

The Ghent Altarpiece

Early Netherlandish, Flemish, French, German and Belgian

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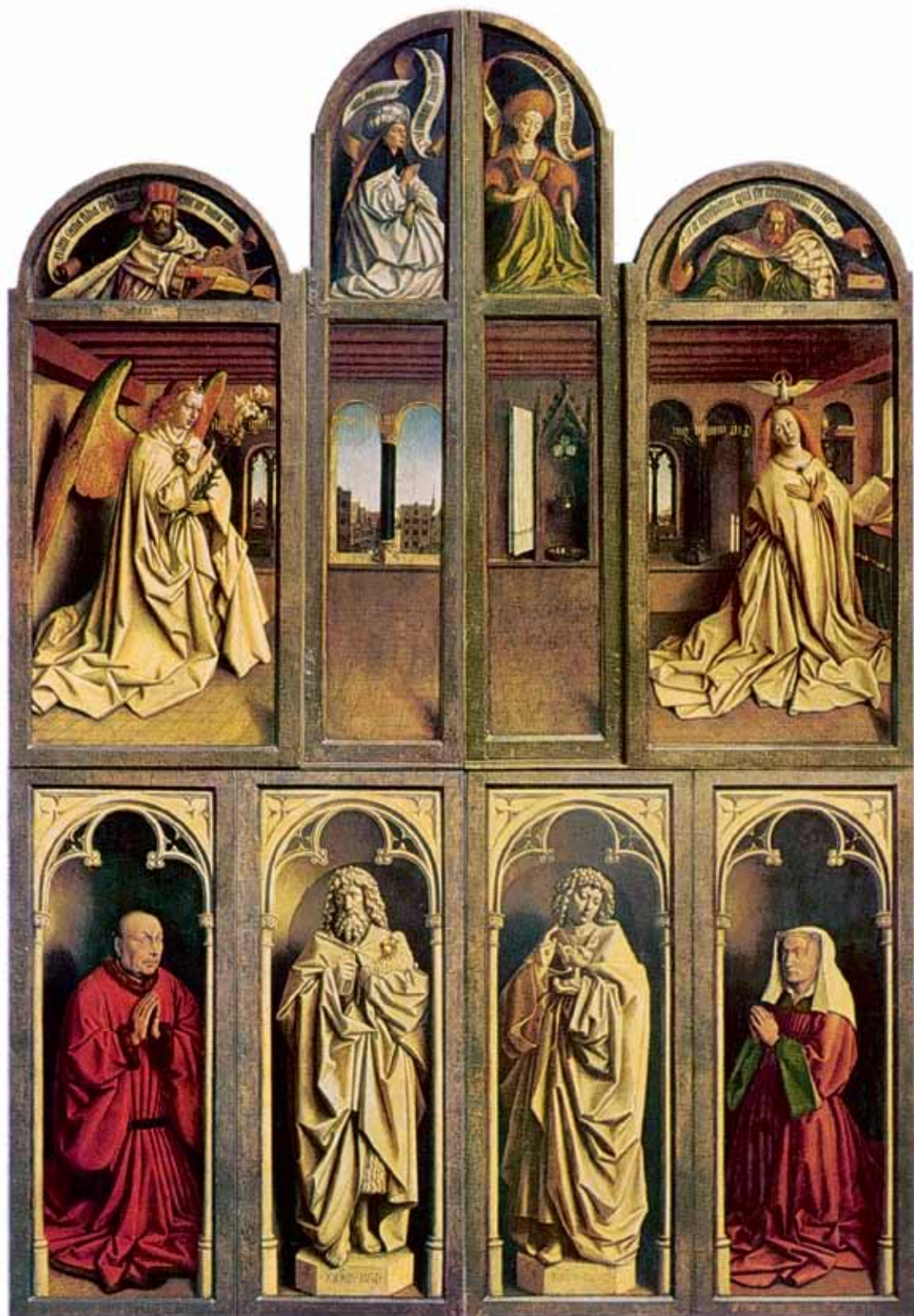
[W E S S E L K R U L]

The monumental Ghent Altarpiece, or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, painted by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck and completed in 1432, is the first great masterpiece of Early Netherlandish painting. It can still be viewed in the church for which it was originally produced, St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, where it attracts thousands of visitors every year. Whatever the viewer's particular interests, there is something in the painting for everybody: evidence of the great urban wealth in fifteenth century Flanders, the earliest and unequalled expression of an important and long-lasting artistic tradition, a visionary image of the Christian faith, and an artistic milestone in the development of extremely accurate realism.

One's astonishment at still finding it in its original setting is an extra bonus. Its size and age, its place and subject matter, all play their part in making the painting a highlight in the cultural history not only of Flanders but of the Low Countries as a whole. However, the impression of permanence given by the location and the painting is misleading. Although it was created specifically for the cathedral in Ghent, its qualities have not always been appreciated nor has it always remained there. Indeed, largely because of its many travels and the reunification of its widely scattered panels in 1920, the altarpiece has acquired a status far above all the other works of the Early Netherlandish School. Over the years, it has become a symbol not only of historical continuity but also of patience and suffering.

Respectful cleaning

The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb is a polyptych consisting of a number of panels or frames, which are painted on both sides so that different scenes appear according to whether it is open or closed. Tradition has it that the work was begun by Hubert van Eyck and completed by his much younger brother, Jan. On the outside the Annunciation is shown with sibyls and prophets and portraits of the patrons, the Ghent burgher Joost Vijd and his wife Elisabeth Borluut. On the inside, the upper panels show God the Father with the Virgin Mary on the left and John the Baptist on the right being sung to by angel choirs on either





side and, next to them at either end of the row, Adam and Eve after the Fall. The lower five panels show the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb near the Fountain of Life by processions of the righteous that include male and female saints, hermits and pilgrims against a background view of the heavenly Jerusalem. This last scene in particular is unusual for the late Middle Ages. It unquestionably makes reference to certain mystical traditions. The theological complexity of the work as a whole makes it unlikely that its content was thought up by the patrons or the artists themselves.

Because of its size, magnificent colouring and astonishing richness of detail, the Ghent Altarpiece soon acquired a reputation as one of the great artistic wonders of the Low Countries. On feast days, when the panels were opened, the church was so full that people could hardly move. Visitors travelled from near and far, from Germany, Italy and Spain, to view the painting and report back to those who stayed behind. In 1458, to mark Philip the Good's entry into Ghent, the St Agnes Chamber of Rhetoric modelled a *tableau vivant* on the painting. Albrecht Dürer considered the altarpiece to be one of the highlights of his journey through the Netherlands in 1521. But around the middle of the 16th century, when the painting was at least 100 years old, it began to show signs of wear. An initial attempt at restoration was so incompetent that a bottom row of panels,

which seems to have included the Last Judgement, was lost. The two painters, commissioned to rescue the painting, Jan van Scorel and Lancelot Blondeel, were so impressed by what was left of the work that they kissed it reverently before starting.

King Philip II, on his departure for Spain, was so reluctant to leave the painting behind that he had a copy of it made by Michel Coxcie. The Reformation, on the other hand, had no time for such explicit Catholic imagery. During the Iconoclastic Riots of 1566, concerned burghers hurriedly removed van Eyck's altarpiece to the safety of the Cathedral's clock tower. When the Calvinists briefly came to power in Ghent, they exhibited the painting in the town hall hoping to be able to sell it. Its purchase by Queen Elizabeth of England failed to go through at the last minute. On the return of the Spanish, the work was restored to its place in the St Bavo cathedral. It is interesting to speculate whether it would have become so famous if it had simply become part of the British royal collection in the sixteenth century. Possibly it would still have done so, if only because of the exceptional status accorded to Jan van Eyck in the history of art.

Giorgio Vasari prefaced his *Lives of the Artists* of 1550 with an extensive introduction on the history of the different forms of art. It included the invention of oil paints, which he attributed to 'Giovanni da Bruggia' in Flanders. This master painter, he tells us, initiated a whole school of painting in Flanders, until Antonello da Messina went there to learn the trade and subsequently took the secret of oil paints back to Venice. In the nineteenth century, pictures were still being painted of Antonello respectfully visiting Jan van Eyck's studio. But though the Italian's work does show some affinity to early Flemish art, he clearly belongs to a later generation. The Ghent Altarpiece was not mentioned by Vasari and neither was Jan van Eyck's elder brother Hubert. These details were added in 1604 by 'the Dutch Vasari', Karl van Mander, in *Het Schilder-Boeck*, his famous handbook of painters.

According to Van Mander, Jan van Eyck was born in Maaseik, in present-day Belgian Limburg. Not only did he learn painting from his brother Hubert but he also collaborated with his sister Margareta who was a painter too. His masterpiece was the Ghent Altarpiece, which he completed after Hubert died in 1426. In Van Mander's opinion, a commission of that size must have come from the Burgundian court. For the rest, Van Mander accepts Vasari's account of the discovery of oil paint, though he attributes it to both brothers. This completed what for a long time was the accepted view of Van Eyck. Vasari's account supplemented by Van Mander survived unchallenged for centuries: Jan van Eyck was the inventor and first grand master of oil painting. That not only places him at the beginning of the Flemish painting tradition, but also of painting in the Northern Netherlands. For Karel van Mander's real subject was the blossoming of art in Holland, even though Rembrandt had not yet even been born.

From admiration to aversion

Admiration for the altarpiece continued unabated throughout the seventeenth century as evidenced by the production of yet another exact copy. However, the painting did not appeal very much to eighteenth century tastes. To supporters of enlightened rationalism it reflected an ecstatic devotion,



that by then had become incomprehensible. And even within the church itself, objections to it were raised. Some of the images on the polyptych no longer lived up to the newer ideals of moral edification and modesty. In the 1770s the panels with the very realistic naked figures of Adam and Eve were detached from the altarpiece and put in store where they remained, removed from the public gaze, for a very long time. The middle section was subsequently looted by the French. In 1794 the Ghent Altarpiece was removed to Paris to become part of the collection in the new national museum, later known as the Musée Napoléon.

The removal to Paris was evidence of a new appreciation of this legendary work of art. It was in this period that a serious interest started to be taken in the so-called 'primitives'. However, the main reason was without doubt the desire of the French authorities to present the painting as 'French' art. After all, it had been produced within the cultural sphere of Burgundy, which was French in language and origin. The Louvre became a treasure house of masterpieces that attracted visitors from all over Europe, especially during the short period of peace in 1802-1803. The large number of art works that it contained made it easier to draw comparisons, which led some sections of the public to conclusions that were radically opposed to those embraced by French national pride. From 1803, Friedrich Schlegel, critic, essayist and leader of the German romantic school, published a series of extremely influential articles about his visits to the Louvre. True art, in his opinion, was religious art. The proper subject matter for painting was the story of Christian redemption. He therefore rejected both classicism and realism. In the Ghent Altarpiece, to which he paid detailed attention, he particularly admired the tranquil solemnity of the subject matter. The painting was reminiscent of something ancient and original. God the Father, John the Baptist and Mary had an 'Egyptian loftiness and dignity'; they were 'stern godlike figures, as if from a misty prehistory'. Schlegel saw no connection with later Netherlandish art, for which he had little sympathy. There was no demonstrable line from Van Eyck to Rubens or Rembrandt, but Van Eyck did herald a style which reached its peak in the work of Dürer and Holbein. Schlegel therefore concluded that Van Eyck's work should be regarded not as Flemish, and certainly not French, but as German art.

Schlegel's decision to begin the history of German art with Van Eyck led to a long-lasting dichotomy in European art history. Time and again, North and South, German and Italian, Germanic and Latin culture were represented as two sharply distinguished artistic traditions and even as two different and opposing philosophies. Schlegel wanted contemporary art to model itself on Van Eyck. A scientific pioneer like G.F. Waagen, however, recognised as early as 1822 that Flemish art in the fifteenth century already represented a separate stylistic school. But even if Van Eyck was



not really German, national boundaries continued to be a permanent feature of art literature. The same pattern was followed in history painting. In his murals in the dome of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, Peter Cornelius represents Jan van Eyck as the leading old master in the North. This was echoed in innumerable similar 'parades of artists', from the Albert Memorial in London to the decorations at the front of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.

The centre panels of the altarpiece, which had been transported to Paris in 1794, were returned to the Ghent cathedral authorities in 1816 after the fall of Napoleon. However, far from viewing this as a restoration of Flemish, or Netherlandish, honour, the return of the painting caused some embarrassment. In the new Kingdom of the Netherlands there was little interest in early Netherlandish art. The same was true in England. Even after 1830, the new Belgian state was more attached to Rubens than to Van Eyck. In England, it was not until 1841 that the National Gallery bought its first Van Eyck. The works of Van Eyck in King Willem II's collection were auctioned off in 1850 without any effort being made by the state or any private individual to keep them in the Netherlands. The cathedral council in Ghent persisted in the indifference, even aversion, that it had shown in the eighteenth century and did everything in its power to rid itself of the work.

The side panels were sold to a London art dealer and through his mediation ended up in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, now the Bode, in Berlin where they became one of the museum's showpieces until the First World War. The middle panels with the image of the Mystic Lamb were not well looked after and suffered fire damage in 1822. The panels with Adam and Eve remained under lock and key for several more decades because of their supposed indecency. In 1861 the church council put them on the market and they were acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. In this way the great polyptych was completely dismantled, with parts of it in Berlin and in Brussels and only the four middle panels, after over 20 years in Paris, back in their original place in Ghent.

National shrine

If there had not been a revival of interest in early Netherlandish art at the end of the nineteenth century, perhaps only a few art experts would have regretted this situation. But with increased public interest, national consciousness again became important. German art literature continued to regard Van Eyck and his followers as 'Northern' artists. A by-product of this was that the discovery of oil paint, traditionally attributed to Van Eyck, and even realism in painting, were also treated as achievements of German culture. Not surprisingly this viewpoint did not go down well in France. The Romantic historian Jules Michelet had already attempted to make Van Eyck a Frenchman. After 1870, French writers laid great emphasis on the French origins of the Burgundian dukes. The artistic impulse that blossomed in Flanders was in their opinion largely inspired by France.

Inevitably, Belgium was drawn into the escalating conflict between France and Germany. Belgium's intermediate position, however, could be considered to have been a positive feature. Around 1900 Belgian consciousness embraced early Netherlandish art as a legacy of Belgium's historical role as a crossroads





of cultures, a synthesis of traditions, and even a source of inspiration for the neighbouring states. The flowering of the arts under the Burgundian dukes, beginning with Van Eyck, was in its nature and originality proof of the Belgian nation's right to exist. This vision underpinned the great and extremely popular exhibition of 'Flemish Primitives' that was held in Bruges in 1902.

That exhibition was a turning point in both public awareness and scientific research. There was hardly anything on show by Van Eyck apart from the Adam and Eve panels, on loan from the museum in Brussels. Memling, whose work until then was considered to be the pinnacle of the early Netherlandish School, still was the central figure. But interest now shifted to the earlier generation and there was a growing conviction that the initial phase with Van Eyck, followed by Rogier, was also the best that this school had achieved. In fact, the organising committee had wanted, even if only for the duration of the exhibition, to bring together the entire polyptych of the altarpiece including the panels from Ghent and Berlin. They were unable to do this. But after 1902 the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb was more and more frequently cited as a national monument, as a visible memorial of Belgium's independent contribution to European culture. Reunifying the altarpiece now became an issue of the greatest importance.

The Bruges exhibition of 1902 triggered a range of reactions in neighbouring countries. A Paris exhibition in 1904 tried to prove that Van Eyck and his followers owed everything to France. However, even in France the attempt was



greeted with some scepticism. The organisers wanted to minimise the role of Van Eyck as an innovator, but at the same time maximise his fame in the interests of French culture. In Germany, the distance from France was again strongly emphasised. Although nobody any longer insisted that Van Eyck laid the foundations of German art, German publications dealing with the early Netherlandish school kept repeating that the altarpiece reflected a 'Germanic sense of form'.

In Holland no serious attempt was made to turn Van Eyck into a compatriot, though the idea that his work formed the origin of Dutch 'realism' remained a fixed tenet in Dutch art history. So Van Eyck was adopted, after all, as the source and origin of a great national tradition of painting. Even a famous historical work that at first sight was written from an opposing point of view is based entirely on this belief. In his *Waning of the Middle Ages in 1919*, Johan Huizinga presented Burgundian culture as a final phase instead of a fresh start or renaissance. Jan van Eyck's careful attention to detail did not reflect a modern approach to life but fitted completely into the world of late medieval belief. It looked as if Huizinga intended to sweep away some long cherished ideas. And yet he did so only partially. He also took for granted a direct relationship between Van Eyck and seventeenth century Dutch art, but in his opinion this was because Dutch art had remained in essence medieval, which gave it its unique character.

The peace negotiations after the First World War opened up the possibility of satisfying at least one Belgian national dream. It is revealing that of



all the Belgian art treasures in German hands, the side panels of the Ghent Altarpiece were the first to be demanded as reparation. In 1920 they returned from Berlin to Ghent where they were recombined with the St Bavo centre panels and the Brussels Adam and Eve panels. Since then this huge work of art has been the main tourist attraction in the city, for symbolic as much as artistic reasons. The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb has become a national shrine, dedicated to the suffering that the Belgian people have endured.

Final wanderings

Its exceptional status ensured that every debate on the masterpiece became a matter of great public interest. In the 1930s many learned discussions about the work took place. What exactly was the painting about? Who was being worshipped, God the Father or the Son? And who was the mysterious Hubert van Eyck? Did he really exist or was the attribution to an elder brother based on a misunderstanding? Such attention also made the work vulnerable to stunts and blackmail. In 1934 the panel with the 'just judges' was stolen in an ostentatious robbery, the purpose of which has never been made clear. The panel has never been recovered, and a copy has replaced the missing section. The return of the altarpiece to Ghent in 1920 did not put an end to its peregrinations. The Second World War ushered in a final episode of transportation and damage. The belief in the work's link with German culture was revived under National Socialism. Adolf Hitler earmarked the Ghent Altarpiece for his planned museum in Linz where it would illustrate the glories of the German artistic tradition. Pending the completion of this project, the polyptych was housed in Neuschwanstein, one of the neo-Gothic fairy tale castles built by King Ludwig II (1845-1886) of Bavaria. After all, did not Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, the Swan Knight, also take place in the Low Countries? Subsequently the painting was brought into 'safety' in the salt mines at Alt-Ansee, from where it was returned to Ghent after the war. But the salt crystals had so seriously damaged the paint surface that a thorough restoration had to be carried out in 1950-51.

The polyptych has now been in St Bavo's Cathedral for over half a century, though not always in the same place. The conflicting demands of security and accessibility mean that where it should stand is a constant matter for debate. In 1986 the polyptych was placed at the back of the church, to the left of the entrance to the Villa chapel, enclosed in a bulletproof glass case. The central panels are now always left open. No-one is satisfied with this location. Restoration work on the church will be starting shortly and it is intended to rearrange the space so as to display the work in a more attractive way. Many tourists actually spend more time in front of the life-size reproduction in the Vijd Chapel, its original location. The reproduction may be photographed; the original may not.

In the course of the past two centuries the Ghent Altarpiece has been claimed by many countries as part of their cultural heritage. After 1900 it long remained a symbol of the historical origins, cohesion and fortunes of the Belgian state. In the Netherlands it has always been honoured as the first important milestone in the 'realistic' artistic tradition which emerged in the period that the Low Countries were still under a single ruler. The special reverence for Van Eyck in Flanders and the Netherlands as the founder of a national school of painting is



perhaps not as strong as it used to be. But the altarpiece still inspires great respect, as was evidenced by the wave of protest at a Flemish advertising campaign which used Van Eyck's image of paradise but replaced the lamb with a llama. Jan van Eyck's masterpiece remains an heirloom which must still be taken very seriously. ■

Translated by Chris Emery



FURTHER READING

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NOTE

Restoration work on the Ghent Altarpiece commenced in the autumn of 2012. It will take five years and the estimated cost will be 1.4 million euro. A team of restorers has been brought together by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage [Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium (KIK)]. The Cathedral has appointed Mrs Anne van Grevenstein-Kruse, Emeritus Professor of Conservation and Restoration at the University of Amsterdam, to direct the project, and an international advisory committee will oversee its execution.

The restoration of the altarpiece is necessary to prevent further hardening of the original layers of varnish which now threaten the pictorial layer of the work. The panels will be thoroughly repaired and consolidated, and earlier retouching and repainting will be treated. After that, the parts that still need it will be retouched and the panels will be given a fresh coat of varnish.

The treatment of the panels will be done in phases at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent and visitors to the museum will be able to observe the process. During the whole period of restoration, the altarpiece, with the exception of the panels actually under restoration, will remain in St Bavo's Cathedral and open for public viewing.