

## The Ambiguous Art of Hyperrestoration

The Case of Jef Van der Veken

98

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

A respected figure in the Belgium art world during the last decades of his lifetime, the Flemish restorer Jef Van der Veken (1872-1964) was for a long time mostly known to the greater public for his meticulous copy of the *Ghent Altarpiece*'s stolen panel of the *Just Judges*. In recent years, however, Van der Veken has become a controversial figure. Since the 'full' extent of his past conservation treatments of a significant number of panels by fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Masters from the Low Countries was revealed to the scholarly community, and presented to larger audiences in exhibitions and publications a few years ago, more critical attention has been paid to his legacy.<sup>1</sup>

A draughtsman gifted with extraordinary mimetic skills, with long years of experience as a copyist of Old Master paintings, with a fervent passion about the Old Masters, and with a systematic interest in exploring historical painting techniques, Van der Veken rose to be one of the leading painting conservators in Belgium from the Interbellum period onwards. Countless prominent masterpieces from public and private collections were entrusted to his care.<sup>2</sup> However, his treatments of Early Netherlandish panels were sometimes far-reaching and, especially in his work for private clients, bordered on the edge of being outright deceitful. He would spend long hours with a magnifying glass in his workshop in order to create detailed and convincing imitations of crack-patterns that he applied with a thin brush on top of his own retouching. In doing so, he not only concealed his own contribution from the eyes of the beholder but also actively created the illusion that the painting he had been working on had an even surface and was in mint condition.<sup>3</sup>

These meticulous imitations of crack-patterns were harmless, however, compared to the more radical, invasive and irreversible treatments of precious panels that Van der Veken applied during some of his restorations. For example, his methods included scraping off damaged paint layers and the preparatory ground below from the wooden boards with scalpels and other tools in order to afterwards carefully reconstruct – rather than to restore – the paintings to his own taste. Treatments such as these that altered paintings in a substantial manner have somewhat euphemistically been termed 'hyper-restorations' as it is not entirely clear from the available documents if Van der Veken always acted with bad intentions: he 'improved' them.<sup>4</sup>



Contemporaries, however, were less reluctant to judge; Van der Veken's name was discretely connected with forgeries as early as 1911. But at a time where the borders between the trade, museums and restorers were not as thoroughly transparent as they are today, the experts were unaware, or negligent, of the scale of his activities.

### **An almost scientific approach**

'Accomplished forgers make successful use of old pictures', wrote Max J. Friedländer in 1942, revising a text from 1919, 'which they clean radically – often down to the gesso preparation – in order to subsequently superpose their forgery, glazing carefully and treating with utmost delicacy the *craquelure*, which they leave exposed'.<sup>5</sup> Whether Friedländer had met Jef Van der Veken, who was also involved in the European art market, during his time either in

Berlin or afterwards in his exile in Amsterdam, is not known and it remains unclear if the scholar had Van der Veken in mind when he wrote the lines above. But he certainly referred to his activities when he concluded his thoughts on forgeries in *Art and Connoisseurship*: 'As the forgers, in conformity to their view of their activities, are manufacturers, they often produce several versions of a fake: and it may be particularly noted that duplicates have emerged from the Belgian workshops which, during the last few decades, have abundantly seen to the supply of early Netherlandish panels'.<sup>6</sup>

Today, Van der Veken most of all emerges as an ambivalent figure. Leaving aside the controversial question whether he produced fakes and deceived his clients intentionally or not: it is clear on one hand that his restoration methods don't comply with today's standards of conservation such as, for example, reversibility of any treatment. But, on the other hand, his experiments and systematic investigations into historical painting techniques, as well as the photographic documentation of some of his treatments, reveal an almost scientific approach that makes him one of the ancestors of modern conservation, alongside legendary restorers from the Anglo-German world such as Helmut Ruhemann and William Suhr who were both younger by more than twenty years.<sup>7</sup>

## Enhancing art

Joseph-Marie – in short: Jef – Van der Veken, born to small shop-owners in Antwerp in 1872, was very much a child of his own time. Placing his accomplishments into a historical perspective, one has to be reminded that restoration and conservation of Old Master paintings in even the most accomplished museums was still entrusted to academic painters during most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, who also more widely acted as curators and directors of their institutions. Wilhelm von Bode in the 1870s witnessed the restorer-director Philipp Foltz (1805-1877) of Munich's Alte Pinakothek changing the colour of the curtain in Rubens's monumental *Portrait of Aletheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel* (1620) from red to green and blue because he believed that these colours would enhance Rubens's intentions. It was left to his successor as restorer, Alois Hauser the Elder (1837-1909), to remove the earlier treatments.<sup>8</sup>

After the premature death of his father in 1879, Jef was sent for a few years to live at an orphanage in Sint Niklaas, since his mother had no means to support the family. Presumably with a clear sense for material wealth, he returned to Antwerp where he was apprenticed in 1884 by a decorator. In 1890 he started to attend evening classes and specialised in painting imitations of wood and marble decorations. When on his twentieth birthday he became eligible for two years' military service, he enlisted with the University Company so that he could follow free lessons at the Antwerp Academy of Arts. There he took a drawing course in 1893/94 in which he was best of his class. During this period, Van der Veken, void of any artistic ambitions or creativity, started to paint portraits after photographs and to draw and paint meticulous copies after Old Master paintings that he made from the originals or reproductions.<sup>9</sup>

In order to make a living, Van der Veken started to produce Old Master copies on demand, mostly for dealers who sold antique or old-looking furniture

and used his paintings for decoration purposes. He soon understood, according to his own testimony, that some of his copies passed as originals in the trade and changed his line of business, starting his own gallery in the elegant Regentschapsstraat in the heart of Brussels, *The Early Art Gallery, Van Snick & Van der Veken & Co*, later *The Early Art Gallery, Van der Veken*. Along with his unknown business partners, he sold Old Master copies and old objects, provided expertise, executed restorations and offered to draw up inventories of estates. Judging from the fact that the enterprise had its own telephone line and kept in close contact with leading auction houses in Germany, France and England, business must have been good. With the beginnings of the Great War in 1914, however, Van der Veken's international business collapsed. He transferred part of his inventory to his brother Gustave who fled to London and tried to involve his sister-in-law, who lived in the peaceful Netherlands, in the sale of paintings.

During the war, Van der Veken gradually switched from mere copies and pasticcios of Early Netherlandish masters to partial fakes of degraded or ruined panels that he had purchased cheaply and planned to sell at great profit. In these 'hyperrestorations', he left minor parts of the original paintings intact and painted the greater part of the composition himself, making use of his extensive repertoire of drawn models, tracings and, increasingly, of photographs. He also 'enhanced' anonymous works by giving them the look and feel of a specific master, like Quentin Matsys, Jan Gossaert or Barend van Orley.



Peter Paul Rubens,  
*Portrait of Aletheia Talbot,  
Countess of Arundel*, 1620,  
© Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Soon after the war, he started a close collaboration with the Bruges collector and banker Emile Renders, who had gained notoriety by publishing highly polemic and controversial books about the Van Eycks and the Master of Flémalle.<sup>10</sup> Renders supplied Van der Veken with money, which bought the damaged or mediocre paintings that the latter turned into masterpieces in mint condition in his Brussels workshop. It is thus likely that Renders was aware of the manipulations and at least endorsed, if not requested them. During the Second World War, Renders sold his collection to Hermann Göring, though most of the works were restituted to Belgium after 1945; today, the authenticity of many of them is now considered problematic or doubtful.<sup>11</sup>

Among the most famous works in the Renders collection that Van der Veken treated is Rogier van der Weyden's *Virgin and Child*, now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Tournai. Originally the left wing of a diptych for Jean Gros, Van der Veken scraped off the damaged parts and built up the painting from scratch, adding painted cracks on the surface. He then copied the motto and emblem from the reverse of der Weyden's portrait of the Burgundian counselor Jean Gros, now in Chicago, on the reverse of Renders's painting.<sup>12</sup> Another panel, an *Annunciation* attributed to the Master of the Baroncelli Portraits, is equally a thorough re-invention by Van der Veken, who even made an extensive



Edmond Van Hove, *Portrait of Galilei*,  
1885, oil on canvas, 143 x 118 cm  
© Groeningemuseum Brugge –  
Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw.  
Photo Stad Brugge



Master of the Baroncelli Portraits, *Annunciation*, c. 1495-1505, 38 x 48.3 cm  
© KMSKA - Lukas-Art in Flanders vzw. Photo Hugo Maertens

underdrawing on the preparatory ground. Since the *Annunciation* is depicted in a fictional portrait of Galilei by the Bruges fin-de-siècle painter Edmond Van Hove, Van der Veken must have worked from an existing original that he much enhanced. He then made – as he often did – a copy of his ‘hyperrestoration’ that entered the art market a few decades ago.<sup>13</sup>

The collector and his restorer collaborated closely until 1927, when Van der Veken revealed to eminent art historians – much to their disbelief – that a panel by the Master of the Baroncelli Portraits shown in an exhibition on Early Flemish Painting in London alongside the ‘masterpieces’ of the Renders collection, had actually been painted by him. At this point, Renders probably became afraid of the publicity of the scandal that made Van der Veken’s name wider known.

His acquaintance with Renders and his growing reputation as restorer of Early Netherlandish masterpieces, though, introduced him to various museums in Belgium that now enlisted his services. He restored several works for the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, among them paintings attributed to Van der Goes, Matsys and Van Dyck. He was even entrusted the conservation treatment of Jan van Eyck’s masterly *Madonna of Joris van der Paele* from the Groeningemuseum by the municipal authorities in Bruges in the early 1930s, the results of which were received very positively in the international press and provided Van der Veken with lots of publicity. At this time, he was assisted by his son-in-law, the painter Albert Philippot, who after being trained as a restorer by Van der Veken later became chief conservator of the Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique (IRPA) in Brussels after the Second World War.<sup>14</sup>



## Humiliation

The treatment of the Bruges panel by Van Eyck had convinced Van der Veken that Van Eyck had used egg-tempera for some of his colours. When he finally received permission to make a copy of the panel of the *Just Judges* from the *Ghent Altarpiece* that had been stolen in 1934 from the Cathedral of Ghent, he therefore used tempera to successfully recreate the image. The personal triumph of the copy that he had produced during the Second World War was followed, however, by what he must have considered deep humiliation. When the panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* returned from Altaussee and were examined by the chemists of the Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique, their results proved his empirical insights wrong and scientifically established Van Eyck's use of oils as binding media.<sup>15</sup> The conservation treatment of the panels was entrusted to his son-in-law Albert Philippot.

In 1962, Jef van der Veken, having been almost entirely blind for five years and unable to work as a restorer, died at the age of ninety in the Brussels quarter of Elsene, estranged from his children after a second marriage, years after the death of his first wife. Keeping a studio with his second wife, he had remained active in the field into his eighties. Among the last of his restorations were *The Three Maries at the Tomb*, usually believed to be by a follower of Van Eyck, that he carried out for D.G. van Beuningen from Rotterdam. Recently his treatment has been superseded by a new conservation campaign.<sup>16</sup> ■

## NOTES

- 1 The Groeningemuseum in Bruges was the first to present the controversy on Van der Veken to a wider audience and, together with the Université Catholique de Louvain, organised the exhibition *Fake/Not Fake: het verhaal van de restauratie van de Vlaamse Primitieven* from 26/11/2004 to 28/2/2005. In 2005, the Institut royal du Patrimoine artistique received a panel that turned out to be a fake and tried to profit from the success of the Bruges show by mounting an exhibition *Autour de la Madeleine Renders* at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels (see Hélène Verougstraete, Roger Van Schoute, Till-Holger Borchert with contributions by Elisabeth Bruyns, Jacqueline Couvert, Rudy Pieters and Jean-Luc Pypaert, *Fake or Not Fake? Het Verhaal van de Restauratie van de Vlaamse Primitieven*, Ghent 2004); and Dominique Vanwijnsberghe (ed.), *Autour de la Madeleine Renders: Un aspect de l'histoire des collections, de la restauration et de la contrefaçon en Belgique dans la première moitié du XXe siècle*, Brussels, 2008.
- 2 *Fake or Not Fake*, pp. 24-34, 110-131.
- 3 See Didier Martens, 'Joseph Van der Veken faussaire des Primitifs Flamands: découverte ou redécouverte?', in: *Autour de la Madeleine Renders*, pp. 177-188.
- 4 The term has been coined by Jean-Luc Pypaert in *Fake or Not Fake*, pp. 111-112.
- 5 Max J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, repr. Boston, 1960, p. 264.
- 6 *ibid.* p. 266; see also Suzanne Laemers, 'A matter of character: Max J. Friedländer et ses relations avec Émile Renders et Jef van der Veken', in *Autour de la Madeleine Renders*, pp. 147-176.
- 7 On Ruhemann, see Morwenna Blewett, 'The Art of Conservation VI: Helmut Ruhemann, Paintings Restorer in Berlin and London', in: *Burlington Magazine* 158 (2016), pp. 638-646. On William Suhr, see: <http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view?docId=ead/870697/870697.xml> (June 2017).
- 8 Wilhelm von Bode, *Mein Leben*, Berlin, 1930, vol. 1, p. 101.
- 9 On the following, see the biographical sketch by Jean-Luc Pypaert, Hélène Verougstraete and Roger Van Schoute in *Fake or Not Fake*, pp. 110-121.
- 10 See Jacques Lust, 'Grandeur et décadence d'Émile Renders. Chronique mouvementée d'une collection d'art Belge', in *Autour de la Madeleine Renders*, pp. 77-146, esp. 79-84.
- 11 *ibid.* pp. 84-138.
- 12 *Fake/Not Fake*, pp. 62-74.
- 13 *Fake/Not Fake*, pp. 36-49; Andreas Burmester, 'Wechselhafte Geschicke. Von falschen und echten Gemälden', in: *Mercedes in aller Welt* 32 (4) (1987), nr. 208.
- 14 Paul Philippot, 'De l'histoire de la restauration comme affaire de famille', in: *Autour de la Madeleine Renders*, pp. 189-196.
- 15 Pim Brinkman, *Het Geheim van Van Eyck*, Zwolle, 1993, pp. 196-205, 214-219.
- 16 See Stephan Kemperdick and Friso Lammertse (ed.), *The Road to Van Eyck*, Rotterdam, 2012, pp. 293-295.