





Early Netherlandish Paintings

REDISCOVERY,
RECEPTION
AND RESEARCH

edited by

BERNHARD RIDDERBOS

ANNE VAN BUREN

HENK VAN VEEN

AMSTERDAM

UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Back cover Robert Campin (?), *The Mérode Triptych*
(central panel 64.1 x 63.2 cm; each wing 64.5 x 27.3 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection

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– *In memory of Alfons Lieven Dierick* –

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General Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, Johanna Schopenhauer, the mother of the great philosopher, visited the collection of early Netherlandish and early German pictures of the Boisserée brothers in Heidelberg. The visit inspired her to learn more about the masters who executed the works, and the result was a two-volume book about 'Jan van Eyck and his followers', published in 1822, the first monograph on this subject. That Johanna Schopenhauer's desire to know more about these artists led to a publication can be attributed to her passion for writing – she produced one book after another – but also to the state of affairs in her day. So little was known about the artists that she had to gather information for herself, and it is understandable that she wanted others to benefit from her efforts.

Thanks to the ensuing flood of publications, present-day lovers of early Netherlandish painting find themselves in a totally different position. They have at their disposal catalogues, handbooks, monographs, myriad articles, and many public collections. And yet, the further one delves into this art and what has been written about it, the more one realizes the impossibility of gaining a full and coherent image of its history, not only because of the paucity of historical data, concerning for instance the mysterious figure of Hubert van Eyck, but also because art historians operate from different premises regarding the interpretation of the pictures. Thus, our understanding of early Netherlandish painting cannot be separated from an awareness of the fragmentary character of our knowledge and from the theories and methods according to which it has been studied. This book explores consequently how paintings and facts have been assembled, analyzed and interpreted from the time of the rediscovery of this art around 1800 to the present day. The works are not discussed in a continuous, chronological survey of developments, as in a traditional handbook, but as individual objects, which have come down to us in various ways and have confronted scholars with countless questions. All the pictures were created in the fifteenth century by masters in the Netherlands, then ruled by the dukes of Burgundy. The chronological demarcation is

debatable, like virtually every periodization, but necessary, in order to limit the material. It is also defensible: painting on isolated panels began to flower in Tournai, Bruges, Brussels, and Ghent in the early years of the fifteenth century, but around 1500 underwent some major changes in the production, which became centered on the new commercial city of Antwerp.

In Part 1, the spotlight is trained on one work at a time, with attention to its style, provenance, the ways in which it became an object of research after centuries of oblivion, the insights gained, and the questions that still remain. The selection represents the most important artists. Hieronymus Bosch, however, was omitted because his oeuvre is a world unto itself and the problems of interpreting his inventions make it difficult to discuss their creator along with the other masters.

The ensuing parts elaborate on themes that have emerged in the preceding section. Part 2 is devoted to the history of collecting, of art-historical research and cultural-historical interpretation during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. It starts with the story of the removal of the paintings, as a result of the French Revolution, from their original context and their being cast adrift until they found new homes in private and public collections in Europe and later also in the United States. This is followed by a historiographical sketch from the rediscovery of early Netherlandish art to the publication of Max Friedländer's pivotal volumes. While various cultural-historical ideas are also discussed in that chapter, such views, by authors from Jacob Burckhardt to Johan Huizinga, are the particular subject of the following one.

Part 3 addresses three fields of modern research: technical examination, archival research into patronage, and iconology. Archival research already developed in the nineteenth century; technical examination and iconology in the twentieth century. Technical examination of early Netherlandish paintings uses techniques of the natural sciences to analyze material aspects of the works and the procedures of the artists. A survey of various aspects of this research is followed by a discussion of a major publication, which gives much attention to technical investigations: the *Corpus of Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège*. The study of patronage, which considers the intentions of the patrons and the social function of the works they commissioned, is presented through a number of particular cases. Iconology examines how symbolic meaning can be assigned to pictures. The chapter focused on this subdiscipline gives a critical survey of its development and its present condition.

The most fertile research combines several fields, of course. This is especially demonstrated in Part 1, but Part 3 also shows connections between technical examination, the study of patronage and the study of symbolic meaning. The purpose of bringing these methods together in one volume and showing how much they have in common is to encourage exchanges among their practitioners.

An earlier edition of this book was published in Dutch by two of the present editors (Bernhard Ridderbos, Henk van Veen, eds., *'Om iets te weten van de Oude Meesters': De Vlaamse Primitieven – herontdekking, waardering en onderzoek*. Heerlen, Nijmegen 1995); its advisers were Ilja Veldman and J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer. For the English edition, the chapters have been considerably revised and expanded or at least updated, making this for a large part a new book. Except for Chapter 8, which was originally written in English, the text was translated by Andrew McCormick and Anne van Buren (Chapter 4 in cooperation with Wessel Krul). Molly Faries has given valuable comments on Chapter 5, and she and Eileen Fry have been a great help and support for the whole book. Joost Keizer has assisted in compiling the list of illustrations and Anna Koopstra has made the index. We want to thank Stephan Kemperdick for his permission to reproduce his reconstruction of the *Flémalle Altarpiece*.

Many of the scholars working in the field of early Netherlandish art knew the late Father Dierick of Ghent and his love for van Eyck and other Flemish masters, which was also expressed in his marvellous photographs. As this study amply illustrates, scholarly opinions are the products of their time. Such love, however, is timeless and that is why the book is dedicated to him. The editors hope this publication will offer both general and specialist readers alike a fresh look at early Netherlandish painting, one that does justice to its immeasurable wealth and the challenges it poses.

BERNHARD RIDDERBOS

ANNE VAN BUREN

HENK VAN VEEN

PART ONE



FIGURE 1 – Robert Campin, *The Virgin and Child* (160.2 x 68.2 cm),
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main



FIGURE 2 – Robert Campin, *Saint Veronica* (151.8 x 61 cm),
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

CHAPTER 1

BERNHARD RIDDERBOS

Objects and Questions

INTRODUCTION

Since Erwin Panofsky published his classic *Early Netherlandish Painting* in 1953, an enormous amount of new data has come to light which has greatly deepened our knowledge of fifteenth-century art from the Low Countries. It would not be easy, however, and might prove impossible to write another synthetic study. Although some of Panofsky's views are outdated, for example those on the development of the individual artistic personalities, no alternative basis has been found for a comprehensive survey. Research into the artistic production of the early Netherlands takes place nowadays primarily within subdisciplines such as technical examination, archival research, and iconology.

The new technical and archival information has caused a positivist momentum which seems unmatched by the apparently less strict methods of iconological interpretation. While some scholars study paintings with infrared reflectography and other technical procedures, and archivists repeat the work of their nineteenth-century precursors more completely or pounce upon documents previously ignored, the iconologists stand somewhat indecisively on the sidelines. But it is precisely from this side that a breakthrough could open the way, if not to new syntheses, at least to more collaboration between the subdisciplines. To this end iconology must study symbolic meanings in ways that consider not only the religious or intellectual content of a picture, but also its artistic and material form, and its historical function.

Even though these subdisciplines have not yet worked together in a new synthesis, collaboration has not been utterly lacking; they have been combined in the study of individual works of art, an interconnectedness manifest in the present chapter. The search for answers to the questions raised by the confrontation with the works of art inevitable crosses the boundaries of the subdisciplines, as the results of the various kinds of research are weighed against one another.

The following selection of individual works and their questions is limited to the most important masters: Robert Campin, alias the Master of Flémalle, Rogier

van der Weyden, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, Dirk Bouts, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling, Geertgen tot Sint Jans, and Gerard David. In this *musée imaginaire* the reader is guided from one picture to the next, so that at the end of that route he will have gained an idea of both the character of early Netherlandish paintings and the manner in which they have been studied. Such questions are discussed as the reconstruction of an original ensemble, attribution, dating, the place of a work within certain artistic developments, its subject and the symbolic motifs it may contain, the role of the patrons, its function for those patrons or contemporary viewers, the artist's goal, the possibilities at his disposal, the choices he had to make and the sort of reality the picture may evoke.

The objects, which raise the issues more or less automatically, have all come to us as fragments from the past, sometimes in a literal sense, because they formed part of a larger whole, such as an altarpiece, of which the other parts are lost. But above all because they have been separated from their original artistic, social, religious or political context. The knowledge lost may vary. The creator of a work may not be known, while for another painting it may be difficult to interpret the content. Of course, many panels raise several of these questions, which are not always explored to the same extent but with a view to both diversity and intrinsic interest.

As a researcher in this field I could not deny myself the pleasure of expressing my own opinions. The discussion of the *Arnolfini Portrait* even includes an extensive reaction to a recent interpretation of that complex image, and the sections on Hugo van der Goes are primarily filled with my own ideas. I have made a consistent effort to base the discussions on the most characteristic visual aspects of the paintings, and, as far as possible, the problems of interpretation are placed under an iconological approach that seeks the interrelation of content, form, and function. The title of this chapter indicates that the questions are more important than the opinions, not only because there are few unequivocal answers, but also because, whenever I have formulated an answer, it is in the first place intended to stimulate the reader to pose questions of his own.

ROBERT CAMPIN

The Virgin and Child, The Saint Veronica, and The Trinity

In the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt hang three panels, in which motherhood, melancholy, and sorrow take the form of monumental figures, lucid drawing, powerful volumes, fine detailing, colors warm and cool, and rhythmic contrasts of light and shadow. The panels depict the Virgin with the Christ Child at her breast [FIG. 1], Saint Veronica, holding the *sudarium* with the impression of Christ's face [FIG. 2], and God the Father, supporting the dead Christ [FIG. 3].¹

Each of the female figures is placed against a richly patterned hanging of brocade. Their robes fall in deep folds onto a meadow that displays the smallest details: flowers, grasses, and herbs. All sorts of other details, such as the jeweled hem of Veronica's garment or the crimped edge of the Virgin's veil, attest to the artist's skill at rendering a variety of materials. Veronica's *sudarium*, of the thinnest gauze, shows the creases along which it has been folded. Equally transparent is the veil tied over her bulging headdress. The Virgin and Child have haloes which appear to be of gold, decorated with gems. The Child presses his mouth to the Virgin's breast, but at the same time turns toward the viewer. Mary's head and breast and the Child's head have the smoothness of youth; softly nuanced colors model Veronica's aged face.

Other contrasts lie in the grayish white of the Virgin's mantle against the warm red of Veronica's, while the colors of the rich brocades are the other way around: red against white. Nevertheless, the panels are united by a common intensity of color and variety of textures. A different impression is made by the monochrome image of God the Father with the dead Christ, for which the artist created the illusion of a sculptured group in a niche. The dove of the Holy Ghost perched on Christ's shoulder indicates that the subject is the Trinity, as specified by an inscription on the pedestal: *Sancta Trinitas Unus Deus* (Holy Trinity, One God). The refined alternation of light and shade – to the extent of double shadows in the arch – combined with sharp contours and deep folds in the Father's robe and with a clear articulation of Christ's limbs make an effective simulation of carved stone. The illusion of depth is further enhanced by the fact that the group projects from the niche. The Frankfurt *Trinity* is thus an eloquent expression of the artist's concern for solid volumes, but clear drawing and insistent masses also characterize the figures of both the Virgin and Child and Saint Veronica.

Johann David Passavant, inspector of the Städel museum, purchased the panels in 1849 from the manufacturer and art collector Ignaz van Houtem in Aachen. He had seen them there a number of years earlier, and mentioned them in his journal as by Rogier van der Weyden, from an abbey in Flémalle, which has never existed, however.² The journal entry also indicates that the *Trinity* formed the reverse of the *Saint Veronica*; they were separated later on – probably before the acquisition.³ The back of the *Virgin* panel, on the other hand, displays a badly damaged *Mater Dolorosa*, the grieving Mary with a sword through her heart. Like the *Trinity*, she is painted *en grisaille*, but was executed only around 1600.⁴

According to the journal kept by Sulpiz Boisserée, van Houtem told him the central panel had been lost in a fire.⁵ This implies that the extant panels were the wings of a triptych which showed the grisaille *Trinity* and *Mater Dolorosa* when it was closed. Now, however, technical analysis has demonstrated that the wood of the *Trinity* did not come from the same tree as the *Saint Veronica* [SEE CHAPTER 5, P. 301].



FIGURE 3 – Robert Campin, *The Trinity* (148.7 x 61 cm),
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

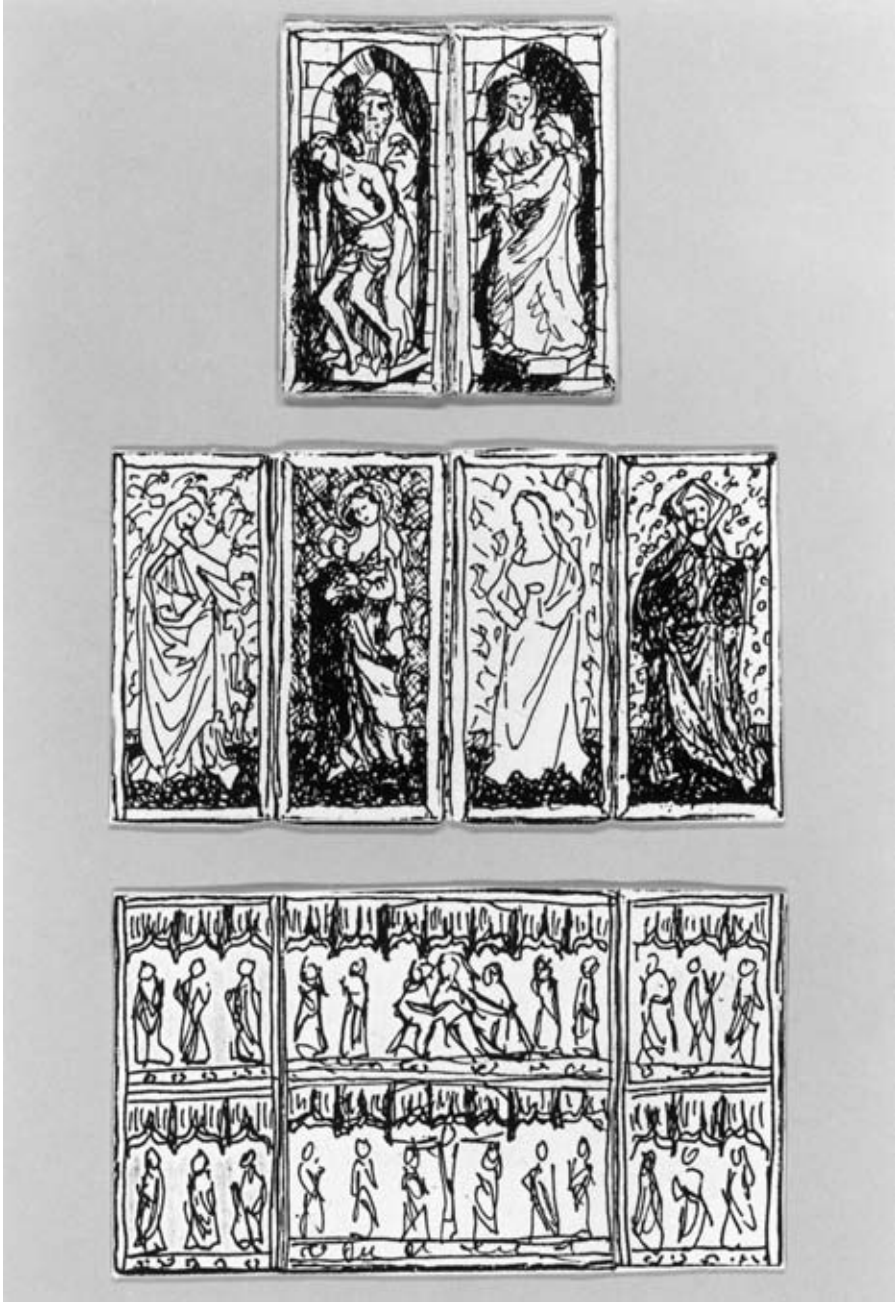


FIGURE 4 – Robert Campin, *The Flémalle Altarpiece*,
reconstruction by Stephan Kemperdick

Presumably they were glued together at the time of the execution of the *Mater Dolorosa*, which may have been painted to complete the exterior of a new ensemble, incorporating the three original panels. But to what sort of ensemble did the Virgin and Child, Saint Veronica, and the Trinity belong when they were made around 1430? Stephan Kemperdick has found an ingenious solution, based on the presence of a number of wooden pins in the planks of the Virgin and Child, which, he argues, were used to attach wood sculpture to the back of the panel.⁶ The three panels may have belonged to an altarpiece with double wings which when it was closed showed the Trinity and another, lost, grisaille [FIG. 4]. Opening the first pair of wings revealed four panels, of which the Virgin and Child and the Saint Veronica survive. The presence of pins in the first panel and the lack of pins in the second suggests that the Virgin and Child was one of the pair of central panels and the Saint Veronica one of the two outer ones. When the central panels were opened the wood sculptures were revealed.

Altarpieces comprising both painting and sculpture were very common, and Melchior Broederlam's panels with the *Presentation* and the *Flight into Egypt* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon) still form the exterior of a triptych with carved figures. Exterior paintings *en grisaille* occur on many Netherlandish altarpieces; the monochrome grisailles contrasted with the wealth of color revealed when the altarpiece was opened on a Sunday. In the Flémalle altarpiece the splendor was doubled when it was fully opened on a high feast-day such as Christmas and Easter. To modern eyes, the expressiveness of the painted panels is unsurpassable, but their contemporaries would have regarded the polychrome and gilt figures they covered as the height of illusionistic display.⁷

The reconstruction of the artist's whole oeuvre constitutes an even greater problem than that of the ensemble to which the three panels belonged.⁸ As already noted, Passavant regarded them as creations of Rogier van der Weyden. For reasons that will be discussed in Chapter 3 [pp. 231-232], he believed there were two artists by this name and that the panels were by the younger of the two, who would have lived into the sixteenth century. After the misunderstanding concerning these two Rogiers had been resolved, in the late nineteenth century the panels were attributed to an anonymous follower of Rogier, called on the grounds of their alleged provenance the 'Master of Flémalle'. The name was also linked to a number of other anonymous and undocumented works, including a fragment showing the *Bad Thief* from a *Descent from the Cross* [FIG. 11] which Passavant acquired for the Städel before the Flémalle panels, also attributing it to the supposedly 'younger' Rogier van der Weyden.⁹

In the early twentieth century, the Ghent art historian Hulin de Loo discovered that four panels from the shutters of an altarpiece are documented as been painted in 1434 by Jacques Daret, in Arras.¹⁰ Archival research had already found



FIGURE 5 – Robert Campin, *The Nativity* (84.1 x 69.9 cm),
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon



FIGURE 6 – Jacques Daret, *The Nativity* (59.5 x 53 cm),
Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

that Daret, together with ‘Rogelet de le Pasture’, had been an apprentice of Robert Campin, who is mentioned as a painter in Tournai in the documents from 1406 until his death in 1444. Seeing the clear influence of the Master of Flémalle in Daret’s panels [FIGS. 5, 6], Hulin de Loo believed that the anonymous artist could have been none other than Robert Campin.

Thus, the Master of Flémalle was then promoted from the status of Rogier’s follower to that of his master, that is, if Rogier van der Weyden is the Rogelet de le Pasture mentioned in the Campin documents.¹¹ A register of the painters’ guild of Tournai reports that Rogelet was apprenticed to Campin in 1427 and became a master in 1432; Rogier van der Weyden is first recorded as town painter of Brussels in 1435. Inasmuch as Tournai was French-speaking and Brussels Flemish-speaking, there is nothing surprising about the change of name, and the data merge all the better for the fact that Rogier van der Weyden’s father is known to have been Henry de le Pasture of Tournai. However, the date of Rogier’s birth, around 1399, causes a problem, since if he became apprenticed in 1427 he did so at a very late age.¹² Therefore, we cannot automatically assume that all the documents concern the same person. And yet, there is no reason to reject the identification. The documents also report that Jacques Daret, whose apprenticeship to Campin is uncontested, lived under Campin’s roof from 1418 for nine years before he became his apprentice in 1427.

Some authors have challenged the dates of Rogelet de le Pasture’s and Jacques Daret’s enrolment as apprentices and masters because the register is a, perhaps inaccurate, copy made in 1482.¹³ But the dates may be right. It is quite possible that the registration as apprentices was a formality to which the two submitted, while already working as journeyman, in order to become independent masters in the future.¹⁴ They may previously have had no interest in becoming masters. Qualifying for this rank was expensive, and many apprentices did not opt to take this final step, since they could continue to work for another painter.¹⁵

The year in which the two apprentices became masters coincides with difficult straits which Campin experienced in 1432. This might explain why Rogelet de le Pasture and Jacques Daret took steps to ensure that they depended on him no longer. Campin was exiled for a year, because of ‘the filthy and dissolute life which he, a married man, has for a long time led in this city with Leurence Polette’.¹⁶ According to the register, Rogelet was admitted to the guild two days after this sentence was handed down, another of the apprentices a day later, and Jacques Daret three months later – three of Campin’s four apprentices in rapid succession.¹⁷

While Rogier van der Weyden may officially have become an apprentice and a master at a late age, there is another obstacle, however, to considering Campin as his teacher. The municipal accounts of Tournai report that the city offered wine to a ‘maistre Rogier de le Pasture’ in 1426.¹⁸ If this ceremonial gesture per-

tained to van der Weyden, it could mean he was not Rogelet, Campin's pupil, who was not yet a master. But, since the occupation of the recipient is not stated, this person could have been someone else. It is also possible that the painter was called a master on this occasion because, although still unauthorized to establish his own workshop, he was functioning as a qualified painter. As to the reason for the gift, when the house of van der Weyden's late father was sold, earlier that year, he was not in Tournai. Perhaps the wine celebrated his return after an extended absence.

Whoever received the wine, there is no reason why van der Weyden could not have been trained under Campin.¹⁹ Indeed, when he died in Brussels in 1464, the painters' guild of Tournai bought candles for his memorial mass, implying that he had been a lifelong member of the guild.²⁰ Furthermore the surname 'van Stockem' of Rogier's Brussels mother-in-law may mean that she was family of Campin's wife, Ysabel de Stoquain.²¹

There are also important stylistic factors to consider. Nowadays scholars agree that the paintings respectively attributed to Campin and van der Weyden contain the sort of parallels and differences one would expect from a master and a pupil. In the past, however, this issue was hotly debated.²² At the time that the name 'Master of Flémalle' was introduced, the German art historian Firmenich-Richartz assigned the works attributed to this artist to the early Rogier van der Weyden. The identification of the Master of Flémalle with Campin did not banish this view, which was still fiercely defended in the 1930s.²³ Even the great connoisseur Max Friedländer became converted to it toward the end of his life [SEE CHAPTER 3, P. 251].

As will be explained in Chapter 5 [PP. 326-327], infrared reflectography of the underdrawing on these panels (sketches made with black chalk or brush before the painting was applied) and dendrochronological analysis (which deduces the age of a panel by measuring the growth rings in the end grain) have vindicated those who attribute them to two different artists. Not that this solves all the problems: the underdrawing is not always visible to the camera, and the character of what there is varies within the oeuvres ascribed to these masters. On the Flémalle panels, reflectography yielded a clear result only for the *Virgin and Child*, allowing divergent conclusions as to whether the three panels are by Campin alone or by both Campin and van der Weyden.²⁴

Thus, even if the Flémalle panels can be taken as parts of the same work and can be placed within an oeuvre under the name 'Master of Flémalle', even if the Master of Flémalle can be identified with Robert Campin and considered as the teacher of Rogier van der Weyden, and even if a distinction can be drawn between their works, it is still not clear to what extent Campin painted the Flémalle panels. This attributional problem is still greater for a painting that also occupies a central place in the oeuvre assigned to the Master of Flémalle: the *Mérode Triptych*.



FIGURE 7 – Robert Campin (?), *The Mérode Triptych*
(central panel 64.1 x 63.2 cm; each wing 64.5 x 27.3 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection



FIGURE 8 – Robert Campin, *The Annunciation* (61 x 63.2 cm),
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

ROBERT CAMPIN (?)

The Mérode Triptych

The provenance of the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 7], like that of the Flémalle panels, goes back only as far as the nineteenth century.²⁵ The work was purchased in Bruges around 1820 by the Belgian Prince d'Arenberg, from whom it passed to the Mérode family. It became public property in 1956, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired the triptych for the Cloisters collection.

The center panel represents the *Annunciation*. On the left the angel, clad in a white alb – a liturgical vestment worn in the mass – enters the Virgin's chamber, which is filled with furniture and smaller objects. Mary, wearing a red gown and mantle, is seated on the footrest of a bench, whose foreshortened shape enhances the picture's illusion of depth. The robes of both the angel and the Virgin are richly articulated by folds, the former further enlivened by shadows, and the latter by accents of light. The somewhat angular folds and the contrasts of light and shade make the figures robust and voluminous. Indeed, light and shade play an important role throughout the scene, give relief to the faces and a tangible quality to the sharply drawn objects. This energetic draftsmanship and the divergent perspective in the depiction of the figures and the interior create a dynamic, even restless, effect. On the right wing Joseph is represented in a workshop, whose window opens to a market square. On the left wing the donors kneel in a walled courtyard at the open door to Mary's chamber. A man stands by a gate in the far wall that frames a glimpse of the city beyond. The furniture of Joseph's workshop, the town outside his window, the flowers and plants in the donors' courtyard, the nails in the door, all attest to the same interest in details created by a strong linearity and a precise handling of light as in the *Annunciation*.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the *Mérode Triptych* was grouped with a number of other works under the name 'Master of the Mérode Altarpiece'.²⁶ Later, the artist was thought to be the same as that of the Flémalle panels and therefore called the Master of Flémalle, who was then identified with Robert Campin. However, technical examinations have challenged this attribution, shedding new light on the relation between the central panel and an *Annunciation* in the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels [FIG. 8], which resembles the Mérode *Annunciation* in size and style, but is in much poorer condition.²⁷ Among other things the angel's and Mary's faces are damaged and have been retouched, and layers of glazes of the Virgin's mantle have worn away.²⁸ Scholars used to regard it as a free copy by an assistant or imitator of Campin, whom some identified as Jacques Daret, but others, Lorne Campbell among them, took a different position.

Long before the underdrawing on any panel by the Master of Flémalle was investigated, Campbell argued that the Brussels *Annunciation*, though not from

the hand of the master himself but rather a product of his workshop, is more representative of his style than the *Mérode Triptych*, which in his eyes displays many weaknesses.²⁹ He cites not only minor shortcomings such as ‘that a line of one of the mortar courses in the garden wall disappears into the donor’s mouth, and that the contour of the table coincides with that of the angel’s right hand’, but also the more striking ‘curious distortions of perspective in the centre panel’ and a ‘confusingly even distribution of interest of pattern and texture’ in the whole painting. In both design and color it lacks coherence; compared with other works in the Master of Flémalle group, the palette is ‘slightly dull and uninteresting’. Moreover, the facial types of Mary and the angel are ‘heavy and coarse’, and both figures and Joseph lack the eloquent expressions and gestures that characterize the Master of Flémalle. Campbell sees this work as a pastiche by a pupil, and, while he assumes that the Master of Flémalle is indeed Robert Campin, calls this pupil the ‘Master of Mérode’.

These observations attest to a fresh, albeit rather critical, look at a work considered as one of the highpoints of early Netherlandish art. Since then, infrared reflectography conducted by J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer and his collaborators has found that the central image is probably modeled on the panel in Brussels.³⁰ In the *Mérode Annunciation* the architectural elements and domestic objects that are also present in the other work are much less underdrawn than other parts. Obviously, the artist followed a drawing that recorded the Brussels composition. This is confirmed by the underdrawn Mérode angel: it differs from the painted figure, but corresponds to the angel as painted in the Brussels *Annunciation*. A comparison between the underdrawing and the painted surface of that work reveals a creative process, possibly indicative of Campin’s own hand.

Yet, the reflectography does not necessarily rule out the master’s participation in the *Mérode Triptych*. Although opinions differ, the underdrawing could be assigned to him.³¹ On the other hand, according to van Asperen de Boer, the underdrawing of the robes in the Brussels *Annunciation* is sloppy, and quite different from underdrawing attributed to Campin. Therefore, he proposed that an ‘elder master’ drew the figures in the Brussels version in a ‘style not encountered elsewhere’, while the underdrawing of the room could be by Campin himself.³²

But for what reason and in which workshop would Campin have collaborated with an elder master?³³ Such a hypothesis does not really offer a solution. We must consider another possibility, for which a suggestion made by Campbell is important, namely that the Brussels *Annunciation* was modeled on a relief which Campin may have designed.³⁴ In that case an assistant could have underdrawn the figures of the Brussels panel on the basis of the relief design. This explains the sloppiness of the underdrawing: the model was within reach and the strokes served primarily to place the figures, which were complemented by a fuller drawing of their sur-

rounding. Because the task was a painting, the suggestion of space for the interior and its contents posed a new challenge.³⁵ One could understand that this part had to be drawn by Campin himself, who then performed the actual painting.

If Campin made the underdrawing on the *Mérode Triptych*, he may have done so because he wished to put the Virgin in a new, frontal, pose. If the painting of this work was left to an assistant, it seems curious that this assistant would have taken liberties with respect to the master's underdrawing by changing the position of the angel's head, for instance. Whether one sees Campin or an assistant as the painter depends on one's interpretation of the stylistic differences noted by Campbell between the *Mérode Triptych* and the Brussels *Annunciation*. Insofar as these differences concern the composition they cannot be blamed on the assistant, if Campin made the underdrawing for the *Mérode* work. Perhaps the alleged weaknesses are not due to insufficient artistic talent or skill. It is conceivable that in the Brussels panel Campin stayed closer to the composition of the relief and in the *Mérode Annunciation* sought to exploit the advantage of painting over sculpture by creating a deeper space and making the Virgin frontal and more three-dimensional. The fine contours of the Brussels Virgin and the rhythmic movement that unites her with the angel were lost, but the pattern of her folds cause an intriguing tension between surface and depth.³⁶ And here she was better attuned to the viewer's devotion: no longer engaged in a dialogue with the angel, she presents herself, reading and contemplating, as an object of worship. In keeping with the deeper space, other aspects of the execution may be due to an endeavor to replace the effect of a polychromed relief with the illusionism of light and shadow which could be uniquely achieved by painting in oils. Such an attempt to transform the relief concept into virtuoso painting may also have compromised the unity and harmony.

These problems show that an attribution can be determined by whether we proceed from our personal judgments of aesthetic value, or from the interrelations of the picture's visual language, material, and function. Nothing is known about the immediate function of the *Mérode Triptych*; it was probably intended for an altar in a family chapel. We can try to determine its role in the owners' religious experience by deciphering the symbolic meanings of various motifs, but such attempts have, no less than the question of attribution, generated a great deal of controversy. The theoretical and methodological aspects of this sort of research are analyzed in Chapter 8. Here follow some of the meanings that Erwin Panofsky and other scholars have found in this painting and some of the ensuing difficulties.³⁷

Certain motifs are easily interpreted. The Virgin's position expresses one of her virtues, her humility. The derivation of the Latin *humilitas* from *humus*, earth, inspired the theme in fourteenth-century Italian art of the Madonna of Humility,

whereby Mary is seated on the ground. The lilies in the pitcher, ‘perfectly at ease upon its table’ according to Panofsky and therefore seemingly a still life, allude to her chastity. After all, lilies occur in many Annunciations with a gold background instead of a seemingly realistic interior. The book and the scroll on the table and the book in which the Virgin is reading are likewise unproblematic: they indicate her piety and her familiarity with the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of Christ. The naked infant with a cross on his back flying through a window along seven rays of light, symbolizing the gifts of the Holy Ghost, is a symbol of Christ’s Incarnation, without violating Mary’s virginity. Literary sources compare the Incarnation to light passing through glass without breaking it.

Less obvious is the meaning of the laver, basin and towel: they could also refer to Mary’s chastity, like the brush on the Brussels panel. The single candle in a sconce, in both works, is even more difficult to interpret. A medieval hymn describes the Virgin as a candlestick and Christ as the lit candle, but these candles are extinguished and the one in the *Mérode Triptych* is still smoking, as though just extinguished by the arrival of the angel or the conception of the Child. Another interpretation seems more plausible, based on a popular vision of Saint Bridget of Sweden, although it concerned the spiritual reliving of the Nativity of Christ rather than the Annunciation. According to Bridget, when Christ was born divine light extinguished the earthly light of a candle.³⁸ This metaphor is illustrated in many Nativity scenes, including Campin’s *Nativity* [FIG. 5], and it could have been extended to Christ’s conception at the Annunciation.

The bench in particular has given rise to divergent opinions. Because of the lions on the armrests Panofsky saw this piece of furniture as an allusion to the throne of King Solomon, and thus to Mary as the Seat of Wisdom. But the presence of carved dogs as well as lions made William Heckscher think of nuptial symbolism, signifying, as in funerary sculpture, the fortitude of the husband and the faithfulness of the wife, and making the bench a ‘pictorial sermon’ about ‘marital faith and constancy’ as hallmarks of marriage under the New Covenant inaugurated by the coming of Christ.³⁹ The marriage theme would connect all three panels, since it is also appropriate to the patrons on the left wing and to Joseph as the prototype of the chaste spouse on the right. In contrast, the hearth, recalling the gate of hell, should be interpreted as a symbol for the darkness of the Synagogue, just as the little sculptures of a man and a woman under the mantel piece could refer to ‘those unfortunate ones whose marriage dated from before the time when Mary and Joseph were chastely joined in matrimony and when the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Virgin’.⁴⁰

Although this reconstruction of a theological program seems far-fetched, it makes us consider where to draw a line between symbolic motifs and the mere evocation of a domestic atmosphere. An approach that avoids the problem, because

it does not aim to unravel symbolic meaning, was taken by Jozef De Coo, who noted that the bench is a turning bench, with a reversible back.⁴¹ The backrest, attached to movable crossbars, could be rotated in order to sit facing the hearth in winter or with one's back to it in summer. As the Annunciation would have occurred in March, the backrest is turned against a cold hearth. De Coo sees no allusion to the throne of Solomon in this ordinary furniture, and he thinks more importance should be assigned to the domestic character of the triptych, which suits its function as an object of private devotion, than to hidden meanings of the depicted objects.

Be that as it may, the scene of Saint Joseph in his workshop [FIG. 9] does embody some erudite theological symbolism. Meyer Schapiro linked the mousetraps on the workbench and on a board outside the window to a statement from a sermon by Saint Augustine:

The devil exulted when Christ died, but by this very death of Christ the devil is vanquished, as if he had swallowed the bait in the mousetrap. He rejoiced in Christ's death, like a bailiff of death. What he rejoiced in was then his own undoing. The cross of the Lord was the devil's mousetrap; the bait by which he was caught was the Lord's death.⁴²

Johan Huizinga had already pointed to this symbolic meaning of the mousetraps [SEE CHAPTER 4, P. 289], but it became famous through Schapiro's publication. In the 1960s this interpretation was contested, because of the assumption that the depicted objects are not mousetraps but carpenter's planes. As a result of this discussion a replica was built at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, which actually caught a mouse.⁴³

At Joseph's feet we see an ax, a saw, and a rod, which Charles Minott connected with a passage in the Book of Isaiah, 10:15:

Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself as if it were no wood.⁴⁴

According to Saint Jerome's commentary on this passage, it refers to the devil:

who is called the ax, the saw, and the rod in the scriptures, because through him unfruitful trees are to be cut down and split with the ax, and the stubbornness of the unbelievers sawn through, and those who do not accept discipline are beaten with the rod.⁴⁵



FIGURE 9 – Robert Campin (?), *The Mérode Triptych*,
right wing: *Saint Joseph in his workshop*

Although the nature of the board in which Joseph is boring holes is ambiguous, Minott notes that the act of drilling can be explained with the help of a Jewish paraphrase of the same verse in Isaiah:

Is it possible that the auger should boast itself against him that bores with it, saying, have not I bored? Shall the saw magnify itself against him that saws therewith, saying, have not I sawn? When one lifts a rod to smite, it is not the rod that smiteth, but he who smites therewith.⁴⁶

Symbolic motifs in early Netherlandish painting are rarely so easily related to biblical and theological texts as these attributes in Joseph's workshop. A theologian must have had a hand in designing the scene. At the same time, this symbolism must have had some meaning for the couple portrayed on the other wing.

Is there anything known about these donors? The windows on the central panel contain two coats of arms; the left belonged to a family from Mechlin, whose surname is spelled in several variants, one of which is 'Engelbrecht'. This has given rise to the attractive hypothesis that a member ordered an *Annunciation* because of the angel (*engel*) who brought (*brecht*) the message. But the connection with the family name may not have existed from the beginning. Dendrochronological analysis of the panels has found that the wings were probably painted some time after the central image, and it must have been on this occasion that the gold ground behind the windows in the *Annunciation* was covered with a painted sky, matching that on the side panels.⁴⁷ They were added not much later, however, since the clothing of all three figures on the left wing belongs to the 1420s, the very decade to which the *Annunciation* can be dated.⁴⁸ X-rays have shown that initially only the male donor was portrayed: the female donor was added together with the man by the gate behind them, who wears the badge of a messenger of the town of Mechlin. The arms in the windows were probably painted even later: this form of the Engelbrecht arms is first recorded in 1450. The relation between the arms and the depicted couple is thus as unclear as whether this couple commissioned the *Annunciation*.

This lack of information prevents any conclusions about the triptych's function and the remarkable symbolism in the right wing. The Virgin's orientation toward the viewer, the emphatic depth of her room, its contemporaneous furnishing, Joseph's workshop, the urban vista, the courtyard, like the wealth of realistic objects, all suggest that the work was meant to relate the Incarnation to the owners' experience. On the other hand, the symbolism of the mousetrap, ax, saw, rod and brace and bit give it a sophistication not usually associated with the piety of laymen.

Perhaps our conception of such piety is too superficial. The couple may have wished not only to immerse themselves in the experience of the Incarnation, facilitated by the artistic illusion, but also to fathom its theological content. Or is there another explanation for the combination of illusionism and intellectualism in the *Mérode Triptych*? Created by a virtuoso painter and a learned theologian, it might have served the owners to impress their associates with not only their piety, but also their taste and erudition.

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN

The Descent from the Cross

The *Descent from the Cross*, in the Prado in Madrid [FIG. 10], is one of the works most certainly attributed to Rogier van der Weyden, but even this certainty is relative, because its sources come from the sixteenth century.⁴⁹ An inventory taken of the palace of the Escorial in 1574 – some 130 years after the panels' execution – describes the painting as 'de mano de Maestre Rogier' and mentions that it had been in the possession of Queen Mary of Hungary, sister of the Emperor Charles V and his governor in the Low Countries. The inventory also says it was part of a triptych whose wings had images of the four Evangelists on one side and the Resurrection of Christ on the other. Other documents indicate that these wings were attached at the behest of King Philip II. Whether the work originally had other side panels is not known. Before Mary of Hungary had the panel shipped to Spain, she kept it in the chapel of the castle of Binche in Hainaut, as we learn from the journal of Vicente Álvarez, who accompanied Philip, then still a prince, on a visit to Binche during his journey through the Low Countries in 1549. In Álvarez's opinion, it was the best painting in the castle, even the entire world: he had seen many good pictures in those regions, but none that equalled its naturalness and piety. He was told that it was over 150 years old and had been in Louvain, where Mary had had it replaced by a copy 'almost as good as the original, but not quite'.

Alvárez does not mention the painter, but in his history of the city of Louvain, of around 1570, Johannes Molanus writes that Master Rogier painted a work for the main altar of the Chapel of Our Lady which Queen Mary acquired from the archers' guild in exchange for an organ and a copy of the painting, and that she had sent it to Spain. Molanus mentions the rumor that because the ship hit a sandbank and lost part of its cargo the panel disappeared beneath the waves, while Carel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck*, of 1604, tells us that it was fished out of the sea and, by virtue of the watertight packing, suffered little damage.

The chapel mentioned by Molanus was that of Our Lady of Ginderbuiten (Without the Walls), the meeting place of the crossbowmen of Louvain. Rogier's



FIGURE 10 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (220.5 x 259.5 cm), Museo del Prado, Madrid

painting has little crossbows hanging from the tracery in its corners. The panel was copied in the triptych of the Edelheere family, in the church of Saint Peter in Louvain. The wings show the donor, Willem Edelheere, his family, and their patron saints. The frame bears the date 1443; however, Edelheere died already in 1439.⁵⁰ Thus, van der Weyden painted the *Descent* before Edelheere's death, and, probably after 1432, when he became a master.

The frontally displayed body of Christ is supported under the arms by Joseph of Arimathea. An assistant, on a ladder behind the cross, holds the Savior's left arm and Nicodemus his legs. To the left the swooning Virgin, also frontal, is supported by her sister Mary Salome and John the Evangelist, while her other sister, Mary Cleophas, stands weeping behind John. At the far right Mary Magdalen demonstrates her sorrow more vehemently, wringing her hands and dropping her head toward her chest. An unidentified man behind her and Nicodemus holds her jar of ointment. The figures stand on rocky ground, on which lie a skull and bone, referring to Golgotha, 'the place of the skulls', but they are also contained in a golden box or niche, like a group of statues. This treats the subject as a religious event outside time in which the believer can participate through his devotion.

The powerful relief of the figures and the rich textures, such as the gold of Nicodemus's brocade mantle, recall the art of Campin, but the composition distinguishes the work sharply from his version of the *Descent from the Cross*. Of the original only the *Bad Thief* survives [FIG. 11]; it is known through a copy [FIG. 12].⁵¹ This *Descent* was more narrative in that Christ's deposition is still in full action. The central scene falls into two parts, the deposition and the Virgin's collapse, whereas Rogier combines these episodes in a single group. Although Campin's original had a gold ground, it must have seemed more three-dimensional than Rogier's, showing Golgotha more fully and reaching much farther into a distinct landscape. The illusion of space was also enhanced by the ladder leaning toward the cross and the backward falling Virgin. Two figures setting a foot on the ladder led the eye from the first to the second plane. In Rogier's *Descent from the Cross*, the eye is conducted parallel to the picture plane, and depth is strongly compressed by a dense overlapping of the figures. The intensely expressive mourners form a single wave of grief around the dead Christ and the swooning Virgin, whose frontal poses command the believer's attention.

The Virgin's pose repeats that of Christ. Otto von Simson has demonstrated that this motif gives visual form to a late medieval doctrine.⁵² In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries an increasing veneration of Mary's sorrows expanded her role in the redemption of mankind. Rogier's contemporary Denis the Carthusian even spoke of the Virgin as *Salvatrix mundi*, through her *compassio*, her empathy with the passion of Christ. Her *compassio* also served to stir the believer's empathy, for which Simson draws a connection between what he calls Gothic religion



FIGURE 11 – Robert Campin, *The Bad Thief* (134.2 x 92.5 cm),
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main



FIGURE 12 – Copy after Robert Campin, *The Descent from the Cross Triptych*
(central panel 59.5 x 60 cm; each wing 59.5 x 26.5 cm),
The Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

and Gothic art: like the expositions of Denis the Carthusian and Thomas a Kempis, Rogier's painting summons the viewer to experience the suffering of the Virgin and Christ.

The pervasive rhythm of the composition also served to arouse a devotional response. Where Campin engaged the viewer by leading his eye from the one group to another and into depth in order to show every incident in the narrative, Rogier achieved a synthesis. Neither style is distinct from the painting's function in conveying the subject: Campin made it come alive and Rogier directly appealed to the viewer's emotions.

The parallel poses of Christ and Mary fit the artist's compositional practice so perfectly that one is inclined to credit him with its invention, but that implies a specific theological knowledge which cannot be taken for granted among painters. The chapel of Our Lady of Ginderbuiten was dedicated to Mary's sorrows, and the prominent display of her suffering in the painting must express the wish of the chapel's ecclesiastical authorities and the patrons, the crossbowmen. This wish was translated into a symbolical portrayal of that grief in a form no other artist of that time could have conceived so movingly. The interaction, however, among Rogier, his patrons, and, probably, a theological adviser cannot be reconstructed.

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN

Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John

The same inventory of the Escorial that lists the *Descent from the Cross* is a source for another equally monumental work by Rogier van der Weyden, one preserved in the Spanish palace [FIG. 13]. The picture is mentioned as 'a large panel on which is painted Christ Our Lord on the cross, with Our Lady and Saint John, from the hand of Master Rogier'.⁵³ The inventory also states that it had been in the royal palace in Segovia and in the Charterhouse of Brussels.

The latter place, the Charterhouse of Scheut, in the vicinity of Brussels, was the original location. In 1448/49 Rogier's son Cornelis entered the Charterhouse of Herinnes, which provided the first prior of the new monastery of Scheut. According to fifteenth-century documents, van der Weyden gave the House of Scheut both money and paintings, and an account of the monastery from 1555 mentions the sale of an image of the crucified Christ given by 'Master Rogier'.⁵⁴ Since the monastery was founded in 1456, this year is a terminus post quem for the picture.⁵⁵ It has suffered considerable damage and has been overpainted; despite a restoration in 1946-1947 its condition is still ruinous.

The crucified Christ is placed against a red cloth hung over a gray wall. His loincloth and the robes of the Virgin and Saint John, now grayish, were originally



FIGURE 13 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John* (325 x 192 cm), Escorial, Monasterio de San Lorenzo

white. All the emphasis is on Christ's suffering and the sorrow of Mary and John, whose expressive faces and gestures, paralleled by the direction of their drapery, lead the eye upward to the Savior. The concentration on emotion and the restricted depth are even greater than in the *Descent from the Cross*, because here they are combined with an extreme sobriety in the palette, the portrayal of texture, and the number of details.

Because everything is reduced to its essence, Panofsky considered this panel the apogee of Rogier's development, and dated it around 1462, two years before the painter's death. He raised it to a timeless level by comparing it to one of the last drawings of Michelangelo:

At the end of their careers, and almost a hundred years apart, the greatest sculptor of the Italian Renaissance, turning to the Middle Ages in renunciation of the 'fables of the world', and the greatest painter of the Late Gothic North, having experienced the Florentine *rinascimento*, met, as it were, half-way between two worlds.⁵⁶

Other writers have more plausibly linked the sober execution and the concentration on essence to the ascetic practices of the Carthusians.⁵⁷ The contrast between Rogier's more material *Descent from the Cross* and the restrained Escorial panel is surely related to the different groups for which they were intended: a laymen's guild and a monastic house of a strict and contemplative order. Yet, it is also true that the two paintings are separated by some twenty years or even more. While the volume of the figures and the rendering of texture in the *Descent from the Cross* recall Campin's style, this influence has disappeared in the *Christ on the Cross* and Rogier's sense of a rhythmic composition parallel to the picture plane has fully come to the fore. That he attuned this painting to Carthusian aesthetics makes it no less a product of his own artistry, since he gave it to the monastery. Infrared reflectography, however, has found something that a modern mind could find anomalous in such a personal work. As will be discussed in Chapter 5 [p. 305], Rogier appears to have made the underdrawing and the painting of the heads, hands and feet, and entrusted the rest of the painting to an assistant. How is this partly execution by his own hand compatible with the idea that the panel was intended as an individual expression of the artist's devotion? Or do we attach too much importance to authenticity? This point, too, is addressed in Chapter 5 [pp. 323-328].

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN

The Polyptych of the Last Judgment

There is no evidence for the attribution of the *Polyptych of the Last Judgment* in the hospice, at Beaune, in Burgundy [FIGS. 14, 15]. Nevertheless, there are documents for the foundation of the institution where it is still preserved.⁵⁸

The Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune was founded by Nicolas Rolin and his third wife, Guigone de Salins. For thirty-five years Rolin was Philip the Good's chancellor, his highest official. In 1443, a year in which the plague was rampant in Burgundy, he signed the hospital charter. Its chapel, at one end of the ward called 'the great Hall of the Poor', was dedicated on December 31, 1451, a day after the pope issued a bull changing the hospital's dedication from Saint Anthony Abbot to Saint John the Baptist. Since the altarpiece shows Saint Anthony, it must have been completed by this time.

The work stood on the chapel's altar until the French Revolution and was hidden in an attic during the Terror. When it was brought out in the early nineteenth century, drapery was painted over the naked figures or offensive parts were covered with flames. Still considered unworthy of attention, it was hung in a separate room three meters above the floor, and partly covered with the white wash used on the walls of the room. In 1836, however, a member of the Commission of Antiquities recognized its value and had taken it down and 'washed with care'. The art-loving Prince d'Arenberg opened a subscription in 1845 for funds for its restoration, which was only performed in 1875 and with dire consequences: the fronts and the backs of the panels were separated and some were transferred to canvas.

At its rediscovery the *Last Judgment* was attributed to the brothers van Eyck, but with the growing knowledge of Rogier van der Weyden it came to be seen as one of his principal achievements. The attribution has stood the test of time, although it is thought that various parts of the execution were left to assistants [SEE CHAPTER 5, P. 320].

The exterior [FIG. 14] shows Nicholas Rolin and Guigone de Salins to the far left and right, kneeling in alcoves before angels bearing their coats of arms. The other panels are imitations of sculpture in grisaille: Saint Sebastian facing Rolin, Saint Anthony Abbot facing his wife, and, above, the Virgin and angel of the Annunciation. The scene of the Annunciation often occurs on the exterior of an altarpiece as the beginning of the Incarnation, while the interior shows one or more themes from its subsequent history. Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony Abbot were invoked against the plague, but their presence also expresses the donors' personal veneration.⁵⁹ In 1430 Rolin endowed masses and made other donations to his family chapel of Saint Sebastian in the church of Notre Dame in Autun, and Guigone belonged to a confraternity of Saint Anthony in Dijon.



FIGURE 14 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Polyptych of the Last Judgment*, exterior (including frame ca. 220/137.5 x 273 cm), Musée de l'Hôtel Dieu, Beaune



FIGURE 15 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Polyptych of the Last Judgment*, interior (including frame ca. 220/137.5 x 547.6 cm), Musée de l'Hôtel Dieu, Beaune



FIGURE 16 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Polyptych of the Last Judgment*,
interior: *Apostles, female saints and damned souls*

On the interior [FIG. 15] the *Last Judgment* spreads over nine panels. In the center Christ is enthroned on a rainbow with his feet on a globe, sending forth a lily and a sword, whose meaning is clarified by biblical texts; in white letters below the lily are the words: ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’, Matthew 25:34 (*Venite benedicti patris mei possidete paratum vobis Regnum a constitutione mundi*); in black below the sword are the words: ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels’, Matthew 25:41 (*Discedite a me maledicti in ignem eternum qui paratus est dyabolo et angelis eius*). On the small upper panels, flanking the image of Christ, angels bear the instruments of the Passion, or *arma Christi*, with which he triumphed over death and the devil. A vertical axis runs through the figure of Christ with the archangel Michael below him, weighing souls and surrounded by trumpeting angels. At the bases of the rainbow, the Virgin and John the Baptist intercede with folded hands, seated in front of rows of the apostles and saints, male on the left and female on the right. The dead rise from the earth, the blessed making their way to the heaven and the damned dragging one another into hell [FIG. 16]. There is an utter limitation of narrative elements: devils are nowhere in evidence, and the heavenly Jerusalem is limited to a golden gate. The emphasis is not on outward display, but on the emotional state of the resurrected, the damned grimacing in horror. As Panofsky put it:

The fate of each human being, determined by the Judge without assistance or interference, inevitably follows from his own past, and the absence of any outside instigator of evil makes us realize that the chief torture of the Damned is not so much physical pain as a perpetual and intolerably sharpened consciousness of their state.⁶⁰

Evidently, Rolin and his clerical advisor thought it salutary for the patients of the hospital to be reminded of their responsibility for their fate and incited to examine the condition of their souls.

While some illusion of depth form the images on the outside, especially in the panels with the pseudo-sculptures, the composition on the inside resembles a frieze. The figures are separated by sharp contours and their robes enlivened by clearly articulated folds. The colors of the figures in heaven stand out against the golden clouds. A brilliant light from the left strikes Saint Michael’s white alb, in a strong contrast with the red of Christ’s mantle, and the red and gold of his cope, like the red of the vestments and wings of the smaller angels, contrast with the pale blue sky. The artist made the composition even clearer by restricting the number of the dead and treating them almost as individuals. As the damned approach the abyss of hell they become more and more compressed

together. Only a few blessed ascend the steps of the Heavenly Jerusalem. That the damned are in the majority must also have given the hospital's residents food for thought.

The large sizes of the heavenly figures, the limited number of the resurrected, the strong linearity and contrasting colors all contributed to the visibility of the polyptych from the ward through the entrance to the chapel. Thus, the artistic form was perfectly attuned to the work's function. But this function should not only be related to the patients.⁶¹ The Rolins intended the chapel to be their burial place (although eventually only Guigone was buried there), in which they provided for daily prayers to be said for the salvation of their souls as well as daily masses for the dead. The altarpiece gives shape to the reward they hoped their charity and piety would earn. This expectation is explicit in the hospital's charter, in which Rolin declares that he is acting in the interest of his salvation, desiring through a happy commerce to exchange the perishable blessings he owes to the grace of God for the celestial and eternal blessings.⁶² However much Rolin wished to lay up treasures in heaven, through this impressive painting he also wanted to guarantee life to his earthly memory.

Of course, the most determining factor for the artistic form of the polyptych was van der Weyden. As we have seen, compositions parallel to the picture plane and expressive figures are characteristic of his art. In comparison to his *Descent from the Cross*, volume and texture were reduced in the *Last Judgment*, but not as much as in the Escorial *Christ on the Cross*. The three paintings show how many factors should be considered in order to understand a work: the artist's personality, its development, the demands of the subject that had to be represented, and a picture's function for the donors and other viewers. The interaction between these determinants is the most complex and most fundamental aspect of the research into early Netherlandish art.

ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN

The Columba Altarpiece

The *Columba Altarpiece* [FIG. 17] is named for its place of origin, the baptismal chapel of Saint Columba's in Cologne, which was founded as a burial chapel for the burgomaster Goedert von den Wasservass, in 1467.⁶³ Because this was three years after Rogier's death, the triptych must have been made for some other site and the donor who kneels behind Saint Joseph must be someone else. The painting remained in the chapel for ages until it was acquired by Melchior and Sulpiz Boisseree in 1808, who sold it with the rest of their collection to the king of Bavaria in 1827 [SEE CHAPTER 2, P. 185]. The Boisseree brothers assigned the triptych to Jan

van Eyck, but in the second half of the nineteenth century it was restored to Rogier van der Weyden and this attribution is generally accepted.

The *Adoration of the Magi* occupies the central panel. The kings and their retinue form a descending, diagonal movement ending in the middle, where the eldest king touches the Child. Their driving force is counterbalanced by the Virgin and Saint Joseph, who frames the scene with the young king at the far right, just as John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalen frame Rogier's *Descent from the Cross*. The adoration of the eldest king is particularly emotional: leading both his companions and the viewer in the devotion for Christ, he grasps the Child by the feet with one hand and with the other raises the Child's hand to his lips. This encounter is emphasized by the axis running through the hat before the king, the motif of the kiss and the crucifix that, in token of the future Passion, hangs on a pillar at the rear of the stable. Thus, the Christ Child, together with the crucifix, reminds us of Salvation and the kiss and the doffed hat express veneration.

The stable functions as a piece of stage scenery before which the protagonists are placed. It is in the form of a ruin, which could, as in other Netherlandish pictures, refer to the Old Covenant abrogated by the coming of Christ. The figures and the stable are connected by the ass, bending over a manger perpendicular to the picture plane, and the retinue of the kings, pushing forward through an opening in the right wall. This wall runs into the foreground, but its advance is splayed outward to reinforce the planarity of the composition. A landscape with a town looms up behind the stable like another piece of scenery. The foreground and background are linked by a road which starts behind the donor.

Although this painting has no golden niche, like the *Descent from the Cross*, a wall with a hanging, like the Escorial *Christ on the Cross*, or a golden heaven, like the *Last Judgment*, again Rogier affirmed his predilection for a frieze-like arrangement that allowed him to exercise his talent for compositional tension. The groups are not only determined by the diagonal movement from the right and the verticals of Mary and Joseph, but also by two curves which run through the heads of nearly all the figures and intersect in the kneeling king. The arched openings in the stable create a faster counterrhythm, which dissolves in the one arch rising above the stable roof. There is also a rhythmic tension between, on the one hand, the figures of Joseph, Mary and the two younger kings, and, on the other, the pillars of the stable. Many small motifs contribute to the rhythmic character of the composition as well, such as the fluttering scarf of the turban of the youngest king, the curve of his sword, the elegant whippet at his feet, the jutting knee of the second king, the rich folds of his mantle, and the rippling sleeves of the eldest king. Reinforcing the encounter with the Christ Child, the folds of these sleeves accelerate the movement from the right which begins in the flourish of the raised turban and ends in the large hat on the

ground, whose spiralling curves resolve the fan-shaped sleeve folds in a calligraphic loop.

The bright, strong colors of the figures (more subdued in the crowd) contrast with the dark stable and the soft tints of the background, and the blue sky counterbalances the lower, more colorful, half of the painting. Above all, the colors lucidly articulate the various elements; they hardly have a spatial effect for lack of an atmospheric light. Their solid support of the picture's content is exemplified in the dominance of the primary colors, blue, yellow and red, in the protagonists. These colors converge where the eldest king kneels before the Virgin and the Child. The most sumptuous texture is given to the youngest king; his elegant dress and the grace with which he removes his turban make a strong contrast with the humble figure of Saint Joseph, and show the dynamism of the arriving worshipers.

The *Annunciation* is represented on the left wing and the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* on the right. The Virgin's chamber and the Temple are clearly demarcated; but here too the depth is restrained. Fully established in the foreground, the protagonists stand out against their spaces. The bed behind the Virgin and the architectural elements of both scenes do more to articulate the surface than to lead the eye inward. In comparison to the other discussed works by Rogier, however, the *Columba Altarpiece* has a spatial richness because of the various planes of the compositions. Does this have to do with its themes and function, or does it represent a stage in Rogier's development? To answer this question, it is important to know the approximate date of the painting's execution, which can be established with the help of technical research.

Infrared reflectography has discovered the remarkable fact that the underdrawing is different from that on other Rogierian panels and must be the work of an assistant.⁶⁴ At the same time, the first layer of paint contains numerous changes, probably by van der Weyden himself. Some of the changes are due to motifs borrowed from Stefan Lochner's *Adoration of the Magi Triptych* in Cologne cathedral [FIG. 18], made between 1440 and 1448. Lochner's standard-bearer in the central panel inspired the pose of Rogier's youngest king, the man holding a hat next to this standard-bearer served as a model for one of the men in the opening of the stable's right wall, and the maiden seen from the back on Lochner's left panel was used for the girl with the doves in the *Presentation*. Furthermore, the Virgin's slightly turned face in the underdrawing of Rogier's *Adoration* was painted in a frontal view, like the face of Lochner's Virgin.

The reflectography has also shown that the donor was not underdrawn. On the basis of these observations, Jeltje Dijkstra has formulated the hypothesis that van der Weyden's workshop in Brussels prepared the panels and executed the underdrawing in his absence.⁶⁵ During that absence Rogier visited Cologne, where he met and portrayed the donor and drew sketches after Lochner's *Adoration of*

the Magi. On his return to Brussels, he added the portrait and used the sketches after Lochner in order to make the changes in the first layer of paint.

Obviously, there was initially no plan to include a portrait of the donor, perhaps because he had commissioned the work from Cologne.⁶⁶ The occasion to visit him might have presented itself during Rogier's journey to Rome in the Holy Year 1450, reported by the humanist Bartolomeo Fazio.⁶⁷ Of course, the artist could have done so another time, but dendrochronological measurements indicate that, indeed, the triptych may have been painted around 1450,⁶⁸ and a long absence from Brussels would explain why van der Weyden left the underdrawing to an assistant.

Whilst all these different suppositions are mutually compatible, they have to be slightly adapted if, as some scholars think, the donor was the Cologne patrician Johan Dasse, who was already dead at this time.⁶⁹ In 1448 Dasse's widow founded in his memory an altar in Saint Columba's dedicated to Our Lady, for which the Mariological subjects of the *Columba Altarpiece* would be quite appropriate. The painting could have been started before her husband's death and his portrait inserted afterward. Rogier's visit to Cologne would have enabled the widow to give him an existing portrait of her husband to copy on the triptych. The problem with this hypothesis is that Dasse would hardly have commissioned the painting without endowing the altar. What is more, the altarpiece does not have to be directly related to an altar of Our Lady. The *Adoration of the Magi* was a favorite subject in Cologne, which preserved their relics, and appropriate to any altar dedicated to the city's patron saints.

If the *Columba Altarpiece* was indeed made around 1450, what does this date say about its artistic character? The *Last Judgment* was painted between 1443 and 1451 and probably finished before Rogier left for Italy; the Escorial *Christ on the Cross* can be dated between 1456 and van der Weyden's death in 1464. This means that the *Columba Altarpiece* would have been executed after the *Last Judgment* and before the *Christ on the Cross*, and it suggests that rather than to Rogier's evolution as a painter the spatial richness of the *Columba Altarpiece* can be attributed to its subject and destination. The three paintings together show that when Rogier became a mature artist he could choose from various styles, according to the theme and function of the work he had undertaken. The donor of the *Columba Altarpiece* may have been an ambitious person who required that it should be a demonstration of artistic virtuosity. The borrowings from Lochner seem to confirm this: they can be considered as an expression of homage to the German master, but also as a challenge which prompted the citizens of Cologne to compare the two paintings and to ask themselves if van der Weyden had outdone their own famous artist. Although Lochner's altarpiece is considerably larger and more monumental, Rogier's is notably more modern.



FIGURE 17 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Columba Altarpiece* (central panel 139.5 x 152.9 cm; left wing 139.4 x 72.9; right wing 139.2 x 72.5 cm), Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, München



FIGURE 18 – Stefan Lochner, *The Adoration of the Magi Triptych* (*Das Dombild*)
(central panel 260 x 285 cm; each wing 261 x 142 cm), Cologne Cathedral

A display of even greater virtuosity is shown by another altarpiece for a family altar, one in which the donors felt the need to have exhibited artistic wealth on the largest possible scale.

JAN (AND HUBERT?) VAN EYCK

The Ghent Altarpiece

Like the *Last Judgment* by Rogier van der Weyden, the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 19, 20] still stands in the building for which it was originally intended. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, it did a good deal of travelling, both in separate parts and as a whole.⁷⁰

From 1432 until the time of the iconoclastic riots in the sixteenth century, the work stood in the chapel of the donors Jodocus Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut, in the church of Saint John in Ghent, which was dedicated to Saint Bavo in 1540 and became a cathedral shortly afterward. In 1566, to protect it from the iconoclasts, the painting was dismantled and hidden in the tower. It returned to its original location in 1569, but less than ten years later supporters of William of Orange brought it to the town hall so that the prince could present it to Queen Elizabeth of England. This plan was not realized, and in 1587/88 it was placed upon a new altar in the Vijd chapel and given a new base, or predella, instead of the original, which, according to the chronicler Marcus van Vaernewijck, bore a representation of hell.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* was then left in peace until the French Revolution. In 1794 the revolutionary invaders from France took the four central panels to Paris, where they were displayed in the new museum in the Louvre [SEE CHAPTER 2, PP. 177, 179]. When these panels came back to Ghent in 1816, the authorities of the cathedral sold the wings to an art dealer, who sold them to an English collector, Edward Solly. In 1821 King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia bought the wings and other paintings from Solly for his picture gallery in Berlin, which was open to the public [SEE CHAPTER 2, PP. 185-187]. The six panels were sawed apart in 1894, so that the fronts and backs could be exhibited side by side.

In 1822 a fire in Saint Bavo's damaged the central part, which had to be restored. The panels with *Adam* and *Eve* had already been stored away for the sake of decency and were only accessible to connoisseurs; in 1861 they were sold to the Belgian state and transferred to the Musée royal in Brussels. During World War I, the panels in Ghent were moved to safety. After more than 150 years, in 1920, all of the work's constituents reunited, because the Treaty of Versailles ordered Germany to give the wings to Belgium. The five hundredth anniversary of the *Ghent Altarpiece* was celebrated in 1932. In the night of 10 April 1934, the panels with the *Just Judges* and *John the Baptist* were stolen. The latter panel was recovered,

but the *Just Judges* have never been found and are now replaced by a modern copy.

When World War II broke out, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was taken to unoccupied France to prevent its capture, but the Germans managed to track it down in 1942, and it spent the next two years in Neuschwanstein. In 1944 the American army found the panels in the salt mines of Alt Aussee, where the Germans had hidden them with countless other treasures. The polyptych returned to Saint Bavo's in 1945, only to be dismantled again in 1950 for a year of technical study and restoration in Brussels. It was reinstalled in the Vijd chapel, but in 1986, after innumerable openings and closings for the tourists, the work was placed in another part of the church, where it is preserved in a bulletproof cage of glass. Because it cannot be closed any longer, there is no meeting between the angel and the Virgin of the Annunciation on the exterior, and it is impossible to undergo the aesthetic experience as it was intended: viewing the limited range of colors on the closed altarpiece, and when it is opened being overwhelmed by the magnificent display of color.

The exterior [FIG. 19], whose layout was followed in van der Weyden's *Last Judgment*, presents life-sized figures of Jodocus Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut praying beside pseudo-statues of John the Baptist, the church's patron at the time, and John the Evangelist, whose apocalyptic vision of the adoration of the Lamb is represented on the inside. Since the altarpiece was dedicated on his feast day, May 6, he may have been the chapel's patron.⁷¹ The *Annunciation* [FIG. 21], in the upper register, is inscribed with the text of the salutation: 'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee', Luke 1:28 (*Ave gracia plena Dominus tecum*), proceeding from the angel's mouth, and with the first words of the Virgin's response: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord', Luke 1:38 (*Ecce ancilla Domini*), upside down, to indicate that they are intended for God. Mary kneels beside a lectern, and the dove of the Holy Ghost has alighted on her head. Sunlight enters through an open window behind her and shines through the glass of a carafe on the sill, so that the Incarnation may be symbolized, as in the *Mérode Triptych*, by light passing through glass.⁷² A niche contains a laver and a basin with a handtowel next to it, likewise symbols of Mary's purity. The windows frame a view of a city that may be Ghent itself.

The lunettes show figures of prophets and sibyls whose banderoles are inscribed with prophecies of the Incarnation; from left to right, Zachariah with: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion [...] behold, thy King cometh unto thee', Zachariah 9:9 (*Exulta satis filia Syon jubila ecce Rex tuus venit*); the Eritrean sibyl with: 'Sounding nothing mortal you are inspired by power from on high' (*Nil mortale sonans afflata es numine celso*); the Cumaean sibyl with: 'The Highest King shall come and shall be in the flesh through the ages' (*Rex altissimus adveniet per secula futurus scilicet in carne*); the prophet Micah with: 'Yet out of thee shall he



FIGURE 19 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior (ca. 375 x 260 cm), Cathedral of Saint Bavo, Ghent



FIGURE 20 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, interior (ca. 375 x 520 cm), Cathedral of Saint Bavo, Ghent



FIGURE 21 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior, upper register: *The Annunciation, prophets and sibyls*

come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel', Micah 5:2 (*Ex te egredietur qui sit dominator in Israel*).

The gowns of the donors provide the strongest colors, since the statues and the robes of the angel and the Virgin are almost entirely white and tints of brown and cream permeate the whole exterior. A warm light envelops the figures, the walls of the niches below, and the room of the *Annunciation*, where the shadows on the floor are cast by the frames of the panels in front of a light coming from the viewer's right. In fact, the Vijd chapel is illuminated by a window on this side (in its new location the altarpiece is illuminated only by artificial light), so that the painted light and the natural light linked the worlds of the painting and of the beholder.⁷³ At the same time, the unnaturally large size of the Virgin and the angel underscores the symbolic character of the scene: the viewer is confronted with the awesome theological reality of the Incarnation.

The richness of the interior of the polyptych [FIG. 20] is almost inconceivable in the variety of the representations and the exuberance of the color, based on red, blue, green, and gold. On the central panel of the lower register we see the adoration of the Lamb [FIG. 22]. The Lamb stands on an altar, blood streaming from his breast into a chalice. The upper edge of the altar frontal, or antependium, is inscribed with the words: 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world', John 1:29 (*Ecce Agnus Dei qui tollit peccata mundi*), and the lappets in front of it with: 'Jesus the Way', and 'the Truth, the Life', John 14:6 (*Ihesus Via and Veritas Vita*). Around the altar kneel angels holding the *arma Christi*, in adoration or swinging censers. In the foreground a fountain is inscribed: 'This is the fountain of the water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb', Revelation, 21:6; 22:1 among other places (*Hic est fons aque vite procedens de sede Dei + Agni*).

The figures on the central panel are grouped in the same categories as in the Litany. To the left of the fountain are gathered the witnesses of the Old Covenant, among them the Roman poet Virgil, holding his wreath of a laurel, who was thought to have foretold the coming of the Messiah. Beside him Isaiah holds a twig, in token of his prophecy of Christ as a 'rod out of the stem of Jesse', Isaiah 11:1. To the right of the fountain are witnesses of the New Covenant: behind the kneeling apostles stand popes, bishops, including Saint Livinus, patron of Ghent, and deacons, including Saint Stephen. In the distance, on the right, come the Holy Virgins, including Agnes, Barbara, Catharine, Dorothy, and Ursula, and, on the left, the Confessors, who witnessed to Christ without suffering martyrdom, together with representatives of the contemplative life. Paradise is a meadow with countless flowers and trees, and the distant heavenly Jerusalem somewhat resembles a Flemish city. Above the scene the dove of the Holy Spirit floats in a radiating halo. This motif was added later, but still in the fifteenth century. Technical

research has shown that originally God's presence was only symbolized by a gilded glory without a dove.⁷⁴

Other multitudes advance on the flanking panels, making their way to the heavenly meadow from different parts of the earth. The frames of the side panels are original, each inscribed with the name of one group. On the far left, the stolen panel was labeled 'Just Judges' (*Iusti Iudices*), closer to the center are the 'Soldiers of Christ' (*Christi Milites*). The panel at the far right shows the 'Holy Pilgrims' (*Peregrini Sancti*), led by the giant Saint Christopher. In front of them walk the 'Holy Hermits' (*Heremite Sancti*) with Saint Anthony Abbot in the vanguard and, at the rear, Saint Mary Magdalen and Saint Mary of Egypt. The panels of the judges and the soldiers are spanned by a typically northern landscape, while the one that covers the panels of the pilgrims and the hermits is explicitly southern, with citrus trees, palms, and cypresses. The contours of the landscapes flow smoothly into that of the central paradise, so that at first sight the whole lower register seems to be covered by a single landscape.

The figures in the upper register are quite enormous. The most monumental are on the central panels [FIG. 23]: God, seated on a throne, flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist. The young, Christ-like God, wearing red robes encrusted with pearls and gems and a triple-crowned tiara, holds a scepter and raises his right hand in benediction. A golden baldric over his chest is inscribed: *Sabaot*, '(Lord) of Hosts'. On the edge of his mantle are the words: 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' (*Rex Regum et Dominus Dominantium*). The step below his feet is inscribed with texts on either side of a crown on the floor. To the left the upper line reads: 'Life without death on his head' (*Vita sine morte in capite*), and to the right: 'Youth without age on his forehead' (*Iuventus sine senectute in fronte*). Below this, to the left, that is to God's right: 'Joy without sorrow on his right side' (*Gaudium sine merore a dextris*), and to the right: 'Safety without fear on his left side' (*Securitas sine timore a sinistris*). The motifs on the cloth of gold brocade behind God symbolize the sacrifice of Christ: grapes and a pelican feeding her young from her own breast. The concentric gold arches above, resembling an enormous halo, are inscribed:

This is God the almighty on account of his divine majesty. The highest, the best of all on account of his goodness full of sweetness. The most liberal remunerator on account of his immense largesse. (*Hic est Deus potentissimus propter divinam maiestatem. Summus omnium optimus propter dulcedinis bonitatem. Remunerator liberalissimus propter immensam largitatem.*)

On God's right hand the Virgin is enthroned, reading a book. As Queen of Heaven she is clad in a jeweled gown and mantle; her crown is adorned with flowers that

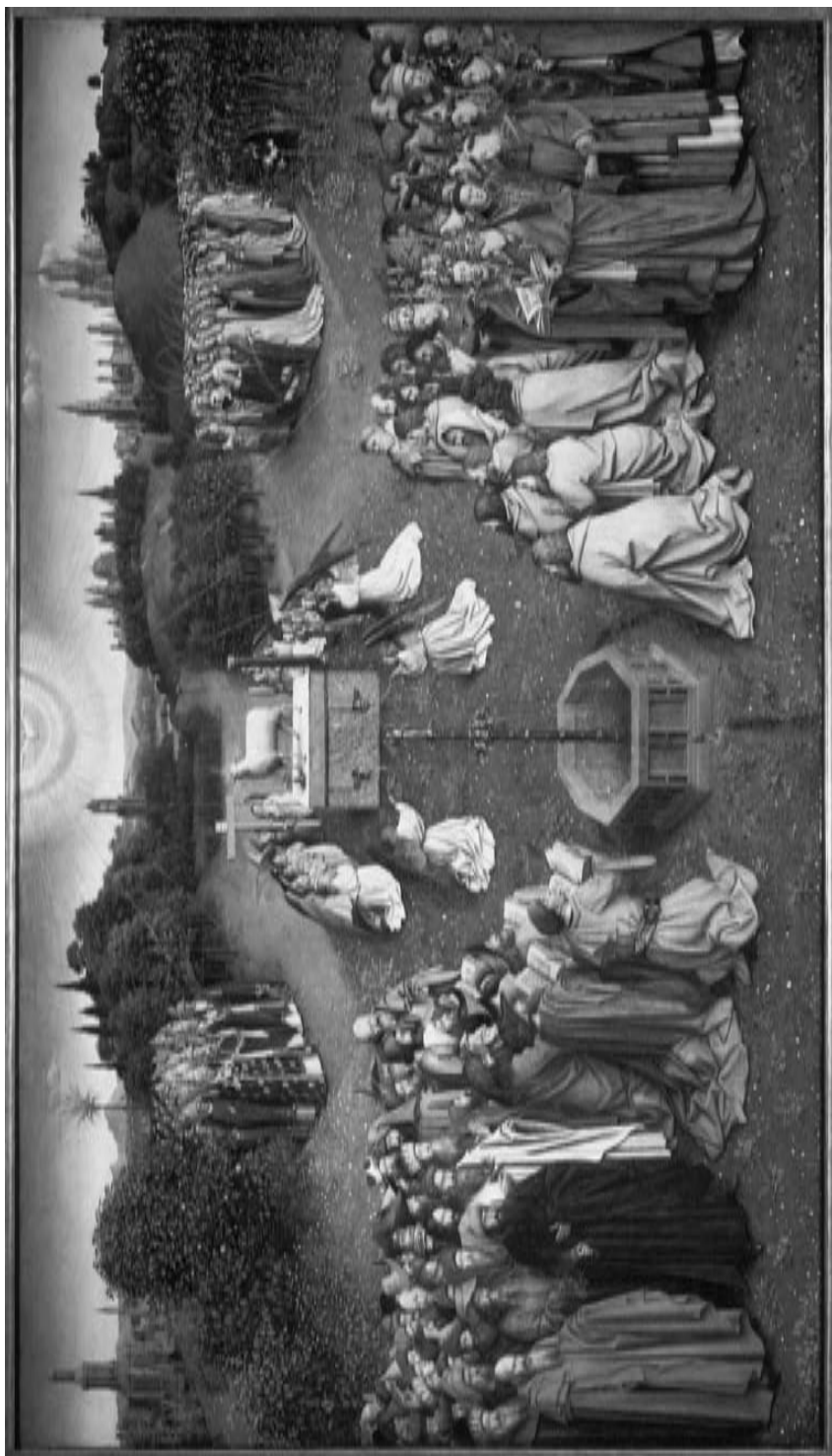


FIGURE 22 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, interior, lower register: *The Adoration of the Lamb*



FIGURE 23 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, interior, upper register: God flanked by the Virgin and Saint John the Baptist

symbolize her virtues, and above them stars, like those in the crown of the apocalyptic woman in the Book of Revelation. The arches are inscribed with a text from the Book of Wisdom 7: 29, 26:

She is more beautiful than the sun and above the whole order of the stars. When compared to the light, she is found to precede it. For she is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God. (*Hec est speciosior sole et super omnem stellarum dispositionem luci comparata invenitur prior. Candor est enim lucis eterne et speculum sine macula Dei.*)

John the Baptist points to God; the book in his lap contains the first word of Isaiah 40: ‘Comfort ye’ (*Consolamini*). The Isaiah chapter speaks of ‘him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord’, and also says that ‘the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together’, which fits the vision illustrated on the whole interior.⁷⁵ The Baptist wears a green mantle, likewise trimmed with pearls and gems, and underneath it the robe of camelhair in which he proclaimed the coming of Christ. The inscription on the arches reads:

This is John the Baptist, greater than man, like unto the angels, the sum of the law, who sowed the gospel, the voice of the apostles, the silence of the prophets, the lamp of the world, the witness of the Lord. (*Hic est Baptista Iohannes, maior homine, par angelis, legis summa, evangelii sacio, apostolorum vox, silencium prophetarum, lucerna mundi, Domini testis.*)

To the right of John the Baptist angels are playing musical instruments; the panel’s frame is inscribed: ‘Praise him with stringed instruments and organs’, Psalm 150:4 (*Laudate eum in cordis et organo*). The corresponding panel to the left of the Virgin depicts singing angels, and the frame has the inscription: ‘A song for God, eternal praise, thanksgiving’ (*Melos Deo, laus perhennis, gratiarum actio*). At the extremities figures of Adam and Eve stand in niches, their size between that of the figures in the center panels and that of the musical angels. Adam’s frame is inscribed: ‘Adam casts us into death’ (*Adam nos in mortem praecipitat*), and Eve’s: ‘Eve harmed by killing’ (*Eva occidendo obfuit*). A simulated relief above Adam’s niche shows the burnt offerings of Cain and Abel, that above Eve has Cain slaying Abel.

Everywhere on the interior the immaterial is embodied by an eruption of brilliantly rendered matter: grass, herbs, flowers, fruit, trees, rocks, clouds, horses and people, woven and embroidered cloth, jewels and gold, carved stone and wood, and the naked bodies of Adam and Eve. All are painted in such detail and with such an illusion of texture that each creature, plant or object has its own

character. And here, as on the exterior, everything is brought to life by an unrivalled handling of light.

A great part of the abundant literature on the *Ghent Altarpiece* has been concerned with the problem of whether two different hands can be discerned. When in 1823, in Berlin, a restorer removed overpaint on the frame, he found at the bottom of the exterior an inscription in the form of a quatrain:

*Pictor Hubertus eeyck. maior quo nemo repertus
Incepit. pondus. que Johannes arte secundus
[Frater] perfecit. Judoci Vijd prece fretus
VersU seXta Mal. Vos CoLLoCat aCta tUerI.*⁷⁶

This can be translated as:

Painter Hubert van Eyck, greater than whom none has been found, began the weighty task, which his brother Jan, second in art, completed at the request of Jodocus Vijd. With this verse on May 6 he places what has been done under your protection.

The capitalized letters can be read as Roman numerals; together, they add up to 1432.

The discovery of the quatrain corroborated what sixteenth-century sources say about the roles of the two brothers, and provoked a dispute over the question of which brother had painted which part. The great obstacle is the lack of other documented works by Hubert van Eyck and the paucity of documentary information about him, although we know that he lived in Ghent and died there in 1426.⁷⁷ There is much more known about Jan van Eyck's life. After having been court painter of John of Bavaria, count of Holland, at The Hague from 1422 until 1425, he was in the service of Philip the Good from 1425 until his death in 1441. He lived in Lille from 1425 until 1428, and in 1432 he bought a house in Bruges. Before he settled in that city, where he died, he undertook journeys by order of the duke; in 1436 he traveled again, possibly to the Holy Land.⁷⁸

One of the most extensive and precise attempts to distinguish the brothers' hands in the *Ghent Altarpiece* was made by Max Dvořák, in the early twentieth century, who thought he recognized Hubert where the figures and the compositions are relatively linear and flat, showing Hubert the last great exponent of a medieval style. The more voluminous figures and groups Dvořák attributed to Jan, who, he believed, inaugurated the art of the modern age. These views are discussed in Chapter 3 [pp. 240-243].

In addition to the stylistic differences noted by Dvořák, Panofsky saw a lack of unity in other aspects of the work.⁷⁹ When closed, the round-topped side panels do not completely cover the central section; the vertical frames that divide the upper register are not aligned with those of the lower register, and on the interior there is an enormous difference in scale between the figures of the two zones. Panofsky also saw important inconsistencies in the iconography. The interior can be seen as an All Saints picture, related to the feast of All Saints and based on the Book of Revelation, in which Saint John describes how a ‘great multitude, which no man could number’ worshiped ‘our God which sitteth upon the throne’ and the Lamb. In the earliest depictions of this theme the adoration is addressed to the Lamb alone, but fourteenth-century examples show instead of the Lamb an enthroned figure symbolizing the Trinity, or a three-figured Trinity. The *Ghent Altarpiece* seems to combine the older and the younger tradition by a Lamb in the lower and an enthroned figure in the upper register. The presence, however, of the Holy Ghost in the lower register suggests that the vertically aligned Lamb, dove, and enthroned figure, being God the Father, together represent the Trinity. Nor is this the only discordant element if the interior is to be an All Saints picture: others are the prominence of John the Baptist and the presence of the *Just Judges*, who do not constitute an official category of saints.

Panofsky connected the anomalies with the statement in the quatrain that Jan van Eyck completed the work at the request of Jodocus Vijd, which could mean that Vijd was not the original patron. In fact, one of the few documents concerning Hubert van Eyck mentions an altarpiece commissioned by the magistrates of Ghent. According to Panofsky, the lower register was originally designed as a separate altarpiece ordered for their chapel in the town hall, which would explain the presence of the *Just Judges*, symbolizing the magistrates. The central panels of the upper register would have been another altarpiece, which paid special honor to John the Baptist, the patron of the church of Saint John. Initially, the central image of this second work would have represented the Trinity. The panels with the musical angels could have been intended as organ shutters. After Hubert’s death his brother Jan van Eyck would have finished the various panels and combined them in a single altarpiece, at Vijd’s request, complementing the interior with the panels of Adam and Eve, and painting the whole of the exterior. The operation would have required cutting down the panel of the *Adoration of the Lamb*, which is lower than its side panels, to accommodate a frame sturdy enough to support the heavy upper panels. The dove of the Holy Ghost would have been added to the *Adoration* to link the upper and lower registers, and as a result the Trinity in the upper register became God the Father.

This creative reconstruction of the polyptych’s genesis deconstructed it as an artistic and theological whole. Knowing that the still unpublished results of

the technical examination might cause him to change some of his views, Panofsky nevertheless declared that: 'nothing short of a personal communication from either Hubert or Jan van Eyck will convince me that the Ghent altarpiece was planned as it is now'.⁸⁰ In spite of the absence of such a communication, his theory no longer holds. In the first place, the technical research found a *barbe* (an upright edge of paint created when a panel is painted in its frame) on the lower central panel, eliminating any possibility of its having been shortened.⁸¹ Furthermore, a study of the frames showed that, presumably, the original shapes of the wings corresponded with the central part.⁸² The other aesthetic inconsistencies Panofsky noticed are not convincing arguments, because they are obviously based on the value judgment, borrowed from the Italian Renaissance, that a work of art should be a harmonious whole into which all elements are integrated and brought into balance. However, he did not discuss the extent to which this norm played a role in early Netherlandish painting. (For more on the Italian Renaissance as Panofsky's point of reference in his study of early Netherlandish painting, see CHAPTER 8, p. 389.)

Nor do the exposed iconographic idiosyncrasies require that the altarpiece is a combination of originally separate works. The *Just Judges* can be explained as an allusion to Jodocus Vijd as an alderman of Ghent. Elisabeth Dhanens has observed that all four of the scenes which flank the *Adoration of the Lamb* could symbolize the status of members of the Vijd family or their charitable deeds.⁸³ The *Soldiers of Christ* could refer to the knighthood of Jodocus's father Clais and of his brother Christoffel, the *Holy Pilgrims*, led by Saint Christopher, patron of Christoffel Vijd, to Jodocus's foundation of a hospice for pilgrims, and the *Holy Hermits* to the Charterhouse at Rooigem patronized and chosen as a burial site by Clais Vijd.

The judges, knights, pilgrims, and hermits thus make their way as representatives of the Vijd family along the road to Paradise, where the Lamb is adored by members of the Church Triumphant. This emphasis on the family may have been due to one of the most important motives, if not *the* most important one, for commissioning such a colossal, virtuoso ensemble: the Vijds were childless.⁸⁴ The wealth Jodocus had amassed as a large landowner lacked the goal that a rich man normally wanted to achieve on earth: ensuring his descendants of comfort and status. What is more, Jodocus's only brother Christoffel was unmarried and without heirs, so that the name of their branch of the family would die out in their generation.

Jodocus Vijd and his wife did not only found an altar, they also paid for the construction of the chapel in which it stood, the first of the radiating chapels on the south side of the choir. According to an act, a mass had to be said daily in perpetuity 'in honor of God, his blessed mother and all his saints, for the salvation of their souls and those of their ancestors'.⁸⁵ The altarpiece expresses this honor and

shows how the Vijd family joins in the divine plan of salvation. The figures of Adam and Eve represent the Fall, the Annunciation scene refers to the Incarnation, and therewith to man's Redemption, which offers hope for heavenly bliss, the principal theme of the painting. The tremendous naturalism of the artistic execution gives the donors' expectations a highly suggestive power as if these are a certainty. Such a display of religious self-confidence could have been a compensation for the couple's incomplete social status due to their childlessness.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* should not be considered only in light of the foundation of a family chapel and private care for the afterlife. It was part of the equipment of the church of Saint John and even of the city, because John the Baptist was also patron of Ghent. His prominence in the upper register and that of his usual attribute, the Lamb, below, can be explained by this double function and underscores the character of the work as a civic monument.⁸⁶ The painting soon became a showpiece in which the entire city of Ghent took pride. In 1458 one of the *tableau vivants* which greeted the triumphal entry of Philip the Good recreated the interior of the altarpiece (apart from the figures of Adam and Eve), and was fully described shortly afterward in the *Kronyk van Vlaenderen*.

The description identifies the enthroned figure of the Deity as God the Father and also mentions the dove, which means that it had already been added to the polyptych.⁸⁷ There can have been a simple reason for this addition. Since the Lamb in the *Adoration* represents Christ, it must have been natural for the viewer to take the enthroned figure as God the Father, even if, initially, this figure was intended as the Trinity. This reading may have led to the idea that the Holy Ghost was missing.

Although the *Ghent Altarpiece* united symbolic functions for the Vijd family, the church of Saint John and the city of Ghent, it was first of all the backdrop for the enactment of the sacrifice of the mass; this function, too, is expressed in the painting. Dana Goodgal found that the iconographic themes and motifs, and even phrases from the inscriptions correspond to a treatise on the Eucharist by a Ghent author, completed in 1440.⁸⁸ On the basis of this tract, she states that 'the inscriptions and images on the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* all relate coherently and simply to a single theme: the communion of the mystical body with its head, through the sacrament of the eucharist'.⁸⁹ This is not to say that much theological erudition was required to grasp the painting's Eucharistic significance. Everyone was familiar with the phrase, inscribed on the altar frontal in the *Adoration* scene, *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*, which was said or sung in every mass during the Eucharist, and the blood pouring from the Lamb's breast into a chalice makes a direct connection between the sacrifice of Christ and that of the mass. The fountain's water, another symbol of Christ's redeeming blood, runs through a trench down to the lower frame, as if to flow into the real chalice on the altar.

The meaning of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is thus complex, but not inconsistent. Its contentual complexity explains its formal heterogeneity, which is perfectly appropriate to its various functions.

Panofsky concluded his subdivision of the work with a distinction between what would have been painted by Hubert and what by Jan. Following Dvořák, he emphasized, among other things, the artistic differences in the *Adoration of the Lamb*, and agreed that the foreground should be attributed to Hubert and the background to Jan. By way of illustration he cited the primitive wide-angle perspective of the fountain in contrast to the more convincingly foreshortened altar.

In 1979 van Asperen de Boer published the results of his infrared reflectography on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which showed that the technique of modeling is one of the principal characteristics of the underdrawing: 'Shadows and tones are indicated with a series of lines mostly running parallel to the contour they follow.'⁹⁰ This manner of shading occurs in parts of the altarpiece attributed by Dvořák and Panofsky to Hubert as well as those attributed to Jan. A remarkable discovery was that no underdrawing was found for the fountain, which appeared to be added on top of the painted meadow. The authenticity of the fountain need not be doubted, but the argument that Hubert painted it before Jan finished the *Adoration* seems to have lost its ground.

Furthermore, van Asperen de Boer opined: 'Much of the underdrawing in the Ghent altarpiece seems anyway quite comparable with that in works signed or usually given to Jan van Eyck.'⁹¹ This observation, since then corroborated by reflectography of other Eyckian paintings,⁹² led him to conclude that he:

if unaware of the existence of the quatrain, would have had no difficulty in regarding all Eyckian changes and the underdrawings in the altarpiece as being from one hand. This does not necessarily exclude the presence of assistants, since they would probably be engaged in the underpainting following the design.⁹³

The many changes made during the process of painting, the most striking being, beside the addition of the fountain, a 'general increase of three-dimensionality' and, in the *Adoration of the Lamb* and the hermits and the pilgrims panels, the replacement of northern trees for Mediterranean vegetation, could be due to the length of time needed for the execution of such a large and complex ensemble.⁹⁴

These conclusions are compatible with certain views on the authenticity of the quatrain on the frame. Already in the 1930s, Émile Renders argued that Jan alone painted the altarpiece and that the inscription is a forgery, invented out of Ghent patriotism because Hubert was considered as a local painter.⁹⁵ More significant were the doubts cast by laboratory analysis of the inscription⁹⁶ and by a



FIGURE 24 – Follower of the van Eycks, *The Fountain of Life* (181 x 116 cm), Museo del Prado, Madrid

philological analysis, which launched the hypothesis that the quatrain is a corruption of an inscription on the original, lost predella. The original quatrain supposedly did not mention Hubert van Eyck.⁹⁷

Although van Asperen de Boer made a substantial contribution to the question of ‘Hubert or Jan’, it took considerable time before his findings were taken up. In 1995 Volker Herzner published a book which used the homogeneity of the underdrawings as one of a number of arguments in favor of Jan van Eyck as the sole creator.⁹⁸ The fervor with which Dvořák assigned parts to Hubert and parts to Jan is equaled by the vehemence with which Herzner, rejecting the quatrain, attributed the whole work to Jan. One of his other arguments is that the *Fountain of Life* in the Prado [FIG. 24] is not, as people held, a pastiche after the *Ghent Altarpiece* by an anonymous follower of Jan van Eyck, but a copy of a lost original by Jan himself. He would have used this original as a model for the polyptych.

In Herzner’s view, Jan could not have started working on the *Ghent Altarpiece* until 1430, four years after Hubert’s death. He bases this idea on a lost portrait of Philip the Good’s wife, Isabella of Portugal, by Jan van Eyck. The portrait is known through a seventeenth-century drawing, and an inscription on the drawing states that the original portrait was sent to Philip the Good, who then married Isabella. Indeed, fifteenth-century sources tell us that in 1428-1429 Jan accompanied a Burgundian embassy to Portugal who negotiated the marriage, and that he portrayed the Infanta. Like other authors, Herzner sees a resemblance between Isabella’s portrait and the Cumaean sibyl on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, and thinks this has a specific meaning. The text on the sibyl’s banderole proclaiming the coming of the Highest Kings would not only refer to the Incarnation of Christ, but also to the birth of a male heir to Philip the Good, and the texts of the other sibyl and the two prophets would allude to this heir as well. In 1430 Isabella gave birth to her first son, who died fourteen months later. The execution of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Herzner argues, cannot have started before the period of her pregnancy, because work must have begun on the wings, which had to be painted at both sides, and first the panels and their frames had to be made by a carpenter, the shapes and sizes naturally depending on the compositions to be depicted. In his opinion, stylistic differences in the painting should not be explained by the involvement of two artists, but by the demands of the subjects.

Like Panofsky’s, these views are open to criticism, although they seem to be supported by the reflectography – except in one point: the discovery that the fountain was added at a later stage cannot be reconciled with the idea that the original of the *Fountain of Life* was the model for the *Ghent Altarpiece*. This addition indicates that the fountain was an original invention, subsequently imitated in the *Fountain of Life*. A second objection concerns the attempt to relate the prophecy of the Cumaean sibyl to the duchess’s pregnancy. The *Ghent Altarpiece* was intended

as an everlasting memorial to the patrons and served a liturgy that was to be performed in perpetuity. Even if the Cumaean sibyl is a portrait of the duchess, the text on her banderole, like those of the other figures, could hardly have referred to such a passing thing as a pregnancy, especially given the high infant mortality of the time. Furthermore, there is a considerable illogic in the dual significance of the ‘Highest King’ as both Christ and a Burgundian prince, and identifying the prince’s mother, instead of with Mary, with a prophetess who proclaims his coming.

Even if the texts do allude to the pregnancy of Isabella, this does not imply that the decision to represent sibyls and prophets cannot have been taken earlier: their primary function is to proclaim the coming of Christ, and a possible second meaning could have risen during the execution. Thus, there is no reason to assume that work on the polyptych cannot have begun before 1430. On the other hand, the replacement of northern by southern vegetation during the process of painting could have been occasioned by Jan’s journey in 1428-1429.

Whoever cannot accept that the ‘Hubert or Jan’ enigma is insoluble must confront two questions: could the brothers have had an identical style of underdrawing, and is the quatrain authentic? The technical examination of the inscription was made half a century ago and because methods have improved new research is needed. But, even if this showed that the letters are not original, it would not necessarily invalidate the content of the quatrain, since they could have replaced an earlier version. Therefore, a new philological study would also be in order.

To take stock of the situation, the paucity of information about Hubert, the uncertain status of the quatrain, and the character of the underdrawing militate against his participation. The quatrain, however, conforms to what can be derived from contemporary documents and later sources about Hubert, while Jan’s position as court painter to Philip the Good seems less compatible with a single-handed execution of this enormous commission than with a moral obligation to finish the opus magnum of his late brother.

JAN VAN EYCK

The Arnolfini Portrait

A man and a woman are seen standing in a room [FIG. 25]. The man has raised his right hand, the woman has laid hers in his left. She wears a green gown trimmed with white fur over a blue under-gown; he wears a purple tabard trimmed with brown fur and a black straw hat. Behind the woman is a hung bed before which lies a carpet; behind the man is a window with a chest below it. Oranges have been placed on the window-sill and on the chest. Against the rear wall stand a high-backed chair and a bench; a brush hangs next to the chair, and the woman’s patters



FIGURE 25 – Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait* (82.2 x 60 cm),
The National Gallery, London

lie before the bench. A mirror and a paternoster hang on the wall, and above the mirror the wall displays the name Jan van Eyck and the date 1434. From the ceiling hangs a chandelier with a single burning candle. A small dog stands before the couple, facing the viewer, and the man's pattens lie in the left corner of the painting.

The picture makes a static impression. Each figure occupies half of the picture plane, and the even distribution of the other elements also contributes to its perfect balance. Together with the mirror, the couple's joined hands, and the dog, the chandelier accentuates a strong central axis. The man's pattens counterbalance both the woman's train and the bundled-up curtain of the bed, while the train is also balanced by the man's hat. The window and the bed frame the scene on the left and the right, and the chandelier and the dog mark the top and the bottom.

The figures are too large for the interior, but at the same time the picture seems remarkably true to life, thanks to both the coherent perspective of the floor, ceiling, bed, and window and to the virtuoso handling of light and shade. The alternating intensity of the light brings out the tangibility and texture of the clothing, the upholstery, the brass of the chandelier, the wood of the man's pattens, the glass of the mirror, the amber beads of the paternoster, and the skins of the fruit.

The inscription on the wall [FIG. 26] gives the name of the artist and the date of the painting: *Johannes de eyck fuit hic / .1434*. Other information is provided by later sources.⁹⁹ The inventory, made in 1516, of Margaret of Austria's paintings in her palace at Mechlin lists 'a large painting called Hernoul le Fin with his wife in a room, which was given to Madame by don Diego' ('ung grant tableau qu'on appelle Hernoul le Fin avec sa femme dedens une chambre, qui fut donné à Madame par don Diego').

This donor was the Spanish nobleman Diego de Guevara, a long-time resident of the Low Countries, whose arms and device the inventory mentions on a pair of shutters. A second inventory, of 1523/24, mentions them again and describes the image somewhat more precisely, as a man and a woman who stand touching each other's hand. This inventory spells the man's name 'Arnoult Fin'. Both sources identify the artist as 'Johannes'. Later inventories report that the painting subsequently entered the possession of Margaret's niece, Mary of Hungary, who took it with her to Spain, and then the collections of Philip II and his successors, where it remained until the end of the eighteenth century. Although there is no guarantee, no one doubts that the painting in London is the one listed in the Habsburg inventories. It was almost certainly taken out of Spain during the Napoleonic wars. An English soldier, James Hay, who sold the painting to the National Gallery in 1843, claimed to have found it in Brussels, where he was recovering from wounds received in the Battle of Waterloo, but he could easily have stolen the work in Spain, where he also served.



FIGURE 26 – Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*,
detail: *Mirror and inscription*

While the *Arnolfini Portrait* causes no discussion regarding its maker, dating, or provenance, this is definitely not the case for the identity of the couple and what they are doing in this particular setting. The nineteenth-century writers Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who first connected the panel in the National Gallery with Margaret's picture, judged the name 'Hernoul le Fin' or 'Arnoult Fin' to be corruptions of 'Arnolfini', the name of a family of merchants and bankers from Lucca. Members of this family had settled in Bruges. Aside from the improbable assumption that the couple are Jan van Eyck himself and his wife Margaretha, this judgment has scarcely been doubted.¹⁰⁰ Jan van Eyck made a second portrait of the same man, now in Berlin's Gemäldegalerie. But which Arnolfini is he?

Until recently, the consensus fell on Giovanni di Arrigo Arnolfini, who supplied silk and other luxury cloth to Philip the Good and received important privileges. He was married to Giovanna, or Jeanne Cenami, whose name has also been closely tied to the double portrait. Therefore, Jacques Paviot's discovery that Giovanni di Arrigo was married only in 1447 came as a little culture shock.¹⁰¹ An entry in the ducal accounts reports that Philip the Good presented him in that year with two silver cups on the occasion of his marriage. The entry does not give the name of the bride, but records of Arnolfini's later religious foundations indicate that Jeanne Cenami was his only wife.

The discovery of the marriage date made it necessary to look for another member of the Arnolfini family. Lorne Campbell believes that the sitter is Giovanni di Nicolao. Documented in Bruges already in 1419, he sold cloth to Philip the Good even earlier than his cousin Giovanni di Arrigo.¹⁰² Giovanni di Nicolao was married to Costanza Trenta in 1426. But a letter written by her mother reveals that she was already dead by 1433, the year before the painting was made. Giovanni di Nicolao would have to have been portrayed with a later wife, about whom nothing is known, so that the couple's identity remains a mystery.

Other central questions are: why are they represented in the formal positions shown and do the objects around them have a specific meaning? In a famous article, of 1934, Panofsky invoked a description by the Ghent historian Marcus van Vaernewijck in his *Spiegel der Nederlandscher audheyt*, published in 1568.¹⁰³ According to this work, the portrait depicts 'the espousal of a man and a woman who were espoused by Fides'. Carel van Mander used this information in his *Schilder-boeck* of 1604, but characterized the scene 'as if they were contracting a marriage/ and they were married by Fides who joined them to each other', making explicit what van Vaernewijck suggests: that the painting includes a personification of the virtue *Fides*. Neither author had ever seen the work, and Panofsky attributed the error to an imprecise use of a lost earlier description which employed the word *fides* as a legal term. The image represents *fides*, because the couple join hands and the bridegroom raises his right hand to take an oath. It is not only a

depiction of a marriage, which, Panofsky argued on little evidence, the custom before the Council of Trent allowed to be performed by merely exchanging vows, without a religious ceremony, but also a document that the wedding has taken place. The inscription on the wall, remarkable because 'fuit', instead of 'fecit', identifies van Eyck not as the painter but as a person present, establishes him as a witness to the wedding and the painting as a 'pictorial marriage certificate'.

In light of the idea that the panel portrays a marriage, the same author believed that the setting takes on a symbolic meaning: the room is a nuptial chamber, hallowed by sacramental associations. The single burning candle is both appropriate to the swearing of an oath and a 'marriage candle'; the ceremony takes place in a bedroom; the back of the chair beside the bed supports a small wooden statue of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of women in childbirth; the dog symbolizes faith; the pattens so prominent in the foreground evoke the sacredness of the occasion by recalling the biblical injunction to Moses to remove his shoes on holy ground. Experiencing the deeper significance of these attributes and symbols need not happen on a conscious level: the viewer can just surrender to the fascination of a transfigured reality in which symbolism and realism permeate one another fully.

In his *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky added several more interpretations of motifs in the portrait.¹⁰⁴ Jan van Eyck is one of the two figures reflected in the mirror as entering the room [FIG. 26], the other man is a second witness; the oranges on the chest and the window-sill refer to man's innocence before the Fall. The scenes of Christ's Passion and Resurrection in its frame underscore the religious significance of the mirror, which like the string of (crystal, according to Panofsky) prayer-beads symbolizes purity. Half a century after Panofsky's first publication on the picture, Robert Baldwin explored an important omission in this religious interpretation of the mirror: the idea that Christian marriage should reflect the Passion through which Christ married his Church.¹⁰⁵ In fact, a verse in the reading for the nuptial mass (Ephesians 5:25) enjoins husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.¹⁰⁶

In the eighties and nineties an associative experience of the various motifs was exploited by Linda Seidel, who presented feminist interpretations, and by Craig Harbison, who detected layers of sexual and social meaning.¹⁰⁷ However, Jan Baptist Bedaux had already taken a different tack by rejecting any symbolic interpretation and insisting on the painting's realistic portrayal of a wedding, seeing the various motifs only as objects used in the ceremony.¹⁰⁸ Yet another reading was proposed by Edwin Hall, who, drawing on extensive research into late medieval marriage practices, argued that the picture represents not a wedding but a betrothal.¹⁰⁹ In his view, the objects are neither symbols nor ritual utensils; they simply attest to the social status of the couple, while also enhancing the illusion of space.

The interpretations of Bedaux and Hall initiated a reaction to Panofsky's ideas, which has culminated in Campbell's catalogue of the early Netherlandish paintings in the National Gallery of London. He does not even accept the notion that the portrait represents a ceremonial event.¹¹⁰ This requires him to take issue with Marcus van Vaernewijck, whom he calls a totally unreliable historian. Campbell dismisses all of his information as nonsense and fable: in addition to suggesting that *Fides* was shown as an allegorical figure, van Vaernewijck referred to the painting as 'a small scene', and claimed that Mary of Hungary had purchased it from a barber.

In regard to Panofsky's observations, Campbell points out that the room in which the couple stand is not a bedchamber but a reception room, which normally included a bed. There is no reason for connecting the burning candle with a marriage ceremony, and the discarded pattens were for outdoor use. Naturally, Arnolfini removed them indoors, but he still wears his boots. Campbell agrees with Hall that the man's gesture has nothing to do with a marriage, but also rejects the possibility of a betrothal, arguing that Arnolfini is greeting the visitors reflected in the mirror, to whom he presents his wife. The lighted candle may serve to honor the visitors, and also to contrast natural and artificial light. As to the curious signature, neither the script nor the content has anything to do with legal documents: the use of the year without the day and the month robs the painting of any legal value and of the idea that the painter is acting as a witness. While the use of the word 'fuit' could merely imply that the artist wished to represent reality as faithfully as possible, it could also have a deeper meaning: that the reality is van Eyck's and the interior a product of his imagination. The signature is 'an assertion of Jan's skill in counterfeiting reality; and it seems to be a clear statement that he is the foremost of the two men reflected in the mirror'.¹¹¹ He is present as a friend of the couple.

Campbell bases his argument for a great part on infrared reflectography, which discovered no underdrawing for most of the supposedly symbolic motifs: the candle, the statue of Saint Margaret, the paternoster, the oranges, the two pairs of discarded pattens, and the dog. The gestures of the couple were altered with respect to their underdrawing during the painting; the signature was probably added at the end, and may not have been planned much in advance. He concludes that the portrait was certainly not based on a 'carefully worked out programme'.¹¹² The painting is merely a portrait without any significant narrative content: its fascination lies in the illusion of a faithful imitation of reality when in fact Jan van Eyck created a reality of his own:

The couple are distorted and idealized, the room is an imagined space, the objects are arranged with marvellous artifice [...]. Jan van Eyck was here and

has persuaded us that we may follow him; but his image is so contrived, is so much the creation of his imagination, that, in truth, only the inimitable Jan van Eyck has been here.¹¹³

Campbell's merit is in his articulation of the artistic qualities of this grandiose painting, but one may wonder whether, in denying a ceremonial character and symbolic meaning to it, he does not throw the baby out with the bathwater of over-interpretation. Moreover, he does not explain why the picture would represent such an unusual, anecdotal subject as that of the couple greeting and receiving their friend the painter.

Because the answer to the question 'Why this greeting?' is not self-evident, we should ask whether the gesture is really one of greeting. In the examples of representations of a salutation, including *Annunciations*, Campbell adduces, both parties – the recipient as well as the greeter – are present in the image. If Arnolfini's greeting is directed to the men in the mirror, who would be in front of the picture, it is strange that he looks not outward, but obliquely downward in the direction of the woman. To relate his gesture to the visitors instead of to the woman is contrived to say the least. At the same time, the couple's solemn pose and gaze make it hardly likely that Arnolfini is merely greeting his wife. The old-fashioned cut of the women's dress supports the idea of a ceremonial act.¹¹⁴ If we accept this idea, Hall's extensive research begs the question whether a marriage or a betrothal is represented. Refuting Panofsky's assertions about private marriages in the Middle Ages, he demonstrates that the present act could only be a betrothal. In fact, a traveler from Leipzig, Jakob Quelviz, who saw the panel in the Alcazar of Madrid in 1599, describes it, in a text unknown to Hall but mentioned and dismissed by Campbell, as a painting 'where a young man and young woman are joining hands as if they are promising future marriage'. Marcus van Vaernewijck's use of the terms 'trauwinghe' (espousal) and *Fides* are also compatible with the subject, because 'trauwinghe' originally meant 'betrothal' and the oath taken by a man during a betrothal was called *fides*.¹¹⁵

Jakob Quelviz copied two lines from Ovid's *Ars amatoria* which an inventory from 1700 says were inscribed on the frame: 'See that you promise: what harm is there in promises? In promises anyone can be rich.' Campbell, like other authors, believes that this inscription dated from the late sixteenth century, by which time the picture was no longer taken for a portrait, but as a genre scene with a pregnant woman being misled by a false oath. But, aside from the problem that they seem to make the image ridiculous, the lines from the *Ars amatoria* are not irreconcilable with a betrothal as a private ritual whose promise was less binding than that of the public wedding, in which the betrothal became an unbreakable bond. Canon law allowed the rupture of a betrothal for certain reasons.¹¹⁶

Quelviz's observation that there was 'much writing' on the painting corresponds to van Eyck's predilection for inscriptions, both on the panels and on their frames, and the *Ars amatoria* was well known in Jan's day and circle, as Campbell acknowledges. If the inscription was original, then it could have served for erudite amusement, as a light-hearted counterweight to the solemnity of the event, without really casting the betrothal in a dubious light. Drolleries in the margins of books of hours and the figures added to the misericords on choir seats exemplify a long-standing tradition of coupling religious themes and acts with jocular motifs, without compromising their sacredness by any means. Indeed, Jan van Eyck did not hesitate to make such a combination within the portrait: just above the woman's hand laid in that of her husband, the arm of the bench against the wall displays a small grinning monster, a hatted lion with human features. This juxtaposition by a painter such as van Eyck cannot be coincidental, but it is just as unlikely that it ridicules the betrothal gesture. What is conceivable is a whimsical point: promises are fragile things of which the devil is always looking to take advantage. Complementing the figure, the inscription on the frame, from the classical culture with which van Eyck seems to have been familiar,¹¹⁷ could also have alluded to the fragility of promises. Arnolfini and his betrothed may have allowed such a rather daring remark, because the painting itself proved that they were not 'anyone' and not only 'in promises rich'.

We do not need, however, the hypothesis that van Eyck himself inscribed the lines from the *Ars amatoria* on the frame, to see the portrait as a dazzling combination of virtuosity and erudition. The motif of the mirror, which also occurred in other, lost, works by van Eyck, makes this clear. In 1456 the humanist Bartolomeo Fazio described Jan's *Women in a Bath*, saying that of one of the women the artist 'has shown only the face and breast but has then represented the hind parts of her body in a mirror painted on the wall opposite, so that you may see her back as well as her breast'.¹¹⁸ Rudolf Preimesberger has discovered a sophisticated motive for demonstrating the artist's ingenuity in a mirror that reflects figures from the back: such a mirror, like the reflections of the pseudo-sculptures of the Virgin and the angel in the polished stone in van Eyck's *Annunciation Diptych* (Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), could refer to the *paragone*, or competition, between sculpture and painting then being discussed in Italy.¹¹⁹ One of the positions in this discussion held that sculpture is higher than painting, because a statue shows the object from every side. By depicting the backs of figures in a mirror or on a reflecting surface, van Eyck may have been proving that a painter is also capable of presenting an object from more than one angle, and even outdoes sculpture in doing it simultaneously.

The programmatic significance of the Arnolfini mirror probably goes further. Given the inscription above it, Jan van Eyck may, as we saw, be one of the two

figures reflected in the doorway. Two figures are also found reflected in the shield of Saint George in van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* [FIG. 160]. Preimesberger assumes that van Eyck portrayed himself in the shield as well, for two reasons.¹²⁰ First, the Middle Dutch word *schild* meant not only 'shield', but also the panel painted by the *schilder* ('painter'). Second, according to an Antique legend which van Eyck could have known, Phidias represented himself together with the statesman Pericles on the shield of his statue of Athena Parthenos.

While in the *Van der Paele Virgin* the reflecting shield refers to the whole painting as a reflecting *schild*, the Arnolfini mirror has obviously a similar function, indicating that the portrait is a mirror.¹²¹ This clarifies the meaning of the 'was here' (*fuir*) in the inscription above the mirror: the artist presents himself as an observer of the reality reflected by the image. Mirror and inscription allude to Jan's art as a play of illusion in which the viewer is made to surrender so completely to the power of the artist's imagination that he experiences the picture as a simple reflection of reality.

This does not exclude a connection between the mirror and the couple. Since the analogy between marriage and Christ's relation to the Church through his Passion was so commonly accepted, it seems rather obvious that the Passion scenes in the frame refer to the pious intentions of the sitters preparing themselves for the married state.¹²² Some further insight into this question is offered by another work that contained a mirror: van Eyck's lost *Woman at her Toilet*, known in an sixteenth-century copy and included in a seventeenth-century painting of an art gallery. It had many things in common with the *Arnolfini Portrait*.

The copy [FIG. 27] shows two women, one naked and one clothed, in a room that resembles the Arnolfini interior.¹²³ This room, too, has a ceiling with wooden beams, a wooden floor, a hung bed on the right, a shuttered window on the left, a chest below it, and a high-backed chair against the rear wall. A mirror hangs from the central bar of the window. Other similar motifs are an orange on the window-sill and, in the foreground, pattens in the left corner and in the center a small dog, now scarcely visible because of the poor condition of the panel.

In the gallery picture painted by Willem van Haecht [FIG. 28] we see the archducal couple Albert and Isabella of Austria visiting, in the company of the painter Rubens among others, the art gallery of the Antwerp merchant, patron, and collector Cornelis van der Geest in 1615. High up on the right wall near the corner hangs a similar painting of a naked and a clothed woman in an interior, which was probably van Eyck's original [FIG. 29]. Although the comb is no longer visible since on that place the original paint is lost,¹²⁴ all the other aforementioned motifs are here and the dog is somewhat more distinguishable. Judging by the size of the other identifiable pictures, the van Eyck panel was about the same size as the *Arnolfini Portrait*. (The sixteenth-century copy is smaller.)¹²⁵



FIGURE 27 – Copy after Jan van Eyck, *Women at her Toilet (Bathsheba?)*
(27.5 x 16.5 cm), Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Jacques Paviot has related this lost painting and the lost *Women in a Bath* to the iconographic and literary theme of naked women, especially women at their toilet or bathing.¹²⁶ His examples show that the images and texts often had a specific literary, mythological, or biblical subject and an allegorical meaning. In fact, Jan Briels had already suggested that van Eyck's *Woman at her Toilet* was a depiction of *Vanitas* evolved from representations of David and Bathsheba.¹²⁷ I think this image refers to the story of Bathsheba as it is told in *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry pour l'enseignement de ses filles*, written in 1371/72.¹²⁸ This work was well known in van Eyck's time, and in 1420 a copy was mentioned in an inventory of Philip the Good's library.¹²⁹ To teach moral behavior to his daughters and maid-servants, the knight collected examples of 'honest and good ladies whom God praises in his Bible' ('preudefemmes et bonnes dames que Dieu loue en sa Bible') and, as a deterrent, also of:

some wicked women who were capricious and cruel, and who came to a bad end, so that you take good example from it to safeguard yourselves from evil and perdition [...] (aucunes mauvaises femmes qui furent diverses et cruels, lesquelles finirent mal, affin de y prendre bon exemple de vous garder du mal et de la perdition).¹³⁰

One of these negative examples is Bathsheba:

She washed and combed herself at a window so that the king could see her well; her head was very beautiful and blond-haired. (Si se lavoit et pingnoit à une fenestre dont le roy la povoit bien veoir; sy avoit moult beau chief et blont.)

The result was that the king fell into the sin of *luxuria* and had her husband murdered:

And all this sin was caused by her combing and taking pride in her beautiful head, of which much evil came. Thus, any woman must conceal and comb and adorn herself in discretion, and she should not take pride in herself, nor show, to please the world, her beautiful head, or her bosom or breast or anything which you should keep covered. (Et tout ce pechié vint pour soy pingnier et soy orguillir de son beau chief, dont maint mal en vint. Sy se doit toute femme cachier et céleément soy pingner et s'atourner, ne ne se doit pas orguiller, ne monstrier, pour plaire au monde, son bel chef, ne sa gorge, ne sa poitrine, ne riens qui se doit tenir couvert.)¹³¹

This description of Bathsheba at her toilet embroiders on the biblical story (II Samuel 11:2), which says only that the king, looking from his terrace, saw a very

beautiful woman taking a bath, without specifying whether she was indoors, or outdoors as she is usually depicted. The knight says she was indoors, near a window, and not only bathing but also combing her blonde hair, details which agree with van Eyck's picture, where a woman with blonde hair reaches toward a wash basin on the chest, beside which lies a comb.

While David is the protagonist of the biblical story, the knight's version has Bathsheba as the central figure and instigator of his sin. The king is absent from the painting, but his spying might be implied by the window. Of course, this absence could be an argument for rejecting the idea that van Eyck's subject is the story of Bathsheba.¹³² The similarities, however, between the description of Bathsheba by the knight of La Tour Landry and the image suggest that if van Eyck did not represent Bathsheba as *Vanitas*, or more correctly, *Luxuria*,¹³³ at least he depicted *Luxuria*, with an allusion to Bathsheba.

This can be supported by two panels by Hans Memling, each of which resembles the van Eyck picture in certain respects: one shows Bathsheba, bathing indoors and assisted by a servant, and the other *Luxuria* as a naked woman holding a mirror [FIGS. 30, 32]. Whereas the latter is completely allegorical, the *Bathsheba* is more narrative than the *Woman at her Toilet*, because Memling's figure is emerging from a bathtub, which might be inspired by van Eyck's *Women in a Bath* as we know it from Fazio's description. Moreover, Memling showed King David and a messenger behind a window [FIG. 31]; they were cut off in later times and replaced by much smaller figures on a distant terrace.¹³⁴

The similarity of the *Woman at her Toilet* to representations of *Luxuria* like Memling's suggest that the mirror in van Eyck's image referred to *luxuria*, and the bed to the same sin.¹³⁵ This means that, even if the mirror in van Eyck's *Women in a Bath* merely alluded to the *paragone* (although one should not rule out a reference to *luxuria*), and even if in certain miniatures a hung bed in a reception room functions only as a furniture of estate,¹³⁶ van Eyck could give such motifs also a moralizing, symbolic meaning.

Such a conclusion corroborates the view that the mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait* refers to the central theme of the image: the couple and their relationship. The Passion scenes show that the meaning of this mirror is opposite to that of the mirror in the *Woman at her Toilet*. The statue of Saint Margaret, patron of women in childbirth, explains that the bed, too, has a contrasting meaning, because this allusion to offspring connects it to the idea of chastity, which in the context of marriage included a sexuality intended for procreation.¹³⁷

The idea of chastity is also expressed by the brush. As noted in the discussion of the *Mérode Triptych*, a brush is found in Campin's Brussels *Annunciation* [FIG. 8], and as a prominent object in a sparsely furnished room it apparently suggests the purity of the Virgin.¹³⁸ Statue, brush, mirror, and prayer beads are



FIGURE 28 – Willem van Haecht, *Albert and Isabella Visiting the Art-Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest* (104 x 139 cm), Rubenshuis, Antwerp



FIGURE 29 – Willem van Hacht, *Albert and Isabella Visiting the Art-Gallery of Cornelis van der Geest*, detail: Jan van Eyck (?), *Woman at her Toilet*



FIGURE 30 – Hans Memling, *Bathsheba* (191.5 x 84.6 cm), Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart



FIGURE 31 – Hans Memling, *King David* (25.4 x 19.7 cm), Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart



FIGURE 32 – Hans Memling, *Luxuria* (20.2 x 13.1 cm),
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

placed close together in the *Arnolfini Portrait*, as if to ensure that they are not seen as ‘mere objects’.¹³⁹ They elaborate on the gesture of the couple’s joined hands and, as it were, answer the threat of the little monster, just as the whole painting may have answered the joke on the original frame about idle promises.

The absence from the underdrawing of Saint Margaret and the prayer beads is no more reason to deny them having a symbolic meaning than the small differences between the couple’s underdrawn and painted gestures preclude a ritual significance in those gestures. We have seen that the iconographically important fountain was added to the *Adoration of the Lamb* in the *Ghent Altarpiece* at a late stage in painting, even over the green color of the meadow. And in an *Annunciation* attributed to Jan van Eyck [FIG. 120], in Washington, the vase of lilies and the Old Testament scenes inlaid on the floor do not occur in the underdrawing, although they are crucial to the theological content of the image.¹⁴⁰ In fact, like the fountain in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, this vase with lilies, symbol of the Virgin’s purity, was superimposed on the painted surface.

Additions and changes during the process of execution point to a consultation with the patron.¹⁴¹ In van Eyck’s *Virgin and Chancellor Rolin* [FIG. 165], a large purse at Rolin’s belt in the underdrawing was omitted in the painting, and there are also changes in the figure of the Christ Child, who raises his left hand and lowers his right arm in the underdrawing, but in the paint holds an orb and raises his right arm to bless the chancellor. Obviously the artist showed the underdrawing to Rolin who then requested the changes.¹⁴² The fountain in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the lilies in the *Washington Annunciation*, and also the chandelier and chair in the *Arnolfini Portrait*, which were added after the rear wall was painted, indicate that painter and patron discussed a work even at a late stage. The addition of the sculpture of Saint Margaret and of the paternoster may have happened in order to integrate bed, mirror, and brush into a symbolic program that was basically the same as the one constituted by these three motifs but that was given shape now in an even more elaborate and sophisticated way.

This attempt to restore a symbolic meaning to some of the motifs in the portrait raises the question whether such a meaning could apply to the other motifs as well, or whether there is a limit to the symbolic explanations. Although the second option seems to draw an arbitrary line between symbolic and non-symbolic motifs, maintaining such a line is preferable to denying any symbolism to the picture or finding it everywhere. Reason enough, for the moment, not to try to read anything into the dog, the pattens and the oranges, which also occur in the *Woman at her Toilet* and, if they are symbolic motifs, must have contrary meanings in the two images. As for the burning candle, it is so appropriate to the solemnity of the image that it trivializes an attempt to give it a specific symbolic meaning. Above all, it invites us to experience this work of art.

PETRUS CHRISTUS

*The Annunciation, The Nativity, and
The Last Judgment*

In 1850 the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin purchased two panels by Petrus Christus, which had been discovered in Spain, likely the wings of a triptych whose central part is lost [FIGS. 33, 34].¹⁴³ Grisaille depictions of the apostles Peter and Paul, also lost, decorated their backs. The left panel, showing the *Annunciation* and the *Nativity*, is signed at the bottom *petrus christus me fecit*. The right panel represents the *Last Judgment* and is dated 1452.

Petrus Christus probably came from the village of Baerle in North Brabant, but he settled in Bruges, where he became a citizen in 1444, three years after the death of Jan van Eyck, and where he was active until he died in 1475 or 1476. Because of the Eyckian character of his work, it has been supposed that Christus lived in Bruges before he acquired its citizenship, as an apprentice of the older artist. This cannot have been the case because he paid for the citizenship as required of a new arrival, but he may well have been in contact with Jan's shop, which seems to have continued for several years after the master's death.¹⁴⁴

The influence of van Eyck is seen above all in Christus's suggestion of depth and in his use of light and shade to give his figures volume. However, his work, by contrast with van Eyck's refined detailing, rich textures and subtle modeling, is much simpler, more emphasizing basic forms and shapes. The *Last Judgment* provides an especially good comparison, since the composition is based on the one in a diptych in New York's Metropolitan Museum, attributed to van Eyck and an assistant and painted around 1430 [FIG. 35].¹⁴⁵ That *Last Judgment* also has a pendant, namely a *Crucifixion*. In the nineteenth century, these panels flanked an *Adoration of the Magi*, now lost, but the frames suggest that they originally formed a diptych.

In general Petrus Christus imitated van Eyck's striking vertical design: Christ, displaying the stigmata in his hands, is enthroned on a rainbow above the heavenly host and surrounded by the *arma Christi* and angels; the dead rise from the earth, and hell opens below an enormous spread-eagled skeleton surmounted by the archangel Michael. There are also great differences. The figure of Christ is not as huge in relation to the blessed; the number of angels is reduced; only two of the *arma Christi* are present and they are not carried by angels; the Virgin and John the Baptist are the same size as the blessed and no longer flank the Judge, but have joined the elect. These are less numerous and the apostles are placed closer to the foreground. On earth, there are fewer figures as well; the sea is smooth and the waves do not yield up their dead. All the dead arise calmly from a peaceful land, undisturbed by conflagrations. Michael's armor is quite plain and no peacock eyes adorn his wings; the skeleton is no longer winged, and in hell the damned

and the monsters are also reduced in number. Finally, the texts inscribed on the Eyckian painting have disappeared.

On the other hand, Christus made additions, some of which are related to the simplifications. The rainbow, scarcely visible in the model, is quite prominent now that the Virgin and John the Baptist have been banished from the upper zone. The column of the Flagellation has been added on Christ's right, counterbalancing the Cross, now moved from behind to his left. Together with the rainbow they put the Judge in a solid rectangular frame. Michael combats a beast and a devil, and a little devil tries to carry off one of the resurrected. There are fires in hell, and the monsters, reduced in number, have larger mouths; the mouth in the left corner is especially striking. The threat of the diabolical forces is presented in a less masterly way, but it is very clear.

Panofsky called Petrus Christus's version 'an abridged paraphrase rather than a complete translation'. The artist omitted what he considered unsuitable for ordinary people and the panel is consequently more 'readable' than van Eyck's: 'what he thought difficult to understand, he explained; and what he chose to retain, he rendered in simple, vernacular language'.¹⁴⁶

There is no way of telling whether this *Last Judgment* was indeed painted for a less sophisticated audience, but van Eyck's diptych appears to have been painted for a high nobleman who may be portrayed below the cross of the Bad Thief. Concerning the Metropolitan panels, Hans Belting and Dagmar Eichberger have argued that they are pre-eminently readable, albeit not in a 'simple, vernacular language'.¹⁴⁷ It is worth summarizing their analysis of van Eyck's *Last Judgment* and their interpretation of the differences between his and Petrus Christus's version.

As already observed by Panofsky, the Metropolitan *Last Judgment* is based on Saint Augustine's *City of God*, of which van Eyck and his patron would have known its widely circulated French translation. In this work Augustine discusses the earthly and the heavenly city, which are intermingled here on earth, but will reach their separate destination as heaven and hell when the earth passes away at the Last Judgment. This is why van Eyck, instead of showing, as usual, the separation of the saved and the damned, focused on the ultimate contrast between the two cities.

Citing the statement, from the Book of Revelation 20:14, that death and hell will be cast into the lake of fire, which is also quoted on the frame, Augustine says they are the devil himself. Van Eyck combined them in the enormous demonic skeleton, whose left wing is inscribed 'great chaos' (*chaos magnum*) and right wing 'shadow of death' (*umbra mortis*). In accordance to this, hell is rendered in dark tints and filled with a jumble of bodies and monsters. As Belting and Eichberger write: 'From his observations at a fish market, the painter has developed an entire repertoire of demonic creatures, whose glittering skins almost make the



FIGURE 33 – Petrus Christus, *The Annunciation and the Nativity* (134 x 56 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 34 – Petrus Christus, *The Last Judgment* (134 x 56 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

viewer afraid to touch them.’¹⁴⁸ The monsters devouring the damned illustrate Deuteronomy 32:23-24, also on the frame, where God says:

I will heap mischiefs upon them; I will spend mine arrows upon them. They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.

Four slender arrows come into hell, each descending from a text. The outer ones have only the word ‘depart’ (*ite*), the inner ones a whole sentence: ‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire’, Matthew 25:41 (*Ite vos maledicti in ignem aeternam*). The fall of the damned recalls Augustine’s account of the plunge of the godless into hell.

In contrast to the older, symbolic treatments, van Eyck shows Satan’s realm, as it was imagined by Augustine and in his own time, below the earth. The skeleton’s wings, upon which Saint Michael stands, in gleaming armor and brandishing his sword, divides the earth from the underworld. Illustrating the Bible and Augustine, the land and the sea give back their dead, the world perishes in a blaze, and the elect hover above the earth. In heaven the saved throng around the apostles, seated in their choir, in front of which angels salute and conduct representatives of the clerical and secular estates, while the Holy Virgins come from the rear. The space in the stalls is steeply foreshortened, in contrast to the planar zone of Christ, the Virgin, and John the Baptist, whose superhuman size abrogates the earthly rules of perspective.

Belting and Eichberger take the differences between this *Last Judgment* and Christus’s simplified version as proof that van Eyck’s illustrative representation was no longer understood. They consider the enormous, open mouth in the left corner of Christus’s hell as a striking demonstration of this lack of understanding. Traditionally, it symbolizes the gate of hell in horizontal *Last Judgments*, but it does not suit a vertical composition, where hell is situated below the earth.

The same authors place the contrasts between the two versions in the perspective of an evolutionary history of art: van Eyck’s *Last Judgment* belongs to a tradition that originated in manuscript illumination, in which the images are read as texts. A group of miniatures in the so-called *Turin-Milan Hours* are attributed to van Eyck as one of his earliest works [FIGS. 36, 128]. He may have executed them in the early 1420s, when he was in the service of the count of Holland, John of Bavaria. The Metropolitan panels, Belting and Eichberger argue, have the same narrative character as these miniatures. In the course of his career, van Eyck would have transformed panel painting into an autonomous medium: the narrative scene gave way to the non-narrative image, formed by concentration and presentation.

However, there are more sources for early Netherlandish panel painting than the art of illumination.¹⁴⁹ The artistic origins of Campin and van der Weyden, for instance, are found in the sculpture of Tournai. Furthermore, Christus's *Last Judgment* is twice as large as van Eyck's and must have had a different function. Stefanie Buck, noting the geometric structure of the former work and the compact forms of its figures and objects, most of which are rendered in primary colors, emphasizes that the 'small Eyckian diptych was painted for a knowledgeable patron who would have been able to decipher the inscriptions on the frame and within the picture at close range', while the panels by Christus 'were never meant to be studied so closely; they were intended to have their greatest impact on the worshiper at a considerable distance'.¹⁵⁰

The larger size only partly explains the simplification in Christus's *Last Judgment*, for there is a simplified use of the Eyckian style in his smaller works as well. Therefore, beside the evolutionary perspective and the function of the Berlin panels, his artistic individuality should be taken into account. Petrus Christus was a more interesting painter than the comparison of the *Last Judgment* with its model suggests, because he did not only simplify van Eyck's art but also developed one of its most important aspects: a convincing illusion of depth.¹⁵¹ His *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saint Jerome and Saint Francis* of 1457 [FIG. 104] is the earliest known Netherlandish picture constructed on a linear perspective with the help of a single vanishing point. Since Christus did not use it for the interior in the *Annunciation*, he was still unaware of this method – introduced in Italy by Filippo Brunelleschi – when he painted the Berlin panels. Nevertheless, the *Annunciation* shows that the artist was already keen to render space convincingly and that his later acquisition of the new perspectival device met a conscious need.

Although the artistic quality of his pictures is limited by the short proportions and rigid poses of the figures, Christus's art expresses a personality who drew upon the Eyckian tradition thoughtfully and selectively, and transformed it.¹⁵² The same attitude can be sensed in his relation to Campin and van der Weyden, and the Berlin panels attest to this multiple orientation.¹⁵³ The angel of the *Annunciation* resembles the angels in the Brussels and Mérode *Annunciations* [FIGS. 7, 8], while the scene as a whole resembles a Rogierian *Annunciation* in the Louvre [FIG. 37].¹⁵⁴ The *Nativity* is influenced by the one in Dijon attributed to Campin [FIG. 5].

Christus was not the only painter of his and later generations who paid attention to the works of his great predecessors. For the borrowing of motifs and compositions, an essential tool was found in drawings made in preparation for or copied after these panels.¹⁵⁵ While Christus's familiarity with the style and technique of Jan van Eyck exceeds what a drawing could impart,¹⁵⁶ his *Annunciation* and *Nativity* make it clear that he had access to drawings from Campin's and



FIGURE 35 – Jan van Eyck, *The Crucifixion and the Last Judgment* (each panel 56.5 x 19.7 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FIGURE 36 – Hand G, *Funeral Mass*, *The Turin-Milan Hours*, fol. 116r, Museo Civico, Turin

Rogier's workshops. The space in the Louvre *Annunciation* betrays the influence of van Eyck, and the Dijon *Nativity* has a spatial character as well. Thus, Christus chose models that suited his purposes, and then transformed them in his own style: simplifying the compositions, softening and rounding the Campinesque and Rogierian figures, stabilizing their movements and quieting their expressions.

The original ensemble to which Christus's *Annunciation*, *Nativity* and *Last Judgment* belonged; the wishes of the donor; the demands made by the size of the panels and the distance from which they would be viewed; the painter's training and contacts with other artistic traditions; his ambitions to develop a style of his own; the extent of his technical ability: all these factors, about which, for the greatest part, we can only guess, affected the character of the Berlin panels.

DIRK BOUTS

The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament

The *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* by Dirk Bouts [FIG. 38] can be admired in exactly the location for which it was intended: the chapel of the Holy Sacrament in Louvain's collegiate church of Saint Peter in Louvain.¹⁵⁷ However, like the *Ghent Altarpiece*, it was dismembered and parts of it were dispersed; this dismemberment occurred in the early eighteenth century. In 1815 and at an unknown date the Boisserée brothers purchased from the von Bettendorf collection, which was first in Brussels and from 1814 in Aachen, the two upper panels of the four that make up the wings. These panels entered the Pinakothek in Munich after King Ludwig I of Bavaria bought the Boisserée collection in 1827 [SEE CHAPTER 2, P. 185]. The two lower panels were acquired from the von Bettendorf collection by the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin in 1834. The central panel remained in Louvain, but was removed from the church when the building was set on fire in 1914. Thanks to the Treaty of Versailles, in 1919, the four side panels, together with the parts of the *Ghent Altarpiece* that were in Berlin, returned to Belgium and the entire altarpiece was re-installed in the church of Saint Peter. But the wings found themselves once more in Germany, in 1942 taken by the occupying forces. They returned in 1945. The triptych was restored in 1997-1998.

Although this altarpiece is the work of Louvain's most important painter of the fifteenth century, his name became forgotten. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the archivist of Louvain, Edward Van Even, discovered and published payments to Dirk Bouts, including the artist's receipt for his final payment in 1468, and the contract whereby the work was commissioned in 1464. Unfortunately, the original documents were destroyed when the church was burnt of in 1914. The contract is analyzed in Chapter 7 [PP. 326-366].



FIGURE 37 – Rogier van der Weyden (or follower), *The Annunciation*,
(87 x 91.5 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris

The triptych was ordered by the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament, two hundred years after the institution of *Corpus Christi*, one of the most important ecclesiastical feasts and dedicated to the veneration of the Holy Sacrament. The commission must have been occasioned by this jubilee.¹⁵⁸ The contract stipulated that the central panel was to portray the Last Supper and the interior of the wings four subjects from the Old Testament: Melchizedek, the Passover, the gathering of the Manna, and Elijah. Two professors of theology at Louvain's university were to advise Bouts on the depiction of the themes.

The central panel [FIG. 39] shows Christ and the apostles seated around a table in a late Gothic hall, watched by four men in the background who are probably the masters of the brotherhood. Christ holds a host above a chalice, and makes the same blessing gesture that a priest makes at the moment of transubstantiation, when the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.¹⁵⁹ The centrality of Christ is emphasized by the enframing fireplace and his raised hand is at the exact center of the composition. A noticeable central axis, accentuated by the chandelier and the vertical slat at the back of the fireplace, runs through the figure of Christ, the host, the chalice, and a large tin platter empty save for a few scraps of bread, which refers to the eating of the Paschal Lamb. In the tympanum above a door beside the fireplace, a statue of Moses with the tablets of the Law likewise alludes to the Old Covenant, which was supplanted by the New Covenant through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.

The figures are defined by clear contours and the large fields of saturated color of their mantles and tunics, enlivened by folds, stand out against the white tablecloth. The powerful orthogonal lines of the ceiling beams and of the patterns in the tile floor form a deep box of space, opened to the world of the viewer, although a certain distance is effectuated by the empty floor in front of the table. The lighting is for the most part even, except for the deep shadow on the window wall, which makes a bold contrast with the lighted wall of the arcade on the opposite side. This contrast is counterbalanced by the subtler contrast of the predominantly tan-colored floor and the brown ceiling. All together, the clear articulation of the figures, the balance between accessibility and remoteness in the space, the symmetrical, static composition, and the careful use of color and light create a penetrating, yet formal, expressiveness perfectly suited to the solemnity of the moment represented.

The events from the Old Testament on the side panels were regarded by medieval theologians as prefigurations, or types, of the institution of the Eucharist. These were undoubtedly found by the theologians mentioned in the contract as Bouts's advisers. They did not have to do much research, for the first three subjects, Melchizedek, the Passover, and the gathering of the Manna, are discussed and illustrated in relation to the Last Supper in the *Mirror of Human*

Salvation (Speculum humanae salvationis).¹⁶⁰ This popular work was available in both illustrated manuscripts and books made with the new technology of print. The fourth subject, Elijah in the Desert, was considered as a type of the Eucharist by several theologians, including Thomas Aquinas.

The meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek [FIG. 40], shown at the top of the left wing, is reported in Genesis 14:18-20. Abraham, engaged in battle with the local kings of Canaan, is greeted by Melchizedek, king of Salem and a priest of God, who brings him bread and wine. The Middle Ages regarded Melchizedek as a type of Christ and his gifts, of course, as prefigurations of the Eucharist. Bouts dressed the king in priestly robes, put a crowned miter on his head, and gave his scepter to an attendant at the far left. Abraham, in splendid armor, salutes the king, while his lance and dagger are held by an attendant at the right. His troops come between the hills behind him, and on the other side the meeting is discussed by two men in fifteenth-century black gowns, the theological advisors who ordered the program.

The Passover scene below [FIG. 41] follows Exodus 12:1-28, which tells how the Israelites on the eve of their departure from Egypt first partook of this meal, with which they celebrated their liberation ever since. According to medieval theologians, the Exodus prefigured man's deliverance from sin through the Crucifixion, and the Passover the Eucharist which was instituted when Christ and his disciples celebrated the Passover on the eve of his Passion. A group of Israelites dine standing, holding their staffs in token of their readiness to leave Egypt, around a table laden with the Paschal Lamb and the prescribed unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

The gathering of the Manna on the right wing [FIG. 42] is based on Exodus 16:2-36. As the Israelites wandered through the desert for forty years God fed them with manna, which fell from heaven like rain. The manna was considered to prefigure Christ, the living bread from Heaven, of which the faithful partake in the Eucharist. Scattered about in a bare landscape the manna is being gathered by the Israelites at dawn. The first light glows above the mountains as God appears in the otherwise dark sky.

I Kings 19:1-8 tells of the prophet Elijah's flight into the desert to escape Queen Jezebel [FIG. 43]. Sitting under a juniper tree he 'requested for himself that he might die' and went to sleep. Twice awakened by an angel who gave him food and water, he gained strength to travel forty days and forty nights 'unto Horeb the mount of God'. Here Elijah is asleep in a desert landscape; having placed a flask and a loaf of bread by his head, the angel bends down to touch his shoulder. In the background the prophet is seen again, striding into the mountains.

Like the central picture, these scenes are characterized by taut compositions, distinct fields of color, clearly drawn figures, and mostly uniform lighting.



FIGURE 38 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*
(central panel 183 x 152.7 cm; side panels: *Abraham and Melchizedek*
87.6 x 70.2 cm; *The Passover* 87.8 x 71.3 cm; *The Gathering of the Manna*
87.6 x 70.6 cm; *Elijah in the Desert* 88 x 71.2 cm),
Church of Saint Peter, Louvain



FIGURE 39 – Dirck Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*,
central panel: *The Last Supper*



FIGURE 40 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, left wing,
upper panel: *Abraham and Melchizedek*



FIGURE 41 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, right wing,
lower panel: *The Passover*



FIGURE 42 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, right wing,
upper panel: *The Gathering of the Manna*



FIGURE 43 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, right wing,
lower panel: *Elijah in the Desert*



FIGURE 44 – Dirk Bouts, *The Triptych of Saint Erasmus* (central panel 82 x 80.5 cm; each wing 82 x 34.2 cm), Church of Saint Peter, Louvain

The series is introduced by the two professors in the first scene,¹⁶¹ and concluded by the small figure of Elijah walking away in the background of the last.

Because it is so well documented, the *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* holds an exceptional place within early Netherlandish painting. Its function is clear: it was ordered by people devoted to the Holy Sacrament for one of the two chapels that fell under their patronage. As for the artistic form, Bouts used a style excellently suited to the theological content of the subjects. However, this style also shapes his other works, such as the *Triptych of Saint Erasmus* [FIG. 44], which he painted for the brotherhood's other chapel. This painting, which is also in its original location, is a remarkable static portrayal of a gruesome martyrdom. Similar to Petrus Christus, Bouts is fond of clarity and order, but he is a creator of more powerful works, weighted with meaning through the combination of lucid draftsmanship, severe compositions, and a restrained but intense palette.

Bouts came from Haarlem and in 1448 married the daughter of a patrician family of Louvain, Katharina van der Bruggen, nicknamed *Metten Gelde* ('With the Money'), but he is not documented as a resident of that city until 1457. It could be that, following a training in the Southern Netherlands, perhaps under van der Weyden who provided the types for his figures, he returned to Haarlem and worked there for nearly ten years before returning to Louvain. In 1468, the year in which he completed the *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, he received two commissions from the town council: four Justice scenes and a triptych with the *Last Judgment*. In 1472 he was appointed official painter of Louvain. By the time of his death in 1475 he had completed one of the two scenes of the *Justice of the Emperor Otto III* and half of the other [FIGS. 45, 46].¹⁶² The story tells of a count who, falsely accused of seduction by the empress, is beheaded. But his widow demonstrates his innocence by grasping a red-hot bar without harm and the emperor orders the execution of his own wife. Bouts finished the *Last Judgment*, parts of which may survive in two wings in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille and in a fragment with a bust of Christ in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm.¹⁶³

Like Petrus Christus, Bouts drew inspiration from more than one of his forerunners. The *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* is a striking example. While the types and the drawing of the figures are indebted to van der Weyden, the three-dimensional character of the central image strongly recalls Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus. In fact, the space was patently designed with the help of one-point perspective. Reflectography has discovered a single vanishing point marked at the top of the fireplace and put there before the paint was applied.¹⁶⁴ Bouts's concern for an illusion of deep space prevented his imitating van der Weyden's rhythmic arrangement of figures parallel to the picture plane, but he found another way to acknowledge the surface, that is, by structuring the *Last Supper* according to geometrical relationships. To mention only a few: the boundary between



FIGURE 45 – Dirk Bouts, *The Justice of Emperor Otto III: The Beheading of the Innocent Count* (324.5 x 182 cm), Musée royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels



FIGURE 46 – Dirk Bouts, *The Justice of Emperor Otto III: The Ordeal by Fire* (323.5 x 181.5 cm), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

floor and back wall is half as high and the horizon approximately two-thirds as high as the overall surface, the width of the back wall is approximately half the total width, and the vanishing point lies on the central axis at the peak of an equilateral triangle based on the lower frame.

Aimé and Henri Pauwels, who analyzed the perspective and the geometric arrangements of the *Last Supper*, think that this deliberate use of proportions could be linked to the milieu of the University of Louvain, but this remains speculative.¹⁶⁵ There is no way of knowing whether the members of the brotherhood, viewing the *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, recognized its intellectual character. If they did not, Bouts's artistic motives were not determined by his clientele, or at least not directly. Perhaps he wanted to do justice to the loftiness of the subject by applying rules that would subliminally create a mood of proportion and harmony. Or was he engaged in an artistic 'debate' with other painters and did he consider the works of his predecessors as a challenge to synthesize and add new inventions to what they had achieved?

Because there was no cultural climate in the Burgundian Netherlands for art-theoretical writing, it is difficult to determine to what extent the notion of artistic self-consciousness was cultivated, but it was certainly present. We have seen that Jan van Eyck alluded to his artistry by depicting himself in a mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait* and on the shield of Saint George in the *Virgin and Canon van der Paele*. Till Borchert has analyzed van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* [FIG. 140] as a work in which the artist competed with both his master, Campin, who painted a *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*, lost but known through a copy, and with van Eyck, whose *Virgin and Chancellor Rolin* [FIG. 165] served as a model for Rogier's picture.¹⁶⁶ The possibility that Bouts, too, consciously vied with other painters should not be ruled out.

There is one important case in which competition, even rivalry, is explicitly mentioned in connection with an early Netherlandish master. In 1495 the Nuremberg humanist Hieronymus Münzer admired the *Ghent Altarpiece*. He wrote that 'another great painter' had attempted to imitate it and had become 'melancholic and insipient' in consequence. While artists are a rich subject for legend, this particular story is not a mere *topos*,¹⁶⁷ but probably concerns a known painter and his monumental creation: Hugo van der Goes and the *Portinari Altarpiece*.

HUGO VAN DER GOES

The Portinari Altarpiece

In 1550 the Italian biographer of artists Giorgio Vasari wrote that a painting in Santa Maria Nuova in Florence was made by a certain 'Ugo d'Anversa'. The work is

the *Portinari Altarpiece* [FIGS. 47, 48] and the painter has been identified as Hugo van der Goes, though nothing is known about any relation between him and Antwerp. Van der Goes was probably born in Ghent, where he joined the painters' guild in 1467. In the late 1470s he became a lay brother, without abandoning his profession, in a monastery of the Modern Devotion, the Red Cloister (*Rode Klooster*) in the vicinity of Brussels. He died there in 1482.¹⁶⁸

Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources make it clear that Hugo van der Goes was regarded as a very important master, no less celebrated than his contemporary Hans Memling. The *Portinari Altarpiece* and other works which have been attributed to its painter on the ground of connoisseurship are of an exceptional quality. Therefore, it is most unlikely that this oeuvre was not executed by the famous Hugo van der Goes, but by an artist of the same Christian name not mentioned in any other source than Vasari's biography.¹⁶⁹ Given Vasari's other mistakes regarding Netherlandish masters, the addition of an incorrect place-name to the painter's first name, the more important name in the fifteenth century, is not surprising.

As the creator of the *Portinari Altarpiece*, the only early Netherlandish painting that can be compared with the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Hugo van der Goes fits Münzer's description of an artist who strove to imitate the famous polyptych. Münzer tells us: 'Thus there appeared another great painter who wanted to imitate this painting in his own work, and he became melancholic and insipient.'¹⁷⁰ The words 'in his own work' suggest that Münzer's 'imitari' should not be taken as 'copying', but as 'to imitate' or to 'emulate'. Furthermore, according to one of his fellow monks, van der Goes suffered from severe depression toward the end of his life. There is thus reason to believe this was the artist Münzer had in mind, even if the causal connection between Hugo's ambition to compete with the *Ghent Altarpiece* and his depression may be a fabrication.

A visual analysis of the *Portinari Altarpiece* confirms that van der Goes was bent on matching the earlier painting.¹⁷¹ The two works are about the same size. In its open state, the *Ghent Altarpiece* measures ca. 3.75 meters by 5.20 meters, the *Portinari Altarpiece* ca. 2.50 meters by 5.85 meters, which makes them the two largest fifteenth-century Netherlandish paintings in existence. Like the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Hugo's triptych contains monumental figures and narrative scenes, but the arrangement is completely different. By the time he painted this work, some forty years after the polyptych, an altarpiece with so many different compartments would not have suited contemporary taste. The number of scenes is drastically reduced and all the principal figures are monumental.

On the exterior [FIG. 47] the angel and the Virgin of the Annunciation are represented like statues, *en grisaille*, in separate niches. With these exterior pseudo-sculptures van der Goes placed himself in the tradition of Robert Campin,



FIGURE 47 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, exterior, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



FIGURE 48 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, interior
(central panel 253 x 304 cm; each wing 253 x 141 cm),
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck, but he also gave his own twist to that tradition by endowing the stone figures with an unprecedented life. Panofsky wrote that 'they seem to have undergone a double metamorphosis as though human beings had first been turned to stone and then brought back to life'.¹⁷²

The interior [FIG. 48] shows the *Nativity* adored by the Portinari family and their patron saints on the wings. The size of the saints looming above the members of the family indicates that they belong to a different sphere of reality. On the left wing are Tommaso Portinari, his sons Antonio and Pigello, Saint Thomas with a spear as his attribute, and Saint Anthony with his bell, cane, and prayer beads; on the right wing Tommaso's wife, Maria Baroncelli, their daughter Margherita, Saint Mary Magdalen with her ointment jar, and Saint Margaret with a dragon at her feet. The presence of all the groups on the three panels in one location creates a continuous ensemble, whereas in the *Ghent Altarpiece* the several landscapes are connected only by a common outline. Hugo further emphasized the connection between the different parts by extending the stable from the middle panel to the left wing.

The space in the *Nativity* scene [FIG. 49] may be compared to that in the *Adoration of the Lamb* [FIG. 22]. The ground stretches more smoothly into depth, but the arrangement around the object of adoration is likewise circular. However, the earlier attempt to arrange the figures in a three-dimensional circle is rather awkward: the altar with the Lamb is too high on the panel and the added fountain creates a second focus, although there is no mistaking that the figures kneeling round the fountain adore the Lamb. With van der Goes there is no trace of such a hesitation. The angels, Saint Joseph, the animals, and the shepherds form a solid circle around the Virgin and the Child, which is closed at the front by a sheaf of grain, and flowers in an apothecary jar and in a glass. Two angels at the far right, facing the viewer, catch the eye and send it to the left, so that we may enter the circle.

The figures themselves are circumscribed by the stable and the edifice behind it, the palace of King David, from whose stem Christ was born. Hovering angels mollify the contrast between the figures and the angles of the architectural elements, and form a deeper but less rigid and less complete circle. The shepherds advancing at the right provide a connection with the landscape, which begins where the midwives, mentioned in the apocryphal gospels, stand behind a gate, while the annunciation to the shepherds takes place on a distant hill.

There is much less depth on the wings [FIGS. 50, 51].¹⁷³ The relation of the figures to the setting recalls the compositions of Rogier van der Weyden. The saints stand in front of the landscape, which, constructed of overlapping layers, is more parallel to the picture plane than receding. On the mountain in the left wing Joseph and Mary journey to Bethlehem, while the three kings proceed through the landscape opposite.



FIGURE 49 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*,
central panel: *The Nativity*



FIGURE 50 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, interior,
left wing: *Tommaso Portinari with his sons Antonio and Pigello,*
Saint Thomas and Saint Antony Abbot



FIGURE 51 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, interior, right wing: *Maria Baroncelli with her daughter Margherita, Saint Margaret and Saint Mary Magdalen*

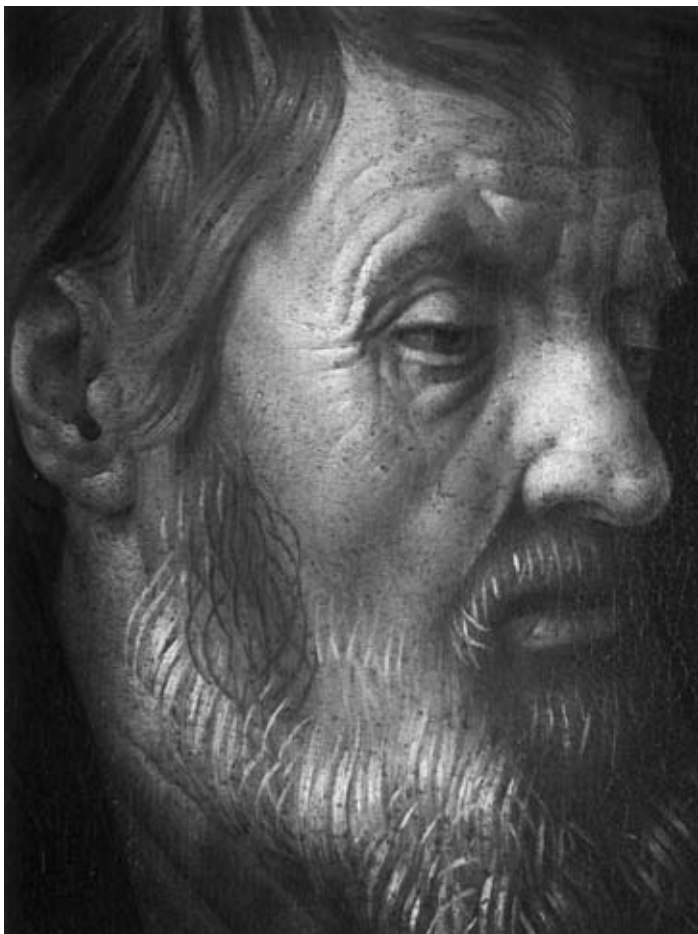


FIGURE 52 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*,
central panel: *Head of Saint Joseph*

Hugo demonstrated his ability to combine Eyckian and Rogierian elements also in the modeling of the figures. In Joseph's head [FIG. 52] he went beyond the robust modeling of the heads of John the Baptist [FIG. 23] and the pilgrims and hermits in the *Ghent Altarpiece* to a broadly pictorial appearance. At the same time, the Virgin's face [FIG. 53] is flatter than the faces of the two Mary figures in the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 21, 23] due to a less pronounced lighting, while emphasis is laid on certain lines, such as those of the eyelids and the jaw. Joseph comes from the world of van Eyck, Mary from van der Weyden's. In one respect the borrowing is almost literal: the Virgin's pose closely resembles, in reverse, that of the Virgin in Rogier's *Altarpiece of Pierre Bladelin*, whose central panel also contains a *Nativity* [FIG. 54].

The male saints and Tommaso Portinari, and the female saints and Maria Baroncelli present a similar, if less pronounced duality. The faces of most angels are drawn rather sharply, but those of the two in the upper left corner are more pictorial. For the group of the shepherds [FIG. 55], however, Hugo drew upon a third tradition: the modeling in contrasting light and shade of the jaws and cheekbones of the younger shepherds recalls the face of Robert Campin's *Bad Thief* [FIG. 11]. Their expressions of surprise, reverence, and joy continue the rendering of emotion that distinguishes the art of both Campin and van der Weyden. In the countenance of the shepherd at the back Hugo achieved an expression strangely comparable to that of a damned soul in Rogier's *Last Judgment* [FIG. 56]. Although the emotions are completely different – awe in the case of the shepherd and horror in that of the condemned man – both images use the same devices to convey these feelings: a gaping mouth with conspicuous teeth and wide open eyes.

In concert with the monumentality of the figures, the planes of the landscape are rather large and the details of the architecture are so judicious that they do not detract from the figures. The play of light on the cracked and pitted column, however, recalls Jan van Eyck's sense of texture. Hugo's virtuosity is even more evident in the still life that closes the circle [FIG. 57]. The flowers symbolize the virtues and sorrows of the Virgin and the sheaf of grain alludes to Bethlehem, 'House of Bread', where Christ, the living bread of heaven, was born.¹⁷⁴ With great subtlety the sheaf of grain shimmers through the glass.

No less striking are the costume of Mary Magdalen and the vestments of some of the angels. The iconographic tradition of the Magdalen as a courtesan allowed the artist to drape her in costly brocade and fur and to give her an impressive coiffure, enveloped by long plaits in the most minute detail. The angels in the right foreground of the *Nativity* rival the musical angels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in the richness of their liturgical vestments.¹⁷⁵ The other angels wear the plain albs of assistants in the mass, like those who kneel round the altar in the *Adoration of the Lamb*, except the angel hovering above Joseph [FIG. 58]. He wears a cope which



FIGURE 53 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*,
central panel: *Head of the Virgin*

displays the same motif, the face of Christ, as the cope of one of van Eyck's singing angels [FIG. 59]. The alb of the angel above the manger [FIG. 60], half shaded and half brightly lit, whirls upward in sharp folds, a late Gothic motif far removed from the art of van Eyck, but found in the angels of Rogier van der Weyden [FIGS. 61, 108]. The dramatic chiaroscuro is Hugo's own invention.

Combining the heritage of van Eyck with other artistic traditions and transforming the borrowings from his predecessors into an imposing, monumental style, Hugo van der Goes created a work no less unique than the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

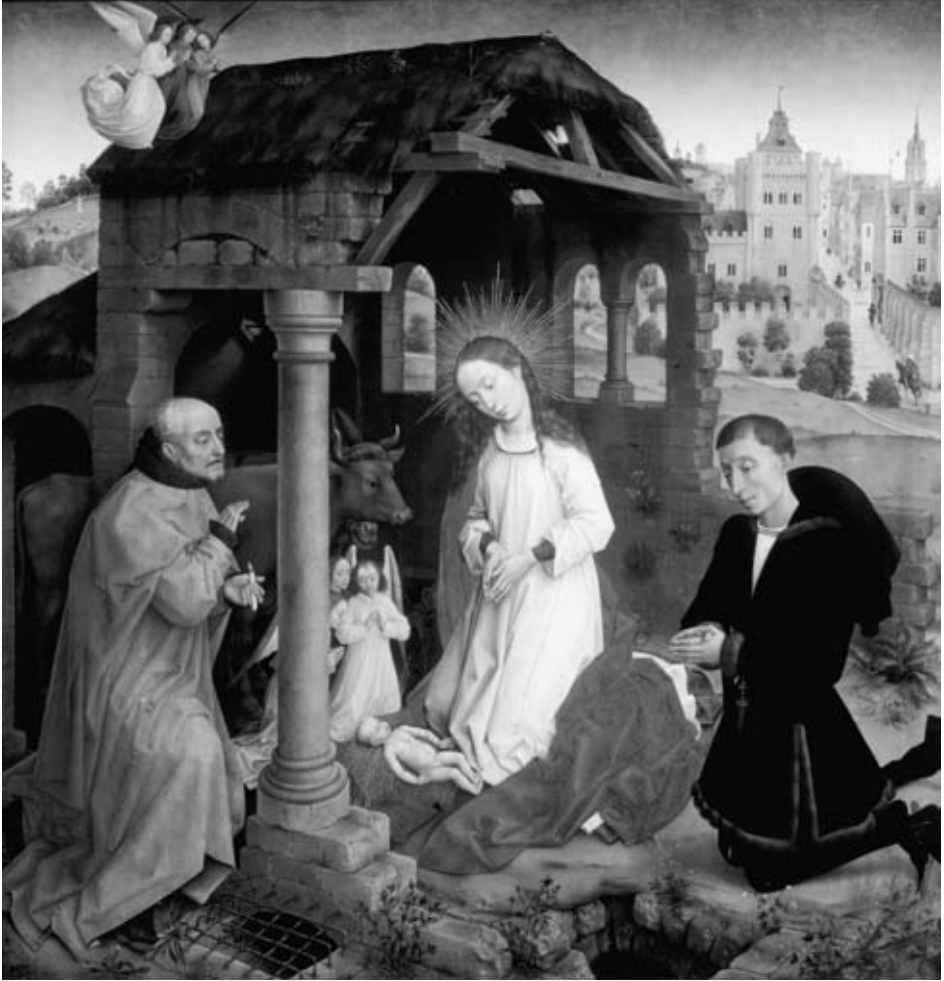


FIGURE 54 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Altarpiece of Pierre Bladelin*,
central panel (93.5 x 92 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 55 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, central panel: *Shepherds*

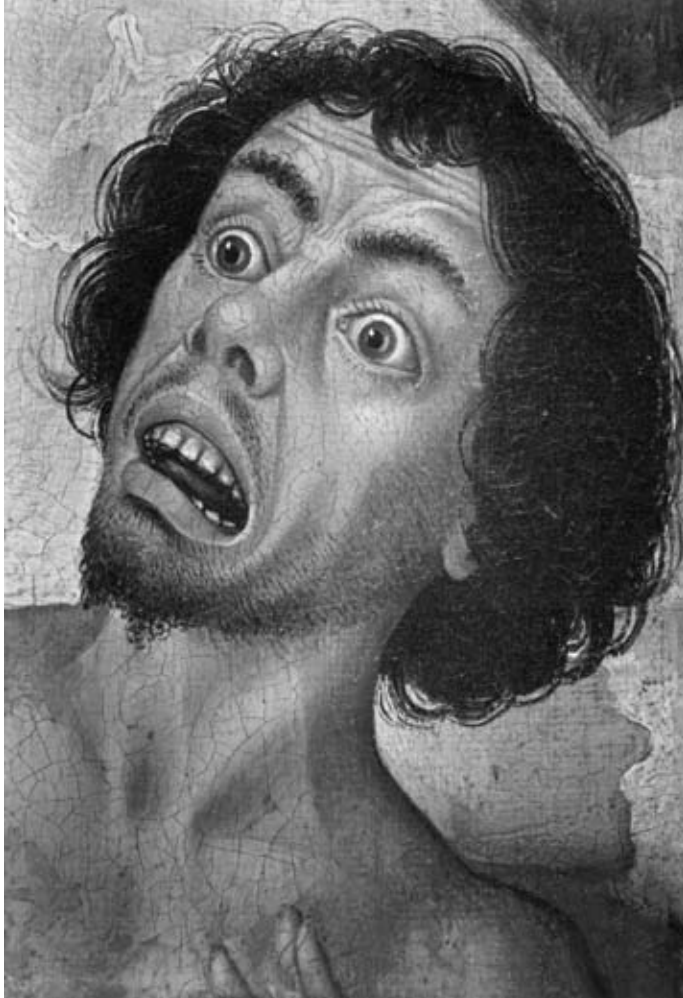


FIGURE 56 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Polyptych of the Last Judgment*,
interior: *Damned soul*



FIGURE 57 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*,
central panel: *Flower still life*

While Christus and Bouts also made use of several traditions, van der Goes used them more explicitly, and the Eyckian and Rogierian angels next to each other almost seem to have a programmatic significance.

However much the *Portinari Altarpiece* resulted from van der Goes's aspirations, its genesis was also influenced by its donor, who had ambitions of his own. Indeed, Tommaso Portinari could match van der Goes on that count, although his ambitions lay naturally in the social realm.¹⁷⁶ From the 1440s this Florentine patrician worked in Bruges for the local branch of the Medici bank. He was placed in charge in 1465, after he had managed to replace Angelo Tani as director. The year before, he had written to Cosimo de' Medici that he would resign if the 'Turk' Tani, who was then in Florence, returned. Tani remained one of his partners, but on much less favorable terms than Portinari, whose status was also raised by becoming a councillor at the Burgundian Court. When Charles the Bold married in 1468, Tommaso was at the head of the Florentine nation in the wedding procession. Initially, he was not permitted to take risks with the financially unreliable Charles, but from 1473 he had the freedom to act at his own discretion. After Charles's death in battle in 1477, it came to light that he had lent the duke enormous amounts. Cosimo's successor, Lorenzo il Magnifico, accused him of having neglected the interests of the Medici to win Charles's favor and to make himself important. Also in other ways he had behaved recklessly and Lorenzo washed his hands of the branch, leaving it to Portinari to deal with its debts.

Tommaso partly recovered from his situation and was later entrusted with missions by Maximilian of Austria, Philip the Handsome and, after a reconciliation, even Lorenzo. He received tributes from the city of Bruges and held public office in Florence, where he died in 1501. The *Portinari Altarpiece* was not sent to Florence until 1483, a year after van der Goes's death.¹⁷⁷ Following its voyage from Bruges to Pisa by way of Sicily, the painting was taken up the Arno to Florence, where sixteen strong men hauled it from the Porta di San Frediano to Santa Maria Nuova.¹⁷⁸ It remained there for over four hundred years, until it was moved to the Uffizi around 1900. The Portinari were the patrons of the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova, founded by an ancestor of Tommaso. Its church, where the triptych was installed on the high altar, was the family's place of burial. A common grave lay before the altar and members of the family were portrayed on the walls. The altarpiece placed Tommaso, his wife and children at the center of attention.¹⁷⁹

Since the youngest of the children depicted was born in or after 1473 and the next child not later than 1479, Hugo must have worked on the painting in the intervening period, although we do not know when he started or finished it.¹⁸⁰ Portinari had previously awarded two, more modest commissions to Hans Memling: a devotional triptych, with portraits of himself and his wife [FIGS. 117, 118]



FIGURE 58 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, central panel: *Angel*



FIGURE 59 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, interior, upper register: *Singing Angels*



FIGURE 60 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Portinari Altarpiece*, central panel: *Angel*



FIGURE 61 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments*,
left panel: *Angel*



FIGURE 62 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of the Last Judgment*, exterior, Muzeum Narodowe, Gdańsk



FIGURE 63 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of the Last Judgment*, interior
(central panel 221 x 161 cm; each wing 223.5 x 72.5 cm),
Muzeum Narodowe, Gdańsk



FIGURE 64 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of the Last Judgment*, interior, central panel: *Elect soul in Saint Michael's scale* (Tommaso Portinari)

flanking a, lost, image of the Virgin and Child,¹⁸¹ and a panel with scenes from the Passion, which contains small portraits of the couple (Galleria Sabauda, Turin). His desire for a more ambitious project may have been stimulated by the altarpiece with the *Last Judgment* which Memling painted for his former superior, Angelo Tani [FIGS. 62, 63].¹⁸² Among the blessed in this altarpiece are a number of portraits of, presumably, members of the Florentine nation in Bruges. Most remarkably, the face of the elect soul in Saint Michael's scales [FIG. 64], although restored, unmistakably bears the features of Portinari. Tani could have hardly wanted to give such prominence to his rival, indeed he may not have planned to include him at all, for the head is painted on a piece of tin foil which has been glued to the surface, probably at a late stage in the execution.¹⁸³ Apparently, he was too dependent on Portinari to refuse him such a central place in his painting. In fact, when the *Last Judgment* was sent to Italy in 1473, it was part of a shipment in Portinari's name. The ship was hijacked en route to England by Polish pirates and taken to Gdańsk, where the altarpiece is still today, although it was plundered by the French under Napoleon, by the Germans in World War II, and by the Russians in 1945.

Michael Rohlmann discovered that the *Last Judgment* was intended for a chapel of the Badia in Fiesole, near Florence.¹⁸⁴ We do not know whether Portinari ordered his altarpiece before Memling's was stolen and expected that the *Last Judgment* would be eclipsed, in the eyes of the Florentines, by his own larger work, but the short time between their execution, and the relationship of the donors suggest that the one commission led to the other.

The destination of the *Portinari Altarpiece* for Florence need not affect the assumption that van der Goes was emulating with van Eyck, since Jan's fame, like Rogier's, extended beyond the Alps. In fact, the Italian destination may have influenced its composition, because monumentality was much more characteristic of Italian than of Netherlandish art. Hugo's creation would be an example of what the Flemings could do and a demonstration that they, too, were capable of a painting of great allure. Its installation in Santa Maria Nuova became a direct confrontation with southern artists, inasmuch as it formed part of a decorative program with, on the walls, scenes from the life of the Virgin, since destroyed, by Domenico Veneziano and Andrea del Castagno.¹⁸⁵

The variety of artistic means in the *Portinari Altarpiece* suggests that the so-called *Monforte Altarpiece* [FIG. 65], likewise attributed to Hugo van der Goes, is an earlier work, painted between 1467, when Hugo became an independent master, and the mid-1470s. The *Monforte Altarpiece*, of which only the central *Adoration of the Magi* survives, likewise expresses Hugo's interest in monumentality, albeit on a less colossal scale. Illusion of depth, a warm palette, an emphatic handling of light



FIGURE 65 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Monforte Altarpiece* (146.5/156.5 x 241.5 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 66 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Death of the Virgin* (147.8 x 122.5 cm),
Groeningemuseum, Bruges

to model the figures, and a virtuoso rendering of fur, brocade, gold, and stone place this work directly in the Eyckian tradition. One can well imagine that later in his career, under the pressure of the Portinari commission, van der Goes sought to extend his artistic range.

In contrast to the *Monforte Altarpiece*, a *Death of the Virgin* [FIG. 66] and a *Nativity* [FIG. 67] present a limited depth, linear contours, de-materializing light and colors, and a paucity of textural display. Technical research has confirmed the view that the *Monforte Altarpiece* predates the *Portinari Altarpiece* and that the *Death of the Virgin* and the *Nativity* belong to Hugo's latest works.¹⁸⁶ Obviously, he moved from one extreme to another. The explanation of these discrepancies within a period of ca. fifteen years is one of the most intriguing problems in the field of early Netherlandish art.

Panofsky looked for the cause of the late style in Hugo's unstable personality. Van der Goes was, perhaps, 'the first artist to live up to a concept unknown to the Middle Ages but cherished by the European mind ever after, the concept of a genius both blessed and cursed with his diversity from ordinary human beings'.¹⁸⁷ The same author also perceived a collision between artistic problems in the *Portinari Altarpiece*, a conflict between 'great form', representing 'a humanistic glorification and idealization of man', and the 'minutiae of optical appearance', as indicative of a 'non-humanistic postulate of total particularization'. In the late paintings, 'the outbreak of the storm can be witnessed'; here, the irrationality of space, light, color, and expression is symptomatic of the artist's mental illness.¹⁸⁸

Susan Koslow rejected this interpretation of the late style as anachronistic.¹⁸⁹ A style based on irrational distortions of reality would not have been accepted by van der Goes's patrons. Instead, to explain the character of the *Death of the Virgin*, she chose an approach based on its subject, destination and function, and on the spiritual concerns of the religious community to which the artist belonged. On the ground of an eighteenth-century inventory, she surmised that the painting was made for the Cistercian Abbey of the Dunes at Bruges, perhaps for a chapel dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, where masses were said for abbots past and present. She proposed that one of those abbots, the famous Jan Crabbe, was the donor, whose choice of van der Goes would have been influenced by the sober character of the Modern Devotion, corresponding to that of the Cistercian order:

To stress the solemnity of the event and its miraculous nature, van der Goes may have decided that material richness would be distracting and indecorous, particularly for an altarpiece depicting the death of the Virgin commissioned by Cistercians whose professed ideals were at variance with material splendor.¹⁹⁰

Koslow also gave another explanation, borrowed from the Italian humanist culture: Hugo obeyed a basic rule of rhetoric, namely that the theme should be treated in an appropriate form.

The proposed connection with the Cistercian order is doubtful, because it is not certain that the *Death of the Virgin* was originally painted for the Abbey of the Dunes. It is equally dubious that van der Goes was familiar with the rhetorical rules of the humanists. But the view that, also in his final period, he made careful stylistic choices is more convincing than Panofsky's notion of irrationality, and a link between the character of the late works and the religious ideals of the Modern Devotion is quite plausible. Indeed, Koslow makes the valuable observation that, in contrast to the iconographic tradition of the *Death of the Virgin*, Hugo's apostles around the deathbed are not 'grieving in unison', but most of them 'pray and meditate in isolation'. She gives the following explanation:

The peculiarities of the apostles were introduced by van der Goes to communicate one of the most important aspects of the life of the Modern Devotionists – the pivotal role of meditation and prayer in the attainment of enlightenment and spiritual purification.¹⁹¹

The importance of meditation for Hugo's late works is also seen in his *Nativity*.

HUGO VAN DER GOES

The Nativity

Two half-length bearded figures, prophets, draw a pair of curtains open to reveal a scene of Christ's Nativity [FIG. 67]. Given their size, they must have been life-size by fifteenth-century standards. The quite frontal prophet at the right, holding the curtain behind him, faces the viewer with a gaze at once visionary and direct. His mouth is half open in speech and with his right hand he motions us to approach. He wears a fur-lined gown of brown and gold brocade, held by a blue and gold embroidered girdle. The gown's brown color is an effective foil for the warm red of the red hood, or chaperon, laid across his shoulders. The prophet at the left, partly hidden behind the curtain, turns his body to us. A chiaroscuro light gives volume to his left shoulder and arm so that they encroach upon our space, but his face is turned in the back to the event behind the curtains. He has a gown of red and gold brocade, and a blue collar and girdle; the cuffs of the sleeves are embroidered in gold and gold buttons catch the light. His soft orange-colored hat is attached to a scarf which falls over his shoulder and, like the girdle that is knotted on the hip, accentuates the turning of his torso.



FIGURE 67 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Nativity* (97 x 246 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

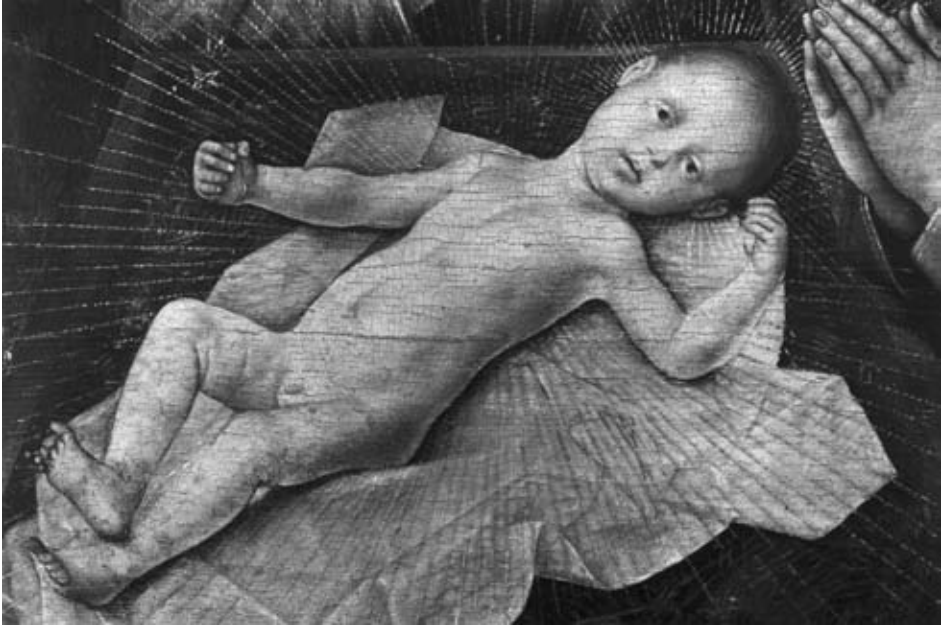


FIGURE 68 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Nativity*, detail: *The Christ Child*

While the prophet on the right invites us, the other guides our transition from the physical world to that of the sacred event. Also the curtains, which are drawn for our sake, are part of our reality. This idea is emphasized in a very physical way by the curtain rod, which is built up in relief. The illusionism of prophets and curtains is the more striking because the scene of the Nativity itself is entirely different. There, the composition is formed by an extension of figures that negates any depth implied by the planes they occupy. The two entering shepherds function as a link between the Holy Family and the angels so that we experience all these figures as a single group.

Through an opening in the right side of the stable, we see the annunciation to the shepherds. At the left shepherds have come around; in spite of their smaller size they are closely connected to the entering figures. The leaning pose of the foremost shepherd, parallel to the curtain in front of him, propels the eye toward the center. This is balanced by a less dramatic movement from the right, initiated by Joseph and the angel behind him, whose bodies are approximately parallel to the other curtain. The two movements come to a halt in the manger, which, perpendicular to the picture plane and steeply foreshortened, occupies a special place in the scene. On it the Child is laid obliquely, naked and fully exposed. He looks out of the picture, his gaze the only element that directly engages the viewer.

Not only the depth but the palette, textures, and modeling too are restricted. The Virgin's mantle and gown are of a similar blue and Joseph's terracotta gown is covered by a red mantle. The nearly uniform fields of color, the emphatic contours and the even lighting make Mary and Joseph appear nearly two-dimensional. The Virgin's face is smooth and flat, while Joseph's is finely drawn with less variation in the hair and beard than in the beard of the prophet on the right. The Child is almost emaciated and without volume.

The angels wear albs of mostly soft colors, light blue and lilac, which harmonize with the strong colors of the clothing of Mary and Joseph. The only colors to attract further attention are the orange-yellow of the angel hovering above the manger and the olive green of the angel at the far right, which repeats the color of the curtain, just as his pose echoes its diagonal. Golden rays emanate from the heads of the Virgin and the Child and from the invisible roof. The principal light, however, falls into the stable from behind the two advancing shepherds. The overexposing effect of this light on the left figure, his curious action of simultaneously running and kneeling, and his intense expression as he gazes at the Child make him an instrument which forces the beholder to acknowledge the significance of Christ's birth.

The *Nativity* was acquired in the early twentieth century by the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum in Berlin. It was found in Madrid; nothing is known about its original provenance. The attribution has never been doubted and, as noted before, this painting is probably one of Hugo's latest works. In order to understand its specific character, with the remarkable artistic differences between the prophets and the central scene, a treatise by the founder of the Modern Devotion, Geert Grote, is of particular importance.

This treatise, *On the four kinds of things on which one can meditate (De quatuor generibus meditabilium)*, with a subtitle calling it a sermon on the Nativity of the Lord, centers on the idea that, while meditation may start with images of earthly life, it must arise from those images to more abstract contemplation.¹⁹² Grote, who discusses mainly mental images, but considers physical ones useful as well, argues that it is vital to a fertile devotional life to experience the faith in human terms. Indeed, he allows the worshiper to embroider on the Bible with the help of his imagination. Saints such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure, Grote reminds us, taught that it is permissible in meditation to attribute more or different things to Christ's earthly life than are actually found in the scriptures so long as they do not conflict with them. We may picture any event as though it occurred today, even as if we ourselves were present. Such acts of appropriation promote a familiarity with the story of salvation, to the point that we identify ourselves with Christ and the saints. As Grote puts it, we can live in one house with Christ and the Virgin and travel with them, 'rejoice with them that do rejoice, and

weep with them that weep, suffer with them that suffer'.¹⁹³ This way of imagining the sacred events is reflected in many early Netherlandish pictures. In the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 7], for instance, the donors kneel by the open door of the Virgin's house, and van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* [FIG. 10] is designed to make the viewer empathize with Christ and Mary.

Images, however, should only be employed for their spiritual meaning. To illustrate this point Grote shows that also the Old Testament prophets used images, which need not always be taken literally. Citing the prophecies from Isaiah 1:3 and Habakkuk 3:2 that an ox and an ass would be present at the Nativity, he asks rhetorically 'What does it matter if this is so or not?' and continues:

If it is not so, then it is not against the law or the prophecy, which we in many and almost all places not literally but in a spiritual sense take to be true. If it was so, then this fact in a spiritual sense points to the same meaning – but more fully and manifestly – that the prophet in the same spiritual sense has expressed in the word, but in a more obscure and unclear manner.¹⁹⁴

Thus, the only difference between a literal and a figurative truth is that the first is a fuller and clearer sign. Also with New Testament events, which should be taken literally, it is the meaning of the events that counts. Here the author arrives at the meaning of Christ's Nativity: man is saved from his pride by the humility with which God became incarnate.

The idea that prophecies can be earthly images attuned to the human imagination is interesting for the most conspicuous motif in van der Goes's panel, the revelation of the Nativity by prophets drawing the curtains, especially because Grote quotes Pseudo-Dionysius, who calls images *velamina*, or veils.¹⁹⁵ This is a telling comparison, for veils conceal but often they also allow what is behind them to show through, and they can ultimately fall or be pulled away. The curtains in our painting are in fact such *velamina*: they are transparent. When they were closed, it was possible to make out something of what they concealed. They may allude therefore to the prophecies of the Old Testament, and the prophets who open them may be Isaiah and Habakkuk, showing that their obscure images are replaced by the clear sign of the Incarnation.

The distinction between prophecies and Christ's Birth as two different kinds of signs accounts for the contrasting treatment of the two parts of the picture. The prophets with their rich costumes and poses and gestures directed to the viewer, like the curtains with the physical rod, are connected to earthly reality. In the central scene, on the other hand, the painter avoided texture, naturalistic detail, volume and space as much as he could. Such an immaterial conception may seem to do little justice to the historical character of the Nativity, but this is pre-

cisely what it does do by transcending the images based on our own experience and focusing on the essential protagonist: the Christ Child.

The meaning of the Incarnation, that God's humiliation saves man from his pride, seems to be asserted by a unique motif: the Child holds a sprig of black nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*), an herb reputed to cure melancholy [FIG. 68]. This might point to van der Goes himself. The chronicle of the monastery, kept by one of his fellow monks, Gaspar Ofhuys, tells us that Hugo was tormented by melancholy, which came to a crisis when he returned from a journey to Cologne with several of the other brothers:

on a certain evening on the way back, our brother convert Hugo incurred a strange mental disease, as a result of which he kept saying that he was a lost soul and was adjudicated eternal damnation; furthermore he was intent on injuring himself physically and committing suicide (and would have done so had he not been forcibly restrained by those who were standing by to help). As a result of this strange disease the end of that trip was overshadowed by heavy sadness. They then reached the city of Brussels in their quest for help and without delay summoned Prior Thomas thither. The latter, after confirming everything with his own eyes and ears, suspected that he was vexed by the same disease by which King Saul was tormented. Thereupon, recalling how Saul had found relief when David plucked his harp, he gave permission not only that a melody be played without restraint in the presence of brother Hugo, but also that other recreative spectacles be performed; in these ways he tried to dispel the delusions. But under such treatment brother Hugo found no relief but still delirious pronounced himself the son of Perdition. Consequently, in this miserable condition he entered this house.

As for the service and assistance of the choir brothers, who cared for him with charity and compassion night and day, – they will remain in divine memory for eternity and beyond.¹⁹⁶

Ofhuys then goes into the possible causes of Hugo's mental illness. Among other things, he relates it to the painter's pride:

For this convert brother was exalted highly in our order on account of his special gifts, was made more famous than if he had remained a layman, and since he was only human like the rest of us, by the honors shown him and the various visits and salutations his heart was elevated, wherefore the Lord, not wishing him to perish, out of compassion sent him this humiliating infirmity, by which justly he was reduced to great humility. The brother, realizing this himself, abased himself very much as soon as he regained his health [...].¹⁹⁷



FIGURE 69 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Nativity*, detail: *Herbs*



FIGURE 70 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Nativity*, detail: *Herbs*

The chronicler's opinion of the source of Hugo's melancholy, apparently shared by the painter himself, corroborates the connection between the painting and Grote's treatise, which explains the spiritual meaning of the Nativity by quoting Saint Augustine's *On the Trinity*, Book 8:

This is after all useful for us to believe and firmly and unshocked to hold in our heart that the humility with which God was born to a woman and the fact that He was put to death by mortals amid so much abuse is the best medicine for curing the tumor of our pride [...].¹⁹⁸

It seems likely therefore that the nightshade in the Child's hand signifies that the Nativity is a remedy for melancholy, because it cures man of his pride.

The painting contains other symbolic motifs. In the foreground, on either side of a sheaf of grain, flowering herbs grow on the parapets behind the prophets. We have seen that the sheaf of grain also occurs in the *Portinari Altarpiece*, alluding to Bethlehem as the 'House of Bread' and to Christ as the living bread. In addition, the herbs, together with the black nightshade in the Child's hand, contain a symbolic program.¹⁹⁹ On the left-hand parapet there are, from left to right, black nightshade, germander speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*), and herb robert (*Geranium robertianum*) [FIG. 69]. On the other parapet grow redleg (*Polygonum persicaria*) and plantain (*Plantago*) [FIG. 70].

Like black nightshade, herb robert was considered a remedy for melancholy. They seem to emphasize once more again that the Incarnation delivers us from melancholy, and thus from pride. Redleg was an herb for curing wounds, whose brownish spots on the leaves may have been associated with the drops of Christ's blood. Plantain, too, was used for wounds, to staunch the flow of blood. It also occurs in Campin's depiction of Saint Veronica [FIG. 2], the saint who wiped the blood-covered face of Christ. These four plants can be related to the passage from Saint Augustine, who calls both the Incarnation and the Passion the best medicine for pride. Particularly remarkable is the germander speedwell: an herb that cleared the eyes. In connection with his central theme, the relation between image and meaning, Grote says that the Holy Scriptures use images because of the clouding of our (inner) eyes so as not to overwhelm us with too much light.²⁰⁰ Therefore, the germander speedwell could signify that this cloud vanishes from our eyes as soon as the spiritual meaning of Christ's Birth is revealed to us.

Without the assurance that Hugo van der Goes knew Geert Grote's treatise, this interpretation of the picture must remain hypothetical. He probably lacked the education to study this complex Latin work on his own and would have obtained his knowledge secondhand, possibly through one of the choir brothers. Grote's

views on meditation were authoritative in Hugo's time. Jan Mombaer, a native of Brussels, who had entered the Modern Devotion monastery of Sint-Agnietenberg near Zwolle, and was in touch with the Red Cloister, published his *Rosetum*, a guide to devotion, in 1494, not long after Hugo's death. The book is not only influenced by Grote's treatise, but also recommends it to the interested reader.²⁰¹

The *Rosetum* also deserves attention because Mombaer mentions an important aid to reaching the contemplation of a spiritual meaning: *affectio*. There is nothing more conducive to meditation without images, he says, than 'vehement affection for God and pure love'.²⁰² *Affectio* was very essential to the spiritual life of the Modern Devotionalists. Research on the significance of *devotio*, as interpreted by them, has shown that of the various meanings they gave it *affectio* was the most common.²⁰³ The vehemence of the shepherd at the left in Hugo's painting can be seen as a manifestation of *affectio*. His dynamism enlivens the scene to such an extent that the passion of *affectio* animates the whole composition.

If indeed the *Nativity* conveys ideas of the Modern Devotion, they must also have influenced Hugo's other late works, like the *Death of the Virgin*.²⁰⁴ His late style may therefore be taken as a means of preventing the viewer from becoming lost in the pictures for their own sake and of leading him to their spiritual content.

We have already found the representation of emotions combined with a sparsity in naturalistic details in works by Rogier van der Weyden, such as the *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John* which he gave to the Charterhouse of Scheut [FIG. 13]. It is no surprise that there is this affinity between van der Goes and an artist who had no ties to the Modern Devotion: a concern for the relation between image and spiritual meaning in meditation was not exclusive to that movement.²⁰⁵ Grote himself quotes Saint Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and Saint Bonaventure. It can be said, however, that, compared to other painters, Hugo van der Goes was intensely occupied with this question. In the *Monforte Altarpiece* he aimed at a great illusion of tangibility; in the *Nativity* and the *Death of the Virgin* he did as much as was possible at the time to abstract the artistic form from illusionism. Ultimately, the tension between illusion and abstraction could not be resolved, and it is tempting to suppose that Hugo's melancholy originated in this tension. Given the incessant self-examination cultivated by the Modern Devotion and the painter's own feelings of guilt, he may have feared that his artistic and religious ideals were irreconcilable. These feelings of guilt may have concerned not only the social pride mentioned by Offhuys, but also the artistic pride of a painter who had vied with the *Ghent Altarpiece* and who now realized that, even in the monastery, he could not free himself from the power of images.



FIGURE 71 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*, exterior, Hospital of Saint John, Bruges



FIGURE 72 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*, interior (central panel including frame 193.5 x 194.7 cm; left wing including frame 193.2 x 97.1 cm; right wing including frame 193.3 cm x 97.3 cm), Hospital of Saint John, Bruges

HANS MEMLING

The Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist

Hans Memling, documented from 1465 in Bruges and active there until his death in 1494, executed several commissions from the local hospital of Saint John, the present-day Memling Museum. For its members he painted the monumental *Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist* [FIGS. 71, 72], the smaller triptychs of Jan Floreins and Adriaan Reins, and the *Saint Ursula Shrine* [FIG. 105], covered with fairytale-like scenes. All of these works are still preserved in the hospital.

An inscription on the frame reports that Memling completed the altarpiece of the two Saints John in 1479.²⁰⁶ This date and the saints on the exterior enabled the great nineteenth-century explorer of the Bruges archives, James Weale, to identify the donors they present.²⁰⁷ The more prominent of the two men on the left wing is Antheunis Seghers; as 'master' of the hospital he was responsible for its management during the first half of the 1470s. The other is Jacob de Ceuninc, a brother not known to have held an administrative post at the time, who is probably shown only because he contributed to the financing of the work. Behind them stand Saint Anthony Abbot with his pig and Saint James the Great in the guise of a pilgrim. On the right wing Agnes Casembrood, as prioress during the 1470s in charge of the patients, kneels in front of Clara van Hulsen, who was probably also included because of a financial contribution. They are accompanied by Saint Agnes with her lamb and Saint Clare, holding a monstrance. Contrary to the simulated sculpture on the *Ghent Altarpiece* and van der Weyden's *Last Judgment*, the saints are represented as persons of flesh and blood and the donors share their niches. In spite of the absence of *grisailles* the exterior is quite subdued, because of the sober habits of the brothers and sisters and of Saint Clare and Saint Anthony. The saints stand behind the donors as they do on the *Portinari Altarpiece*, but there is no difference in scale. Since the donors do not face the saints, as in the *Ghent Altarpiece* and Rogier's *Last Judgment*, or a scene on the interior, as in the *Portinari Altarpiece*, their devotion seems to have no object. That only appears when the altarpiece is opened.

On the central panel of the interior we find the Virgin and Child seated beneath a baldachin, with a costly hanging behind them and a rich carpet at their feet. They are surrounded by saints and angels, while two hovering angels hold Mary's crown just below the baldachin. The Child holds an apple, which signifies that he and the Virgin are the new Adam and Eve. With his right hand he slides a ring onto the finger of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, in token of their mystic marriage. Catherine wears the crown and the ceremonial open-sided surcot of a princess, and has beside her the wheel and the sword, instruments of her martyrdom. Opposite sits Saint Barbara, reading a book. Behind her is her attribute the

tower, in which she was incarcerated by her father, shaped like a monstrance and containing a host, another of her attributes. These female saints often occur together and here they serve as counterparts of John the Evangelist and John the Baptist, who stand behind them. Although only the two Saints John are the subject of the scenes on the columns, and of those in the background and on the wings, the brothers and sisters of the hospital were equally represented in the relative numbers of male and female saints.

The hospital was originally dedicated to John the Evangelist, but in the course of time this was extended to John the Baptist. He is portrayed with a staff and beside him the lamb, symbolizing the Lamb of God whom he proclaimed. Although usually shown carrying the lamb and pointing to it, here he points to the Christ Child. John the Evangelist holds a chalice with a serpent in it, recalling the poisoned cup from which the legend says he was forced to drink, but survived. In front of the Baptist a kneeling angel in a dalmatic of gold brocade, like Catherine's sumptuous garment, plays a portative organ. The angel who kneels in front of John the Evangelist, wearing a plain alb, holds up a book in which the Virgin is reading.

The holy company occupies an open porch with an inlaid floor, whose columns and pillars afford glimpses of city streets. The capitals of the columns behind the Baptist represent the annunciation of his birth to his father Zachariah and the birth itself, while the landscape in the background contains further scenes from his life: his sojourn in the desert, his preaching, his arrest, and the exhumation and incineration of his mortal remains. The capitals of the columns behind the Evangelist display his resurrection of Drusiana and drinking of the poisoned cup; in the background he is seen baptizing the philosopher Crato, being immersed in boiling oil, and embarking by boat for the island of Patmos.

The right background also portrays a contemporary activity: next to the city's crane of Bruges one of the brothers from the hospital gauges wine in barrels. This was a privilege granted to the hospital. Inconspicuously but strikingly, the little scene connects the transcendent reality of the *Sacra Conversazione* – as the theme of the Virgin and Child together with saints in Italian art is called – with the context in which the altarpiece functioned. Another brother, partly concealed behind a column at the far right, also represents the world of the hospital.

The left wing shows the Baptist's decollation. The executioner places the head, which he has just severed from the body, on a platter held by Salome. Together with three bystanders, whose gestures underscore the drama of the event, they form a circle around the headless corpse. The preceding event, the Dance of Salome, is in a building at the left, and as the eye wanders into the background, we go even further back in time: on a bank of the river Jordan, John calls his disciples' attention to Christ, whom he then baptizes while God the Father sends down the dove of the Holy Ghost.

On the right wing [FIG. 73] the Evangelist on Patmos experiences his apocalyptic visions, recording them in a book. In the upper left corner God encircled by a rainbow that flashes lightning is enthroned below seven lamps and above a sea of glass like to crystal. From a book on his knees hang seven seals, which the Lamb, standing beside him, breaks with his forelegs. Before the throne are the four beasts, and around it are seated the twenty-four elders. The angel who had asked who is worthy to break the seals stands on a second rainbow. The apparitions that follow the breaking of each seal are depicted in the middleground: an archer riding on a white horse; a swordsman on a red horse; a man with a pair of balances on a black horse; one whose name is Death on a pale horse, emerging from a monstrous mouth of hell; the moon that became as blood; falling stars and people of every station hiding in the mountains.

After the breaking of the seventh seal, trumpets are given to seven angels who are seen at the top of the outer rainbow. Below it, a kneeling angel censes a golden altar on which a fire burns. When he has cast the fire upon the earth a series of disasters unrolls, each introduced by the sound of a trumpet. We see hail and fire burning trees and grass, a burning mountain cast into the sea destroying ships, a falling star that poisons the waters, a wailing eagle, a second falling star that opens a bottomless pit, from which monstrous locusts arise, and four angels and their horsemen sent out to kill. Behind these angels stands a colossal figure: the angel described as clothed with a cloud, with a rainbow upon his head, a face like the sun and legs as pillars of fire. Setting his right foot on the sea and his left on the earth, he cries with a loud voice, whereupon seven thunders represented by dark clouds with lightning are heard. With his right hand the angel swears an oath, with the other he holds an open book intended for John, a tiny figure standing on the shore.

Above the thunderclouds appears a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. The child she has borne is carried off by an angel to save it from a great red dragon, with seven crowned heads and ten horns, whose tail sweeps down a multitude of stars. On the far right Michael and his angels defeat the dragon, who then pursues the woman. On the horizon it finally surrenders its power to another seven-headed beast, like a leopard, which rises from the sea.

All this detail demonstrates Memling's skill as a storyteller, but his narrative style exhibits the same concentration and synthesis which are shown on the other two panels. Unity is created by means of a composition more or less parallel to the picture plane, dominated by the relatively flat images of John on Patmos in the lower right corner and the open heaven in the upper left. The scenes in between, while diminishing as they recede in the distance, are linked in an almost two-dimensional chain, appropriate to their unrealistic, visionary character, and



FIGURE 73 – Hans Memling, *The Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*, interior, right wing: *Saint John the Evangelist and apocalyptic scenes*

this pattern ensures the coherence of all the elements. Although the panel calls for close reading, with the Book of Revelation in hand, even at a glance one sees that heaven is opened to John on his island, and that his visions unfold in a series of events at sea, on land, and in the air.

In contrast to the two-dimensional John on his rock, the pitched-forward body of John the Baptist on the left wing threatens to breach the picture plane. The circle of figures around the body, however, presses so close to the foreground that the illusion of depth remains limited. This not only avoids a too strong contrast between the two wings, but also unites their main figures with the slightly larger ones of the *Sacra Conversazione*, except for the towering two saints John. They stand out as the saints to whom the altar was dedicated and accentuate the monumentality of the central image, whose glorious, timeless character transcends martyrdom and catastrophe.

The central panel manifests the artist's talent for representations that are both elegant and dignified. The sublime peace which inhabits most of his works show Memling as an artist who wanted serenity above all. Therefore, it is not surprising that the *Decapitation of John the Baptist* is hardly dramatic and that the apocalyptic scenes are more poetic than horrific. The serene character of his pictures was enormously admired in the nineteenth century; it was even said that Jan van Eyck saw with his eyes, but Memling with his soul.²⁰⁸ In the twentieth century this praise turned to criticism: Memling was condemned for his lack of innovation and artistic temperament.

Just as the positive appreciation for sentiment in Memling's art was linked to romantic norms and values, the negative reaction was determined by a twentieth-century norm of originality. But neither approach says much about Memling's own goals or the significance of his works in his day, which was considerable, given the nature of the commissions and the productivity of his studio. In regard to artistic form, he, more than any other painter, synthesized the achievements of van Eyck and van der Weyden. Though nothing is known about the movements of Memling – who was born in Germany – before he settled in Bruges, he must have studied with van der Weyden in Brussels.²⁰⁹ Not only bears his oeuvre the stamp of the older master's style, technical analysis has shown that his early paintings display a similar technique of underdrawing.²¹⁰ His settling in Bruges within a year of Rogier's death makes it all the more likely that he had previously worked in the studio of this artist. In Bruges Memling steeped himself in the tradition of van Eyck. As a result, the *Sacra Conversazione* of the altarpiece of the two Saints John is a remarkable combination of a two-dimensional composition and a structure in depth, of linear drawing and modelling with light, together with an Eyckian rendering of texture.

On either side of the Virgin and Child, half of the surface is filled by a standing male saint, a kneeling female saint, a kneeling angel, a hovering angel, and an equal number of columns and pillars. Despite the static impression of this symmetry the scene is far from wooden, thanks to the curving folds and contours among other things. The tautness of the upper half of the picture, with its many vertical elements, dissolves in a fluid play of lines in the lower half. Thus, Catherine's mantle falls in a calligraphic arabesque, while its contour continues the line of the Baptist's leg.

The illusion of space was created with no less thought. The geometric perspective is emphasized by the orthogonal lines of the tile floor and the carpet beneath the Virgin's feet, the floor lines running back to a low hedge around the building, which recalls the motif of the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden that symbolizes Mary's virginity. In the foreground depth is also accentuated by the spreading gowns of the female saints and Catherine's wheel.

All the figures, on both the exterior and interior, are defined by clear contours, and their volume is created by a subtle and generally even light. The cloth of honor behind the Virgin and Child, the carpet, the garments of Saint Catherine and of the angel next to her, and the marble columns demonstrate the artist's virtuosity in suggesting the texture of precious fabrics and stone.

Contrary to that of van der Goes, Memling's oeuvre, spanning almost thirty years, exhibits no ruptures. Throughout his career he was able harmoniously to incorporate the influence of van Eyck in a style based on van der Weyden. Obviously, he was not troubled, like van der Goes, by the relationship of visible forms to their spiritual content. His use of illusionistic devices suggests that neither he nor his patrons regarded the capturing charm of images as a danger to be evaded. And yet, what were the consequences for a theme such as the *Sacra Conversazione* when the evocative power of a picture threatened to overwhelm the content it should denote? Was this theme, which represents no specific event, not symbolic by definition, and therefore incompatible with an illusionistic portrayal?

Craig Harbison has argued that Memling's *Sacra Conversazione* can be seen as a visualization of a mental image of the donors. This would explain why they are presented without an immediate object of worship:

In fact, Memling here shows more clearly the relation between exterior and interior of the triptych which was only implied by Jan van Eyck or Rogier van der Weyden. In their works the donors on the outside are most often provided with an immediate object for their prayers. Yet the interior panorama in the Ghent Altarpiece or Beaune Last Judgment was surely the target of these mortals' pious meditations; that is the vision in their mind's eye. Memling has brought us closer to seeing the different 'levels of reality' which the exte-

rior and interior of a triptych may represent; he has implied more strongly than earlier artists that it is the donors' prayers which bridge the gap or crack leading to the visionary heart of the triptych.²¹¹

Harbison terms the mental images reflected or stimulated by painted images both 'meditations' and 'visions', because he believes there was no essential difference between the two concepts. This holds true when a vision signifies a meditation with the help of mental images. Ideally, such a meditation should lead to the imageless contemplation promoted by Geert Grote and others. But a vision may also concern a supernatural apparition, and a picture, or statue, could give rise to such a vision as well. To cite but one example, when Saint Catherine of Alexandria appeared to the fifteenth-century Florentine citizen Giovanni Morelli, he recognized her from paintings he had seen: young, very white, with a palm in her right hand and a wheel in her left.²¹² Evidently, the symbolic manner in which she was usually depicted, with attributes alluding to her martyrdom, was not considered to be only symbolic: it was also the form in which she could manifest herself. Thus, the holy figures in Memling's *Sacra Conversazione* may have suggested to the original viewers that they could reveal themselves outside the painting just as they appeared in it, perhaps even in the same company. This idea would have conveyed a feeling of their proximity and protection, for which the hospital brothers and sisters felt a quite practical need.

Until the mid-fifteenth century the hospital fell under the supervision of the town council. When it was plunged into debt by the economic crisis that struck Bruges around 1440, the magistrates had tightened their control. In 1459, however, the brothers and sisters, exploiting an ongoing conflict between the city of Bruges and the duke, placed themselves under the authority of the bishop of Tournai, Jean Chevrot, who was the president of Philip the Good's advisory council. If they had hoped for more freedom now, their action did not have the desired effect: in 1463 the bishop and the town council agreed that they would supervise the hospital together.

The council's stricter control in the 1440s led it to appoint receivers, who audited the hospital's accounts. During Antheunis Seghers's first tenures as master in 1461/62 and 1465/66 he was audited by these receivers; from 1466/67-1467/68 he was a receiver himself. In 1469/70 he was master again until his death in 1475, and from 1472/73 he also held the office of hospital's bursar. Remarkably, no receivers were appointed then by the council.²¹³ Vida Hull, who studied Seghers's various posts in relation to the office of receiver, concluded that he had won the council's trust.²¹⁴ The stability of the hospital in the 1470s may also be reflected in Agnes Casembrood's last term of office. The master and the prioress were appointed for one year at a time, but could be re-appointed. Having been the

prioress in 1459/6 and 1462/63, Agnes held the office again in 1469/1470 and probably until her death in 1488 or 1489.²¹⁵

In light of the prestige that both administrators enjoyed, it is not surprising that their common tenure in the 1470s included the decision to expand the twelfth-century church with a new apse. The apse was built in 1473-1474, and Memling's monumental triptych, which must have been commissioned before Seghers's death in 1475, was painted for the high altar. Apsé and altarpiece express the self-confident identity of the hospital in its period of renewed autonomy.²¹⁶

The altarpiece shows that the brothers and sisters of the hospital placed themselves under the protection of the heavenly figures whose presence was made palpable in the pictorial evocation of a supernatural, visionary reality. This did not mean an escape from earthly reality, but could even heighten a social self-consciousness. After Saint Catherine's appearance, Giovanni Morelli experienced the contact he so ardently desired with the soul of his dead little boy, who relieved the conscience of his father, consumed by guilt in connection with the child's death. The soul then answered a number of Giovanni's questions in the affirmative: would he find solace in his other sons? Would he win wealth and honor in the world, and would he have a long life? For Giovanni, the supernatural apparition pointed the way back to society. Certain aspects of Morelli's story, analyzed by Richard Trexler,²¹⁷ are applicable to the civic culture of the Burgundian Netherlands. Contact with the sacred, as represented by sacraments, relics, religious images, visions and other miraculous events, had a fundamental effect on one's functioning in society. The access afforded by ritual actions and objects, and miracles to a metaphysical reality was regarded not only as a preparation for or foretaste of heavenly life, but also as a basis for social prestige. Insofar as the sacred was represented by images and relics, the portraits and coat of arms of the donors on the paintings and reliquaries attracted the esteem of their fellow citizens. The donors of Memling's triptych, revealing their identity through their portraits and name saints, made it clear to their fellow brothers and sisters, the hospital patients, the magistrates of Bruges, the bishop, and to whomever visited the church that their prestige came from their access to the heavenly reality evoked in the central scene.

Yet, this work does not only show the conjunction of different realities. Memling's fellow artists and other art lovers must have recognized the traditions from which he took his artistic procedures, just as they must have been conscious of his transformation of his artistic sources into a new entity. To the extent that he competed with other artists, Memling must have expected such an evaluation, and the donors may have been interested in it because the admiration received by the altarpiece redounded to them. Although it is obvious that the triptych did not only function as a liturgical object, but also as a contribution to the hospital's civic

and social status, it is difficult to say how much the prestige it lent the donors was based on its evocation of a supernatural reality or on the public's appreciation of Memling's art.

HANS MEMLING

The Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove

The hospital of Saint John has, since 1815, also possessed a diptych that Memling painted for a Bruges patrician [FIG. 74].²¹⁸ The inscription on the frame of the left panel says Maarten van Nieuwenhove ordered the work in 1487, and the one on the right frame tells us that he was twenty-three years old. The diptych is unsigned and its artist undocumented, but Memling's hand was recognized in the mid-nineteenth century; this attribution is universally accepted.

In 1492 Maarten van Nieuwenhove became a member of the Bruges town council, and in 1497 burgomaster. The portrait shows him in half-length, wearing a violet doublet, a black frock (scarcely visible apart from the short sleeves and edges of the opening held by ribbons of the same color as the doublet), and a brown gown lined with black fur.²¹⁹ His hands are folded above a prayer book, with his coat of arms on the clasp. Windows behind him open to a landscape. The nearer window contains stained glass with an image of Saint Martin, the donor's name saint. The opposite panel of the diptych presents the Virgin and the Child, the object of van Nieuwenhove's devotion. The Virgin hands an apple to the Child seated on a cushion on the carpet-covered balustrade, which also supports the prayerbook. The intimate relation between the three figures, who are in the same room, is accentuated by the prayer book lying on a piece of Mary's mantle. A mirror hangs from the shutter of one of the windows behind her. The upper half of this window displays van Nieuwenhove's arms with the device *Il y a cause* and four medallions emblazoned with a hand that scatters seed on a flower garden. This is a visual pun on his name, which means 'new garden'. The other window, containing medallions of Saint George and Saint Christopher, gives a beautiful view of a landscape.

The diptych with half-length figures of the Virgin and Child and a praying donor was introduced in early Netherlandish painting by Rogier van der Weyden, who placed the figures against a neutral ground [FIG. 75].²²⁰ Petrus Christus took portraiture an important step forward in 1446, in a panel which shows the English nobleman Edward Grymeston in an interior [FIG. 76]. Dirk Bouts further developed the representation of a half-length figure in an interior in a man's portrait of 1462 (The National Gallery, London) and a *Virgin and Child* of circa 1465 [FIG. 77], by providing the room with a window open to a landscape.

Memling elaborated these devices by depicting several windows and uniting the Virgin and Child and the donor in a common interior, which he carefully constructed. The underdrawing of the donor's panel has diagonal lines, directed at a vanishing point in the middle of Mary's face, which serve to foreshorten the right wall, and also diagonal and vertical lines dividing its windows and shutters [FIG. 139].²²¹ In spite of the unity of space, each panel possesses its own character. The three-quarters position of the donor and the foreshortened wall make the right panel quite lively and approachable. The frontality of the Virgin and Child and the wall behind them create a formal image, in which depth is only suggested by the balustrade, the landscape in the background, and the reflection in the mirror.

Like the mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait* this one reflects the whole room [FIG. 78], demonstrating that Memling is no less an artist than Jan van Eyck. At the same time, this mirror too has a symbolic meaning in relation to the subject of the painting. A passage in the *Book of Wisdom* (7:26), inscribed on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, behind the enthroned Virgin, and on other works by van Eyck, calls wisdom, with whom medieval theologians identified the Virgin, 'the unspotted mirror of God's majesty'.²²² Since the mirror shows both Mary and the donor, it may proclaim that van Nieuwenhove considers the Virgin, who is the mirror of God, as his mirror.

The Arnolfini mirror exhibits even more than is seen in the room itself, and the same can be said of Memling's mirror: it reveals that the Virgin is seated, an open book lying at her right side, that Maarten is kneeling, and that they are before windows whose frames coincide with the frames of the panels. As Hans Belting has explained, because of the many windows the room must have a double meaning. The interior seems at first to be a chamber in the donor's residence, even the chamber where the diptych was placed. But all those windows, more numerous than in any Flemish house, give the room an air of another world transforming it into the dwelling place of the Queen of Heaven, to which only the soul can gain access.²²³ This is underscored by the absence of a door, which can be deduced from the reflection of the left wall in the mirror. Maarten van Nieuwenhove, practising his prayers before his diptych, may have felt himself carried away by the illusion that the presence of the Virgin and the Child changed his own surroundings into a celestial reality.

The windows Memling used as frames for the Virgin and Child and van Nieuwenhove follow a long tradition for half-length figures in which only a balustrade could indicate that they appeared in a window. Thus, even without the mirror, the presence of the front windows may have been clear to the contemporary beholder. In his classic study on half-length devotional images, Sixten Ringbom demonstrated that the window was a sign of rule because the depicted person seemed to come from a different, higher reality. As he observes on representations of Mary: 'While constituting, at the same time, an allusion to the favorite



FIGURE 74 – Hans Memling, *The Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove* (each wing including frame 52 x 41.5 cm), Hospital of Saint John, Bruges



FIGURE 75 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Diptych of Laurent Froiment*;
 left wing (51.5 x 33.5 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Collection Mancel, Caen;
 right wing (51.1 x 33.2 cm), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

epithet of the Virgin as a *fenestra coeli* [...] the window motif was as eloquent a means of indicating her majesty as placing her on a throne.’²²⁴ He also pointed out that the use of the window in both religious and secular images led to the emergence of the half-length devotional diptych. Originally intended for the noble laity, such diptychs were being made for ordinary wealthy citizens by the end of the fifteenth century.²²⁵ Although Maarten van Nieuwenhove, as a patrician, could not claim the power of a nobleman, he undoubtedly wanted a devotional diptych for reasons not only of devotion but also of status. The same considerations must have caused him to commission an example that outshone other ones in the virtuosity of the images.

In spite of the work’s various meanings and functions, a contemporary viewer must have experienced it in its entirety. Of course, it is impossible to reconstruct an experience in the remote past; yet we can try to evoke it. Assuming that this viewer was acquainted with van Nieuwenhove, he, recognizing the holy figures and the sitter, immediately would have been struck by their seeming to be



FIGURE 76 – Petrus Christus, *Portrait of Edward Grymeston* (36 x 27 cm), The National Gallery, London



FIGURE 77 – Dirk Bouts, *The Virgin and Child* (38.8 x 29 cm), The National Gallery, London

present in person. He would have been entranced by the illusion of looking through windows into a real room and through other windows into a landscape. His admiration must have increased when he noticed that the whole scene, and even more, was reflected on a minute scale in the mirror. The beholder would also have discovered the references to van Nieuwenhove in the stained glass-paintings and on the clasp of the book. Perhaps less explicitly but not less intensely, he would have been impressed by the radiance and serenity of the picture and by the suggestion that his friend could be together with the Virgin and Child in one room and be admitted to a heavenly dwelling from which van Nieuwenhove appeared to him.

GEERTGEN TOT SINT JANS

The Man of Sorrows

One of the most moving paintings in early Netherlandish art is a *Man of Sorrows* attributed to Geertgen tot Sint Jans [FIG. 79]. This panel, formerly preserved in the church of Saint Willibrord in Utrecht, may have been the left wing of a diptych, as



FIGURE 78 – Hans Memling, *The Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove*,
left wing: *Mirror*

cuts indicate that there could have been hinges on its right side and a clasp on the left. The lost wing may have contained another religious scene, the portrait of a donor, or even a text.²²⁶ Slightly inclined, grasping the cross that leans against him, the suffering Christ stands in an obliquely positioned sarcophagus, his face and body covered with blood, his right hand showing the wound in his side. At the right, before the sarcophagus, a worshipful Virgin and a weeping John the Evangelist give vent to their grief. Her hands folded, Mary gazes pitifully at her Son. John wipes his tears with the back of his hand, a gesture already used by Robert Campin in an *Entombment* [FIG. 167]. Behind the sarcophagus Mary Magdalen leans on its edge, with folded hands and downcast eyes as if deep in thought. While the Cross is held by Christ himself, hovering angels carry the other instruments of the Passion. One angel holds a hand to his cheek, varying the gesture of the Evangelist. The angel next to him folds his hands and seems to meditate, as the Magdalen does.

Notwithstanding certain details such as the blood and the marble of the sarcophagus, the forms are generally simplified. The ovoid faces are not particularly differentiated and a bright light accentuates their basic geometry, especially in the face of Mary Magdalen. The costumes are enlivened by folds, but there is no other indication of texture. The composition is highly original, even daring in the cutting off of the Magdalen and the Evangelist.²²⁷

The attribution of this work to Geertgen tot Sint Jans is not based on a document. The principal source of our knowledge about the painter is Carel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* (1604), which says he was a pupil of the Haarlem painter Albert van Ouwater and died already at the age of about twenty-eight years. Van Mander also reports that the artist lived with the Knights of Saint John in Haarlem, whence his name, although he was not himself a member of this order of laymen. He executed 'a large, distinguished piece – namely a *Crucifixion*' for the high altar of their church. The central panel and one of the wings were destroyed in either an iconoclastic riot or the siege of Haarlem in 1573. The remaining wing was sawn in half: the scene that had been on the outside represented 'one or other miracle or unusual history', and the one on the interior was:

a God in Distress or Deposition in which Christ is most naturally depicted dead, lying stretched out, with some disciples and apostles displaying grief. The Marys in particular show such sorrowful expressions that greater grief could not be portrayed. Mary, sitting with a restrained sorrowful demeanour, seems in particular to have and feel heartache, such that it is admired and highly praised by the greatest artists of our time.²²⁸



FIGURE 79 – Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Man of Sorrows* (26.2 x 25.2 cm),
Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht

Two panels in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which show the *Burning of the Bones of Saint John the Baptist* and the *Lamentation* [FIG. 80], have been identified with these fragments. Their size confirms that the original altarpiece was, as van Mander says, 'a large, distinguished piece'; the subjects match his description and the story of the relics of John the Baptist is well suited to the destination for a Commandery of the Knights of Saint John, all the more in that the panels incorporate portraits of members of this order. In 1484 the Knights of Saint John posted on the island of Rhodes acquired relics of John the Baptist, and this event was probably the incentive for the house in Haarlem to commission an illustration of the legend of the relics.²²⁹ This date gives also a general indication of the period in which Geertgen, about whom so little is known, was active.

Similarities between the Vienna panels and a *Raising of Lazarus* [FIG. 81], which can be attributed to Albert Ouwater because of a description by van Mander, confirm his statement that Geertgen was trained by this master. Ouwater, too, emphasizes basic forms and there is a certain naïveté in the figures of both painters, with their angular bodies and clumsy poses, although Geertgen's are more monumental and pictorial.

Geertgen tot Sint Jans was influenced by southern Netherlandish masters, enough to suggest that he spent some time in the south.²³⁰ Although the volume and depth in the Vienna panels remove them from the art of van der Weyden, the rendering of emotions in the *Lamentation* does recall his work. Indeed, the hand-wringing Mary Salome is modelled, in reverse, on the Magdalen in Rogier's *Descent from the Cross* [FIG. 10]. At the same time, the relief of the massive figures and, in the *Lamentation*, the monumental composition are indebted to Hugo van der Goes in his early period. The kneeling Nicodemus with his hand on his chest in the *Lamentation* is even based on the middle king in the *Monforte Altarpiece* [FIG. 65].

The *Man of Sorrows* is strikingly similar to the *Lamentation* in the simplified, geometric forms, the folds of the dresses, the expressions of the mourners, and the facial types of Mary and John. Despite the great difference in size, the *Man of Sorrows* emits the same dramatic power and displays the same free execution. There is no reason to question its attribution to the same artist.

Nor did Max Friedländer do so, but he felt that Geertgen's style 'does not come to the fore with clarity' in the *Man of Sorrows*. The main figure 'standing exhausted with buckling knees, his body covered with wounds' is quite traditional, and, whereas the faces of the women and the hands of the Virgin 'are equal to the master's best work', at the same time they accentuate the shortcomings of the picture: 'Illusion begets its own demand. [...] the Virgin's folded hands are so realistic, with such carefully observed shadows, that the absence of spatial elaboration overall is felt to be all the more vexing.' Beside this contrast between volumes and lack of depth, there are still other flaws: 'Geertgen's composition, with its heavy

slanting lines in a narrow field, leaves a restless and unplanned impression. The panel looks like a fragment, devoid of balance.²³¹

This view of the panel's restless character and fragmentary appearance contrasts with Panofsky's, in a famous article on images of the *Man of Sorrows*, published in the same year, 1927, as Friedländer's volume on Geertgen.²³² Panofsky says:

As, however, all the seemingly so haphazard composition lines lead with compelling force to the face of the Savior, which, lifted out of the image, focuses its large, tearful eyes on us, the sum of all the sorrows which he suffers, and of all the mourning that is suffered for him, now appears to besiege us [...].²³³

Thus, in this judgment, the remarkable disposition of the figures around the central Man of Sorrows serves to direct the viewer to Christ, who fixes his gaze on him.²³⁴ The picture, therefore, has a high degree of what Alois Riegl called 'äusere Einheit' ('external unity'), which means that it is not self-contained but is united with the viewer's world. The fragmentary character of the scene enhances this effect, in suggesting that the image extends beyond the panel. The depth suggested by the volume of the figures and the diagonal placement of the sarcophagus also makes the viewer a participant. Then, why is there at the same time, as Friedländer notices, an absence of spatial elaboration, caused by the flat ground of gold leaf? Instead of seeing it as a shortcoming of Geertgen to use such an archaic device in his time, it seems more responsible to look for an explanation that does justice to the work's content.

We have seen a combination of illusionism and abstraction in other Netherlandish paintings, especially in Hugo van der Goes's *Nativity*. To interpret this phenomenon in Geertgen's *Man of Sorrows*, we need not assume a specific influence of theological ideas about meditation, for the contradiction in its execution can be explained primarily in view of the subject. As an image of the suffering Christ, the picture served to make the viewer empathize with him, but it is also a symbolic representation, because Christ is isolated from the narrative of the Passion, and because it includes elements that allude to the Resurrection and Last Judgment.²³⁵ The Redeemer stands in the sarcophagus as if he has risen from the dead, and the angels with the instruments of the Passion recall those angels of the Last Judgment who display the *arma Christi* in token of his majesty. Christ showing his wound in his side and his half-kneeling pose may hint at the coming Judgment as well: these motifs derive from the theme of the *intercessio Christi*, in which the Son, by virtue of his suffering, intercedes with the Father on behalf of mankind.



FIGURE 80 – Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *The Lamentation* (175 x 139 cm),
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna



FIGURE 81 – Albert van Ouwater, *The Raising of Lazarus* (122 x 92 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

The archetypal form of images of the *Man of Sorrows* originated in twelfth-century Byzantium and shows only the Christ of the Passion in half-length. This form already contained a symbolic program, because Christ is represented as simultaneously dead and alive.²³⁶ The *Man of Sorrows* became highly popular in Europe during the late Middle Ages and other figures and attributes were added. Geertgen's version represents a culmination in its expressionistic appeal to the viewer's emotions, but at the same time it teaches the beholder that the Christ of the Passion is also the resurrected Christ, the Christ who intercedes for us, and the Christ who will appear as the Judge. This symbolic function might be the reason why the panel is endowed with an abstracting background of gold.

Hans Belting has drawn attention to the problem that a modern viewer of an image of the *Man of Sorrows* is unfamiliar with the codes involved and unaccustomed to encountering a simultaneous presentation of illusionism and symbolism.²³⁷ Nevertheless, it is necessary to try to grasp this form of simultaneity that determines Geertgen's image, not only to understand its devotional function, but also, as we see in Friedländer's mistaken judgment, to appreciate it as a work of art.

GERARD DAVID

The Justice of Cambyses

Justice scenes occupy a special class in early Netherlandish painting. They represent stories of fair judgments and were hung in town halls, in the chamber of the aldermen. Rogier van der Weyden painted four panels for the Brussels town hall which illustrated the justice of Trajan and of Herkinbald; in 1695 they were destroyed, but their compositions survive in a monumental tapestry (Historisches Museum, Bern). The panels with the *Justice of Emperor Otto III* [FIGS. 45, 46] which Dirk Bouts painted for the town hall of Louvain have already been mentioned.

Gerard David's *Justice of Cambyses* [FIGS. 82, 83] was placed in the aldermen's chamber of the town hall of Bruges.²³⁸ The scenes tell a story from classical antiquity, first reported by Herodotus and then by Valerius Maximus; in the Middle Ages it occurred in the popular *Gesta Romanorum* (*The Deeds of the Romans*) among other texts. The left panel shows in the distance the judge Sisamnes accepting a bribe, for which he will hand down an unjust ruling. In the foreground he is seated in a loggia where he is arrested on the order of King Cambyses. Surrounded by his entourage, the king counts off the points of his charge on his fingers. Cambyses's gruesome sentence is carried out on the right panel: the corrupt judge is flayed alive, in the presence of the king and other witnesses. In the background the new judge, Otanés, the son of Sisamnes, occupies the seat which the king has had covered with the skin of his hapless father.

The *Justice of Cambyses* remained in the town hall until 1794, when, like other early Netherlandish masterpieces, it was plundered by the French and taken to Paris; it returned to Bruges in 1816 [SEE CHAPTER 2, PP. 177, 191]. In 1863 the painting was attributed to David by James Weale, who had found entries in the city accounts recording payments to this master for work destined for the alderman's chamber. Hugo van der Velden has shown that only the last of these payments, mentioning a large panel, in a register which runs from September 2, 1498 to September 2, 1499, can be connected with the *Justice of Cambyses*.²³⁹ On the left panel the date 1498 is inscribed above the seat of the judge. Originally, the panels were joined in a single frame, but at some time the mullion which divided the two scenes was sawn through.

The subject of the painting is not mentioned in the entry. In fact, only one of David's works is thoroughly documented: a *Virgin among Virgins* [FIG. 84], which he made for the convent of the Carmelites of Sion in Bruges. An inventory of 1537 from the convent describes it as a beautiful panel in oils standing on the high altar and showing the Virgin and Child, holding a bunch of grapes, attended by two angels and many holy virgins, and made and donated by Master Gerard David in 1509.²⁴⁰ A man and a woman portrayed in the left and right upper corners of the painting must be David and his wife, Cornelia Cnoop. This portrait of him makes it possible to recognize the artist in the *Arrest of Sisamnes*, in the man at the far left whose face is partly cut off by the frame. In keeping with the earlier date, he appears younger here than in the *Virgin among Virgins*.

Gerard David, who came from Oudewater, is documented as a master in Bruges from 1484 until his death in 1515. He was thus a mature artist when he received the commission to depict the story of Cambyses, but this confronted him with quite a different task from those to which he was accustomed, since his forte was a dreamy rendering of timeless, religious themes. Despite its poor condition, the *Virgin among Virgins*, which in the floral tapestry at the back is now totally darkened,²⁴¹ displays David's specific talent better than do the Cambyses scenes. His fellow citizen Memling also excelled in portraying a serene and pious atmosphere, but David used a softer, warmer palette, and a richer play of light and shadows in the faces, which give an intimate character to his panels for private devotion. This category includes his many pictures of the Virgin and Child in a landscape [FIG. 85]. They reveal a great sensitivity to nature, as do some of his altarpieces, such as the *Triptych of the Baptism* (Groeningemuseum, Bruges). The abundant foliage so characteristic of these landscapes almost became a subject in itself in a pair of panels [FIG. 86] which originally formed the exterior of a triptych centered on the *Nativity* (the interior panels are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Although this continuous forest scene should be understood in connection with the *Nativity* on the inside and may have a specific biblical meaning, the panels



FIGURE 82 – Gerard David, *The Justice of Cambyses: The Arrest of Sisamnes* (182.3 x 159.2 cm), Groeningemuseum, Bruges



FIGURE 83 – Gerard David, *The Justice of Cambyses: The Flaying of Sisamnes* (182.2 x 159.4 cm), Groeningemuseum, Bruges

have naturally gained a reputation in the art-historical literature as the first independent landscape painted in the Netherlands.²⁴²

There is a great contrast between the subject of these quiet, static pictures and that of the Justice scenes, but the *Cambyses* panels did not only serve to draw attention to the frightening consequences of corrupt behavior. They also had a representative function: among the spectators are numerous portraits of Bruges magistrates. In addition to David's style, the presence of these portraits provided another reason to limit the action to a few realistic details.

Probably because a new council was elected each year, the members to be immortalized in the painting were changed as well. Technical investigations have shown that a number of the portraits were replaced or added in the process of execution. Other alterations show David following a new artistic trend.²⁴³ Initially, the judgment seat in the *Arrest of Sisamnes* had a canopy, like that of the throne in Bouts's *Justice of Emperor Otto III* [FIG. 46], which, apparently, influenced the *Arrest*'s entire composition. At a later stage, David omitted the canopy and instead decorated the wall with roundels, based on antique gems, and putti with garlands. He made similar changes in the *Flaying of Sisamnes*. In Maryan Ainsworth's opinion, these changes indicate that David gravitated away from the influence of Bouts, which he underwent early in his career. There is no documentation of David's artistic formation, but Ainsworth's analysis of his style and working procedures demonstrates the importance of his contact with Bouts before coming to Bruges. Once in that city, David seems to have established as the successor of Hans Memling, who had just died and some of whose works already incorporate such Renaissance motifs as garlands and putti.²⁴⁴ At the same time, David placed himself in a longer Bruges tradition: in the *Arrest* the reflection in the helmet of a soldier [FIG. 87] recalls a device typical of van Eyck's art.

Beside David's changing artistic orientations and the magistrates' decisions regarding their portraits, alterations in the *Justice of Cambyses* could be due to historical circumstances, although the extent to which and the nature of the connection is a matter of discussion. Above the garlands in the *Arrest of Sisamnes*, the arms of Philip the Handsome and Joan of Castile were added at a late stage, and the young nobleman with a red hat [FIG. 88] standing below Philip's arms replaced a completed figure. Hans van Miegroet has suggested that this figure is a portrait of the duke and that the man with the double chin in the *Flaying of Sisamnes*, to the left of Cambyses, also unplanned at the beginning, could be Engelbert II, count of Nassau.²⁴⁵

Philip, who became duke of Burgundy in 1494, married Joan of Castile in 1496, and the following year they made their triumphal entry to Bruges. Engelbert II had previously been regent of the Netherlands, when a struggle erupted between the Flemish cities and their ruler Maximilian of Habsburg, widower of



FIGURE 84 – Gerard David, *The Virgin among Virgins* (118 x 212 cm),
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen



FIGURE 85 – Gerard David, *The Virgin and Child in a Landscape* (42.6 x 24.7),
Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam



FIGURE 86 – Gerard David, *Forest scene* (each wing 89.9 x 30.7 cm),
Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague



FIGURE 87 – Gerard David, *The Arrest of Sisamnes*, detail: Soldier

Mary of Burgundy and Philip's father. The people of Bruges revolted no less than three times and even imprisoned Maximilian in their city.

Weale supposed that the *Justice of Cambyses* alludes to the sentencing of certain councillors who had accepted bribes to support Maximilian,²⁴⁶ but van Miegroet made the proposal, based on the ducal arms and the presumed portraits of Philip the Handsome and Engelbert, that the painting was meant as a confirmation of princely power: the scenes would contain not only a warning against corruption, but also an admonishment to the populace that, if they again took arms against their sovereign, they would be severely punished.²⁴⁷

The story of Cambyses has nothing to do with revolt, however, but with corruption, and, since van der Velden has demonstrated that it occurs in all sorts of medieval texts as an exhortation to the impartial exercise of judicial authority, it is improbable that David connected it to the late rebellion.²⁴⁸ Van der Velden also rejects the idea that Philip is portrayed, because in that case he should wear the collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece.²⁴⁹ However, in a group portrait of the members of the Guild of Saint George of Mechlin by an anonymous master (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp), Philip is portrayed in the guise of Saint George without these insignia, and in the *Triptych with the Miracles of Christ* by the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine and other anonymous artists, we see numerous disguised portraits of members of the House of Burgundy or persons



FIGURE 88 – Gerard David, *The Arrest of Sisamnes*, detail: *Man with a red hat* (Philip the Handsome?)



FIGURE 89 – Anonymous, *The Triptych with the Miracles of Christ*,
interior, left wing: *The Marriage at Cana* (112.2 x 35.6 cm),
The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



FIGURE 90 – Anonymous, *The Marriage at Cana*, detail: *Philip the Handsome*



FIGURE 91 – Pieter van Coninxloo (?), *Diptych with Portraits of Philip the Handsome and Margaret of Austria*, left panel (22.6 x 15.5 cm), The National Gallery, London



FIGURE 92 – Anonymous, *Diptych with Portraits of Philip the Handsome and Margaret of Austria*, left panel (27.5 x 14 cm), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

connected to it, without the collars of the Golden Fleece.²⁵⁰ In the *Marriage at Cana* [FIGS. 89, 90], on the left interior wing of this triptych, Philip the Handsome is sitting at the far right, and the man in the foreground pouring wine into a cup could be Engelbert of Nassau. Comparison of portraits in this panel with the prototypes on which they are based shows that the collars of the Golden Fleece have been transformed into generalized ornaments.²⁵¹ Obviously, the disguised character of the portraits required this: as participants the princes are completely integrated into the depicted event.

The man with the red hat in the *Arrest of Sisamnes* bears a strong resemblance to two portraits of Philip the Handsome in London and Vienna, painted around 1495, although the former has more idealized features [FIGS. 91, 92].²⁵² Because he is standing below Philip's arms and was added instead of an already completed figure, there are several reasons to consider him as a disguised portrait of the duke. The addition of this portrait and of Philip's and Johanna's arms, in occasion of their triumphal entry of 1497, can be taken as an expression of homage,

but this might also say something about the relation between the duke and the city. The ducal arms are matched with the arms of Bruges and Flanders on the other panel, placed above the entrance to a building which may resemble the Bruges town hall as it was at the time.²⁵³ If the identification of Philip, and also that of Engelbert, is correct, the prince and the former regent have joined the magistrates in observing Cambyses's enforcement of law. The mythical king was a personification of the ideal of governmental justice, and the message could be that both the Burgundian rulers and the magistrates must submit to this ideal.

Other grounds exist to see the *Justice of Cambyses* in the light of its time, but they are not so much political as economic. This prestigious work was made just when the florescence of Bruges was coming to an end, confronted by the rise of Antwerp. The painting seems to be an attempt to reinforce the public self-confidence threatened by the deteriorating economy.

The decline of Bruges also had consequences for David's career. Antwerp was fast becoming the great center of art as well as commerce, and it is significant that, in order to sell his work in that city, he joined its guild of painters in 1515, although he continued to live in Bruges. At the same time, he modified his production. Genre-like depictions of the *Virgin and Child with the Milk Soup* [FIG. 93], mass produced without any distinction between an original version and replicas, represent new workshop practices and new developments on the art market.²⁵⁴ In that sense these panels are the harbingers of a new age in the history of art.



FIGURE 93 – Gerard David, *The Virgin and Child with the Milk Soup* (33 x 27.8 cm),
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

PART TWO



FIGURE 94 – Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man (The Albergati Portrait)*
(32.5 x 25.5 cm), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

CHAPTER 2

TILL-HOLGER BORCHERT

Collecting Early Netherlandish Paintings in Europe and the United States

The history of collecting early Netherlandish paintings spans different periods. This chapter begins with the earliest collections, it focuses on the rediscovery and collecting of these works from the French Revolution until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and it concludes with a brief outline of American collecting at the turn of the twentieth century.

EUROPE

The Habsburg collections

In the sixteenth century, Margaret of Austria, regent of the Low Countries, amassed a sizeable collection in her palace at Mechlin, which included, beside works of art by contemporary masters, panels by Rogier van der Weyden and Hans Memling, and even one of the most important fifteenth-century Netherlandish pictures, the *Arnolfini Portrait* by Jan van Eyck [FIG. 25].¹ After her death in 1530, the collection was divided among her heirs in Spain and the German Empire. Thanks not only to Margaret but also to her niece Mary of Hungary, her nephew Charles V and his son Philip II, Netherlandish paintings came into the possession of the House of Habsburg.² To mention but a few of the early works, Mary of Hungary purchased Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* from the guild that had commissioned it, Charles V owned a triptych by Hans Memling, and Philip II acquired paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. All were shipped to Spain, where they can now be seen in the Prado.



FIGURE 95 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Fall of Man* (32.3 x 21.9 cm),
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna



FIGURE 96 – Hugo van der Goes, *The Lamentation* (34.4 x 22.8 cm),
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

The later Habsburgs continued to purchase fifteenth-century Netherlandish art. Under Emperor Rudolf II, Prague became an important European center for the arts, and his *Kunstkammer* forms the core of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.³ Rudolf's brothers Matthias, Ernst and Albert, successively the governor of the Southern Netherlands, were no less active as collectors. The inventory of the estate of Archduke Ernst lists, in addition to pictures by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, works by Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hieronymus Bosch.⁴ Another Habsburg, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, likewise governor of the Southern Netherlands, was acquainted with such connoisseurs as the Antwerp collector Peter Stevens, from whom he acquired van Eyck's famous *Portrait of Cardinal Niccolò Albergati* [FIG. 94].⁵ It is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, which also preserves panels by Rogier van der Weyden [FIG. 168], Geertgen tot Sint Jans [FIG. 80], and Hugo van der Goes [FIGS. 95, 96], from Leopold Wilhelm's collection. When the Archduke died in 1662, his nephew, the future Emperor Leopold I, added his holdings to the collections of Rudolf II and Ferdinand III and had them transferred from Prague to the Stallburg in Vienna. Together with the other imperial treasures, this collection was later housed in the Oberes Belvedere, where the Swiss engraver Christian von Mechel, who published the first catalogue in 1783, arranged them by school and period. The Viennese collection was then open to the public on certain days, 'even more for instruction than for momentary pleasure', as Mechel wrote.⁶

Such a didactic ideal notwithstanding, there was little serious interest in early Netherlandish painting at the time. The apparently primitive style and the religious subject matter clashed with the taste of the aristocrats, who preferred the Italian High Renaissance, the Baroque, and the Rococo. Indeed, collectors rarely purchased northern European panels of the 1400s and early 1500s.

FRANCE

On 10 August 1793, in the first year of the Revolution, the Louvre, the king's Parisian palace, was opened to the public as a picture gallery. The first official public art museum, it was dubbed the Musée Central des Arts in 1797 and would be renamed as the Musée Napoléon in 1803.⁷ Its Grande Galerie displayed several altarpieces confiscated from French churches alongside pieces from the former royal collections. But although this public presentation was precipitated by the Revolution, its origins lie in the Ancien Régime.

As early as 1699 Louis XIV placed the Grande Galerie and the Salon Carré at the disposal of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture for its exhibitions. In 1750 parts of the royal collection were moved from Versailles and shown tem-

porarily in the Palais du Luxembourg. The works selected – by Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Correggio, Titian, Rubens, van Dyck, Poussin, Veronese, and Reni – reflected the current court taste.

The year 1768 marked the start of a project to combine the royal collections, which comprised not only paintings but also applied art and objects of natural science, with the Bibliothèque royale in the Louvre and to house the academies of arts and sciences there as well. This project entailed major alterations to the Louvre and the surrounding neighborhood. The plans were implemented slowly, however, and then halted abruptly with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. Nevertheless, the royalists and revolutionaries alike backed the plan to install a museum in the Louvre. The royal decree of November 22, 1789, nationalizing ecclesiastical property, suddenly provided a new basis for establishing a public museum. Commissions were formed to administer what had belonged to the church and to supervise its distribution. Treasures from the churches of Paris and its environs were stored in the former monastery of the Petits Augustins.⁸

In the year that the Louvre opened as a museum the collection comprised 537 paintings, three-quarters of which came from the royal collection; the rest were the secularized church property that had been stored in the monastery of the Petits Augustins. New acquisitions were made before long, confiscated from aristocrats who had left the country or brought from abroad. Indeed, the revolutionary armies' occupation of the Southern Netherlands served as a model for the plundering of art in subsequent French campaigns in other countries. The Commission Temporaire des Arts was charged with drawing up quickly lists of art objects which were sent to the armies, together with instructions as to the handling and transportation of the works. In 1794 paintings by Rubens, Jordaens, and van Dyck were brought from the Southern Netherlands to Paris, and promptly displayed in the Louvre. Also early Netherlandish panels were confiscated: from Ghent, the central panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 22, 23], and from Bruges, Memling's *Moreel Triptych* [FIGS. 154-157], Gerard David's *Justice of Cambyses* [FIGS. 82, 83], and van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* [FIG. 160]. They were apparently selected because of their size, among other things, since in the Louvre they would be seen by droves of visitors. Otherwise, the organizers probably consulted the writings of Jean-Baptiste Descamps. This author, interested in early Netherlandish art, had praised and described the works that were later taken to Paris.

Descamps was a painter from the French-speaking part of Flanders and a member of various academies. In 1753 he published a tome entitled *La vie des peintres flamands, allemands et hollandais*, written in the tradition of art historiography based on artists' lives. The most famous examples, of course, are Vasari's *Vite*, Carel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck*, and Joachim von Sandrart's *Teutsche Academie*. Descamps's goal had been an encyclopedia of Netherlandish and German painting as



FIGURE 97 – Gerard David, *The Marriage at Cana* (96.8 x 127 cm),
Musée du Louvre, Paris

a whole, including not only the most famous artists but also those less well known. As he studied the original works and plumbed local oral tradition, his admiration for the early masters grew. Instead of considering their art as merely an intimation of things to come, he began to realize that it possessed a character of its own.

His positive, detailed assessment of early Netherlandish painting, based on his own observations, differs markedly from current French art literature, because he was the first French author to treat the early Netherlandish masters systematically and extensively.⁹ The primary vehicle of his ideas was his next book, published in Paris in 1769, the *Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant*. Its careful descriptions of pictures show that Descamps had further developed his artistic criteria. To clarify the specific qualities of each master, works were judged according to composition, drawing, palette, expression, and faithfulness to nature.

Although the emphasis in the Louvre was on paintings of the High Renaissance and the Baroque period, there had never been such an assembly of important examples of early Netherlandish art. In addition to works confiscated from



FIGURE 98 – Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* (including frame 33.3 x 27.5 cm), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna



FIGURE 99 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man* (31 x 23.2 cm), Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

the Southern Netherlands, the museum possessed Gerard David's *Marriage at Cana* [FIG. 97], which had belonged to the French royal collection and was attributed to Jan van Eyck.¹⁰ Van Eyck's *Virgin and Chancellor Rolin* [FIG. 165], formerly in the cathedral of Autun, had entered the Louvre in 1800.¹¹ After the Peace of Amiens on June 25, 1802, between England and France, English artists and men of letters made their way to Paris. However, few took any notice of the early Netherlandish painters, with the exception of Henry Fuseli, who was impressed by the panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.¹²

In 1802 Vivant Denon was appointed director of the museum.¹³ Chevalier Dominique Vivant Denon, who called himself 'citoyen Vivant Denon' during the Revolution, was a diplomat and a painter. His charm and energy had come to the attention of Napoleon in the course of the Egyptian campaign. As the director Denon proved extremely capable and during the wars of conquest he went, if at all possible, immediately to the site to select the works of art that had been seized. Among the most important early Netherlandish paintings he acquired were Memling's *Last Judgment* from Gdańsk, then attributed to Jan van Eyck [FIGS. 62, 63], and van Eyck's *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* from Vienna [FIG. 98]. His purchase for his own collection of Memling's *Portrait of a Man* [FIG. 99], then in Lyon, attests to a

taste for early Netherlandish art, even though he took the artist to be Antonello da Messina. One of his greatest accomplishments was a historically sound presentation of the collection, displaying the paintings by period and school.

GERMANY

Despite the historical presentation in the Louvre, the works of the High Renaissance and the Baroque were so predominant that it took extraordinary sensitivity to grasp the beauty of fifteenth-century art. But this is what Friedrich Schlegel possessed.¹⁴ In 1802 he went to Paris to perfect his knowledge of Persian and Sanskrit. Once in the French capital, he was impressed by the Musée Napoléon and immersed himself in aesthetics and art. The late medieval panels in the museum kindled the religious sentiments of the philosopher, who in 1808 converted to Roman Catholicism. In his *Gemäldebeschreibungen aus Paris und den Niederlanden in den Jahren 1802-1804*, Schlegel reflected on his visits to the Louvre:

Even with respect to charm, the Italian school is indeed preferable to Upper but not to Lower German art, if one judges the latter by its florescence of a Wilhelm von Köln, Jan van Eyck and Hemmelinck [Memling], and not by its later anomalies.¹⁵

The feelings he expressed for the Louvre's early Netherlandish pictures were entirely in the spirit of the Romantic conception of art formulated by Wilhelm Wackenroder [SEE CHAPTER 3, P. 220]. Schlegel's remarks on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Gerard David's *Marriage at Cana*, and the *Moreel Triptych* of 'Hemmelinck', as Memling was then known, exhibit the same approach. What mattered was the picture's religious truth and this experience was joined with nationalistic ideals. Schlegel counted the early Netherlandish school as German, because Holbein had modeled himself on van Eyck and van Eyck's figures were quite unlike those of later Flemish painters. In his eyes the sequence of van Eyck, Dürer and Holbein clarified the history and development of German art.¹⁶

Schlegel's description of Memling's *Moreel Triptych* [FIGS. 154-157] is a splendid example of Romantic art criticism. His views on the qualities of this work correspond to the ideal of the German Romantics, entirely aimed at an inner, subjective reality: 'The landscape continues from the central scene to the side panels; it is so quiet and green, full of feeling for nature, German and touching [...].' He notes 'the lovingly honest and friendly expression on the face of Saint Christopher'. Compared with Dürer, Schlegel finds Memling 'thoroughly still and touching [...], simpler, and more charming. [...] This excellent and relatively less famous

painter opens one's gaze to a still unknown region of early German art history'. The painting breathes 'a moving expression of the most heartfelt devotion and piety'.¹⁷

These ideas on early northern art had a great appeal for the young Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée, who made Schlegel's acquaintance when they went to Paris in 1803.¹⁸ The brothers belonged to a Cologne merchant family that specialized in wine and groceries. The premature death of their parents left them orphans at an early age. Sulpiz was sent to study trade in Hamburg, where he indulged his interest in literature. Returning to Cologne in 1799, he visited his bookbinder, who kept him abreast of new titles from the annual bookfair, and met there the seven-year-old Johann Baptist Bertram, a law student and passionate admirer of Friedrich Schlegel. In 1803 Bertram went with the Boisserée brothers to Paris, where they spent a year with Schlegel and his wife, Dorothea. Their host gave them lessons in the history of philosophy and literature and also imparted his enthusiasm for the early masters in the Musée Napoléon. In 1804 the Schlegels accompanied the brothers Boisserée and Bertram back to Cologne, stopping en route to see the art in various southern Netherlandish cities. In Cologne the Boisserées combined their new interest in medieval painting with an instinct for business, purchasing panels which had been scattered through the town since church property was confiscated under the French occupation. Sulpiz Boisserée has described how these activities began:

It happened a few months after our return [from Paris], when we were walking with Schlegel on the Neumarkt, the city's largest square, that we encountered a stretcher filled with all sorts of objects, including an old painting on which the golden halos of the saints shone from far. The painting, which showed the Carrying of the Cross with the weeping women and Saint Veronica, seemed to have some merit. I [...] asked the name of the owner, who lived there in the neighborhood; he did not know where he should leave the big picture and was happy to be rid of it for the price he asked. [...] to avoid any fuss or mockery we decided to take the dusty antiquity through a back door into our family's house [...].¹⁹

The brothers were not the first people in Cologne to collect early masters. The canon Ferdinand Franz Wallraf and the merchant Jakob Johann Nepomuk Lyversberg already assembled sizeable collections of late medieval panels painted in Cologne, which eventually became the core of the city's Wallraf-Richartz-Museum.²⁰ However, the Boisserées distinguished themselves from those collectors, not so much in the size of their collection as in their single-mindedness and outspoken perception of quality. Naturally enough, they began with the art of their



FIGURE 100 – Dirk Bouts, *The Adoration of the Magi Triptych* (*The Pearl of Brabant*) (central panel 62.5 x 62.5 cm; each wing 62.5 x 27.5 cm), Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

own region, the Rhineland. In letters, in publications, and in person, they campaigned for the preservation of the national heritage. Sulpiz Boisserée's journal shows his awareness of the import of their undertaking. In addition to their concern for the preservation of this art, they came to realize that the panels provided insight into the history of late medieval painting.

The Boisserées trained their eyes by making comparisons of style and developed standards of quality. Using their notes on paintings in museums, churches and private collections, they organized their own acquisitions by date and place of execution and they drew conclusions about artistic developments. The rigid forms and gold backgrounds of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Cologne painting, they believed, came from Byzantine art, and the liberation from its influence should be ascribed to Master Wilhelm of Cologne, mentioned by a late fourteenth-century chronicler as the city's most important painter. As his masterpiece they saw the *Adoration of the Magi Triptych*, now attributed to Stefan Lochner and dated between 1440 and 1448 [FIG. 18]. Furthermore, the Boisserées assumed that Cologne painting was the source of the art of Hubert and Jan van Eyck, who merely represented a new chapter in the history of German art.

According to this view, the collection was enriched by early Netherlandish works and in 1808 its greatest treasure was acquired: van der Weyden's *Columba Altarpiece*, from the church of Saint Columba in Cologne, which the brothers assigned to Jan van Eyck [FIG. 17].²¹ In 1810 the pictures were moved to Heidelberg, where they were admired by Goethe, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schlegel's brother August Wilhelm, Ludwig Tieck, and Johanna Schopenhauer.²² In the following years other important Netherlandish paintings were collected. In 1813 the Boisserées purchased from a Brussels dealer Memling's so-called *Seven Joys of the Virgin* [FIG. 152], in their view probably made by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, 'one of van Eyck's best pupils', and from its owner in Mechlin Bouts's *Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi* [FIG. 100]. The next year another Brussels dealer sold them a *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*, a late fifteenth-century copy of a painting by van der Weyden,²³ which they attributed to van Eyck. In 1815 and at an unknown date they bought the *Abraham and Melchizedek* [FIG. 40] and the *Gathering of the Manna* [FIG. 42] from Bouts's *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* [FIG. 38]. These panels came from the von Bettendorf collection, which was brought from Brussels to Aachen in 1814.²⁴

Through prints and articles the Boisserées tried to ensure a broader knowledge of their collection. But they went even further: they conceived a plan to sell it and to have it placed in a public museum. The kings of Prussia, Bavaria, and Württemberg expressed interest, as did the Frankfurt banker and collector Städel, the founder of the institute that still bears his name. Sulpiz's journals and correspondence convey his thinking about the sale as he considered where the paintings could best serve art-historical education.

As early as 1797, in a lecture to the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts and Sciences in Berlin, the archeologist Alois Hirt pleaded for the establishment of an art museum. But the political situation was such that his proposal, inspired by the museum in the Louvre, could only be realized after Napoleon's final defeat.²⁵ The treaty that ended the Napoleonic wars was signed in 1815, and on their return from Paris the Prussian privy councillor Altenstein and the legation councillor Eichhorn passed through Heidelberg to discuss the conditions under which the Boisserées would sell their collection to the Prussian state.²⁶ The following year the influential architect and painter Karl Friedrich Schinkel was sent from Berlin to Heidelberg for further negotiations. It took him two weeks to reach an agreement with the brothers, which he urged the Prussian government to accept. In arguing the case, he spoke of the uniqueness and completeness of this collection formed according to strict scholarly criteria in order to 'make clear the historical development of art first in the Lower Rhenish German school and then in the Upper German, from the end of the thirteenth into the sixteenth centuries'.²⁷ There were political considerations as well: the people of the Rhineland, which the Congress of Vienna had joined to Prussia, 'would never be able to forgive the Prussian government for relinquishing such a treasure, to which they attach uncommon importance as a monument of the art of their land'. It was desirable, furthermore, that:

Prussia no longer constantly appears abroad and even at home merely as a financial and military state; for in view of the general interest which the people, governments and princes take in this matter, it will make an extraordinary sensation when Prussia's acquisition becomes public in Germany. [...] All things considered, the possession of this collection seems imperative for Prussia at any price.²⁸

Despite Schinkel's plea the purchase was blocked by the minister of finance, on the ground among others that the collection consisted 'for the most part of very small pieces that, regardless of their great historical and artistic value, were better off in a cabinet than in a museum and would be of interest mainly to artists, but much less for the general public'.²⁹

When negotiations with the Städelches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt also foundered, the Boisserées accepted an offer from the king of Württemberg to keep the collection temporarily in Stuttgart. Here, in 1819, it was open for several hours a day and attracted throngs of visitors. Enthusiastically, Sulpiz wrote to Goethe: '[...] a veritable pilgrimage arises, and now hardly a day passes in which fifty to sixty persons do not come together in a couple of hours. Indeed, the number increases now and then even to over a hundred.'³⁰ But the purchase of the collection, envisioned by the king, fell through in 1826, because his ministry of

finance advised against it.³¹ Crestfallen, the Boisserées considered accepting payment to show the collection in Paris or selling it through the dealer Nieuwenhuys to the Prince of Orange at The Hague.

At this point the brothers were again approached by King Ludwig I of Bavaria.³² He had already seen the collection several times when it was in Heidelberg and had expressed an interest in combining it with the early German paintings in his collection. The plan had been abandoned for political reasons in 1816; it was ill advised to compete with Prussia.³³ By the time Prussia decided against the purchase, Ludwig's interest had shifted to the art of Classical Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. However, in 1826, serious negotiations started with the result that, the next year, Ludwig bought the collection and had it moved from Stuttgart to his castle at Schleissheim, where, at first, the 261 pictures could only be seen with royal permission. At the same time, Leopold von Klenze was building the Pinakothek, the picture gallery in Munich, where, after it was opened in 1836, the Boisserée collection found its final destination.³⁴ The Pinakothek was organized along national lines, and, according to the new insights discussed in Chapter 3 [p. 221], the early Netherlandish works were no longer presented as part of a German but of a Flemish school, also represented by altarpieces of Rubens. The esteem enjoyed by early Netherlandish art in Munich was reflected in the cupola paintings by the contemporary painter Peter von Cornelius. (They were destroyed in World War II.) Beside a cupola honoring Raphael, Dürer, and Leonardo da Vinci, one was devoted to the van Eyck brothers and another to Memling.

Although the Prussian government decided to forego the Boisserée paintings, Berlin's Gemäldegalerie eventually acquired exceptional early Netherlandish panels. The core of its collection was established by the kings, particularly Frederick the Great, and it was enriched in 1815 by the purchase of the collection of Cardinal Giustiniani. The museum possessed for the most part works of the Italian Baroque and French Rococo period. An infusion of earlier pictures occurred in 1821, when Prussia acquired the collection of Edward Solly.³⁵

This English merchant had settled in Berlin and he amassed a fortune during the Napoleonic wars in the timber trade between the Baltic countries and England. Since his vessels had been registered as part of the Prussian fleet, they were captured in 1809 by the Danes, who had sided with Napoleon, and diverted with their cargo to Copenhagen. Nearly ruined, Solly sought compensation, or at least some financial help, from the Prussian state. Only in 1819 did he receive from King Friedrich Wilhelm III the funds needed to rescue his London firm. As collateral, his collection was pawned and in 1821 Solly sold it to the king.

The Solly collection, numbering some 3,000 works, was considerably larger than that of the Boisserées, but the quality was not consistent. Solly's motives,



FIGURE 101 – Gerard David, *The Crucifixion* (141 x 100 cm),
Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

unlike those of the Boisserées, for collecting panels of early masters are not clear, but they may have been at least partly financial and he may have purchased these paintings already thinking of selling them to Prussia.³⁶

A total of 677 pictures was selected for the Gemäldegalerie; the rest were divided among the royal castles or, in most cases, placed in storage. Of those selected for the Gemäldegalerie some 250 were Italian paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The early Netherlandish group, about a fourth as large, included such important works as the wings of the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 19, 20], excepting the *Adam* and *Eve* panels which remained in Belgium, a *Crucifixion* by Gerard David [FIG. 101], the *Visitation* and the *Adoration of the Magi* by Jacques Daret [FIGS. 102, 103], a *Portrait of Charles the Bold* by Rogier van der Weyden or his workshop,³⁷ and a *Portrait of a Lady* by Petrus Christus. In addition there were pictures by early German artists, especially the fifteenth-century school of Cologne and the Lower Rhine.

Thanks to the art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen, other important early Netherlandish paintings entered the Gemäldegalerie.³⁸ On the advice of his cousin, the Romantic writer Ludwig Tieck, Waagen had visited the Boisserée collection at an early date. In 1823, shortly after the publication of his book on the van Eyck brothers [SEE CHAPTER 3, PP. 219-225], he was appointed to a committee in charge of the Gemäldegalerie, and he became its director in 1830. This year also marked the opening of a new accommodation for the gallery, the Deutsches Museum, designed by Schinkel in close consultation with Waagen.³⁹ As director, Waagen bought the *Passover* [FIG. 41] and *Elijah in the Desert* [FIG. 43] from Bouts's *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* [FIG. 38], Christus's two panels with the *Annunciation*, *Nativity*, and *Last Judgment* [FIGS. 33, 34], and van der Weyden's *Altarpiece of Pierre Bladelin* [FIG. 54], *Miraflores Altarpiece* [FIG. 130], and *Saint John the Baptist Altarpiece*.

The Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt likewise came into possession of Netherlandish art.⁴⁰ The Frankfurt merchant and collector Johann Friedrich Städel, who died in 1816, had established this institution by testamentary disposition, but legal complications with his descendants prevented the purchase of the Boisserée collection. In 1840 Johann David Passavant was appointed as inspector of the institute. He had started out as a painter in the circle of the Nazarenes – Romantic artists who exalted the Middle Ages in the spirit of Wilhelm Wackenroder. A self-taught art historian, Passavant became a connoisseur of the Italian and early Netherlandish schools and acquired Campin's Flémalle panels [FIGS. 1-3], van Eyck's *Lucca Virgin* [FIG. 145], and Christus's *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saint Jerome and Saint Francis* [FIG. 104], which he bought for himself from the collection of Carl Aders in London in 1830 and later presented to the 'Städel'.



FIGURE 102 – Jacques Daret, *The Visitation* (59.5 x 53 cm),
Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 103 – Jacques Daret, *The Adoration of the Magi* (57 x 52 cm),
Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 104 – Petrus Christus, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saint Jerome and Saint Francis* (44.9 x 43 cm), Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

BELGIUM

We have seen that during the French Revolution churches and other buildings in the Southern Netherlands were stripped of their treasures, and that important pictures were taken to France. Nevertheless, in Ghent a law was enacted in 1798, ironically under the French regime, calling for a national art museum in the former church of Saint Peter. The plan was finally realized in 1802. Belgium's first public museum could not present any masterpieces of early Netherlandish painting, but displayed some Flemish art of the seventeenth-century.

The restitution of works taken by the French from the Southern Netherlands as well as other countries was negotiated at the Congress of Vienna. As a result, the four central panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* came back to Ghent in 1816, but in the same year the wings, excepting the *Adam* and *Eve* panels, were sold by the cathedral fabric to the art-dealer Nieuwenhuys and subsequently purchased by Solly. The central panels were at first exhibited in the museum, but were shortly afterward surrendered to the ecclesiastical authorities, who were declared the rightful owners. Despite some bequests from major Flemish private collectors in Flanders and a few fortuitous acquisitions, the museum in Ghent was never able to achieve an important collection of early Netherlandish art.⁴¹

In Bruges the pictures confiscated by the French were returned in 1816. The bells were rung when they arrived by boat. They were taken to the town hall in a festive procession accompanied by music. Among them were van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele*, Memling's *Moreel Triptych*, and David's *Justice of Cambyses*, which was temporarily housed in the town hall, while the other two works were installed in the Academy of Fine Arts. This institute already boasted van Eyck's portrait of his wife Margaret. The portrait had escaped the French, as had Hugo van der Goes's *Death of the Virgin* [FIG. 66], which had been moved from an abbey to the town hall and was transferred to the Academy in 1828 along with the *Justice of Cambyses*. All these works were preserved in the museum of the Academy until the end of the nineteenth century and are now in the Groeningemuseum.⁴²

Hans Memling's altarpieces and *Saint Ursula Shrine* [FIG. 105] in the Bruges hospital of Saint John were spared the journey to Paris. So was the same artist's *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove* [FIG. 74], which was in the hospital of Saint Julian and moved to that of Saint John in 1815. There, Memling's creations were admired by the Boisserée brothers and by Johanna Schopenhauer, and since the hospital became a public museum in 1839 they stirred romantic feelings in the hearts of countless other visitors.⁴³ Interest in Memling's art was stimulated by a little, Romantic book published in 1818, *Ursula, princesse britannique* by Baron de Keerbergh.⁴⁴ It ostensibly dealt with Ursula, the heroine of Memling's *Saint Ursula Shrine*, but the real subject was the artist.



FIGURE 105 – Hans Memling, *Saint Ursula Shrine*, Hospital of Saint John, Bruges

In Brussels a museum had already been established in 1803, to display works of art that had not been taken to Paris. After the Congress of Vienna it was enriched with restituted masterpieces of the Flemish Baroque art. In 1846 it became the Musée royal de peinture et de sculpture de Belgique and began to purchase important early Netherlandish paintings. The *Justice of Otto III* panels by Bouts [FIGS. 45, 46] were acquired from the estate of King William II of the Netherlands in 1850, and in 1861 the museum bought van der Weyden's *Portrait of Anthony of Burgundy* (considered as a portrait of Charles the Bold) and Memling's portraits of Willem Moreel and Barbara van Vlaenderberch [FIGS. 158, 159] from the art-dealer Nieuwenhuys.⁴⁵

In Antwerp, too, the restitution of its paintings by France increased the number of Baroque works in the museum, which belonged to the Academy of Fine

Arts.⁴⁶ Early Netherlandish art arrived in the form of a bequest from the Antwerp nobleman Florent Van Ertborn, who had been mayor of Antwerp and governor of the province of Utrecht until 1830.⁴⁷ At his death in 1840 his collection, consisting chiefly of early Netherlandish panels but also works by early Italian, French, and German masters, comprised 115 pictures, which were then in The Hague and Antwerp. Van Ertborn had campaigned for the revaluation of late medieval art, believing that the painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were closer to nature than the later masters.⁴⁸ In 1824 Sulpiz Boisserée visited Van Ertborn and also met the history painter Van Bree, who shared their taste. At Keverberg's request, Van Bree had restored a *Lamentation* attributed to 'Hemmelinck' [FIG. 109]. Neither Van Ertborn nor Van Bree had ever heard of the lithographic reproductions of the Boisserée collection. In a letter Sulpiz described their reaction when he showed them his plates:

these two men spent much of the evening admiring them highly. It is such a wonderful connection that we now come to the Netherlands and only now acquaint the people with their own early masters. Time and again the mayor, and Van Bree as well, exclaimed: 'We don't know this master, we can distinguish only a few, regarding others we are completely ignorant, because we have almost nothing left in this country, and, in the past our old painters were unfortunately quite despised. You and the English carried off whatever was left to sell, and now we have kept the gleanings, which is very poor.'⁴⁹

Treasures in Van Ertborn's bequest were van Eyck's *Virgin and Child at the Fountain* [FIG. 106] and *Saint Barbara* [FIG. 107], van der Weyden's *Altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments* [FIG. 108], and a *Portrait of a Man* by Memling [FIG. 99], which had once belonged to Vivant Denon. When the Antwerp museum took possession of the collection, Waagen, Sulpiz Boisserée and the, likewise German, Heinrich Gustav Hotho helped with the cataloguing, which confirms that the Belgians acknowledged the greater expertise of the German collectors and art historians.⁵⁰

THE NETHERLANDS

The collection of King William II of the Netherlands was more important than Van Ertborn's and on a par with that of the Boisserées concerning Netherlandish painting.⁵¹ At the beginning of his collecting career, when he was still Prince of Orange and living in Brussels, William concentrated on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art and primarily the early Netherlandish school. In 1843 the dealer Nieuwenhuys published a catalogue of the king's pictures, which had in the meantime



FIGURE 106 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child at the Fountain* (including frame 24.8 x 18.1 cm), Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp



FIGURE 107 – Jan van Eyck, *Saint Barbara* (32.3 x 18.5 cm),
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp



FIGURE 108 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments*
(central panel 200 x 97 cm; each side panel 119 x 63 cm),
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp



FIGURE 109 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Lamentation* (80.7 x 130.3 cm),
Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague

been moved to The Hague. The catalogue laid the greatest emphasis on the 59 early works of the collection of 129, on the ground that they were the least known.

The interest of this royal collector in early Netherlandish masters can be explained in various ways. One was his sympathy with the struggle for independence of the Southern Netherlands: in 1830 he let it be known that he would be willing against his father's wishes to ascend the Belgian throne – in the event to no avail. He had designed and built a Neo-Gothic gallery for his pictures at The Hague and was interested in the Church of Rome. It was rumored that he even wished to convert. An interest in medieval art was often associated with Roman Catholic sympathies: mention has already been made of Schlegel's conversion to Catholicism, and Ludwig I had implored the Boisserées to bring their collection to Catholic southern Germany.

William II owed the quality of his collection to Nieuwenhuys, whose clients also included the Boisserées and Solly, and the leading collector of early Netherlandish art in London, Carl Aders. When the king died, the House of Orange decided to dispose of his paintings and in 1850 Nieuwenhuys organized its sales. Throngs of buyers from Russia, England, and Germany converged on The Hague. In a few days the collection amassed over three decades was scattered far and wide. Van Eyck's *Annunciation* [FIG. 120] went to the Russian czar, van der Weyden's

Miraflores Altarpiece [FIG. 130] and two panels from his *Saint John the Baptist Altarpiece* to the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Bouts's *Justice of Otto III* [FIGS. 45, 46] to the museum in Brussels, and van Eyck's *Lucca Virgin* [FIG. 145] and a *Portrait of a Man* by Memling to the Städtisches Kunstinstitut.⁵² Private collectors in England purchased works by Christus and Bouts.

It seems curious that not one of these masterpieces has found its way into a Dutch museum. In 1798, in the wake of the French Revolution, the Dutch founded a national museum, which was initially housed at The Hague but moved to Amsterdam in 1808, where, after some years, it received the name 'Rijks Museum'. The collection included three paintings ascribed to the van Eyck brothers: the *Holy Kinship* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, the *Virgin and Child with Female Saints* by the Master among Virgins, and a copy of an *Adoration of the Magi* by Hieronymus Bosch.⁵³

Since 1822 the Mauritshuis at The Hague displayed works belonging to the House of Orange which had been brought to France during the Revolution. Regaining them had not been easy: about 125 of the Orange pictures plundered by the French came back, 68 remained in France. Only a few panels were added to the collection in the following years; one of these was the *Lamentation* that Keverberg had had restored by Van Bree [FIG. 109]. King William I had bought this work by Rogier van der Weyden and his workshop for the Mauritshuis in 1827. Most of early Netherlandish painting now in Holland was acquired after the nineteenth century, and even now this school is only modestly represented.⁵⁴

ENGLAND

In the mid-seventeenth century, the English royal collections preserved in the Long Gallery in Whitehall and in similar galleries in other palaces were hardly inferior in size or quality to the Habsburg collections in Vienna and Madrid and the collections of the French crown. At considerable expense, Charles I had expanded his art treasures with systematic acquisitions, especially of Cinquecento Venetian masters. But, in the Civil war, the king was defeated by Oliver Cromwell and Parliament. On the sale of his collections after his execution, the paintings went to the Spanish Netherlands, to Holland and France, and to private collectors in England.⁵⁵

The English art market developed rapidly in the late seventeenth century in response to the aristocracy's insatiable appetite for old masters.⁵⁶ One of the most famous collectors was Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. In addition to pictures by the renowned Venetians and Raphael and Rubens, he also bought works by Jan van Eyck: the inventory of his collection drawn up in 1655 lists two panels by van Eyck, one of which, described as a self-portrait, is the *Portrait of a Man with a Red*

Turban [FIG. 110].⁵⁷ The aristocratic collections, however, consisted mainly of seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch art. In the eighteenth-century, the young members of the upper class, traveling to Italy, acquired especially paintings of the contemporary Venetian school. Masterpieces of the Italian Baroque were coveted, but no longer easy to find. A sea change was brought by the outbreak of the French Revolution. In 1799 the collection of the House of Orléans was snatched from the French Republic and sold in London, giving the English nobility a chance to satisfy their taste for the Italian Baroque.⁵⁸

Aside from the Orléans collection, no less important than the French royal collection, other pictures were brought on the London art market by emigrés. They were not purchased by aristocrats alone: rich merchants, such as John Julius Angerstein, an insurance magnate whose collection later became the basis of the National Gallery, were buying also actively.⁵⁹ The *Memoirs of Painting*, published in 1824, of William Buchanan, a Scottish lawyer who was very active on the art market, describes the auctions and public sales in England during the Napoleonic wars.⁶⁰ His lists are, however, devoid of early Netherlandish works. Passavant's *Kunstreise durch England und Belgien* and Waagen's *Kunstwerke und Künstler in England* give an idea of the wealth and breadth of English private collections after these wars, but confirm that most of their owners were not interested in early Netherlandish art.⁶¹

An exception was the German merchant and insurance agent Carl Aders, who lived in London.⁶² His collection, part of which was kept in his castle in Bad Godesberg, near Bonn, was famous in both Germany and England. Aders possessed paintings by Bouts, Memling, David, and a copy of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Although he was undoubtedly familiar with the Romantic literature of his day, his love for the early masters does not appear to have been motivated by nationalism or religion. In 1831 business reverses left him in financial straits, and his pictures were handed over to the Society of British Artists for a sale exhibition, but only seventeen of the 120 works listed were sold. A public auction was consequently held in 1835, also without success, and another auction, at Christie's, four years later.

The London physician and surgeon Joseph Henry Green, who was introduced to Aders by the poet Coleridge, bought paintings at both of these auctions. Green's widow left these works, including Bouts's *Christ Crowned with Thorns* and David's *Adoration of the Magi* and *Lamentation*, to the National Gallery in London, thus fulfilling at least part of the wish Aders expressed before his death in 1846, to donate his collection to the English nation.⁶³

When these paintings entered the National Gallery in 1879, this institution had been in existence for nearly fifty years and had become one of Europe's leading museums. After the Peace of Amiens in 1802, English art lovers visiting Paris had had the opportunity to perceive the advantages of a national art museum, and



FIGURE 110 – Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man with a Red Turban (Self Portrait?)*
(including frame 33.1 x 25.9 cm), The National Gallery, London



FIGURE 111 – Jan van Eyck, *Tymotheos* (33.3 x 18.9 cm),
The National Gallery, London

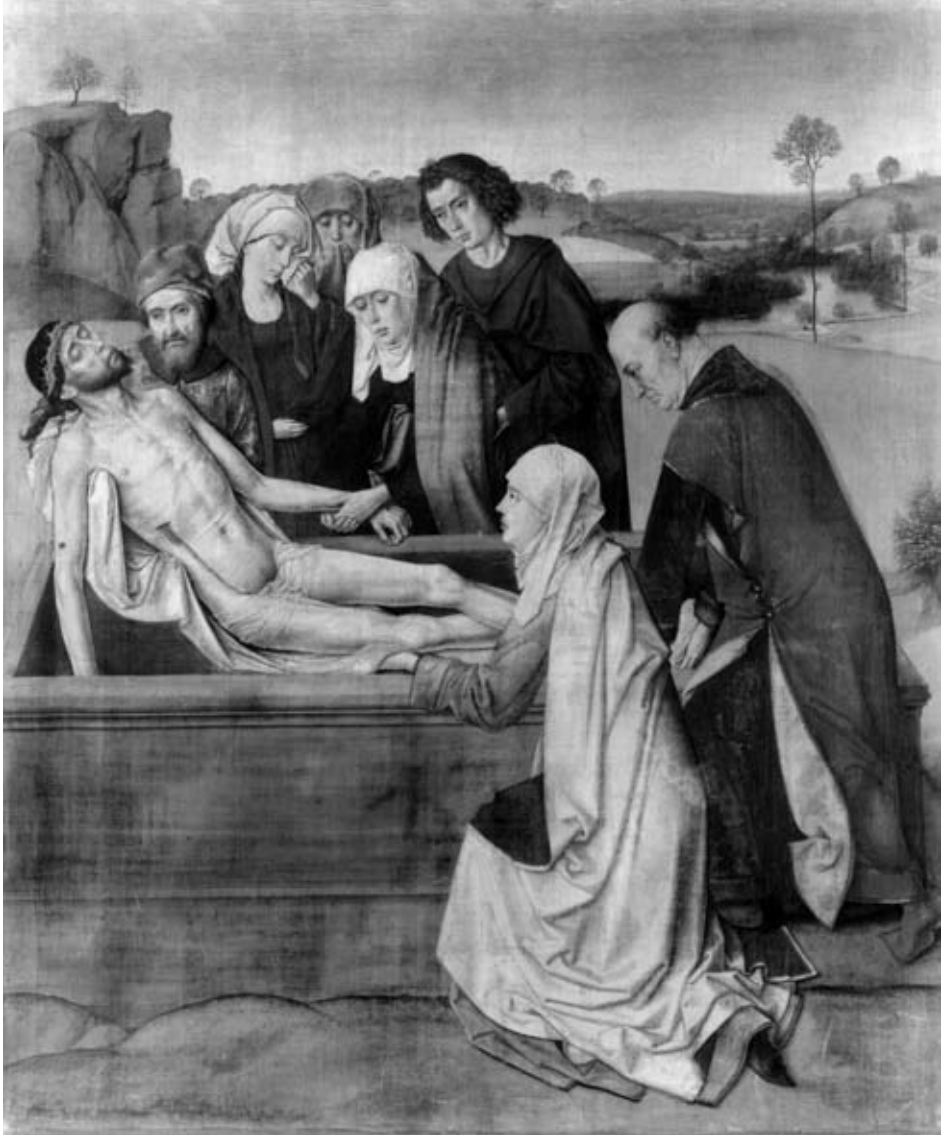


FIGURE 112 – Dirk Bouts, *The Entombment* (87.5 x 73.6 cm),
The National Gallery, London

in 1824, under the leadership of Lord Liverpool, the National Gallery was founded with the purchase of a private collection of thirty-eight works. It was initially housed in the residence of their former owner, Sir John Julius Angerstein, and new pictures were mostly donations or bequests, because there was no such thing as an acquisition budget.⁶⁴ In 1841, however, the National Gallery bought its first early Netherlandish work: Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* [FIG. 25], which had come from Spain and fallen into the hands of a British soldier.⁶⁵

In 1843 Charles Eastlake was appointed as keeper.⁶⁶ In his youth Eastlake had spent a good deal of time in Rome, where he came into contact with the group of Romantic artists known as the Nazarenes and met Johann David Passavant. Moreover, Eastlake and his wife, Elizabeth Rigby, had close ties with Gustav Friedrich Waagen.⁶⁷ Given these connections it is not surprising that, in addition to the traditional artists, he admired the early masters.

There was no one better suited than Eastlake to establish the international prestige of the National Gallery, which had in the meantime moved to Trafalgar Square. He was in the center of the public eye, however, and faced with opposition. His purchase of a portrait by Holbein, which was soon recognized as the work of an anonymous painter and had to be removed from the gallery, was seized upon as evidence of his lack of expertise. Other purchases were criticized as well. The opposition finally centered on a method of restoration he had introduced: the removal of varnish from a number of pictures had caused these works to lose their highly appreciated brownish tint. This led to a parliamentary debate in 1847, and Eastlake was forced to resign. Nevertheless, after three years, he became a trustee of the museum, and he was able to initiate the acquisition of van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man with a Red Turban* among other paintings. He also appointed a 'travel agent', Otto Mündler, who played a role in the purchase of van Eyck's so-called *Tymotheos* [FIG. 111].

In 1860 Eastlake managed to acquire the Beauconsin collection in Paris, which included the fragment with the *Magdalen Reading* by van der Weyden and two portraits by Robert Campin.⁶⁸ That same year he bought an *Entombment* in Milan [FIG. 112], then attributed to Lucas van Leyden, in which he thought he recognized the hand of van der Weyden; this work is now ascribed to Dirk Bouts. In 1863 the National Gallery acquired from Queen Victoria twenty-five early pictures from a collection of early Italian, Netherlandish, and German works which had belonged to her late husband, Prince Albert. One of these was a *Virgin and Child* by Memling.⁶⁹ In 1865, shortly before Eastlake's death, the side panels of an altarpiece, also by Hans Memling, with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Lawrence were purchased in Paris.

Eastlake's private collection reflected the same taste as his policy for acquisitions by the museum. In England he had bought the *Exhumation of Saint Hubert*

by van der Weyden and his workshop, then taken as by Jan van Eyck, and in Italy he had found Bouts's *Virgin and Child with Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, which he attributed tentatively to Hugo van der Goes. His widow sold these and other pictures to the National Gallery.

The relatively late formation of the collection of London's National Gallery more or less rounded off the origin of the public presentation of early Netherlandish art in Europe. The Prado in Madrid had already opened in 1819, and the Austrian imperial collection was open to the public, as we have noted, from the end of the eighteenth century, although the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna was only inaugurated in 1891. The richness of the collections of Madrid, Vienna, Munich, Berlin, Frankfurt, Bruges, and London in early Netherlandish paintings gave access to the heritage of the Burgundian period. It is ironic that, after Napoleon, France, which had inadvertently stimulated the collection of such works by plundering them, lacked an acquisition policy comparable to that of Germany and England, despite all the interest shown by French historians in early Netherlandish art [SEE CHAPTER 4]. Aside from van Eyck's *Virgin and Chancellor Rolin*, which came from Autun, one of the Louvre's best examples of this school is van der Weyden's *Braque Triptych*, which was not acquired before 1913. Other works also entered the museum mainly at a rather late date. The most important developments, however, in the history of the collection of this art after the period discussed above, took place in the New World.

THE UNITED STATES

Early paintings from the Low Countries were displayed in the United States not long after the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other public art collections came into being in the last quart of the nineteenth century. Like most American art museums, this institution was founded, in 1870, by a private initiative and acquired early Netherlandish pictures mainly through private donations and bequests. In 1889 the railroad investor Henry G. Marquand became the second president of the museum, and the same year he purchased fifty paintings by old masters for the museum.⁷⁰ Among them were two important early Netherlandish works. The first was a free copy after Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child at the Fountain*, in Antwerp, then considered an authentic van Eyck, which had belonged to William II of Holland and was sold to Marquand by a Parisian dealer. The second picture was a *Lamentation* by Petrus Christus [FIG. 113], which came from London.

Around the same time, a *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*, ascribed to Rogier van der Weyden and later proven to be the original of four versions [FIG. 140],



FIGURE 113 – Petrus Christus, *The Lamentation* (25.4 x 34.9 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FIGURE 114 – Jan van Eyck, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (12.4 x 14.6 cm),
John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia

entered the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, which had been founded in 1876. It was auctioned in New York in 1889 as part of the collection of Don Pedro de Borbón and bought by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Lee Higginson, who seem to have acquired the picture with the Boston Museum in mind: they donated it four years later.⁷¹

John Graver Johnson, a lawyer in Philadelphia, who built up a broad collection of over twelve hundred pictures, purchased many examples of early Netherlandish painting. In 1894 he bought, in London, a small panel attributed to Jan van Eyck, of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* [FIG. 114].⁷² His later acquisitions included a large diptych of *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John* by Rogier van der Weyden [FIG. 115], which had been on the market in Paris. Johnson left his works of art to his city in 1917, and they were moved from his former residence to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1933.⁷³

The majority of the early Netherlandish paintings entered American private collections at a time of great prosperity. Most collectors were self-made men who had learnt, as Friedländer put it, that the only decent way to show capitalistic wealth was in the form of valuable works of art.⁷⁴ Donating them to public institutions was a key to lasting fame. However, the presence of works of high quality in the museums should not only be ascribed to the zeal of collectors, but also to the advices of art experts and the influence of dealers. After receiving the amount of five million dollars which the locomotive manufacturer Jacob S. Rogers had left for acquisitions, the Metropolitan Museum hired the English painter and art critic Roger Fry, founder and publisher of the *Burlington Magazine*, to act as its buying agent from 1905 until 1910.⁷⁵ Two purchases Fry arranged on the London art market were a *Virgin and Child in an Apse*, a copy after Robert Campin then attributed to the Master of Flémalle, and a *Crucifixion* by Gerard David.

Indirectly, Wilhelm von Bode, the director of the Berlin museums, played a part in the collecting of early Netherlandish painting in the United States.⁷⁶ Beginning around 1880 he advised collectors and later catalogued their acquisitions. Among them were the bankers Maurice and Rodolphe Kann, in Paris.⁷⁷ Rodolphe Kann, whose collection Bode described in a lavish catalogue in 1900, bought important early Netherlandish works, some of which were in the famous Bruges exhibition *Les Primitifs Flamands* of 1902 [SEE CHAPTER 4, PP. 275-278]. When he died in 1905, his pictures came on the art market and the Anglo-American dealer Joseph Duveen, together with another firm, managed in a spectacular transaction to obtain the entire collection. The paintings were primarily sold to American collectors, on whom Duveen exercised great influence.⁷⁸

Most of the early Netherlandish panels from the Kann collection went to the New York banker J. Pierpont Morgan, whose entry into the market drove prices to unprecedented heights. Morgan became the owner of two portraits by

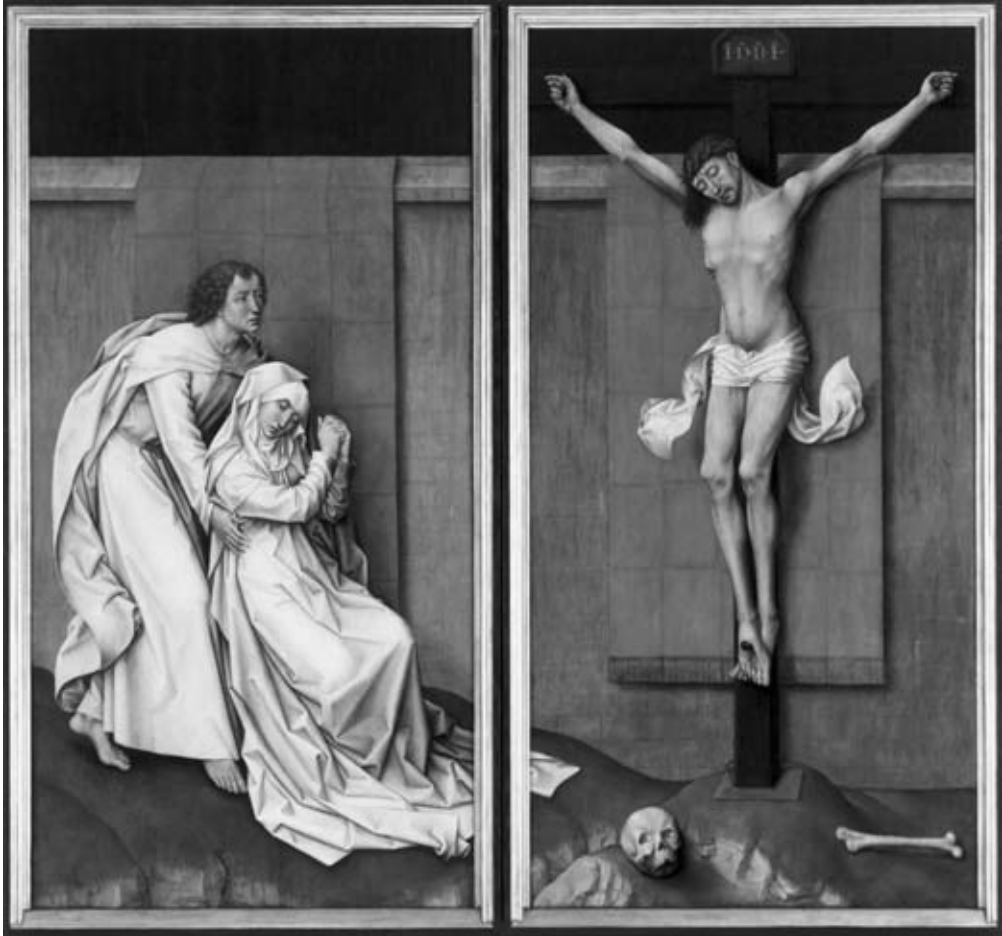


FIGURE 115 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John* (each panel 180.3 x 92.5 cm), John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia



FIGURE 116 – Follower of Rogier van der Weyden (possibly Hans Memling),
The Morgan Annunciation (186.1 x 114.9 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FIGURE 117 – Hans Memling, *Tommaso Portinari* (42.2 x 31.8 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FIGURE 118 – Hans Memling, *Maria Baroncelli* (42.2 x 32.1 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Memling, the interior wings of the *Jan Crabbe Triptych*, also by Memling, and a monumental panel by a follower of Rogier van der Weyden, known as the *Morgan Annunciation* [FIG. 116]. After his death in 1913, this panel was donated together with the majority of his other pictures to the Metropolitan Museum, of which he had been president.⁷⁹

Beside Duveen, the dealer Kleinberger was an important supplier of early Netherlandish art in the United States. In 1910 he sold Memling's portraits of Tommaso Portinari and his wife Maria Baroncelli [FIGS. 117, 118], from the collection of the Parisian banker Léopold Goldschmidt, to Benjamin Altman, a New York merchant whose profits came from a successful department store.⁸⁰ The next year Altman bought another Memling from Kleinberger, a *Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Barbara*, which also came from the Goldschmidt collection. Before his death in 1913, he acquired through Kleinberger two paintings from the Cologne Oppenheim collection: a portrait by Dirk Bouts and one by Memling.⁸¹ Altman purchased these pictures after he decided to leave his collection to the Metropolitan Museum, stipulating that the museum would display his pictures permanently in designated rooms.

Although Altman and Pierpont Morgan had no special preferences for early Netherlandish painting of the fifteenth century, the mediation of the dealers stimulated them to make spectacular acquisitions in this field. But, of course, they made the decisions themselves. Altman even returned a portrait after he had bought it: van der Weyden's *Portrait of Jean Gros*. The panel, which came from the Kann collection and passed through Duveen into the hands of another dealer and then into Kleinberger's, was eventually sold to Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson, who left it to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1933.⁸²

Bode, who visited the United States for the second time in 1911 to gather information about American museums, paid tribute in his memoirs to the achievement of the collectors, with some astute conclusions:

Their principle was to acquire as far as possible the best of the best masters; since they were indifferent to the price for achieving this goal, they [...] succeeded within a few years to bring together artworks of a quality that the collections of the Old World can scarcely exhibit. The European owners of excellent works of art rarely resisted the prices they paid, and will also in the future resist them only rarely. In the foreseeable future a large part of the best of what is still here in private ownership will likewise cross the ocean; and since these treasures will gradually, thanks to the civic spirit and ambition of the Americans, be transferred in the form of bequests to the museums, these will within a few decades be on a par with the grand old European museums, and will surpass them even in some respects.⁸³



FIGURE 119 – Petrus Christus (?), *The Friedsam Annunciation* (77.5 x 64.1 cm),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



FIGURE 120 – Jan van Eyck, *The Annunciation* (90.2 x 34.1 cm),
National Gallery of Art, Washington

The development of the art market in the wake of World War I made Bode's remarks all the more prescient. On the Continent, as a result of the Great War, a stagnant industrial development, and above all the inflation of the 1920s, major private collections were dispersed and their pictures came into the hands of American collectors. In addition to important bourgeois collections in Germany and France, this condition also affected venerable princely German collections.⁸⁴

The collecting activities of Altman and Pierpont Morgan set an example for a younger generation. Altman's manager, confidant, and later successor as president of the department store, Michael Friedsam, started collecting in the footsteps of his mentor.⁸⁵ He, too, purchased early Netherlandish panels from Kleinberger, relying particularly on the greatest connoisseur of early Netherlandish painting, the Berlin art historian Max J. Friedländer, who published a catalogue of Friedsam's 'Primitives'. From Kleinberger Friedsam acquired Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of Francesco d'Este* in 1918 and, in 1926, the so-called *Friedsam Annunciation* [FIG. 119], long attributed to Hubert van Eyck but now assigned to Petrus Christus. Kleinberger also sold him works by Memling and David. Friedsam's bequest of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Netherlandish pictures to the Metropolitan Museum, upon his death in 1931, comprised the unprecedented number of thirty.

Thanks to the donations by the aforementioned collectors and others, like the stockbroker Jules S. Bache, owner of Christus's *Portrait of a Carthusian*, and later the banker Robert Lehman, whose paintings included Christus's *Goldsmith in his Shop* and an *Annunciation* attributed to Memling, the collection of early Netherlandish art of the Metropolitan Museum became one of the most important in the world.⁸⁶ This was demonstrated by the exhibition *From van Eyck to Bruegel* in 1998, which was solely composed of the Metropolitan's holdings.⁸⁷ No other museum in the United States, not even the National Gallery of Art in Washington, founded only in 1937, with its excellent works from the Andrew W. Mellon and Samuel H. Kress collections,⁸⁸ can compete with the breadth and quality of the Met's collection.

In 1929 Mrs. Hearst, president of the charitable *Free Milk Fund for Babies, Inc.*, organized, together with Kleinberger, an exhibition of early Netherlandish pictures in American public and private collections. Friedländer was ready to write a foreword in the catalogue, which solicited support for the milk fund, and he underscored the importance of private collecting in the United States, where 'an exhibition usually reveals what the country and the private collector has acquired and the amateur can enjoy with pride and satisfaction the sensation of an astonishing enrichment'.⁸⁹

This was also the year of the great stockmarket crash, the repercussions of which were felt around the world. The American art market, whose rise had

seemed as irreversible as that of the stockmarket, was dragged down along with everything else, effectively destroying the financial means of many collectors and dealers. Consequently, 1929 created a hiatus in the collecting of early Netherlandish painting, which makes it a good point at which to conclude this brief survey. Nevertheless, we must mention the three most important acquisitions of the following decades. In the 1930s the government of the Soviet Union, in desperate financial straits, sold a number of works from the Hermitage in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) to the dealer Knoedler. These included Jan van Eyck's *Annunciation* [FIG. 120], which went to the Mellon collection in Washington in 1930 (and thus the National Gallery later on), as well as the same artist's diptych with the *Crucifixion* and *Last Judgment* [FIG. 35], which was secured by the Metropolitan in 1933 and then attributed to Hubert van Eyck.⁹⁰ In 1956 the *Mérode Triptych* by the Master of Flémalle [FIG. 7] made its way through the dealer Rosenberg from Brussels to the Metropolitan's collection in The Cloisters.⁹¹

CHAPTER 3

BERNHARD RIDDERBOS

From Waagen to Friedländer

INTRODUCTION

When, in the early nineteenth century, the reassessment and collecting of early Netherlandish painting began to stimulate art-historical research, scholars were faced with the summary, indeed fragmentary character of their knowledge of the painters and their works. Since archival research on early Netherlandish masters was undertaken only later, the available historical sources were limited. Among them were the passages on Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden that the Italian humanist and historian Bartolomeo Fazio wrote in his *De viris illustribus* of 1456; they cite works by these artists, which were in Italy at the time.¹ Giorgio Vasari's famous *Vite*, whose first edition appeared in 1550, credits van Eyck with the invention of the painting in oil, adding that in his old age he passed this discovery on to his pupil 'Rogier from Bruges'.² In his *Spiegel der Nederlandscher oudtheijdt* of 1568, among other works, the painter and historian Marcus van Vaernewijck devoted attention to early Netherlandish masters; from Vasari he borrowed the story of how Jan van Eyck invented the oil technique while searching for a quick-drying varnish.³ Van Vaernewijck also mentioned the inscriptions on Jan's grave in the church of Saint Donatian in Bruges and on that of his brother Hubert in the church of Saint John in Ghent.⁴ Carel van Mander used both Vasari and van Vaernewijck for his *Schilder-boeck* of 1604, which contains a number of biographies of early Netherlandish painters.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries information gleaned from these sources was put in several lexicons and compilations of artists' lives. Hubert and Jan van Eyck were cast as the founders of a new school of painting, but there was no real interest in their works until Jean-Baptiste Descamps distinguished himself by recording his personal observations on early Netherlandish pictures. The most important contribution of the Enlightenment was to prove the groundlessness of the myth, taken for granted since Vasari, that Jan van Eyck discovered oil painting: in 1774 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing demonstrated that the technique

was already described before van Eyck.⁵ The first studies on early Netherlandish painting were thus based on the limited factual material, on a general knowledge of the history of the Burgundian Netherlands, and on the works themselves.

The following historiographical sketch begins with the two earliest monographs on the van Eyck brothers and other Netherlandish masters, and concludes with Friedländer's monumental series *Die altniederländische Malerei*, which is both the fruit of the nineteenth-century research tradition and the foundation of modern research. The choice of the other publications addressed here and the manner in which they are discussed make no attempt at a comprehensive historiographical survey – impossible within the scope of this chapter – but rather aim to show the variety of insights and ideas which developed in the course of time. In order to highlight not only this diversity, but also the relationships among the authors, most of the sections compare two authors who dealt with the same subjects or started from similar backgrounds.

Johanna Schopenhauer wrote about the van Eycks in a purely Romantic, Waagen in a scholarly fashion, albeit still in the Romantic tradition, which did not prevent him from becoming the first great connoisseur of early Netherlandish art. Hotho and Schnaase expounded philosophical interpretations of the van Eycks, which bear the stamp of Hegel. His influence is most recognizable with Hotho, whereas Schnaase transformed it into a new theory. Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who produced a handbook of early Netherlandish painting, will mainly be treated as one author. Weale and Hulin de Loo were both responsible for the famous exhibition of Flemish Primitives in Bruges in 1902, on which occasion Hulin reacted to Weale's catalogue by embracing the cause of scholarly connoisseurship in a catalogue on his own. Shortly afterwards, Dvořák attempted to give connoisseurship a scholarly base by basing his approach on the evolution of artistic forms. Friedländer's more intuitive attitude stands over against that effort and has proven to be less fettered by its time. This series of authors' portraits is interrupted by a section that explains how archival discoveries enabled the formation of a more accurate image of the person and the oeuvre of Rogier van der Weyden.

ROMANTIC EXPERIENCE AND SCHOLARSHIP: JOHANNA SCHOPENHAUER AND GUSTAV FRIEDRICH WAAGEN

The year 1822 witnessed the publication of both *Johann van Eyck und seine Nachfolger* by Johanna Schopenhauer, in two volumes, and *Ueber Hubert und Johann van Eyck* by Gustav Friedrich Waagen. Art historians have largely ignored Johanna Schopenhauer's popularizing book in favor of Waagen's study, which is

the first scholarly book on the brothers van Eyck. Nevertheless, the two authors have enough in common to justify a comparison of the writings of Waagen and Schopenhauer on certain points.⁶

Johanna Schopenhauer fully acknowledged the amateurish quality of her approach:

I write only for people like myself: for women who, like me, fell in love with German art, at most for art lovers whose circumstances do not permit them to devote a deeper study to the history of the art of their fatherland.⁷

As this passage shows, the author joined Friedrich Schlegel's view in considering the art of the van Eycks as German. The new enthusiasm for the national heritage had already in 1797 been expressed by Wilhelm Wackenroder in a collection of poetic reflections on art, the *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, published together with Ludwig Tieck. In one chapter the art-loving monk tells us of his visit to a castle, whose picture collection contained works by Raphael and Dürer. During the night spent in the castle he dreamt that, after midnight, he went all alone with a torch through the dark rooms to the picture gallery. At the door he heard a soft murmuring inside and, opening it, saw that the gallery was filled with a strange light, and that a number of venerable masters were standing before their pictures. He recognized many Italian painters, a few Dutch masters, '– and lo! There, apart from all the others, Raphael and Albrecht Dürer stood bodily before my eyes, hand in hand, gazing in amicable silence at their paintings, which hung side by side.'⁸

In this juxtaposition Wackenroder promoted the parity of German and Italian art, the same valorization of German art which made Johanna Schopenhauer write about the early Netherlandish masters and to exult: 'A beautiful day has dawned clear and bright, by the light of which we recognize ourselves, our surroundings, I would even say our ancestral home, after a long period of blindness.'⁹

After all, she continues, one is proud that Germans can stand in every science and art alongside all the civilized peoples of the world. Gifted scholars had recently discovered the Song of the Nibelungs, the *Minnesänger* as well as the early painters. With joyful surprise the Germans realized they possessed an art of their own no less than the Italians, which had flourished in the region of the Lower Rhine and reached a highpoint with that of van Eyck, Memling, and Scorel.

Johanna's book offers readers first a general sketch of the rise of late medieval art borrowed from Goethe. It formulates the vision of the Boisserées: in both Italy and the area of the Rhine, art had to free itself from the shackles of Byzantine conventions before its sensitivity to truth and the 'charm of Nature' could awaken. Jan van Eyck's naturalism was prepared in the Cologne painting

around 1400 with Wilhelm of Cologne as the most important representative of that school.

Turning to the van Eycks, she weaves a poetic story from the meager biographical information available at the time. One of the reasons she could do so was that Romanticism drew a direct connection between the character of an artistic oeuvre and that of its maker. Jan's art elicited the pronouncement that 'his judicious nature, the grace and goodness of his character, the unpretentious, noble elegance of his manners won him esteem and love among young and old wherever he appeared'.¹⁰

For Waagen, too, artistic creation was directly related to the character of the artist, whose panels are 'the purest effusions of a tranquil, truly religious enthusiasm'.¹¹ But rather than indulging in historical fantasies, he analyzes the works themselves. Whereas in the past the figures needed explanatory texts to clarify the religious meaning of the image, Jan's pictures require no such aids: 'In his art has come of age and speaks principally in its own language.'¹² The word 'language' ('Sprache') echoes Wackenroder's concept of art as a God-given language, which could express higher things impossible to articulate in mere words. The specific character of van Eyck's 'language', Waagen argues, lies in the true-to-life quality of his art, as if his figures were produced directly by nature; but, rather than slavishly imitating nature, they represent it in a higher potency. In the symmetry of the compositions the author still recognizes an old tradition: 'Thus, in his conception of sacred objects, Jan van Eyck stands as if between the early Christian tradition and a more arbitrary manner.'¹³ He then discusses the depiction of human heads, here too recognizing the transitional character of Jan's art; of the other parts of the bodies, which he considers inadequate, and of the drapery, which shows the evolution of Jan's style: in his earlier paintings the folds exhibit the simplicity, grandeur, and idealization also found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sculpture, while in his later works they have a somewhat 'accidental, individual' character. Waagen also emphasizes the masterful palette, handling of light, and portrayal of detail.

Before this analysis of Jan van Eyck's art, Waagen has already related it to the national character of the Netherlands, breaking with the view that Jan should be regarded as a German artist, although he still sees early Netherlandish and early German art as products of a common culture [SEE CHAPTER 4, P. 260].¹⁴ The economic, political, and cultural development of the Netherlandish cities is discussed, as well as the landscape and the physiognomy and character of the people. Common to all Netherlanders are:

good-naturedness, an ardent love of freedom, steadfast loyalty to the just and lawful lord, a diligent, healthy sensuousness and heroic courage, a great

toughness and perseverance in everything they do, an uncommon ability and skill in all sorts of technical matters, and hence an exceptional industry.¹⁵

These qualities are important for the origin and evolution of art; they are found to a greater or lesser degree in every nation that has taken art to a high degree of perfection. Which is not to say that art is engendered automatically when they are present; it also needs a deep and lively feeling for religion and country and for co-operation toward common and public goals. These feelings were abundant in the Netherlands.

Because Waagen considered van Eyck's art as truly Netherlandish, there was no reason to relate it to Wilhem van Cologne, the alleged creator of the *Triptych of the Adoration of the Magi*, now attributed to Stefan Lochner [FIG. 18]. Already the great stylistic differences between this work and Eyckian painting made such a relationship problematic, and Waagen avoided the Romantic notion of van Eyck's genius as an explanation of these differences.¹⁶ To define the tradition that engendered this master he recommended the study of manuscript illumination.

Another indication of Waagen's scholarly attitude is the value he attached to a critical use of written sources.¹⁷ The book begins with an assessment of the reliability of the remarks about van Eyck by the 'chroniclers of art history', as Waagen calls Fazio, Vasari and van Mander, and emphasizes the importance of archival research, although he had no opportunity to do any himself. Discussing individual pictures, Waagen starts with those that bear an inscription or are otherwise documented and takes them as a standard for the comparison of undocumented paintings.¹⁸

Both Johanna Schopenhauer and Waagen give much space to descriptions of pictures, which was necessary inasmuch as the reader had no reproductions to consult. Another aspect of the descriptions becomes apparent if we consider the Romantic view of art as a 'language' that expresses a higher reality. Even though this language is beyond words, attempts should nonetheless be made to verbalize the experience of the higher things embodied in a work of art.

The two authors had similar experiences of Eyckian paintings. Johanna described her reaction to the *Singing Angels* from the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIG. 20]. She saw this panel through the doorway to the room where it was displayed: 'a sharp bright sunbeam illuminated it, and the boys stood free and lively in the room as if they had just stepped from the frame'.¹⁹ According to Waagen, Jan van Eyck's art creates the illusion that a curtain suspended before another world has suddenly been pulled away, as the figures carry on their action oblivious of our gaze.²⁰ The high degree of illusionism did not detract from the idea of a higher reality: Waagen believed, as we have seen, that van Eyck portrayed nature in a higher potency,

and Schopenhauer felt that ‘the whole of nature showed herself to her favored darling always in the transfigured light’.²¹

Since they are in such agreement in their Romantic experience of Jan’s art, it is not surprising that their descriptions are essentially the same. Indeed, Waagen saw no difference between his approach and that of the amateur, for he borrowed the descriptions of the wings of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which, although they were in Berlin, he had apparently not yet seen, from Johanna Schopenhauer, and his own description of the central part is likewise a fruit of Romantic art appreciation. This is obvious in what he says about the panel with the enthroned Virgin [FIG. 23]:

Her head is inclined slightly forward, her downcast eyes are focused on a book she holds with both hands, and from which she seems just to be reading some words aloud; her light brown hair flows down both sides of her head. This face expresses the most blessed quiet, the greatest devotion and inwardness, the highest moral purity. [...] the oval of the face, the large vaulted eyelids, the finely formed nose, the beautiful mouth put her in a class with the Madonnas of a Leonardo da Vinci and a Raphael.²²

As Waagen attempts to put the higher reality expressed by the image into words, he also emphasizes its aesthetic value. His comparison with Madonnas of Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael has nothing to do with a scholarly observation of the style, but is born of the struggle to place northern art on the same level as Italian art and pervaded with the spirit of Wackenroder.²³

Only after presenting an entire visual description of the altarpiece to the reader, does Waagen make a few stylistic observations. He finds something old-fashioned about the three upper panels of the central part because of the gold background and a certain stiffness in the gestures of the figures. These images and the rest of the upper register must, he thinks, have been painted earlier than the lower register, superior in its drawing and soft handling of the paint.²⁴ This stylistic division corresponded to the evolution Waagen saw in Jan’s oeuvre and did not lead him to speculate about the respective shares of Hubert and Jan.

Waagen did not address the *Ghent Altarpiece* in a serious, scholarly way until after the publication of his book, when an important documentary source had come to light. In 1823 the overpainted inscription on the frame, which says that the work was initiated by Hubert and finished by Jan, was discovered. The next year, by which time he had seen the panels in Berlin, he published his opinion on the respective contributions of Hubert and Jan.²⁵ The inscription’s statement did not prevent him from assuming (like van Mander, who mentioned a corresponding tradition concerning the shares of the two brothers) that Jan was involved in the execution from the outset, but he saw Hubert as ‘the real undertaker and chief

master of the entire work', endowed not only 'with the really creative talent', but also 'with the sense for conceiving the grandest, ideal characters, for a noble, pure style in the drapery'.²⁶

In distinguishing the two hands, Waagen went back to the difference that he had pointed out in his monograph between a more old-fashioned and a more modern style in the work. He now attributed the former to Hubert, who supposedly painted both the inside and the outside of the upper register [FIGS. 19-21, 23]. In his view, the technical differences from the lower register were almost even greater than the stylistic ones: Hubert's brushstrokes merge completely, whereas Jan's are more distinct. Only a few parts of the *Adoration of the Lamb* [FIG. 22] and the *Knights of Christ* correspond in technique to the upper register and are therefore also by Hubert.

In a subsequent publication, of 1847, Waagen presented new ideas on the altarpiece, grounded in comparisons with two other paintings which he considered as documented works by Jan van Eyck because of the inscriptions on the frames: a panel of Saint Thomas Becket now attributed to Colyn de Coter, and the *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* [FIG. 160].²⁷ On this basis he characterized Jan's style as explicitly realistic, and also invoked other factors such as the fusion of the individual hues. This last observation contradicted his earlier opinion that the brushstrokes were more distinct in Jan's sections. According to his division, Jan painted the *Singing Angels*, the *Just Judges*, the *Knights of Christ*, the left half of the *Adoration of the Lamb*, and the entire exterior save for the two sibyls and the prophet Zachariah in the lunettes, which being weaker should be attributed to neither brother. Waagen described the style of Hubert, to whom he assigned the entire concept, as likewise realistic but also charged with an idealization that stemmed from the fourteenth century. As to the technique, not only were Hubert's brushstrokes less blended together than Jan's, his forms were also less sharply defined. This made him attribute the *Adam* and *Eve* panels, which he had now seen in Ghent, to Hubert, in spite of their lack of idealization. Their realism should be explained through the subject: 'Here where the task was to depict the father and mother of all mankind, the master was determined to represent a man and a woman as they live bodily, with the greatest fidelity in every detail [...].'²⁸

Waagen's ultimate view on the *Adam* and *Eve* panels shows that his judgment on the *Ghent Altarpiece* was no longer determined by the concept of two artistic styles belonging to different periods, but that he relied in the first place on his own visual observations, which is essential for real connoisseurship.²⁹ In his van Eyck book he cast Jan as a transitional figure between the Middle Ages and Renaissance whose art moved from an idealizing to an individualizing style. In his article of 1824 he used the idea of an older and a more modern style to separate Hubert's hand from Jan's, but combined this division with technical observations.

In the final publication of 1847, however, he started from other works attributed to Jan and came to new conclusions. Although he still saw Hubert's and Jan's styles as respectively idealizing and individualizing, in the *Adam* and *Eve* panels he attached more importance to the painting technique than to this difference.³⁰

The flexible vision he developed make one understand that Waagen became the first great connoisseur of early Netherlandish art. His expertise contributed above all to his collecting for the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, of which he was the first director.³¹ For this purpose he made many journeys throughout Europe, during which he acquired an impressive visual memory, recording what he saw along the way in informal travel reports.³² Waagen's connoisseurship laid an important foundation for the research of later scholars.

PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS: HOTHO AND SCHNAASE

Heinrich Gustav Hotho, who worked under Waagen in the Gemäldegalerie and would ultimately become director of the Kupferstichkabinett, had aspirations other than connoisseurship, despite his museological activities.³³ In the introduction to *Die Malerschule Huberts van Eyck nebst deutschen Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen*, published in two volumes in 1855 and 1858, Hotho rejects the 'learning of connoisseurship', which is limited to the history of painting technique and the characteristics of each master and work. In fact, the connoisseur, he argues, goes no further than an art dealer or even an art lover, but one should dig deeper into art and form judgments of the truly artistic elements. For this reason the introduction begins: 'No part of art history can be completely fathomed without knowledge of the beautiful and art.'³⁴

Hotho had the requisite schooling to discuss aesthetics: he was a pupil of Hegel and edited his teacher's *Ästhetik*. However, notwithstanding his advocacy of a philosophical approach to art history, he did not wish merely to surrender to abstract reflections, since he had a very concrete goal in mind, which he termed 'understanding in enjoyment' ('geniessend verstehen') and 'enjoying in historical terms' ('historisch geniessen').

The full implications of this concept are already clear in one of the lectures Hotho delivered at the university of Berlin, which were published in 1842 and 1843 under the title *Geschichte der deutschen und niederländischen Malerei*.³⁵ Here he delves into the incomprehension which, despite the Romantic movement, still prevailed regarding the art of the Netherlandish and German past. The reason, he argues, is that people, caught up in prosaic matters of current life, are incapable of opening themselves to the poetry of the art of earlier times. He takes it upon himself to fill the wide trench:

that the centuries have dug between us and the understanding of the merits of those epochs and masters which for me shine forth as the first and most excellent in the history of the development of German and Netherlandish painting. I want to try to transplant you into the artistic sense and spirit of those times and masters, and so to lead you to the appreciation and the happy enjoyment of the individual works [...].³⁶

For Hotho this ‘happy enjoyment’ was anything but noncommittal given the significance he attaches to art. When art reaches its true level, the eternal inner meaning of God, nature, and the human world is revealed to it. To be sure, art addresses the reality with which we are familiar, but it transforms what we know into such inner and outer perfection that ordinary understanding is incapable of experiencing the eternal character of its figures, events, and actions.³⁷ To find the password that gives access to a work of art requires an inward oriented spiritual attitude, and since the prosaic modern mind obstructs this proper receptivity Hotho sees it as his task to bring his contemporaries to the true understanding of German and Netherlandish art of the past. Therefore, it is necessary to see art as an expression of the collective mentality of its time:

We should be primarily concerned with what in the religious as well as the secular respect constitutes the general view of the world in each period, and the ways the individual schools and outstanding masters gave an artistic conception to this view and worked it out in painting.³⁸

This point of departure is clearly recognizable in Hotho’s interpretation of the art of the van Eycks as is the core of his aesthetics: ‘The purest vocation of free art is to form the original divine and human truly and fully into beauty.’³⁹ The van Eycks were pre-eminently successful in this vocation, which also required the precise depiction of reality. Another of the lectures lists the subjects that are faithfully rendered by them: churches and gates, rooms with household objects, fields with springs and streams, forests, rocky mountains and glaciers.⁴⁰ Hotho praises their keen observation and masterful depiction of the splendor of domestic and foreign costume, of rare furs, metals, pearls, gold and silver brocade, of the color of hair and skin, not to mention the variety of people: kings and emperors, priests and laymen, men and women. But this richness is only an outer aspect: the form and characters express an inwardness that gives them an unfathomable depth. The burghers, warriors, and maidens captured by the van Eycks appear as pious as if they were in church; they seek nothing other than ‘the sanctification of their way of life’. This sanctification was typical of the collective mentality from which the

art of the van Eycks sprang: in the Flemish cities urban freedom and national patriotism were coupled with a deeply religious attitude.

Hotho's interpretation served not only to cultivate a proper sensitivity to Eyckian painting in his readers, but also as a criterion for the attribution of undocumented works. If a work lacked manly gravity, mysterious depth, and ecclesiastical majesty it was not made by these masters. At the same time, he draws a distinction between the ways in which each brother amalgamated the spiritual and the secular. Like Waagen, Hotho presupposes that Hubert was closer to an earlier tradition: 'In the compositions, symmetry still holds sway, and his chief concern is to deepening the religious content of his pictures through symbolic references.'⁴¹ Jan achieves a complete penetration of the spiritual and the material: in everything he paints he aims at individuality of character, form, and setting, thus coming closer to real life than any other master of his school. The further he goes toward such a portrayal, however, the greater the power of his 'ecclesiastical view' and the more he succeeds in blending spirit and matter so that they reinforce each other.

Hotho does not take the reference to Jan as 'second in art' in the inscription on the frame of the *Ghent Altarpiece* literally, but ascribes it to his modesty, as the surviving brother. Hubert must have executed only the figures of God, John the Baptist, and the Virgin [FIG. 23] and supervised Jan's painting of the *Adoration of the Lamb* [FIG. 22]. The author thus follows Waagen and Carel van Mander in assuming that Jan worked on the painting while Hubert was still alive. The *Adoration* belongs to Jan's earliest artistic phase: the composition is symmetrical, the groups are compact and not very lively, the figures not particularly slim, the flesh tones monotonous, and the colors not especially harmonious. After Hubert's death Jan painted both the inside and the outside of the wings [FIGS. 19-21]. In this phase the figures are looser and more individual: 'the breath of a more richly enlivening spirit organizes and unites them'.⁴²

Remarkably, Hotho developed a totally different vision of the two brothers in his later *Die Malerschule Huberts van Eyck*. Abandoning the idea that Jan carried Hubert's art to a new height, he defended the opinion, also expressed in the title, that Hubert was the more important master. Although he admits that Hubert was closer to the previous period, he considers him to be the more original artist. This negates Jan's role as the one who, through a high degree of individualization, achieved an intensification of the spiritual. Hubert had already arrived at this synthesis, and Jan is even described in a negative way:

His nature is poorer and narrower. His limited powers of invention do not serve the more colorful circle of life, nor do they follow Hubert's ample thoughts and style, which is great even in the smallest detail [...]. Jan may

adorn Mary as visibly as he will with an authoritative severity, but her sovereignty is only skin deep.⁴³

Hubert is Jan's superior in 'expressing the soul': his figures speak as if gestures and gazes were the true language which utters the inexpressible. Jan's characters speak too, but neither in unforgettable words nor in one moment that tells of a whole, long, past life.⁴⁴ Hotho's altered views also mean that he no longer credits Jan with a substantial share of the *Ghent Altarpiece*: he painted none of the panels independently, and only where a distinction can be made between a 'greater' and a 'lesser' style on one panel it can be assumed that he was involved.

In his attempt to assign such a place of honor to the largely unknown Hubert, Hotho is even more loyal to his philosophical principles than in his previous lectures. By characterizing Hubert as the one who perfectly combined the sacred and the secular, he gives a more metaphysical dimension to the idea of Eyckian art as the expression of the *Weltanschauung* of the Burgundian period, which would have revealed itself completely already in the first of the great Netherlandish masters.

Of course, this view implies a Romantic notion of genius, precisely what Waagen rejected. And yet, although Hotho calls Hubert a genius, he also wants to avoid this notion, at least in part. Even at turning points, he argues, the boldest artist does not develop without precursors, nor all at once.⁴⁵ Hotho even tries to throw some light on earlier artistic traditions and voices the suspicion that Hubert was primarily influenced by sculpture. Regarding the artist's own development, he writes: 'Hubert was hardly a precocious genius. He advances on his laborious path only through dogged perseverance.'⁴⁶ This ambivalent view of Hubert is typical of Hotho, the pupil of Hegel and assistant of Waagen: on the one hand he approaches the art of the past from a speculative, philosophical angle, on the other he takes account of traditions, style, technique, and written sources.⁴⁷

It is not surprising that this attempt to combine metaphysics and art history could not provide a serious basis for further developments in scholarly research, but Hotho's writings are more than mere curiosities. His plea for 'understanding in enjoyment' and 'enjoyment in historical terms' of the art of the past regained currency in recent years, when the subjective 'historical experience' was reintroduced into scholarly debate.⁴⁸

Also under the influence of Hegel, Carl Schnaase philosophized about the history of art, but, compared to Hotho, his approach has more in common with later views.⁴⁹ Schnaase spent much of his life working on a lengthy and never-finished *Geschichte der Bildenden Künste*.⁵⁰ Here I will discuss ideas which he presented in the very different context of a collection of travel letters, his *Niederländische Briefe*, of 1834.

In the thirteenth letter, written in Bruges, Schnaase mentions his deep emotion before the works of Jan van Eyck and Hans Memling, and he wonders what accounts for the higher, religious character of their art.⁵¹ It cannot be the subject, for innumerable ecclesiastical paintings evoke no devotional sentiment. This character is usually attributed to the mentality behind it, apparently referring to the spirit of the time, since pictures of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are regarded as more religiously expressive than those of the seventeenth. In fact, every period has had its pious and its frivolous artists: was the fifteenth century as a whole really more devout than the sixteenth or the seventeenth? Besides, among the various fifteenth-century schools, that of van Eyck produced works of more ‘devout warmth and intimacy’ than the German school, even though the seeds of the Reformation had already germinated in the German territories – hardly a sign of religious tepidity. Therefore, to trace a work’s religious expressivity to the piety of a particular period or country is problematic, and even more so to adduce the piety of an individual artist. The religious character of a work of art is anchored in its form, and if some artistic forms have less religious expression than others, this is caused not by a lack of pious feeling but by a sense of form aimed in another direction: ‘In art, religious expression should arise from delicate relationships of form and color, thus from things for which religion, in the strict sense, has no standard.’⁵²

By ‘religion in the strict sense’ Schnaase means ecclesiastical doctrine, but, he argues, religion is much broader. God is known very incompletely through ecclesiastical doctrine, and one should realize that He also lives in nature. Art can contribute to this realization by reshaping nature and by making the divine visible. Architecture, sculpture, and painting each do so in their own way. However, Schnaase also sees parallels among these media and what he says about architecture is significant for his view of early Netherlandish painting.

He rejects the claim that architecture has no subject, as sculpture and painting do. Its subject is the same as that of the other arts: the natural, except that in this case the natural consists not of people, animals, and plants, but of inorganic nature. By inorganic nature Schnaase does not mean stones and earth, but the mathematical and physical laws to which they comply, such as gravity. In addition to giving shape to these general laws, architecture meets the basic human need for protection and shelter, and its forms reflect this function as well. Furthermore, architecture expresses the creative human mind, which always manifests itself as the spirit of a nation at a particular time. It is this spirit which gives each architectural style its own character. Thus, a creative evolution took place: architecture gradually came to be more richly decorated, at first with vegetative forms and then with animal and human figures, and this led to the emergence of independent sculpture. Although Schnaase does not say so, it is clear that painting represents a subsequent stage.

This evolution brought growing artistic freedom. While architecture is still close to the laws of nature, sculpture is further removed from them, because the proportions of the human body can be shown in various ways. Although architecture represents a lower level of civilization, it embodies the essence of art: here, the interventions of an individual are still limited. Whenever the human mind can entirely surrender to its own imagination, it incurs the danger of losing the eternal formal principles that derive from nature and the pantheistic element they express. It is therefore crucial to include an architectonic element even in painting so as to impose order on the more arbitrary elements.

Schnaase concludes that the religious character of early Netherlandish painting is the result of its architectonic qualities. This gives a foundation to his observations formulated in the preceding letter, in which he reports on his visit to Ghent and his experience of the four central panels of the famous altarpiece [FIGS. 22, 23].⁵³ Ignoring the 'Hubert or Jan' issue, he follows only the distinction in Waagen's book on the van Eycks between an older and a more modern style in the upper and lower registers. Especially the frontal figure of God has something architecturally stern in his eyes even while the color, light effects, and fresh flesh tones give this image an element of life not seen in older pictures. The figure of the Virgin, likewise, is turned to the viewer in a traditional fashion, and she is portrayed with a regular oval for her face and right angles in the folds of her mantle, but her delicate facial features possess more power and vigor than the earlier depictions. There is also some architectonic symmetry in the figure of John the Baptist, although his virility required a more individual treatment. The *Adoration of the Lamb*, on the other hand, is far more characteristic of Eyckian painting, because it combines the rigor of symmetry with the 'beauty of life'. The groups form a square with the Lamb at its center, and the radiant fountain is at the mid-point of the pattern of color. The rigidity is mitigated by the sweetness of the landscape, sky, grass, trees and flowers, and of the adoring figures and angels.

The element of life predominates in the works that Jan van Eyck executed after the *Ghent Altarpiece*: the variety increases and there is less symmetry. Something of the earlier symmetry remains, however, being reminiscent of 'the mystical reduction of the whole to one central point'. This is no longer caused by the composition, but by the harmony of the colors and, sometimes, a shining, central object that reflects more distant objects. While the symmetry in the *Adoration of the Lamb* could be explained by the subject, the later works demonstrate that this element belongs to the 'mystery of art', since it also occurs in Jan's secular works.

Despite the global character of Schnaase's observations, the expressive meaning he assigns to the architectonic element of artistic form, without deducing this meaning from a particular mentality or subject, paved the way for the for-

malistic approach in art history. As for early Netherlandish painting, at the beginning of the twentieth century Max Dvořák based his, finally unsuccessful, attempt to distinguish two hands in the *Ghent Altarpiece* on the study of formal principles. Otto Pächt, whose art-historical career started in the 1920s, was able to show that an analysis of *Gestaltungsprinzipien* can shed much light on the character of early Netherlandish art.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH: THE CASE OF ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN

When Johanna Schopenhauer and Waagen wrote their monographs, the personality of Rogier van der Weyden was completely obscured by the mistaken idea of two painters named Rogier. This view had already been taken by Carel van Mander, who devoted a biography to each one. The so-called Rogier of Bruges had been an apprentice of Jan van Eyck, but none of his presumed works is mentioned. Rogier van der Weyden, active in Brussels, was the more famous master and his Justice scenes were displayed in its town hall ‘as an eternal memorial’.⁵⁴ This statement proved too optimistic, in the event, since the paintings were destroyed in 1695. Van Mander, who also mentions the *Descent from the Cross*, now in the Prado [FIG. 10], strangely enough asserts that Rogier van der Weyden died in 1529.

Waagen addressed the problem of inexistent works by Rogier of Bruges in a letter from 1825.⁵⁵ In the 1830s a solution seemed to be at hand when the Frankfurt Städelsches Kunstinstitut acquired the *Medici Virgin*, which came from Italy and was thought to have been executed for the Medici [FIG. 148; SEE CHAPTER 7, P. 345].⁵⁶ Attributed to Jan van Eyck or his school, to Memling, or to Rogier of Bruges, the last of these was considered most likely by Baron Van Ertborn and Johann David Passavant, because Fazio writes about ‘Rogier of Gaul’, a countryman and pupil of Jan van Eyck, who had been in Italy.⁵⁷ Passavant also attributed two panels in the Boisserée collection to the same artist: the *Columba Altarpiece* [FIG. 17] and a *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*.

Rogier of Bruges as an independent personality of whom works were known was not granted a long art-historical life: in the 1840s and 1850s the Brussels archivist Alphonse Wauters published documents showing that the Bruges and Brussels Rogiers were one and the same person.⁵⁸ But this did not entirely clear the air: van Mander’s erroneous date for Rogier van der Weyden’s death created a problem, since it was considered much too late for at least a number of the works connected with that painter. Thus, the idea arose that there had been a Rogier van der Weyden the Elder and his son Rogier the Younger. Passavant

thought that the former painted the *Miraflores Altarpiece* [FIG. 130] and the latter the *Descent from the Cross* mentioned by van Mander, and then in the Escorial.⁵⁹ He also attributed the Flémalle panels by Robert Campin [FIGS. 1-3] to Rogier the Younger.

With the elimination of Rogier of Bruges, the works that had been assigned to him were given to the older Rogier. In his *Handbuch der deutschen und niederländischen Malerschulen*, of 1862, Waagen compiled two different oeuvres, likewise crediting the son with the *Descent from the Cross*.⁶⁰ The second myth was also losing ground, however. Rogier the Younger does not play a role in Crowe and Cavalcaselle's *Early Flemish Painters* of 1857. The authors do not go so far as to deny his existence, but they state that there are no distinct traces of this artist and consider the *Descent of the Cross* as the last great work by the fifteenth-century Rogier van der Weyden.⁶¹

In the last volume of his unfinished *Geschichte der bildenden Künste*, which appeared posthumously in 1879, Schnaase explains how the confusion concerning van der Weyden arose and which facts are reliable.⁶² Because Rogier's paintings were known in Italy along with those of Jan van Eyck and Jan was held to have invented oil painting, Rogier was taken for his pupil and thought to have likewise lived in Bruges. Rogier was also called 'of Brussels', however, because he was known to have lived there. Vasari, who used both names, was referring to a single person, since in both cases he regarded the Rogier in question as the master of Hans Memling. The mistake of van Mander, who misunderstood Vasari or disagreed with him, persisted until Wauters's archival findings brought new facts, which showed that Rogier of Bruges and Rogier of Brussels were one and the same person, who probably died in 1464. As for the idea of an older and a younger Rogier: none of the four children of Rogier 'the Elder' bore his name and, while his grandson Goswijn had a son called Rogier, also a painter, this Rogier was still alive in 1537, far too late to have executed paintings that display a style close to that of his great grandfather.

Schnaase dispels the idea of Rogier van der Weyden's apprenticeship to van Eyck with the help of documents discovered in Tournai, which indicate that Rogier was probably trained by Robert Campin. Although his relation to Campin was hotly debated in the twentieth century, it is now generally accepted.

A HANDBOOK: CROWE AND CAVALCASELLE

In his memoirs Joseph Crowe tells how he decided, while working in London as a young journalist who admired the work of Jan van Eyck, to devote a study to this painter and other early Netherlandish masters. To this end he made a pilgrimage

to Bruges, Ghent, and Louvain in 1846. The next year he returned to Belgium for a more thorough study of Flemish painting, and then went on to Berlin. At one of the stops in his stagecoach journey to the Prussian capital he was joined by a young man ‘seven years my elder, with black hair and beard, a colored complexion, Italian, an artist’. Giovanni Cavalcaselle, ‘a painter who had given up painting’, had set out ‘to look at those pictures of his countrymen which had found their way out of Italy, and to compare the lost treasures of his country with those which still remained at home’. After they separated on their arrival in Berlin, they met again by chance at the doors of the Gemäldegalerie: ‘He confided to me that he had come to Berlin to study the Italian masters in the Museum; I confided to him that I was going to do the same thing for the Flemings.’ On entering the museum one went to the left and the other to the right, but at one point Cavalcaselle ran to Crowe to persuade him to give up his ‘stupid quest of the Flemings’ and come along to look at an Italian masterpiece. Crowe, on the other hand, had just discovered the wings of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and was lost in admiration:

so much so that I stopped my friend and tried to persuade him that he was prejudiced; and, to my surprise and great pleasure, I gradually saw a smile of enjoyment playing about his features. He looked at the pilgrims and hermits riding and marching to the adoration, and he burst out at last with the confession that he had never seen the like by a Flemish master.⁶³

The two men could not suspect that they would become famous as the authors of a handbook on the early Flemings and a much more extensive standard work on the early Italians. They lost sight of one another after this encounter, but in 1849 Crowe, whilst working as a correspondent in Paris, bumped into a quite scruffy Cavalcaselle, who had been sentenced to death by the Austrian authorities in Italy for his part in the war of independence, and had by chance escaped execution. Crowe helped his friend to reach London, where they collaborated on *The Early Flemish Painters*, published in 1857. According to Crowe, Cavalcaselle’s most important share was ‘to see and judge of panels and canvases, and confirm or contest my opinions respecting them’. His friend also knew a great deal about the masters’ artistic evolution, but Crowe says he himself did all the writing.⁶⁴

In the introductory chapter the authors examine among other things the political and social circumstances that would have encouraged the florescence of early Netherlandish painting. The dukes of Burgundy brought the opulence of the Parisian court to Bruges. Art objects contributed to the ostentation, but they also served a devotional purpose: ‘the sacristies of churches were thus enriched with chiselled cups and shrines, and the chapels with pictures given by princes to adorn their walls’. Since Flemish art ‘rose from a sentiment of luxury as much as from

religion' it had no real depth.⁶⁵ The view that early Netherlandish art was the fruit of a court culture contradicts that of Waagen and Hotho, who saw it as a product of urban culture, and it was developed, including the notion of the superficiality of this art, in the early twentieth century by the great historian Johan Huizinga in his *Autumn of the Middle Ages* [SEE CHAPTER 4, PP. 283-289].

Thus, their love of early Netherlandish painting did not prevent Crowe and Cavalcaselle to be rather critical of its character, and they showed a similar approach in their discussion of individual artists. On the one hand they voiced admiration, on the other they perceived deficiencies. Regarding the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 19-23], they assert that the central panels of the upper register and *Adam* and *Eve* were undoubtedly painted by Hubert van Eyck. The figure of God is grand and solemn, if overloaded with gems; the palette has a power that only Hubert possessed. The figure of Adam attests to 'the painter's sound knowledge of anatomy, and his study of the principles of perspective applied to the human form', but the Eve is less successful: 'the head is over large, the body slightly protrudes, and the legs are too spare'. The authors contend that the other panels are by the hand of Jan, except perhaps the pseudo-statues of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist on the outside, which appear to be the work of pupils. Jan knew less about anatomy than Hubert. He was also less of a colorist 'and rarely produced the true harmonies for which Hubert is remarkable'; his handling of shadows lacks vigor and warmth.⁶⁶

Although in their eyes Jan was not of the same caliber as Hubert, Crowe and Cavalcaselle did not lack enthusiasm about his work. After all, Crowe had converted his friend to the Flemish masters standing before parts of the *Ghent Altarpiece* they later attributed to Jan. Their book especially admires a work that now is seen as a pastiche or, at most, a copy after a lost original: the *Fountain of Life*, in the Prado in Madrid [FIG. 24]. In their view, the panel was 'the noblest of John van Eyck's great works, commanding our attention, by its importance as a composition, and the splendor of its design and execution'.⁶⁷ In his later memoirs, Crowe withdrew this attribution upon which, he said, Cavalcaselle had insisted.⁶⁸

Considering Rogier van der Weyden as 'an artist of some qualities, marred by many imperfections', they write about his strengths:

harmonious in composition, finished in design, possessed of a fair knowledge of anatomy, and happy in the reproduction of the real in nature, he abounded in varied and good expression, and was as free from flattery as any painter of the Netherlands.

And about his weaknesses:

his conceptions were rarely noble; he failed to impart idealism, when he sought for it in the heads of the Virgin and Savior. He exaggerated the idea of length, not only in the human figure, but in its component parts – the face, the body, limbs, hands, and feet [...]. Lacking majesty and elegance in the disposal of draperies, he generally spoilt the effect of his pictures by the hard outlines of the parts, and the angularity of the folds, at times even marring a good attitude by it.⁶⁹

Crowe and Cavalcaselle had a greater appreciation for Memling, who was superior to his master in space, ‘showing that he possessed a truer sentiment of color and aerial perspective’. Although he, too, was not able to create ideal types, ‘a soft, meek beauty is to be found in most of his delineations’. They mention the elevated taste he shows in his images of the Virgin, ‘her grave and lofty mien expressing dignity and religion’, and although in his portrayals of the Child Memling used van der Weyden’s elongated and somewhat awkward body shapes, he gave him a more natural flesh and ‘a nobler and happier cast of countenance’.⁷⁰

In their preference for Memling – ‘he perfected his teacher, in fact, where improvement was possible’ – Crowe and Cavalcaselle reflect the taste of their day, when the Neo-Gothic movement and Pre-Raphaelites focused on the most exalted and serene aspects of medieval and early Renaissance art. At the same time, their criterion of accuracy in anatomy and perspectival foreshortening demonstrate how much they also espoused the norms of the art of the Italian Renaissance [SEE CHAPTER 4, PP. 256-257].

Apart from this, their remarks on quality exhibit a candor and directness that also characterized the great connoisseur Max Friedländer later on. Nowadays, quality judgments are mainly used in attributions or detecting workshop practices, and seem hardly compatible with a historical approach to the great masters themselves. Subjective evaluation, indeed, prevails over a sense of the historical relativity of aesthetics in Crowe and Cavalcaselle’s distinction between the artistic execution of *Adam* and that of *Eve* in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, or between the harmony of Rogier’s compositions and the hardness of his contours. Yet, there is something appealing about this critical attitude, which attests to a fresh and active eye at the least.

INTO THE ARCHIVES; AN EXHIBITION AND A CRITICAL CATALOGUE: WEALE AND HULIN DE LOO

In 1855 W.H. James Weale and his family settled in Bruges, where he remained for twenty-three years and where, after moving back to England, he returned each year for a visit.⁷¹ Having converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of seventeen,

Weale devoted his life to the revival of Christian art through the promotion of Neo-Gothic art and the extensive research on medieval art and architecture, which brought him to Flanders. His first historical investigations were primarily aimed at an inventory of memorial plaques, but before long his activities expanded into the whole field of historic preservation. Around 1860 he began to take an interest in early Netherlandish painting with impressive results, thanks to his archival research, especially in Bruges. His efforts complemented those of other scholars such as Wauters, already mentioned, the Louvain archivist Edward Van Even, Edmond de Busscher, who combed the archives of Ghent, and Alexandre Pinchart, who worked in the royal archives of Belgium.

One of the first fruits of Weale's spadework was a catalogue of the picture collection of the Bruges Academy of Fine Arts, which is now preserved in the Groeningemuseum.⁷² The catalogue devotes attention to Gerard David for the first time and also includes a biography of Memling, based on archival research. In the 1860s and 1870s Weale presented other discoveries in two journals of his own founding: *Le Beffroi*, which contains studies on Petrus Christus, Gerard David, Jan Provost, and Adriaen Isenbrant, and *La Flandre*, the organ of the Société archéologique of Bruges, which he had also founded.⁷³ One of his pieces in the latter journal was a study of van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele*. Furthermore, Weale's searches in the archives led to a number of books, among which various monographs on Memling and one on Gerard David, whom he had rediscovered. His most famous book, *Hubert and John van Eyck, their Life and Work*, appeared in 1908, and became, because of its transcription of all the relevant documents, the basis for subsequent studies of the van Eycks.⁷⁴

In 1867 Weale organized the *Exposition de tableaux anciens, d'objets d'art et d'antiquités* in Bruges, which was the first exhibition in Belgium exclusively devoted to early art.⁷⁵ In 1902 the *Exposition des Primitifs flamands et d'Art* was held, also in Bruges. Since then, the term 'Flemish Primitifs' has remained a common designation for early Netherlandish paintings.⁷⁶ The cultural significance of this exhibition, which has become famous because of the many important panels it showed, is explained in the following chapter [pp. 275-278]. This time, Weale, who had returned to England, was not the initiator but he assisted in the organization and wrote the catalogue of the paintings, which was not ready until long after the opening and was of little value, since, as in the earlier exhibition, the attributions were determined by the owners of the works. Weale refused any responsibility for these attributions and said so in the catalogue.⁷⁷ His contribution is limited to an introduction to early Netherlandish painting and entries with brief descriptions of the pictures, supplemented wherever possible with historical information concerning their provenance or the identity of the people portrayed.

The Ghent professor Georges Hulin de Loo, who was also one of the organizers of the exhibition, found Weale's catalogue so inadequate that he published one of his own.⁷⁸ Under no obligation to the lenders, he meant his catalogue to be 'un guide critique'. As an introduction to the presentation of his findings, Hulin writes that there are two different ways of assigning anonymous works to a particular milieu: one based on stylistic analysis, and another which employs historical data, such as the altar in a certain church for which a painting was made or the identity of the donors. Arguing that most attributions can only be made on the ground of their style, Hulin gives a nice explanation of why it is not possible to explain every reason for such judgments:

These reasons are always the result of a highly complex combination of tenuous indications, mostly impossible to express adequately in words, which can be grasped only by practiced eyes, through a kind of superimposition of images, backed by a memory that embraces a fairly complete inventory of the master's production and that of his close associates.⁷⁹

He points out that archival and stylistic research not only use different methods, but require different ways of life: archival research is quintessentially sedentary, whereas connoisseurs often have to cover great distances. No wonder that there are two kinds of art historians: those who are respected for their publications of documents, but cannot distinguish one painter from another, and connoisseurs, such as 'le célèbre Waagen', who not only have never touched a document, but lack historical judgment and go flying off in the wrong direction. Of course, even without mentioning his name, Hulin also criticizes Weale, as a representative of the archival research.

The scholarly results of these two groups, Hulin observes, often remain independent of one another: artists' names and biographical data on the one hand and anonymous oeuvres on the other. True, linking works without names to names without works is a hazardous adventure, but: 'will all the sailors who are victims of shipwrecks prevent their descendants from defying the sea? – Hypotheses are as indispensable to scholarship as they are to life'. Moreover, absolute certainty is impossible 'even in the case of a signed painting accompanied by the painter's receipt'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, it happens that while direct proof of the attribution of a particular painting is impossible, the artist's whole production yields so many and such varied indices that this attribution acquires a high degree of probability, what is called a 'moral certitude'.

As an example of how historical and stylistic research could be combined, Hulin discusses a triptych with the *Assumption of the Virgin* [FIG. 121], around which an oeuvre had been assigned to its eponymous Master of the Assumption.⁸¹



FIGURE 121 – Albrecht Bouts, *The Triptych with the Assumption of the Virgin*
(central panel 185 x 107 cm; each wing 185 x 47 cm),
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

The archivist Van Even had taken a step forward by identifying the painting with a work that, according to the sixteenth-century local historian Johannes Molanus, was both executed and donated by Albrecht Bouts, the second son of Dirk, for a chapel in Louvain's church of Saint Peter. On the ground of its style, Max Friedländer had established a pupil-master relationship between the anonymous painter and Dirk Bouts, and therefore attributed the work to Albrecht. Hulin, who independently followed the same reasoning as Friedländer, adduces as further evidence the escutcheons supported by angels that are depicted high in the sky on the side panels.

Although he had just said that absolute certainty was never possible, he nonetheless finds the arms to be undeniable proof of the master's identity, even more than a signature. In fact, this is true only of the arms on the right wing, above the kneeling couple. The shield contains those of the Louvain painters' guild combined with two arrows and the letter 'A'. Since the Flemish word for an arrow is 'bout', Hulin concludes that the altarpiece is indeed the one painted by Albrecht Bouts, who portrayed himself and his wife as its donors. He is less certain of the arms and the portrait of a man on the other wing, but suggests that an uncle of Albrecht is depicted here. This individual has recently been identified as Albrecht's father-in-law.⁸²

The catalogue devotes considerable attention to Hugo von Tschudi's reconstruction of the oeuvre of the Master of Flémalle, and a series of stylistic and historical arguments leads Hulin to contend that the Master must be Jacques Daret, van der Weyden's fellow apprentice under Robert Campin.⁸³ He discusses three panels from an altarpiece whose patron, portrayed on one of the panels [FIG. 102], he identifies as Jean du Clerq, abbot of the monastery of Saint Vaast in Arras, and suggests that the work was painted by one of Daret's pupils.

Some years later, however, Hulin found payments for the altarpiece to Daret himself in the monastery accounts, which made him decide that the Master of Flémalle could be none other than Campin. Publishing the discovery in 1909, he took the opportunity of commenting on his earlier supposition to reassert the need to formulate hypotheses:

A scientific hypothesis is not an object of belief, but an instrument of research; not something to put our minds to rest, but, on the contrary, to be worked upon. Every logical consequence should be drawn and confronted with facts.⁸⁴

The discovery of the maker of the Saint Vaast altarpiece – Hulin published a fourth panel two years later⁸⁵ – was one such fact and it caused him to transform his original hypothesis on the identity of the Master of Flémalle into a new one, which has finally won consensus.

The *Catalogue critique* marked the beginning of the author's art-historical career. Holding doctorates in law as well as literature and philosophy, Hulin initially taught logic and natural law at the University of Ghent and later became professor of art history at the same institution, while also teaching the subject in Brussels. Numerous short publications show his gifts as a connoisseur of early Netherlandish painting, and in 1911 he published a monograph, *Les Heures de Milan*, on a detached section of the Turin-Milan Hours. The other part, published by Count Paul Durrieu, had been preserved in Turin but was destroyed by fire in 1904, while the part from Milan eventually came to Turin. The Turin-Milan Hours had already been detached in the fifteenth century from a book of hours, now in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. The great manuscript was illuminated in the fourteenth and fifteenth century and Hulin distinguished the hands of eleven miniaturists, to whom he assigned the letters A through K. He thought he recognized Hubert van Eyck in Hand G [FIGS. 36, 128] and Jan in the less interesting Hand H. Nowadays most scholars identify Hand G with Jan, and attribute the miniatures by Hand H to one of his followers.⁸⁶

FORMAL PRINCIPLES AND CONNOISSEURSHIP:
DVOŘÁK AND FRIEDLÄNDER

Shortly after Hulin published his *Catalogue critique*, questions of method were also discussed by the Viennese art historian Max Dvořák. He did so regarding the long-standing and never-ending discussion as to the respective share of the van Eyck brothers in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In 1904 he published *Das Rätsel der Kunst der Brüder van Eyck*, in which he attempted to reconstruct the origins of their art. But instead of combining the results of stylistic and archival research, as Hulin did, he concentrated on style, which he felt had not, as far as the *Ghent Altarpiece* was concerned, been studied in a truly scholarly fashion.

First, Dvořák cleared the way for his own findings by pointing out, even more vehemently than Hulin had done, the shortcomings of current scholarship. He saw a fundamental error in its lack of attention to the connection between the art of the van Eycks and the preceding artistic traditions: studies on early Netherlandish art had merely sketched out general relations and resorted to broad cultural-historical reflections in order to explain the innovations of the van Eycks. As a result, the genesis of their art was still regarded as a spontaneous phenomenon. Van Mander was the first author to propagate this idea. While in its model, Vasari's *Vite*, Italian painting commences with Cimabue and Giotto, in van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* Netherlandish painting starts with Hubert and Jan. Just as Cimabue was Giotto's teacher, Hubert was the teacher of Jan, who was the real

founder of a new art. Over against this view, shared by most scholars, Dvořák placed a new approach:

Under the influence of exact research methods we have gradually, consciously or unconsciously, learned in scientific investigations never to regard a fact as an isolated phenomenon, but always as a link in a definite sequence of facts of the same or a related kind.⁸⁷

He takes this idea as an axiom for the study of the relation of formal elements in a picture to visible reality, since the evolution of problems of representation is the essential theme of art history. In order to place the art of the van Eycks within such an evolution, Dvořák espoused the principles of Franz Wickhoff, his predecessor at the University of Vienna, who had studied the genetic development of forms in the quite different field of Roman art. Wickhof had sought to demonstrate that over a long period of time the forms of representation are part of homogeneous evolutionary series, which means that every artist expresses himself within the boundaries of one series.

In the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIGS. 19-23] Dvořák sees the forms of representation as derived from two series. He compares details of the three enthroned figures in the upper register of the central part, such as their facial types and the drawing of the mouth and eyes, with authenticated works of Jan van Eyck, finding among other things that the schematic drawing of the Virgin's lips corresponds to a traditional ideal of beauty, but not to the lips of Jan's Madonnas, which are immediately taken from life and bring the scholar to exclaim: 'These lips report on one of the greatest events in the history of art: the replacement of a thousand-year-old law by a new covenant with Nature.'⁸⁸

Dvořák contends that the three upper panels were painted by Hubert, who still worked in a tradition that could be traced as far back as Byzantine art and which was developed in fourteenth-century Italian painting and French Gothic sculpture. Jan van Eyck, however, abandoned these schematic forms to concentrate on nature. The author further supports this idea – already voiced by Waagen – that Hubert's art represents the final phase of an old tradition and Jan's the beginning of a new, naturalistic era by examining the composition of the groups and the spatial effect in the lower register of the interior of the altarpiece. He shows the limited nature of the perspective in the two groups in the foreground of the *Adoration of the Lamb* – compact units without space between the figures and not integrated with the landscape. The groups on the side panels, on the other hand, are more loosely built up and occupy a greater depth:

Thus, the two groups in the *Adoration of the Lamb*, like the three sacred figures of the upper row, are the work of a painter whose art, with respect to composition, representation of space, perspective, types, and forms, is stylistically and in all formal problems closer to the practice of art of the late Middle Ages than to the principles of Jan's art and those according to which other parts of the *Ghent Altarpiece* were invented and executed.⁸⁹

This means that the background in the *Adoration of the Lamb* was painted by Jan: here the landscape runs much more gradually into depth, and the groups of holy bishops and virgins who advance from the distance really do fill space.

As explained in Chapter 1 [p. 56], technical examination has shown that the underdrawings do not confirm the differences noted by Dvořák and seconded by Panofsky; they form a stylistic whole and correspond to those of Jan's authenticated works. Dvořák's approach is questionable also on the ground of method. His procedure is quite equivocal, for, in spite of his criticism of earlier authors, he, too, proclaims Jan van Eyck the founder of a new kind of painting. The *Ghent Altarpiece* presents the contrast between the old and the new covenant in the history of art:

Like the personifications of the Old and New Testament on the portals of the Gothic cathedrals, so, at this gate to the modern art of the North, monuments of the old, backward looking, vanquished art and of the new art, confident of the future and victorious, stand opposite one another.⁹⁰

He takes a different stance, however, at the end of his book, where he compares the style of Jan van Eyck with that of Hand G from the *Milan-Turin Hours* [FIGS. 36, 128]. Unlike Hulin, he does not identify this hand with one of the van Eycks, but he relates its style to both Jan's and older, French art, concluding 'that there was no break between Jan's art and all the art that preceded it, in the style or the evolution of the representational problems'.⁹¹ Dvořák both wanted to show continuity and to maintain the traditional hiatus in the history of Netherlandish painting.

There is a further conflict between his aspiration to a method that met scientific standards and his tendency to pass quality judgments on the objects of his research. Although he saw the two brothers as members of two traditions with different goals – a schematic and a naturalistic form of depiction – he clearly preferred the latter: Hubert's use of perspective is not only medieval but also clumsy, whereas Jan's is 'free and modern'.⁹² In the painting of Jan, Dvořák recognized intentions which, he believed, art had maintained down to his own day.⁹³ Impressionism strove about all for a truthful and non-schematic rendering of nature, and Dvořák's approach can hardly be detached from this movement, which had exerted

great influence on the development of Wickhoff's theories. Remarkably, later in his life, when Expressionism was on the rise, Dvořák reversed his position in favor of an entirely different concept of art, that is, art as the expression of the spirit of its time, and this caused him to analyze art-historical developments from the perspective of the history of ideas [SEE CHAPTER 8, P. 382].⁹⁴

Dvořák's approach to the *Ghent Altarpiece* was severely criticized by Max J. Friedländer, in his volume on the van Eycks and Petrus Christus, which appeared in 1924 as the first in his magnum opus, the fourteen-volume *Altniederländische Malerei*.⁹⁵ Friedländer, who made a career in the Berlin museums until he was forced to flee from the Nazis to the Netherlands, could not resist a swipe at Dvořák's academic status:

With the persuasive tones of professorial self-assurance, Dvořák has detailed the arguments by which he has distinguished Hubert's share from that of Jan. [...] This careful and closely reasoned analysis might seem to solve every aspect of the puzzle. Hubert recedes into the shadows, a man still in thrall to the Middle Ages, while Jan blazes the trail towards the shining light. Dvořák is able to make his argument only by introducing bias and prejudice into his observations – or so it seems to me. He greatly exaggerates stylistic contrasts, leaving out of account the degree to which such differences are rooted in scale and subject matter.⁹⁶

Friedländer sighs that he himself has never succeeded in dividing the *Ghent Altarpiece* between two different hands. To be sure, it lacks harmony and unity of style, which agrees with the fact that Jan worked on a project he had not designed. But instead of a stylistic distinction, Friedländer imagines that Hubert conceived the painting and initiated its execution, 'while Jan was compelled to come to terms with this work of another, finally going over all the panels, in order to achieve the harmony he sought'.⁹⁷ Then he suddenly changes the subject, and adduces the *Ghent Altarpiece* as evidence that Hand G in the *Milan-Turin Hours* could be Jan van Eyck, while ignoring the question of Hand H. In the midst of this exposition, however, he heaves another sigh concerning the problem of the altarpiece:

The most searching examination of the Ghent altarpiece gives no enlightenment. Oddly enough, while it seems so multiform at first glance, when an attempt is made to dissect it, it flows together like a fluid.⁹⁸

Nonetheless, Friedländer uses the altarpiece to identify Hand G, and he does so in a surprising fashion: rather than parallels between the painting and the minia-

tures, he looks for differences, especially in the drapery of the figures. The *Ghent Altarpiece* lacks the soft, flowing forms of Hand G as do the later, authenticated panels of Jan, in which the patterns are even more rectilinear. This means that the miniatures could represent an early phase in his development before his work on the altarpiece. Friedländer sees no grounds to identify this hand with Hubert, if at least he was responsible for the ‘three-dimensional clarity’ of certain bodily details in the altarpiece, such as the hands of God, John the Baptist, the Virgin, and Adam and Eve, the fleshly realism of which is not found in Jan’s paintings. It is at this point that Friedländer writes the statement just quoted, as if to warn himself.

As already noted, the identification of Hand G with Jan van Eyck is considered very likely nowadays, and Friedländer’s hesitating position on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, expressed in a concise and fragmentary way, is less dated than the solution advanced by Dvořák, who resorted to an avalanche of arguments and a compulsive systematization. Finally, in the last volume of *Die altniederländische Malerei*, which appeared in 1937, Friedländer shared the view of Émile Renders, who believed that Jan was the sole author of the altarpiece.⁹⁹

Also in other cases the value of Friedländer’s judgments does not lie in comprehensive, thorough formulations, but in a connoisseurship that combined a vast visual experience with great intuition in matters of style. This connoisseurship was developed during the years, between 1896 and 1933, he spent in Berlin’s Kupferstichkabinett and Gemäldegalerie [FIG. 122]. It led to numerous important acquisitions, including Hugo van der Goes’s *Nativity* [FIG. 67] and *Monforte Altarpiece* [FIG. 65].¹⁰⁰ Appreciation for connoisseurship is hardly unanimous today, and its subjective character causes it to be sometimes disqualified as a useful means of study.¹⁰¹ In his *On Art and Connoisseurship* of 1942, which was first published in English, Friedländer himself underlined this subjectivity, but also held that any number of factors can be used to corroborate an attribution or a date, citing signatures, documentary sources (contemporaneous, but also authors such as Vasari and van Mander), and ‘measurably similar forms’. This last category includes anatomical details, such as ears, hands, and fingernails, whose study was recommended by the Italian connoisseur Giovanni Morelli, as the pre-eminent expressions of an artist’s individuality, like the features of handwriting. In his analysis of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Dvořák had used Morelli’s method in support of his own approach. Friedländer emphasized the limited value of these so-called objective criteria: signatures can be false, and sometimes masters signed works executed by assistants; documents, too, can be unreliable, and why would the study of similar forms be any more objective than the general impression of the whole work? Anyway, it is useless for distinguishing originals from copies.



FIGURE 122 – Aloys Hauser, restorer, Wilhelm von Bode, director of the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, and Max Friedländer, head of the Kupferstichkabinett, ca. 1920, in the Altes Museum in Berlin

Ultimately, he argues, the verdict of a connoisseur rests on intuition, and offers no absolute certainty. Inward certitude depends on the overall impression of a work of art and the unconscious comparison with an imaginary ideal picture by the artist in question. The first impression is most important: one is better off looking at a work several times for six seconds than once for a whole minute. A mistrust of intuition leads to analytical research, which can address a whole series of questions. The first is whether a work is still in its original state or is a fragment of a larger ensemble. Then one can examine the wood or the canvas and the paint

pigments, which help determine the region and the period in which the work was made. Chemical investigation of pigments, X-radiography, and the use of ultraviolet light complement the observations of the naked eye. At the same time, Friedländer warns that undue attention to such invisible aspects may impede one's receptiveness to the artistic effect of what is directly visible. As for a painter's technique, even the very smooth surfaces of fifteenth-century panels will yield information about their execution.

At the end of his book, Friedländer clearly links connoisseurship to an experience of art rooted in the Romantic tradition:

The more deeply observation and notation have penetrated into spiritually emotional existence, the better will the reader – who, however, must not only be a reader – be enabled to carry out an investigation based on criticism of style, and especially to unmask copies and forgeries.¹⁰²

He adds that each description aimed at characterizing a work destroys the totality of its qualities, but this is not a problem so long as one is conscious of this one-sidedness and ready to neutralize it. Instead of thorough descriptions Friedländer prefers aphoristic pronouncements 'throwing light like flashes', admitting that this is a personal matter. We have seen this preference in his summary of the 'Hubert or Jan' problem when he says that the *Ghent Altarpiece* flows together like a fluid.

Friedländer's aversion to lengthy descriptions is also demonstrated by his appraisal of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man with a Ring* [FIG. 123].¹⁰³ This small panel, which at some point was provided with the date 1492 and the monogram of Albrecht Dürer, was rediscovered as a work of Jan van Eyck in the late nineteenth century and displayed in the Bruges exhibition of 1902. In the meantime, however, the attribution had been challenged by the German art historian Karl Voll, who dated it to the late fifteenth century. Like Hulin de Loo, Friedländer, as he made clear in his reviews of Voll's book and the Bruges exhibition, regarded the portrait as definitely by Jan van Eyck. Voll stood by his rejection, though he changed his mind about the dating and now believed that it was executed around 1450. In *Die altniederländische Malerei*, Friedländer made hardly any effort to clarify his position, saying only that the portrait is closer than any other painting to Jan van Eyck's *Tymotheos* (which bears the painter's signature and the date 1432; FIG. 111). Considering it just as lifelike he declared: 'It is certainly a work by Jan van Eyck, done about 1433.'¹⁰⁴

Almost thirty years later, Panofsky defended the idea, in his *Early Netherlandish Painting*, that the portrait was the work of a later artist. He did so in a note that reads like a short essay. The portrait lacks:

both the contentual profundity and the formal integration of other portraits by Jan van Eyck. The personality of the sitter does not project itself with the quiet authority characteristic of Jan's other subjects. The hands and ears give the impression of detachable units rather than parts of an integral whole. And the very fact that both hands are shown in their entirety is hard to reconcile with Jan's fine feeling for balance. It should also be noted that the dimensions of the panel do not conform to his usual practice.¹⁰⁵

Panofsky assigned the panel to the archaizing revival of Eyckian art that occurred in Flanders around 1500. For almost another three decades the question remained unresolved, until the portrait was restored at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1991. Technical examinations found an underdrawing quite similar to that in Jan's authenticated paintings and a likewise corresponding structure of the paint layers.¹⁰⁶

Just like his judgment on the *Ghent Altarpiece* [SEE CHAPTER 1, PP. 53-54], Panofsky's opinion seems to have been determined by criteria better suited to the art of the Italian Renaissance than to early Netherlandish painting, since he found the various elements of the portrait insufficiently integrated in the whole. Aside from this bias his argumentation is impressive, far outstripping that of Friedländer. The latter, however, must have been thinking of himself, when he wrote in *On Art and Connoisseurship*: 'It is noticeable that gifted experts in particular, who make their decisions with inner certainty, have little inclination to provide "proof" [...]'.¹⁰⁷

In fact, Panofsky was fully aware of Friedländer's greatness as a connoisseur of early Netherlandish art. The copy of his *Early Netherlandish Painting* he gave to the older colleague contains the dedication: 'M.J. Friedländer, magistro magistrorum, trepida manu adscripsit Erwin Panofsky, discipulorum discipulus' ('For M.J. Friedländer, the master of masters, Erwin Panofsky, the disciple of disciples, has added these lines with a trembling hand').¹⁰⁸

These kind words notwithstanding, there is no reason to assume such a relationship. Not only because of their totally different approaches to the *Ghent Altarpiece* and the *Man with a Ring*, but also because Panofsky's most important contributions to the study of early Netherlandish painting are in the field of iconology, for which Friedländer had no interest. To understand the differences between them, we may also consider their views of the *Man of Sorrows* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, as discussed in Chapter 1 [FIG. 79, PP. 152-156]. Although he did not question the attribution to Geertgen, Friedländer was not much taken with this panel, whereas Panofsky, discussing the image in the context of the theme of the *Man of Sorrows*, had a clear insight into its profoundly expressive character.

Despite its neglect of iconology, *Die altniederländische Malerei* contains much more than the opinions of a connoisseur. It covers the same period as Friedländer's collection of essays *Von Eyck bis Bruegel*, already published in 1916, but treats many more painters and includes data from archival documents. Beside questions of attribution and dating, the author presents general, literarily tinted considerations on the style and personality of the painters, in which the influence of the Romantic tradition is again apparent. Jan van Eyck, he tells us, was a faithful son of the Church, whose 'serene nature was never ruffled by any conflict between his joy in the world of the senses and his task of creating types for his fellow faithful'.¹⁰⁹

In the volume on Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Flémalle, Friedländer compares Rogier's artistic personality to that of Jan: 'Jan van Eyck proceeded from the visible, individual case, Rogier from the idea. Jan van Eyck grasped the natural context, Rogier the spiritual context of doctrine and hierarchy.'¹¹⁰ At the same time, he acknowledges that it is difficult to delimit the individual element of Rogier's style, because we know virtually nothing of its origins. Furthermore, his style had a great influence during the second half of the fifteenth century, all the way to Germany, Italy, and Spain. Rogier must have headed a large workshop, which made copies after his designs, just as students who graduated from it employed his compositions. With these remarks on workshop practice, Friedländer raised an issue that did not receive serious attention until the last few decades.¹¹¹

Of course, Hugo van der Goes, whose life story is so poignant, was pre-eminently suited to ruminations about an artist's character:

Never, never was he on familiar terms with religion, never was it a peaceful matter, to be regarded with equanimity [...]. Intemperate and eccentric – such was his state of mind at all times and in all circumstances.¹¹²

Following the notes of Gaspar Ofhuys, who lived in the same monastery as van der Goes [SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 130], Friedländer thinks that 'pride, ambition, the joy of creating were at war with his religious qualms, his need to humble himself'. Although the art that grew from this conflict gained in grandeur and pathos, the master continued to struggle: 'He was a stranger in Ghent, a stranger in the monastery, a stranger in his age. Striding forward in solitude, he lost his way.'¹¹³

Friedländer saw this foreignness not only as the hallmark of Hugo's personality, but also as related to contemporary developments in the world around him.¹¹⁴ The guild system was beginning to decline and artists were now able to emerge 'from the toils of the craft to vulnerable freedom' and win personal fame. In contrast to virtues compatible with the guild system, which anyone could acquire, namely hard work and honest craftsmanship, genius set one apart and one



FIGURE 123 – Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of a Man with a Ring* (19.1 x 13.2 cm),
Muzeul Național de Artă, Bucharest

conscious of his superiority became an enemy of society. Hugo's rapid rise of fame and esteem created a gap between him and his fellow townsmen, and eventually caused him to seek freedom inside the walls of a monastery. Although this theory seems a bit extreme, it appears from Ofhuys's account that the painter had the liberty to comport himself as a celebrity in the monastery. Friedländer's remarks on the changes in the guild system, like those on Rogier's workshop, show that his reflections on artistic personalities went beyond psychological interpretation.

Like Crowe and Cavalcaselle, he did not hesitate to find fault with the great masters, but he differed from them by criticizing Memling for his lack of originality: neither possessing Jan van Eyck's passion of vision nor Rogier's fanaticism of faith, Memling took no chances and there is nothing surprising about his art. A significant part of this dismissive attitude was probably owed to the idea shared with Dvořák – notwithstanding their opposite views – of an artistic evolution that led all the way to Impressionism.¹¹⁵ Consider, for example, this passage on Jan van Eyck from *Die altniederländische Malerei*:

The crucial element in art is whether the painter is involved with the absolute – those aspects that have nothing to do with the exigencies of light and place – or with the adventitious phenomena of form and color, in which things are seen as unique in a given situation. The entire evolution of painting might well be conceived of in terms of the progress from the former approach to the latter. Along this road, the painter departs, more or less, from the sculptor. Every great painter has traversed a distance on it. Jan van Eyck made giant strides on it – to the critical point where his lively and alert quest for encompassing existence was still compatible with his spell-bound surrender to the way things looked.¹¹⁶

This statement suggests that Friedländer questioned the greatness of not only Memling but also Rogier van der Weyden. Although he did not go so far, the evolutionary principle did play a role in his characterization of Rogier. Having opined in this passage from the volume on the van Eycks that Jan 'made giant strides' in the development of painting, in the volume on van der Weyden he writes that 'Jan van Eyck had pushed ahead too far' and that Rogier's art is a 'belated stirring of the mediaeval spirit'.¹¹⁷ Each is assigned to a different phase of development. The problem with Memling was that he represented neither phase in a definite way.

Friedländer believed so fundamentally in the idea of an artistic evolution that, even while recognizing the medieval character of Rogier's art, he judged it also by naturalistic standards. Van der Weyden was, he declared, familiar with anatomy and perspective:

Yet, in the absence of the painter's integrating vision, of observation of the interplay of light, of a sense of continual flow and colorful context, Rogier's paintings as a whole do not keep the promise of realism they seem to hold out.¹¹⁸

This artist ceased to renew himself: while van Eyck was able to retain his spontaneity by giving himself up to nature and sharing in the infinite wealth of the visible world, Rogier became a prisoner in a cage of his own making. In the end, his style, aimed at the spiritual, became dry and mannered.¹¹⁹

The importance Friedländer attached to artistic renewal played tricks on him when, in the last volume of *Die altniederländische Malerei*, he succumbed to Rengers's theory that the works of the master of Flémalle should be attributed to van der Weyden. The addition of the Master's works to Rogier's oeuvre, he reasoned, 'allows the continuous growth of a single personality to emerge'.¹²⁰ This vision, which has been contradicted by technical examinations, is not a true measure of Friedländer's connoisseurship. As for his value judgments, even though he was critical of Memling and ambiguous toward Rogier, this did not prevent him from a compelling presentation of the specific character of their oeuvres. Johan Huizinga appreciated this approach in his review of the second volume of *Die altniederländische Malerei*. Citing the author's negative characterization of Rogier, he asks: 'Would one not think, on the ground of so much rejection, that Friedländer passes a scathing judgment on Rogier and his art?' His answer, still very much worthy of consideration, is: 'Whoever wishes to convince himself to the contrary should read the work itself.'¹²¹

Realism, Renaissance and Nationalism

MIDDLE AGES OR RENAISSANCE?

Nineteenth-century historical discussions of early Netherlandish painting were primarily concerned with its place within the development of European civilization.¹ But the more that was written about it, the more enigmatic the art of the van Eyck brothers and their contemporaries seemed to be, defying easy assignment to one of the usual categories. Was it a new beginning or a final stage? How was it related to the art developing elsewhere in Europe, especially in Italy? What did it have in common with the art, that flourished later on in the Low Countries? And how did it reflect the social life of its day? To what extent did its character represent Netherlandish civilization in general? Already in the first monographic studies of early Netherlandish art, connections were made with the national character of the region. In the course of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, reaching a highpoint in the years prior to World War I, the thrust of these interpretations became more and more political and nationalistic.

The nationalistic element in the debate became more important whenever early Netherlandish art was linked to questions of progress and decline. Every nineteenth-century author agreed that it was characterized by an exceptional precision in the rendering of visible reality. In this respect it surpassed anything previously accomplished in art. Moreover, it perfected the technique of oil painting, which was subsequently adopted throughout Europe. There were thus reasons to see fifteenth-century painting in the Low Countries as the origin of a new period. On the other hand, however, it still clung to Gothic forms and traditional religious subjects and its technical innovation was not matched by a progressive development in the style. Before long it lapsed into repetition, and was revived only around 1500, through the appropriation of new stylistic elements from Italy. From

this perspective, it was no more than a late stage of medieval art, an ending rather than a glorious beginning.

Much depended on what the current viewers thought of the developments in contemporary art. Adherents of the classical ideal, which remained the norm for the academies far into the nineteenth century, condemned the realism of the early Netherlandish painters as lacking in taste and discernment, despite the artists' undeniable technical skill. In their eyes the 'Flemish Primitives' were on the wrong side of the boundary drawn by the Italian Renaissance. The Romantics, on the other hand, saw this art as the last example of a purely religious art, before the Renaissance brought in a new worldly culture. For both groups it belonged to the Middle Ages. This image was complicated by the rise of the realist and naturalist movements after the middle of the century. Some admirers of these movements sought to justify their rejection of classicism by tracing an autonomous realist current throughout the history of European art. In their view, the great moment of renewal was not the rebirth of Classical Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance, but the impartial rendering of reality in early Netherlandish art, so that they hailed the 'Flemish Primitives' as the first moderns. They took little interest in the religious content of the paintings. In the late nineteenth century, however, authors influenced by the symbolist movement thought they recognized a pre-eminently modern approach to life in the early Netherlandish amalgamation of religious subjects with an almost painfully precise sense of reality.

If the art of the van Eycks had been a turning point in history, then its fame must reflect on the regions where they worked. The nationally minded public in the Netherlands, Belgium, and even France flattered itself with the idea that the great renewal of painting was not, or not exclusively, an Italian invention: north-western Europe had made its own contribution to the Renaissance, or perhaps had even experienced a Renaissance of its own. But, of course, the political situation of the fifteenth century did not correspond to the present borders: the realm of the Burgundian dukes had been divided among the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, which allowed patriotic souls in all three countries to claim the glory of early Netherlandish painting for their own. This debate accentuated not only the differences with Italy, but also those among the three northern nations.

The conviction that a new sense of reality, and not a renewed appreciation of Classical Antiquity, was the kernel of the Renaissance played an important role in the reception of early Netherlandish art. The equation between Renaissance and realism goes back to Jacob Burckhardt's great work of 1860, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Although Burckhardt wrote little about early Netherlandish painting, his interpretation of the Renaissance profoundly influenced discussion of the subject, and this is why I shall begin with his ideas. This survey will conclude with Johan Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, published in 1919.

Huizinga, unmistakably inspired by Burckhardt, tried to place early Netherlandish art in the whole of fifteenth-century Burgundian civilization. He took his lead from the questions that had arisen in the previous literature, but rejected many of the current answers, because he had little patience with the notion of early Netherlandish realism as a Renaissance and with appeals to national characteristics and differences. His work was both a summary of the foregoing discussion and a fresh start.

JACOB BURCKHARDT AND REALISM

Burckhardt, professor of history and art history in Basel, was a convinced classicist, who regarded Italian art of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century as the indisputable highpoint of European civilization. He was not much interested in medieval art and appreciated seventeenth-century Dutch art to a limited extent. In his view, however, the greatness of the Italian Renaissance was not the rediscovery of Classical Antiquity: humanism and the return to classical forms were part of a more radical change which amounted to nothing less than a new mastering of reality.

In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt set out to fashion a comprehensive image of Italian culture from the mid-fourteenth century to the sack of Rome in 1527. To culture he assigned everything from festivals to orations, the cult of honor and fame, the rearing and education of children, humor and satire, athletic competitions, warfare, travel, the appreciation of the countryside, the concept of propriety, faith and superstition, and he sought a common ground beneath all these various phenomena. The Renaissance was a rebirth of human consciousness itself, and, as such, it initiated the modern attitude toward life. Renaissance man became more acutely aware of the world around him and began to explore his own nature without prejudice. A new image of the world thus distinguished the Renaissance from the Middle Ages:

In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within and that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an objective treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such.²

North of the Alps fifteenth-century civilization still took no part in this renewal. Burckhardt devoted little attention to the relations between Italy and the Burgundian Low Countries, but his remarks make it clear that he regarded the culture of Burgundy as still entirely medieval. He pointed out that a personality like that of Charles the Bold mystified the Italians. They saw his crusading ideals, his attachment to chivalric honor, his readiness to gamble his power and even his life for little gain as quite incomprehensible.³ To Burckhardt, their reaction demonstrated the gap between the illusions of the Middle Ages and the realism of the new culture in Italy, and he could only explain the level-headedness with which the French chronicler Philippe de Commines judged the behavior of the Burgundian duke from the standpoint of power politics as foolish by assuming some Italian influence.⁴

If the hallmark of the Renaissance was a new sense of reality, what could Burckhardt say of the much-discussed realism of early Netherlandish painting? He admitted that the art of the van Eycks was realistic, but it was more important for art to move beyond the mere reproduction of reality to casting it in a poetic image. This the van Eycks had to a certain extent achieved:

Their landscapes are not merely the fruit of an endeavor to reflect the real world in art, but have, even if expressed conventionally, a certain poetic meaning – in short, a soul.⁵

By the word ‘conventional’ Burckhardt meant that early Netherlandish art remained subject to the norms of religious tradition. Nor could it have done otherwise: no other concepts were available to the painters. In Italy, however, the emergence of an artistic imagination was preceded by a renewal in literature; indeed, it took a century for Dante’s world to find an equivalent in the visual arts. In the north the situation was reversed: the portraits of the van Eycks and their school surpassed for many years whatever literature achieved.⁶

Burckhardt repeatedly reflected in the course of his scholarly career on how to write a cultural history of the Burgundian period, a project he recommended to others, but never managed to undertake himself.⁷ His awareness of the complexity of such a history appears in the distinction in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* between the form and the content of early Netherlandish painting: its forms sometimes coincided with those of contemporaneous Italian art, but the intellectual content was still completely medieval. He took a different position toward the end of his life, however, in lectures on the history of art in Basel, by minimizing the realism of early Netherlandish painting: the van Eycks had been a brilliant exception. The following generations of artists looked not to them but to Rogier van der Weyden, whose art Burckhardt considered weak in composition

and lacking in the reproduction of the physique and facial expressions. This showed how far they were from the Italians.⁸

More important for the study of early Netherlandish art than this one-sided picture were the questions raised by Burckhardt's use of the concepts of realism and individualism to characterize the Renaissance. First, his proposition stimulated comparisons between visual and literary expressions: in Italy he saw a correspondence among the various cultural phenomena, which was much less the case north of the Alps. This led directly to the relationship of art and society. Was the realism of the van Eycks an expression of a new mentality or an isolated exception in a culture that was otherwise still medieval? In other words, did this painting usher in a renewal similar to that in Italy, or did this sense of reality come from completely different sources?

REALISM, RELIGION AND NATIONAL CHARACTER

Just how difficult it was to accommodate the realism of the early Netherlandish painters within the history of European art is seen in the variety of views that emerged around the time of the publication of Burckhardt's *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. For those who, like Burckhardt, considered the Italian Renaissance as the highest standard of art, northern realism was an early and still somewhat crude preamble of a renewal that eventually lost its impetus. The admirers of medieval religious art, however, thought that this new realism degenerated into secularism. Both points of view assumed a break in the historical evolution. German writers, on the other hand, embraced a vision that laid the emphasis on continuity, in which the national character functioned as the cohesive element. Early Netherlandish realism had nothing to do with the Italian Renaissance, but was an expression of the robust Germanic sense of reality, which was also manifested in the art of Dürer and his contemporaries and, later on, in the works of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century. I shall address the three different visions in this order.

The important contribution to the knowledge of early Netherlandish painting made by John Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle in their *Early Flemish Painters* was discussed in Chapter 3 [pp. 232-235]. As explained there, these authors saw early Netherlandish painting as a product of the culture of the Burgundian court, and their attitude toward this art was rather critical. Both points are worth reconsidering here.

According to Crowe and Cavalcaselle, early Netherlandish painting originated from the pomp and splendor displayed by princes and nobles, and it even retained the character of a courtly art later on, when the guilds and the town councils began to commission art as well. This dependence on court patronage ex-

plained the inability of early Netherlandish art to go beyond a meticulous recording of reality. It was at least as much a product of worldly ostentation as of religious belief, and this is why the Flemings lacked ‘that elevated sentiment which can arise alone from the deepest fervor and a strong religious feeling’.⁹ The position of the artists among the servants at court ‘subjected them, perhaps, to caprices unfavourable to the development of high aspirations, or to the contemplation and free communion with self which are the soul of art’.¹⁰ The earliest signs became apparent shortly before 1400 in the work of the sculptor Claus Sluter and his assistants on the *Well of Moses* in Dijon [FIGS. 124, 125], one of the first large commissions awarded by the Burgundian court: ‘Their figures express, in most instances, physical suffering, intended for gravity or melancholy’. Crowe and Cavalcaselle did not consider this a proper objective. The whole testified to a dubious taste: ‘Art in such hands as these [...] could scarcely be said to progress’.¹¹

The authors did not conceal from their readers how in their eyes the realism of early Netherlandish art could be hard and cruel. Jan van Eyck achieved true greatness, but even his work sometimes lacked true harmony and nobility of spirit. Their ultimate assessment was determined by a preference for the Italian Renaissance. Compared to the exalted style and tone of the Italians, early Netherlandish art looked rather coarse. Nor did it go through a continuous development. By the end of the fifteenth century, having exhausted its possibilities, it could only be renewed by submitting to the formal principles of Italian art. Although there was much to admire in Memling, the history of early Netherlandish art was generally one of decline, while that of the Italian Renaissance progressed:

In the same period we see the upward and the downward course. Can men of taste be blamed for preferring the former to the lowest extreme of the latter?¹²

For the Abbé Chrétien Dehaisnes, who published a survey of Flemish painting in 1860, this art was not at all the product of a secular court culture, but of a profoundly religious sentiment. Nor did it undergo a steady decline, but it reached its apogee in Memling, ‘the most pious and most Christian artist Flanders has produced’.¹³ Memling combined realism and religious fervor in an art that offered the viewer a foretaste of the sweetness of heaven. Unfortunately, the later Flemish painters did not continue in this direction, but indulged their inclination toward an unbridled depiction of reality. They turned away from religious themes and represented nothing more than nature and daily life. Indeed, the danger of this tendency was already present in the work of Jan van Eyck.¹⁴

For Deshaisnes, as for Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Italian religious art was ultimately the norm. The greatest honor he could pay Memling was to call him ‘the



FIGURE 124 – Claus Sluter, *The Moses Fountain: David*,
Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon



FIGURE 125 – Claus Sluter, *The Moses Fountain: Moses*

Fra Angelico of Flanders'.¹⁵ At the same time, he endeavored to convince the reader that the century of the van Eycks did not lag far behind the Italian Quattrocento. The Flemish painters were ahead of the Italians in realistic representation and the use of color, and even contributed substantially to the flowering of Italian art. Dehaisnes did not look for the origin of Flemish realism in the status and demands of the patrons, but in something less tangible: the sense of reality of the Germanic mind. Perhaps because he saw this realism as a possible danger, he did not expand on this theme. Gustav Waagen discussed the German character at much greater length, however, in the manual of Netherlandish and German art he published in 1862.

The idea of deriving the differences between the Netherlandish and Italian schools of painting from the contrasting natures of the Latin and Germanic peoples began in the heyday of German Romanticism and it was summarized by Waagen. European art, he averred, comprised two main currents, the one idealizing and the other realistic. The idealizing direction, which originated in classical Greece, resurfaced in its most characteristic guise in fourteenth-century Italy, because the style of the Italian Renaissance suited the temperament of the Latin peoples. Alongside it, with the rise of Flemish painting, 'the singularity of the Germanic artistic temperament' was manifested in an almost absolute form.¹⁶

Although Waagen clearly distinguished between German and Netherlandish art, this did not prevent him from considering them both as branches from the same trunk: the Germanic sense of art was characterized by a strong religious sentiment, expressed in an utterly faithful depiction of visible reality, while the realism of early Netherlandish painting meant an important progress in the way this artistic sense took shape through the centuries. The landscapes on the *Ghent Altarpiece* already testify to the profound sensitivity to nature that would reach its apogee in Ruysdael's landscapes two centuries later.

Despite the progressive character Waagen attributed to early Netherlandish realism, he regarded the entire Flemish school, from van Eyck to Quentin Massys, unreservedly as medieval art. The realistic sculpture of Claus Sluter had been an important model for the painters: as in Italy, a renewal in sculpture had preceded the renewal of painting. But in the Netherlands the sense of reality was put in the service of religion. As soon as the realism became too conspicuous, Waagen turned away from it. In the *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* [FIG. 160] – a work most nineteenth-century viewers found difficult to enjoy – he thought the Virgin 'of a rare ugliness', and the figure of Saint George a 'by no means saintly character'.¹⁷ He also argued that van der Weyden's realism now and then became tasteless and repulsive.¹⁸ Like everyone in his time, Waagen most admired the modest, chaste piety of Memling's work.

These three examples show what ideas about the cultural background of early Netherlandish painting were current around 1860. Crowe and Cavalcaselle presented early Netherlandish realism as a product of the decadent ostentation of late medieval court culture. Their view was closely connected to the image of the Burgundian period presented by its chroniclers, an image which was popularized in Victor Hugo's famous historical novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, of 1831. For the Abbé Dehaisnes and other propagandists of the Gothic Revival, early Netherlandish painting was deeply religious, contrasting sharply with the frivolous materialism of the Burgundian court, though it did not escape secular influence in the long run. In the Germanic tradition as formulated by Waagen there was no conflict between realism and sincere piety: both were part of the Germanic feeling for art, which found one of its most brilliant expressions in early Netherlandish painting.

While for Crowe and Cavalcaselle and Deshaisnes Italian Renaissance art was the standard, Waagen had no need to consider the relationship of early Netherlandish art to the Renaissance, because they belonged to entirely different cultural spheres. This relation, however, became a subject of discussion in France, where some authors saw realism as an important advance in the history of European art.

BOURGEOISIE AND PROGRESS

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, French art criticism began to take a particular interest in Dutch painting. This was connected with the official politics of art in France. Government policy, dominated by a strict classicism, was contested by realism, which presented itself as a controversial, provocative avant-garde movement. Whereas classicism implied conformity and submission to authority, realism denoted innovation, progress, and political freedom. Several critics and historians placed this idea in a historical context. In their opinion the realism of seventeenth century Dutch art reflected the bourgeois, republican, Dutch community which had so successfully resisted princely absolutism, and which the France of Napoleon III would do well to take as a model. Consequently, admiration for Dutch realism became part of a progressive political program.

The most prominent propagandist of Dutch art as an alternative to French academic classicism was the former revolutionary Théophile Thoré, who during the years of his exile in the Low Countries had acquired a thorough knowledge of art collections in Holland and Belgium. His books and articles, published under the pseudonym of W. Bürger (meaning both 'bourgeois' and 'citizen') were devoted to seventeenth-century painting. As he wrote in his *Musées de la Hollande*, of 1858, this bore no relation to the realism of the early Netherlandish masters:

‘Dutch art is inspired altogether differently from the mystical art of the Middle Ages or the allegorical and aristocratic art of the Renaissance which is still continued in contemporary art’.¹⁹ Until 1579, when the Northern and Southern Netherlands separated, they had practised a common artistic style, dominated initially by medieval religious faith and later by the influence of Italy. The great renewal of Dutch realism came only with the political independence of the Northern Netherlands.

But couldn’t one already look for traces of a confident bourgeois culture in the florescence of the guild system and the resistance of the Flemish cities against princely domination? It was known that some early Netherlandish painters held prominent positions in the guilds. And didn’t the unassuming, contemplative character of their religious works conceal a rejection of the clamorous ostentation of the ducal court? Perhaps the democratic spirit of seventeenth-century Holland had its roots in the realism of the ‘Flemish Primitives’. A number of French writers in the 1860s promoted this theory with growing insistence.

Starting in 1848, the art historian Charles Blanc, younger brother of the well-known socialist Louis Blanc, edited the enormous *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles*. The series of volumes by different authors was published in 631 separate installments, each devoted to a single painter, and the two volumes on the Dutch school were completed in 1861. In his introduction Blanc took the same position as Thoré: prior to 1579, there was hardly any difference in the art of the Dutch, the Flemish, and even the Germans. The Dutch owed the originality of their art to achievements of the Republic such as national independence, freedom of conscience, and a popular government.²⁰ In the course of its history, European art had known its most glorious moments in three cities: Athens, Florence, and Amsterdam, which proved that democracy, and not the lust for power of princes and magnates, offered the best conditions for art.²¹

The volume on the Flemish school, which appeared in 1868, presented early Netherlandish art emphatically as the beginning of the later flowering of Dutch and Flemish art. The van Eyck brothers, Paul Mantz declared in the opening article, brought about a ‘renewal’; they were ‘inventors’, not only in a technique, but also ‘in matters of thought and feeling’. What they showed in their art was a ‘fervent, sincere, passionate return to nature, so disdained by the Middle Ages’.²² Alfred Michiels’s essay on the van Eycks struck a similar note: ‘the mystical night of the Middle Ages was coming to an end, the first glimmer of modern thinking trembled on the horizon’.²³ Because early Netherlandish painters had never lost contact with the common people, their art pointed to the future. They had discovered the poetry of reality:

The artists, connected with the craftsmen by public opinion and custom, had not yet conceived the ambitious ideas, the taste for luxury and splendor, and

the inordinate self-esteem they acquired from the opulent classes later on. [...] This is how they were able, even while frequenting the court, to isolate themselves in the midst of their era, to suffer no bad influences, and to surround themselves with an aura of light.²⁴

A literary scholar of Belgian descent who was raised in France, Michiels took French nationality out of sympathy for the Revolution of 1848. He had embarked on a monumental *Histoire de la peinture flamande et hollandaise* in 1843, and he planned to carry the series through to his own time. Five years later, however, he became stuck in the mid-sixteenth century, having already published four volumes on the earlier art. Yet, his book long remained the only survey in the French language. Along with supplemental volumes about Rubens and his age, it was reissued between 1865 and 1876 as *Histoire de la peinture flamande*. Although Michiels was a writer of virtually inexhaustible prolixity, he added little to the knowledge of early Netherlandish painting. As late as 1865, in the face of all the recent scholarship, he was still doggedly attributing the *Last Judgment* altarpieces of van der Weyden and Memling to Jan van Eyck. But he was nonetheless the first to attempt a systematic derivation of this art from the character of the country and its people.

Michiels assumed that the painting of the Low Countries from the very beginning displayed certain general traits which survived the separation of Holland and Belgium, and which necessarily resulted from the nature and history of the region. The first volume of his work was devoted to the climate, the composition of the soil, and the racial background, which determined the concepts of beauty, religion, and politics. His treatment of the general history of the region paid as much attention to the great men as to the people. Only after this extended introduction did Michiels address the history of art. Certain that early Netherlandish painting sprang from local traditions in manuscript illumination and sculpture, he assigned a decisive role to the realism of Claus Sluter and his pupils.²⁵

In spite of the fact that Sluter, like van Eyck, had been a court artist, Michiels believed that the mainstream of early Netherlandish art moved apart from the culture of the nobility. In reaction to the cruelty and uncertainty of public life, the authentic culture withdrew into a realm of private religion. This was the side chosen by the painters and in their work mysticism and realism attained a new harmony:

These unsophisticated masters took the Christian tradition back into nature, plunging it into the ocean of realism. Their splendid panels skillfully fuse the last reflections of the Middle Ages and the first glimmer of modern thought. Legend dominates everywhere, but observation reigns as well: the new order of ideas rises like a young star in the splendor of a setting sun.²⁶

Seventeenth-century Dutch painting continued this contemplative realism. The Brothers of the Common Life had prepared the way for the disciples of Menno Simons. Was Ruysdael not a Baptist, and possibly also Hobbema, Flinck, and even Rembrandt?

Not everyone was swept to such heights of enthusiasm. But the greatness of Dutch painting of the Golden Age and its derivation from the 'Primitives' soon became commonplace in French art literature. An article written by Ludovic Vitet in 1860 shows how the taste of the public began to change, even outside socialist and liberal circles. Vitet, a member of the Académie Française and formerly a high official under King Louis-Philippe, belonged to the literary and political establishment. He was repelled by the Revolution of 1848, but he had also no sympathy for the regime of Napoleon III, and this amalgam of conservatism and liberalism was reflected in his taste in art. He closed his remarks on the Netherlandish school with a hymn to Titian, whose works display 'an imperfect ray of heavenly beauty, before which even the most perfect image of the beauties of this world grows pale'.²⁷ Nevertheless, he found the Netherlanders not only 'great and strong' but also very modern: 'Of all the schools in painting, this is the most cosmopolitan.'²⁸

It was unfortunate, in Vitet's view, that admirers of seventeenth-century Dutch art so rarely explored its genealogy. Convinced that the 'Flemish Primitives' were the legitimate ancestors of Ter Borch, Metsu, Hobbema and Ruysdael, he attributed the lack of insight on this point to the existence of so much second-rate fifteenth-century Flemish art. When the best paintings were considered, however, the origins of the later florescence were obvious. Of course, the high points were the van Eyck brothers and 'Hemling'. Vitet devoted only a few words in passing to the 'numerous followers' of Rogier van der Weyden. The van Eycks were the great technical innovators, who also introduced the modern observation of reality. On the other hand, their ideas were still partly tied to the Middle Ages. 'With Hemling' it was just the reverse: his work was technically less adventurous but showed 'enormous progress in a moral sense, in the realm of feeling and thought'.²⁹ In spite of the medieval aspect of van Eyck's art:

[he] arouses only earthly ideas, even when he is depicting saints, whereas everything in Hemling raises us to heaven, even when he is only painting the things of this world. It is not material means that make the difference, but rather the soul of the artist.³⁰

At its best, Netherlandish art, in its fifteenth as well as its seventeenth-century form, was just as spiritually uplifting as that of the great masters of classical idealism. In this way, Vitet made Netherlandish realism palatable to a conservative

audience without so much as mentioning the bourgeois self-confidence Thoré had perceived.

Hippolyte Taine summarized many of the ideas discussed so far in lectures on Netherlandish art at the École des Beaux-Arts, which were published as a book in 1868. His views on Netherlandish civilization were primarily derived from the work of Michiels: culture was determined by the threefold influence of ‘race, milieu and moment in time’, in this case the Germanic character of the population, the changeability of the weather and the political power of the cities. He paid much attention to the phlegmatic character of the Flemings and the Dutch, which made them unreceptive to abstraction and idealism; to the fog and humidity of their climate, which cast everything in a constantly changing light, and to the early affluence of the middle class, which fuelled an enormous demand for art. Under these circumstances, Dutch painting could only be realist painting.

Taine tried to warn his audience of the surprises that might come in a confrontation with Germanic art, to which he also assigned the English, Flemish, and Dutch schools:

if your mind is filled with noble Italian or elegant French forms, your eyes will be shocked; you will have difficulty in finding the right point of view from which to see these works, and you will think the artist is determined to focus on ugliness. The truth is that he is not put off by the banalities and irregularities of life. He has no natural understanding of symmetrical order, flowing and tranquil movement, beautiful proportions, or the health and nimbleness of bare limbs.³¹

But Taine had read Burckhardt’s *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, a book he called ‘the most complete and most philosophical book about the Italian Renaissance’,³² and he affirmed Burckhardt’s position that realism was the hallmark of the Renaissance. North of the Alps as well, a new sense of reality had been engendered by economic circumstances similar to those that had prevailed in Italy. Early Netherlandish art ‘sprang from a renaissance, that is a great rise in prosperity, wealth, and intellect. Here, as in Italy, the cities flourished at an early date and became virtually independent’.³³ As in Florence one sees in Flanders around 1400, ‘the mind of the Middle Ages dissolving and coming apart’,³⁴ from which emerged a new relationship to reality:

The symbolic age has given way to the pictorial age; the mind is no longer content with a scholastic construction; it wants to observe a living form; and human thinking now requires, to be complete, to be communicated to the eyes through a work of art.³⁵

Like Burckhardt, Taine argued that Franco-Flemish literature continued to develop along traditional lines for a long time to come, because religious sentiment was more resilient and more deeply rooted than in Florence or Venice. The northern Renaissance should therefore be regarded as a Christian Renaissance:

A Flemish renaissance governed by Christian ideas, there indeed is the two-fold character of art under Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Memling, and Quentin Massys, and the other traits follow from these two. On the one hand, artists take interest in real life [...]. It is clear that at this point they discover nature: the scales fall from their eyes and they have just understood almost all of a sudden the whole sensory world, its proportions, its structure, and its color [...]. But on the other hand, [the art] is also a glorification of the Christian faith.³⁶

Since for Taine this combination of realism and piety could be explained by the prevailing geographic and historical circumstances, a French effort to imitate it would be just as unsuccessful as the endeavor by Flemish and Dutch painters of the sixteenth century to follow the Italian style. This cancelled out any ideological obligation to study Netherlandish art. A Frenchman could admire it, but there remained an unbridgeable distance.

The alleged progressiveness of Netherlandish art no longer played an important role in French art criticism of the 1870s. Developments in contemporary art had outdated this view. Dutch realism had been successfully employed around 1860 in the struggle against the official classicism, but the 1870s witnessed the emergence of Impressionism, which went much further than modern realism in its attempt at a direct reproduction of reality. Compared to this new movement, Netherlandish realism appeared as a model of a 'natural', or even naïve, realism which was admired for its simple joy in things for their own sake. (It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that authors such as Dvořák and Friedländer saw correspondences between Impressionism and the art of Jan van Eyck [SEE CHAPTER 3, PP. 242-243, 250].)

Eugène Fromentin's *Les maîtres d'autrefois*, of 1875, is a case in point. Like Thoré, whose *Musées de la Hollande* Fromentin aimed to supplant, he took the reader on a tour of Dutch and Belgian museums. The book, in which the author expressed himself with great elegance, became a highly popular introduction, also in the Netherlands. That Fromentin was himself an artist lent weight to his words: he had made a name for himself as a painter of oriental landscapes in a rather conventional academic style, thought little of the Impressionists, and saw no connection between this avant-garde movement and seventeenth-century Dutch realism, which he described with a mixture of admiration and astonishment. In his view, the

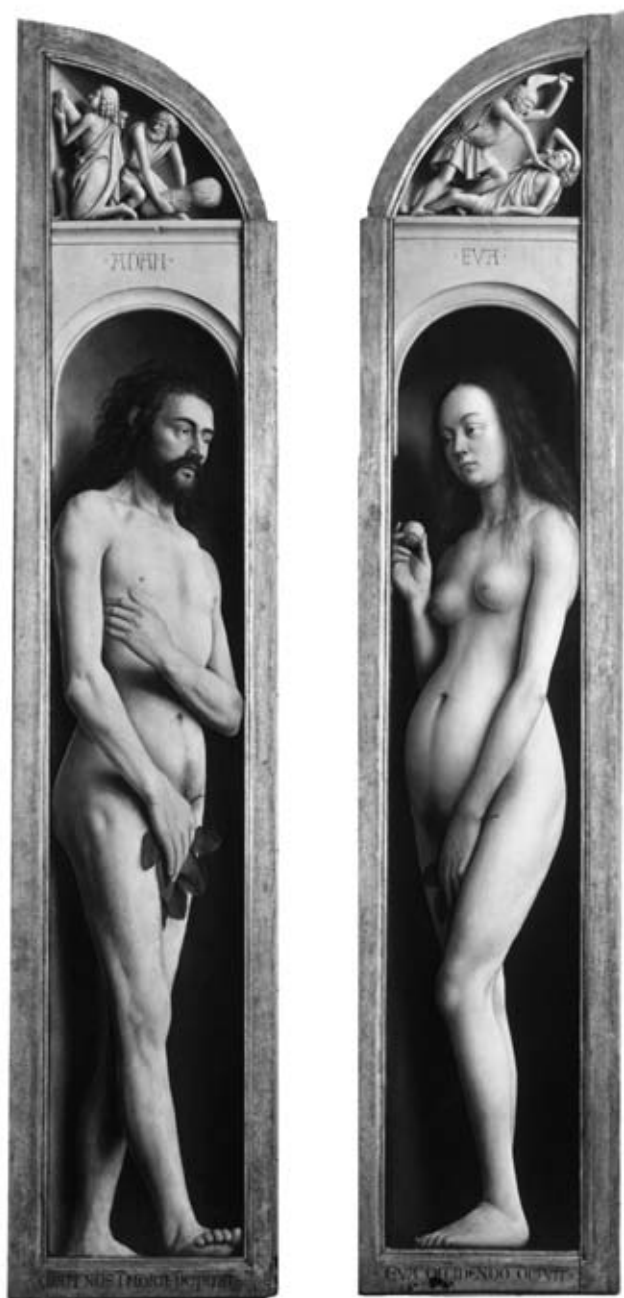


FIGURE 126 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, interior, upper register: *Adam and Eve*

Dutch painters had no particular intention in their representation of reality. In a certain sense, they were naïve artists who uninhibitedly recorded the world around them and simply immersed themselves in the refinement of the act of painting.

Fromentin was primarily concerned with the age of Rembrandt and Rubens. But he also devoted some attention to the older art he had seen in Brussels, Ghent, and Bruges. While in the seventeenth century, he thought, no contrast had existed between art and life, the two had been sharply at variance in the fifteenth century. There is a romantic vehemence in his notion of Burgundian culture:

In those days human conscience lacked most of the elementary virtues: integrity, sincere respect for holy things, the sense of duty, patriotism, and, on the part of both men and women, modesty. This above all we should remember when, in the midst of this brilliant and terrible society, we see the florescence of this surprising art, which was supposed to represent its moral basis along with its surfaces.³⁷

The shamelessness of Burgundian society could be seen in the *Adam and Eve* panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIG. 126], at the time displayed in the Musée royal in Brussels. Fromentin described these portrayals of the ancestors of mankind, created in God's image, as 'two wild beings, roughly hirsute, both come out of I know not what primeval forests, not in the least intimidated by their ugliness, with their swollen bodies and scrawny legs'.³⁸ Nevertheless, he recognized the greatness of the van Eyck brothers, whose technical skill in depicting the visible world was never surpassed.

For Fromentin Memling possessed a singular beauty found nowhere else: 'this powerful naïveté, this rapt attention, this energetic patience'.³⁹ Memling's art was chaste and elegant, an oasis of peace 'amid the horrors of the age, a privileged place, a kind of angelic refuge, ideally silent and enclosed, where the passions are quiet'.⁴⁰ The author's enthusiasm did nothing to solve the question that had occupied previous authors: if early Netherlandish art reached a high point in Memling's religious contemplation, while there was nothing metaphysical about seventeenth-century Dutch realism, how could the one period follow from the other, and how could both be the product of the same civilization? Although Fromentin did not address this problem, his observations suggested a conclusion similar to the one presented by Thoré: there was no direct continuity from the 'Primitives' to the age of Rembrandt.

Against this view stood that presented by Michiels, Vitet and Taine: early Netherlandish and seventeenth-century Dutch painting testify to the same national identity. The question as to which vision was correct was a matter of paramount importance to some Dutch authors of this period.

LOOKING BACK FROM REMBRANDT

The French debate on Dutch realism was closely followed in the Netherlands. It provided a new argument for the Dutch sense of nationhood, which had become rather uncertain after Belgium had separated in 1830. Dutch historians had traditionally described the past greatness of their country in terms of its political and intellectual achievements without considering the art of painting. One of the reasons was that classical art theory did not value the types of art in which the masters of the Golden Age excelled. Moreover, the great seventeenth-century writers had paid little attention to art. Thus, there was no reason to see the highpoint of Netherlandish civilization in Dutch realism, whose attention to daily matters deviated so markedly from the European pattern.

Dutch nationalism began to change in the decades following 1860, so that the national identity was increasingly defined with the help of concepts borrowed from the appreciation of art, rather than literature. This shift was unmistakably influenced by the ideological dimension the French art critics had given to Dutch realism. Indeed, the equation of artistic realism with a bourgeois individualism and love of independence was irresistible.

The first attempt to popularize the new insights was made in 1874 by Johannes van Vloten. Fifteen years earlier, as van Vloten remarked, Thoré had considered a survey of Dutch painting ‘extremely difficult’, perhaps even ‘impossible’. Thanks to all the research carried out since, the situation now looked quite different.⁴¹ The names van Vloten mentioned were mainly those of Dutch archivists; the general line of his interpretation, however, was based on the French authors. From Thoré he took on the idea that Dutch realism was not the result of an inability to respond to classicizing ideals, but that ‘precisely therein appears the originality of Flemish and Dutch painting’.⁴² Sharing the same political views, he, too, saw realism as a sign of the progressive character of the bourgeoisie. From Taine he borrowed the idea of painting as a true expression of the Dutch national character. He admitted that Taine’s *Philosophie de l’art* contained a lot of ‘superficial and ridiculous exaggeration’, but this did not prevent him from taking over entire sentences almost verbatim.

Although van Vloten did not go so far as to use the word ‘Renaissance’ as Taine had done, he argued that from the very beginning Netherlandish art showed an aversion to abstract ideals and a predilection for the wealth of everyday reality. Van Eyck gave the first impulse to this representation of the fullness of life:

Even in the throngs of his prophets, saints and apostles, we are struck by facial features whose generous roundness and jocular expression involuntarily bring a smile to our lips and reveal, in embryo, the future of the Dutch brush, in its whimsical aspect.⁴³

The later Flemish and Dutch art were ‘two stems from one root’. Both derived from early Netherlandish realism:

Despite its Christian content it was in Flemish painting, as manifested from the days of the van Eycks, that the first steps were taken in the domain of nature and reality.⁴⁴

The most important Dutch contribution to the field of cultural history around the same time was Conrad Busken Huet’s *Het land van Rembrandt*, of 1882-1884. Like Thoré, Busken Huet saw early Netherlandish and seventeenth-century Dutch painting as products of two different cultures. To this he added a thrust of his own, an absolute insistence that seventeenth-century Dutch culture possessed no originality apart from its painting. Dutch literature had attempted to transcend national boundaries and failed in the attempt, never producing more than a weak imitation of what others had invented. Painting, on the other hand, by remaining aloof from the ideals of the international Baroque, was the only truly original contribution of Dutch civilization. As for political history, Holland’s only enduring achievement was its colonial empire in the East Indies. Indeed, the greatness of the Netherlands could be summarized in the phrase referring to both their colonies and Rembrandt’s great painting: ‘Java and *The Syndics*’.

Huet’s cultural history glorified the energy of the nation, which in the seventeenth century had led to results never surpassed. The Dutch of that era had been realists in their commercial interests, their religious tolerance, their colonial politics, and their art, but traces of this realism had been rare before this period. The Middle Ages, to which he devoted the major part of the first volume of his book, were cruel and passionate:

With all that, meanness is still firmly established; the better emotions are violently suppressed by the ferocity of civil unrest; the silver crescent of nobility appears only fleetingly amid the dirty gray clouds at dusk.⁴⁵

In the fifteenth century, religious literature – with its greatest example, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis – and painting were rare signs of moral elevation. It was of course praiseworthy that the writers and painters tried to provide a moral position in the face of so much turbulence, but, to Huet’s regret they saw no other solution than to turn away from society. Their work was ultimately anti-social, and the best forces were absorbed by the church, which stood in the way of progress.⁴⁶

Huet, himself an apostate preacher, was a convinced anticlerical. In his opinion, early Netherlandish art offered a clear example of the innervating effect of belief. He was especially repelled by the male portraits:

Their princes and their prelates, their nobles and their military officers, their judges, their burghers and their burgomasters, sometimes even their executioners, they all look pious, and all look like imbeciles.⁴⁷

For this reason he made no attempt to claim the renown of the old Flemish painters for the Netherlands. The van Eycks and their followers were southerners, and therefore different from the North Netherlanders. Even the painters who were born in the territory of the later Dutch Republic, but worked in the south – Petrus Christus, Dirk Bouts, Gerard David and the like – became southerners thereby:

Their works show no evidence of a specifically north Netherlandish origin. They belong to the Flemish school in whatever they produced.⁴⁸

A distinctly north Netherlandish tradition emerged only in the course of the sixteenth century, when Dutch painters no longer moved abroad and found an audience in their own land and surroundings.

And yet, Huet's national pride convinced him that Dutch realism had an early origin even older than that of Flemish painting. The art of the van Eyck brothers might appear to have come suddenly, as if from the void, but it was preceded by the sculpture of Claus Sluter and his workshop. The *Well of Moses* in Dijon, completed in 1402, displayed a striking sense of reality in no way inferior to the realism of the van Eycks. Sluter was a court artist, like Jan van Eyck, and, according to the documents, came from 'Orlandes', that is Holland. Unlike the paintings of van Eyck, Bouts or David, his sculpture bore 'an unmistakably Dutch hallmark'.⁴⁹ The *David* of the *Well of Moses* [FIG. 124] reminded Huet of the type of Dutchman he admired in his own day: 'in the fleet, in the army, in the world of trade and commerce',⁵⁰ and the *Moses* [FIG. 125] resembled Rembrandt's portrayals of biblical figures, for which he chose members of the Jewish community in Amsterdam as models. The inevitable conclusion was that this sculptor initiated the Dutch school in the visual arts. Between his work and that of the great masters of the seventeenth century there was a natural connection, which could only be explained by innate and hereditary traits.

Huet's thought was a refinement of a long-standing idea. Alfred Michiels, as we saw, had already assigned a decisive role to Sluter forty years earlier, and since then, the assumption of some kind of connection between Sluter and Rem-

brandt had become widely accepted. It received official sanction shortly after the publication of *Het land van Rembrandt*, on the façade of the newly built Rijksmuseum at Amsterdam, which opened its doors in 1885. The central gable relief shows Sluter leading a group of the artists of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, as the counterpart of Rembrandt who heads the artists of the seventeenth century.⁵¹

But if these two artists were allied by their realism, how could the van Eycks, whose sense of reality was hard to deny, be excluded from this long-range perspective? Huet ignored this problem because his image of early Netherlandish art was dominated by later fifteenth-century painters such as Memling, in whom he found nothing of Dutch realism. It goes without saying that French and Belgian authors, who viewed Sluter from a Burgundian perspective, were of a different opinion.

A NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

Louis Courajod reaffirmed Taine's idea of a northern Renaissance, but instead of considering realism as alien to French culture, he saw it as an element that was linked with everything healthy and strong in the French people. Courajod was a curator in the sculpture department of the Louvre. From 1886 until his premature death in 1896, he also taught the history of sculpture at the art school attached to the museum, and it was not long before his impassioned lectures, which covered much more than sculpture, attracted the attention of a large and interested audience.⁵² In his scholarship he continued the work of Count Léon de Laborde in the 1840s and 1850s, whose archival studies on the Burgundian period were also read by Taine and Busken Huet. From Laborde he borrowed the idea of a major artistic and stylistic change in France between 1350 and 1400.

Already during that period, Courajod argued, realism developed in France.⁵³ From the sixteenth century onwards, however, French civilization had also been influenced by Italian classicism. This foreign importation had time and again led to frivolity and decadence. Courajod's taste was formed by modern literary realism and naturalism, and he was intensely averse to all art inspired by Antiquity, including the academic art of his own century. For him the work of Jacques-Louis David and his followers was an abject product of the Italianizing movement. On the other hand, he acclaimed the work of François Rude, creator of the patriotic sculptural group on the Arc de Triomphe, as a continuation of the same realist tradition to which Sluter belonged.⁵⁴

Like so many of his countrymen after the war against Germany in 1870, Courajod had been deeply impressed by the vigor and organizational talent of the

German nation, which, in his view, the French should take as an example. This they could do only by embracing their own realist tradition, which he traced back to the renewals in French art of the second half of the fourteenth century. Since then, France had for a long time been unable to contribute much to the new movement because of the devastating wars that afflicted the country. The center of culture had shifted to Burgundy, where the art of Sluter and his pupils joined the realist tendency, and afterwards to the Low Countries, where the painters, and not the sculptors, took the lead. Nevertheless, the realism of the van Eyck brothers came directly from sculpture. Jan van Eyck must have come into contact with Sluter's work. Not only did he represent deceptively realistic stone statues in some of his paintings, but, according to the documents, he also polychromed existing sculptures, and possibly even designed some himself.⁵⁵ His precise rendering of the human exterior, with all its physical imperfections, which so strongly offended Fromentin, was, in Courajod's view, a sign of a will to master the natural world. Van Eyck's followers maintained his predilection for realistic detail but not the monumentality of his figures. In the meantime, Italy witnessed the emergence of a new style inspired by the ancients, which produced great results, but constituted a danger north of the Alps. Art in France and the Low Countries experienced its best movements when it held to its own tradition of portraying the visible world.

Thus, the concept of a double Renaissance, a realist one in the North and a classicizing one in Italy, enabled Courajod to give early Netherlandish art a place in European history that was both logical and highly advantageous. Credit for 'inventing' the northern Renaissance went to France, and in this way he managed to claim the realist tradition as French, which according to Taine was a Germanic and according to Huet a specifically Dutch affair.

REALISM AND DECADENT SENSIBILITY

Authors such as Taine or Courajod, who related early Netherlandish painting to a great realist tradition, tended to regard the religious content of most pictures as nothing more than a traditional motif and as something of incidental importance. At the other extreme were scholars and critics who, like the earlier German Romantics, valued their devotional character as an essential element. To this second group belonged the great English archival scholar James Weale, whose research contributed much to our knowledge of early Netherlandish painting, and the novelist and art critic Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Initially a defender of modern realism and Impressionism, Huysmans shifted his attention in the 1890s almost completely to the art of the fifteenth century.⁵⁶ The religious subject matter appealed to him as much as the faithful rendering of

realistic detail. He saw no conflict between them: rather than anticipating a later, secular concept of art, the realism served to emphasize the religious content.

A Parisian of Dutch descent, Huysmans started out as a follower of Zola's naturalism, but soon became one of the leading figures of the decadent movement in literature. In the novel that made him famous, *À rebours*, of 1884, the protagonist escapes the reality of daily life in a series of aesthetic experiments. He discovers the beauty of the Middle Ages, which he, in a very traditional manner, interprets as a long period of artistic and moral decline. But that is precisely why they appeal to him. Huysmans's own longing for the Middle Ages, and especially the later Middle Ages, continued to grow. In his novel *Là-bas*, he contrasted life in the fifteenth century, with its extremes of sanctity and cruelty, favorably with the industrial dullness of the modern city. Not long after the book was published in 1891, the author entered the Catholic Church.

What Huysmans admired in the art of the 'Primitives' was not the peaceful contemplation of holy things, but the intensity of emotional expression. There was, he believed, no period in history that bore so much affinity with the uncertainties of the fin-de-siècle as the late Middle Ages. Then as now the thirst for power and wealth, and sensuality alternated with moments of profound doubt and a need for religious reflection. However, the people of the Middle Ages had an advantage over those of the nineteenth century in one respect: they were not hindered by the oppressive mediocrity of modern culture. The emotions still lay close to the surface. Every feeling manifested itself as unique and overwhelming; every change of mood led directly to the other extreme.

Since he connected the creation of form in early Netherlandish art directly with its religious content, for Huysmans, as for many other authors, Jan van Eyck and Memling did not belong to different spheres: they were two sides of the same mentality, which could suddenly change from excessive display to deep humility. Above the celebrated Memling, he placed the pathos of Rogier van der Weyden, and the highpoint of 'spiritual naturalism' was, in his opinion, the work of the German 'Primitive' Matthias Grünewald.⁵⁷

The way in which Huysmans gave a new color to the appreciation of early Netherlandish painting can be compared to a contemporaneous change in the performance practice of early Netherlandish polyphonic music, whose composers were likewise often referred to as 'Primitives'.⁵⁸ It had a long time been customary to perform this music slowly, solemnly, and sweetly, but now certain directors experimented with faster tempi, sharper transitions and accentuating the dissonances. Huysmans did the same for art criticism. Some of his observations on the 'Primitives' were no more than fantasies on the familiar themes of current 'decadent' literature, but his vision of a relation between seemingly contradictory tendencies in fifteenth-century culture opened up new vistas. It cannot be denied

that his admiration also contained an element of snobbery: the relative obscurity of the painters was part of their charm. ‘Even in the Louvre’, he wrote in 1898, ‘one can count on being alone with the Primitives’.⁵⁹ It was partly his own doing that this situation quickly changed.

BRUGES 1902

The great exhibition of ‘Flemish Primitives’ in Bruges, in the summer of 1902, was a turning point in the appreciation of early Netherlandish art, whose historical and artistic significance was definitively recognized from that time onward.⁶⁰ The number of visitors was estimated at 35,000, and because of the crowds the exhibition was extended for several weeks. Never before had so many works by early Netherlandish masters, many of them from private collections, been visible together. The organizers, who had to overcome all kinds of difficulties, had a two-fold purpose. First of all they hoped to advance connoisseurship: the opportunity for direct comparisons would bring more clarity to the confusing divergence of attributions that still hindered the study of early Netherlandish painting. But they also wanted this survey to focus attention on the significance of Belgium within European culture. The exhibition presented early Netherlandish art explicitly as Belgian art, and, if only for that reason, acquired a distinctly nationalistic tenor.

There were also some unforeseen consequences. The choice of Bruges as the site of the exhibition, which had originally been planned for Brussels, reinforced the image of early Netherlandish painting as a late medieval art, a final stage, rather than a new beginning. For many viewers Bruges, with its reputation in literature as ‘Bruges-la-morte’, the ‘dead city’, evoked a melancholy ill-suited to the national triumph the organizers had in mind. Moreover, the preponderance of works by Memling tended to eclipse Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, who were too little represented in relation to their importance. Of the sadly dispersed *Ghent Altarpiece*, for instance, only the *Adam* and *Eve* panels were brought from Brussels; the central part stayed in Ghent, and the other panels in Berlin.

Despite this imbalance, the exhibition did much to stimulate knowledge and appreciation of the ‘Flemish Primitives’. The *Catalogue critique* which Georges Hulin de Loo published on his own initiative, in response to James Weale’s disappointing official catalogue, launched his career as connoisseur of early Netherlandish art [SEE CHAPTER 3, PP. 237-240].⁶¹ Many critics ventured more or less extensive commentaries, including Max Friedländer, who wrote a long review. Partly through the sometimes very expensive picture books which appeared in its wake, the exhibition remained a point of reference for many years.⁶² It also helped private owners to gain a sense of the value of their property, and major museums



FIGURE 127 – Geertgen tot Sint Jans, *John the Baptist in the Wilderness*
(42 x 28 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

paid high prices for some of the works that were shown. For instance, the *John the Baptist* by Geertgen tot Sint Jans [FIG. 127], which had been auctioned in London in 1894 for three and a half pounds, was purchased by the Berlin museum for a thousand pounds before the exhibition had even closed.⁶³

Although the reviews, ranging from jubilant admiration to sober indifference, often reiterated earlier attitudes toward early Netherlandish painting, some important shifts took place. Perhaps precisely because of the display of such a huge number of his works, Memling's fame began to fade. While some still saw his art as the highpoint, several reviewers confessed, sometimes in surprise, that they saw it as a formal routine performance. This attitude gained ground in the twentieth century, when Memling was frequently regarded as a painter of the second rank: worthy and elegant, but superficial.⁶⁴ In the years that followed the exhibition, Weale continued to insist that Memling was a greater, because more religious, painter than van Eyck, but he was proclaiming a view that had had its day.⁶⁵

The flagging estimation of Memling was symptomatic of a general phenomenon. Realistic details like those on the *Adam and Eve* panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIG. 126] or in the *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* [FIG. 160] no longer had the shocking effect felt by earlier generations. There was also a growing interest, first among the connoisseurs, later also the general public, in other kinds of religious experience than a mood of heavenly sweetness.

Nevertheless, for most of the reviewers early Netherlandish painting still offered a picture of peace, a quiet contemplation, which could serve as a consolation to the modern world of 'feverish and neurotic souls'.⁶⁶ Little attention was paid to the grim cruelty of some works in the exhibition, such as Bouts's *Triptych of Saint Hippolytus* (cathedral of Saint Salvator, Bruges), and above all David's *Justice of Cambyses* [FIGS. 82, 83].⁶⁷

Although some reviewers made an exception for Jan van Eyck, nearly all agreed that the 'Flemish Primitives' were a manifestation of late medieval culture. One or two of them even rejected their art as alien to the modern age. The Dutch art critic G.H. Marius, a specialist in nineteenth-century Dutch painting, saw the current interest in these old religious paintings as a passing fashion:

In 1850, for instance, one would have called this Christian art papist and idolatrous. Nowadays, to the detriment of a firmly outlined belief, people admire the ardent faith of the Middle Ages in the same way as they admire statues of the Buddha and Buddhism.⁶⁸

Like Busken Huet considering religious art as a form of misdirected energy, she could admire without reserve only the portraits, whose realism was 'not bound to a specific age'. Her article concluded with a hymn to the railroad bridge at

Cologne, a symbol of contemporary aspirations, just as medieval ideals were symbolized by the adjacent cathedral.

At the other extreme stood the detailed discussion the Belgian poet Karel van de Woestijne devoted to the exhibition. He regarded the late Middle Ages entirely as a period of decline and admired their art because it perfectly agreed with the decadent sensitivity of the *fin-de-siècle*. For him the exhibition was dominated by the image of Bruges, a 'rigid and dead-tired survival of medieval glory'.⁶⁹ The ducal court wore itself out in ever wilder extravagance, spending what remained of its accumulated wealth: 'The autumn of flourishing Bruges now bears rich, but already softened fruit.'⁷⁰ The striving for beauty left no room for anything else, and the artists profited:

They lived off the perpetual festivities that whirled through court and city. They looked with awe at the burning gold of that setting sun: the city condemned to drown in its own opulence.⁷¹

Their work was like a 'fiercely red, but already fading rose',⁷² with which the doomed aristocracy adorned itself. There was no conflict with the religious subject matter, because pride and ostentation alternated with sudden bouts of deep remorse:

Repentance enters the hearts and, if they cannot resist it, they lament the great sins of adultery and greed and feel they are still very pious, if sometimes forgetful.⁷³

The author was clearly acquainted with the work of Huysmans, whose *Là-bas* contains a pivotal scene of ecstatic conversion in the fifteenth century. The piety of the late Middle Ages was, in van de Woestijne's view, in no way apart from the spendthrift culture of the court, but was the other side of the coin.

NATIONAL CONTRASTS

Neither the opinion of G.H. Marius nor of Karel van de Woestijne could have pleased the organizers of the exhibition, who wanted most of all to show early Netherlandish art as a moment of national renewal and glorification. Their effort was better understood in France. Among the exhibition's many pictures certain works could plausibly be attributed to French masters, and their inclusion as Flemish offended the national pride of some patriotic Frenchmen, who did not only attempt to draw more attention to French art of the fifteenth century, but also tried

to claim, as far as possible, the fame of early Netherlandish painting for France.

In early 1903 Henri Bouchot, curator of prints at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, placed a call in the periodicals for an exhibition of 'Primitifs français'. His initiative was taken up immediately. The exhibition, which opened in Paris in the spring of 1904, was entirely based on the ideas of Courajod: the new sense of reality in art was first manifested in France and the Flemish masters simply carried on this development.⁷⁴ The wealth of the Burgundian dukes enabled them to attract the most capable talents (among them many Frenchmen) into their service. As a result, French art was overshadowed for some time. But the organizers tried to prove too much, as was obvious in the introduction to the catalogue. They endeavored to show that French art had always had a character of its own, and that French masters, therefore, could easily be distinguished from Flemish painters. At the same time, they cast some of the most important 'Flemish Primitives' as French: were not Rogier van der Weyden and the Master of Flémalle, natives of the French-speaking part of the Low Countries, really French artists?⁷⁵

Henri Bouchot went even further in a separate pamphlet published for the occasion. Not only did he assert that early Netherlandish painting stemmed entirely from French models, but he attributed many of its highpoints to French painters, including some well-known works by van Eyck.⁷⁶ Although his imaginings found little approbation, even among his countrymen, Bouchot was no isolated fanatic: his wounded patriotism belonged to a long tradition of distress about the weakness of the French State during much of the fifteenth century. Already in 1841 the great romantic historian Jules Michelet had attempted to certify van Eyck as more or less a Frenchman.⁷⁷ In addition to a dispute with Weale, who of course rejected his view on these paintings by van Eyck, Bouchot also became involved in a vehement polemic with the art historian Louis Dimier, a no less ardent patriot, who regarded classicism, which had set the tone at the French court since the sixteenth century, as the national style of France.⁷⁸

For their part, the Dutch did not begrudge the Belgians the fame of the 'Flemish Primitives'. No attempt was made, in the form of an exhibition or anything else, to appropriate the art of the Southern Netherlands into the current of Dutch history. On the contrary, many critics distinguished, even in the fifteenth century, a separate northern Netherlandish art within the larger whole: if the realism of Claus Sluter's sculpture had anything to do with his origin in Holland, it meant that Dutch art was early on characterized by an unadorned sense of reality. It was probable that, despite the great affinity among the early Netherlandish masters, more of this spontaneous and less formal realism had survived in the northern provinces, away from the artistic centers. The contrast between Rubens and Rembrandt, traditionally seen as summarizing the difference between Flemish and Dutch art, was now recognized in the earlier period as well.

In 1894 Aart Pit had argued, on the basis of his study of late medieval manuscripts, that Dutch art showed more naïveté, or simplicity, in the portrayal of ugliness, and a less formal style, but also a stronger sense of atmosphere and color. He thought that these traits became characteristic of Dutch panel painting from the sixteenth century onward. The penchant for the atmospheric rendering of color and light came especially to the fore in landscape painting.⁷⁹ That a sensitivity to landscape existed even before 1500 was demonstrated in 1902 by the facsimile publication of the practically unknown *Turin Hours* [SEE ALSO CHAPTER 3, PP. 240, 242-244].

Several of the leaves in this book of hours were of such high quality that they aroused a busy speculation as soon as the facsimile appeared. Some art historians discerned the hand of Jan van Eyck in a number of miniatures [FIGS. 36, 128]. Considering that the manuscript was supposed to date from the first decades of the fifteenth century, these miniatures had to come from his earliest period, when he was painter to the count of Holland at The Hague.⁸⁰ Indeed, the river views and seascapes seemed to represent the Dutch countryside. This would not only be an important link in the transition from manuscript to panel painting, but also proof that van Eyck had acquired at least part of his training in Holland.

This last point was raised from hypothesis to presumed certainty in 1903 by Johanna de Jongh's book on landscape painting. The author triumphantly claimed the 'discovery' of landscape for northern Netherlandish art, and deduced from this head start that the realism of early Netherlandish painting was the result of Dutch influences. Flanders, she maintained, was the land of strict, formal, Gothic ecclesiastical art; and it was through van Eyck, who had learned to paint in Holland, that a feeling for atmosphere and color developed in the Southern Netherlands. The masters followed various tendencies: van der Weyden laid the accent on the representation of human action, whereas Dirk Bouts, as a North Netherlander, displayed a particular talent for capturing the mood of changing daylight.⁸¹ But, in de Jongh's opinion, a separate northern tradition could be distinguished from the very beginning; a direct line existed from the miniatures in the *Turin Hours* to the art of Rembrandt and Vermeer.

In 1905 the historian H.T. Colenbrander, expressing himself more cautiously, came to the same conclusion: the Northern Netherlands had 'an unmistakable individuality which, in the fifteenth as much as in the seventeenth or nineteenth century, was less salient in literature than in the visual arts'.⁸² What was obvious in the art of the seventeenth century was also present in that of the fifteenth:

In Flemish art the sculptural prevails, the action; in Dutch art, the picturesque and passive. The Fleming seeks to approach a type, the Dutchman presents, however crudely or finely, the individual.⁸³



FIGURE 128 – Hand G, *The Prayer on the Shore*, *The Turin-Milan Hours*, fol. 59v, formerly Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, Turin (destroyed)

For Colenbrander, the history of art confirmed a political position. It was his intention, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Belgian declaration of independence, to demonstrate the rightness of the separation of the Northern and Southern Netherlands. The ‘occurrence of such a profound difference, despite such an undeniable relationship, as that between Flemish art of the fifteenth century and Dutch art’ explained the inevitability of the partition in two independent nations.⁸⁴

In Belgium the almost desperate nationalism of Henri Bouchot was answered with proud assurance. The Ghent connoisseur and cultural critic Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert shared the views of the organizers of the 1902 exhibition: the art of the ‘Flemish Primitives’ was a step forward in the history of civilization and it demonstrated what a small nation like Belgium could achieve.⁸⁵ Fierens’s *La Renaissance septentrionale et les premiers maîtres des Flandres*, published in 1905, stood half-way between an essay in art history and a political manifesto.⁸⁶ Its author, who had read Courajod, set out to demonstrate three things. First, in the course of the fourteenth century a new realism arose in France and the Netherlands, which was the germ of all further innovations in art and deserved the name ‘Renaissance’. Second, this Renaissance was primarily the work of artists in Belgium and therefore redounded to the honor and glory of the Belgian nation. And third, it did not spring from a specially Flemish sense of reality, but from a cooperation between the country’s two linguistic groups, between Flemings and Walloons. In keeping with Courajod, Fierens attributed great significance to sculpture as a model for the painters. He also dealt at length with the growing realism of late fourteenth-century book illumination. The art of the van Eycks was not a sudden turn, but a synthesis of everything that preceded it:

Jan van Eyck dominates the first, northern, Renaissance; he is its result and its culmination. [...] As a tireless student of nature, he is one of the patriarchs of the Renaissance and of modern art.⁸⁷

After van Eyck, Fierens contended, realism spread over all of Europe, especially in Italy, where it contributed to the further renewal of art. He hardly paid attention to the later early Netherlandish masters. With van Eyck, Belgium had made a first and essential contribution to the progress of European culture, and because his art drew on both Flemish and Walloon sources, it proved, in retrospect, the right to exist of the Belgian State, in which the two populations were united. His book ends in an emotional tone with a hymn to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, as the sacred altar of the fatherland.

Fierens was not alone in these sentiments. While far more circumspect in his use of the term ‘Renaissance’, the historian Henri Pirenne was convinced that

around 1400 the Low Countries showed the beginning of modern culture. In 1903, in the second volume of his monumental *Histoire de Belgique*, he wrote:

The abandonment of the medieval tradition, which becomes so brilliantly visible in the Burgundian period, in the masterpieces of painting, sculpture, and music, and which was simultaneously realized in the realm of the institutions, attests to a profound intellectual and moral transformation in society.⁸⁸

The new spirit may have reached its greatest height in painting, Pirenne believed, because painting managed to transcend the social oppositions of the time, of class as well as language. Literature remained divided between the French-speaking nobility and the Dutch-speaking townsmen. Painting, however, combined the bourgeois need for realism with the aristocratic taste for display and style, and both language groups contributed in equal measure: beside van Eyck, the Fleming, stood van der Weyden, whose real name was Roger de le Pasture. This collaboration of classes and language groups was one of the things which indicated that the Belgian nation, the synthesis of Flemish and Walloon, of Germanic and French culture, had already found its own identity at the dawn of the modern age.⁸⁹

Not much later the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argued that the fifteenth century offered no evidence of either a Belgian or a Dutch national identity, that early Netherlandish painting did not represent a northern Renaissance, and that it could be called realist only to a very limited extent.⁹⁰

JOHAN HUIZINGA: RENAISSANCE AND NATIONALISM

In a famous passage from his autobiography Huizinga described how, while taking a walk one day around 1907 – he was then a professor in Groningen –, he was suddenly struck with the idea of writing a book on Burgundian culture ‘not as the announcement of what is coming, but as the dying out of what is fading away. [...] In those years, it was customary [...] to see early Netherlandish art as an emerging northern Renaissance. My view went directly against this’.⁹¹ With these words Huizinga rejected the opinion that early Netherlandish art was a product of the modern age. In presenting it as medieval, he took no controversial position: most of the reviewers of the exhibition of 1902 had thought the same. Refuting the concept of a northern Renaissance, however, he also turned against nationalist annexations of the ‘Flemish Primitives’.

Beside that exhibition, another one, on the Order of the Golden Fleece, held in Bruges in 1907,⁹² was a particular stimulus for Huizinga, who was equally

interested in early Netherlandish art, the Italian Renaissance, and the Dutch seventeenth century. During this period he found a point of view that brought his studies of Burgundian culture and the Italian Renaissance into line. He assigned the Burgundian period to the Middle Ages, but, in an unpublished lecture of 1908, he also rejected Burckhardt's vision of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of modern civilization: the culture of the Italian Renaissance, with all its exuberant striving for beauty, was a superficial phenomenon, the self-glorification of a decadent aristocracy; the real break came only with the Reformation. In the following years Huizinga elaborated these corresponding visions of the two cultural periods only with respect to Burgundy.

The occasion was Huizinga's agreement with a publisher to write a book about Dutch culture from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, a counterpart to Busken Huet's *Het land van Rembrand*. Whereas Huet had limited himself to the territories that later formed the Dutch State, and had consistently taken the culture of the seventeenth century as his standard in assessing the Middle Ages, Huizinga would show how a separate northern civilization gradually detached itself from the culture of the Burgundian Netherlands. Although at first sight this seems at odds with his plan to describe the Burgundian period as formulated in the passage from his autobiography, his 'medieval' viewpoint was at work here as well: early Netherlandish art did not anticipate the realism of the Golden Age, but seventeenth-century Holland produced an art in which many medieval traits remained. In other words, the Middle Ages had not died out completely. Huizinga began to prepare the section on the Burgundian period in 1909, squaring off in a sort of friendly competition with Henri Pirenne.

He admired Pirenne, probably rightly, as the greatest historian alive at the time, and went to Ghent, in 1908, to pay his respects to the older scholar. However, he did not believe in Pirenne's concept of an age-old Belgian identity and the idea that fifteenth-century civilization was the beginning of modern culture. The national problem occupied him first: was there already in the fifteenth century anything like a Burgundian identity, or a sense of local patriotism, of being Flemish or Walloon, a Southern or a Northern Netherlander? This question, especially, was of great importance for the cultural history he had in mind.

In 1911, in the presence of Pirenne, Huizinga gave a lecture entitled: 'The Early History of our National Consciousness' ('Uit de voorgeschiedenis van ons nationaal besef'), and a year later dedicated the published version to Pirenne.⁹³ Huizinga had started his career as an orientalist, and this was the first article he wrote after moving into history in which he made use of his knowledge of cultural anthropology. He concluded that everything that was so often taken for a modern national sentiment consisted of loyalties of a different and much more primitive

kind: the bond with the local community, the relationship between lord and servant, the magical veneration of princely blood, mutual dependence through the exchange of gifts, taking oaths and vows, and above all, the sense of belonging to a certain ‘house’, that is, to one of the parties in the great conflicts of the time. These were not political parties in the modern sense: they supported not programs but persons. What held the Burgundian territories together was no consciousness of a national identity, but the very primitive feeling of attachment to the ducal house in its struggle for revenge on the house of Armagnac. Only after the death of Charles the Bold in 1477 did a sense of common interests over against the new rulers arise now and then.

The collaboration between Flemings and Walloons, between aristocrats and burghers, was thus not the result of a growing national sentiment, as Pirenne supposed, but of their relationship to the court. This conclusion had far-reaching consequences for Huizinga’s book on Dutch culture. He revised his original plan, in order to concentrate entirely on the later Middle Ages, and also abandoned his focus on the Northern Netherlands. Burgundian culture was dominated by the court; burghers in the cities derived their model of civilized life from the court. The language of the court was French and its life style drew upon French traditions. Thus, the context for the florescence of early Netherlandish painting was not Belgian or Dutch, but a French-speaking cultural circle that comprised both northern France as well as the Low Countries. This is the basis of his *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, which finally appeared in 1919.

THE AUTUMN OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The Autumn of the Middle Ages (also known, in an earlier English translation, as *The Waning of the Middle Ages*) is often taken for a history of the Burgundian State. The book is definitely not about that, any more than it is a cultural history of the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. The Northern Netherlands are largely left aside and also the cultural production in the Dutch language. Huizinga’s point of departure was early Netherlandish painting or, as he formulated it in the introduction, ‘the attempt to better understand the work of the van Eycks and that of their successors, and to understand it within the context of the entire life of that age’.⁹⁴ The life of the age was first of all the life of those who commissioned the paintings and had themselves portrayed, the high officials and higher clergy; in short, all who stood in some relation to the ducal court. Consequently, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* became a description of the mentality, the norms and values, the fears and ideals of the Burgundian aristocracy.

In Huizinga's view, late medieval courtly culture bore all the traits of a civilization in decline. In his introduction he used a metaphor that had already been employed by Karel van de Woestijne:

This book is an attempt to view the time around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, not as announcing the Renaissance, but as the end of the Middle Ages, as the age of medieval thought in its last phase of life, as a tree with overripe fruits, fully unfolded and developed. [...] In writing this text, my eye was trained on the depth of the evening sky, a sky steeped blood red, desolate with threatening leaden clouds, full of the false glow of copper.⁹⁵

The main lines of the medieval world view had been drawn in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: a closed system, which could hardly be changed without destroying it. What the fourteenth and, especially, the fifteenth century added was further elaboration, refinement, detailing, and increasingly meticulous implementation. The noble way of life, with its codes of knightly honor and loyalty, its festivals and solemn oaths, its tournaments, duels, and courtly love, was constantly weighed down by ever higher ambitions and improbable rules, distinctions and precepts. The same applied to religion. The church, the religious orders and the lay movements exhausted themselves in efforts to make the sacred accessible in every particular. In these endeavors an important function was performed by the exceptional realism and precision of early Netherlandish art.

The reason why this was not immediately apparent to the modern observer lay in a change of the recent culture. Whereas around 1860 historians and men of letters created an image of the Burgundian period which was based on the fifteenth-century chroniclers, painting now became the chief source of information. But the image it presented was highly incomplete: most of the secular art had not survived and the religious art evoked a world of introverted piety. In fact, as courtiers and prominent burghers, the painters were in the midst of the social life of their time, and the religion expressed by early Netherlandish painting was not opposed to court life with all its excesses: it merely represented another aspect of that life.⁹⁶

As a student, Huizinga had been deeply impressed by the work of Huysmans, and he held on to the novelist's image of the fifteenth century as a time of sharp contrasts, of extraordinary harshness and cruelty interrupted by moments of fear and deep remorse. The religious art corresponded to the latter moments in order to ensure the salvation of the soul of the patron. At the same time, it also served as a demonstration of wealth and worldly power. The infinite dedication with which van Eyck depicted jewels and precious stones, rich garments and tapestries was an expression of both the secular need for display and splendor and the

religious need to present the verities of the faith as concretely as possible. The refinements realized by painting in oil were used to interpret traditional ideas. Religious art followed the current theology without renewing it, merely adding more particulars to the same themes:

Accordingly, the naturalism of the Van Eycks, which is usually regarded in art history as an element announcing the arrival of the Renaissance, should rather be regarded as the complete unfolding of the medieval spirit. [...] The art of Van Eyck is, in content, still entirely medieval. No new ideas are expressed by it.⁹⁷

Just how strongly Huizinga felt about this conclusion is evident from his discussion of the sculpture of Claus Sluter, which for so many authors was the model used by Jan van Eyck, and thus the beginning of modern realism, in short, the beginning of modern art. In the first Dutch edition of the *Autumn of the Middle Ages* he mentioned Sluter only in passing, but he redressed this fault in the later editions with a long passage, explaining that sculpture, being three-dimensional, always looks more realistic than painting. If one kept this in mind, the *Well of Moses* in its original painted and richly decorated state showed the same exuberance that he had come to see in painting as something purely medieval.⁹⁸

Huizinga meant nothing pejorative about the term ‘medieval’ where early Netherlandish painters were concerned. It gave him the opportunity to reconsider the relationship between painting and literature, or rather between literary and pictorial representation. As mentioned above, Burckhardt was of the opinion that in the Low Countries literature lagged behind painting; Huizinga demonstrated that the differences between the two forms of art was not due to a backwardness of literature, but to the diverse means they possessed to achieve the same goal. The literature of the Burgundian period tried no less than the visual arts to describe a nearly endless multiplicity of detail; what painting could arrange in a coherent whole, remained in poetry an exhausting and long-winded catalogue. Within the context of medieval artistic purposes, the visual arts were more immediately effective.

The definition of pictorial realism as an element of late medieval civilization constituted an important turn in the discussion of early Netherlandish painting, but it introduced a new problem, one that Huizinga himself was incapable of solving and of which he was perhaps not even fully aware. If late medieval religious art gave form to complex theological programs and aimed at making the sacred accessible, could one maintain that it was truly realistic? He explained in detail how the religious thinking applied itself to an ever more elaborate symbolic interpretation of the world. Practically everything became a symbol or an allegory;



FIGURE 129 – Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, exterior, upper register: *Niche with laver and basin*

an allusion to the history of salvation could be seen in the most insignificant objects, and it was obvious that this way of thinking should be reflected in painting.

While, initially, Huizinga described the mousetraps in Saint Joseph's workshop on the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 9] as an element that brought the work close to a piece of genre,⁹⁹ in a later edition, he added a note pointing out that this motif could refer to a passage in Petrus Lombard's *Sententiae* (III, Dist.19), which says that God made a mousetrap for the devil, using Christ's human flesh as bait.¹⁰⁰ He expressed this view in 1935, ten years before Meyer Schapiro published a similar interpretation of the mousetrap, based on Peter Lombard's source, Saint Augustine [SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 20]. Huizinga's interests, however, lay elsewhere. In order to explore such meanings, one would have to adopt the mentality of late medieval theologians, whose exertions he had repeatedly dismissed as trivialities.

What he most admired was not the immediate theological content of the paintings – the angels, madonnas and saints, or the majestic figure of God as he appears in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. All of these images were an expression of the desire for worldly display that also characterized the age in other respects. Huizinga condemned early Netherlandish painting for worldliness where it wished to be deeply religious, but he was strongly moved wherever it was content to portray the life of everyday. Small still lifes such as the kettle in the background of the *Annunciation* on the *Ghent Altarpiece* [FIG. 129] touched him most.¹⁰¹ He valued these motifs not as specific symbols, but as tokens of eternity embedded in the ephemeral and the coincidental.

Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages* stood on a frontier. It closed the debate on the modern-realist character of early Netherlandish painting, but it took no part in the symbolic interpretations that would occupy younger generations of scholars.

PART THREE

CHAPTER 5

JELTJE DIJKSTRA

Technical Examination

INTRODUCTION

The most striking difference about the present-day study of early Netherlandish painting as compared to the nineteenth century is the application of technical methods. These methods elucidate physical and technical aspects of paintings that, when analyzed in an art-historical context, can help in understanding the working methods of the painters.

Technical methods were first systematically employed in restoration laboratories to learn more about the physical condition of paintings and to detect overpainting. Starting in the 1920s, the use of X-rays, ultraviolet and infrared light was introduced in rapid succession.¹ What these methods have in common is that they can reveal elements of a painting that are otherwise invisible. They all use radiation which cannot be perceived by the human eye: ultraviolet and X-rays have a shorter and infrared rays a longer wavelength than visible light. This radiation is converted into images we can see, which are subsequently recorded in the form of radiographs or reflectograms.

Art historians were initially somewhat hesitant about the application of these methods, and X-rays caused particular concern. Around 1930 there was a spate of rumors that X-radiography had caused serious damage to pictures, including the Rembrandts in the Gemäldegalerie in Kassel. Extensive checks carried out on 'worthless' paintings then proved conclusively that X-rays are not harmful to works of art.² Once the panic had subsided the arsenal of scientific research methods gradually expanded.

Roughly two groups of methods can be distinguished: those for surface examination, whereby the painting need not be touched, and those for point investigation, which require minuscule samples of the paint. To the first group belong examination with the stereo-, or binocular microscope, ultraviolet, infrared and X-rays, to the second group methods for the analysis of paint samples.³ Dendrochronology, which falls into neither group, stands alone.

In order to grasp the value of the data yielded by the various methods, one must first understand the structure of a fifteenth-century painting made in the Low Countries. First of all there is the support on which the artist paints. The vast majority of the extant pictures of this period is painted on wood and the pictures are therefore usually called panels. The wooden support was first smoothed and then covered with several layers of warm animal glue so that the ground, applied later, would adhere better. The ground, a mixture of chalk and animal glue, was applied, also in several layers, in order to conceal the grain of the wood. After it dried, this white, hardened surface was smoothed and the panel was ready for the execution of the painting. The artist sketched the composition in black chalk or with a brush, creating the so-called underdrawing. On, or under, the underdrawing a thin coating was applied to prevent the oily binding agent of the paint layers from penetrating the ground. Then the image itself was painted with fine brushes, each part in various superimposed paint layers. At the end, varnish was applied on top of the layers of paint.

Ideally, the technical investigation of an early Netherlandish painting combines dendrochronology, infrared study, radiography, and an analysis of the paint layers and pigments. I shall discuss these methods in order.

Dendrochronology can determine the approximate age of a wooden support or, more precisely, the felling date of the tree whose wood was used. Peter Klein has applied this method to early Netherlandish panels since the 1970s. The painters used oak, primarily from the Baltic region. Oak comprises the hard, durable heartwood and the more perishable sapwood just beneath the bark. The growth of a tree is marked by rings which, in oak, form each year, and, of course, this process ends when the tree is cut down. To estimate the felling date of the tree used for a given panel, the dendrochronologist carefully records the rings in the end grain of the planks with a measuring loupe. The width of the successive rings, determined by the climatological conditions of the years during which the tree grew, displays a particular pattern. This pattern is then compared with master chronologies, based on the study of many trees or wooden artifacts from the same area whose age has been certified. The date of the youngest – or last-growing – heartwood ring can thus be determined precisely. To establish when the tree was felled, the number of missing sapwood rings must also be taken into account. This number is determined statistically, because the sapwood is almost always trimmed off when the wood is processed. Baltic oaks have between 9 and 36 sapwood rings, and 50% of all measured values lie between 13 and 19, the statistical average being 15. If a panel still has some sapwood, the felling date can be calculated rather precisely by adding 13 to 19 sapwood rings to the youngest heartwood ring. When the sapwood has been entirely removed, however, an accurate dating is impossible, because there is no way of knowing whether all the heartwood rings are still

present. After the felling date one must add an interval for seasoning, which, in the fifteenth century, is thought to have been about ten years, before the planks could be painted. Of course, a dendrochronological dating always provides a *terminus post quem*, because the painting could only have been executed after the date established for the last-growing ring.⁴

Under certain circumstances, the underdrawing of a painting can be revealed with the help of infrared light. The oldest and simplest method is infrared photography. The painting is illuminated with light with an infrared content and then photographed with a film that is specially sensitive to this radiation. A disadvantage of this technique is that infrared cannot penetrate green and blue pigments, so that the underdrawing becomes only partly visible.

In the 1960s J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer developed a much improved technique, which can theoretically reveal the entire underdrawing: infrared reflectography, abbreviated IRR.⁵ With this technique, infrared light can also penetrate the parts that remain opaque in infrared photography. The reflected radiation is sensed by a television vidicon responsive to infrared and translated into an image visible on a television monitor. This image, called a reflectogram, is then photographed or captured by a computer. Since a reflectogram can image only a small part of a painting's total surface, a contiguous series of reflectograms is made, which are joined together. The time-consuming process of mounting the reflectograms by hand has recently been facilitated by the computer, which has also improved the legibility of the image: in digital IRR composites the seams between the reflectograms are no longer visible.

The success of this technique depends on, among other things, the material of the underdrawing and whether there is enough contrast between the underdrawing and the background. Netherlandish underdrawings are generally dark, presumably containing carbon, although some may have been executed in lead- or silverpoint. The introduction of IRR enabled the study of underdrawings to begin in earnest, and the revelation of the underdrawings considerably expanded the material available for the study of early Netherlandish painting. Above all, IRR provides a means to learn more about the painter's working methods.

With radiography, the painting is usually placed horizontally, with the image facing upward, over the source of radiation, and an X-ray film, wrapped in a lightproof envelope, is laid on top. Following irradiation the X-ray film is developed, but not printed. X-ray negatives are easier to interpret than prints, because the lights and darks in a negative correspond to some extent to the light and dark areas of a painting. This has to do with the painting technique at the time, which used a great deal of lead white, not only to indicate highlights, but also, mixed with other pigments, to achieve lighter tones. Only the pigments that absorb X-rays become visible in a radiograph, producing an image that varies from white to

dark gray: the higher the X-ray absorption, the lighter the tint on the X-ray film. Of all the pigments, lead-tin yellow has the highest absorption, followed by vermilion and lead white. Thanks to the frequent occurrence of lead white in a fifteenth-century picture, most of the painted forms will become clearly visible in the radiograph. The white chalk of the ground does not absorb X-rays and therefore remains black.

Beside information about the application of paint, radiographs yield data about other aspects of painting technique and about later interventions, which include changes the artist may have made during the process of painting, as well as later overpainting and restorations. The discovery of such interventions is important for the evaluation of the style and the interpretation of the iconography of a given work. Any number of motives could have caused a picture to be overpainted, changing taste being one. Prudery led to the draping of nudes in depictions of the Last Judgment, for example, and a change of ownership could lead to the alteration of coats of arms or the addition of donors' portraits.

Pigments are not the only elements of a painting that show up in radiographs. All materials that absorb X-rays are recorded, such as the wood of the support, the joins between the planks, and damaged areas. This means that radiographs can reveal a great deal about the condition of the support and of the painting.

The composition of the paint layers is studied with the help of paint cross-sections and a stereo- or binocular microscope, the best instrument for examining the surface of a picture. Unlike an ordinary microscope, a stereo-microscope has a binocular eyepiece, which allows one to see the relief of the surface forms. This makes it possible, in places where paint has been lost, to gain a general idea of the layered structure of the paint and to determine the best places to take paint samples. The samples, less than the size of a pinhead, are removed from the painting with a needle or probe honed to a sharp point. A cross-section is then made of the sample, which ideally includes every layer from the ground up to the varnish. The sample is mounted in a transparent plastic, sectioned and polished in such a way that all the layers are clearly visible, and then studied under an analytical microscope. Enlarged hundreds of times, the composition, thickness, and sequence of the layers can be precisely determined. The pigments and binding agents are identified by a variety of sophisticated laboratory methods. This is not the place to describe all the different methods in any depth.⁶ Suffice it to say that the study of paint samples provides detailed information about painting techniques.

Because the data generated by individual methods are often complementary, their full significance for the history of art emerges only when they are used together. For example, IRR and X-radiography elucidate different stages in a painting's exe-

cution, namely the underdrawing and the subsequent application of the paint layers, during which the artist could deviate from his original plan. By comparing the painted surface with reflectograms and radiographs, one can see when this occurred: in the application of the underpainting (the first layer of paint) or at a later stage. If the forms in the radiograph correspond to those in the painting but differ from the underdrawing, it means that the changes were carried out during the first application of paint. If, however, the forms in the radiograph deviate from the painted surface and correspond to the underdrawing, the changes were made at an intermediate stage. Of course, changes can have been made both in the underpainting and at a later stage, and this, too, can be determined with the help of reflectograms and radiographs.

The significance of technical examination for early Netherlandish painting cannot be overestimated. Since the works are rarely signed or dated, before the development of technical methods their attribution and dating rested primarily on stylistic analysis combined with information from whatever written sources may survive. In fact, however, only a few early Netherlandish panels can be attributed to a particular painter with any certainty. These form the core of oeuvres that have been extended on the ground of style. But most early pictures cannot be linked in this way to a particular painter, which caused the literature to teem with names of convenience for the unknown artists [SEE CHAPTER 6, PP. 340-341].

While technical examination offers new possibilities for attribution and dating, it can also tell us a great deal about the working methods and painting technique of the masters. Given the lack of written sources on the subject, such as artists' manuals, if they ever existed in the Low Countries, this is very important. The following survey of the contribution of the scientific methods to our knowledge of early Netherlandish painting is divided into five sections. The first four treat the nature and scope of the findings as well as the conclusions that can be drawn. Each revolves around an element of a fifteenth-century painting and the relevant technical methods. For the support, these are dendrochronology and radiography; for the ground, the identification of the materials; for the underdrawing, infrared reflectography; for the paint layers, the analysis of their structure, of the pigments and of the binding agent, and radiography. At the end, the results of the technical examination will be compared to traditional art-historical notions and methods, such as connoisseurship.

THE SUPPORT

The overwhelming majority of the surviving early Netherlandish paintings is painted on wood, although sources tell us that canvas was also often used. Thirty

to forty percent of the painters documented in Bruges between 1400 and 1530 appear to have been ‘cleederscrivers’, that is, painters on canvas.⁷ Among other things, paintings on canvas were an inexpensive alternative to tapestries and panels, but since they were extremely fragile, only a fraction has been preserved. One of the most famous is Dirk Bouts’s *Entombment* in London [FIG. 112].

The cellular structure of a wooden support is identified with the help of a microscope or, in some cases, radiographs. The species of the wood is an important, albeit rough, indication of a painting’s geographical origin. In the Low Countries oak was used apparently exclusively, in Italy mainly poplar, and in Germany mostly limewood, in addition to fir, pine, and oak.⁸ Early Netherlandish artists working abroad usually resorted to indigenous woods. For instance, all but one of the pictures Joos van Gent painted in Italy for the duke of Urbino are on poplar,⁹ while Juan de Flendes, who worked for a long time in Spain and sometimes painted on oak or limewood, more often used local fir and walnut.¹⁰

It is fortunate that the early Netherlandish masters painted on oak. Since the year rings of oak trees form a distinctive pattern, the panels are subject to dendrochronological dating. Even if the method is not altogether precise, in one important respect such datings are more secure than those based on style: they can irrefutably establish that a panel was not painted before a particular year, because the tree from which the wood came had not yet been felled. In turn, this can affect an attribution, if the felling date occurs after the year of the supposed artist’s death. For example, the discovery that the *Portrait of a Man with the Pinks* (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin) could not have been painted before 1474 precluded an attribution to Jan van Eyck, who died in 1441.¹¹

On the other hand, authenticity is not precluded by a felling date prior to the year of the painter’s birth. For there are various reasons why a felling date can prove to be too early. In the case of the support of Jan van Eyck’s *Virgin and Child in a Church* [FIG. 163], this very small panel consists of a single plank which lacks sapwood and presumably came from the center of the tree. This means that the youngest heartwood ring cannot be taken as any indication of the age of the panel. In view of the Eyckian style of this painting, the estimated felling date of 1322, which could be as early as 1320 or as late as 1326, is nowhere near the actual felling date, and many rings should be added to the number actually measured.¹² In other words, dendrochronology does not always have the last word and can be corrected by stylistic considerations.

It should be clear by now that dendrochronology is too imprecise to establish an exact chronology of a painter’s oeuvre. The method’s principal advantage – the possibility of demonstrating that paintings may be of later date than one would assume on stylistic grounds – is of great importance for a deeper understanding of a striking phenomenon in early Netherlandish painting: the large production of

exact copies. The works of the Master of Flémalle, Jan van Eyck, Dirk Bouts, and Hugo van der Goes were often copied, and those of Rogier van der Weyden even hundreds of times. In many cases, only the figures were borrowed from the originals, although entire compositions were also reproduced quite regularly.

Until rather recently, the assumption was that these 'literal' copies stemmed from the same workshops as the originals. Since an exact copy usually follows the style of the original, it was often impossible to determine whether a work was original or a copy. Nevertheless, owing to the modern preoccupation with authenticity, specialists were always attempting to do just that, resulting in nothing more than hypotheses. There was generally no agreement as to which of a pair of identical versions was the original until dendrochronology and IRR broke the stalemate. IRR will be discussed in the section on underdrawings; here it can be said that the underdrawing of an original tends to be quite different from that of a copy.

Most of the replicas that have been so far submitted to dendrochronological analysis are works attributed to Rogier van der Weyden, the Master of Flémalle, or their followers. Some of these dendrochronological datings were surprising in two respects. First, notwithstanding the consensus in the literature in some cases as to which of the pictures was the original and which a copy, the truth proved to be the opposite. One example is van der Weyden's *Miraflores Altarpiece* in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin [FIG. 130], of which an identical version is divided over the Capilla Real in Granada and the Metropolitan Museum in New York [FIG. 131]. While the Berlin altarpiece came from the Charterhouse of Miraflores near Burgos, the version in Granada and New York originally belonged to the collection of Queen Isabella of Castile. This illustrious provenance enhanced the long-held belief that it was the original, but dendrochronological research showed that it could not have been painted before 1492, twenty-eight years after Rogier's death.¹³

It was also ascertained that none of the other works which proved to be literal copies after van der Weyden and the Master of Flémalle could have been painted before 1482.¹⁴ A number of these copies date from the sixteenth century, and some could have not been painted until between 1540 and 1550. In contrast to what has long been thought, the literal copying of early paintings appears to have become common only late in the fifteenth century and to have continued well into the sixteenth century. The notion that identical versions were made in the studios of the Master of Flémalle and van der Weyden is therefore implausible at best.¹⁵ In certain respects this conclusion places early Netherlandish painting in a very different light, a point I shall take up in the last section.

By comparing curves of year-ring growth, dendrochronology can often determine whether the planks from which panels were assembled came from the same tree. This information can then be used to help reconstruct ensembles – diptychs, triptychs, or polyptychs – whose components have been dispersed.



FIGURE 130 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Miraflores Altarpiece* (each panel 71 x 43 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



FIGURE 131 – Copy after Rogier van der Weyden, *Christ Appearing to His Mother after the Resurrection* (62.2 x 37.1 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

As described at length in Chapter 2, most of the early Netherlandish paintings that survive have had a chequered career. Many of the panels now separated in collections around the world originally belonged to a larger ensemble. Altarpieces usually consisted of a middle panel with moveable wings, which could be closed to protect the central part. The construction of the supports (the assembly and gluing of the planks) and the framing was done by joiners.¹⁶ They delivered the ensembles, usually with the frames, to the painters, who thus often painted the panels within their frames. In the course of time, many altarpieces were removed from their original location, losing their liturgical function, and dismantled. Frames disappeared, panels were lost, and separated wings were often sawn lengthwise, so that the images on each side became separate ‘paintings’. Frequently, a separated panel was cut down and reshaped to fit a new location. Along with the original frames a good deal of valuable information was inevitably lost, since frames were commonly inscribed with texts pertaining to the images they surrounded. These texts often included the name of the donor or the sitter, and presumably also that of the painter and the date of completion – if we can assume that the common practice is reflected in the eight surviving frames in the oeuvre of Jan van Eyck.¹⁷

The results of dendrochronological investigation can both corroborate and negate the reconstruction of a given ensemble. The latter possibility is illustrated by the panels of the *Saint Veronica* and the *Trinity* which, together with the panel showing the *Virgin and Child*, form the core of the oeuvre of the Master of Flémalle [FIGS. 1-3]. For a long time it was thought that the *Saint Veronica* and the *Trinity* originally formed one wing of an altarpiece and that this panel was later sawn in two. If this were the case, then the wood on which they are painted would exhibit the same growth pattern. Dendrochronological research, however, has discovered that the wood came from different trees, invalidating the traditional reconstruction of the altarpiece. (For a recent hypothesis, see CHAPTER 1, P. 9; FIG. 4.)¹⁸

An example of a successful reconstruction with the help of dendrochronology is a triptych attributed to the Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine, often identified as a son of Rogier van der Weyden named Pieter [FIGS. 132, 133]. In this case X-ray examination was also used, because radiographs can establish whether a support still has its original form and dimensions. Whenever a panel is painted in its frame, a little ridge of paint, the so-called ‘barbe’, forms against the frame and support. The higher concentration of pigment at this point causes the barbe to absorb more X-rays than the surface of the picture, and therefore appears in the radiograph as a lighter stripe. If the support is intact, a radiograph will show both the lighter stripe of the barbe and the dark edge of the unpainted wood beneath the frame. The point of departure for the triptych’s reconstruction was a pair of



FIGURE 132 – Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine, *Altarpiece*, reconstruction by C. Deroubaix; interior, central panel: *The Adoration of the Magi* (160 x 107 cm), Switzerland, private coll.; left wing: *The Annunciation and the Presentation* (each panel 78.5 cm x 50.5 cm), Museo Nazionale di Bargello, Florence; right wing: *The Nativity* (78 x 50.5 cm), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels



FIGURE 133 – Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine, *Altarpiece*, reconstruction by C. Deroubaix; exterior: *The Virgin and Child and Saint John the Evangelist*, upper parts: Museo Nazionale di Bargello, Florence; lower part of the *Virgin*: Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

wings, each painted on both sides, in the Bargello in Florence. The inside of the one wing shows the *Annunciation*, the outside the *Virgin and Child*; the other wing has the *Presentation in the Temple* on the inside and *John the Evangelist* on the outside. The Virgin and Saint John are represented half length, which is highly unusual. X-radiographs showed, however, that the panels lack both a barbe and unpainted wood at the bottom, meaning that the Virgin and Saint John must have originally been depicted full length and were at some point cut off at this side. The hypothesis was then formulated that the original altarpiece had been a triptych whose central image was flanked by four lateral ones: two on each interior wing, one above the other. The *Annunciation* and the *Presentation in the Temple* suggested that the middle image and the missing lateral scenes were related to the theme of the Nativity. A search through the large photographic archives of the Centre international d'étude de la peinture médiévale des bassins de l'Escaut et de la Meuse in Brussels, and the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie at The Hague bore fruit. Two panels were traced on the basis of their style: an *Adoration of the Magi*, in a Swiss collection, whose dimensions corresponded to the presumed middle panel, and a *Nativity*, in Brussels, whose dimensions were appropriate for half of one of the wings. The outside of the *Nativity*, however, was covered by a layer of black paint. At this point, dendrochronological research discovered that the panel's annual rings matched perfectly those of the *Annunciation*, and the radiograph revealed the lower half of the Virgin's body underneath the black paint. We await the discovery of the fifth panel as the crown of this reconstruction.¹⁹

THE GROUND

The white ground of early Netherlandish paintings invariably consists of a mixture of chalk and glue. Indeed, chalk was used as the solid material for the ground throughout northwestern Europe. In southern Europe, on the other hand, especially in Spain and Italy, painters employed a mixture of plaster and glue known as gesso. A very small piece of the ground, isolated from a cross-section of the paint layers or taken at a spot where the paint is missing, is enough to identify chalk (calcium carbonate) and gesso (calcium sulphate), using simple microchemical tests.

Thus, like the wood of the support, the composition of the ground can help determine the general origin of a picture, with one difference: the use of gesso or chalk is more strongly determined by regional custom than the species of the wood.²⁰ An example is the copy of the *Miraflores Altarpiece* mentioned earlier. The copy was painted in Spain after van der Weyden's original, then in the Chapterhouse of Miraflores. Its support is imported oak, but the ground is gesso in keeping with the Spanish practice.²¹

Early Netherlandish art was popular in Spain and had a profound impact on Spanish, especially Castilian, painters. Not only were large quantities of Netherlandish pictures exported to Spain, but southern Netherlandish painters also went there to work, while Spanish painters came to Flanders to be trained by local masters. Indeed, Castilian painting of the second half of the fifteenth century is termed ‘Hispano-Flemish’. Since it may be difficult to determine whether a painting has a Castilian or southern Netherlandish origin solely on the ground of style, the composition of the ground provides invaluable additional evidence.

THE UNDERDRAWING

The underdrawing constitutes the first stage in the execution of a painting. As working drawings, intended to be seen by no one outside the workshop, except probably the patron, underdrawings are a valuable source of information about artistic practice. Generally, they served two purposes: deploying the forms across the surface – in other words establishing the composition – and in their hatched shadows preparing for the modeling of the forms. Underdrawings can be sketchy, but they can also be elaborately detailed. That depends not only on the painter’s own procedure, but also on the type of painting: an original work or a copy, a narrative or a portrait. The character of an underdrawing was also determined by its specific function for the master or his assistants, as we learn from underdrawings by Rogier van der Weyden.

The underdrawings in the works by this artist are usually spontaneous and at times even somewhat chaotic [FIGS. 134, 135]. That of his *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John*, however, is quite orderly and carefully elaborated [FIG. 136]. It is equally remarkable that this underdrawing was precisely followed in the painting [FIG. 13], save for minor adjustments in the heads, hands, and feet. A plausible explanation may lie in the division of labor in van der Weyden’s workshop, since a master and his assistants often collaborated on a painting. Rogier probably made the underdrawing himself, for the manner of hatching and indicating drapery recalls underdrawings of paintings which are attributed to him with considerable certainty, such as the *Descent from the Cross* in the Prado and the *Miraflores Altarpiece*. Otherwise, he appears to have painted no more than the heads, hands, and feet, the only places that show any deviation from the underdrawing. Evidently, he left the rest to assistants, who used the underdrawing he executed so carefully as an obligatory guideline.²²

As this example shows, the underdrawing of a picture can be reliably interpreted only after as much as possible of the oeuvre of a painter and his shop has been examined with IRR to gain a general impression of his practice in underdrawing.



FIGURE 134 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the robe of Mary Magdalen in Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, Museo del Prado, Madrid

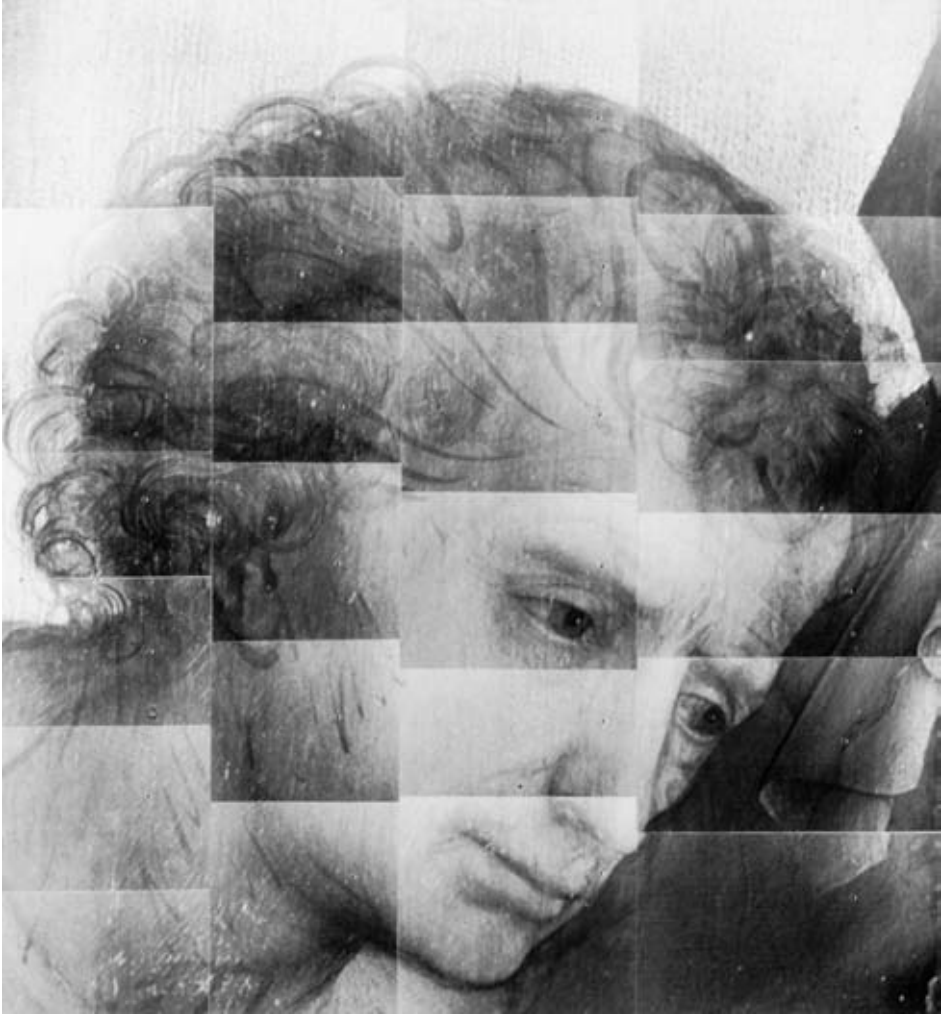


FIGURE 135 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the head of Saint John the Evangelist in Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, Museo del Prado, Madrid



FIGURE 136 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the head of Saint John the Evangelist in Rogier van der Weyden's *Christ on the Cross with the Virgin and Saint John*, Escorial, Monasterio de San Lorenzo



FIGURE 137 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the Virgin and Child in Jan van Eyck's *The Virgin and Child with Canon George van der Paele, Saint Donatian and Saint George*, Groeningemuseum, Bruges



FIGURE 138 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the lower left part of the Virgin's robe in Robert Campin's *Virgin and Child*, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

Once such information is available, underdrawings can help in making attributions. Now that those of the most important early Netherlandish painters are known, it is clear that each master drew in a distinctive way. The recognition of the specific characteristics of an underdrawing is a form of style analysis, however, and therefore subjective.

In original works by early Netherlandish masters the appearance of the underdrawing often differs considerably from the definitive painting, the degree and the manner depending on the painter. Jan van Eyck underdrew his compositions with great care, down to the last detail. He outlined the forms and filled in much of the background, a rare practice among early Netherlandish painters. The zones of shadow are indicated by a network of parallel- and cross-hatchings [FIG. 137]. During the work of painting he constantly made changes, especially in the position of hands and feet, which he sometimes, as the radiographs show, was still correcting in the last layer of paint. The radiograph of the *Lucca Virgin* [FIG. 146] shows that the cloth on which the Child sits was originally larger than in the paint-



FIGURE 139 – Infrared photograph of the right panel of Hans Memling's *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove*, Hospital of Saint John, Bruges

ing, covering part of his lower body up to the middle of his back. This was revised only after the first application of the layer of paint. Equally characteristic for van Eyck are iconographic changes: the omission of elements originally planned or the addition of new ones. It is also typical of this artist that, as the work progressed, he often attuned the images to the viewer by enhancing the illusion of three-dimensional space.²³

The underdrawings of paintings attributed to the Master of Flémalle are sketchier and considerably less nuanced in the modeling of the forms [FIG. 138]. Several of his underdrawings are difficult to reveal even with IRR. The layers of paint apparently block much of the radiation, a result of his painting technique. The changes in the course of execution are generally few, but nonetheless characteristic. Most of the alterations are in the faces: shifts in the contour and position of eyes, noses, and mouths. The underdrawings of Rogier van der Weyden, as noted before, are spontaneous, and many changes are seen in the layers of paint. Part of his search for the proper form, it appears, took place on the panel itself. The same applies to Hans Memling, at least so far as original compositions are concerned. But in compositions from his standard repertoire, with which he repeated earlier work or copied work of someone else, he employed a different method. Both methods can be seen in the underdrawn figures in the *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove* [FIG. 139]. The portrait on the right wing was sketched directly on the panel: the hesitant, short, constantly interrupted, and readjusted lines create a confusion that seems to have little relation to the final work [FIG. 74]. Such hesitations are absent from the impersonal and rather summary underdrawing of the Virgin and Child on the left wing: the contours are drawn in with rather flowing, continuous lines, but there are few indications of features, folds or modeling. In the painting, Memling deviated little from this underdrawing, which must have been based on a model in the workshop.²⁴ The procedure used for the Virgin and Child corresponds to a widespread practice: the closer the painting comes to a literal copy, the more impersonal the underdrawing, and the fewer the discrepancies between painting and underdrawing. Memling's workshop painted a number of versions of this particular Virgin with an apple in her hand and the Child on a brocade cushion, which vary only in details.

The underdrawing is thus not only a criterion for attribution, but also an aid in distinguishing an original from a copy. A case in point is constituted by four identical versions of *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* [FIG. 140]. The style was long ago recognized as that of van der Weyden, but opinions differed as to which was the original work. Examination with IRR left no doubt that the Boston panel was genuine, and also provided further grounds for its attribution to van der Weyden.²⁵ This panel alone displays changes in the stage between underdrawing and paint surface, which are rather radical, in keeping with Rogier's way of working.



FIGURE 140 – Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*
(135.3 x 108.8 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

What is more, the style of its underdrawing resembles that of other underdrawings by his hand.²⁶

Technical examination can help to reconstruct the way in which painters went about making an exact replica on the same scale as the original. Their procedure has sometimes left traces visible only in infrared photographs, reflectograms or radiographs. Apparently, pouncing was the most common technique. The first step was to make a so-called template by tracing the composition on transparent paper laid on the painting or other model to be copied. The transparent paper was then laid over a blank sheet and the lines of the tracing were pricked with a needle. The sheet of paper with the holes was affixed to the new support and carbon powder was patted over the holes. The powder left black dots on the ground, which could be connected with brush and watercolor or chalk to make the underdrawing. The presence of such black dots in the underdrawing indicates that the copy was made by this means [FIGS. 141, 142].

From the end of the fifteenth century onward, workshops increasingly specialized in particular subjects, of which they produced whole series. For example, Gerard David's studio turned out at least six identical versions of the *Virgin and Child with the Milk Soup* [FIG. 93], all six of which bear traces of pouncing.²⁷ Other workshops specialized in subjects like the *Virgin Nursing the Child* or the *Holy Family*. Study of the underdrawings reveals that in such compositions the usual practice was to fix only the main figures by mechanical means, and to draw the surrounding scenery freehand.

Underdrawing research can teach us, in an indirect way, even more about drawings that were present in a workshop. This information is important, because very few drawings have come down to us. Aside from a handful of preparatory studies for, say, a figure or a head, most of the extant sheets are copies after finished works, which means that we know little about the steps before a composition was transferred to a panel. A design was probably made first of all, followed by preparatory studies, and then by a more or less detailed compositional drawing. The assumption that painters made such compositional drawings is supported by specific similarities between the underdrawings of original works and painted copies which include motifs present in the underdrawing of the original but not in its finished state. The best explanation for these correspondences is that the underdrawing of an original reproduced a studio drawing, and that the copyist used the same sheet, or a drawing after it, as his model. The Master of the Prado Adoration of the Magi, who copied the *Adoration of the Magi* in van der Weyden's *Columba Altarpiece*, must have disposed of such a model.²⁸ During the process of painting, Rogier altered the position of the Child among other things. The finished work shows the Child extending both arms to the eldest of the three kings [FIG. 17], whereas in the underdrawing he raises his right arm to bless the king

[FIG. 143]. The original gesture, as well as several other motifs that only occur in the underdrawing of Rogier's picture, are found in the copy [FIG. 144]. Already before this correspondence came to light, it had been supposed that the author of the copy had worked in Rogier's atelier. Now that we know he had access to the master's compositional drawings, his presence there is all the more likely.

We have been discussing the significance of underdrawing research for attributing pictures, distinguishing copies from originals, and understanding how copies were made. In addition, IRR combined with X-radiography has shed new light on another important topic: collaboration, or the division of labor within the studio, already touched upon in connection with Rogier's *Christ on the Cross*. Before we go any further into this contribution of IRR, some general remarks are necessary about the organization of a workshop.

A medium-sized painter's studio in the Low Countries during the fifteenth century included the master, one or more apprentices and one or more assistants, called 'compagnons', or 'cnapen', or in English 'journeymen', because they were paid by the day. After a period of training, which usually lasted four years, an apprentice could set himself up as a master on his own. There were numerous costs involved, however, and not everyone could afford to take this step. For many there was no choice but to become an assistant in another painter's shop. These journeymen, fully qualified painters, presumably had a substantial share in the workshop's production, yet they remain almost completely unknown, because, unlike apprentices, who had to be officially registered with the painters' guild, they were registered nowhere. Every painting the workshop produced was the master's responsibility and was therefore associated with his name alone.²⁹

The traditional assumption was that the apprentices and journeymen were limited to activity that had little to do with the actual painting: the tedious grinding of pigments, the preparation of panels, the painting in of backgrounds, and so forth. Thanks in part to technical examination, we have refined our understanding of how the work was shared in a studio. A good example is the oeuvre of Rogier van der Weyden, about which a relatively large amount of technical information is available.³⁰ Several hands appear to have been involved in a number of his works.

On the *Columba Altarpiece* it was found that an assistant took part even at an early stage of the execution.³¹ The elaborate underdrawings display few of the hallmarks of Rogier's hand and seem to have been done by this assistant, working from composition-drawings made by van der Weyden himself. Examination by X-ray suggested that the remaining tasks were also divided. Numerous changes were made in the underpainting with respect to the underdrawing. Beside the introduction of motifs from Stefan Lochner's *Adoration of the Magi Triptych* [SEE CHAPTER 1, PP. 38-39], the majority of these changes consists of improvements in the composition.³² For both reasons these changes were probably made by the master himself.



FIGURE 141 – Gerard David, *The Adoration of the Magi*, copy after a lost work by Hugo van der Goes (121 x 167 cm), Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



FIGURE 142 – Infrared reflectogram of a shepherd in
Gerard David's *Adoration of the Magi*

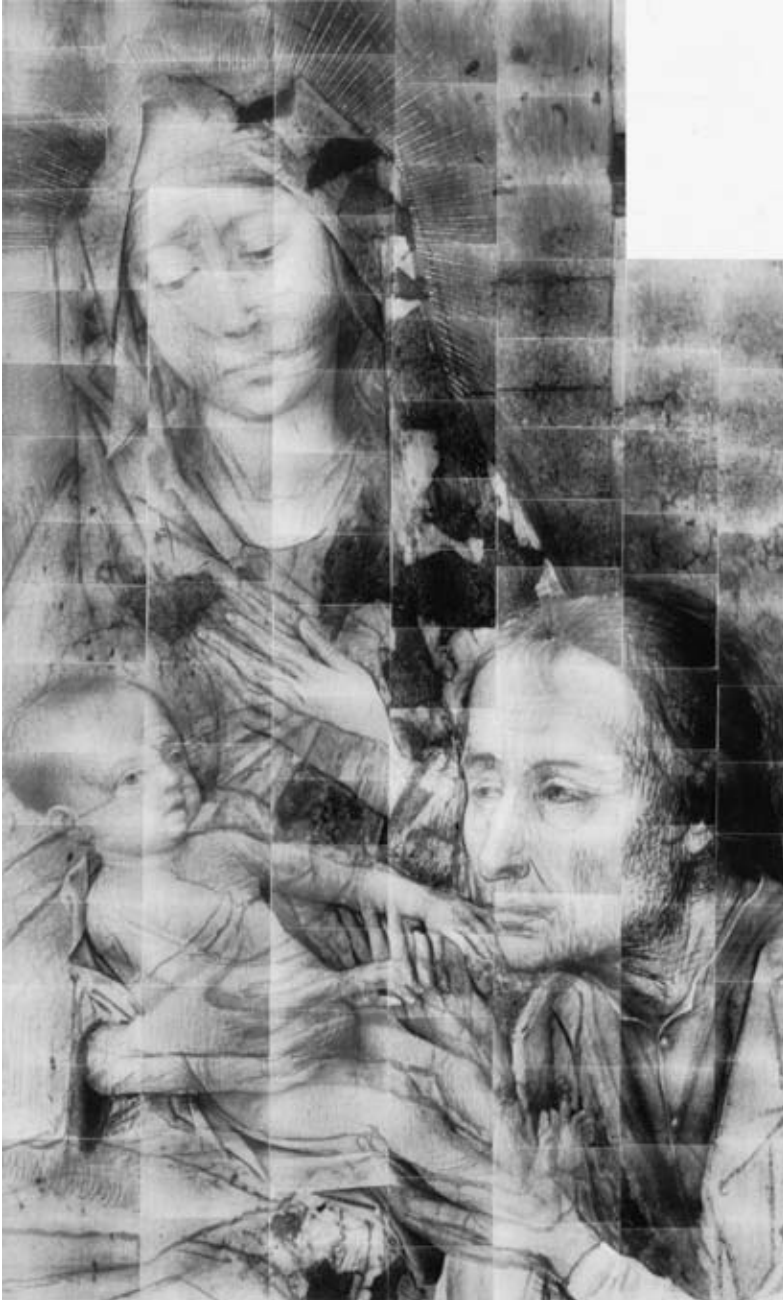


FIGURE 143 – Infrared reflectogram assembly of the Virgin and Child and the head of one of the magi in Rogier van der Weyden's *Columba Altarpiece*, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



FIGURE 144 – Master of the Prado Adoration of the Magi,
The Adoration of the Magi (59.5 x 54.6 cm), Museo del Prado, Madrid

Since hardly anything was changed in the upper paint layers, one or more assistants may have been put to work again after the underpainting was completed.

Many hands appear to have been involved in the making of van der Weyden's *Last Judgment* [FIGS. 14, 15].³³ This monumental altarpiece comprised nine panels, six of them painted on both sides. In a heavy-handed restoration between 1875 and 1878, six of the paintings were transferred from panel to canvas, largely destroying the underdrawings, so that it is impossible completely to reconstruct the genesis of the work. Technical examination, insofar as it was possible, has led to the following understanding of the division of labor: Rogier did the underdrawing and painting of the principal figures, Christ, Saint Michael, the Virgin, and John the Baptist in the middle section, as well as the donors on the outside. Presumably, he also established the figures of most of the apostles and saints in the lost underdrawings. The rest of the work he will have entrusted to the assistants for the most part. No less than three other hands can be distinguished in the underdrawing. One person's task was apparently not confined to any one panel: the hand that made the underdrawing of the heavenly Jerusalem on the panel at the far left also drew the rising dead, who are scattered over several panels. Almost all the changes made during the process of painting are found in the underpainting, which could therefore be executed by Rogier himself, while he left parts of the subsequent execution to his assistants.

Thus, the technical examination of van der Weyden's oeuvre indicates that his assistants were intimately involved in much of his production, at the stage of underdrawing as well as in the painting.³⁴ Their share remained limited, however, since they do not seem to have executed paintings wholly on their own. The master put his creative stamp on the work and supervised the entire process of its execution.

THE PAINT LAYERS

Examination of the structure of the paint layers, the pigments and the binding medium can tell us a great deal about the technique of the various masters. So far the application of this form of research has not been very systematic, because it requires analysis of one or more samples of each color of the picture – an intervention that, however minimal, is not always possible. Paint samples are preferably taken during restorations, from areas that have suffered damage or are concealed by the frame. For lack of such data, our knowledge of the technique of the individual painters is still fragmentary. The exception to a certain extent is Petrus Christus, most of whose relatively small oeuvre has now been studied, primarily with the help of the stereo-microscope.³⁵ Concerning the others, we have at least some

general idea how they built up the layers of paint and which pigments they employed.³⁶

As noted earlier, a thin intermediate layer was applied before or after the underdrawing, to prevent the ground from absorbing the oil in the paint. This layer is usually colorless or white, but can be tinted: flesh colored, for instance, or gray. The paint was then applied on the underdrawing or on this isolating layer. A paint layer consists of a binding medium, usually a fast drying oil, and various pigments. The colors were built up in three or four layers, usually from light to dark. The lightest layers at the bottom are the least transparent. As a result, light penetrates the upper layers to some extent and is reflected by the underpainting and the ground. This gives early Netherlandish paintings their radiance. In the case of an entirely transparent layer, called a glaze, only pigment was added to the binding medium and no lead white.

Not only was the basic tone established in the underpainting, but also the lighter parts of the forms. The underpainting thus contains the most lead white and forms a light undertone for the upper layers. The pigments employed in the underpainting are often less expensive than those in the upper layers, the color blue, for instance, being usually worked up from an underpainting in relatively inexpensive azurite and finished with one or more layers of costly lapis lazuli. The thickness of a glaze usually varied, according to the desired depth of tone: the darker the tone, the more glaze required. This does not hold for the color green, however, because a thick glaze was not sufficient for a deep green and black or gray underpainting was needed. The palette of the early Netherlandish painters consisted of a rather limited number of pigments, which were primarily based on naturally occurring minerals. The most common colors were white, red, green, blue, yellow, brown, and black, for each of which two to four different pigments were available. For yellow, for example, lead-tin yellow and ochre were used; for red: vermilion, red ochres, and organic red. Mixed colors were also employed, such as purple, which was composed of blue and red pigments. Lead white was consistently mixed with other pigments to obtain lighter tones, but black pigments were not generally mixed in for shading. This would have reduced the transparency of the paint layers, which was the hallmark of early Netherlandish technique.

The particular pigments used give a general indication of the date of a painting, because others were employed in the course of the centuries. Synthetic pigments were introduced in the eighteenth century. Analysis of the pigments is especially useful to identify late copies and to unmask forgeries. To distinguish between these two categories is sometimes extremely difficult, as appears from the case of the small panel with a *Mater Dolorosa* held to be the work of an anonymous Flemish artist of the late fifteenth century. The composition corresponds in every respect with that of a number of late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century

southern Netherlandish panels. However, pigment analysis showed that the Virgin's blue mantle does not contain azurite or lapis lazuli, but Prussian blue, which was discovered only in 1704. The panel is thus not early Netherlandish, but one is hard pressed to say whether it is a very late copy or a forgery.³⁷

Although the systematic study of paint cross sections is still in its infancy, it is already clear that the artists used different techniques. Compared to Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling seems to have applied fewer layers of paint, and used more lead white instead, in line with the general simplification in technique that occurred in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.³⁸ Hugo van der Goes and Gerard David likewise compensated for the reduction in the number of layers with more lead white in the underpainting.³⁹ Dirk Bouts took a middle road: he, too, applied fewer layers, but without additional lead white. Instead, like van Eyck, he relied on the translucency of the layers for a luminous effect.⁴⁰

While paint samples are the most reliable source of information on individual techniques, X-radiographs can also be useful. In particular they can show how an artist used lead white to build up the forms. Each painter had his own method for this, though the differences are sometimes minimal. With sufficient comparative material and expertise (interpreting radiographs is notoriously difficult) an analysis of this aspect of the artist's technique can become another criterion for attribution.

The amount of lead white varied not only between the generations of van Eyck and Memling, but also between contemporaries, such as van Eyck and the Master of Flémalle. A comparison of similar details in radiographs of van Eyck's *Lucca Virgin* [FIGS. 145, 146] and the *Virgin and Child* by the Master of Flémalle [FIGS. 1, 147] elicits two different impressions. The flat, only partly visible, forms of the Virgin and Child in the former work contrast sharply with the solid appearance of the figures in the latter, which are discernible almost to the last detail (the image of Mary's face is somewhat distorted, except in the dark areas, by a painting on the back of the panel that also registers in the radiograph). The brocade backgrounds also differ: the radiograph of the Flémalle panel shows the whole pattern, whereas only a few motifs can be discerned in the Eyckian one. These differences suggest that the Master of Flémalle used lead white in rather high concentrations to model the forms and to indicate the illuminated areas, while van Eyck used it sparingly, preferring the white ground for this purpose.⁴¹ Since radiographs of other panels ascribed to the Master of Flémalle and Jan van Eyck display the same characteristics, in these cases the painting techniques corroborate attributions made on the ground of style.

A CLOSER LOOK AT TECHNICAL EXAMINATION

Although the use of scientific methods may seem ideally suited to bringing ‘hard’ facts to light, the reader will have realized by now that this is true only to a certain extent. To be sure, analysis of the support, the ground, the paint structure, the pigments, and the binding agent do yield objective data, but infrared photographs, reflectograms, and X-radiographs must be interpreted, and this is inevitably subjective.

Notwithstanding this caveat, there is no doubt that technical examination has substantially increased our knowledge of both individual pictures and early Netherlandish painting in general.⁴² In various ways it can help to trace the provenance of a painting. The wood of the support and the composition of the ground make it possible to establish the region in which it was made, an oak support and chalk as the solid material of the ground being characteristic of the Low Countries. Combining dendrochronology, the study of the underdrawings and the frame, if it is original, and analysis of the paint layers and the pigments provides a quantity of data that can enable more precise determination of the place of origin, sometimes even the studio. Dendrochronology and pigment analysis yield estimates for dating, and the study of underdrawings, the frame, the working methods, and the painting techniques helps in attribution.

Technical examination can also tell us whether and to what extent paintings have maintained their original appearance, because it can detect later interventions such as overpaintings, restorations, and changes in format. It also plays a fundamental role in reconstructing an original ensemble, and it reveals much about the genesis of a painting, from the underdrawing to the final layer of paint, making it possible to establish whether the painter made changes, how and at what stage. The presence or absence of such changes and the character of the underdrawing may reveal the difference between an original and a copy. Study of the copies leads to knowledge of the copying methods, and demonstrates, indirectly, the existence of particular model drawings in the painters’ workshops. Taking into account how many copies from the late fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth century survive, their examination has only just begun, and can be expected to add considerably to our knowledge of workshop practices.

The accumulation of technical data concerning the oeuvre of a particular painter can increase our understanding of how labor was divided in his studio. As we saw in connection with examples from the oeuvre of Rogier van der Weyden, assistants could be brought in at any stage of the work.

This summary of the role of technical examination raises the question of the consequences the use of scientific methods may have for the practice of art-historical scholarship in the field of early Netherlandish painting. Our answer will center around two themes: the concept of ‘originality’ and the role of connoisseurship.



FIGURE 145 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child (Lucca Virgin)*, (63.8 x 47.3 cm), Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main



FIGURE 146 – X-radiograph of part of
Jan van Eyck's *Lucca Virgin*



FIGURE 147 – X-radiograph of part of
Robert Campin's *Virgin and Child*,
Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main

The dendrochronological datings of exact copies of works by the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden known thus far show that they were painted at the earliest toward the end of the fifteenth century. This fact more than anything else has compelled art historians to reconsider the meaning and function of a work of art in this period. These copies were thus not produced in the same workshop as the originals, and most likely not for the market, but were specially ordered. Interest in copies on the part of patrons is also seen in surviving contracts with painters, sculptors, and carvers. Among other stipulations, these contracts usually describe the work to be executed, often mentioning a specific work to be taken as a model.⁴³ Between an art-historical appreciation for originality, which stems primarily from the nineteenth century, and fifteenth-century expectations of a work of art, there is a world of difference. Copies were not regarded as inferior, any more than copyists were seen as uninspired, somewhat dubious, artisans. Copies were very much in demand and highly valued.

The study of early Netherlandish painting on the basis of contemporary norms, which held copies to be legitimate works of art, is only in an initial stage.⁴⁴

The impulse was given by technical examination of the works. Combined with a fresh look at written sources, such an approach will enhance our understanding of how and why copies were produced. What we already know, gives enough grounds to question the art-historical depreciation of these works.

Technical advances have also forced art history to rethink the direction of its scholarship. Old-fashioned connoisseurship has come under fire. Dendrochronological datings have punched unexpected holes in chronological reconstructions of the oeuvres of some of the painters. Perhaps even more unsettling for connoisseurship is the considerable space of time that has been established between the originals of the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden on the one hand and their dendrochronologically dated exact copies on the other. This is, after all, incontrovertible proof that the copyists – or should we say, the painters in general? – were extraordinarily adept at imitating a style. Add to this the evidence that several hands might collaborate on a single painting, and there is little choice but to conclude that the dating and attribution of an early Netherlandish painting on its style alone is an increasingly perilous enterprise.

Let us look more closely at this issue. Could it be said that connoisseurship will play a less significant role because technical examination provides a more secure basis for attribution and dating? In certain respects, technical data are undoubtedly more reliable, because the analysis of style alone rests almost entirely on the personal judgment of an expert. It is also limited by the aforementioned difficulty in distinguishing an original from a faithful copy and in dating such a copy. However, if we put aside the thorny subject of copies, the prospects of connoisseurship seem much brighter.

Although it appeared in the 1920s and 30s, Max Friedländer's *Altniederländische Malerei* is still a benchmark. The vast majority of his oeuvre catalogues is still essentially intact. One has to keep in mind, however, that the works of anonymous masters with names of convenience have been subjected to almost no systematic technical examination. Nor are the technical data on the known masters anywhere near complete for that matter. Aside from analyses of paint cross-sections, dendrochronological datings are often lacking, so that at this stage of the technical research it is difficult to judge the success of connoisseurship.

A good example of the relationship between connoisseurship and technical examination is provided by the research on the Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden, the reason being there are extensive technical data on those panels.⁴⁵ The occasionally passionate discussions which took place in the 1930s about the identity of the Master of Flémalle divided the analysts of style into two camps: a minority who insisted that the Master of Flémalle and van der Weyden were one and the same person, and a majority who regarded the Master of Flémalle as Rogier's teacher, whom most of them identified with Robert Campin. Friedländer,

who treated the Master of Flémalle and Rogier as different artists in 1924, in the second volume of *Die altniederländische Malerei*, changed his mind in the last volume of 1937, and thenceforth took up the cause of the minority – albeit with some reservations [SEE CHAPTER 3, P. 251]. The results of the technical research unequivocally support the position of the majority. Study of the underdrawings has shown that the two groups are so dissimilar with respect to style and working method that they must be divided between at least two different workshops. The sculptural quality of his underdrawing shows that the Master of Flémalle was primarily concerned to indicate volume, while van der Weyden used his underdrawing to mark contrasts of light and shadow.⁴⁶ This distinction corresponds to the difference observed by connoisseurs between the plasticity of the style of the Master of Flémalle and the rhythm of Rogier's. Furthermore, dendrochronological analysis has shown that most of the panels in the Flémalle group are considerably older than those in that of van der Weyden.⁴⁷

As to the two oeuvres compiled by the majority of connoisseurs, technical analysis so far has given rise to no significant changes. Only two paintings – a *Trinity* in Louvain's Museum Van der Kelen-Mertens, and a *Crucifixion* in Berlin's Gemäldegalerie – have been moved from the Flémalle to the van der Weyden group, on the grounds of technique and underdrawing. A number of questionable attributions could also be clarified, although at the same time new problems arose, such as the attribution of the *Mérode Triptych* in the Flémalle group. With regard to the chronology based on style, dendrochronological datings tend to confirm the conclusions of the connoisseurs.

Summing up, since connoisseurship has been rather successful in grouping works around these two painters and in charting their stylistic development, it is inconceivable the future holds no place for connoisseurs, who, using the naked eye, first impose some order on the scores of undated and unsigned works left by the early Netherlandish painters. But technical examination is now in a position to provide a wealth of data with which to test their attributions and datings.

There is, however, one point on which the application of scientific methods to works by the Master of Flémalle and van der Weyden is not complementary or corrective to connoisseurship, but downright confrontational: its findings tend to undermine the attribution of a painting to either the master or his workshop – as connoisseurs are wont to do. Sometimes different hands are found to have executed different layers of the painting, and various hands can have been involved even on a single layer. It is necessary, therefore, to revise the traditional concepts of 'originality' and 'authenticity'. Connoisseurs based their attributions on the concept of authenticity. Collaboration, however, was the order of the day in the fifteenth century, not only between a master and his assistants, but also between different workshops.⁴⁸ As long as one tries to divide a painter's oeuvre rigorously

into the categories of authentic works by the master and inauthentic works by others, one ignores the circumstances under which paintings were executed.

Attempts to distinguish hands in a painting on the ground of their style alone are almost always doomed to fail. After all, workshop practice required that painters be trained to modify their style. As a matter of course, apprentices and journeymen had to emulate the style of their master, and the journeyman who moved from shop to shop had to adapt each time he joined a new master. Only when a painter established himself as an independent master could he develop his own style, which then became the standard for his assistants.

By unveiling the aspects of a painting invisible to the naked eye, technical research is better equipped than the connoisseur to distinguish different hands. So far, these have only been found in the oeuvres of Rogier van der Weyden and Dirk Bouts, but not in those of Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, or Hans Memling.⁴⁹ Jan van Eyck seems to be exceptional: if any of the early Netherlandish painters could be said to have produced 'authentic' works, it is this artist. Eight signed and dated paintings survive, not including the *Ghent Altarpiece* with its contested inscription. Aside from the *Arnolfini Portrait*, the inscriptions are on the frame, and all were made between 1433 and 1439, when van Eyck maintained a workshop in Bruges and employed a number of journeyman.⁵⁰ The technical data on the panels published so far create a very consistent impression of the style of underdrawing, the working method, and the application of the paint. This consistency and the small size of the majority of these panels suggest that Jan van Eyck did all the painting himself, but that is by no means certain. The *Ghent Altarpiece*, supposedly initiated by Hubert van Eyck and finished by Jan, likewise defies a division of hands on the ground of technical research, since the underdrawing is virtually uniform on all its panels and displays the same characteristics as the underdrawings of Jan's authenticated works [SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 56].⁵¹ Yet, this does not necessarily mean that Hubert did not also work on the altarpiece, and that no assistants were involved in this huge project, because it can be taken as one more indication that workshops went to great lengths to achieve a unified appearance.

Whilst collaboration is a key concept for early Netherlandish painting, it is more accurate, instead of trying to separate masters from assistants, to speak of a 'van Eyck Group', a 'Bouts Group' and so forth, each group comprising all the known works in the artist's style. This is how their works are discussed in the *Corpus of the Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège*, which is the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

HENRI PAUWELS

The Corpus of Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège

THE ORIGINS

In 1949 the Centre national de recherches ‘Primitifs flamands’/Nationaal Centrum voor de Navorsingen over Vlaamse Primitieven was established in Brussels. It now bears the rather grand name of Centre international d’étude de la peinture médiévale des bassins de l’Escaut et de la Meuse/Internationaal Studiecentrum voor de Middeleeuwse Schilderkunst in het Schelde en Maasbekken. The Center is allied with the Royal Institute of Cultural Heritage, which was established in 1946 under the name Archives centrales iconographiques d’art national et du Laboratoire central des Musées de Belgique, or ACL.

The foundation of both the ACL and the Centre national should be seen against the background of the pressure that existed in Western Europe just after World War II to reorganize the scholarly study of works of art along new, American lines, whose key concepts were teamwork and interdisciplinarity. The management committee of the Center was initially formed by a core of three scholars: Paul Coremans, director of the ACL, Herman Bouchery, professor at the University of Ghent, and Jacques Lavalleye, professor at the Catholic University of Louvain. Already before the end of the Center’s first year the group was expanded by Paul Bonenfant, professor at the University of Brussels, and Paul Fierens, professor at the University of Liège. This meant that all four of the Belgian university institutes of art history and archeology were represented on the Committee.

The Center’s mission, as formulated by Coremans in a memorandum entitled *Plan de travail*, and dated November 29, 1951, was tripartite:

- 1 The formation of a library ('the acquisition of all publications related to the 'Flemish Primitives' and thus to create the most complete library in the field').
- 2 The collection of a photographic archive, consisting of both prints of negatives in the ACL and photographs obtained directly from museums, private collectors, and so forth. The photographs would show details as well as entire works.
- 3 The compilation of an inventory of all the works by southern Netherlandish painters of the fifteenth century, arranged in three categories: geographical, alphabetical by the name of the artist, and systematical according to their subject.

On another occasion Coremans described the scholarly mission of the Center as follows:

The Center is devoted to the systematic study of the Flemish paintings of the fifteenth century preserved in Belgium and abroad, from a historical, an iconographic and a stylistic point of view, as well as in relation to their physical and chemical structure. It publishes three series: the *Corpus van de Vijftiende Eeuwse Vlaamse Schilderkunst in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden* [Corpus of the Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands], the *Repertorium van de Vlaamse Schilderkunst in de Vijftiende en de Zestiende Eeuw* [Repertory of Flemish Painting in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century] and the *Bijdragen tot de Studie van de Vlaamse Primitieven* [Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives].¹

In that same first year of the Center's existence, Coremans, together with Aquilin Janssens de Bisthoven, head of the Archives centrales iconographiques, and René Sneyers, head of the Laboratoire central, received a grant to promote the study and publication of the 'Flemish Primitives'. The Committee thereupon promptly decided to publish a Corpus of fifteenth-century southern Netherlandish painting. The first volume, devoted to the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, appeared already in 1951.²

The composition of the Committee shows that the initiators wished to guarantee the interuniversity character of the enterprise, and that importance was attached not only to a purely art-historical, but also to a physical-scientific study of the objects. In the introduction to the first volume, such research was summarily called 'les travaux de laboratoires de physique et de chimie'.³ This was primarily understood as photographs made with infrared and ultraviolet light, X-radiographs, and chemical analysis. Indeed, art-historical and scientific research were treated as complementary throughout the execution of the project.

PAUL COREMANS AND
THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF PICTURES

It was without doubt Paul Coremans who gave the activities of the Center their particular scientific character. He held a doctorate in chemistry and from the very beginning of his career, when he was attached to the *Musées royaux* in Brussels, he had introduced scientific methods into the practice of art history. In this he joined a tradition. In the early 1930s Jean Capart, then head curator of the *Musées royaux* and a noted Egyptologist, conceived the plan – following similar initiatives in important foreign museums – of installing a laboratory in his institution in which the authenticity of works of art offered for sale could be tested. Capart thus associated himself with a new type of research, which aimed through scientific methods not only to distinguish genuine from false, but also to gain a better understanding of the technique and structure of the works under investigation. Needless to say the data generated by this research were a welcome aid in solving specific art-historical problems of attribution, localization, dating, conservation, and so forth. A thorough physical knowledge of works of art was, moreover, conducive to a justified execution of restorations, which were initially carried out mainly on paintings.⁴ Coremans was appointed head of the laboratory for the physical and chemical investigation of works of art which Capart had set up, and built it into an institution in the service of the entire country. Its independence was achieved after the war in the establishment of the ACL.

The rapprochement of scientists on the one hand and art historians, art critics and restorers on the other, orchestrated by Coremans, did not always proceed easily. It even experienced fierce opposition from many quarters, which sometimes discharged as genuine enmity. This is illustrated by the notorious affair surrounding the painter Han van Meegeren, in which Coremans himself was closely involved.

After the war van Meegeren was accused of collaboration with the Nazis for selling Göring a work attributed to Johannes Vermeer. Van Meegeren responded by declaring that the painting, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, was a forgery by his own hand. Furthermore, he had also painted other works attributed to Vermeer that had appeared on the art market since 1937. Among them was the *Supper at Emmaus*, purchased by the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam. A committee of experts, among whom Coremans, was specially appointed in connection with the lawsuit, and came, after an examination of *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, to the unanimous conclusion that the work was indeed a forgery. In all the commotion caused by publications and articles in the press, the proceedings of the committee of experts did not go unnoticed, the more so in that their research also paid attention to the other ‘Vermeers’.⁵

Not everyone accepted the conclusions of the experts. The noted collector D.G. van Beuningen had seen his Vermeer – a *Last Supper* – declared counterfeit, and brought a suit in 1952 against Coremans, who had played an important role in the research. The suit was still going on when van Beuningen died in 1955. Although his heirs offered to settle out of court, Coremans refused, because he considered the charge an affront to his scientific integrity. When he was finally acquitted in 1956, the plaintiffs were ordered to pay the court costs and damages, as well as to allow a number of foreign and domestic newspapers to publish the integral text of the verdict. Although this did not put an end to the discussion, which continued even after Coremans's death in 1965, the van Meegeren case marked an important breakthrough for the scientific study of works of art. Coremans undoubtedly saw this affair as a welcome opportunity to demonstrate its importance.

Discussions no less violent arose when scientific methods were used for the restoration of important works of the old masters such as the *Ghent Altarpiece*.⁶ The physical and chemical investigation of works of art had found a kind of official confirmation, however, when Coremans was appointed to the Institute for the History of Art and Antiquity at the University of Ghent in 1948. There he taught a course on 'the technique of the visual arts', in which the author of the present chapter was enrolled.⁷

Thanks to Coremans, interdisciplinary cooperation between art historians and scientists has grown immensely.⁸ In addition, he played an important role in the decision to publish a *Corpus of fifteenth-century southern Netherlandish painting*. The enterprise bears his stamp to such an extent that he can be considered, if not the spiritual father of the project, at least its captivating inspiration.

THE CORPUS AND OTHER LONG-TERM PROJECTS FOR THE PUBLICATION OF SOURCES

In the introduction to the first volume of the *Corpus*, Jacques Lavalleye, president of the Center's directing committee, described as the goal of the series to collect for the use of scholars a precise, critical, and objectively presented documentation related to all the extant paintings by Flemish masters of the fifteenth century. To attain this purpose three disciplines were called upon: the criticism of style, the analysis of manuscripts and printed sources, and physical and chemical laboratory research.⁹ The plan thus entailed a long-term publication of sources, in which the works of art would be as fully as possible documented as physical sources and systematically opened up to researchers.

This type of publication was relatively recent within the field of art history, but elsewhere in the historical sciences the gathering and publishing of a partic-

ular type of sources enjoyed a long tradition.¹⁰ As examples one can cite the *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* (only one of many series of ancient texts) or the *Corpus vasorum antiquorum*, but these are not products of an interdisciplinary approach.

In the field of western European art history, two older series worth mentioning are the *Corpus della maiolica italiana* and Richard Offner's *Corpus of Florentine Painting*, projects which are likewise not based on interdisciplinary research.¹¹ Superficially, the *Corpus of Florentine Painting* is the most comparable to that of the southern Netherlandish painting, because it concerns the same medium, but there are obvious differences in both the grouping of the works and the manner in which they are investigated. Offner's *Corpus* is in fact a series of oeuvre catalogues of the various painters from a particular artistic center. The paintings are arranged by the artist's name and, when they are not considered to be by the master himself, distributed among categories such as 'Following', 'Remote Following', and 'Milieu'. There is even a subcategory for masters with names of convenience whose style resembles that of the painter concerned. These distinctions are not made in the *Corpus* of southern Netherlandish painting: works related to a certain master are treated as one group without further subdivision. With Offner everything revolves around the analysis of style, which is the basis of his attributions. Furthermore, he consciously rejected the potential of scientific research. In his justification of his *Corpus*, he acknowledged that the microscope, X- and ultraviolet rays, and chemical experiments could be indispensable aids – provided their limitations were recognized and they were used properly – but he found that their value had so far been overestimated.¹²

The *Corpus of Florentine Painting*, like that of Italian majolica, originated before the war. In the postwar years, interest in this kind of opening up and investigation of historical sources grew stronger. The explanation lies in the increasingly scholarly character of the discipline of art history and in the realization – reinforced by wartime experience – of just how vulnerable is an artistic patrimony, and how important the duty to protect and conserve it. Apart from the *Corpus* of southern Netherlandish painting, other similar projects were established, such as the publication of medieval stained glass, the *Corpus vitrearum medii aevi*.¹³ This series, too, is organized geographically, but, because of the different nature of the objects, it is administered by national committees.

In the realm of southern Netherlandish painting, the *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* should also be mentioned. As early as the 1920s, Ludwig Burchard had thought of revising, updating, and republishing the oeuvre catalogue of Rubens that Max Rooses had assembled at the end of the nineteenth-century. The scope of the undertaking expanded to the point that Burchard could not complete the project, and his heirs entrusted the enormous documentation he had accumu-

lated to the Nationaal Centrum voor Plastische Kunsten van de 16de en de 17de eeuw (National Center for the Visual Arts of the 16th and 17th Centuries), which publishes this *Corpus*.¹⁴

DEFINITION OF THE AREA OF RESEARCH

Already at the beginning of the *Corpus* of fifteenth-century southern Netherlandish painting, there was a pressing need for a delimitation of the subject and a precise definition of the period and the chronological and geographical region. The *Corpus* was supposed to be primarily restricted to painting, even though the initial idea was certainly not to treat panel painting alone. As H. van de Waal pointed out in his review of the first volume, the prospectus declared that wall paintings, illuminated manuscripts and tapestries were omitted 'for the time being'.¹⁵ But the promoters of the *Corpus* must have quickly realized that to exceed the limits of panel painting would lead into a boundless territory and would endanger the series's feasibility.¹⁶

As appears in the title, the decision was made to limit the *Corpus* chronologically to the fifteenth century and geographically to the Southern Netherlands. The demarcation was confirmed and partly elucidated in 1960, by Nicole Verhaegen, the Center's scientific secretary, in response to criticism in various reviews of the first volumes.¹⁷ Regarding the chronological limit, she said merely that the *Corpus* would include the oeuvre of painters active between 1400 and 1500. Here it can be remarked that southern Netherlandish painting in the first quarter of the fifteenth century was indeed still strongly determined by the tradition of the fourteenth century, but that a new style was beginning to emerge from it.¹⁸ No less obvious is the fact that toward the end of the late fifteenth century there occurred definite changes, because a number of artists submitted to the influence of the Italian Renaissance.

With respect to the geographical limitation, Verhaegen felt that the difference between the painting of the Northern and Southern Netherlands was just as real as that between the culture, religion and politics of the two regions. Apart from this argument, she recognized that the choice of a territory which coincides more or less with the present-day political boundaries of Belgium was connected with the fact that the Center was subsidized by the Belgian government. The demarcation was dictated, however, above all by the same practical consideration that restricted the project to panel painting: if both northern and southern Netherlandish painters were discussed, the pictures would be too numerous for the sort of *Corpus* the compilers had in mind. The number of works to be investigated already reached five thousand.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in 1996, the title of the *Corpus* was

expanded to include the Principality of Liège, which territorially was never an integral part of the Southern Netherlands.

On the basis of the demarcation, Verhaegen presented a list of painters who qualified for the Corpus, by name or name of convenience, along with their years of birth and death or, lacking these, the period of their known activity [SEE APPENDIX 1, PP. 340-341]. The names of Juan de Flandes, who worked in Spain, or Simon Marmion, primarily active in Valenciennes, did not appear on the list, and this explains why these masters are not included in the first two of the volumes devoted to the National Gallery in London, published in 1953 and 1954. They are treated only in the third, supplementary volume of 1970.

These are borderline cases. There is no indication in the written sources that Juan de Flandes ever was active in the territory of the Southern Netherlands, although his name points to a Flemish origin and his style is connected with that of his Flemish contemporaries. The decision to include Marmion after all is easier to understand. Valenciennes, where he settled, was the capital of Hainault, which constituted a part of the Southern Netherlands.

Conversely, one may wonder whether a master such as Jean Hey belonged to the list that Verhaegen drew up in 1960. Only one documented work is known, the *Ecce Homo* in the Musées royaux in Brussels, which the inscription reports that he executed in France. Since Nicole Reynaud has demonstrated that Hey is to be identified with the Master of Moulins, there are even fewer arguments for including him in the Corpus.²⁰ The issue will certainly be raised again when the volumes on works in the Musée royaux are published.²¹

PUBLICATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE CORPUS

Each volume of the Corpus is the fruit of the close cooperation between the Center and the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage. The Center provides art-historical and logistical support, the Institute facilitates the conduct of technical research on location. The works in the Corpus are arranged by their present location, in accordance with an effort to publish all the southern Netherlandish paintings in a collection together in one or more volumes. If a museum or other institution has its own specialized services, then, of course, the research is conducted in consultation with these services. The synthesis and the editorial work are entrusted to one or more specialists, who are either attached to the institution in question, always with the support of the Center's scientific staff, or employed by the Center.

When a small number of works is distributed among different collections in the same area, these paintings are brought together in one volume. Thus, the

fourth volume is devoted to pictures in six museums of New England. In his review of the first volume, Julius Held called attention to the problem of paintings in private hands or on the art market, whose mobility makes it difficult to group them by their present location.²² No solution has yet been found for this problem.

Two numbers are assigned to each work treated in the *Corpus*. The first numbering, which runs through all the volumes, indicates the chronological order in which the pictures are published. In this way they are given a permanent number that can be used to identify them in subsequent research. After it they receive the number of the group in which they have been placed. As mentioned earlier, each group contains all the paintings, documented or attributed, which can be linked to a particular master, including workshop products and copies, and subcategories are avoided, because they are subjective and hard to verify. When the master's name is unknown, a name of convenience is employed. Such names are based on the title of a key work in the oeuvre, for example, or on its place of origin or present location. Those paintings that cannot be associated with any of the names listed here in Appendix 1 [pp. 340-341] are placed in a group of anonymous works which does not include masters given a name of convenience, although they too are anonymous, in fact. The type of classification aims for the objective character that the participants believe essential to the project.

Each individual painting is discussed according to a fixed scheme, which contains the following rubrics:

- A Classification in the *Corpus* (nr. in the *Corpus*; group + nr.; title)
- B Identifying references
- C Physical characteristics (form, dimensions, protective layer, paint layer and underdrawing, changes in composition, ground, support, marks on the back, frame)
- D Description and iconography (subject, colors, inscriptions and heraldry)
- E Origin (factual evidence, opinions concerning attribution and date) and subsequent history (records concerning ownership and exhibitions, records of condition and treatment)
- F Comparative material
- G Author's comments
- H Bibliography
- I Transcriptions of documents and literary sources
- J List of plates

Recently, in volume 20, the scheme was modified according to current developments in art-historical research:

- 1 Identification (nr. in the Corpus; inv. nr.; group + nr.; title; signature and date; inscriptions, heraldry and emblems, marks)
- 2 History of the work (origin and subsequent history; material history; exhibitions)
- 3 History of the research
- 4 Physical analysis (form; dimensions; support; ground; underlying drawing; paint layer; varnish; restorations)
- 5 Pictorial analysis
- 6 Comparative material
- 7 Comments
- 8 Documents and literary sources
- 9 Bibliography
- 10 List of illustrations

THE CRITICAL RESPONSE

Classically trained art historians have understandably found this strict arrangement somewhat odd. In his review of the volume on the museums of New England, Josua Bruyn wrote: 'At first the art historian is somewhat uncomfortable with the system of letters and numbers that frames all this scholarship and is clearly inspired by the terminology of laboratory formulae. But necessity, in order to realize this vast project, for the many authors to follow the same procedure makes this rather formalistic arrangement acceptable.'²³

The constantly recurring fixed rubrics may create the impression of a strait-jacket in which the author abandons his personality and becomes a mere executor. Nevertheless, each volume bears the stamp of its author. Already at the publication of the first volume, Held remarked that, depending on the author's personality, considerable differences could arise among the volumes.²⁴

Of course, the publication of the Corpus over the years has been critically followed in the professional journals. There has been criticism of both the general plan and the approach in the individual volumes. Hans Konrad Röthel, reviewing the two volumes on London's National Gallery, took issue with the scope of the research.²⁵ He felt that no meaningful boundary could be drawn, be it geographical, political or chronological, with the exception of the initial period. Friedländer's delimitation 'from van Eyck to Bruegel' in *Die altniederländische Malerei*, encompassing both northern and southern Netherlandish masters, was still the best. Röthel also wondered why certain masters, such as Gerard David and the Master of the Morrison Triptych, were included and others, such as Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Jan Provost and Quentin Massys, were not. He also thought that the works

were treated too much as isolated objects, apart from their art-historical context, and consequently that a section entitled 'Significance' should be introduced.

The isolated presentation of the individual works had already been criticized by Edouard Michel, in his review of the first volume, which also laments the absence of biographical information on the artists.²⁶ Furthermore, Michel saw it as a shortcoming that the rubrics allowed no space for an aesthetic evaluation of the works or the art-historical context to which they belonged. Held, too, entered, in his review of a later volume, upon the lack of an aesthetic approach, objecting to the fact that the same importance was given to third-rate works as to masterpieces.²⁷

Aside from such fundamental criticisms, there were also comments of a practical nature. Thus, Held, in his review of the first volume, suggested that a distinction be drawn between permanent and variable material data.²⁸ The latter include the state of conservation and overpainting, which can be altered by restoration. He also urged the reproduction of X-radiographs and the integral transcription of archival documents. These wishes were satisfied in the subsequent volumes.

CONCLUSION

The *Corpus* offers a solid basis for further research, but is not meant to contain solutions to art-historical problems; rather it seeks to provide no more and no less than a state of the question. Nevertheless, there is space for the authors to present new information and to express their own views.

Considering that each volume of the *Corpus* reflects the state of scholarship at the moment it went to press, the published volumes are unavoidably bound in the course of time to be superseded in certain respects. This is simply the fate of long-term projects in a field of lively and rapidly evolving scholarship, and it does not undermine the overall value of the enterprise.

Appendix 1

LIST OF PAINTERS INCLUDED IN THE CORPUS

Hieronymus Bosch, ca. 1450? - 1516	Gerard Horenbout, fl. in 1487 - before 1541
Agnes van den Bossche, fl. ca. 1470 - 1500	Juan de Flandes, fl. in 1496 - 1519
Aert van den Bossche, fl. 1490 - 1494	Joos (Justus) van Ghent (Joos van Wassenhove), fl. before 1460 - ca. 1480
Albrecht Bouts, ca. 1460 - 1549	Simon Marmion, fl. 1449 - 1489
Dirk Bouts, ca. 1420 - 1475	Nabur Martins, fl. ca. 1440 - 1454
Melchior Broederlam, ? - after 1409	Gerard van der Meire (Master of the Bruges Passion Scenes? Master of 1500?), fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1510
Robert Campin (Master of Flémalle?), ca. 1378 - 1444	Hans Memling, ca. 1443 - 1494
Petrus Christus, fl. 1444 - 1472/73	Jan Rombouts, fl. after 1485 - 1534
Pieter van Coninxloo (Master of the Legend of the Magdalen?), fl. ca. 1481 - ca. 1513	Michiel Sittow (Master Michiel), ca. 1469 - ca. 1525
Colijn de Coter, fl. ca. 1475 - after 1506	Vrancke van der Stockt (Master of the Prado Redemption), before 1424 - 1495
Pierre Coustain, ? - before 1497	Hubrecht Stuerbout, fl. ca. 1439 - 1482
Jacques Daret, ca. 1404 - after 1468	Joos van Wassenhove (Joos van Ghent), fl. ca. 1460 - ca. 1480
Gerard David, ca. 1450/60 - 1523	Goossen van der Weyden, ca. 1465 - after 1538
Hubert van Eyck, ? - 1426	Rogier van der Weyden, 1399/1400 - 1464
Jan van Eyck, ? - 1441	
Hugo van der Goes, ? - 1482	
Jean Hey, fl. in 1494 - after 1504	
Jean Hayne de Bruxelles, fl. ca. 1454	

Masters with names of convenience

Master of Affligem (Master of the Joseph Sequence), fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500	Master of the Family of Saint Anne (Master of Saint Lieven), fl. ca. 1500
Master of the André Madonna, fl. 1480 - ca. 1500	Master of Flémalle (Robert Campin?), ca. 1378 - 1444
Master of the Baroncelli Portraits, fl. ca. 1480 - ca. 1490	Master of Frankfurt, fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1520
Master of the Brandon Portraits, fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1525	Master of the Gold Brocade, fl. ca. 1490 - 1500
Master of the Bruges Passion Scenes (Gerard van der Meire? Master of 1500?), fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1510	Master of the Guild of Saint George, fl. ca. 1470 - 1500
Master of the Embroidered Foliage, fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500	Master of Hoogstraten, fl. ca. 1495 - ca. 1520
	Master of the Joseph Sequence (Master of Affligem), fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500
	Master of the Khanenko Adoration, fl. ca. 1490

- Master of the Legend of Saint Augustine,
fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1500
- Master of the Legend of Saint Barbara,
fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500
- Master of the Legend of Saint Catherine
(Pieter van der Weyden?),
fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500
- Master of the Legend of Saint Godelieve,
fl. ca. 1500
- Master of the Legend of Saint Lieven (Master
of the Family of Saint Anne), fl. ca. 1500
- Master of the Legend of Saint Lucy,
fl. ca. 1480 - ca. 1505
- Master of the Legend of the Magdalen (Pieter
van Coninxloo?), fl. ca. 1481 - ca. 1513
- Master of the Legend of Saint Ursula,
fl. ca. 1480 - ca. 1495
- Master Michiel (Michiel Sittow),
ca. 1469 - ca. 1525
- Master of the Morrison Triptych,
fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1520
- Master of the Orsoy Altarpiece, fl. ca. 1500
- Master of the Portraits of Princes,
fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1500
- Master of the Prado Adoration of the Magi,
fl. ca. 1450 - ca. 1475
- Master of the Prado Redemption (Vrancke
van der Stockt), fl. before 1424 - 1495
- Master of the Retable of Saint John the
Evangelist, fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1500
- Master of Saint Giles, fl. ca. 1500
- Master of San Lorenzo della Costa, fl. ca. 1500
- Master of the Turin Adoration, fl. ca. 1500
- Master of the View of Saint-Gudule,
fl. ca. 1470 - ca. 1500
- Master of 1473, fl. ca. 1473
- Master of 1499, fl. ca. 1485 - ca. 1510
- Master of 1500 (Gerard van der Meire?
Master of the Bruges Passion Scenes?),
fl. ca. 1490 - ca. 1510

Appendix 2

LIST OF PUBLISHED VOLUMES OF THE CORPUS

- 1 A. Janssens de Bisthoven and R.A. Parmentier, *Le Musée communal de Bruges*. Antwerp 1951
A. Janssens de Bisthoven, *Stedelijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Groeningemuseum) te Brugge* (revised and enlarged according to the French edition of A. Janssens de Bisthoven and R.A. Parmentier). Antwerp 1957
A. Janssens de Bisthoven, *Le Musée communal des Beaux-Arts (musée Groeninge) Bruges*. Antwerp 1959
A. Janssens de Bisthoven, with the assistance of M. Baes-Dondeyne and D. De Vos, *Stedelijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten (Groeningemuseum) Brugge* (revised and enlarged according to the first Dutch and the second French edition), I. Brussels 1981
A. Janssens de Bisthoven, with the assistance of M. Baes-Dondeyne and D. De Vos, *Le Musée communal des Beaux-Arts (Musée Groeninge) Bruges* (troisième édition en langue française, traduction de la seconde édition en langue néerlandaise, revue et augmentée), I. Brussels 1983
- 2 D. Aru and E. de Gérardon, *La Galerie Sabauda de Turin*. Antwerp 1952
- 3 M. Davies, *The National Gallery*, London, I. Antwerp 1953
M. Davies, *The National Gallery*, London, II. Antwerp 1954
- 4 C.T. Eisler, *New England Museums: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge; Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown; Worcester Art Museum, Worcester*. Brussels 1961
- 5 H. Adhémar, *Le Musée national du Louvre, Paris*, I. Brussels 1962
- 6 R. Van Schoute, *La Chapelle royale de Grenade*. Brussels 1963
- 7 J. Lavalleye, *Le Palais ducal d'Urbino*. Brussels 1964
- 8 V. Loewinson-Lessing and N. Nicouline, *Le Musée de l'Ermitage, Leningrad*. Brussels 1965
- 9 J. Białostocki, *Les musées de Pologne (Gdańsk, Kraków, Warszawa)*. Brussels 1966
- 10 I. Vandevivere, *La Cathédrale de Palencia. L'Église paroissiale de Cervera de Pisuerga*. Brussels 1967
- 11 M. Davies, *The National Gallery*, London, III. Brussels 1970
- 12 U. Hoff and M. Davies, *The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne*. Brussels 1971
- 13 N. Veronee-Verhaegen, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Beaune* (introduction par P. Quarré). Brussels 1973
- 14 M. Comblen-Sonkes and N. Veronee-Verhaegen, *Le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon*, 2 vols. Brussels 1987
- 15 M. Comblen-Sonkes, *Les musées de l'Institut de France (musées Jacquemart-André et Marmottan à Paris, Musée Condé à Chantilly)*. Brussels 1988
- 16 M.-L. Lievens-De Waeghe, *Le Musée national d'Art ancien et le Musée national des carreaux de faïence de Lisbonne*. Brussels 1991

6 – THE *Corpus of Fifteenth-Century Painting*

- 17 M. Comblen-Sonkes and Ph. Lorentz,
Musée du Louvre, Paris, II, 2 vols. Brussels
1995
- 18 M. Comblen-Sonkes, *The Collegiate
Church of Saint Peter, Louvain*, 2 vols.
Brussels 1996
- 19 Ph. Lorentz and M. Comblen-Sonkes,
Musée du Louvre, Paris, III, 2 vols.
Brussels 2001
- 20 H. Mund, C. Stroo, N. Goetghebeur,
H. Nieuwdorp, *The Mayer van den Bergh
Museum*. Brussels 2004



FIGURE 148 – Rogier van der Weyden, *The Medici Virgin*
(including frame 53.1 x 37.5 cm), Städelsches Kunstinstitut,
Frankfurt am Main

CHAPTER 7

MAXIMILIAAN P.J. MARTENS

Patronage

INTRODUCTION

Whereas technical investigations of early Netherlandish paintings developed after World War II, the study of patronage has a much longer tradition, one that goes back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Already at this early stage of scholarship, knowledge of the patron of a picture was considered to be important for understanding its historical significance. In 1833 the artist Ernst Förster sold Rogier van der Weyden's *Medici Virgin* [FIG. 148] to the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt.¹ In his correspondence with the museum's director, Philipp Veit, prior to the delivery of the panel, Förster pointed not only to the beauty, but also the historical value of the panel:

The lily in the lower coat of arms is the Florentine or Medicean coat of arms; both of the portrait figures hold medicine bottles, emblems which indicate physicians (*medici*) and most likely are to be taken symbolically as referring to the Medici family [...].²

Förster was evidently aware of the late medieval tradition of depicting patrons with attributes enigmatic to the modern viewer. The figures to the right of the Virgin in the painting are not portraits of members of the Medici family, however, but images of Saints Cosmas and Damian.³ The attribute of the first is a urinal, that of the second a spatula for the application of salve. Because Cosmas and Damian were patron saints of physicians and also the Medici family, a connection between the panel and the Florentine banking family remains quite possible.

More interesting for our present concern than whether Rogier's painting has anything to do with the Medici is Förster's effort to identify the patron on the ground of a coat of arms and attributes held by the figures. This method is still valid, but there are sometimes other clues, such as inscriptions. These can be rather extensive texts, like the quatrain on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which describes

the circumstances of the painting's genesis [SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 52]. Likewise, genealogical research and the reconstruction of the work's provenance (the succession of its former owners) can shed valuable light on the patrons.

In some cases their portraits can be identified through comparison with those in better documented paintings, drawings, miniatures, stained-glass windows or engravings, or on tombs, medals or seals. For instance, Jan Białostocki based his suggestion that the sitter in Memling's *Portrait of a Man* in Florence [FIG. 149] is Angelo Tani on the resemblance he saw (in spite of the different hair cut) between this person and Tani's portrait on the exterior of the same artist's *Polyptych of the Last Judgment* [FIG. 62].⁴ Josua Bruyn argued that a portrait which he ascribed to Rogier van der Weyden represents the Burgundian chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet [FIG. 150], by comparing the man's facial features to those of a figure in the dedicatory miniature of a manuscript made for Philip the Good [FIG. 151], and to a drawing in the famous sixteenth-century collection of portraits of noted Burgundians, the *Receuil d'Arras*.⁵

Such identifications are often criticized, however, for the subjective element in the recognition of facial features. Indeed, an identification based on the features alone, without any further documentation, is almost always inadequate. Beside an original inscription on a painting or its frame, archival documents are the most reliable sources for the identity of a donor. Nineteenth and twentieth century historians and art historians have regularly combed fifteenth-century accounts and inventories for information on patronage.

The work of James Weale, whose scholarly activities were discussed in Chapter 3 [PP. 235-236], is exemplary in this regard. His systematic research in the archives of Bruges not only contributed a great deal to our knowledge of the lives of Jan van Eyck, Petrus Christus, Hans Memling, and Gerard David among others: certain cases also revealed the name of a person who commissioned a particular picture. The following text, which Weale found in the inventory of the chapel of the guild of the Bruges tanners, is a good example of the evidence he brought to light:

First, at our altar, a beautiful panel of Our Lady which was given by sir Pieter Bultync in the year one thousand four hundred and seventy nine before Easter; and the same Pieter desired that from then on the priest should read a Miserere mei Deus and a De profundis for all souls at the end of each mass of the corporation.⁶

This text corroborates the inscription on the frame of Memling's *Seven Joys of the Virgin* [FIG. 152]. The frame was already lost when Weale discovered the inventory, but the inscription had been recorded in the late eighteenth century by the Bruges artist Pierre François Ledoux:



FIGURE 149 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man* (38 x 27 cm),
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



FIGURE 150 – Rogier van der Weyden (?), *Portrait of a Man with a Turban* (*Enguerrand de Monstrelet?*) (28.3 x 19.5 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Jules Bache Collection



FIGURE 151 – *Histoire d'Alexandre, Dedicacion Miniature*, detail:
Enguerrand Monstrelet (?), Bibliothèque nationale de France,
Paris, f. fr. 9342, fol. 6r



FIGURE 152 – Hans Memling, *The Seven Joys of the Virgin* (81 x 189 cm), Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, Munich



FIGURE 153 – Master of the Legend of Saint Ursula, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne Presenting Anna van Nieuwenhove* (49.8 x 34.3 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In the year 1480, this work was given to the corporation of the tanners by sir Pieter Bultync, filius Joos, tanner and merchant, and lady Katelyne, his wife, Godevaert van Riebeke's daughter; for this the priest of the corporation must read a Miserere and a De profundis for all souls after each mass.⁷

In the light of this information, the couple kneeling at the left and the right in the panel was identified with the Bruges tanner Pieter Bultinc and his wife, Katelijne van Riebeke, and this was confirmed by the coats of arms beside them. Thus, the two texts prove that the tanner Pieter Bultinc and his wife donated the panel to his guild for placement on the altar of its chapel.

Ledoulx's copy of the inscription shows how written sources from later centuries can play a role hardly less important than that of original archival material. The value of eighteenth- and even nineteenth-century sources was demonstrated by my own research on the *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne Presenting Anna van*

Nieuwenhove, a panel attributed to the Master of the Legend of Saint Ursula [FIG. 153]. The woman portrayed was the wife of Jan van Nieuwenhove, brother of Maarten van Nieuwenhove, who was immortalized by Memling. She is unequivocally identified by the inscription at the bottom of the panel. Various kinds of evidence, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century descriptions of Bruges tombs and epitaphs, allow us to hypothesize that the panel had served as an epitaph in the van Nieuwenhove family chapel in the Bruges church of Our Lady.⁸

In both of these cases it became possible to establish the panel's original function with some certainty. Since the function of a painting is inextricably bound up with its content and its artistic form, the study of patronage is an indispensable part of art-historical research.⁹ The element of function, however, is not limited to the question whether a work was an altarpiece, an epitaph, an image for private devotion or a portrait, or whether it belonged to quite another category such as Justice scenes. It also has to do with the various ways in which the patrons used the paintings to manifest themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond the identification of the original provenances of works of art, to analyze the patrons' status and ambitions and the demands they placed on the artists.

Three examples will serve to illustrate various aspects of patronage research. The first shows how the donors of Hans Memling's *Moreel Triptych* were identified and how essential this identification is in understanding the altarpiece's subjects. The second discovers the circumstances of a commission by analyzing the contract for Dirk's Bouts's *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* in the light of other contracts. Finally, Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele* is discussed in order to consider how the panel functioned for its patron.

SAINTS AND DONORS IN HANS MEMLING'S

Moreel Triptych

The central panel of the *Moreel Triptych* [FIG. 154] presents three saints: in the middle Saint Christopher, bearing the Christ Child, at the left Saint Maurus and at the right Saint Giles.¹⁰ On the left panel [FIG. 155] the donor, depicted together with five sons, is introduced by his patron saint, William of Maleval, and on the right panel [FIG. 156] we see the donor's spouse along with eleven daughters and her patron saint, Barbara. The figures are depicted before an expansive landscape beneath an overcast sky which spans all three panels. The exterior of the wings [FIG. 157] shows two saints *en grisaille*: John the Baptist with the Lamb on the left, and Saint George slaying the dragon on the right. Inside the triptych, the lower frame of the central panel is inscribed *anno Domini 1484*, and the same date recurs on the lower frame of both wings.



FIGURE 154 – Hans Memling, *The Moreel Triptych*, interior (central panel including frame 141 x 174 cm; left wing including frame 141 x 86.9 cm; right wing including frame 140.8 x 86.8 cm), Groeningemuseum, Bruges



FIGURE 155 – Hans Memling, *The Moreel Triptych*, interior, left wing:
Willem Moreel with his sons, and Saint William of Maleval



FIGURE 156 – Hans Memling, *The Moreel Triptych*, interior, right wing:
Barbara Vlaenderberch with her daughters, and Saint Barbara

The donors were identified by Weale, who noticed their resemblance to portraits likewise painted by Memling [FIGS. 158, 159].¹¹ Original inscriptions on the backs of those portraits give the names and coats of arms of the sitters: the man is the Bruges patrician Willem Moreel and his wife is Barbara van Vlaenderberch. Despite the sometimes problematic character of identifying portraits on the ground of facial features, Weale's method did produce acceptable results in this case, inasmuch as the Christian names of the individuals depicted in the portraits match the patron saints on the triptych. But Weale also found more evidence to support his identification.

The next phase of the research consisted of collecting biographical information on the donors. This is naturally important, if only because the date of the donor's death is a *terminus ante quem* for dating a work of art. By the same token, the birth date of the youngest of any children depicted provides a reliable *terminus post quem*. Further, if one can determine where exactly a patron lived, it is not difficult to learn the parish to which he belonged, and whether he established foundations in its church, be it to construct a chapel or for the performance of dedicated masses at an existing altar. Membership in certain confraternities can be relevant to his devotional life, which may be expressed in the painting, and details regarding his professional career and position can shed light on the work's function in his social group.

Weale's research on the Moreel family found Willem Moreel to have been a rich landowner and spice merchant.¹² He inherited the title Lord of Oostcleyhem from his father and acquired the title Viscount of Roeselare. An important politician as well, he was an alderman between 1472 and 1475, burgomaster in 1478 and 1483, bailiff in 1488, and treasurer in 1489. He became prominent as an opponent of Archduke Maximilian, for which he was imprisoned from October 1481 to March of the following year. In 1490 Moreel paid a considerable part of the fine imposed on the rebellious city, which tells us he was one of the city's richest citizens. Barbara van Vlaenderberch bore him no less than eighteen children: five sons and thirteen daughters. Moreel died in 1501, two years after his wife.

Because Moreel held so many public offices, Weale came across him regularly in the municipal archives. He gleaned the information regarding Moreel's family primarily from the archives of the Orphans' Chamber and the church of Saint James, and from descriptions of gravestones. In addition, he found documents concerning a foundation Willem and Barbara had made in Saint James's, in 1485, when they received permission to endow an altar dedicated to Saints Maurus and Giles, and to be buried in front of it.¹³ As customary, Moreel committed himself to maintain the altar and to provide, among other things, vestments, curtains, a chalice, and a missal. On high feast days he would decorate his altar just as the church's other altars were embellished.



FIGURE 157 – Hans Memling, *The Moreel Triptych*, exterior:
Saint John the Baptist and Saint George, Groeningemuseum, Bruges



FIGURE 158 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of Willem Moreel* (37 x 26.8 cm),
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

Each of the Moreels promised to sponsor a dedicated mass every year, but they seem not to have fulfilled this obligation, since they were buried in the churchyard instead of before the altar. Only when their son Jan took on the expense of the two annual masses in 1504 was he granted permission to transfer his parents' remains inside the church. As was often the case with private foundations, the responsibility for the altar was eventually transferred to a guild: that of the dressers of gray (or squirrel) fur.¹⁴ The transfer did not prevent later members of the Moreel family from adding their own foundations for this altar.¹⁵

The documents concerning the initial foundation make no mention of a painting. The *Moreel Triptych* has the format of an altarpiece, however, and its central panel displays the saints to whom the altar was dedicated, Maurus and Giles. Furthermore, the year 1484, referring to either the completion of the painting or the dedication of the altar for which it was made, is inscribed, as we saw, no



FIGURE 159 – Hans Memling, *Portrait of Barbara van Vlaenderberch* (37.5 x 27.8 cm),
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels

less than three times on the frame. The foundation for the altar was established before Easter of 1485, which means that, according to the calendar in use at the time, this occurred in 1484.¹⁶

It may seem curious that no altarpiece is mentioned in the charter of the foundation, but this is common in fact. For instance, the description of the Vijd couple's endowment of a chapel in the church of Saint John in Ghent says nothing about the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which was made for it.¹⁷ More curious is the lack of any mention of the *Moreel Triptych in situ*, as there is of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Even Albrecht Dürer's account of his visit to the church of Saint James in 1521 does not refer to this work.¹⁸ How long it remained in its original location is not known. Weale suspected that it was transferred to the hospital of Saint Julian during the religious riots in 1578, although it is not cited there until 1699.¹⁹

A subsequent step in the study of the triptych was to identify the children. All five sons are portrayed, and eleven of the couple's thirteen daughters. Weale reconstructed the Moreel family tree, but, as the birth dates of most of the children are unknown, he was unable to determine the sequence of their birth.²⁰ The eldest son was named Willem, but of the eldest daughter it is known only that she became a Dominican nun. Both are clearly recognized on the altarpiece. The second daughter, whose name was Maria, was identified by the same scholar with the girl in a light brown gown and transparent veil who occupies the most important place after her mother and older sister.²¹ The research on the identity of the children was complemented in the 1950s, when A. Janssens de Bisthoven noted that the headband of the girl who appears just above the head of the nun is inscribed 'Maria'.²² Weale's genealogy shows that the couple had not one but two daughters by this name.²³ Although one would ordinarily assume that the first Maria died and a younger daughter was named after her, in the late Middle Ages two children in a family could bear the same name. But no one has been able to explain why the painting identifies only this second Maria.

Dirk De Vos's monograph on Memling presented new information concerning the portrayal of the daughters: at least six of their heads are painted over the completed landscape.²⁴ Although the author does not explain which heads, the composition makes it clear that the one designated Maria, who was born ca. 1489, is one of these later additions. The altarpiece was thus updated prior to the birth of the two youngest daughters (the only children who are missing) by the addition of the portraits of six daughters who were born after it was painted.

Whereas it was only recently established that the daughters' panel was adapted to the growing number of children, changes in the execution of the wing with the sons were already detected in the 1950s, with the help of X-radiography.²⁵ Just behind the eldest son a figure was underpainted but not completed, while in the middle of the back row a boy was added. The assumption is that the unfinished figure was to be a portrait of the second son, and that this portrait was moved to the left to make room in the back row for a son who had been born in the meantime. However, the son in the middle of the back row is anything but a baby. Apparently, the two other portraits in the back row were not yet finished so that the head at the right was used for the youngest son. Even so, this head looks older than the boy must have been at the time, but that is not unusual.

The identification of the donors naturally demanded a study of the saints. Whereas William of Maleval, founder of the order of the *Guillaumites* (or Hermits of William), and Saint Barbara are evidently the patron saints of the Moreel couple, it is less clear what Saints Christopher, Giles, and Maurus meant to the donors. Their altar was dedicated to the last two, but this does not explain why the Moreels venerated them. Shirley Blum gave a plausible interpretation for the

choice of Saint Maurus by pointing to an etymological affinity.²⁶ Maurus means ‘Moor’ and the Moreel arms contained three Moor’s heads.²⁷ De Vos offered a similar explanation for the presence of Saint Giles, whose attribute, a hind, could be an allusion to Barbara van Vlaenderberch’s second surname, van Hertsvelde (‘hert’ meaning ‘deer’ in Dutch).²⁸ It can hardly be coincidental that Saint Maurus is placed next to the wing with Willem Moreel and Saint Giles next to that of his wife.

An explanation for the presence of Saint Christopher is less obvious. Blum posited two reasons.²⁹ In the Bruges calendar of feast days, Christopher and James the Great are honored on the same day, July 25.³⁰ The dedication of the church where the Moreels’ altar stood automatically made Saint James a patron of the family, and the donors would naturally have venerated his liturgical companion. But there might also have been another reason: Christopher was an important figure in late medieval devotion because he was thought to protect against unexpected death, before the extreme unction could be administered. He was therefore appropriate to the funerary context of the triptych placed on the altar in front of which the donors planned to be buried.

The exterior images of John the Baptist and Saint George were related by Weale to the sons Jan and Joris (John and George).³¹ Of course, William of Maleval, depicted on the interior, was the patron saint of not only the donor but also his eldest son Willem. Weale argued that the grisailles, whose quality is inferior to that of the interior, were not by Memling but were added after his death, when Jan Moreel had the remains of his parents moved to tombs at the foot of the altar in 1504.³² This view is not supported by the underdrawings: Maryan Ainsworth and other scholars see those on the interior and the exterior as by the same hand.³³ Although the painting may well have been delegated to an assistant, the images on the exterior were surely underdrawn by Memling himself.

The identification of the donors of the *Moreel Triptych* led to knowledge of its original placement and the foundation to which it was related. This information casts light on the intention of the commissioners: they wanted a painting that manifested their family identity by representing themselves and their children, along with their patron saints and those of three of their sons. Two other saints emphasized this identity by alluding to their family names. At the same time, the presence of Saint Christopher, presumably (also) chosen as a protector against an unexpected death, shows that all this family pride was subordinated to the ideal of a Christian death and hope for the future life.

THE COMMISSION OF

The Triptych of the Holy Sacrament

The terms of the commission of a painting were often laid down in a written contract between the donors and the artist. Such contracts are obviously of enormous historical value, because they tell us the date of the work and the name of the artist, and inform us of the wishes of the patron. Unfortunately, precious few of these contracts survive from the fifteenth century, one reason being that contracts were private matters, and private archives were seldom preserved.

If a contract was ratified by a municipal authority, however, the chance is greater that a copy was preserved in the local archive. In Ghent, for instance, one could have a contract legalized by the aldermen, so that one could turn to them if a conflict arose.³⁴ In Bruges, it was the clerks of the tribunal who ratified these contracts,³⁵ but their archive has been preserved only from 1484 onward, whereas the annual registers of the Ghent aldermen are nearly complete from the year 1339.

Given the loss of so many of the documents and the survival of so little of the art production, it is no wonder that very few fifteenth-century paintings can be linked to an archival text. In this respect Dirk Bouts's *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* [FIGS. 38-43] is unique: the contract, some records of payments, and a receipt autographed by the artist are known. As noted in Chapter 1 [p. 86], these documents were destroyed, but, fortunately, after they had been published.³⁶

The contract between the artist and four representatives of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament of the collegiate church of Saint Peter in Louvain was drawn up on March 15, 1464.³⁷ Bouts was asked to paint a precious panel on the subject of the Holy Sacrament. It was to be a triptych, with the Last Supper on the central panel and typological scenes on the flanking wings: 'the first of the heavenly bread, the second of Melchizedek, the third of Elijah, and the fourth of the eating of the Paschal Lamb under the Old Covenant'.³⁸ The scenes on the wings are not mentioned in the sequence in which they appear on the altarpiece. The exterior of one of the wings was to receive a representation of the Showbread; the passage in the contract that mentions the other subject is lost. These images were probably never executed.³⁹ Bouts promised to make the work 'to the best of his ability, sparing neither labor, expense nor time'.⁴⁰ Two professors of theology at the University of Louvain were to advise him in working out the iconographic program.

From the moment Bouts embarked on the triptych he was to accept no other commission until it was finished. His fee was set at two hundred Rhenish guilders in twenty stiver-pieces. As soon as he began the work, the brotherhood would pay an advance of twenty-five Rhenish guilders. Within a half year after that, he would receive again twenty-five guilders, and another fifty when the work was finished. The remaining hundred guilders would be paid within fifteen

months after its delivery, but in case the members' donations on behalf of the altarpiece came so quickly that the entire sum was collected before it was finished, Bouts would be paid the rest of his fee as soon as he had delivered it.

Five witnesses – the two professors who would advise the artist, a knight, a priest, and a schoolmaster – were present at the signing of the contract. It was not closely obeyed, however, and may have been revised, or modified in a verbal agreement. The other documents concerning the triptych attest to three payments; they were made on irregular dates and the amounts are smaller than those stipulated for each instalment. Bouts received thirteen guilders on July 4, 1466, another eight on August 6, 1466, and a final remittance of twenty-nine guilders in 1468. After February 9 of that year he wrote a receipt declaring that he was fully paid for his work. Since these amounts add up to only fifty guilders, the records of other payments must be lost. The three existing payments give no indication of the moment when Bouts started on the altarpiece or when he finished it, and whether he worked on it without interruption is also uncertain. While the contract forbade him to paint other panels during the execution of the triptych, this may not have excluded other activities, such as making designs or painting on canvas.⁴¹ What is more, the payments may have been irregular because the artist did not keep to the stipulations. The question which might have been the cause and which the effect remains unanswered.

Is this agreement typical of a fifteenth-century artist's contract in the Low Countries? One must realize that it was the brotherhood's original contract, whereas most of the other surviving examples are copies preserved in the archives of public institutions. In contrast to the originals, copies often give no more than the basic facts: the date on which the agreement was signed and became legally binding, the names of the parties, the fee and, in most cases, the deadline for the delivery.⁴² Despite these limitations it is still worth trying to determine how far the stipulations in Bouts's contract conformed to standard practice. They include the form of the altarpiece, the description of the subjects to be depicted, what was expected of the painter, the appointment of external advisors, the obligation to take on no other work, the fee, and the payment schedule.

Since the triptych form of Bouts's painting was so common for an altarpiece, we should not be surprised to see this form mentioned in other contracts as well. To cite but one example, a contract signed in 1434 between the Ghent citizen Willem de Busoen and his fellow townsman, the painter Saladin de Stoevere, concerns 'an altarpiece with doors that belong to it'. In this case, the triptych was not to be only the product of a painter: Stoevere was to polychrome the carved wooden figures of a *Crucifixion* and to furnish it with pictures on the wings.⁴³ The iconographic instructions were rarely as explicit as in Bouts's contract. Often, the work is merely characterized as a painting on a panel, 'een tafele van pourtraituren',

meaning not a portrait in the modern sense of the word.⁴⁴ Naturally, the lack of more precise descriptions has to do with the different status of most of the surviving records of commissions. Nonetheless, some contracts record what a painter was to depict. Usually, the themes are more conventional than that of the *Sacrament Triptych* with its Old Testament prefigurations. The contract with Saladin de Stoevere says that he will paint the *Birth of the Virgin* and the *Death of the Virgin* on the inside of the wings, and grisailles of four unspecified saints on the exterior.

The next item in the contract of the brotherhood concerns Bouts's effort: he is to execute the work to the best of his ability. Stipulations of this kind are also found in other artists' contracts, which insist that the commission be carried out 'as it should be' or 'as the work requires'.⁴⁵ Such expressions imply a certain consensus on the quality that was expected of a painter, but also that this quality could only be described in general terms – a point to which I shall return. It is possible, by the way, that Jan van Eyck's motto, *Als Ich Can* (As I can), referred to these customary contractual formulations, among other things.⁴⁶

A peculiar aspect of the contract is the mention of external advisors, professors of theology who would counsel Bouts on handling the various themes. However, it was presumably not unusual for a painter to turn to such advisors in devising the portrayal of symbolic motifs or concepts. In 1472 the town council of Louvain paid the theologian Jan van Haecht for finding a subject for Bouts's Justice scenes.⁴⁷ Furthermore, it is hardly imaginable that the programs of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and the right wing of the *Mérode Triptych* were conceived without theological advice.

Of course, the clause prohibiting Bouts from taking on other panel painting during the time he worked on the *Sacrament Triptych* aimed to ensure that the commissioned work was finished in the foreseeable future. It was more common to set a deadline for delivery. The retable that Saladin de Stoevere was to polychrome and furnish with painted wings was to be delivered in March of the following year.⁴⁸ One month later he was to deliver a polychromed statue of Saint William and the painted doors of a cupboard. All these commissions were intended for the donor's family chapel in the church of the Franciscans in Ghent. If he failed to meet the terms, he would be fined twenty pounds of Paris. In Ghent contracts such sanctions in relation to delivery dates were quite normal. The contract to polychrome a retable which the Ghent painter Nabur Martins concluded with the churchwardens of Lede even mentions a fine as much as six times higher than that which hung over de Stoevere. Moreover, the wardens threatened Martins to abrogate his right to exercise his profession.⁴⁹ Evidently, he was reputed for late deliveries, but he was not the only one who was treated severely in this regard. Other documents hold out the prospect of imprisonment to masters who do not comply with the contractual agreements.⁵⁰

As for Bouts's fee, recently Raymond Van Uytven has demonstrated that the artist was not paid much more for his paintings than his colleagues, but that he was in a privileged position because of the prestigious commissions he received.⁵¹ The distribution of the payment over a period of time was a common practice. The advantage to patrons, of course, was that they were not obliged to pay the sometimes considerable sum all at once. Comparative research has found no set rules regarding payment schedules. Apparently, individual factors, such as the work's expense or a patron's finances, played a role. Nor do I know of another contract allowing the payment of no less than half the total sum as much as fifteen months after the work's completion. Although the fragmentary character of the surviving source material prevents any firm conclusions, this suggests that it was no easy matter for the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament to amass the necessary funds.

It is remarkable that the contract for Bouts says nothing about colors and materials. Patrons could be quite explicit on this point. In the contract with Saladin de Stoevere it is stated, among other things, that the sun and moon above the cross are to be gilded and the clouds silvered and outlined in blue and green. For the scenes on the wings the painter was to use 'oil paint of good quality' and, in the blue areas, 'fine azure'.⁵² To judge from the statutes of the artists' guilds, the quality of the materials was strictly regulated and controlled.⁵³ The stipulations about quality in contracts seem therefore to indicate a lack of faith in the guilds' control on the part of some patrons. A similar mistrust echoes from a demand placed upon the painter Clerbout van Wistevelde in 1456: he had to guarantee his work for a period of twenty years.⁵⁴

The members of the brotherhood were obviously unconcerned about the quality of Bouts's materials and they also kept silent in the contract about the artistic form of the altarpiece. Yet, it was not unusual to refer to a design supplied by the artist or to an existing work to be taken as a model. Such a work could be from the hand of another artist: its use as a model set the standard for a certain quality, and it could even function as a point of reference if the quality of the resulting work was contested.⁵⁵ In Bouts's case, both the freedom in the materials and the lack of an obligation to work from a particular design suggest that any restrictions in these respects were considered inappropriate for a master of his reputation.

In conclusion to this analysis of the contract for the *Sacrament Triptych* in relation to other artists' contracts, we shall pay a brief attention to a different sort of contract. In 1464 the wardens of the church of Our Lady in Bruges signed an agreement with Mark Spronkholf for the construction of a new organ.⁵⁶ The contract was drawn up by a notary in the presence of the provost of the chapter of the church, the wardens, and the organ builder. Spronkholf had already submitted a design for the instrument, signed by the notary, which formed the basis for the contract. To avoid any suspicion of fraud and to earn only 'bliss and honor', he

insisted that someone be appointed to help him purchase the necessary material. He also requested that the organ be judged, as soon as it was ready, by a commission of experts composed of Flemings and foreigners. If it did not turn out 'to be a good work, sounding well, and as well-tuned as any other in the lands of our redoubtable lord', Spronkholf would not accept any payment.⁵⁷ Only when the experts had approved his work would he receive the agreed honorarium. Moreover, he would maintain the organ as long as he lived and see that it always sounded as it did on the delivery. Like Bouts, he promised to accept no other work until this one was completed.

Strikingly, Spronkholf's contract demands heavier guarantees of the quality of the materials and execution than any known contract for an altarpiece. The discrepancy may be explained by the high cost of the project as well as by the existence of clearer norms for a musical instrument than for a pictorial work. This brings us to an interesting problem. The patrons of an altarpiece naturally wanted a product of high quality too, but, although ideas on this matter did exist, it may have been harder to submit them to objective judgment than those that measure the quality of an organ. For this reason the contracts could contain guarantees such as the use of a design or model. The greatest certainty, however, was obtained by choosing an artist whose name automatically guaranteed a high quality. This certainty was available to the commissioners of the *Sacrament Triptych*, one reflected as much in the high artistic value of the result as in the absence of a report of a tested preliminary design.

CANON GEORGE VAN DER PAELE AS PATRON

The information derived from contracts does not tell us what the works meant to the people who ordered them. The discussion of the *Moreel Triptych* yielded some idea of its significance for the donors by exploring the relations between the Moreel family and the saints portrayed. Now, in the light of Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon George Van der Paele, Saint Donatian and Saint George* [FIG. 160] we shall delve more deeply into this matter.

The picture's attribution to Jan van Eyck, its dating, and the identification of the donor are all based on the Latin inscription on the lower frame, which also displays van der Paele's coats of arms:

Master George van der Paele, canon of this church, has had this work made by the painter Jan van Eyck and he founded two chaplaincies to be served by choir personnel, 1434. He completed it in 1436, however. (*hoc opus fecit fieri magister Georgius de pala huius ecclesie canonici per Iohannem de eyck pic-*

*torem. Et fundavit hic duas capellanas de in gremio chori domini. M. CCCC. XXXIII. complevit autem. 1436.)*⁵⁸

The radiograph of this inscription leaves no doubt that the passage ‘and he founded two chaplaincies to be served by choir personnel’ is not original.⁵⁹ Investigating the life of van der Paele has learned that he did not institute the second chaplaincy until 1443, seven years after the painting’s completion.⁶⁰ The inscription was thus altered after the second foundation by someone other than van Eyck, who died in 1441.

George van der Paele, an illegitimate son of Jan van der Paele, was probably born around 1370 in or near Bruges, where he died in 1443.⁶¹ In 1387 Pope Urban VI appointed him canon of the chapter of the church of Saint Donatian in Bruges. An uncle, Judocus van der Paele, was a canon there since 1364, and George’s brother, also called Judocus, was a chaplain and canon-candidate of this chapter until his death in 1413. Saint Donatian’s was one of the oldest and most prestigious secular collegiate churches in Flanders and, from the beginning, connected to the court of the count of Flanders.⁶² In 1089 Robrecht I, count of Flanders, made the provost of the chapter of Saint Donatian’s chancellor of Flanders by virtue of this office. In exchange, the count gained the right to confirm the appointment of the provost, who was elected by the chapter. In addition to the provost’s position as chancellor of Flanders, the chapter itself had secular powers and received the considerable revenues of the deanery of Saint Donatian, an extensive seigniorship which it had on loan from the count.

The chapter consisted of thirty-one canons and several chaplains, some of whom participated in the choir services (*de gremio chori*) whereas others (*extra chorum*) were only responsible for the services at altars assigned to them, in the transept or the nave, or in one of the church’s external chapels, such as that of the Holy Blood. A chapter school attached to Saint Donatian’s educated the local intelligentsia.⁶³ In 1394 Philip the Bold managed to have his almoner appointed provost, none other than Jean Gerson, chancellor of the Sorbonne and one of the leading theologians of his day.⁶⁴ During his tenure, until 1411, Gerson raised the intellectual level of the chapter and reorganized the library.⁶⁵ His appointment coincided with van der Paele’s dismissal as canon because of his loyalty to Rome at a time when both Philip and the city of Bruges sided with the pope of Avignon. The two events show how much influence the duke exercised over the chapter of Saint Donatian.

Although van der Paele remained a sub-deacon for the rest of his life and did never earn an academic degree, he built a distinguished career, thanks to his appointment as *scriptor* at the papal curia in Rome, in 1396, which gave him the title *magister*.⁶⁶ He must have learned from the loss of his position in Bruges, for he behaved very cleverly in the rapidly evolving political climate and garnered a



FIGURE 160 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child with Canon George van der Paele, Saint Donatian and Saint George* (including frame 140.8 x 176.5 cm), Groeningemuseum, Bruges

large number of ecclesiastical offices. Moreover, he was permitted to accumulate their various incomes without meeting the usual residential requirements. In 1410 he was reappointed to the chapter of Saint Donatian in Bruges, thanks to the antipope John XXIII, who had been elected by the council in Basel. In July 1418, several months after the election of Pope Martin V, who was recognized by the entire Western Church, George left Rome and retired to Bruges.

In September 1434 van der Paele was so ill that the chapter excused him from all choir service, without depriving him of his income, and a few days later he founded his first chaplaincy at the altar of Saints Peter and Paul in Saint Donatian's.⁶⁷ Evidently, his declining health and advancing age made him concentrate on the salvation of his soul. He may also have wished, at this final stage of his career, to enhance his prestige within the chapter to which he had been attached for so much of his life, and from which he had been so ignominiously barred for sixteen years. This foundation of a chaplaincy consisted of three weekly masses: a requiem mass for the dead on Mondays, a low mass on Wednesdays, and a mass dedicated to the Holy Cross on Fridays.⁶⁸ After van der Paele's death, the chaplain who recited the mass would afterward sprinkle his tombstone with holy water and say a *Miserere Mei* or a *De Profundis*. The chaplain received the annual interest of three pounds from van der Paele's fund of 72 pounds.⁶⁹ The canon also donated 125 pounds for the maintenance of the church.⁷⁰ Since the painting was finished in 1436, he must have commissioned it not long after he established the foundation.

In 1440 van der Paele instituted an additional fund of a hundred pounds for an annual mass for the dead, a breakfast for his colleagues, and an annual mass for his brother Judocus. The deed of this additional foundation mentions the location of George van der Paele's tombstone:

in the nave of the church on the north side of the altar of Saints Peter and Paul, at which he has founded a perpetual chaplaincy.⁷¹

The eighteenth-century archeologist Pierre de Molo gives further information:

In the second chapel in the direction of the Burg [...] there also lies sir Georgius de Pala, canon and cantor of Saint Donatian's, who had this precious panel made in 1434 by master Jan van Eyck.⁷²

In other words, the grave lay to the left of the altar of the second chapel from the transept, in the south side aisle [FIG. 161].⁷³ The incised stone presented a figure, clad in canonicals, surrounded by the symbols of the Evangelists in the corners.⁷⁴ Van der Paele's uncle and brother were buried beneath separate gravestones in the same chapel.⁷⁵ An inventory of the chapels in the church, made in 1462, calls

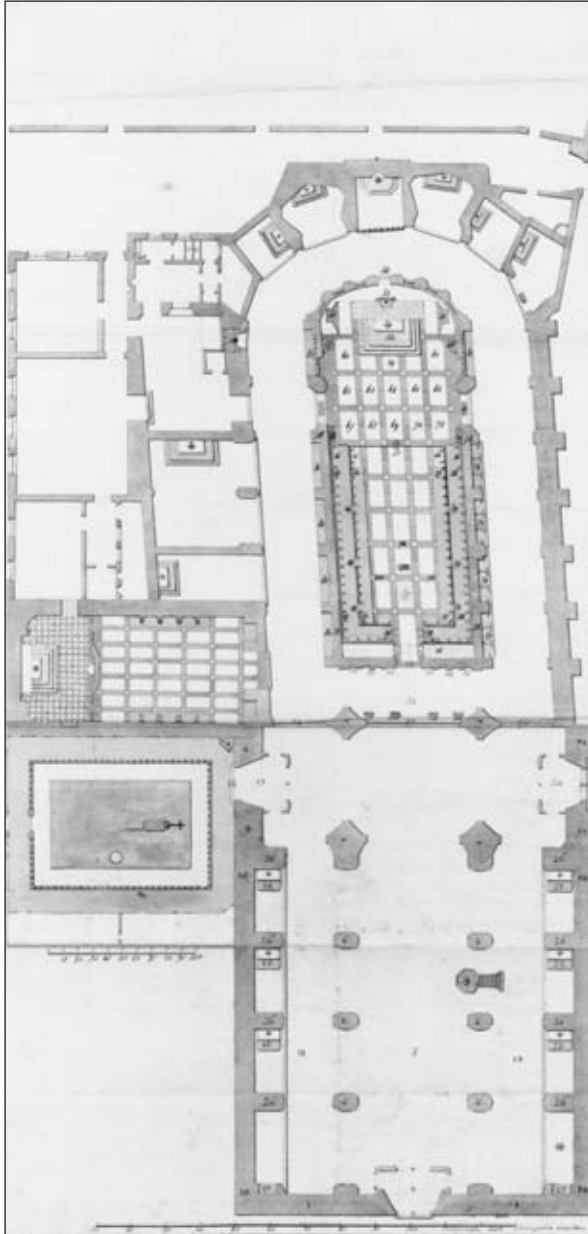


FIGURE 161 – Plan of the Church of Saint Donatian in Bruges, in:
Pierre de Molo, *Recueil de tous les tombeaux, épitaphes et pierres sépulchrales
qui ont existé dans la ci-devant église cathédrale de S. Donas à Bruges [...]*,
vol. 2, annexes, fol. 19r, Bruges, Stadsbibliotheek, ms. 595 (18th century)



FIGURE 162 – Drawing of a lost epitaph of Willem de Niepa in the Church of Saint Donatian in Bruges, in: Ignace De Hooghe, *Versaemelinghe van alle de sepulturen, epitaphien, besetten, waepens ende blasoenen, die gevonden worden in alle de kercken, kloosters, abdyen, capellen ende godshuysen, binnen de stad van Brugge [...]*, vol. 1, Bruges 1698-1707, fol. 33r, Bruges, Stadsbibliotheek, ms. 449

the chapel the 'Capella de Arbosio' and lists liturgical vestments and other objects van der Paele donated for use at the altar of Peter and Paul.⁷⁶

In 1441 he gave the church some relics of Saint Christopher and Saint Ursula.⁷⁷ Their relics were kept in a rock crystal cylinder mounted in a tower-shaped silver reliquary crowned by a crucifix and further decorated with the donor's arms and a statuette of Saint George in a tabernacle.⁷⁸ The foundation of the second chaplaincy, recorded in January 1443, provided for four masses on the other days of the week. It was financed by the income from real estate: an annual interest of four pounds for the chaplain and seven pounds and ten shillings for the church's maintenance.⁷⁹ Van der Paele's concern for his soul made him promise more money than he could afford: in 1447, only four years after his death, the revenues from the designated property were already insufficient to support the second foundation.⁸⁰

The coronation of the endowments was of course the commission of a painting by Jan van Eyck. It must have stirred consternation among the other canons, whose foundations were comparatively insignificant.⁸¹ The contrast makes one wonder all the more about van der Paele's motives. Concern for the soul and craving for status in the chapter do not explain sufficiently why he ordered a work whose prestige and expense distinguished him from any other Flemish cleric of his day. Perhaps it was simply a question of personality. The opportunism with which he accumulated so many benefices may have been accompanied by an equal ambition in patronage. But, another factor could also have played a part: his illegitimacy. As a rule, the chapter of Saint Donatian's automatically inherited the movable property of members who were illegitimate.⁸² This presumably extended to income from real estate. Van der Paele may have well have preferred instead to invest his revenues as much as possible in the salvation of his soul and the perpetuation of his memory.

The documents say nothing about the location of the painting.⁸³ We know only that, after around 1588, it stood, surrounded by a carved frame, on the high altar of the church.⁸⁴ Before that time it can hardly have been anywhere else than in the chapel where van der Paele founded his two chaplaincies, where he and two family members were buried, and to which he donated liturgical equipment.⁸⁵ Indeed, it may well have been there before his death, especially since, as often happened, his grave was already in place.⁸⁶

Some authors suppose the *Van der Paele Virgin* was an altarpiece, and others an epitaph panel.⁸⁷ The latter view is the most convincing, since it does not show Saints Peter and Paul to whom the altar was dedicated. In fact, a document of 1439, overlooked so far, states that, only three years after van Eyck finished it, another work stood on this altar:



FIGURE 163 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child in a Church* (31 x 14 cm), Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

Item for cleaning the exterior side of the retable on the altar of the apostles Peter and Paul, six shillings of Paris.⁸⁸

The mention of the exterior means that this altarpiece was a triptych. The *Van der Paele Virgin*, however, has never had wings.

Although images of a kneeling donor being presented to the Virgin and Child are not only found in funerary contexts, Flemish epitaphs regularly feature such compositions.⁸⁹ There is even some formal correspondence between van Eyck's painting and a lost stone epitaph of Canon Willem de Niepa of about 1460 [FIG. 162], which was likewise in the church of Saint Donatian.⁹⁰ Both show the deceased introduced by his patron saint to the enthroned Virgin and Child. Willem de Niepa was a colleague of van der Paele, and one of his executors.⁹¹ His epitaph, to my knowledge the only one in stone in Saint Donatian's during this period, may have been a modest attempt to follow his friend's example.

If the *Van der Paele Virgin* was an epitaph, where was it situated? One cannot determine the exact dimensions of the chapel, but there was probably not enough room for the large panel above van der Paele's gravestone, to the left of the altar.⁹² This leaves only the west or the south wall of the chapel. The west wall is the most likely place, since the natural light there corresponded to the light in the painting, just as in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, while on the south wall the work would have hung under the window.

In order to understand how the *Van der Paele Virgin* reflected its function as an epitaph, we must pay attention to the holy figures and the inscriptions related to them. Of course, the donor's name and that of the church explain the presence of Saint George and Saint Donatian, but the inscriptions on the frame give them a deeper, theological meaning. The inscription on the side of Saint George tells us:

Born in Cappadocia, he fought for Christ. Fleeing the idleness of the world, he triumphed although he was killed. He slew the dragon. (*Natus Capadocia. Christo militavit. Mundi fugiens ocia. Cesus triumphavit. Hic draconem stravit.*)⁹³

The inscription on the frame next to Saint Donatian says:

From one childbed he was born as the ninth of his brothers. Immersed in water, he was returned alive. Reborn, he became the first archbishop of Reims. Now he enjoys God. (*Solo partu nonus fratrum. Mersus vivus redditur. + Renatus archiepiscopus primus. Remis constituitur. Qui nunc Deo fruitur.*)⁹⁴

The text concerning Saint George describes his earthly struggle in the service of Christ, his victory through his martyr's death, and his conquest of Satan's power.

The one on Saint Donatian connects his miraculous rescue from drowning to his rebirth from sin through baptism, and mentions his ecclesiastical career and the heavenly glory that resulted. These themes of rebirth, struggle against the evil, death, victory, and eternal life are well suited to the picture's function as an epitaph.⁹⁵

To grasp the full significance of the Virgin and the inscription that refers to her, we must first consider the handling of the light, which enters the setting, the apse of a church, from the left. The same direction of the light is emphasized even more strongly in van Eyck's small, devotional *Virgin and Child in a Church* [FIG. 163]. Discussing this image, Panofsky pointed out that the light from the left comes unnaturally from the north because Gothic cathedral choirs face east, and that it symbolizes Mary as the supernatural light which exceeds the light of the physical world.⁹⁶ In support of his interpretation he adduced a text, derived from the Book of Wisdom 7:29 and 26, that is inscribed on the hem of the Virgin's mantle. This text sings her praise as the supernatural light. It is also quoted on the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* [SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 51], and on the frames of van Eyck's *Dresden Triptych* [FIG. 164] and *Van der Paele Virgin*, which displays the following words on the upper frame:

She is more beautiful than the sun and above the whole order of the stars. When compared to the light, she is found to precede it. For she is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God's majesty. (*Hec esse speciosior sole + Super omnem stellarum dispositionem luci comparata invenitur prior. Candor esse enim lucis eterne. + Speculum sine macula Dei maiestatis.*)⁹⁷

According to Panofsky, in the *Dresden Triptych* and the *Van der Paele Virgin* the light, which enters from the left, likewise comes from the north.⁹⁸ Craig Harbison, however, has rejected the whole idea of supernatural light, arguing that not all churches in the Southern Netherlands faced to the east.⁹⁹ Nonetheless, most churches did, including Saint Donatian's, and I think Panofsky's symbolic interpretation is still valid. Of course, if indeed the painted light in the *Van der Paele Virgin* was attuned to the natural light in the chapel, this can be taken as a sufficient explanation why it falls from the left, but this does not exclude a symbolic meaning which seems to be corroborated by the inscription.

In addition to the light, Panofsky argued, the church interior in the *Virgin in a Church* has a special meaning: it functions as a symbolic attribute of the Virgin, whom medieval theology regarded as a personification of the Church. This symbolism is equally appropriate to the *Van der Paele Virgin*,¹⁰⁰ and conforms to the themes expressed by the figures of Saint George and Saint Donatian. The painting shows that for Canon van der Paele the Church is the context within which rebirth takes place, evil is vanquished, and salvation offered.



FIGURE 164 – Jan van Eyck, *The Dresden Triptych* (central panel including frame 33.1 x 27.5 cm; each wing including frame 33.1 x 13.6 cm), Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden

Thanks to the chaplaincies van der Paele founded, there were daily masses recited for his soul in the chapel which he had furnished with liturgical equipment and where he was buried. His most impressive donation to this chapel was the epitaph by the celebrated Jan van Eyck, which testifies to the canon's attachment to the Church and hope for eternal life.

CONCLUSION

The three different examples of research into patronage discussed in this chapter reflect its largely fragmentary character even as they represent its diverse concerns. The *Moreel Triptych* served to show the possibilities and methods available to discover the identity of donors who are portrayed without distinguishing attributes. Once achieved, as demonstrated in the report of the investigation of the Moreels and its gradual supplementation by further information, the identification makes it possible to explain other elements in the picture. This particular case is noteworthy for the continuity of the research from the nineteenth century into modern times.

The discussion of the contract for Bouts's *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* in relation to other contracts brought forward a number of factors which played a role in the awarding of a commission. In addition, this contract allows a presumption that there was a connection between the artist's reputation and the extent to which certain aspects were specified. A comparison with a contract for an organ showed that the quality of a pictorial work of art could not be as strictly guaranteed as that of a product with a more evidently useful function.

It is precisely the function of a painting for its commissioner that is at the center of the investigation of Jan van Eyck's *Van der Paele Virgin*. Biographical data made it possible to place the work in the context of the canon's foundations on behalf of his funerary chapel. The discovery of a document showed that the panel served as an epitaph, while the illusion of light led to propose a place in the chapel where it may have hung. The holy figures and the handling of light and architecture in the painting could be related to its funerary function and the donor's ecclesiastical status.

As seen in this last example, patronage research can contribute to the discovery of the historical identity of a painting by viewing it as not only a creation of its maker, but also an expression of the commissioner's mentality and social circumstances. In this way patronage research is close to iconology.

CHAPTER 8

CRAIG HARBISON

Iconography and Iconology

INTRODUCTION

Admiration has always been accorded to early Netherlandish painting due to its visual realism, the way it seemed to reproduce, on a two-dimensional surface, aspects of the world we see around us. Writing in 1456, the Italian historian Bartolomeo Fazio marveled at a now lost work by Jan van Eyck where:

there is a lantern in the bath chamber, just like one lit, and an old woman seemingly sweating, a puppy lapping up water, and also horses, minute figures of men, mountains, groves, hamlets, and castles, carried out with such skill you would believe one was fifty miles distant from another. But almost nothing is more wonderful in this work than the mirror painted in the picture, in which you see whatever is represented as in a real mirror.¹

Over five hundred years later a modern commentator, writing about van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* [FIG. 25], echoed Fazio's fascination:

A simple corner of the real world had suddenly been fixed on to a panel as if by magic. Here it all was – the carpet and the slippers, the rosary on the wall, the little brush beside the bed, and the fruit on the window-sill. It is as if we could pay a visit to the Arnolfini in their house.²

Today we may realize that fifteenth-century observers like Fazio were describing early Netherlandish painting in ways to a great extent determined by the categories and conventions of ancient writings on art – ancient writings that they were in the process of rediscovering.³ Apparent imitation of the visible world was such a category. But as the modern quotation given above reminds us, we are still seduced by this quality in the art. And we have great difficulty seeing such painted realism for what it was: a complex artistic device mingling convention,

idealization, and conscious manipulation with direct, first-hand observation.

We do know that the apparent visual accuracy of early Netherlandish painting mattered to patrons and artists alike. The images themselves are perhaps enough evidence to prove this point, but literary documents provide striking substantiation of it as well. First, there are the contemporary commentaries such as Fazio's dwelling on the mimetic power of the pictures. More telling are the contracts which specify that contemporary genre-like details should be included in religious representations. A 1448 commission for a sculpted altarpiece in Valenciennes mentioned that the Virgin Mary's bed at the *Nativity of Christ* should be like those of the 'seigneurs et bourgeois' and, again, that it should appear like those beds then found in Brabant and Flanders.⁴ Thus, by mid-century we can say that the realism of early Netherlandish art was in all likelihood commissioned to be painted. Patrons consciously requested and artists intentionally produced the kind of remarkable still life detail that attracts us still to panels like the *Arnolfini Portrait*. Based on contemporary documents, as well as the pictures themselves, we might then legitimately label this a descriptive realism of particulars. However manipulated the final, overall image may be, we are not being anachronistic in admiring the attention that the painter has paid to capturing the visual details of his own physical world.

The same cannot be said for our modern obsession with the presumed minute religious symbolism of these works. Investigation of such symbolism has been most fully supported by the use of the iconographic method, which involves a systematic attempt to determine and then explain the subject matter and associated symbolic references of a work of art by comparison to other visual and literary examples or traditions. This is what Erwin Panofsky called 'iconographical analysis in the narrower sense'. The significance of such symbolism can be further explained by an investigation of the original historical context of the artwork. We might want to explain how its symbolic references reveal an artistic personality or define a specific religious or philosophical position. Or we might try to determine more generally the way in which those references elucidate the underlying mentality of a culture or period. This is what Panofsky called 'iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense', or 'iconological interpretation'.⁵ The term 'iconology' is also often used for the first method (and, therefore, elsewhere in this book it refers to both methods). But here it will be important to distinguish iconographical analysis in a narrower sense from iconological interpretation, or iconography in a deeper sense.

When applied to early Netherlandish painting, the iconographic method has, until recently, served almost exclusively to decode the supposedly complex religious symbolism 'disguised' in the realistic details of the imagery. This means that such iconographical analysis has been largely based on the assumption that

the pictures' realism was a clever means of conveying complex theological information. I need to stress from the beginning that this particular assumption, and thus this specific application of the iconographic method, finds very little justification or articulation within this historical context. No surviving literary sources from the fifteenth century suggest that the ordinary lay viewer or patron of this art was unusually concerned with the religious subject matter and symbolism of a visual image. We might well want to end up claiming that the images themselves are sufficient evidence for a view of the art that places great emphasis on complex theological meaning. But in the meantime we must acknowledge one important fact: while we have contracts for private works of art that specify a particular obsession with 'realism', no contracts for these works do the same with theological 'symbolism'. The simple theme or story, *Nativity of Christ*, for instance, would certainly be dictated to the artist, but little, if anything, more. Beds were to be portrayed in a manner that was geographically and socially specific; beds were not dictated to be represented in a form that was said in the fifteenth century to convey complex symbolic information about the Incarnation of Christ.⁶ As E.H. Gombrich has opined: 'one might wish for more evidence that these symbols and metaphors were commissioned to be *painted*'.⁷

There are several surviving documents which do indicate that works ordered for public locations – churches and town halls – or monasteries were more fully defined in terms of subject matter. In the contract for Bouts's altarpiece for the Brotherhood of the Holy Sacrament [FIG. 38], discussed in the preceding chapter [pp. 362-366], two professors of theology from Louvain were named to 'prescribe [to the artist] with regard to the subjects' of the work.⁸ Another doctor of theology and Augustinian friar was paid by the city of Louvain in 1472 for providing the 'subjects and characters' for the Justice panels that Bouts executed for the town hall [FIGS. 45, 46].⁹ In 1453 a priest ordered a panel depicting the *Coronation of the Virgin* for a Carthusian monastery at Villeneuve-lès-Avignon from the French painter Enguerrand Quarton (Musée de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon). The contract for this work specified twenty-six different items to be included.¹⁰ Church and municipal authorities were obviously keen to have the images within their walls portray particular scenes in what might have been symbolically charged ways.¹¹ Still, none of these documents indicates that the specific theological meaning or symbolism of the many details found in these public works was as minutely predetermined as modern scholars have at times supposed.

Perhaps more importantly, no comparable documents have emerged in the realm of private lay patronage. Individual lay patrons seem to account for over two-thirds (about 70%) of the paintings executed in the Netherlands in the fifteenth century;¹² and presumably many, if not the majority, of these works were meant for private devotion or edification. For these personal images, we have no

confirming evidence, outside the panels themselves, that detailed religious symbolism was of special interest to the patron or artist. And, once again, this seems of present concern in connection with a method that claims to focus on an understanding of subject matter in a particular historical context.

I hasten to add that I do not believe that this by any means negates the value of an iconographic/iconological approach to early Netherlandish painting. But I would like to stress this particular lack of historical evidence from the start in order to help the reader understand a rapid transformation of opinion that has taken place in the brief time since a particular complex symbolic interpretation of this art was first proposed. Within the space of fifty years, the search for detailed religious symbolism has moved from seeming immensely enlightening and, indeed, central to an understanding of the pictures, to being viewed as flawed, even misleading, or at least in need of redirection.¹³ Perhaps this striking reversal was inherent in the initial lack of historical grounding for an approach that claimed, remarkably, to be above all a historically grounded methodology?

Beginning in the mid-1930s several art historians, especially Charles de Tolnay and Erwin Panofsky, began to hypothesize that early Netherlandish paintings had embedded within them detailed programs of Christian theology. What had previously been thought of as the straightforward, if highly refined, naturalism of this art was now said to be adjusted to complex religious needs: *la terre toute entière est divinisée*.¹⁴ In this chapter I will indicate how this view first arose, what precedents there might have been for it in earlier art-historical writings and how it was first and most influentially articulated. There was in turn some initial skepticism voiced, but in the 1960s and 1970s there was a great wave of further development and elaboration. In the last two decades many art historians have become increasingly wary, if not openly critical, of the particular kind of symbolic analysis first formulated by scholars like Panofsky. A number of them seem to deny altogether the existence of complex religious symbolism in these works, while other writers have proposed a different understanding of the nature and interaction of realism and symbolism, a different iconography and iconology, differently conceived and thus differently embedded in the paintings that have come down to us. Some of these recent views of the nature and function of symbolic reference in this art have interesting precedents in earlier twentieth-century writings of such authors as Aby Warburg and Johan Huizinga.

MAX DVOŘÁK AND CHARLES DE TOLNAY

It was by no means an entirely new idea in the mid-1930s to propose a connection between fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting and Christian theology. Writing in 1918, the Viennese art historian Max Dvořák certainly felt that there existed an interesting analogy between late medieval art and theology. In discussing the background of the work of van Eyck, Dvořák referred at length to the important theological conflict between philosophic Realism and Nominalism. Realist philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas, believed that the articles of Christian faith were rationally demonstrable, in part using information gleaned from the physical world. Nominalists, like William of Ockham, cut the tie between reason and faith, claiming that all that could be known for certain was the nominal, or individual, thing. Realists studied the world as it revealed the divine; Nominalists looked to the world in a more modern, scientific manner, as intriguing in and of itself. Dvořák saw Jan van Eyck's descriptive naturalism as corresponding to philosophic Nominalism. But for this scholar the religious content of the art was not specifically derived from such philosophic issues and positions. The philosophical/theological ideas contributed to his analysis by way of making a commentary on the same *Weltanschauung*, or world view, that was exhibited in the paintings.¹⁵ In Dvořák's view, the history of art reflected the history of ideas in a less disciplined and precise way than Panofsky was later to propose.

Somewhat earlier, the French medievalist Émile Mâle, writing about the art of the late Middle Ages, had made a provocative statement:

There is not a single artistic work produced in the fifteenth century that cannot be explained by a book. [...] Thus, an essential part of our task is the study of theologians, mystics, hagiographers and sermon writers of the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries.¹⁶

In fact, this claim was only supported in general thematic terms. Ideas about virtue and vice, death and judgment were shown to be parallel in art and literature in a straightforward way. Mâle did not analyze the realism of fifteenth-century northern European panel painting as though it were a symbolic program serving as a detailed theological illustration. That task was left to de Tolnay and Panofsky.

Charles de Tolnay authored three publications, the first in 1932, followed by ones in 1939 and 1941, all of which made rather novel and sweeping claims for the iconology of early Netherlandish painting. His views were completely opposed to those of Johan Huizinga, who had written:

In our view, there were in that time two spheres of life that were strictly separated. On the one side, the culture of the court, the nobility, and the wealthy burghers: boastful, craving honor and wealth, riotously colored, glowing with passion; on the other side, the quiet, uniformly gray sphere of the *devotio moderna*: the serious men and the submissive wives of the middle class who sought spiritual support in the Fraterhouses and from the Windesheimers. This is also the sphere of Ruusbroec and of St. Colette. This is the sphere to which, according to our sentiments, the art of the Van Eycks with its pious quiet mysticism belongs. Yet it is more likely to be at home in the other sphere. The modern *dévotés* rejected the great art that unfolded during their age. [...] It is very likely that they would have regarded even a work like the *Adoration of the Lamb* as an expression of unmitigated pride.¹⁷

However, de Tolnay saw Huizinga's two spheres, the worldly and the religious, coming together:

When in the beginning of the fifteenth century the great new spiritual reorientation took place and Western man began to turn his eyes earthward rather than heavenward as he had done in the Middle Ages, the Flemings, by virtue of their native tellurian disposition and free urban spirit, seem to have been predestined to play a leading role. The Flemish masters brought the old metaphysical-religious conceptions into harmony with the idea of the worth of earthly existence. By means of a pantheistic turn they combined religious thought with new, empirically directed spiritual interests. Their famous 'realism' is actually an adoration of God as immanent in all creation.¹⁸

Unlike Huizinga, de Tolnay claimed that a painting by Jan van Eyck embodied the contemplative ideal preached by the Modern Devotionalists, who renounced all worldly goods and led humble lives of prayer and devotion.¹⁹ Based on contemporary accounts, Huizinga had said of the wealthy and powerful chancellor of the Burgundian realm, Nicolas Rolin, that 'the spirit of piety that drove him to make his [religious] donations was widely mistrusted'.²⁰ For de Tolnay, the work van Eyck painted for Rolin [FIG. 165] was, simply, a beautifully fashioned hymn of religious devotion: everything was devoutly inspired, rich in Christian symbolism, illuminated by mystical 'light divine'.²¹ The great German mystics of the fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart and Heinrich Suso, were the 'direct precursors' of the early Netherlandish painters Robert Campin and Jan van Eyck.²²



FIGURE 165 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child with Chancellor Nicolas Rolin* (66 x 62 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris

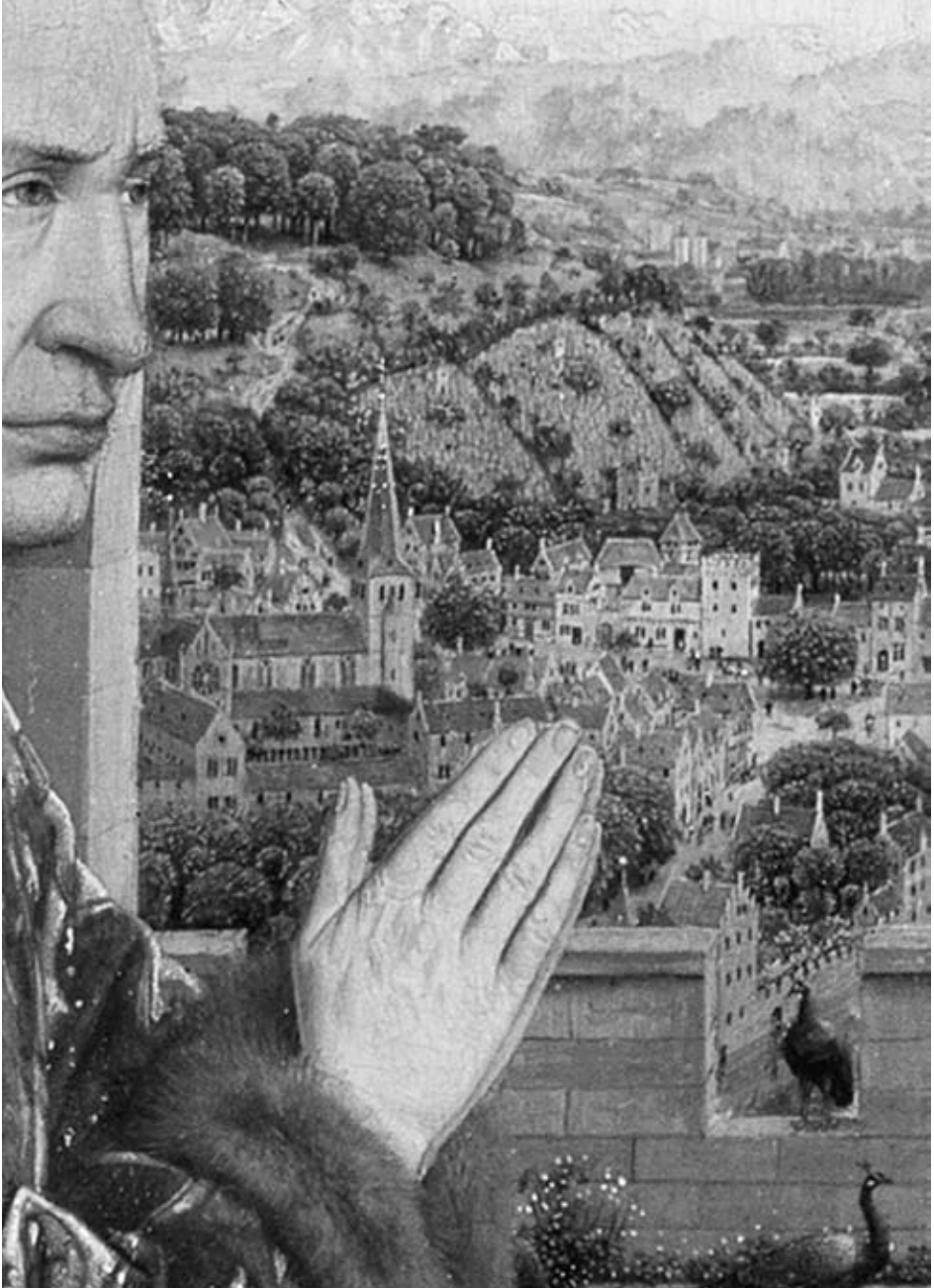


FIGURE 166 – Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child with Chancellor Nicolas Rolin*,
detail: Rolin's hands and part of the landscape

The author mentioned the philosophy of one fifteenth-century thinker as an analogy to what he called the 'pantheistic *Kunstwollen*' (or artistic will) of fifteenth-century Netherlandish painters.²³ This was Nicholas of Cusa, an influential cardinal of the Church, who traveled widely and wrote learned treatises on theological as well as political issues. He was an almost exact contemporary of Rogier van der Weyden, living from 1401 to 1464, and expressed open admiration for Rogier's work in his *Vision of God*.²⁴ De Tolnay's quotations from his works were very slight and not completely representative.²⁵ Cusa may have been attracted to art, but there is also a strong sense of monkish withdrawal in his writings that de Tolnay did not consider.

Such an approach to early Netherlandish painting was certainly what Panofsky termed an exercise in 'synthetic intuition'.²⁶ For Panofsky, in order to uncover the intrinsic meaning or content of a work of art (its iconological meaning), one must try to sense similar 'essential tendencies of the human mind' in other roughly contemporary means of expression, whether they are political, poetic, religious, philosophic, or social in nature. These essential tendencies of the human mind were also called the 'symbolical values' or 'cultural symptoms' found in the artwork.²⁷ In de Tolnay's view, there was a harmony between religious and worldly aims in early Netherlandish painting, which was its ultimate 'symbolical value' or content. That idea was not only different from the evaluation of Johan Huizinga, but also from other observers like Aby Warburg, who studied the complex, dialectical relationship between Flemish realism and Italian Renaissance art.²⁸ De Tolnay compared what he identified as the transfigured realism of this art to an earlier mystical tradition (Eckhart and Suso), and he felt that the earlier spirit was revived in the fifteenth century by both painters and Nicholas of Cusa in ever more pantheistic terms.²⁹ However, he did not develop a very detailed exposition of the new, fifteenth-century mentality, limiting himself to a few generalities and selective quotations and without expounding upon particular artistic examples at great length. In his first study in 1932, indications of the possible ways that individual images exhibited the symbolic thinking of the time were confined to a lengthy footnote.³⁰

ERWIN PANOFSKY

It was in fact the distinctive contribution of Erwin Panofsky to apply to particular artistic examples, in a detailed, even brilliant fashion, an iconological interpretation of early Netherlandish art quite similar to that of de Tolnay, although in terms of an overall historical structure he, too, said little and that only of a very general nature. In 1934 Panofsky published his first attempt at a symbolic reading

of an early Netherlandish painting, the *Arnolfini Portrait* [FIG. 25].³¹ Here the mentality that produced this art was rather simply referred to as a perfect reconciliation between medieval symbolism and modern realism.³² It was not until seventeen years later, in 1951, that he justified this view:

nominalism and mysticism prove to be *les extrêmes qui se touchent*. We can easily see that these apparently irreconcilable tendencies could variously interpenetrate in the fourteenth century and ultimately merge, for one glorious moment, in the paintings of the great Flemings, much as they did in the philosophy of their admirer, Nicholas of Cusa, who died in the same year as Roger van der Weyden.³³

There is little further analysis given for the presumed harmonious relation between Nominalism and mysticism, or that between early Netherlandish art and Cusa's thought, no further discussion of him at all in fact, and only a few general indications of the ways the paintings could be said to exhibit either 'the empiristic and particularistic spirit of nominalism' or 'the sense of infinity' engendered in the devout by mysticism.³⁴ Panofsky's classic *Early Netherlandish Painting*, of 1953, does not offer a fuller iconological explication of the world view underlying this art, which, in hindsight, does seem to be a remarkable lacuna. Authors like Huizinga and Warburg had gone to great lengths to study the individual, as well as group, psychologies of men and women from that time: courtiers, Italian merchants, poets, and historiographers. Like de Tolnay, Panofsky mainly ignored this accumulated historical information and posited the notion of glorious reconciliation between the medieval and the modern, not of any antipathy between these competing world views.³⁵ The work of art was not to be embedded in the issues of personal behavior and practical function dwelt upon by Warburg and Huizinga. Rather, it was to be seen as an elite, intellectual and aesthetic form of communication. Panofsky was a philosopher/theologian, not an anthropologist. Early Netherlandish painting became for him a medieval theologian's dream come true.

Whereas Panofsky's 'synthetic intuition' was not carefully supported in general historical terms, an attempt was made to demonstrate its value in particular examples. It is sometimes claimed today that the great German art historian moved from a theoretically focused stage of writing, while he was growing up in Germany, to a more practical, empirically oriented approach during his years in America, from 1934 until his death in 1968.³⁶ Such a proposal is congruent with Panofsky's work in the field of early Netherlandish painting. His approach rested on the compelling detective work that he exhibited in interpreting individual images. The first object of his analysis, van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, was a picture that had always seemed the epitome of a rather naïve, documentary realism.

Huizinga had said that ‘painting the portrait did not require that [van Eyck] reproduce the splendid majesty of God nor sense the haughtiness of the nobleman’ – the artist was, after all, simply depicting his friends.³⁷ Panofsky’s ideas were somewhat different. As has been explained in Chapter 1 [pp. 63-64], he viewed the painting’s realism as documentary, even legal: the work was a painted marriage certificate, complete with witnesses in the mirror and certifying signature on the wall. In addition, many objects in the portrayed environment were claimed to carry religious, or sacramental, symbolism. The panel was said to function allegorically as a hymn to the Christian theology of matrimony.

The most important aspect of this interpretation was, I believe, the notion of a totally transfigured realism. Panofsky managed to make his readers sensitive to the possible symbolic significance of everything in the image. Knowing this would allow us to understand better the complex overall meaning that the portrait had for its contemporaries. In its simplest sense, iconography involved the identification of subject matter; to that initial determination was now added the notion that the humblest detail within such a composition might add further symbolic reference to the scene.

In his 1953 study Panofsky codified this point with the claim that van Eyck’s ‘imaginary reality was controlled to the smallest detail by a preconceived symbolical program’.³⁸ Although he believed that the ultimate ‘symbolic value’, or iconology, of a work of art often remained unconscious, he clearly raised the level of attention paid to the artist’s conscious behavior.³⁹ Artistic creativity was thereby increasingly rationalized and predetermined. In spite of this, Panofsky himself never did explain absolutely every detail in a picture and that seems quite intentional. It was important to enunciate a new principle of minute, careful observation, not necessarily to give a literal-minded demonstration of it. If carried to its almost illogical conclusion, such an analysis might well render the image of little more visual interest than a recipe. I believe Panofsky was wary of this eventuality; many of his followers have not been. They have taken his general pronouncements as a challenge to explain everything in light of one overriding symbolic program. No one has ever succeeded in this task. More important to Panofsky than making everything fit into a rigid program was the suggestion that everything had explanatory potential. This is something that could be a liberating not a limiting idea.

In order to define the kind of symbolism that could within an apparently realistic image take on symbolic meaning, Panofsky coined the term ‘disguised (or concealed) symbolism’, which was necessary, he claimed, to distinguish this symbolism from other ‘open (or obvious) symbolism’.⁴⁰ He first suggested this notion in 1934; by 1953 it had become a ‘principle’ reaching its climax in the great Flemings:

In Early Flemish painting [...] the method of disguised symbolism was applied to each and every object, man-made or natural. It was employed as a general principle instead of only occasionally just as was the case with the method of naturalism. In fact, these two methods were genuine correlates. The more the painters rejoiced in the discovery and reproduction of the visible world, the more intensely did they feel the need to saturate all of its elements with meaning. Conversely, the harder they strove to express new subtleties and complexities of thought and imagination, the more eagerly did they explore new areas of reality.⁴¹

It might seem that Panofsky is here espousing an equally determining relation between the realism and the symbolism of these images. But his notion of a preconceived symbolical program that controls the portrayal of reality down to the smallest detail obviously shows his priorities. For him a subtle hierarchy existed since, in an ideal case, everything should be symbolic significant. If it was not, as was the case, he believed, with some works by Robert Campin, then the painting was not coherent or stabilized: its system of symbolism was not yet crystallized.⁴² Because of the apparent symbolic richness of his works, van Eyck was the focus of Panofsky's interpretation of early Netherlandish art.⁴³

At the same time, Panofsky discussed realism apart from disguised symbolism. *Early Netherlandish Painting* begins with an introduction to the development of realism north and south of the Alps. He was here essentially reworking a topic to which he had devoted an earlier study, a 1924/25 essay on perspective.⁴⁴ In the introduction he thus placed great emphasis on the use of linear perspective in the creation of a 'modern' and 'stable' view of the visible world on a two-dimensional surface. As others have remarked, it was unfortunate that he should have based his presentation in this case on perspective, since northern fifteenth-century European artists showed little concern with it.⁴⁵ It was also unfortunate that he should have adopted a view which made it seem that everyone strove to achieve the 'modern' and 'stable' representation of reality gradually and increasingly over time. This seems hardly to be demonstrated by the many artistic styles employed in the north throughout this period. Panofsky's stated view of Netherlandish realism was, to put it succinctly, rather simplistic.

It is curious that he often kept the quotation marks around his 'modern', 'stable' and 'coherent' concept of realism.⁴⁶ He thereby recognized, I believe, that his interpretation greatly simplified what many authors before him had seen as a much more complex phenomenon. He showed some recognition of this complexity when he referred to van Eyck's *imaginary* reality.⁴⁷ His symbolic interpretations were in general based on an artist's ability to manipulate the visual reality of his images to suit symbolic ends.

In order to apply his concept of disguised symbolism, Panofsky had to answer the question how one was to know that a realistic detail held symbolic significance. He began with a general statement, but quickly added three quite specific conditions:

There is, I am afraid, no other answer to this problem than the use of historical methods tempered, if possible, by common sense. We have to ask ourselves whether or not the symbolical significance of a given motif is a matter of established representational tradition [...]; whether or not a symbolical interpretation can be justified by definite texts or agrees with ideas demonstrably alive in the period and presumably familiar to its artists [...]; and to what extent such a symbolical interpretation is in keeping with the historical position and personal tendencies of the individual master.⁴⁸

These three safeguards – representational tradition, literary tradition, and personal artistic tendencies – gave Panofsky’s approach a deceptive aura of objectivity. The author made it sound like a certain source would unequivocally indicate that a certain image meant a certain thing at a certain time. Later applications have shown that there is a great deal of latitude possible in the use of these guidelines. But still there was a sense of objectivity in Panofsky’s plan that was probably partly responsible for scholars’ willingness to ignore the lack of specific historical documentation for his theory. If all individual interpretations were to be so carefully supported and certified, then perhaps the underlying cultural construct or mentality, not yet well defined, would emerge over time?

It is in this light, too, that we can further appreciate Panofsky’s preference for the telling model or case study. Whereas his study of the *Arnolfini Portrait* initiated this direction, he returned in *Early Netherlandish Painting* to a focus on the particular. For instance, he ended his discussion of symbolism with a detective-like treatment of van Eyck’s *Virgin and Child in a Church* [FIG. 163]. Here, as in his earlier *Arnolfini* essay, the reader was cunningly led through miscellaneous tidbits of medieval thought – legend, archeology, and literature – until arriving at a conclusion that seemed both circuitous and inevitable. Even if we feel that Panofsky’s interpretation was based on one-sided information,⁴⁹ we must admit that the procedure was engrossing and enlightening. This was the kind of thing other teachers could repeat to their students – and they did, over and over again.

Panofsky’s neat formulations of opposing forces (‘medieval symbolism’ and ‘modern realism’), his precise methodological outlines and procedures, and finally his intriguing case studies stick in the mind long after one has learned that they may not fully convey the complexity of the historical situation. These are some of the reasons that art-historical scholarship fell almost completely under his influ-

ence in the 1960s and 1970s. One critic noted that his formulations tended to disengage themselves from reality: intellectual delight was intense but abstract.⁵⁰ Indeed, his was an academic exercise, and he succeeded brilliantly in drawing the viewer ever more securely into the intellectual arena of his choosing. In 1939 Panofsky's wish to claim that works of art reflected some of 'the boldest intellectual structures ever erected by the human mind'⁵¹ might have struck some scholars as far-fetched. Today, after observing his (and others') mental gymnastics for over fifty years, few would deny that, at least in some cases, he had proved his point. In presenting his theory of disguised symbolism, he may have raised more problems than he solved. But for all its drawbacks, his theory did manage to highlight one very important issue – and that was the status of the visual arts. For Panofsky the visual arts were not dumb, sentimental or merely aesthetic. In the process of addressing this issue, he may have made painting seem too rational, too intentional, too predetermined, and too elite in its intellectual component. But after Panofsky art and art history would never be the same again. He brought them both in quite concrete ways into the realm of intellectual history in general.

INITIAL REACTION TO PANOFSKY

Once Panofsky's theory about the finely-wrought religious symbolism of early Netherlandish painting was put forward, for many people it became a quite natural and readily understandable interpretation: if an artist were as neat and detailed in his portrayal of the physical world as van Eyck, then would he not also be neat and detailed in his exposition of Christian theology? But did these two elements in fact go together harmoniously? In his 1956 review of Panofsky's *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Otto Pächt expressed his doubts. He first acknowledged the nineteenth-century view that Eyckian painting was characterized simply by the 'discovery of nature'; this, he said, had clearly proven to be an inadequate historical explanation. But Panofsky's approach posed a fundamental, social and psychological, problem:

The secretive nature of early Christian art which had to invent pictorial signs intelligible only to the initiated can easily be understood, but that a new cryptic language should have been created at the very moment when religious art was anxious to broaden its basis and to appeal to wider circles, to people less familiar with theological concepts, would at first seem paradoxical and demands some explanation.⁵²

Pächt, as well as several other early critics,⁵³ disagreed with Panofsky's explanation for this conceptual problem – that realism needed symbolism in order to develop more fully. In this scenario, how and why would a realistic form of representation be initiated at all?

Julius Held was disturbed by Panofsky's rather simplistic analysis of the development of realistic representation. Throughout fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting, Held saw a tension between two-dimensional surface pattern and three-dimensional illusion, a deliberate play between what Panofsky had labeled *retardataire* versus progressive elements in the evolution of realism. Held thus gave greater attention to a variety of formal problems in early Netherlandish art.⁵⁴ In his opinion, Panofsky's consistent, linear view of the progress of visual realism was misleading. It gave a false impression about the complexity of this historical phenomenon. However, he did not extend this critique to include the relative importance of detailed religious symbolism in Panofsky's system. In fact, he treated the issue of symbolism as a quite separate one, simply needing the careful application of Panofsky's safeguards in order to protect scholarship from 'trigger-happy iconologists'.⁵⁵

Perhaps Held was right here. An exhaustive application of Panofsky's checks and balances might well produce an understanding of symbolism both more detailed and more attuned to a particular historical context than the scholar himself or his immediate followers often favored. Panofsky had illuminated this situation when he wrote of a case where 'texts familiar to everyone for many centuries [had] yet failed to produce a visual image until the temper of the times demanded it'.⁵⁶ This indicated that an important part of iconographic analysis would not only be identification of the literary source but, in addition, a discussion of how the source coincided with the personal tendencies and historical position of the artist. There was a danger that an investigation would be immediately halted when it was thought that a literary source for the representation had been found.⁵⁷ We would still need to explain just how that source came to be used in that particular way at that time.

Related to this issue was Held's displeasure with Panofsky's lack of attention to social history.⁵⁸ He suggested that consideration should be given to painters' different social *milieus* when evaluating the meaning of their art. Not all artists at all levels of society would have access to, or interest in, the same erudite theological discourse. Years before Panofsky published his book, Meyer Schapiro had already focused on this situation and proclaimed:

The introduction of nature and, with it, of the domestic human surroundings into painting can hardly be credited to a religious purpose. The mousetrap found in the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 9; SEE CHAPTER 1, P. 20], like other house-

hold objects, had first to be interesting as a part of the extended visible world, before its theological significance could justify its presence in a religious picture.⁵⁹

And in the same article Schapiro elaborated further:

These symbols, whether religious or psychological, presuppose the development of realism, that is the imaging of the world for its sake, as a beautiful, fascinating spectacle in which man discovers his own horizons and freedom of movement. The devoted rendering of the objects of the home and the vocation foretells the disengagement of still life as a fully secular sphere of the intimate and the manipulable. Religious thought tries to appropriate all this for itself; it seeks to stamp the freshly discovered world with its own categories, to spiritualize it and incorporate it within a scheme of otherworldly values [...].⁶⁰

Here we find a quite different set of priorities from Panofsky's, and these priorities resulted in a quite different iconology for early Netherlandish painting. Gone was de Tolnay's and Panofsky's glorious and harmonious interaction of sacred and secular worlds. In its place, Schapiro introduced a thinly veiled Marxist critique of religious life. His 'synthetic intuition' assumed that the Church was a repressive force in people's lives and that their intimate personal and material desires would strive to express themselves outside the bounds of organized religion. This point of view, which was closer to that of Johan Huizinga, was also either implicitly or openly supported by several of Panofsky's other contemporaries.⁶¹ However, during the 1960s and 1970s, no one pursued the ideas and theories of this group of critics; a social-historical explanation for the production of art was not in favor. In fact, Schapiro's views have at times been unthinkingly lumped together with Panofsky's.⁶²

THE NEXT GENERATION

Whereas several art historians in the later 1940s and 1950s questioned the crucial role that both Panofsky and de Tolnay gave to erudite Christian symbolism in the origins and development of early Netherlandish painting, few such doubts interfered with the iconographical investigations of those authors working in the following two-and-a-half decades. Detailed religious symbolism was primary; its interpretation would allow the observer properly to analyze an artist's use of realistic motifs.⁶³ Throughout this period the interpretations of disguised symbol-

ism became increasingly complex. Medieval theological writings were minutely examined; visual precedents were brought forth from all over Europe. As one critic of this kind of elaboration later remarked: 'In systems like [...] Christian theology, matured and elaborated over centuries, almost everything can signify something [...]; many things can signify various things.'⁶⁴

Indeed, so assiduous were scholars that they rapidly proved both of these contentions: all things were meaningful and many things were doubly, even triply so. Faced with such an embarrassment of riches, a number of writers clearly felt that complexity was best: 'the most hidden meanings are the sweetest', a quotation from the early Christian Church Father Saint Augustine, was an appropriate motto for the interpretations.⁶⁵

But were multiple meanings likely, even possible, for fifteenth-century Netherlandish artists to have embedded within their works? Panofsky had certainly been aware of the potential for various meanings, even conflicting ones, to be given to one motif. Interestingly, his discussion of this point is buried in the last footnote of his *Arnolfini* essay.⁶⁶ A dog could stand for both faithfulness and carnal desire, but not, he felt, in the same picture: in any one image we should opt for the one meaning that 'fit'. Gombrich decisively sided with this view: he knew of no medieval or Renaissance text which supported the notion that a work of pictorial art was intended to carry more than one meaning.⁶⁷ On the other hand, some investigators pointed out that late medieval writings, like the *Mirror of Human Salvation* (*Speculum humanae salvationis*), openly acknowledged that things could appear to have various meanings: Christian scripture, the *Mirror* claimed, was intentionally malleable. This, according to a modern author, 'might be taken as the iconographer's license to practice'.⁶⁸

If a painter were going to use such complex, multi-dimensional symbolism, he would surely need help and advice, a research assistant (like those employed by the scholars who were producing these interpretations!); in fact, he would need what quickly became known as a 'theological advisor'. I have already mentioned some of the rare documented cases of a fifteenth-century Netherlandish artist being advised about the 'subjects' of a commissioned work. Despite the paucity of this kind of evidence and its limited application to the vast majority of fifteenth-century paintings, the notion of 'theological advisors' became a commonplace. William Heckscher was certain that a modern interpretation of an early Netherlandish picture could not hope to be successful unless it tried to discover 'how the composition as a whole and in its parts may have been determined by iconographic advisors'.⁶⁹ Carla Gottlieb thought it seemed 'probable that the symbolic program of the Mérode Altarpiece was devised for the painter by an advisor'.⁷⁰ And John Ward wondered to what extent Jan van Eyck could have been responsible for 'the extremely intricate and erudite symbolism' he discovered in the artist's paintings:

‘It seems likely that [van Eyck] needed, and had available, religious scholars to consult.’⁷¹

After reading unsubstantiated statements such as these, we might rightly wonder what had happened to Panofsky’s safeguards: representational tradition, literary tradition, and the personal tendencies and specific historical position of the individual artist? Were art historians using all three conditions in a carefully coordinated and historically sensitive fashion? The answer, of course, is no, they were not. Actually, the situation is more complex and interesting than that simple negative would suggest. In his study of the *Friedsam Annunciation* [FIG. 119], Panofsky gave a vivid demonstration of the way he tried to assemble a visual iconographic tradition.⁷² He gathered together tens of examples of the *Annunciation* in order to discuss something quite general about the image: the kind of architectural enclosure or backdrop used, domestic or ecclesiastical, interior or exterior. His followers were concerned to trace much more specific and peculiar compositional elements of paintings. Why, for instance, was a domestic fireplace included in some scenes with the Virgin and Child?⁷³ According to the author who posed this question, the fireplace symbolized the holocaust, or Jewish burnt offering, which was superseded by the Christian Eucharistic sacrifice. The only possible visual prototype for the motif was found in an early fourteenth-century fresco in Assisi, and the reader was left wondering how the northern artists could have known, or even properly interpreted, the Italian work. In another example, the curtains being pulled aside by prophet-like figures in the foreground of Hugo van der Goes’s *Berlin Nativity* [FIG. 67] were identified with the altar curtains pulled back during the mass at the time of transubstantiation.⁷⁴ The visual prototypes produced to support this interpretation were suggestive, but were drawn from different centuries and geographical regions. Some scholars finally chose to avoid the issue of representational tradition, claiming that the symbolism they had discovered was unique: it had no visual precedents and could not automatically be transferred from one picture to another.⁷⁵

Often Panofsky’s second kind of safeguard, literary tradition, fared no better. A number of art historians did show alertness to the idea that they should be able to indicate that a literary source was known to the artist in question.⁷⁶ But many earlier medieval texts were cited without any specific justification for their use in the fifteenth century; a correspondence with the image was enough. In the case of van Eyck’s *Virgin and Chancellor Rolin* [FIG. 165], no special reason was given when a twelfth-century monkish exegesis was said to have been employed as the basis for a painting executed for a powerful and worldly lay donor, who lived much later.⁷⁷ Scholastic theories about personal beatitude were equally linked to ecclesiastical and lay, public and private commissions.⁷⁸ A critic of this rather indiscriminate application of medieval literary sources has noted that interpreta-

tions of Scripture favored in the fifteenth century were often quite different from those proposed several centuries earlier.⁷⁹ Apart from this, the question of how earlier texts could have arrived in a fifteenth-century artist's mind, or hands, was not resolved. One suggestion here has been a consideration of the role of late medieval *compendia*, handbooks made from earlier treatises for the use of priests in composing sermons.⁸⁰ In this way, sophisticated theology and imagery might have reached a popular audience and been included in painting, without direct knowledge of its original, erudite source.

While religious texts were accumulated rather loosely, they were connected to the images ever more strictly. According to a scholar, 'one is tempted to imagine that the painter read [the text] as he was painting the picture'.⁸¹ Details in paintings were said to 'literally illustrate a significant passage' in the Bible. A small white pebble on Joseph's workbench in the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 9] was thus 'meant to illustrate a passage in the text of the Apocalypse'.⁸² If this were true, the need for advisors, as well as the specter of an extremely rational creative process, would be omnipresent.

To be fair, I should point out that some attempts certainly met both the spirit and the letter of Panofsky's prescriptions concerning literary sources. Carol Purtle made a conscientious effort to interpret van Eyck's Marian paintings in light of fifteenth-century churchgoers' 'daily bread'. She asked herself: what symbolism would have been clear and intelligible to the educated men and women who frequented the churches and chapels where, she presumes, van Eyck's paintings were displayed? Her answer was that symbolism was drawn from or based on 'the continual living record of the Church's public worship [...] accessible in her liturgical books'.⁸³ Although she did occasionally interject earlier medieval source material into her discussions, Purtle showed a prime concern with 'illustrating the attitude of the teaching Church' in order to understand the symbolism of religious art. Some of the scholars who anticipated or followed her interest in the Catholic liturgy used information thus gained to interpret details or special kinds of imagery;⁸⁴ others saw the liturgical and sacramental texts and practices of the Church as providing far-reaching explanation for a great variety of pictures.⁸⁵ This kind of investigation has remained speculative, since we do not know exactly how the works were used in relation to church ceremonies.

To my knowledge, there exists only one extended account of the way a complex fifteenth-century theological text could be said to exhibit religious concerns very similar to those discovered in a painted image. Dana Goodgal found a treatise on the Eucharist written by the prior of Saint Bavo's monastery in Ghent, nearby the church of Saint John, for which the *Ghent Altarpiece* was painted.⁸⁶ The treatise was completed eight years after the polyptych, so it is not a prior source for it. Yet, the important point remains that here we have a literary work by a contempo-

rary author, conceivably acquainted with the artist, and this text is strikingly close to the image in theological terms.

Perhaps the least respected of Panofsky's safeguards was the category of personal artistic tendencies. In the face of the overwhelming drive toward more complex iconographic explanations, personal differences among painters were mainly swept aside. Panofsky had insisted on seeing Robert Campin's work as a still imperfect version of the Eyckian ideal combination of realism and symbolism, the work therefore of a primitive and provincial master.⁸⁷ Meyer Schapiro, on the other hand, championed this artist of the middle class, attempting to show that his work exhibited a subtle mixture of religious, social, psychological and sexual concerns.⁸⁸ In either case, the individuality and distinctiveness of Campin was assumed. A few art historians in the 1960s and 1970s did stress a painter's individual approach to the issue of symbolism. Robert Koch connected Hugo van der Goes's personal psychology with the presence of both a chill landscape and an elaborate symbolic floral still life in the *Portinari Altarpiece* [FIGS. 48, 57].⁸⁹ Shirley Blum wrote that 'eventually scholars may find that the work of early Netherlandish masters differs almost as much in symbolic practice and interpretation as it does stylistically'.⁹⁰ In the art of Rogier van der Weyden, she pointed to the manner in which he segmented space, even out of doors, for psychological and symbolic purposes.

In contrast to Blum's surmise, a number of studies went to great lengths to equate the symbolism of a work like the *Mérode Triptych* [FIG. 7] with that originally only claimed for van Eyck's imagery.⁹¹ In these writings no account was taken of the particular social, political or economic setting for this work. No special allowance was made for the personal demands of the patrons kneeling patiently in the left panel. No reason was given for this particular artist at this particular time and place to want to convey the particular symbolic meaning that was being suggested. The principle seemed only to be that the religious symbolism of every painter deserved to be interpreted in as complex a manner as possible.

VARIOUS DIRECTIONS

Panofsky's general 'synthetic intuition' about early Netherlandish painting was in some ways highly personal and subjective.⁹² Were it not for his iconological pre-sumptions about the essential nature of this art, he would not have looked for his evidence where he did. In his book of 1953 he claimed that in the fifteenth century 'a way had to be found to reconcile the new naturalism with a thousand years of Christian tradition'.⁹³ The imperative sense that he gives to this situation is revealing. Why did this reconciliation have to take place? According to Meyer

Schapiro, it certainly did not. What if some people in the fifteenth century found it difficult to continue to propound or believe the ever more complex rational theological arguments that had characterized the Scholastic tradition?

Panofsky took the motto for his chapter on symbolism in this book from Saint Thomas Aquinas: 'corporeal metaphors of things spiritual' (*spiritualia sub metaphoris corporalium*). He clearly thought that the explanation for the intriguing complexities of early Netherlandish realism was to be found in the medieval *summas*. We might note in passing that he was increasingly drawn to the Catholic Church and, according to one friend and colleague, might have converted if his sense of betrayal of the Holocaust would not have been so great.⁹⁴ Perhaps because of his own interest in Scholasticism, he failed to acknowledge the serious decline of this intellectual tradition that had already occurred in the fourteenth century.⁹⁵ One theologian in the fifteenth century has in fact been dubbed 'the last of the Schoolmen',⁹⁶ indicating the limited appeal that such thinking had at that time. Although Panofsky mentioned the rise of Nominalism in the fourteenth century, he did not sufficiently explain its purpose and its impact.

Philosophic Nominalism was essentially a skeptical response to the exaltation of human reason accomplished by medieval Scholasticism. For William of Ockham, an early fourteenth-century English theologian and champion of Nominalism, idle speculation on the nature of the divine plan was decisively cut off by 'Ockham's razor', a concept which dictated that the simplest argument was best. Aspects of a discussion that were not necessary or provable should be set aside.⁹⁷ The difference between Nominalism and Scholasticism is one that finds distinct analogies in the different approaches of recent art historians to the problem of symbolism in early Netherlandish painting. Several scholars believe that symbolism will not be inherently or necessarily complex and propose interpretations that are 'iconographically minimalist': if an explanation can be offered that does not require 'hidden symbolism', then that would be preferable.⁹⁸ Others try to find, as Panofsky and his followers did, that religious images carry complex, rationally identifiable symbolism.

One of the earliest representatives of the first group is Jozef De Coo, who sought to embed the *Mérode Triptych* in a particular social and economic setting.⁹⁹ He pointed out that, due to its small scale and the presence of donors, the work should be considered a private middle class commission. Its individual elements, especially the newly invented reversible bench before which the Virgin reposes, were meant to function directly within an everyday Netherlandish context [SEE ALSO CHAPTER 1, PP. 19-20]. Common human feelings such as pride of ownership and desire for children effaced theological intricacies as the explanation for the painting's appearance. As I have mentioned in my introduction, contemporary documents do reinforce some of De Coo's arguments: specific pieces of furniture

were commissioned to be included in mid-fifteenth-century Netherlandish artworks.¹⁰⁰ But there is no proof that these objects did not take on further meaning once inserted into pictures. Perhaps there is a useful distinction to be made here between the conscious intention of the painter (in this case, to include a specific new kind of bench) and ideas that might have occurred to people when looking at the painting (and imagining possible religious significance for the bench)?¹⁰¹

De Coö's rationale for the painter's inclusion of a reversible bench in the *Mérode Triptych* raises the issue of the visual realism once again. How accurate were the images? How much documentary information about contemporary life can we derive from them? Were they meant to act in some way as literal records of interiors at that time? The painting that has always been most subject to speculation in this regard is the *Arnolfini Portrait* [FIG. 25; SEE ALSO CHAPTER 1, PP. 59-77]. In reaction to Panofsky's idea that the work functioned as a kind of marriage certificate and that the apparent realism of the scene was carefully constructed along symbolic lines, Jan Baptist Bedaux eliminated the second part of this argument, considering the idea of documentary realism as a sufficient explanation.¹⁰² There is no necessity for conscious symbolism; therefore, it is eliminated by virtue of 'Ockham's razor'. Bedaux did not doubt that objects in the picture might have had significance in the context of local folklore, as traditional accompaniments to a wedding ceremony. But by van Eyck's time knowledge of the specific meaning and function of these objects was at least partly forgotten; they were depicted because they were there, in the house, in the bridal bedroom.

Intent on limiting the symbolic interpretations of the portrait as Bedaux was, Svetlana Alpers proposed that van Eyck was one of the first in a unique Netherlandish tradition, that is an obsession with pictorially describing the surface of things, rather than intellectually trying to delve beneath those surfaces, to display some hidden symbolism.¹⁰³ Alpers felt that in the *Arnolfini Portrait* 'van Eyck bears witness to or documents a world that is prior to him rather than laying claim to be the creator of a new or second one'.¹⁰⁴ In a similar vein Edwin Hall, who demonstrated that a specific moment in the couple's betrothal process is represented, called the room itself a 'studied depiction of upper-middle-class affluence'.¹⁰⁵ Lorne Campbell brought forward information gleaned from an examination of infrared reflectograms.¹⁰⁶ Because many of the presumed symbolic details in the image were not underdrawn, he concluded that there was no preconceived program and that van Eyck painted with marvelous artifice but no particular symbolic or narrative meaning.

In response to these various expressions of symbolic reductionism in relation to the *Arnolfini Portrait*, it seems important to emphasize the issue of pictorial order. Do the incredibly controlled compositions of van Eyck suggest a casual photographic eye that simply recorded what it saw?¹⁰⁷ Surely the way all the

objects in the *Arnolfini Portrait* were arranged on the surface of the image demonstrates van Eyck's manipulative skills and designs (as Campbell, too, acknowledges). The three-dimensional structure is impossible: both mirror and chandelier are too low, the former inappropriately below eye level, the latter, also inappropriately, at or just above eye level. The combination of mirror, chandelier, prayer-beads, dusting brush, signature, and joined hands certainly creates a visually, and intellectually, rich focus at the center. An artist who controls his two-dimensional compositions in such elaborate ways does not seem like the naive realist that some authors propose. It should therefore not be surprising that others continued to see cleverly contrived indications of symbolic meaning in this work, be it social, sexual or religious.¹⁰⁸

Interpretations of the presumed disguised symbolism of early Netherlandish art have also in other cases been pursued with renewed vigor. Several different avenues have been explored, some rather closely aligned with Panofsky's earlier formulations.¹⁰⁹ Melanie Gifford and Carol Purtle have studied what might be called van Eyck's iconography-in-progress.¹¹⁰ These authors initially uncovered evidence similar to that which Lorne Campbell found in the *Arnolfini Portrait*: van Eyck's underdrawing in the Washington *Annunciation* is different from, and not nearly as detailed or explicit as, the final surface of the painting. They did not, however, conclude that this made the search for symbolism questionable or irrelevant; rather, they felt that 'van Eyck literally built additional meaning into the [image] as the painting progressed'.¹¹¹ Purtle has also continued to espouse her belief in the way images of the Virgin and Child illustrate the attitudes of the teaching Church; these proposals form an intriguing contrast to the more documentary, secularizing views of Catherine Reynolds.¹¹²

An observer who tried to revive Panofsky's rather general iconological formulations is Shirley Blum, who studied the art of the fifteenth century in both northern and southern Europe and believed she discovered a grand concordance between the two:

The persistent and continuous search by these artists to sanctify the earth by imitating the visible world while portraying the invisible is unlike any known in the Middle Ages [...]. For one commanding moment the otherworldly and the earthly lived in perfect and reciprocal harmony.¹¹³

Unfortunately, as was the case with Panofsky's own pronouncements, Blum's sweeping statements receive little detailed historical justification in her study.

This brings us to the possibility of developing a new iconology of early Netherlandish art, an iconology that counters Panofsky's overriding emphasis on the harmonious relation of the symbolic and real with a more contentious, com-

plex and perhaps even ambiguous picture. Art historians who have explored this possibility can also be grouped according to two distinguishable approaches. These approaches, however, are not opposed but related to each other. On the one hand, authors have tried to ascertain what sort of popular religious beliefs and practices might be embodied in the paintings, considering that an image is primarily a representation of a previously existing practice or attitude. On the other, authors have suggested that artists and patrons were especially concerned with the personal, self-conscious activities and thoughts engendered by the very presence of the work of art. They have put forward the question how the art did engage the viewers in a lively dialogue, making them aware of their own part in forming the work's meaning. In both cases, there is a general shift of iconological emphasis from the uniformity of theological writing to the complexity of religious and social practice and feeling, and this is an interesting reflection of the views of scholars like Warburg, Huizinga, Schapiro and Held, who saw many, often conflicting, forces at work.¹¹⁴

In terms of the interest in existing practices and attitudes, already in the 1960s Sixten Ringbom has related images to the religious imagination of lay people.¹¹⁵ This imagination was not a tremendously refined or erudite one; it was not based on complex biblical exegesis – not on the penetrating examination of the symbolic ramifications of an event in Christ's life. Religious experience in the late Middle Ages that relied on images was unsophisticated, direct and sensual, seeking contact with the physical humanity of Christ and the saints. In the words of Lloyd Benjamin: 'Descriptive art encouraged and satisfied the demand of the devout for empathetic meditation.'¹¹⁶

Scholars have not produced a more detailed understanding of this experience since Ringbom analyzed it, but they have pointed to the outlines of religious life provided by religious and intellectual historians, such as Jacques Toussaert.¹¹⁷ His conclusions, based on extensive documentation about the devotional practices in various Flemish parishes, including Bruges, are that lay people did not focus their religious feelings on their parochial duties like attending mass and confession. They were more extravagant and magical in their attitudes, trying for instance to 'see' the consecrated host as a vision of the Christ Child, and going on both real and imaginary pilgrimages and processions, mingling superstition and personal desires with more officially recognized activities.

Early Netherlandish paintings have now been viewed as revealing these concerns. In this light images of the Enthroned Virgin and Child are not interpreted as disguised representations of the Eucharist presented on the altar (lap of the Virgin). They are rather understood as the direct embodiment of the contemporary obsession with seeing the body of Christ: when the host was elevated, people thought they saw, or wanted to see, the Christ Child.¹¹⁸ The way pilgrimage became

a theme in several images has also been examined. These include Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child in a Church* [FIG. 163], which is now be said to represent a pilgrim's vision of a cult statue that has miraculously come to life and grown large.¹¹⁹ As has been discussed in the preceding chapter [P. 375], Panofsky had suggested that this painting held complex theological significance relating to the idea of the Virgin symbolically standing for the Church; it was a representation not of the Virgin *in* a church, but of the Virgin *as* the Church.¹²⁰ For him Mary was large in van Eyck's image simply because of her symbolic meaning. A comparable transformation has been worked on Robert Campin's *Entombment* [FIG. 167]: previously said to contain complex liturgical references,¹²¹ now it has been interpreted as a pilgrim's vision or meditation.¹²² And also, Petrus Christus's *Our Lady of the Dry Tree* (Fundación Colección Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid) is now considered to portray a miraculous cult image rather than illustrating a biblical passage or medieval allegory, as Panofsky and others had assumed.¹²³

In these and other cases, the authors, using a descriptive approach based in anthropology, have constructed a narrative of religious life that focused at times on extreme forms of adoration and manipulation of images. More humble, popular works of art have been studied alongside great masterpieces.¹²⁴ This does not mean that these scholars believe that late medieval theology is irrelevant to a lay audience. But if it is invoked it tends to be given a particularly human slant. Already in an article from 1953, Otto von Simson had pointed in this direction by relating van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* [FIG. 10] to the popular religious concept of the co-passion of the Virgin [SEE CHAPTER 1, PP. 25, 28].¹²⁵ More recently, the Holy Family in the *Mérode Triptych* has been viewed, with the help of theological texts, as a marriage model for the lay patrons of the work.¹²⁶ Rather than always invoking classic medieval theological texts, authors have turned their attention to the popular devotional handbooks and movements of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Reindert Falkenburg has tried to illuminate the devotional attitudes at work in the *Mérode Triptych*, and Bret Rothstein has related writers of the Modern Devotion to van Eyck's *Virgin and Canon van der Paele*.¹²⁷ While in the 1970s Susan Koslow noted the influence of this movement on Hugo van der Goes's late style, this idea has now been explored further by Bernhard Ridderbos [SEE CHAPTER 1, PP. 124-133].¹²⁸

The art historians who studied the relations between pictures and popular religion did not consider the images only as reflections of devotional behavior, but also as meditational guides or models. This aspect has been elaborated upon by those scholars who stress on the presumed self-consciousness of both artist and viewer. Here, too, Ringbom has been a pioneer. In a similar way, James Marrow has attempted to define an overall sense of personal, psychological engagement with the art that he feels increasingly characterizes fourteenth-, fifteenth- and six-



FIGURE 167 – Robert Campin, *The Entombment Triptych (Seilern Triptych)*
(central panel including frame 65.2 x 53.6 cm; each wing including frame
64.9 x 26.8 cm), The Courtauld Institute Galleries, London, Seilern Bequest



FIGURE 168 – Rogier van der Weyden or follower, *The Crucifixion Triptych*
(central panel 96 x 69 cm; each wing 101 x 35 cm),
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

teenth-century northern examples.¹²⁹ Marrow has evaluated the religious symbolism of Netherlandish painting as quite traditional. He has emphasized instead as one of the innovative features of this art the ‘conspicuous displays of reactive emotionality’ indicated by depicted gestures and expression. Through these emotional reactions, the represented participants in the imagery are said to provide models for the meditative beholder [FIG. 168]. Both artist and spectator are seen as newly self-conscious, reaching out to one another in compelling dramatic terms. According to Marrow:

texts on the uses of religious art from this period reiterate themes familiar from other genres of contemporary devotional literature: they focus on responses to the work of art (that is, what one ‘does’ in front of it, or with it), and on the development of new states of consciousness through the use of works of art.¹³⁰

John Ward has carried further his earlier interpretation of what he calls van Eyck’s ‘enactive symbolism’.¹³¹ He speculates that by disguising his symbols this artist meant to ‘delay awareness of underlying meanings’ and thus ‘create an expressive effect of revelation and transcendence during the process of meditation’ on the image.¹³² It is only after prolonged looking that the viewer would realize the full significance of van Eyck’s subtle compositional juxtapositions, like that of the Christ Child’s blessing hand which runs into the distant bridge and thus reaches across the composition to the waiting Chancellor Rolin [FIG. 166]. Ward’s ultimate justification for this kind of interpretation of symbolism is positioned clearly within the imagery itself: its compositional methods, its details, relationships, and overall structural design.

Julien Chapuis believes that the precise meaning of early Netherlandish art is often elusive. Meaning is especially constructed by the beholder, depending on that person’s own beliefs, superstitions, experience, and knowledge.¹³³ He feels that the painters developed multiple ways of engaging the viewers: through naturalism, figures within the images which acted as models, mirrors and reflections that suggest the beholders’ presence, and frames and framing devices which activate the space between the viewers and the image. Alfred Acres is another observer who has recently placed much importance on the response to the religious images.¹³⁴ Rogier van der Weyden is said by Acres to use relatively neutral features or objects in his paintings to draw the viewers in and make them part of a complex temporal play which relates their life to that of Christ. This author claims that the artist was trying to persuade the beholders about the religious truth of the image by using complex representational rhetoric. In the *Columba Altarpiece* [FIG. 17], Rogier used successive views of a continuous landscape, seen through the arches of

the stable, in order to encourage the viewers to imagine the whole world as dynamically culminating in the foreground epiphany.¹³⁵

Scholars who emphasize such imaginative participation in the construction of the meaning of a picture are, of course, using modern perceptions and critical theories, like reader response theory. But from an iconological point of view, interpretation of this art is not primarily a modern or contemporary problem. Of interest to the iconologist is not the mere creation of new theories of meaning, but rather the way those theories are grounded in a particular historical context. Acres acknowledges that his ideas about van der Weyden's visual sensibilities have 'no compatible density of textual resonance in medieval theology'¹³⁶ – nor did they, he might have more cogently admitted, in fifteenth-century religious literature. Are clever visual analyses sufficient evidence for the production of new iconological theories about the self-reflective nature of early Netherlandish art?¹³⁷

One thing that we seem to have learned over the past 75 years is that there are many historical contexts at work in this art – many texts available, many kinds of patrons, commissions, theological issues and controversies that could impact artists, or on which they could have their own original effect. Perhaps we have also learned that a grand synthesis like Panofsky's about the harmonious relation of realism and symbolism is rarely possible, or even reasonable, in such a time of conflict and transition as the fifteenth century. It might be true that recent iconological investigations have identified more accurate 'symbolical values' for this period.

These values would include partially unconscious feelings about the fragmentation of religious motivation and behavior, as well as the newly assertive self-consciousness of both patrons and artists in constructing their own answers to a complex, constantly changing situation. No matter what, it is good to be able to say that the issue of the proper iconological understanding of early Netherlandish painting is alive and well – and not yet completely settled.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

- 1 For these panels, see esp. Sander 1993, pp. 88-128 and Sander 1996; Panofsky 1953, p. 169; Davies 1972, p. 251; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 64-67; van Asperen de Boer 1996; Châtelet 1996, pp. 65-76, 286-288; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 12-28.
- 2 Eich 1981, p. 101.
- 3 Kemperdick 1997, p. 171, n. 99.
- 4 Kemperdick, *ibid.*, pp. 21-22, attributes the *Mater Dolorosa*, modeled, as he demonstrates, on an engraving by Anton II Wierix, to the Louvain painter Josse van der Baren.
- 5 In an entry of 1848, in his journal, Boisserée asserts that the panels came from the (equally imaginary) abbey of Falin, near Sedan, and also mentions that van Houtem purchased the panels from a cleric in Liège, according to whom the central panel was burnt in the battle of Neerwinden (1793); Firmenich-Richartz 1916, p. 523; Eich 1981, p. 102. Châtelet 1996, pp. 76, 287, thinks that the original location may have been a monastery in Phalempin, in the vicinity of Lille.
- 6 Kemperdick 1997, pp. 13-18.
- 7 Kemperdick, *ibid.*, p. 21, believes that sculpture functioned on three levels: completely opened, the altarpiece showed real sculpture; open once, it showed painted sculpture, but more animated than real sculpture; completely closed, it presented imitations of sculpture.
- 8 Sander 1993, pp. 98-128; Châtelet 1996, pp. 7-13; Foister 1996; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 5-11, 149-164.
- 9 Sander 1993, pp. 129-153; Panofsky 1953, pp. 167-169; Davies 1972, pp. 248-251; Châtelet 1996, pp. 288-290; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 29-42.
- 10 Hulin de Loo 1909; Hulin de Loo 1911.
- 11 For documents on Rogier van der Weyden, see Dhanens 1995.
- 12 Feder 1966, pp. 422-423, finds nothing exceptional about this, but this is contested by Dhanens 1995, p. 42. De Vos 1999, p. 70, n. 18, assumes that the registration was a mere formality required to become an independent master.
- 13 Dhanens 1995, pp. 40-43; Martens 2001, pp. 34-35.
- 14 De Vos 1999, p. 70, n. 18.
- 15 Campbell 1981, pp. 47-50.
- 16 Feder 1966, p. 425.
- 17 In the event, the sentence was overturned through the intervention of 'Madame de Haynau', that is, Margaret of Burgundy, widow of the previous reigning duke of Hainaut, William IV of Bavaria. This was not Campin's first sentencing. In 1429, because he was not willing to testify against a member of the painters' guild who had been indicted, he was sentenced to a pilgrimage to Saint Giles in Provence and permanently barred from public office in Tournai. Whether he ever made the pilgrimage is not known. For differing views on whether these sentences were politically motivated because of Campin's leading position in the revolt of 1423-1428 in Tournai, compare Feder 1966, p. 425, Campbell 1974, p. 634 and Châtelet 1996, pp. 24-31, to Schabacker 1980, who denies any such motive.
- 18 Dhanens 1995, p. 46.
- 19 Châtelet 1996, pp. 27-29; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 152-154; De Vos 1999, pp. 46-50.
- 20 Feder 1966, p. 427; Dhanens 1995, p. 117; Kemperdick 1997, p. 152.
- 21 In keeping with their respective domiciles, Rogier's mother-in-law used the Flemish version 'van Stockem', and Campin's wife the French version 'de Stoquain'. Given that the name 'Lysebette' is a Flemish version of 'Ysabel', Rogier's

- wife Lysebette Goffaert could have been Ysabel de Stoquain's namesake and perhaps a niece; De Vos 1999, pp. 50, 71, n. 35.
- 22 See n. 8, above.
- 23 Renders 1931.
- 24 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 10-16, 64-67. Sander 1996, pp. 11-14, gives examples of various views concerning the participation of the two artists formulated before the publication of the results of the technical research and remarks that the underdrawing did not provide a solution to this problem. Châtelet sees no stylistic differences between the three panels, Kemperdick argues that the *Saint Veronica* was painted by both Campin and van der Weyden; Châtelet 1996, pp. 65-76, 286-288; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 24-28.
- 25 For this triptych, see esp. Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998, pp. 89-96; Panofsky 1953, pp. 164-167, 142-143; Davies 1972, pp. 258-260; Campbell 1974; Dijkstra 1990, pp. 162-185; Dijkstra 1996; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 103-116; Châtelet 1996, pp. 93-112, 291-294; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 77-99.
- 26 See n. 8, above.
- 27 For this panel, see esp. Stroo and Syferd'Olne 1996, pp. 37-50; Campbell 1974; Dijkstra 1990, pp. 162-185; Dijkstra 1996; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 97-102; Châtelet 1996, p. 318; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 77-99.
- 28 Stroo and Syferd'Olne 1996, p. 41.
- 29 Campbell 1974, the quotations on p. 644.
- 30 Dijkstra 1990, pp. 162-185; Dijkstra 1996; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 13-14, 97-116.
- 31 According to van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 75, 113-116, the underdrawing of the Mérode angel and Virgin is very close to the underdrawing of the *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen* in The National Gallery, London (*Salting Madonna*), and the underdrawing of the Virgin's gown in the latter to that in the Frankfurt *Virgin and Child*. But Bomford et al. 1996, p. 45, dispute these resemblances. See also Campbell 1998, p. 98, who regards the *Virgin and Child before a Firescreen*, like the *Mérode Triptych*, as a pastiche and thinks both may be by the same follower of Campin.
- 32 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 99-101, 116.
- 33 Van Asperen de Boer, *ibid.* p. 116, makes things even more complicated by suggesting that the elder master also participated in the painting of the *Mérode Triptych* where he would have employed 'a more "archaic" technique, such as the silver foil of tinfoil glazed with yellow [...] in the windows of both paintings, those in the Mérode version being overpainted with the sky by the second artist at some stage'.
- 34 Campbell 1974, p. 644. See also Kemperdick 1997, p. 182, n. 41.
- 35 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, p. 99: 'Much of the architecture in the Brussels picture was clearly "created" '.
- 36 Pächt 1977, pp. 21-24.
- 37 Panofsky 1953, pp. 131-148. In addition to the authors mentioned below, see also Meiss 1945; Gottlieb 1970; Hahn 1986; Falkenburg 2001.
- 38 Minott 1969, p. 270, identifies the candlewick as the 'smoking flax' from Isaiah 42:1-4.
- 39 Heckscher 1968.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 41 De Coo 1981.
- 42 Schapiro 1945, p. 182. See also Minott 1969.
- 43 Zupnick 1966; Jacob 1966; Eisler 1966; Schapiro 1966; Nickel 1966.
- 44 Minott 1969, p. 267.

- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 268. For suggestions concerning the possible function of the board with holes, see *ibid.*, p. 268, n. 14; Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998, p. 90.
- 47 Klein 1996. For a discussion of the various stages of the *Mérode Triptych*'s execution and hypotheses regarding the identity of the donors, see Kemperdick 1997, pp. 84-88; Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998, pp. 91-96; Thürlemann 1997.
- 48 The discovery of the separate creation of the central and side panels has led some scholars to discern different hands in the triptych; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 94-99; Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998, pp. 95-96.
- 49 For this panel, see esp. De Vos 1999, pp. 10-41, 185-188; Panofsky 1953, pp. 256-258; Folie 1963, pp. 208-210; Sulzberger 1963; Davies 1972, pp. 223-226; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 137-143; Dhanens 1995, pp. 129-130, 133-137; Kemperdick 1997, pp. 45-52; Suckale 2001.
- 50 Comblen-Sonkes 1996, p. 144.
- 51 See n. 9, above.
- 52 Von Simson 1953.
- 53 For this panel, see esp. De Vos 1999, pp. 291-294; Panofsky 1953, pp. 288-289; Folie 1963, p. 210; Davies 1972, p. 211; Soenen 1979; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 144-151; Dhanens 1995, pp. 130, 133-134; Hedemann 1995.
- 54 Soenen 1979; Dhanens 1995, p. 130.
- 55 De Vos 1999, p. 292, believes the painting was executed 'in anticipation of the foundation of the monastery', because the figure of Saint John would already have been borrowed by another painter around 1455.
- 56 Panofsky 1953, p. 289.
- 57 Davies 1972, p. 211. See also Hedemann 1995.
- 58 For this altarpiece, see esp. Veronee-Verhaegen 1973; De Vos 1999, pp. 252-265; Panofsky 1953, pp. 268-272; Blum 1969, pp. 37-48; Davies 1972, pp. 197-199; Feder 1975; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 181-201.
- 59 Veronee-Verhaegen 1973, pp. 45-46, 64.
- 60 Panofsky 1953, p. 270.
- 61 De Bruyne 1992; Blum 1969, pp. 37-48.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 136, n. 64.
- 63 For this altarpiece, see esp. De Vos 1999, pp. 120, 276-284; Panofsky 1953, pp. 286-288; Davies 1972, pp. 227-228; Dijkstra 1985; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 202-221. For a specific iconological interpretation, see Acres 1998.
- 64 Dijkstra 1985; van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 202-221.
- 65 Dijkstra 1985.
- 66 Dijkstra, *ibid.*, p. 193, assumes that, initially, the altarpiece was not destined for the portrayed donor. De Vos concludes from this that, according to Dijkstra, the work was originally uncommissioned, an idea he rejects. In his view the insertion of the portrait does not imply that its subject was not the original commissioner, but only that, at the outset, the triptych may have been planned to dispense with a portrait; De Vos 1999, pp. 282, 284, n. 16.
- 67 The borrowings from Lochner were first observed by Markham Schulz 1971, who proposed that Rogier added a sojourn in Cologne to his journey to Italy.
- 68 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 44-45. De Vos 1999, p. 281, dates the work between 1450 en 1456. See also Markham Schulz 1971, pp. 69-72.
- 69 De Vos 1999, pp. 281-282.
- 70 For the history of the altarpiece following its installation, see Coremans 1953, pp. 21-32. For its history during the German

- occupation, see also Lust and Marijnissen 1992, pp. 21-43.
- 71 Dhanens 1965, p. 47.
- 72 Meiss 1945, esp. n. 27. For a different interpretation, see Madigan 1986.
- 73 For artistic means which link a painting to the world of the viewer, see, concerning the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Ridderbos 1991, pp. 18-19, 176-177 and Wilhelmy 1993, pp. 71-75; concerning late medieval northern European painting in general, Marrow 1986.
- 74 Coremans 1953, pp. 108-111; van Asperen de Boer 1979, pp. 192-201, 206-207.
- 75 Herzner 1995, pp. 40-41.
- 76 Dhanens 1980, p. 81.
- 77 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-31.
- 78 *Ibid.*, pp. 34-59; Paviot 1990.
- 79 Panofsky 1953, pp. 205-232.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 443, n. 7.
- 81 Coremans 1953, pp. 115-116.
- 82 Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1987.
- 83 Dhanens 1965, p. 31.
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 30; Wilhelmy 1993, pp. 68-70.
- 85 Dhanens 1965, pp. 89-93.
- 86 *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 87 *Ibid.*, pp. 96-99; Van Asperen de Boer 1979, p. 200.
- 88 Goodgal 1981.
- 89 *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- 90 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, pp. 208.
- 91 *Ibid.*
- 92 Van Asperen de Boer and Faries 1990; Bosshard 1992, pp. 9-11; Billinge and Campbell 1995; van Asperen de Boer 1995; van Asperen de Boer 1997; Faries 1997.
- 93 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, p. 212.
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 Renders 1933.
- 96 Coremans 1953, pp. 120-122.
- 97 Ampe 1969.
- 98 Herzner 1995.
- 99 Unless otherwise stated, the facts regarding the *Arnolfini Portrait* derive from Campbell 1998, pp. 174-211.
- 100 Huizinga 1949, pp. 489-491, voiced doubts about the reading of the name as Arnolfini. See also Ridderbos 2002.
- 101 Paviot 1997.
- 102 Campbell 1998, 192-198.
- 103 Panofsky 1934.
- 104 Panofsky 1953, pp. 201-203.
- 105 Baldwin 1984. See also Bedaux 1986.
- 106 Anne van Buren pointed this out to me.
- 107 Seidel 1989; Seidel 1993; Harbison 1990; Harbison 1991, pp. 33-47.
- 108 Bedaux 1986.
- 109 Hall 1994. See also Eörsi 1996.
- 110 Campbell 1998, pp. 198-204.
- 111 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 112 *Ibid.*
- 113 *Ibid.*, p. 204.
- 114 Oral information by Anne van Buren, who also drew my attention to von Wilckens 1988, p. 52, according to whom the dress's green color may refer to young love and hope. This idea is further explored in Tripps 1994.
- 115 Hall 1994, pp. 64-65, 83.
- 116 *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
- 117 Preimesberger 1991.
- 118 Baxandall 1971, p. 107.
- 119 Preimesberger 1991, pp. 480-481. See also Belting 1994, pp. 74-75; Borchert 1997a, pp. 74-75; Paviot 2000, p. 277.
- 120 Preimesberger 1991, pp. 483-485.
- 121 *Ibid.*, p. 484; Belting and Kruse 1994, p. 73. See also Yiu 2001, esp. pp. 175-196. This study appeared too late to be included in my discussion.
- 122 In the underdrawing the mirror is not only larger, but octagonal. Invoking a nineteenth-century type of mirror, a round, surrounded by eight smaller mirrors, and called a nine-eyes (*negenooog*), Campbell 1998, p. 189, suggests that such a mirror was planned at first. This is rather speculative, and there is no reason to assume that the scenes from the Passion were not

- originally planned: an octagonal frame could have shown the eight actual Passion scenes. When its form was changed, it became possible to include the *Harrowing of Hell* and the *Resurrection*.
- 123 For the technical examination and dating, see Spronk 1996, pp. 10-13; Hensick 2003.
- 124 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 125 Held 1982, pp. 35-64; Schabacker 1974/76. In Ridderbos 1993, I followed Held's hypothesis that the lost panel was originally the cover of the *Arnolfini Portrait*, but have since abandoned it, persuaded by the arguments of Campbell 1998, p. 201.
- 126 Paviot 2000.
- 127 Briels 1980, pp. 175-180.
- 128 I suggested a relation between van Eyck's picture and *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* in Ridderbos 1993. In Borchert et al. 2002, p. 239, nr. 36, it is erroneously stated that I consider the *Woman at her Toilet* as an allegory of *Fides*. For other views, see Held 1982, pp. 35-64, and Schabacker 1974/76.
- 129 Doutrepoint 1977, p. 66-67, nr. 106; Bousmanne, Johan and Van Hoorebeeck 2003, pp. 119-122. See also *ibid.*, pp. 88-92.
- 130 Montaiglon 1854, p. 3. For a recent study on *Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry*, see De Gendt 2003.
- 131 Montaiglon 1854, pp. 154-155.
- 132 See Paviot 2000, pp. 267-269, who relates the image to the themes of *Luxuria* and *Superbia*.
- 133 Paviot, *ibid.* p. 279, n. 20, points out that the term *vanitas* was not used in van Eyck's time.
- 134 For Memling's *Bathsheba* and *Luxuria* and their relations to the two lost van Eyck pictures, see Briels 1980, pp. 178 (n. 110)-180; De Vos 1994, pp. 245-247; 272-275.
- 135 For other images of *Luxuria* which might go back to the *Woman at her Toilet*, see Schabacker 1974/76; Paviot 2000, pp. 276-277.
- 136 Hall 1994, pp. 83-88.
- 137 For medieval, theological views on marriage and their relevance to the *Arnolfini Portrait*, see Bedaux 1986.
- 138 *Ibid.*, p. 39; Stroo and Syfer-d'Olne 1996, p. 46.
- 139 Hall 1994, pp. 107-123, provides depictions in which one or more motifs from the *Arnolfini Portrait* occur without any symbolic meaning.
- 140 Gifford 1999; Purtle 1999.
- 141 As for the *Arnolfini Portrait*, Campbell 1998, p. 201, assumes a 'constant contact between the artist and his subjects'.
- 142 Van Asperen de Boer and Faries 1990.
- 143 Buck 1995.
- 144 Ainsworth and Martens 1994.
- 145 Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998, pp. 86-88; Belting and Eichberger 1983; Buck 1995.
- 146 Panofsky 1953, p. 309.
- 147 Belting and Eichberger 1983.
- 148 *Ibid.*, p. 100: 'Der Maler hat aus den Beobachtungen eines Fischmarkts ein ganzes Repertoire dämonischer Tierwesen entwickelt, deren glitzernde Häute beim Betrachter fast eine Berührungsgangst hervorrufen.'
- 149 Van Buren 1986.
- 150 Buck 1995, p. 72.
- 151 Ainsworth and Martens 1994, pp. 33-49.
- 152 Upton 1995.
- 153 Upton 1990, p. 38. For Christus's relation to earlier masters, see especially Panhans-Bühler 1978.
- 154 De Vos 1999, pp. 195-199.
- 155 Dijkstra 1990, p. 51; Ainsworth 1998, pp. 7-55.
- 156 Ainsworth and Martens 1994, pp. 53-55.
- 157 For this altarpiece, see esp. Comblen-Sonkes 1996; Blum 1969, pp. 59-70;

- Butzkamm 1990; Wilhelmy 1993, pp. 43-59; Smeyers 1998a.
- 158 Blum 1969, pp. 62-63.
- 159 Smeyers 1998a, p. 47.
- 160 Blum 1969, pp. 66-68; Wilson and Lancaster Wilson 1984.
- 161 Smeyers 1998a, p. 50.
- 162 *Ibid.*, pp. 532-535, cat. nos. 232-233; Stroo et al., 1999, pp. 56-104.
- 163 Smeyers 1998a, pp. 536-540, cat. nos. 234-236.
- 164 For the perspective and geometric relationships in the *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament*, see A. and H. Pauwels 1998.
- 165 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 166 Borchert 1997a. See also Marrow 1997 and Kruse 1999.
- 167 Cf. Kris and Kurz 1979, pp. 84-90; Borchert 1997a, p. 82, n. 11.
- 168 Thompson and Campbell 1974, pp. 3-7; *Imaginaire Museum Hugo van der Goes* 1982; Dhanens 1998.
- 169 Cf. Miedema 1989, pp. 20-24, 50-51, who voices skepticism about attributions to Hugo van der Goes.
- 170 'Item quidam alius magnus pictor super-venit volens imitari in suo opere hanc picturam et factus est melancolicus et insipiens'; *Imaginaire Museum Hugo van der Goes* 1982, p. 71, doc. 38; Dhanens 1998, p. 391, doc. 29.
- 171 For a more extensive version of this analysis of the *Portinari Altarpiece* in relation to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, see Ridderbos 1991, pp. 11-46.
- 172 Panofsky 1953, pp. 332-333.
- 173 Thompson and Campbell 1974, pp. 65-68.
- 174 Panofsky 1953, pp. 333-334, 500 (p. 333, n. 4); Koch 1964; Lane 1975, pp. 479-480.
- 175 McNamee 1998.
- 176 De Roover 1963; De Roover 1966; Rohlmann 1994, pp. 53-65; Boone 1999; Koster 2003.
- 177 Sander 1992, p. 246; Rohlmann 1994, pp. 59-60.
- 178 Hatfield Strens 1968.
- 179 Rohlmann 1994, pp. 60-61. For a specific iconological interpretation of the *Portinari Altarpiece* in relation to both the hospital and the Portinari family, see Miller 1995.
- 180 Thompson and Campbell 1974, pp. 102-106. Thompson presumes the wings were painted around 1479.
- 181 Waldman 2001.
- 182 Białostocki 1966; Blum 1969, pp. 77-86; Rohlmann 1994, pp. 41-49; De Vos 1994, pp. 82-89.
- 183 For other examples of portraits pasted onto the surface, see Marijnissen and Van De Voorde 1983; Marijnissen and Van de Voorde 1985; Châtelet 1989. Also on his own altarpiece Portinari's head is painted on an intermediate support. To explain this, Sander 1992, pp. 243-246, proposes that the execution of the left wing was not far enough advanced for the portrait to be painted directly when Portinari, in the wake of the financial debacle, went to Italy in 1477, not knowing when he would return. His wife and children followed him in 1478.
- 184 Rohlmann 1994, pp. 41-49.
- 185 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
- 186 Sander 1992; Grosshans 2003.
- 187 Panofsky 1953, pp. 330.
- 188 *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332, 337-338.
- 189 Koslow 1979.
- 190 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 191 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 192 Tolomio 1975. An English translation of Grote's treatise was published in Van Engen 1988, pp. 98-118; in this translation Grote's quotation from Saint Augustine's *On the Trinity*, Book 8, crucial to my argument, is omitted. For Grote's treatise, see also Waaijman 2000. For more extensive versions of my interpretation of the *Nativity*, see Ridderbos 1990 and Ridderbos 1991.

- 193 Tolomio 1975, p. 56: 'flere cum flentibus et gaudere cum gaudentibus et compati cum patientibus'; cf. *Romans* 12:15.
- 194 Tolomio 1975, p. 68: 'Quid refert si sic vel non? Si non sic est, non est contra legem vel prophetiam, quam in multis locis et fere omnibus sine littera veram credimus in spiritu. Si sic fuit, tunc hoc factum in spiritu signat spiritualiter id idem, sed plenius et manifestius, quod propheta in eodem spiritu verbo expressit, sed obscurius et non excussum.'
- 195 *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 112. For a liturgical interpretation of the curtains, see Lane 1975 and my comments in Ridderbos 1990, pp. 142-143, n. 22.
- 196 Translation: McCloy 1958, pp. 19-21.
- 197 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 198 Tolomio 1975, p.77: 'Hoc enim pro nobis prodest credere, atque firmum et inconcussum corde retinere, humilitatem qua natus est Deus ex femina, et quod a mortalibus per tantas contumelias perductus est ad mortem, summum esse medicamentum quo superbiae nostrae sanaretur tumor'.
- 199 For the herbs in the *Nativity* and their symbolic meanings, see Behling 1967, pp. 59-60, 64-66.
- 200 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 201 Debongnie 1927; Tolomio 1975, pp. 35-37. For the possible influence of an unpublished version of Mombaer's *Rosetum* on van der Goes's *Death of the Virgin*, see Koslow 1979, p. 42.
- 202 Debongnie 1927, p. 217.
- 203 Gerrits 1986, p. 300.
- 204 The author is preparing a study on the *Death of the Virgin*.
- 205 Ringbom 1969. For art in relation to the Modern Devotion, see esp. Veelenturf 2000.
- 206 For this altarpiece, see esp. De Vos 1994, pp. 150-157; Blum 1969, pp. 87-96; Hull 1981, pp. 51-91; Lobelle-Caluwé 1985, pp. 48-59; Martens et al. 1998, pp. 13-14. For an earlier version of my analysis of the altarpiece, see Ridderbos 2001.
- 207 For the donors, see Hull 1981, pp. 54-57; Martens 1994, pp. 14-15.
- 208 McFarlane 1971, pp. 28-45; Hull 1981, pp. 204-225; Borchert 1997b.
- 209 De Vos 1994, pp. 20-21.
- 210 Ainsworth 1994.
- 211 Harbison 1985, p. 106.
- 212 Trexler 1980, p. 184. For other examples of images as a source for visions of the supernatural, see Ringbom 1969.
- 213 Hull 1981, pp. 54-55; Martens 1994, pp. 14-15.
- 214 Hull 1981, p. 55.
- 215 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56; Martens 1994, p. 15.
- 216 The relation between the commission of the altarpiece and a certain recovery of the hospital's autonomy during the early seventies of the fifteenth century has been discussed earlier in Ridderbos 1991, pp. 138-139. Martens 1995, connects the motives behind the commission to a 'process of burgundization', because the hospital placed itself under the supervision of Jean Chevrot, who would have given the hospital more autonomy as well as a higher status. There is no evidence, however, that the hospital became more autonomous at that time. The suggestion that the figures of Saint Catherine and Saint Barbara are portraits of Mary of Burgundy and Margaret of York respectively, which 'would confirm an enhanced Burgundian influence in the hospital', is implausible, because the saints' features are too generalized to be portraits.
- 217 Trexler 1980, pp. 184-185.
- 218 For this work, see esp. De Vos 1994, pp. 278-283; Hull 1981, pp. 226-227; Martens et al. 1998, p. 18.

- 219 Madou 1994, p. 51.
- 220 Panofsky 1953, vol 1, pp. 294-296; De Vos 1999, pp. 111-116.
- 221 De Vos 1986; Ainsworth 1994, p. 87.
- 222 Hall 1994, pp. 118-121.
- 223 Belting 1990a, pp. 480-483. See also Belting and Kruse 1994, p. 78.
- 224 Ringbom 1984, p. 43.
- 225 *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.
- 226 Defoer 1994, p. 11; Dijkstra, Dirkse and Smits 2002, pp. 48-49.
- 227 Although the original frame, which was part of the panel, was sawn away, the painting appears unreduced; Defoer 1994, p. 11.
- 228 Miedema 1994, p. 82.
- 229 Miedema 1995, p. 266; Snyder 1960, p. 128; Snyder 1971, p. 446.
- 230 Snyder 1960, pp. 120-122.
- 231 Friedländer 1969, p. 23.
- 232 Panofsky 1927. The article was published in a *Festschrift* in honor of Friedländer.
- 233 *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- 234 Cf. Marrow 1986.
- 235 Panofsky 1927, pp. 290-292; Defoer 1994, p. 10; Ridderbos 1998, p. 176.
- 236 *Ibid.*, passim.
- 237 Belting 1981, pp. 100-102.
- 238 For these panels, see esp. A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, pp. 102-129; van der Velden 1995b; Ainsworth 1998, pp. 57-73; Martens et al. 1998, pp. 24-25.
- 239 Van der Velden 1995b, pp. 41-48; Ainsworth 1998, pp. 60-61. See also Martens 2001, pp. 29-34.
- 240 Van Miegroet 1989, p. 350; Ainsworth 1998, p. 73.
- 241 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 242 *Ibid.*, pp. 207-255; van Suchtelen, Bruijnen and Buijsen 1997.
- 243 For all the changes during the execution of the *Justice of Cambyses*, see Ainsworth 1998, pp. 57-73.
- 244 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67, 72, and passim for Bouts's influence on David in general.
- 245 Van Miegroet 1988; van Miegroet 1989, pp. 143-175.
- 246 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 109; Ainsworth 1998, pp. 61-62, who mistakenly assumes that the condemned magistrates had opposed Maximilian.
- 247 Van Miegroet 1988; van Miegroet 1989, pp. 143-175.
- 248 Van der Velden 1995a; van der Velden 1995b.
- 249 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-52.
- 250 Both examples are mentioned by van Miegroet 1988, p. 130. For the group portrait of the Guild of Saint George, see Onghena 1959, pp. 117-119, nr. 34; Vandenbroeck 1985, pp. 84-90. For the *Triptych with the Miracles of Christ*, see Onghena 1959, pp. 110-112, nr. 31; Hoff and Davies 1971, pp. 1-28, esp. 6-7, 19.
- 251 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 252 Each portrait is the left panel of a diptych which also shows Philip's sister Margaret of Austria; Onghena 1959, pp. 112-117, nrs. 32, 33; Campbell 1998, pp. 110-115.
- 253 Van Miegroet 1988, p. 125.
- 254 Ainsworth 1998, pp. 3, 294-308.

CHAPTER 2

- 1 Eichberger 2002.
- 2 *Maria van Hongarije* 1993; Trevor-Roper 1991, pp. 74-78.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 87-115; Kaufmann 1994.
- 4 Heinz 1967, pp. 7-15.
- 5 Briels 1980, pp. 137-202. For arguments against the identification of the sitter as Albergati, see Hunter 1993.
- 6 Plagemann 1967, p. 23: 'mehr zum Unterricht noch, als nur zum vorübergehenden Vergnügen'. See also *ibid.*, pp. 22-24; Meijers 1991; Meijers 1995; Bjurström 1993.
- 7 For the history of the Louvre as a museum, see Gould 1965; McClellan 1994.
- 8 Gould 1965, p. 22-23; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 236-237; McClellan 1994, pp. 91-92.
- 9 Von Löhneysen 1956, pp. 481-490; Puttfarken 1985; Thuillier 1994. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French authors on Jan van Eyck, see Brinkman 1993, pp. 103-109; regarding Rogier van der Weyden, see Dhanens 1995, pp. 145-146, 148-150, 157-159.
- 10 Sulzberger 1961, p. 11; Adhémar 1962, pp. 120-121, 124.
- 11 Sulzberger 1961, p. 40; Comblen-Sonkes and Lorentz 1995, p. 51.
- 12 Sulzberger 1961, pp. 104-105; Gould 1965, pp. 80-85.
- 13 Sulzberger 1961, pp. 32-34, 45; Gould 1965, pp. 86-102; Chatelain 1973; F. Haskell 1976, pp. 43-44.
- 14 Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 49-55; Waetzoldt 1921, pp. 252-272; von Löhneysen 1956, pp. 501-502; Schlegel 1959; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 44-52; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 432-436; Behler 1995; Borchert 1997; Borchert 2001.
- 15 Schlegel 1959, p. 152: 'Selbst in der Anmut kann die italiänische Schule zwar wohl den Vorzug gegen die oberdeutsche, aber nicht vor der niederdeutschen Kunst behaupten, wenn man diese anders nach der Blüten-Epoche eines Wilhelm von Köln, Johann von Eyck und Hemmelink beurteilt, und nicht nach den späteren Abartungen.'
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 43: 'Da nun Holbein dem Eyck sich nachgebildet hat, die Gestalten des letztern auch durchaus nicht niederländisch sind in der spätern Bedeutung, so wäre es wohl am verständlichsten den Eyck zur deutschen Malerei zu rechnen, deren Geschichte und Entwicklung in der bestimmten und äusserst einfachen Stufenfolge des Eyck, Dürer und Holbein dadurch sehr deutlich und begreiflich wird.' See also Borchert 2001.
- 17 Schlegel 1959, pp. 44-45: 'Die Landschaft ist in den Seitenstücken vom Mittelbilde aus fortgesetzt; sie ist so still und grün, naturgeföhlt, deutsch und röhrend [...]. Der liebevoll redliche und freundliche Ausdruck im Gesichte des heiligen Christoph, [...] durchaus still und röhrend [...] einfacher und anmutsvoller. [...] Hier in diesem vortrefflichen und verhältnismässig nicht so berühmten Maler öföhnet sich der Blick in eine noch unbekannte Weltgegend der altdeutschen Kunstgeschichte. [...] Es atmet durchaus in ihm ein röhrender Ausdruck der innigsten Andacht und Frömmigkeit.'
- 18 For the Boisserées and their collection, see Firmenich-Richartz 1916; Waetzoldt 1921, pp. 272-283; Schlegel 1959; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 53-79; Feldhaus 1980; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 434-435; Gethmann-Siefert and Collenberg 1995; Gethmann-Siefert and Pöggeler 1995.
- 19 Boisserée 1978, p. 26: 'Denn es geschah in den ersten Monaten nach unserer Rückkehr, als wir mit Schlegel auf dem Neumarkt, dem grössten Platz der Stadt, spazierten, dass wir einer Tragbahre mit allerlei Geräte begegneten, worunter sich auch ein altes Gemälde befand, auf dem

- die goldenen Scheine der Heiligen von ferne leuchteten. Das Gemälde, die Kreuztragung mit den weinenden Frauen und der Veronika darstellend, schien nicht ohne Vorzüge. Ich [...] fragte nach dem Eigentümer, der wohnte in der Nähe, er wusste nicht wo das grosse Bild zu lassen, und er war froh es für den geforderten Preis loszuwerden. [...] um Aufsehen und Spottreden zu vermeiden, beschloßen wir das bestaubte Altertum durch eine Hintertüre in unser elterliches Haus zu fördern.' See also Diederich 1995.
- 20 Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 21-42; Kier and Zehnder 1995.
- 21 Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 455-456.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 88-114; Gethmann-Siefert and Collenberg 1995. On Goethe's relations with the Boisserées, see Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 115-247; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 59-68; Osterkamp 1991, pp. 229-280; Gethmann-Siefert 1995; Borchert 1997b, pp. 143-144.
- 23 De Vos 1999, p. 204.
- 24 Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 456-459.
- 25 Plagemann 1967, pp. 38-41; Bock et al. 1985, p. 12-14; Vogtherr 1997.
- 26 Wolzogen 1862, vol. 2, p. 172.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182: 'die historische Entwicklung der Kunst zuvörderst in der niederrheinisch-deutschen und dann in der oberdeutschen Schule vom Ende des dreizehnten bis in 's sechzehnte Jahrhundert hinein klar zu machen'.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185: 'würden es der preussischen Regierung nie vergeben können, einen solchen Schatz, auf welchen sie, als auf ein Denkmal der Kunst ihres Landes, einen ungemeinen Werth legen, aus den Händen zu lassen. [...] dass Preussen im Auslande und im Inlande selbst nicht beständig mehr blos als Finanz- und Militärstaat erscheint; denn bei dem allgemeinen Interesse, welches Volk, Regierungen und Fürsten an dieser Sache nehmen, wird es ein ausserordentliches Aufsehn machen, wenn Preussens Acquisition öffentlich in Deutschland bekannt werden wird. [...] Nach allem scheint der Besitz dieser Sammlung für Preussen um jedes Opfer unerlässlich.'
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 175: 'Erstens bestände die Sammlung nur aus meistens sehr kleinen Stücken, welche, ihres hohen historischen und Kunstwerthes ungeachtet, doch mehr für ein Cabinet, als für ein Museum passten und hauptsächlich nur für Künstler, weit weniger aber für das grosse Publikum Interesse haben würden.' See also Vogtherr 1997, pp. 81-82.
- 30 Firmenich-Richartz 1916, p. 334: 'es entsteht eine wahre Wallfahrt, und nun geht schon fast kein Tag vorüber, an dem nicht in wenigen Stunden Fünfzig bis Sechzig Personen sich zusammenfinden. Ja dann und wann steigt die Zahl gar über Hundert.'
- 31 Ministerial decree of 18 Feb. 1826; Firmenich-Richartz 1916, p. 446. The decree held that 'jedoch in Beziehung auf Grossartigkeit des Styls, würdevolle Composition, Richtigkeit der Zeichnung und Harmonie der Farben, selbst die besseren dieser Bilder denjenigen der späteren italienischen Schule um Vieles nachstehen.'
- 32 Eikemeier 1986; Heilmann 1986.
- 33 Wolzogen 1862, vol. 2, pp. 183-184.
- 34 Plagemann 1967, pp. 82-89, 390-393.
- 35 Herrmann 1967a; Herrmann 1967b; Herrmann 1967c; Herrmann 1967d; Herrmann 1991; Grosshans 1975; F. Haskell 1976, pp. 34, 41-42; Lowenthal-Hensel 1979; Bock et al. 1985, pp. 10-15; Köhler 1988; Bock 1993; Dietl 1993; Vogtherr 1997.
- 36 F. Haskell 1976, pp. 41-42. Solly's commercial interest in art outlived the sale of his collection; returning to England, he became a successful art dealer in London; Herrmann 1967b, p. 15.

- 37 De Vos 1999, pp. 308-310, considers the portrait as an original work by Rogier.
- 38 Woltmann 1875; Waetzoldt 1924, pp. 29-45; Geismeier 1995; Stonge 1998.
- 39 Plagemann 1967, pp. 66-81; Bock et al. 1985, 15-17; Vogtherr 1997.
- 40 Waetzoldt 1924, pp. 14-29; Sander 1993, pp. 14-25.
- 41 Decavele 2000.
- 42 Sosson 1966; De Vos 1979, pp. 9-17.
- 43 Van Biervliet 1994, pp. 117-120; Lobelle-Caluwé 1989/90, pp. 273-274.
- 44 Sulzberger 1961, pp. 122-123; Van Biervliet 1994, pp. 114-116.
- 45 Roberts-Jones-Popelier 1987.
- 46 Maréchal and De Jong 1990.
- 47 Cornette 1938; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 83-84; De Coo 1954/60; De Coo 1969; Buyck 1977.
- 48 Cornette 1938, p. 32: 'Ils étaient plus près de la nature qu'on ne l'a été depuis parce qu'ils n'avaient pas eu le temps de se faire des systèmes.'
- 49 De Coo 1954/60, p. 37: 'und diese beiden Männer brachten einen grossen Theil des Abends in der grössten Bewunderung derselben zu. Es ist doch eine wunderliche Verknüpfung, dass wir jetzt nach Niederland kommen und die Leute erst ihre eigenen alten Malermeister kennen lehren. Der Bürgermeister, sowie Van Bree, riefen ein über das andere mal: den Meister kennen wir nicht, wir wissen hier nur ein paar zu unterscheiden, im übrigen sind wir ganz ignorant; denn wir haben fast nichts mehr im Lande, und früher hat man leider unsere alten Maler ganz verachtet, sie und die Engländer haben uns alles entführt, was noch zu verkaufen war; wir können jetzt nur die Nachlese halten, die höchst ärmlich ausfällt.' See also Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 527-528.
- 50 De Coo 1954/60, p. 36.
- 51 See esp. Hinterding and Horsch 1989. See also Sulzberger 1961, pp. 82-83.
- 52 Sander 1989.
- 53 Filedt Kok 1998, pp. 127-129.
- 54 Hoetink 1985.
- 55 Millar 1972; Waterfield 1993, pp. 84-85.
- 56 Cowan 1999; Ormrod 1999.
- 57 Hervey 1921; Howarth 1985; Campbell 1998, p. 212.
- 58 Buchanan 1824, vol. 1; F. Haskell 1976, pp. 24-29.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 60 Buchanan 1824; F. Haskell 1976, pp. 27-29; Brigstocke 1982.
- 61 Passavant 1833; Waagen 1837-1838.
- 62 Joseph 1953; Baum 1964/65; F. Haskell 1976, p. 42; Bonomi 1996; Campbell 1998, pp. 12-14.
- 63 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
- 64 Robertson 1978, pp. 49-51.
- 65 Millar 1953; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 115-116; Robertson 1978, pp. 80, 294; Campbell 1998, pp. 12, 174-178.
- 66 For Eastlake and the National Gallery, see Robertson 1978.
- 67 F. Haskell 1988; Waterfield and Illies 1995.
- 68 Campbell 1998, pp. 13-14.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 70 Fahy 1998, p. 65.
- 71 MacBeth and Spronk 1997, pp. 104, 130, n. 7.
- 72 A larger version, by van Eyck, is in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin; van Asperen de Boer et al. 1997.
- 73 *John G. Johnson Collection* 1972, p. V.
- 74 Friedländer 1967c, p. 75: 'kreditsteigern den Reichtum anständigweise nur in Form wertvoller Kunstwerke zeigen könnte.'
- 75 Fahy 1998, p. 65.
- 76 *Wilhelm von Bode* 1995 and von Bode 1997.
- 77 F. Haskell 1987, pp. 189-190.
- 78 Behrman 1982.
- 79 Fahy 1998, p. 66.
- 80 *Ibid.*, and esp. F. Haskell 1987, pp. 186-206.
- 81 For the Oppenheim collection, see Teichmann 1995.

- 82 Fahy 1998, p. 66; De Vos 1999, p. 298.
- 83 Von Bode 1997, vol. 1, p. 386: 'Ihr Prinzip war, von den besten Meistern möglichst das Beste zu erwerben; da ihnen der Preis zur Erreichung dieses Zieles fast gleichgültig war, ist es ihnen [...] gelungen, in wenigen Jahren Kunstwerke in einer Qualität zusammenzubringen, wie sie Sammlungen der alten Welt kaum aufzuweisen haben. Den Preisen, die sie zahlten, haben die Besitzer hervorragender Kunstwerke in Europa nur selten widerstanden und sie werden ihnen in Zukunft auch nur selten widerstehen. In absehbarer Zeit wird daher das Beste von dem, was hier noch in Privatbesitz vorhanden, zum guten Teil gleichfalls über das Wasser wandern; und da dank dem öffentlichen Sinn und dem Ehrgeiz der Amerikaner diese Schätze allmählich als Vermächtnisse in die Museen übergehen, so werden diese in wenigen Jahrzehnten an Bedeutung den großen alten Museen Europas nicht nachstehen, ja, sie nach einzelnen Richtungen noch übertreffen.'
- 84 Sperling 1929, pp. 13-14. Wealthy European collectors, like the Rotterdam harbor baron D.G. van Beuningen, the German industrialist Heinrich Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza, and the Armenian oil magnate Calouste Gulbenkian, also benefitted from the economic malaise of the Continent, the breakup of old collections, and the lively art market. For van Beuningen, see van Wijnen 1999; for the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, see Eisler 1989, pp. 9-10; for Gulbenkian, see Delaforce 1996.
- 85 Fahy 1998, p. 69.
- 86 *Ibid.*, pp. 71-73.
- 87 Ainsworth and Christiansen 1998.
- 88 Hand and Wolff 1986.
- 89 Sperling 1929, pp. 11-12.
- 90 Fahy 1998, pp. 69-70.
- 91 *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.
- ### CHAPTER 3
- 1 Baxandall 1971, pp. 106-109, 165-167.
- 2 Brinkman 1993, pp. 15-52.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 90.
- 4 Dhanens 1965, pp. 112-113.
- 5 Brinkman 1993, pp. 121-133.
- 6 On Waagen distinguishing himself as an exponent of the historical-critical method from Johanna Schopenhauer in his van Eyck book, see Bickendorf 1985 and Bickendorf 1991. On his combination of a Romantic and a scholarly approach in this study and in later publications, see Lunzer 1983, pp. 123-183.
- 7 Schopenhauer 1822, p. 3: 'Ich schreibe nur für meines Gleichen: für Frauen, welche, wie ich, die deutsche Kunst lieb gewannen, höchstens für Kunstfreunde, deren übrige Verhältnisse ihnen nicht erlauben der Kunstgeschichte ihres Vaterlandes ein eignes tieferes Studium zu weihen.'
- 8 Wackenroder and Tieck 1983, p. 58: 'und siehe! da standen, abgesondert von allen, Raffael und Albrecht Dürer Hand in Hand leibhaftig vor meinen Augen und sahen in freundlicher Ruhe schweigend ihre beisammenhängenden Gemälde an.'
- 9 Schopenhauer 1822, p. 1: 'Ein schöner Tag ist hell und klar angebrochen, bei dessen Licht wir uns, unsre Umgebungen, ja ich möchte sagen, das Vaterhaus, nach langer Verblendung wieder erkennen.'
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 21: 'sein verständiges Wesen, die Anmuth, die Güte seines Karackters, die anspruchlose edle Zierlichkeit seiner Sitten erwarben ihm überall Achtung und Liebe, wo er auch erschien, bei Grossen und Kleinen.'
- 11 Waagen 1822, p. 142: 'die reinsten Ergüsse einer ruhigen, echt religiösen Begeisterung'.
- 12 *Ibid.*: 'Die Kunst ist bei ihm mündig geworden, und redet vornehmlich in

- ihrer eigenen Sprache.’ See also Bickendorf 1985, pp. 36-46, 122-124.
- 13 Waagen 1822, p. 148: ‘So steht J. v. Eyck in der Auffassungsart heiliger Gegenstände zwischen der altchristlichen Tradition und einer mehr willkürlichen Art, gleichsam mitten inne.’
- 14 On Waagen’s discussion of Jan’s artistic personality and the relation between his art and the national character of the Netherlands, see also Bickendorf 1985, pp. 111-129.
- 15 Waagen 1822, p. 55: ‘Allen Niederländern aber ist Gutmüthigkeit, glühende Freiheitsliebe, standhafte Treue gegen den billigen, rechtmässigen Herrn, eine tüchtige gesunde Sinnlichkeit und heldenmüthige Tapferkeit, eine grosse Zähigkeit und Ausdauer in allem, was sie treiben, eine ungemene Anstelligkeit und Geschicklichkeit zum Technischen aller Art, und daher eine ausserordentliche Betriebsamkeit, gemeinsam.’
- 16 Lunzer 1983, pp. 101-103, 135-139; Bickendorf 1985, pp. 115-117, 161-172.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 135-148.
- 18 Lunzer 1983, pp. 158-159, 173; Bickendorf 1985, pp. 150-161; Bickendorf 1991, pp. 369-370.
- 19 Schopenhauer 1822, pp. 58-59: ‘ein scharfer heller Sonnenstrahl beleuchtete es, und die Knaben standen wie herausgetreten aus den Rahmen frei und lebendig im Zimmer’.
- 20 Waagen 1822, p. 143.
- 21 Schopenhauer 1822, p. 29: ‘die ganze Natur zeigte sich ihrem begünstigten Liebling stets im verklärten Licht’.
- 22 Waagen 1822, pp. 213-214: ‘Ihr Haupt ist etwas vorüber geneigt, ihre niedergeschlagenen Augen sind auf ein Buch geheftet, welches sie mit beiden Händen hält, und woraus sie so eben einige Worte auszusprechen scheint; ihr hellbraunes Haar fliesst zu beiden Seiten des Hauptes herab. In diesem Gesichte ist die seligste Ruhe, die grösste Andacht und Innigkeit, die höchste sittliche Reinheit ausgedrückt. [...] das Oval des Gesichts, die grossen gewölbten Augenlieder, die fein gebildete Nase, der schöne Mund, stellen sie in eine Klasse mit den Madonnen eines Leonardo da Vinci und eines Raphael.’
- 23 This view concurs with Lunzer 1983, pp. 146-147, who already related this passage from Waagen to the Romantic tradition, and is opposed to Bickendorf 1985, pp. 172-187, who related it to the historical-critical method. See also Ridderbos 1986.
- 24 Waagen 1822, p. 224.
- 25 Waagen 1824, pp. 103-104; Lunzer 1983, pp. 148-153.
- 26 Waagen 1824, pp. 103-104: ‘der eigentliche Unternehmer und Hauptmeister des ganzen Werks [...] mit dem eigentlich schöpferischem Talent [...] mit dem Sinn für Auffassung der grossartigsten, idealen Charaktere, für einen edlen, reinen Styl in der Gewandung’.
- 27 Waagen 1847; Lunzer 1983, pp. 153-155, 160-162.
- 28 Waagen 1847, p. 162: ‘Hier wo die Aufgabe war, Vater und Mutter des ganzen Menschengeschlechtes darzustellen, kam es dem Meister darauf an, einen Mann und eine Frau, wie sie leiben und leben, in allen Einzelheiten mit der grössten Treue wieder zu geben’.
- 29 I am much indebted to Lunzer’s analysis of Waagen’s various views on the *Ghent Altarpiece*, but she is more critical about his connoisseurship because of its intuitive, unsystematic character; Lunzer 1983, pp. 173-183. I would like to suggest that connoisseurship has to be intuitive and unsystematic; see my discussion of Friedländer in this chapter.
- 30 Lunzer 1983, pp. 154-155.
- 31 Geismeyer 1995.
- 32 Waetzold 1924, pp. 34-37.

- 33 For Hotho's ideas as discussed here, see Waetzold 1924, pp. 53-70; Gethmann-Siefert 1983; Lunzer 1983, pp. 257-263. For Hotho, see also Ziemer 1994.
- 34 Hotho 1855, p. 1: 'Kein Theil der Kunstgeschichte ist ohne Erkenntniss des Schönen und der Kunst vollständig zu ergründen.'
- 35 'Erste Vorlesung'; Hotho 1842, pp. 1-26.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24: 'Die Aufgabe, die ich mir durch eine derartige Auffassung der Sache stellen muss, kann nur darin ihre Lösung finden, dass ich den breiten Graben auszufüllen suche, den die Jahrhunderte zwischen uns und der Einsicht in die Vorzüge derjenigen Epochen und Meister gezogen haben, welche mir innerhalb der Entwicklungsgeschichte der deutschen und niederländischen Malerei als die Ersten und Vorzüglichsten hervorzu-leuchten scheinen. Ich will versuchen, Sie in den künstlerischen Sinn und Geist jener Zeiten und Meister zu versetzen, und dadurch zur Würdigung und zum frohen Genuss der einzelnen Werke, so weit ich es durch schnell skizzierte Ueberblicke im Stande bin, hinzuführen.'
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- 38 *Ibid.*: 'Uns nähmlich muss es hauptsächlich auf das ankommen, was nach der religiösen wie nach der weltlichen Seite hin in jeder Epoche die allgemeine Weltanschauung ausmacht, so wie auf die Art und Weise, in welcher dieselbe von den einzelnen Schulen und hervorstechenden Meistern künstlerisch gefasst und male-ri-sch ist herausgearbeitet worden.'
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 19: 'Das ursprünglich Göttliche und Menschliche aber wahr und ganz zur Schönheit zu bilden ist der reinste Beruf der freien Kunst.'
- 40 'Fünf und zwanzigste Vorlesung'; Hotho 1843, pp. 40-56.
- 41 'Sechs und zwanzigste Vorlesung'; *ibid.*, p. 65: 'In der Anordnung herrscht bei ihm noch die Symmetrie vor, und seine Darstellungen durch Symbolische Bezüge religiös zu vertiefen ist Er vornehmlich bedacht.'
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 72: 'der Hauch eines reicher belebenden Geistes gliedert und einigt sie'.
- 43 Hotho 1858, pp. 155-156: 'Er ist eine ärmere, engere Natur. Seine beschränkte Erfindungsgabe macht sich weder den bunteren Lebenskreis dienstbar, noch folgt sie Hubert's weiten Gedanken, und bis ins Kleinste hin grossem Styl [...]. Johann mag Maria so sichtlich er will mit ehrfurchtgebietender Strenge schmücken, ihre Hoheit betrifft nur Aeusserlichkeiten.'
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 156: 'Hubert's Gestalten reden, als seien Geberde und Blick die wahre Sprache, die erst das Unausprechliche sagt. Auch Johann's Charaktere reden. Doch weder in Worten zum Nimmervergessen, noch erzählt ein Moment ein ganzes langes vergangenes Leben.'
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 62: 'Doch selbst auf Wendepunkten entwickelt sich auch der Kühnste weder ohne Vorläufer noch mit einem Schläge.'
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 67: 'Ein frühreifer Genius war Hubert schwerlich. Er schreitet auf seiner mühsamen Bahn nur durch zähe Ausdauer mühsam vor.'
- 47 Waetzold 1924, pp. 69-70; Gethmann-Siefert 1983, pp. 236-237, 239.
- 48 Tollebeek and Verschaffel 1992; Ankersmit 1993.
- 49 On the innovative aspects of Schnaase's interpretation of Eyckian painting, see Lunzer 1983, pp. 263-274, 337-338. For Schnaase, see also Waetzold 1924, pp. 70-92; Zeitler 1958; Podro 1982, pp. 31-43; Stemmrich 1983; Beyrodt 1986.
- 50 Schnaase 1843-1861. The eighth volume was published posthumously in 1879.
- 51 Schnaase 1834, pp. 363-374.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 365: 'In der Kunst aber soll der religiöse Ausdruck aus zarten

- Verhältnissen der Form und der Farbe entstehen, also aus Dingen, für welche die eigentliche Religion gar keinen Massstab hat.’
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 314-317.
- 54 Miedema 1994, p. 85.
- 55 Sulzberger 1961, p. 131.
- 56 Sander 1993, pp. 319-325.
- 57 Baxandall 1971, pp. 108-109.
- 58 Von Löhneysen 1956, p. 434; Sulzberger 1961, pp. 134-135.
- 59 Von Löhneysen 1956, pp. 433-435.
- 60 *Ibid.*, pp. 458-459.
- 61 Crowe and Cavalcaselle 1857, pp. 185-186, 194.
- 62 Schnaase 1879, pp. 165-170.
- 63 Crowe 1895, pp. 65-66.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 65 Crowe and Cavalcaselle 1857, p. 13.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 68 Crowe 1895, p. 232.
- 69 Crowe and Cavalcaselle 1857, pp. 173-174.
- 70 *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.
- 71 The biographical information on James Weale is derived from Van Biervliet 1991.
- 72 Weale 1861; Van Biervliet 1991, pp. 136-138, 143, 146-147.
- 73 *Ibid.*, pp. 98-110.
- 74 An abridged version written with W.H.J. Brockwell without the texts of the documents appeared in 1912. See also Van Biervliet 1991, pp. 140-141.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 127-131.
- 76 Sulzberger 1961, pp. 14-20.
- 77 Van Biervliet 1991, pp. 131-134; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 453-461.
- 78 Van Biervliet 1991, pp. 132-134; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 461-462. For Hulin de Loo, see also Hulin de Loo 1931, pp. V-IX; Bautier 1946; Lavalleye 1961; Lavalleye 1964. Hulin de Loo 1942 contains a complete bibliography of his publications.
- 79 Hulin de Loo 1902, p. X: ‘Ces raisons résultent toujours d’ensembles très complexes d’indices très ténus, le plus souvent impossible à exprimer adéquatement en paroles, saisissables seulement, au moyen d’une sorte de superposition d’images, par des yeux exercés, doublés de mémoires qui embrassent un inventaire relativement complet de la production du maître et de ses proches voisins.’
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. XVI: ‘tous les marins, victimes des naufrages, empêcheront-ils leurs descendants d’affronter la mer? – Les hypothèses sont indispensables à la science comme à la vie’ [...] la certitude absolue n’existe jamais, même pour un tableau signé, accompagné de la quittance du peintre.’
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. XVIII-XXIV.
- 82 Stroo et al. 2001, p. 150.
- 83 Hulin de Loo 1902, pp. XXXV-XLVII.
- 84 Hulin de Loo 1909, p. 205.
- 85 Hulin de Loo 1911.
- 86 Belting and Eichberger 1983; Châtelet 1993; van Buren, Marrow and Pettenati 1996.
- 87 Dvořák 1925, p. 13: ‘Unter dem Einflusse der exakten Forschungsmethoden haben wir nach und nach – bewusst oder unbewusst – gelernt in wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen eine Tatsache nie als eine vereinzeltte Erscheinung, sondern stets als ein Glied in einer bestimmten Aufeinanderfolge von Tatsachen derselben oder verwandter Art zu betrachten.’
- 88 *Ibid.*, p. 157: ‘Diese Lippen berichten von einem der grössten Ereignisse in der Geschichte der Kunst: das tausendjährige alte Gesetz wurde durch einen neuen Bund mit der Natur ersetzt.’
- 89 *Ibid.*, p. 80: ‘Die beiden Gruppen in der Anbetung des Lammes sind also ebenso wie die drei heiligen Gestalten der oberen Reihe das Werk eines Malers, dessen Kunst in der Komposition, in der Raumdarstellung und Perspektive, in den Typen und Formen, stilistisch und in

- allen formalen Problemen der spätmittelalterlichen Kunstübung nähersteht als den Prinzipien der Kunst Jans und den Prinzipien, nach welchen andere Teile des Genter Altares erfunden und ausgeführt wurden.’
- 90 *Ibid.*, p. 81: ‘Wie an den Portalen der gotischen Dome die Personifikationen des alten und des neuen Testaments, so stehen sich an dieser Pforte der modernen Kunst des Nordens Denkmäler der alten zurückblickenden, überwundenen und der neuen, zukunftsfrohen und sieghaften Kunst einander gegenüber.’
- 91 *Ibid.*, p. 237: ‘dass es zwischen der Kunst Jans und der ganzen vorangehenden Kunst keine Unterbrechung gegeben hat, weder im Stile noch in der Entwicklung der malerischen Darstellungsprobleme.’
- 92 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 93 *Ibid.*, p. 77. Dvořák, nevertheless, sees a renewal in nineteenth-century art comparable to that effected by Jan van Eyck, and he considers Millet, who replaced compositional principles with the uncomposed ‘Naturausschnitt’, to be the key figure of this renewal; *ibid.*, p. 238.
- 94 Frey 1922, pp. 18-19.
- 95 Friedländer 1924-1937. An English translation, supplemented with comments and notes by the editors, was brought out in 1967-1976.
- 96 Friedländer 1967a, p. 54.
- 97 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 98 *Ibid.*
- 99 In the English edition his supplement to the van Eycks is included in the first volume; *ibid.*, pp. 100-103.
- 100 For biographical information on Friedländer, see Winkler 1959; Held 1978.
- 101 Miedema 1989, pp. 41-51.
- 102 *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- 103 For a historiographic survey of the various attributions, see van Asperen de Boer, Ridderbos and Zeldenrust 1991, pp. 17-35.
- 104 Friedländer 1967a, p. 58.
- 105 Panofsky 1953, p. 437 (p. 199, n. 1).
- 106 Van Asperen de Boer, Ridderbos and Zeldenrust 1991, pp. 8-15.
- 107 Friedländer 1942, p. 167.
- 108 This copy is in the Istituto Universitario Olandese di Storia dell’Arte, Florence.
- 109 Friedländer 1967a, p. 78.
- 110 Friedländer 1967b, p. 29.
- 111 Dijkstra 1990.
- 112 Friedländer 1969, p. 49.
- 113 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 114 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- 115 On Friedländer’s admiration for the Impressionists, see Winkler 1959, pp. 166-167.
- 116 Friedländer 1967a, p. 79.
- 117 Friedländer 1967b, p. 29.
- 118 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 119 *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 32.
- 120 In the English edition his supplement to Rogier van der Weyden is included in the second volume; *ibid.*, pp. 53-56, esp. 55. See also Renders 1931.
- 121 Huizinga 1949, p. 493.

CHAPTER 4

- 1 Two recent essays discuss partly the same material as treated here: Deam 1998, and Moxey 1998 (reprinted in Moxey 2001, pp. 8-41). Lisa Deam, who focuses on Friedländer, has had no access to sources written in Dutch or Flemish. Her suggestion that the expression ‘Flemish Primitives’ implies a connection with France, while the use of ‘early Netherlandish’, as in Friedländer, tends to Germanize this school of painting, is untenable in the light of common usage in present-day Holland or Belgium. Keith Moxey holds that all literature on early Netherlandish painting has been politically biased to conclude that art history is not only frequently used for political purposes, but that it is perfectly right, and even necessary to do so. This is not a point of view I want to defend here.
- 2 Burckhardt 1981, p. 81.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 4 The footnote in which Burckhardt makes this observation is omitted from the English translation; cf. Burckhardt 1938, p. 90.
- 5 Burckhardt 1981, p. 181.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 189.
- 7 Burckhardt 1955, p. 70; Burckhardt 1963, pp. 74-80; Huizinga 1948b, pp. 238, 251; Kaegi 1956, pp. 163-164, 288.
- 8 Kaegi 1977, p. 473.
- 9 Crowe and Cavalcaselle 1857, p. 13.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 354.
- 13 Dehaisnes 1860, p. 174: ‘l’artiste le plus pieux et le plus chrétien que la Flandre ait produit’.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 214.
- 16 Waagen 1862, p. 67: ‘die Eigenthümlichkeit des germanischen Kunstnaturells’.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 89: ‘von seltner Hässlichkeit’; ‘durchaus keinen heiligen Charakter’.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- 19 Thoré 1858, p. 326: ‘L’art hollandais [...] est l’indication d’un art inspiré tout autrement que l’art mystique du Moyen Age, que l’art allégorique et aristocratique de la Renaissance, toujours continuée par l’art contemporain.’
- 20 Blanc 1876, vol. 1, Introduction, p. 4.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 22 Blanc 1868, Introduction (Paul Mantz), p. 2: ‘une rénovation’; ‘des inventeurs’; ‘dans les choses de la pensée et du sentiment’; ‘un retour ardent, sincère, passionné vers la nature, si dédaignée au Moyen Age’.
- 23 *Ibid.*, ‘Van Eyck’ (Alfred Michiels), p. 2: ‘la nuit mystique du Moyen Age allait finir, les premières lueurs de la pensée moderne tremblaient au fond de la perspective.’
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 19: ‘Réunis par l’opinion et par la coutume aux gens du métier, les artistes n’avaient pas conçu les idées ambitieuses, le goût du luxe et des plaisirs, l’admiration outrée d’eux-mêmes, qui leur ont donné depuis les vices des classes opulentes. [...] C’est ainsi que, même en fréquentant la cour, ils ont pu s’isoler au milieu de leur époque, ne subir aucune influence mauvaise et s’entourer d’une lumineuse atmosphère.’
- 25 Michiels 1865-1876, vol. 2, pp. 23-82.
- 26 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 216: ‘Ces maîtres ingénus emportaient la tradition chrétienne au milieu de la nature, la plongaient dans l’océan du réalisme. Leurs splendides tableaux fondent habilement les derniers reflets du moyen âge et les premiers lueurs de la pensée moderne. Partout domine la légende et partout règne l’observation: le nouvel ordre d’idées se lève comme une jeune étoile, dans la splendeur d’un soleil couchant.’

- 27 Vitet 1864, vol. 3, p. 274: ‘un imparfait rayon de la céleste beauté devant lequel pâlit la plus parfaite image des beautés de ce monde.’
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 274: ‘Un art grand et fort’; *ibid.*, p. 193: ‘De toutes les peintures, c’est bien là la plus cosmopolite.’
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 217: ‘dans l’ordre moral, au contraire, dans le sphère du sentiment et de la pensée, progrès immense’.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 224: ‘Jean van Eyck n’éveille en nous que des idées terrestres, même quand il fait des saints; chez Hemling, tout nous enlève au ciel, lors même qu’il ne veut peindre que les choses de la terre. Ce ne sont donc pas les moyens matériels qui font la différence, c’est l’âme de l’artiste.’
- 31 Taine 1917, vol. 1, p. 267: ‘si vous avez l’imagination remplie par les nobles formes italiennes ou par les élégantes formes françaises, vos yeux seront choqués; vous auriez peine à vous mettre au point de vue, vous croirez souvent que l’artiste vise au laid, de parti pris. La vérité est qu’il n’est pas rebuté par les trivialités et les irrégularités de la vie. Il ne comprend point naturellement les ordonnances symétriques, le mouvement aisé et calme, les belles proportions, la santé et agilité des membres nus.’
- 32 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 31: ‘livre admirable, le plus complet et le plus philosophique qu’on ait écrit sur la Renaissance italienne’.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 2: ‘Elle a pour cause une renaissance, c’est-à-dire un grand développement de la prospérité, de la richesse et de l’esprit. Ici, comme en Italie, les cités se sont trouvées de bonne heure florissantes et presque libres.’
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 5: ‘l’esprit du moyen âge s’altère et se défaire’.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 15: ‘L’âge symbolique a fait place à l’âge pittoresque, l’esprit ne se contente plus d’une entité scolastique; il veut contempler une forme vivante, et la pensée humaine a maintenant besoin, pour être complète, de se traduire aux yeux par une oeuvre d’art.’
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-21: ‘Une renaissance flamande sous des idées chrétiennes, c’est là, en effet, le double caractère de l’art sous Hubert et Jean van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Memling et Quentin Massys; et de ces deux traits suivent tous les autres. D’un côté, les artistes prennent intérêt à la vie réelle [...]. Il est clair qu’en ce moment on découvre la nature; les écailles tombent des yeux; on vient de comprendre, presque tout d’un coup, tout le dehors sensible, ses proportions, sa structure, sa couleur. [...] Mais d’autre part, elle est une glorification de la foi chrétienne.’
- 37 Fromentin 1877, p. 420: ‘C’est que la plupart des vertus primordiales manquaient alors à la conscience humaine: la droiture, le respect sincère des choses sacrées, le sentiment du devoir, celui de la patrie, et chez les femmes comme chez les hommes, la pudeur. Voilà surtout ce dont il faut se souvenir quand, au milieu de cette société brillante et affreuse, on voit fleurir l’art inattendu qui devait, semble-t-il, en représenter le fond moral avec les surfaces.’
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 423: ‘deux êtres sauvages, horriblement poilus, sortis l’un et l’autre, sans que nul sentiment de laideur les intimide, de je ne sais quelles forêts primitives, laids, enflés du torse, maigres des jambes’.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 435: ‘cette naïveté forte, cette attention émue, cette patience énergique [...]. La première renaissance italienne n’a rien de comparable.’
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 444: ‘au milieu des horreurs du siècle, un lieu privilégié, une sorte de retraite angélique, idéalement silencieuse et fermée où les passions se taisent.’

- 41 Van Vloten 1874, pp. 351-352.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 42: 'er juist de oorspronkelijkheid der vlaamsche en hollandsche schilderkunst in uitkomt'.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 40: 'Zelfs onder de drommen zijner profeten, heiligen, en apostelen, vallen ons gelaatstrekken in 't oog, wier gulle rondheid en boertige uitdrukking ons onwillekeurig een glimlach op de lippen brengt en in welke zich de toekomst van 't nederlandsch penseel, van zijn schertsende zij, in zijn kiem reeds openbaart.'
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 56: 'Met de vlaamsche schilderkunst, gelijk zij sedert de dagen der Van Eycks zich werkzaam toonde, waren, bij alle Kristenzin, die haar kenmerkte, de eerste stappen op 't gebied der natuur en der werkelijkheid gedaan.'
- 45 Busken Huet 1886, vol. 1, p. 141: 'De gemeenheid, met dat al, zit er nog dik op; de betere aandoeningen worden door de felheid der burgerwisten gewelddadig ondergehouden; de zilveren sikkels van het edele komt tussen de vuilgrijze avondwolken maar even te voorschijn.'
- 46 *Ibid.*, pp. 176-177, 181-182.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 403: 'Hunne vorsten en hunne prelaten, hunne edelen en hunne militairen, hunne rechters, hunne burgers en hunne burgervaders, – somtijds zelfs hunne beulen – , allen zien vroom, en allen hebben een voorkomen van imbecilliteit.'
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 383-384: 'Blijken van specifiek noord-nederlandsche herkomst zijn in hunne werken niet te bespeuren. Met al hetgeen zij voortgebracht hebben behooren zij tot de vlaamsche school.'
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 367: 'een onmiskenbaar nederlandschen stempel'.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 371: 'op de vloot, bij het leger, in de handelswereld'.
- 51 Becker 1984, pp. 252-253; Braat et al. 1985, p. 24. The last plaster cast acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1921, a replica of Sluter's *Well of Moses*, was given a place of honor in the reception hall; *ibid.*, pp. 67, 94. The comparison with Rembrandt is still found in more recent literature on Sluter; David 1951, p. 101; Morand 1991, p. 45.
- 52 Ferguson 1948, pp. 316-318; Schulte Nordholt 1948, pp. 74-75; Kaegi 1977, pp. 480-482; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 442-445.
- 53 Courajod 1901.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 344, 346.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp. 307-311. There is no evidence that van Eyck designed sculpture.
- 56 Maingon 1977; Guyaux, Heck and Kopp 1987.
- 57 Huysmans 1967.
- 58 H. Haskell 1988, p. 46.
- 59 'Même au Louvre, l'on est bien certain que, près des Primitifs, l'on sera seul.' Quoted in Guyaux, Heck and Kopp 1987, p. 284.
- 60 Van Biervliet 1991, pp. 131-134; F. Haskell 1993, pp. 445-468.
- 61 Hulin de Loo 1902.
- 62 Hymans 1902; Friedländer 1903; Martin 1903; de Mont 1904.
- 63 Weale 1903, p. 329.
- 64 Panofsky 1953, p. 347. In the aftermath of World War II the nationalistic interpretation of art was sometimes turned against Memling: he could not be a good painter because he was born in Germany; Genaille 1954, p. 70.
- 65 F. Haskell 1993, p. 454.
- 66 De Mont 1904, p. 4: 'tout ce monde de fiévreux et de neurasthéniques'.
- 67 The only critic who expressed surprise at this cruelty was the French writer Octave Uzanne 1902, p. 176 (in a review for an English journal): 'The middle ages not only harnessed the bodies of the heroes, the souls as well were closed, serene, cold, and deprived of tearful and soft pity.' Uzanne was acquainted with

- Huysmans's view of Burgundian culture; *ibid.*, p. 179.
- 68 Marius 1902, p. 125: 'In 1850 b.v. zou men deze Christelijke kunst paapschheid en afgoderij genoemd hebben. In dezen tijd, ten koste van een vast omljnd geloof, bewondert men het vurige geloof der middeneeuwen, zooals men bewondert de Boudha-beelden en het Boudhisme.'
- 69 Van de Woestijne 1949, p. 15: 'star en stervensmoe naleven der Middelleeuwsche heerlijkheid'.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 16: 'De herfst van het bloeiende Brugge draagt thans hier rijke, maar reeds beursche vruchten.'
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 17: 'Zij leven van 't aanhoudend feest dat Hof en stad doorwoelde. Zij bewonderen het brandend goud dezer avondzon: de stad die onder zal gaan in eigen weelde.'
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 81: 'deze fel-roode, maar reeds welkende roos'.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 17: 'inkeer komt in de gemoederen, en, zijn zij tot weerstand onmachtig, zij betreuren de groote zonden van overspel en gulzigheid en gevoelen dat zij nog zeer geloovend zijn, hoewel vergetend soms.'
- 74 Thiébaud, Lorentz and Martin 2004; this publication appeared too late to be included in my discussion of the exhibition.
- 75 *Primitifs français* 1904, p. XXIV.
- 76 Bouchot 1904.
- 77 Michelet 1898, p. 145.
- 78 Rosen and Zerner 1984, p. 190.
- 79 Pit 1894. For Pit, see also Heijbroek 1985.
- 80 Durrieu 1903. See also Belting and Eichberger 1983, pp. 23-34.
- 81 De Jongh 1903, pp. 26-29, 38-40.
- 82 Colenbrander 1905, p. 46: 'een onmiskenbare eigen individualiteit, die, in de vijftiende evenzeer als in de zeventiende of in de negentiende eeuw, minder sterk tot uitdrukking komt in de letterkunde dan in de beeldende kunsten.'
- 83 *Ibid.*, p. 59: 'In de Vlaamsche kunst overweegt het plastische; de actie; – in de Hollandsche het schilderachtige en passieve. De Vlaming zoekt de type te benaderen, de Hollander geeft, zoo ruw of zoo fijn als het zijn mag, het individueele.'
- 84 *Ibid.*, p. 63: 'het voorkomen van zóó diepgaand verschil bij zoo onloochenbare verwantschap, als tusschen de Vlaamsche kunst der 15de eeuw en de Hollandsche bestaat'.
- 85 Already in 1899 Fierens had railed against the moral laxity of the spirit of the fin-de-siècle; Fierens-Gevaert 1899. In his view, the 'Primitives' are simpler, more direct, closer to full life than the nineteenth-century artists; their work exudes certainty and confidence. Perhaps on account of this vision, at the exhibition in Bruges he was disappointed by the somewhat weak character of Memling's art. Here he found too little of 'le génie réaliste des Flandres' that announced 'la création gigantesque de Rubens'; Fierens-Gevaert 1902, pp. 110, 436; Fierens-Gevaert 1903, pp. 204-205, 208-209.
- 86 See also F. Haskell 1993, p. 467.
- 87 Fierens-Gevaert 1905, p. 174: 'Jan van Eyck domine la première Renaissance septentrionale; il en est l'aboutissement, le point culminant. [...] Scrutateur infatigable de la nature, il est l'un des Pères de la Renaissance et de l'art moderne.'
- 88 Pirenne 1908, p. 469: 'L'abandon de la tradition médiévale, qui s'affirme pendant la période bourguignonne d'une façon si splendide dans les chefs-d'oeuvre de la peinture, de la sculpture et de la musique, et qui se réalise en même temps dans le domaine des institutions, répond à une profonde transformation intellectuelle et morale au sein de la société.'
- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 459-466, 478. See also Jongkees 1990, pp. 145-146.

- 90 See also F. Haskell 1993, pp. 468-495; F. Haskell 2000, pp. 155-159; Krul 1997.
- 91 Huizinga 1948a, p. 39: 'niet als de aankondiging van het komende, maar als het afsterven van dat wat heengaat. [...] Het werd in die jaren juist gewoonte, om [...] de Oud-Nederlandse kunst te zien als een aanbrekende Noordelijke Renaissance. Mijn denkbeeld ging daar lijnrecht tegen in.'
- 92 *Exposition de la Toison d'or* 1907. *The Mérode Triptych* by the Master of Flémalle, until then inaccessible in a private collection, was on public view for the first time at this exhibition.
- 93 Reprinted in Huizinga 1948b, pp. 95-160 (without the dedication to Pirenne). See also Jongkees 1990, p. 148.
- 94 Huizinga 1996, p. XX.
- 95 *Ibid.*, p. XIX.
- 96 *Ibid.*, pp. 313-314.
- 97 *Ibid.*, p. 319.
- 98 *Ibid.*, pp. 307-310.
- 99 *Ibid.*, p. 361-362.
- 100 The note was added to the fourth Dutch edition: Huizinga 1935, p. 437. It cannot be found in either of the English-language versions: the translation by F. Hopman, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, was published in 1924, and R.J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch used the second Dutch edition of 1921 for their recent translation, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*.
- 101 Huizinga 1996, pp. 312, 337.

CHAPTER 5

- 1 Nicolaus 1979, pp. 51, 71-72, 167-168.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 3 For a complete survey of the two groups, see van Asperen de Boer 1976.
- 4 Klein 1989, with further bibliography; Klein 1994; Klein 2003.
- 5 Van Asperen de Boer 1970.
- 6 For more on these methods, see van Asperen de Boer 1976, pp. 19-26.
- 7 Wolfthal 1989, pp. 6-7.
- 8 Marette 1961, pp. 48-75; Nicolaus 1990, p. 17.
- 9 Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1989, pp. 12-13; Campbell 1998, p. 267.
- 10 Thissen and Vynckier 1964; Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1989, p. 13.
- 11 Klein 1987, p. 32.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
- 13 Ainsworth 2003, p. 140; Klein 2003, pp. 73-74.
- 14 Klein 1987, pp. 34-37; Klein 1989, pp. 27-33; Klein 1991, pp. 31-35.
- 15 One cannot say, however, that no exact copies were made in the first half of the fifteenth century. For instance, the two versions of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* in the Galleria Sabauda, in Turin, and the John. G. Johnson Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which are identical, apart from their sizes, could both have been made in the workshop of Jan van Eyck; van Asperen de Boer et al. 1997.
- 16 Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1989, pp. 9-17.
- 17 Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1986, pp. 27-28; Verougstraete-Marcq and Van Schoute 1989, pp. 60-69, and also 336-337, pointing out that often an original frame has lost its inscription, but that its construction may provide some indication about the date and provenance of the panels.
- 18 Klein 1985, pp. 22-23.

- 19 For the complete story of this reconstruction, see Deroubaix 1978/79.
- 20 Merrill 1976, with further bibliography; Bergeon 1986, pp. 35-38.
- 21 Ainsworth 1992, p. 65.
- 22 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 144-151.
- 23 This procedure is observed particularly in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (Taubert 1976, pp. 47-50; Campbell 1998, pp. 182-185, 202-204) and the *Lucca Virgin* (Sander 1993, pp. 252-261).
- 24 Hollanders-Favart 1983 and Ainsworth 1994, p. 87.
- 25 Faries 1981; Faries 1985, pp. 144-146; Faries 1997. The version in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg was cut off at the top and transferred to canvas in the nineteenth century.
- 26 Dijkstra 1990, pp. 115-116. See also Faries 1997, pp. 94-98, and MacBeth and Spronk 1997, pp. 118-119, 128.
- 27 Comblen-Sonkes 1974/80; Ainsworth 1998, pp. 295-308.
- 28 Dijkstra 1989, pp. 43-46.
- 29 Campbell 1981, pp. 44-50; Van der Stock 1993.
- 30 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pp. 202-221.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 181-201; Veronee-Verhaegen 1973; Veronee-Verhaegen 1983.
- 34 Campbell 1998, pp. 407-427, argued very plausibly, on the basis of the *Exhumation of Saint Hubert* (The National Gallery, London) and its pendant the *Dream of Pope Sergius* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), that Rogier already used assistants to help paint panels from the moment he became an independent master in Brussels.
- 35 Ainsworth and Martens 1994; Stroo et al. 1999, pp. 141-161; Campbell 1998, pp. 105-109.
- 36 Périer-d'Ieteren 1985, pp. 7-52; van Asperen de Boer, Faries and Filedt Kok 1986, pp. 88-91; Bergeon 1986; Dunkerton et al. 1991, pp. 182-197.
- 37 Marijnissen 1985, pp. 320-323.
- 38 Périer-d'Ieteren 1994, pp. 70-71.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 75; van Asperen de Boer, Faries and Filedt Kok 1986, pp. 89-90. For Gerard David's technique, see esp. Ainsworth 1998.
- 40 Périer-d'Ieteren 1994, pp. 70-71.
- 41 Wolters 1938, pp. 25-29.
- 42 Recent museum catalogues and monographs that make optimal use of scientific methods show how much these methods have expanded our knowledge of the individual paintings (among others, Stroo and Syfer-d'Olne 1996; Campbell 1998; Stroo et al. 1999), and deepened our understanding of the methods and intentions of individual painters (Ainsworth and Martens 1994 and esp. Ainsworth 1998). For excellent analyses of the contribution of technical studies to art-historical scholarship, see Faries 2001; Faries 2003.
- 43 Dijkstra 1990, pp. 11-28.
- 44 Ainsworth 1992, pp. 70-76.
- 45 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992; Campbell et al. 1994; Stroo and Syfer-d'Olne 1996; van Asperen de Boer 1996; Bomford et al. 1996; Garrido 1996; Billinge, Campbell and Spring 1997; Faries 1997; MacBeth and Spronk 1997; Newman 1997.
- 46 Van Asperen de Boer, Dijkstra and Van Schoute 1992, pp. 10-37, 40-43.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.
- 48 Sources relating to the collaboration between masters are discussed in: Campbell 1976, pp. 193-194; Campbell 1981, pp. 50-52; Van der Stock 1993.
- 49 Workshop participation in the case of Dirk Bouts has been established above all in the *Justice of Otto III* (Philippot 1958;

- Sneyers and Thissen 1958; Stroo et al. 1999, cat. nr. 1) and in the *Triptych of the Holy Sacrament* (Comblen-Sonkes 1996, pp. 179-180).
- 50 In sources from 1432 and 1433 ‘cnapen’ and ‘varlets’ are mentioned respectively; Weale 1908, pp. XXXVIII-XXXIX.
- 51 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, pp. 205-213.

CHAPTER 6

- 1 Coremans 1964.
- 2 A. Janssens de Bisthoven and Parmentier 1951.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. V.
- 4 For more on the development of scientific methods in the service of art history, see van de Wetering 1990. See also the extensive bibliography in H. Mund and C. Stroo 1998, pp. 12-15.
- 5 See esp. Coremans 1949; Coremans 1950; Decoen 1951. See also Meurice and Van Vaerenbergh 1951.
- 6 The criticism was severe and not always impartial; Sulzberger 1950; Sulzberger 1950/51; Sulzberger 1957; Radar 1958.
- 7 H. Pauwels 1965.
- 8 Panofsky 1965. See also Châtelet 1965, p. 581: ‘The future will undoubtedly recognise in Paul Coremans a key figure in the history of art of our time, since he was the first systematically to bring scientific methods to bear on our own disciplines.’
- 9 Lavalleye in: A. Janssens de Bisthoven and Parmentier 1951, p. V. See also Lavalleye 1952.
- 10 For more on the origins, development and significance of art-historical repertories, see Chastel 1954; Chastel 1980, pp. 71-76, 90-91.
- 11 The first volume of the *Corpus della Maiolica Italiana* appeared in 1933, and that of the *Corpus of Florentine Painting* in 1930.
- 12 Offner 1931, p. VIII. This ‘General Introduction’ appeared not in the first, but in one of the later volumes. Needless to say, the scientific study of art was still in its infancy in 1931.
- 13 The initiative for this project was undertaken in 1952 by Prof. H. Hahnloser in occasion of the International Congress of the History of Art in Amsterdam; Chastel

- 1980, pp. 90-91. The first volume appeared in 1952.
- 14 The first volume appeared in 1968.
- 15 Van de Waal 1953, p. 196.
- 16 Beside the Corpus the Center has produced several publications not directly or only in part related to panel painting: the catalogue of the exhibition *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization*, Detroit 1960; the study of M. Sonkes, *Dessins du XVe siècle: Groupe Van der Weyden*, Brussels 1969 (in the series *Contributions to Fifteenth-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands and the Principality of Liège*); the two-volume exhibition catalogue of M. Comblen-Sonkes and Ch. Vandenberg-Pantens, *Memoriën van Anthonio de Succa*, Brussels 1977.
- 17 Verhaegen 1960.
- 18 This early phase is denoted ‘pre-Eyckian realism’; Smeyers 1989/91, pp. 82-83; Smeyers 1998b, pp. 173-228, and 509-510, with a bibliography on the subject.
- 19 The last work in the most recent volume of the Corpus (vol. 20), devoted to paintings in the Mayer van den Bergh Museum, in Antwerp, is numbered 224.
- 20 Reynaud 1968; Sterling 1968. Châtelet 2001 identifies the Master of Moulins with Jean Prévost.
- 21 The volumes of the *Catalogue of Early Netherlandish Painting in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium* published so far (with the support of the Center) do not include Jean Hey; Stroo and Syfer-d’Olné 1996; Stroo et al. 1999; Stroo et al. 2001.
- 22 Held 1952.
- 23 Bruyn 1962, p. 144.
- 24 Held 1952. This prognosis has been confirmed. See also Châtelet 1965, p. 581, in his review of the volumes devoted to New England, the Louvre and the Capilla Real in Granada: ‘Each volume has a quite different approach. Thus, Colin Eisler’s study is chiefly attractive for its innumerable observations on iconography [...]. The Louvre volume provides a great deal of documentary evidence [...] the Granada volume remains not only the richest in its documentation, but also the most personal.’
- 25 Röthel 1956.
- 26 Michel 1952.
- 27 Held 1962.
- 28 Held 1952.

CHAPTER 7

- 1 Sander 1993, pp. 318-319, 333-335.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 334: 'Die Lilie im unteren Wap-
pen ist das Florentiner oder Medizeer
Wappen; die beiden Portraitfiguren
haben Arzneiflaschen in der Hand,
Embleme die auf Aerzte (Medici) deuten
und höchstwahrscheinlich symbolisch zu
nehmen sind um die Familie der Medi-
zeer zu bezeichnen'. (Letter dated 6 July
1883.)
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 318, and pp. 322-323, on the
supposedly portrait-like features of
these men.
- 4 Białostocki 1968.
- 5 Bruyn 1968.
- 6 Weale 1864/65c, pp. 268-271: 'Eerst te
onzen houtaere een scone tafel van onser
liever Vrouwen de welke ghegheven was
by deer Pieter Bultync in tjaer duust
vierhondert neghen ende tseventich voor
Paeschen; ende begheerde de zelve Pieter
al dien dat men van dier tyt voort telken
henden van des hambochs messen zal de
zelve priester ghehouden zyn over alle
zielen te lesen Miserere mei Deus ende
De profundis.' See also Martens 1992a,
pp. 227-232, 567-568, doc. 143.
- 7 Weale 1864/65c, p. 265: 'Int iaer M.CC-
CC.LXXX zo was dit werc ghegheven de
ambochte van de hueidevetters van dheer
Pieter Bultync fs. Joos, hueidevetter ende
coopman, ende joncvrouwe Katelyne syn
wyf, Godevaert van Riebekes dochtere,
dies moest de priestere van desen
ambochte achter elcke misse leesen
eenen miserere ende profundis voor
aller zielen.' P.F. Ledoulx, *Levens der
konstschilders, konstenaers en konste-
naressen* [...]. Bruges 1795, inserted page
between 10 and 11, Stadsarchief Brugge,
Fonds Academie, ms. 230. See also
Martens 1992a, pp. 227-228. For the
panel, see De Vos 1994, pp. 173-179.
- 8 Martens 1992b; Ainsworth and
Christiansen 1998, pp. 176-178.
- 9 The fullest studies of the patronage of
early Netherlandish paintings are Blum
1969; Martens 1992a.
- 10 For this triptych and its patrons, see
esp. *ibid.*, pp. 278-287; De Vos 1994,
pp. 238-244.
- 11 Weale 1864/65b, pp. 189-192. For these
portraits, see De Vos 1994, pp. 131-133.
- 12 Weale 1864/65b, pp. 181-182.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186, n. 70; A. Janssens de
Bisthoven 1957, pp. 100-101.
- 14 The deed of transfer to this guild is lost,
but the transfer can be deduced from
sixteenth-century documents; Rombauts
1986, p. 27, n. 4.
- 15 Weale 1864/65b, pp. 192-196; Rombauts
1986, p. 27.
- 16 Martens 1992a, p. 279, n. 440.
- 17 Dhanens 1965, pp. 27-32.
- 18 Martens 1992a, pp. 267, 274.
- 19 Weale 1864/65b, pp. 185-186; De Vos
1994, p. 244.
- 20 The birth dates of only two children
are known: Catharina, ca. 1478 and the
second Maria, ca. 1489; Weale 1864/65b,
pp. 182-185; A. Janssens de Bisthoven
1957, p. 95.
- 21 Weale thought he recognized the same
individual in Memling's so-called *Sibylla
Sambetha*, of 1480 (Hospital of Saint
John, Bruges), but this daughter would
have been too young in 1480 to be the
woman portrayed in that portrait; Weale
1864/65b, pp. 189-192; De Vos 1994,
p. 168.
- 22 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1957, p. 96.
- 23 Weale 1864/65b, pp. 184-185.
- 24 De Vos 1994, p. 241.
- 25 *Ibid.*; A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1957,
p. 93.
- 26 Blum 1969, p. 101.
- 27 De Vos 1994, p. 241. For the coat of arms,
see Weale 1864/65b, p. 190.

- 28 De Vos 1994, p. 241.
- 29 Blum 1969, pp. 100-101. Ninane 1958, p. 13, suggested that Moreel may have venerated Christopher because he was the patron saint of maritime transport, on which Moreel as a merchant was dependent.
- 30 For their place in the Bruges calendar of feast days, see Strubbe and Voet 1960, p. 178.
- 31 Weale 1864/65b, p. 189; Weale 1901, p. 34.
- 32 Weale 1864/65b, p. 189, cited by, among others, A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1957, p. 97. Blum 1969, p. 102, also follows Weale's argument. Pauwels does not accept it and attributes the grisailles to Memling himself or his workshop; *Eeuw der Vlaamse Primitieven* 1960, p. 115. De Vos 1994, p. 241, does not concur with Weale, either.
- 33 Oral communication from Maryan Ainsworth, for which my thanks.
- 34 Decavele 1990, p. 59.
- 35 Schouteet 1973; Vandewalle 1979, p. 93.
- 36 For the texts, see Comblen-Sonkes 1996, pp. 73-75, nr. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and for their contents also *ibid.* p. 41.
- 37 Not 1465, as I stated in the Dutch edition of this book. Van Uytven 1998, p. 187, n. 1, pointed out that the Louvain clergy did not use the Easter style, like the rest of the Burgundian Netherlands, but the so-called Christmas style.
- 38 Comblen-Sonkes 1996, p. 73: 'Die eenen vanden hemelscen / brode Die andere van melchisedech die derde van helyas ende die vierde vande etene des paeschlams in die / oude wet.'
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 73: 'na allen synen besten vermoegenen egheenen arbeit cost noch tyt dair inne sparende.'
- 41 Wolfthal 1989, pp. 38-41.
- 42 De Busscher 1859, p. 71, n. 1.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 28-32, n. 1. De Busscher misread the artist's name as 'De Scoenere'; Van der Haeghen 1899, p. 18.
- 44 De Busscher 1859, p. 71, n. 1; van der Velden 1995b, p. 46.
- 45 For examples, see De Busscher 1859, p. 73, n. 1, p. 88, n. 1.
- 46 On van Eyck's motto, see, among others, Scheller 1968; De Vos 1983.
- 47 Stroo et al. 1999, p. 97, doc. 5.
- 48 De Busscher 1859, pp. 28-32, n. 1.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 73, n. 1.
- 50 Martens 1989, pp. 186, 205, doc. 34.
- 51 On the fees Bouts received for his paintings, see Van Uytven 1998.
- 52 De Busscher 1859, pp. 28-32, n. 1.
- 53 Martens 1989, pp. 14-21.
- 54 De Busscher 1859, pp. 78-79, n. 2.
- 55 Dijkstra 1990, pp. 7-10.
- 56 Rijksarchief Brugge, *Fonds Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk*, Oud Archief, charters, prov. nr. 1364; Martens 1992a, pp. 205-206.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 206, n. 165: 'Ende wordet dan niet ghewyst dat een goet werc es, wel ludende, wel gheacordeert alzo wel of bet dan eenich bin sgheduchts heere lande, hy en wil eenen groten vander kerke niet nemen.'
- 58 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, pp. 202-203.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 60 Not in 1441, as most authors claim; Weale and Brockwell 1912, p. 122. Nor in 1442, as stated by Viaene 1965, p. 260, and Dhanens 1980, p. 212. In 1441 van der Paele merely received the permission to make the second foundation; Dewitte 1971, p. 18; A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 204.
- 61 Weale 1864/65a, pp. 28-29, n. 31; Viaene 1965; de Keyser 1971; de Keyser 1972; Harbison 1991, pp. 57-60.
- 62 Marechal 1960, pp. V-VI; B. Janssens de Bisthoven 1978; Martens 1992a, pp. 171-172.

- 63 For the cultural life of the chapter of Saint Donatian's in the Middle Ages, see Strohm 1983, pp. 10-41, and Geirnaert 1992, pp. 225-226, 240-241, and in the Renaissance, Martens 1992c.
- 64 Van Steenberghe 1935.
- 65 Derolez 1961.
- 66 De Keyser 1971, p. 338.
- 67 Weale 1908, p. 84; A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 222, doc. 1.
- 68 Weale 1864/65a, p. 28, n. 31; A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, pp. 222-223, doc. 2.
- 69 The currency mentioned is in Flemish pounds.
- 70 Not 25 pounds, as in Weale 1864/65a, p. 28, n. 31, and in A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 222; see Dewitte 1971, p. 16.
- 71 Weale 1864/65a, p. 28, n. 31: 'in navi ecclesie ad latus septentrionale altaris sanctorum Petri et Pauli, ad quod ipse perpetuam cappellaniam fundavit.'
- 72 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, pp. 225-226, doc. 13: 'In secundo sacello versus Burgum. [...] daer light ook heer Georgius de Pala, Canonynck ende Cantor van St. Donaes, die dese costelicke tafel dede maken anno 1434 by Meester Joannes de Eyck.' De Molo's information, based on epitaphs transcribed by Jean-François Foppens (1689-1761), is confirmed by other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century collections of Bruges epitaphs; *ibid.*, p. 226, doc. 13.
- 73 Wilhelmy 1993, pp. 86-94, misled by later changes in the names of the chapels in Saint Donatian's, draws the unlikely conclusion that the altar of Saints Peter and Paul stood against a southern pillar in the nave and that the *Van der Paele Virgin* served as its altarpiece.
- 74 Gailliard 1861, p. 184; Vermeersch 1976, vol. 1, p. 142; *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 171, nr. 180.
- 75 Weale and Brockwell 1912, p. 122, supposed that George van der Paele and his brother were buried in the same grave, although George received permission to lay a gravestone for his brother between that of his uncle and the tomb of Margaret of Flanders; Weale 1864/65a, p. 28, n. 31.
- 76 Bisschoppelijk Archief Brugge, *St. Donaas, Testamenten en Fundaties*, 1434, unnumbered document; Martens 1992a, pp. 464-468, doc. 64. Another member of the chapter, Petrus de Nayere, donated a number of objects for use at the same altar. Probably for lack of space they were kept in the adjacent chapel. Wilhelmy 1993, p. 92, thinks that the 'Capella de Arbosio' housed only objects for use at the altars in the nave, but it is inconceivable that the inventory of all the chapels would not refer to the altar of this chapel or the objects that were used at it.
- 77 Weale 1864/65a, p. 29, n. 31; Martens 1992a, pp. 427-428, doc. 16.
- 78 *Ibid.*, pp. 427-428, docs. 2 and 158.
- 79 Weale 1864/65a, pp. 28-29, n. 31. Dewitte 1971, p. 18, doc. 5, gives a summary of the deed of foundation.
- 80 Bisschoppelijk Archief Brugge, *St. Donaas, Acta Capituli*, nr. a. 51, fol. 185v; Dewitte 1971, p. 20.
- 81 Martens 1992a, pp. 184-194.
- 82 De Keyser 1971, p. 337.
- 83 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 204.
- 84 *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 224, doc. 7.
- 85 Weale and Brockwell 1912, p. 120; de Keyser 1972, col. 676; H. Pauwels 1985, p. 224. Viaene 1965, p. 263, and Harbison 1991, p. 57, are of the opinion that it was placed in the chapel only after van der Paele's death.
- 86 This can be deduced from the absence of the customary date of death in the inscription on the stone; Gailliard 1861, p. 184; Vermeersch 1976, vol. 2, p. 171.
- 87 For the former view, see, for example, Friedländer 1967a, pp. 42-43; for the latter, see Viaene 1965; Terner 1979.

- Viaene notes that the painting would have reminded the chapter to fulfil its obligations with respect to van der Paele's foundations.
- 88 'Item pro mundatione tabule exterioris ad altare apostolorum petri et pauli VI s par.' Bisschoppelijk Archief Brugge, *St. Donaas. Rekeningen van de kerk-fabriek*, nr. g. 4, 1439, fol. 13r; Martens 1992a, p. 423, doc. 11.
- 89 For instance the epitaph panel of Joos Brids and Yolente Belle, of 1420 (Belle Hospital, Ypres) and a number of reliefs, dating from ca. 1490-1500, in the church of Our Lady in Bruges, such as the epitaph of Lodewijk de Baenst Sr and Clara Losschaert, and that of Jacob van den Velde and his family; Devlieghe 1965, p. 77, nr. 109; Viaene 1965, p. 262; Vermeersch 1976, vol. 2, pp. 350-353, 358-361.
- 90 The epitaph is known through a drawing in a late seventeenth-century description of Bruges tombs: I. De Hooghe, *Versaemelinghe van alle de sepulturen, epitaphien, besetten, waepens ende blasoenen, die gevonden worden in alle de kercken, kloosters, abdyen, capellen ende godshuysen, binnen de stad van Brugge [...]*, Bruges 1698-1707, vol. 1, fol. 33r, Bruges, Stadsbibliotheek, ms. 449; Vermeersch 1976, vol. 2, pp. 224-226, nr. 230, pls. 102-103. An engraving of the drawing was published in Gailliard 1861, pl. XLV.
- 91 De Keyser 1972, col. 676. Willem de Niepa was accused of irregularities in the execution of van der Paele's will; Dewitte 1971, p. 20.
- 92 The dimensions can be calculated roughly on the basis of the plan of the church reproduced in FIG. 161. This plan includes a scale, but its accuracy is uncertain.
- 93 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 202.
- 94 *Ibid.*
- 95 See also Purtle 1982, pp. 93-95, for the analysis of the iconography of the sculpture on the throne and the capitals.
- 96 Panofsky 1953, pp. 147-148.
- 97 A. Janssens de Bisthoven 1981, p. 201. I have corrected 'purior' in this transcription as 'prior'; cf. *Liber Sapientiae* 7:29.
- 98 Panofsky 1953, p. 148.
- 99 See the next chapter, note 49.
- 100 Purtle 1982, p. 91.

CHAPTER 8

- 1 Baxandall 1971, p. 107.
- 2 Gombrich 1995, p. 240.
- 3 Baxandall 1971, pp. 97-103.
- 4 Campbell 1976, pp. 192-193.
- 5 Panofsky 1939, pp. 3-31; Panofsky 1955, 26-41.
- 6 Koslow 1986, pp. 9-34, discusses the possibility that early Netherlandish beds represented in paintings convey complex symbolic information.
- 7 Gombrich 1972, p. 15.
- 8 Stechow 1966, pp. 10-11; Comblen-Sonkes 1996, p. 73.
- 9 Van Molle et al. 1958, esp. p. 9; Stroo et al. 1999, p. 97.
- 10 Stechow 1966, pp. 141-145.
- 11 The contract did not indicate the specific theological meaning that individual details were presumably meant to convey; Denny 1963. Jacobs 1994, gives details on a number of clerical commissions for sculpted altarpieces.
- 12 Harbison 1986, p. 171.
- 13 Marrow 1986, pp. 151-152; Bedaux 1990, p. 11; Hall 1994, pp. 95-129.
- 14 De Tolnay 1939, p. 15.
- 15 Dvořák 1967, introduction p. XXV and pp. 106, 112-113, 136-150.
- 16 Mâle 1986, p. VI.
- 17 Huizinga 1996, pp. 313-314.
- 18 De Tolnay 1941, p. 174.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 20 Huizinga 1996, p. 317.
- 21 De Tolnay 1939, pp. 29-30.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.
- 23 De Tolnay 1932, p. 332; de Tolnay 1939, p. 34. For a discussion of the concept of *Kunstwollen*, see Kleinbauer 1971, p. 22.
- 24 Panofsky 1953, p. 248.
- 25 De Tolnay 1932, pp. 333-335.
- 26 Panofsky 1939, esp. p. 15.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.
- 28 Warburg 1932; Gombrich 1986, pp. 134-167.
- 29 De Tolnay 1939, p. 16.
- 30 De Tolnay 1932, pp. 332-334, n. 17.
- 31 Panofsky 1934.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 33 Panofsky 1951, pp. 19-20.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19; also pp. 12-18.
- 35 Held 1955, pp. 214-215.
- 36 Holly 1984, esp. pp. 158-159; Bois 1985.
- 37 Huizinga 1996, p. 312.
- 38 Panofsky 1953, p. 137.
- 39 Pächt 1956, p. 276; Kleinbauer 1971, pp. 54-56.
- 40 Panofsky 1953, p. 141. See also his earlier discussion in Panofsky 1934, p. 126.
- 41 Panofsky 1953, p. 142.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 43 In fact, Panofsky uses what he assumes to be the peculiarly complex iconography of Eyckian works as a means of attributing images to van Eyck himself; Panofsky 1935, p. 449.
- 44 For the English translation, see Panofsky 1991.
- 45 Held 1955, p. 207.
- 46 Panofsky 1953, pp. 3, 5, 8, 11, 12, 16 and 19; noted previously in Harbison 1989, p. 198.
- 47 Panofsky 1953, p. 137. For another reading of Panofsky's use of linear perspective as a 'modern' symbolic form, see Snyder 1995.
- 48 Panofsky 1953, pp. 142-143.
- 49 In claiming that the light in the *Virgin and Child in a Church* panel was symbolic, Panofsky, *ibid.*, p. 147, asserted that 'there is in all Christendom no Gothic church having a full-fledged choir with radiating chapels that would face the west and not the east'. While perhaps technically correct, this statement does not allow for the existence of many Gothic and Romanesque churches (without full-fledged radiating chapels) in the region where van Eyck lived whose orientation is so skewed, even backward,

- that such ‘northern’ light is possible in reality. I have discussed this situation at greater length in Harbison 1991, esp. pp. 172-175, and Harbison 1993, esp. pp. 163-164.
- 50 Held 1955, p. 207.
- 51 Panofsky 1939, p. 129.
- 52 Pächt 1956, p. 275.
- 53 Meiss 1945, p. 176, esp. n. 2; Schapiro 1945, p. 183.
- 54 Held 1955, p. 207.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 56 Panofsky 1953, p. 378.
- 57 Gombrich 1972, pp. 11-12, called this the ‘dictionary fallacy’.
- 58 Held 1955, pp. 214-215.
- 59 Schapiro 1945, p. 185.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 61 Meiss 1945, p. 176; Pächt 1956, p. 275, esp. n. 37.
- 62 Gottlieb 1970, p. 65; Wood 1993, p. 178.
- 63 Snyder 1967, p. 165; Heckscher 1968, p. 43.
- 64 Baxandall 1985, p. 132.
- 65 Koch 1964, p. 70.
- 66 Panofsky 1934, p. 127, n. 35.
- 67 Gombrich 1972, pp. 15-16.
- 68 Smith 1972, p. 128.
- 69 Heckscher 1968, p. 38.
- 70 Gottlieb 1970, p. 84.
- 71 Ward 1975, p. 220, n. 129.
- 72 Panofsky 1935.
- 73 O’Meara 1981.
- 74 Lane 1975b.
- 75 Gottlieb 1970, p. 83.
- 76 Koch 1964, p. 71.
- 77 Van Buren 1978, and the comments by Harbison 1989, p. 201.
- 78 Hall and Uhr 1978.
- 79 De Coo 1981, p. 132.
- 80 Madigan 1986, esp. p. 230.
- 81 Van Buren 1978, p. 622.
- 82 Minott 1969, pp. 267-268.
- 83 Purtle 1982, esp. pp. XV-XVIII.
- 84 McNamee 1972; McNamee 1974a; McNamee 1974b.
- 85 Lane, 1975a; Lane 1975b; Lane 1984.
- 86 Goodgal 1981; Goodgal 1982.
- 87 Panofsky 1953, p. 143.
- 88 Schapiro 1945.
- 89 Koch 1964.
- 90 Blum 1977, p. 103.
- 91 Heckscher 1968; Minott 1969; Gottlieb 1970; Lane 1984.
- 92 Lash 1996, p. 91.
- 93 Panofsky 1953, p. 141.
- 94 Eisler 1985, p. 87.
- 95 Leff 1956; Oberman 1978.
- 96 Denis the Carthusian; von Simson 1953, p. 15.
- 97 Ozment 1980, p. 56.
- 98 Baxandall 1985, p. 131.
- 99 De Coo 1981.
- 100 Campbell 1976, pp. 192-193.
- 101 Baxandall 1985, p. 132.
- 102 Bedaux 1986; Bedaux 1990, pp. 21-65.
- 103 Alpers 1983.
- 104 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 105 Hall 1994, esp. p. 125.
- 106 Billinge and Campbell 1995; Campbell 1998.
- 107 Harbison 1995, pp. 342, 344.
- 108 Seidel 1989; Seidel 1993; Harbison 1990; Carroll 1993; Ridderbos 1993.
- 109 A number of studies also continue on the paths of Panofsky’s followers; see for instance Pitts 1986; Merryday 1988; Neuner 1994/95; Fleckner 1996; Michael 1996.
- 110 Gifford 1999; Purtle 1999.
- 111 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- 112 Purtle 1996; Reynolds 1996.
- 113 Blum 1996, p. 171.
- 114 Holly 1993. On the other hand, Lane 1988 has criticized some recent observers for not valuing the single-minded piety of fifteenth-century northern Europeans highly enough.
- 115 Ringbom 1965; Ringbom 1969. See also Ringbom 1984.
- 116 Benjamin 1976, p. 12.

- 117 Marrow 1979, pp. 20-26; Harbison 1985, esp. pp. 87-88; Harbison 1986; Harbison 1989; Toussaert 1963.
- 118 Harbison 1989, pp. 203-204; Harbison 1991, pp. 86-92.
- 119 *Ibid.*, pp. 168-192; Harbison 1993.
- 120 Panofsky 1953, pp. 144-148.
- 121 Lane 1975a.
- 122 Harbison 1985, pp. 88-90; Botvinick 1992.
- 123 Van der Velden 1997.
- 124 Freedberg 1989; Belting 1990b; Belting 1994.
- 125 Von Simson 1953.
- 126 Hahn 1986.
- 127 Falkenburg 1991. See also Falkenburg 2001; Rothstein 1999.
- 128 Koslow 1979; Ridderbos 1990; Ridderbos 1991, esp. pp. 190-209.
- 129 Marrow 1986.
- 130 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 131 Ward 1994.
- 132 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 133 Chapuis 1999.
- 134 Acres 1997; Acres 1998; Acres 2000.
- 135 Acres 1998, esp. 432-433.
- 136 *Ibid.*, p. 447.
- 137 See also Preimesberger 1991, and Belting and Kruse 1994, for further reflections on the self-consciousness of early Netherlandish artists.

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