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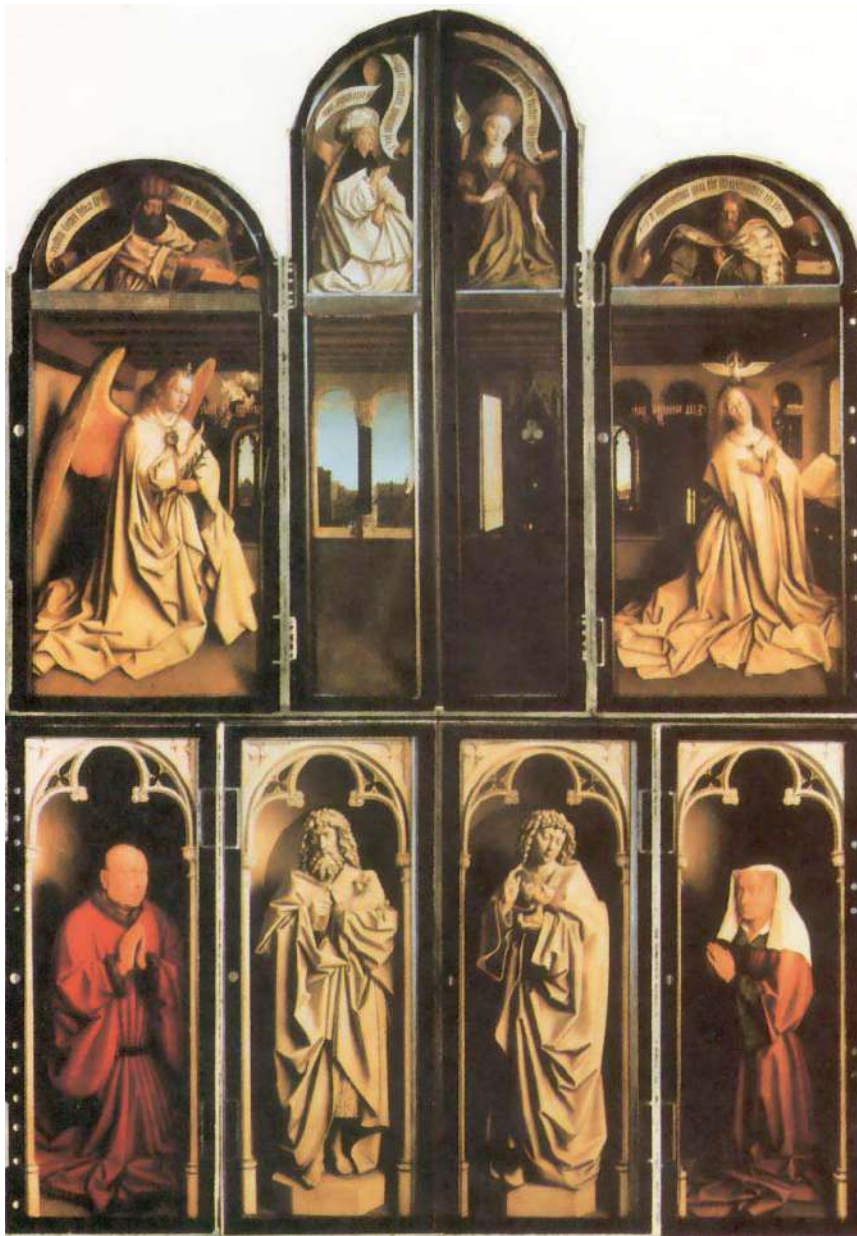
The Ghent Altarpiece

JAN VAN EYCK AND HIS PATRONS



Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece* (open), completed 1432. Tempera and oil on panel, about 11 x 15ft (3.35 x 4.57m). St Bavo, Ghent.

The altarpiece of the *Lamb of God* by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck is one of the few large fifteenth-century polyptychs (multi-paneled paintings) that can be seen today in its original physical context, an apsidal chapel in the cathedral of St Bavo, Ghent. It was commissioned by Joos Vijd (d. 1439) and his wife Elisabeth Borluut (d. 1443) who paid for the construction of the chapel, where daily masses were to be said for them and their ancestors in what was then their parish church, dedicated to St John the Baptist, whose emblem is a lamb. The chapel itself, with high windows and a vault in the Gothic style current at the time in Flanders, differs from others in the apse only by inconspicuous carvings of the Vijd and Borluut coats of arms. But the altarpiece, begun before 1426 and finished in 1432, is in every way exceptional; it is one of the earliest, finest and largest examples of fifteenth-century Flemish painting. Every detail contributes to its religious meaning as an exposition of the doctrine of Redemption. Everything has a symbolic significance although being rendered with the vivid naturalism that the development of oil paint had just then made possible. The shadows of the figures and framing devices seem to be cast by the natural light falling from the windows on the



spectator's right. In this way the spiritual truth of the Christian doctrine is corroborated by the tangible fidelity with which the visible world is represented.

The altarpiece consists of 20 panels, 16 of them mounted on the doors which, when closed, cover the central four. Originally there was a predella beneath, representing the hell or limbo into which Christ descended to redeem the virtuous. On the outside of the doors the donors are portrayed life-size, kneeling before simulated stone statues painted in *grisaille* of St John the Evangelist and St John the Baptist. Above them the archangel Gabriel is shown announcing to the Virgin that she is to give birth to the Redeemer, as foretold by the two prophets and two sibyls who appear in the top register. The windows of the Virgin's room open on to a townscape of typically Flemish buildings.

When the doors are opened a more brilliantly colored celestial vision is revealed. In the center of the top register Christ (sometimes mistaken for God the

Father), more than life-size, is enthroned as 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' (the inscription embroidered on the hem of his robe), wearing the papal crown, raising his right hand in benediction and holding a scepter in his left, with a jewel-encrusted royal crown at his feet. He is flanked by the Virgin and St John the Baptist, with angels singing and making music on either side of them. Adam and Eve, depicted in the end panels in niches beneath simulated stone reliefs of Cain and Abel, seem to have been placed there to record the origin of sin that necessitated redemption. Inscriptions state 'Adam thrusts us into death' and 'Eve has afflicted us with death'. The beautifully painted flesh of their bodies, frail but living, Adam's sunburn on hands and wrists and above the neck, is a reminder of mortal weakness and transience. (He was evidently painted from a model normally clothed, whereas Adam lived in a state of nature.)

The lower register has a unified background, a panorama of wooded hills surrounding a lush meadow bright with flowers of all seasons. There are trees that grow in different parts of Europe, including the palms, cypresses, stone-pines, pomegranates, olives and oranges of the Mediterranean region. Swallows and other small birds soar and swoop in the clear summer sky. This is a vision of

paradise where all the most beautiful plants flourish; and they are depicted with such precision that they may be botanically identified. Towers and spires rising above the horizon include those of Utrecht Cathedral and the church of St Nicholas in Ghent: they symbolize the heavenly Jerusalem where the whole community of the redeemed, the 'ransomed of the Lord', will be united in worship. The meadow is approached over rough ground in the other panels by Just Judges, Christian warriors, hermits and a giant St Christopher leading pilgrims. Patriarchs and prophets (including Virgil); popes, bishops and other clergy are in the foreground of the main panel, as well as confessors who avowed the Christian faith despite persecution, and an endless procession of female saints beyond them. In the center beneath the dove of the Holy Spirit, the Lamb of God stands on an altar, blood flowing from his breast into a chalice. A fountain in the foreground is inscribed: 'This is the fountain of the water of life proceeding out of the throne of God'.

The meaning of the open altarpiece would have been explicit when it was seen above the head of a priest celebrating the Mass and, after the consecration of bread and wine, reciting the *Agnus Dei*, 'Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us'. But the iconographical program of the whole polyptych is complex, inspired by various medieval writings and presumably drawn up by the donors in consultation with an erudite priest who selected the Biblical texts for the numerous inscriptions. No fewer than 18 manuscript volumes are depicted, and the words in some of them are legible. The impression made by the painting is, nevertheless, visionary. The van Eycks succeeded in translating what must have been an abstruse theological discourse, propounded by the donors and their priestly advisers, into a pellucid visual language.

On the outer frame of the doors a dedicatory inscription in Latin verse states that 'Hubert van Eyck, than whom none was greater' began the altarpiece and his brother Jan, 'second in art', completed it at the request of Joos Vijd on 6 May 1432. This is the only contemporary record of the work's authorship and has given rise to much discussion. Hubert is an obscure figure, occasionally mentioned in the civic archives of Ghent where he died and was buried in St John's Church (now the Cathedral of St Bavo) in 1426. A sister named Margaret, also a painter, probably worked with him and is said to have been buried beside him. By 1432, however, Jan was already embarked on the career that was to win him international renown, although no work from his hand earlier than the Ghent altarpiece survives. Ten years earlier he had been taken into the service of Duke John of Bavaria, Count of Holland, at The Hague where he executed wall paintings. Three years later he was appointed court painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy and ruler of most of Flanders, who entrusted him also with secret missions as far afield as Portugal.

Philip the Good was the grandson of Philip the Bold who had employed Claus Sluter at Dijon and great-nephew of the Duke of Berry who had commissioned the *Tres Riches Heures* from the Limbourg brothers. Employment by a member of this family of distinguished patrons helps to set the work of Jan van Eyck, emerging from the so-called International Gothic style, in its social and art historical contexts. For although Joos Vijd was a burgher, serving from 1395 intermittently on the Ghent city council, he was a member of the minor nobility and a landowner. As such he had sometimes attended the court of Philip the Good. His wife Elisabeth Borluut came from a patrician family of Ghent that had included knights and abbots. However, their wealth probably came from wool on which the prosperity of Ghent was founded and so, for them, the Lamb of God—which had appeared on the city's seal since the thirteenth century—must have had a mundane as well as a spiritual significance.

NOTE: This reading assignment also includes ["Jan van Eyck's Annunciation" pamphlet from National Gallery, Wash DC, summer 94.](#)