, his extraordinary realism the cornerstone of his international reputation which was cemented in the boom years of art history itself during the twentieth century. In 1945 we find that quintessential modernist Clement Greenberg, the American art critic better known for his promotion of Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, citing the portraits of Van Eyck and his school, with their unrivalled depiction of the human psyche, as early art at its most modern. For Ernst Gombrich in *The Story of Art*, first published in 1950, Van Eyck was a revolutionary, the first to show the light in a horse's eye, the stark naked human figure of a life study, a '*corner of the real world... fixed onto a panel as if by magic.*' This tendency to see in Van Eyck the fountainhead of modern art is particularly evident in the words of the Viennese art historian Otto Pächt during the 1960s, who thought Van Eyck's style, '*has a prophetic message that is all its own, pointing forward to Vermeer and Cézanne, the two other great representatives of painting as an art of pure, will-less contemplation, of Being as a coloured still-life, of narrative-free, silent, unalterably mute imagery.*' The global recognition which Van Eyck's image now commands gives little indication that he first had to be rescued from obscurity as recently as the nineteenth century, after Napoleon looted panels from his masterwork, the Ghent altarpiece, and took them back to the Louvre in 1794. The Enlightenment had quietly placed Van Eyck in the Gothic tradition, but with his work centre stage in the greatest art gallery of the time he could be reinvented in the image of the nineteenth century.

The inventor of oil painting

The roots of Van Eyck's modern rediscovery lie in his literary reputation as the inventor of oil painting, a legend which originates in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, the sixteenth-century chronicle of Italian Renaissance art told in a series of successive biographies of artists from Cimabue to Titian. Emulating classical traditions, the narrative structure of the *Lives* was driven forwards by colourful anecdotes such as the story of Van Eyck's invention, told in the life of the Venetian artist Antonello da Messina (d.1479). The limitations of the Italian method of painting in egg tempera during the fifteenth century, writes Vasari, were overcome and the future brilliance of Italian art secured, when Antonello da Messina travelled to Flanders to learn the secret of oil painting from a celebrated Fleming. Vasari's Van Eyck, schooled in alchemy as well as art, stumbles upon a new method of blending linseed and nut oil with his pigments, giving such lustre and durability to his works that word of his fame reaches Italy. In the nationalist spirit of such histories, Vasari naturally saw Van Eyck's invention as a handy

service to the Italians rather than as an integral part of his own artistic endeavours. In the Low Countries, on the other hand, in Karel van Mander's adaptation of the story for his *Schilder-boeck* (1604), it became the foundation for the whole Northern tradition. Although modern scholarship has all but purged popular culture of the myth, which was first challenged as early as the eighteenth century by the antiquarian Rudolf Erich Raspe, himself better known for his *Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1785), the legend took on new life in the nineteenth century when it was revived by the Romantics, thus rekindling interest in Van Eyck.

The main source for the Van Eyck legend's revival was Jean-Baptiste Descamps' *Vies des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais* (1753–64), a fashionable handbook in the biographical genre, and the first history in French of Netherlandish painting at a time when Flemish genre painting of the seventeenth century was particularly in vogue in *ancien régime* France. Descamps was himself a member of the French Academy as a genre painter in the Flemish style who had trained in Antwerp. The French were first alerted, he tells us, to the rich artistic heritage housed in Flemish town halls and churches but a step from their border by the French occupation of Flanders between 1746 and 1748. And to encourage French connoisseurs to look beyond Italy, as it were, on their art travels, Descamps' 1769 *Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant* documented the contents of numerous churches in such painstaking detail that the *Voyage* became the definitive handbook of its day for continental travellers to the Low Countries. It was used, for example, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy in London, during his tour of Flanders and Holland in 1781.



Portrait of Hubert Van Eyck (engraving).

In: Jean-Baptiste Descamps, *La Vie des peintres flamands*, vol. I (1753).



Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, Portraits of the brothers Van Eyck in the *Ghent Altarpiece* (detail of the Righteous Judges). 145 x 51 cm. Image courtesy of Lukasweb.

Descamps' most important legacy, however, is to have roused the interest of Napoleon's looting committee in acquiring the Ghent altarpiece for the Louvre, irrevocably changing Van Eyck's fortunes when its four central panels were taken from St Bavo's Cathedral to Paris in 1794 and placed on public view. After all Diderot himself, art critic and founder of the *Encyclopédie*, had noted the limitations of Descamps' own works of art. 'The one who's crying', he wrote of a child painted by Descamps in the Flemish genre style, 'if it's because of the enormous head you've given him, he has good reason'. Since we know that Napoleon's experts used his handbooks to select the main spoils of the Flemish churches, however, it comes as no surprise that they wanted what Descamps describes as the first oil painting in the history of art. Descamps had reinforced the point with a specially-made engraving of Jan's older brother Hubert (d.1426), who, according to a local Ghent tradition repeated in Karel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck*, had begun the altarpiece, before it was completed by Jan in 1432. The engraving included a quaint reminder of Jan's invention in the brushes, bottles and flasks to Hubert's right, and his likeness derives from the portraits of the brothers in the left wing of the altarpiece. Following Descamps, the images of Hubert in the fur hat and Jan in the distinctive tied *chaperon*, much like a turban, were deliberately adapted from the altarpiece during the following century as their names re-entered the canon. Their Ghent likenesses were copied into the newly fashionable pantheons of artists (Delaroche's *Hémicycle* in Paris, for example), and carved in stone on monuments (including Armistead's Albert Memorial in London). Originating in the antiquarian books of a now long-forgotten French academician, followed by a spectacular display in the French capital of the cultural trophies of war, put on in symbolic representation of Napoleon's defeat of nations, Van Eyck's pan-European revival had begun.

Van Eyck and the Romantics

If Napoleon's was the first of a series of nationalist appropriations of Van Eyck and his school as the cultural identities of modern Europe were worked out, others followed, perhaps because Van Eyck's style was still unfamiliar – unclaimed territory, as one might say. The most influential of these appropriations for Van Eyck's future legacy was not Napoleon's vision of French power politics in the museum, however, since the altarpiece panels were returned to Ghent in 1816, after Waterloo, before they could become a permanent part of French cultural heritage. Instead it was the German Romantics who adopted Van Eyck's school as their own, after they saw the plundered art at the Louvre. Early Flemish art attracted new admirers in Goethe and Hegel, and sparked a culture of collecting the style in Germany which gave rise to the modern academic study of the subject. For the Germans, Van Eyck became an ancestral figure, a Gothic forebear of their own national style at a time when such associations mustered patriotic feeling following the French occupation of their lands. If German thinkers were looking, as Till-Holger Borchert has put it, to create a cultural identity for the future German state, the deeply pious feeling of the early Flemish painters was particularly compatible with their Catholic ideals. The rediscovery of what the Romantics saw as an essentially German heritage, 'the art of the fatherland' even, was likened by, for example, Johanna Schopenhauer, mother of the famous philosopher and herself a cultured art critic, to a bright, clear day, 'by



H. Brown, Jan Van Eyck
(wood engraving).

In: Jean-Baptiste Madou, *Scènes de la vie des peintres de l'école flamande et hollandaise* (1842).



Aimé de Lemud,
Légende des frères Van Eyck (lithograph).
In *L'Artiste* (1839).

the light of which we recognise ourselves, our surroundings, I would even say our ancestral home, after a long period of blindness'.

It was in this context of German Romanticism that the Ghent altarpiece underwent a further upheaval which for much of the nineteenth century sealed Van Eyck's fate as an honorary German. In 1816, just when the central sections had been returned to St Bavo's Cathedral from Paris, the wings of the altarpiece were sold to an art dealer to raise funds for the building's fabric. The dealer was L.J. Nieuwenhuys, who had already put Hans Memling's *Seven Joys of the Virgin* on the German market in 1813; it had previously belonged to Josephine Bonaparte after being confiscated from Bruges during the Revolutionary period. By 1817 the Ghent altarpiece's wings were in Berlin. By 1821 they had entered the Prussian royal collection, and in 1830 they became the pride of German connoisseurship when the royal collection was transferred to the public Berlin Gallery. The Flemish reckoned the majority of their treasures lost to the Germans, the altarpiece now dismantled for good; the wings would not be returned until 1920, in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles.

In the wake of his rediscovery, other identities for Van Eyck were forged to suit the ideologies of particular audiences. For the French Romantics, he became a quintessential painter's painter in the context of their fascination with secrecy and experiment in the hallowed space of the studio, a well-worn trope in word and image during this period. In one such novella, serialised in *L'Artiste* in 1839, Van Eyck is a mad scientist who works through the night in an underground laboratory perfecting his secret formula. In true Vasarian style, although the original tale contained no such thing, Van Eyck's sister Margaret

– a spinster who spurned marriage to follow her brothers in art, according to a local Ghent myth – artlessly shares Jan’s secret with an eager Italian who has wooed her on false pretences. Van Eyck turns would-be murderer to protect his secret, catching up with the Italian as he flees to the coast – Jan’s horse spurred on by a magic potion – where he leaves the imposter for dead.

While the French revelled in the romance of the Van Eyck legend, it was its nationalist implications that were exploited in his homeland, where it was patriotically adopted to bolster the cultural identity of the new Belgian state. At a time when the figure of the artist-hero universally carried the weight of chauvinistic agendas, the value of underlining an illustrious artistic past was felt particularly urgently in Belgium following its independence in 1830. With an explicit nod to Descamps, for example, the Brussels academician Jean-Baptiste Madou produced a folio of engravings after the lives of Flemish and Dutch painters for the Society of Fine Arts at Ghent in 1842. Opening with a whimsical image of Jan instructing Antonello da Messina, who has his traveller’s bag across his shoulder, in the art of oil painting, the volume stressed the importance of the Flemish contribution to the history of art. Madou’s was an exclusively Northern pantheon of artists which intentionally deprived the usually-ubiquitous Italians of their leading role.

Jan Van Eyck,
*Portrait of Giovanni(?)
Arnolfini and his Wife.*
1434.
Panel, 82.2 x 60 cm.
National Gallery, London
© National Gallery.



William Orpen,
The Mirror. 1900.
Canvas, 68.2 x 58 cm.
Tate, London.



An artist for the modern age

The crucial shift in Van Eyck's identity, from the Romantic figure of the Vasarian legend to the image he has today as the first artist of the modern age, as one who rejects dogma and convention for the real world, who makes the ordinary man his subject, occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. The trigger was the newfound fame of the *Arnolfini Portrait* which was first brought to London after Waterloo by an English officer, probably looted from the Spanish royal collection. Acquired by the National Gallery in London in 1842, and followed by Van Eyck's self-portrait in a red chaperon in 1851, the rediscovery of these works encouraged a particular view of Van Eyck in the context of developments in realism and photography during the nineteenth century. Van Eyck's identity was remoulded once again to fit a particular set of values, this time those associated with the rise of the modern realist tradition from the English Pre-Raphaelites and Impressionism onwards. Coupled with the period's obsession with self-portraits and the image of the artist, the developing realist trajectory allowed painters to make explicit links between Van Eyck's and their own aspirations, calling on him anew as an ancestral figure. William Orpen's

Bruges,
'La Place Jean Van Eyck',
c.1900. Postcard.



The Mirror (1900), for example, projected a self-identity for the artist that was simultaneously of the moment and part of a longer tradition. Like Van Eyck, Orpen portrays himself in the mirror as a witness to his scene, asserting the authority of the artist's gaze as he directs the model from his easel, a modern-day gas lamp in place of Van Eyck's brass candelabra with the burning candle. *The Mirror* goes beyond pastiche to function as a declaration of the power of the artist, Orpen's confident style hovering somewhere between the fifteenth century, in the Van Eyckian carpet, and Manet.

By the turn of the century, Van Eyck's star was in the ascendant, his turbaned image a symbol of tourist Bruges itself. Indeed, issues of nationalism never resonated more strongly in Van Eyck's reception than in the period that followed, arising out of precisely those questions of nationhood and boundary, of artistic heritage and its proper custodianship which had surrounded his rediscovery since the Enlightenment. A bare two decades after the wings of



Public invitation to the ceremonies marking the return of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, October 1945. Image courtesy of Lukasweb.

the Ghent altarpiece were returned to Belgium by the Treaty of Versailles, the altarpiece, this time in its entirety, was taken back to Germany in 1942 on the personal orders of Hitler. Placed in Neuschwanstein Castle, and then hidden in an Austrian salt mine, the altarpiece was made to stand for Hitler's rejection of the treaty itself and for his vision of an exclusively Germanic history of art, which, as we have seen, had continuously been part of the altarpiece's aura since the Romantic period. The return to Ghent of the Van Eycks' masterwork by American forces in 1945, conducted by truck, police escort and an official parade which ended in the sung mass and the ringing of St Bavo's bells, thus sought to efface the work's association with German cultural power inscribed upon it since the Napoleonic era. To the strains of the hymn of praise which has usually marked the election of a pope, a royal coronation or the canonisation of a saint, Ghent's most powerful resident was returned to its original setting. ■

FURTHER READING

Jenny Graham, *Inventing Van Eyck: The Remaking of An Artist for the Modern Age*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007, 288 pp.