

# DER GENTER ALTAR THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

Reproduktionen, Deutungen, Forschungskontroversen  
Reproductions, Interpretations, Scholarly Debates

Für die Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
herausgegeben von Stephan Kemperdick, Johannes Rößler und Joris Corin Heyder

For the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,  
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**Gemäldegalerie**  
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

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## MICHEL COXCIE'S COPY AS A FORMAL REFERENCE OF THE MATERIAL CONDITION OF THE GHENT ALTARPIECE IN 1557

Since September 2012, The Royal Institute for Cultural heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) has been in charge of the conservation treatment of the Van Eyck brothers' *Ghent Altarpiece* (figs. 1, 2). The project is carried out in public view in a purpose-built studio in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent and is planned in three successive phases, starting with the reverses of the wing panels. The treatment is followed by an international commission of experts composed of conservators, art historians and conservation scientists.<sup>1</sup> The present study introduces research on Michiel Coxcie's copy of the altarpiece (figs. 43, 44) undertaken in connection with the conservation-restoration project.<sup>2</sup> The quality of Coxcie's meticulous copy, carried out between 1557 and 1558 for Philip II of Spain, has been recognized since its completion, and the royal painter was generously rewarded for his work. Historical sources indicate that the copy was shipped to Spain early on, possibly in October 1559, and installed in the royal

chapel in the palace (Alcázar) of Madrid. It remained in the possession of the Spanish monarchs until the beginning of the 1800's and was valued both as a liturgical object and a jewel of the royal holdings. Despite being difficult of access, its prestigious reputation endured through the centuries, and the royal pedigree contributed to its inclusion in important collections in the course of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Humanists appreciated Coxcie's attentive, skilled reproduction and, since Carel van Mander, critics identified corrections introduced by the painter, such as the insertion of significant motifs and portraits, obvious alterations of awkward figures and the omission of archaic accessories such as scrolled banderols (figs. 54, 55). The fundamental updates to the copy are visible on the reverses of the wings of the lower register, when the retable was closed: the portraits of the donors were not reproduced for this royal commission and only the figure of saint John the

Fig. 53. Michiel Coxcie, *Virgin Enthroned*, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, detail

Fig. 54. Jan and Hubert Van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, *Prophet Miceah*, lunette above the *Virgin Annunciate*, Ghent, Saint-Bavo Cathedral



Fig. 55. Michiel Coxcie, *Prophet Miceah*, lunette above the *Virgin Annunciate*, Brussels, RMFAB





Evangelist served as a model in a row of four grisailles representing the evangelists (fig. 44). The old sources, however, do not describe the range of stylistic changes introduced by the copyist.<sup>4</sup>

Authors of technical studies have commented on Coxcie's use of quick and economical painting and gilding techniques, efficiently imitating the exceptionally complex pictorial and textural renditions of the prototype.<sup>5</sup> Some areas are executed more carefully than others: the backgrounds tend to be simplified, the rather dry rendition of the *Annunciation* and of the landscapes contrasts with the careful execution of the enthroned figures - in particular the *Virgin Enthroned* -, and of the *Angel* panels. In terms of technique and colour range, the artist also made a number of adaptations that clearly aimed to update the style of the older masterpiece. The draperies and the proportions of the bodies differ slightly. In the copy, the eyes are larger, the noses smoother and the eyebrows less pronounced. Pinks, purples, greens, flesh tones and, particularly, the skies of the copy, are swiftly painted in fluid, more vibrant colours. The often repeated anecdote of the acquisition of a bright and costly blue from Titian, related in 1568 by Marcus van Vaernewijck, echoes the attention given to the choice of materials for the copy.<sup>6</sup> Chromatic and aesthetic dissimilarities, mainly due to Coxcie's use of different pigments and techniques, could moreover have increased to different degrees through natural alterations and human interventions.

Given the range of changes introduced by the copyist, it is necessary to assess to what extent the copy can be used to date and characterize early, extensive overpaint that is presently being removed in the course of the conservation-restoration treatment of the *Ghent altarpiece* and gain insight into the early material history of Van Eyck's original masterpiece.

In order to achieve this study, Coxcie's panels were examined and technical documentation was undertaken. The exhibition on Coxcie's work, held in M – Museum Leuven from October 2013 to February 2014, also stimulated further research on the artist's practice.<sup>7</sup> This paper reflects a first phase of an on-going study by the author, with the collaboration of the team of conservators and scientists, and concentrates on the examination of the *Annunciation* and of the monumental enthroned figures.

## Condition of Coxcie's panels

The condition of the panels varies. The enthroned figures of the *Virgin* (figs. 53, 56) and the *Baptist* (fig. 58) are in an exceptional condition, with a smooth, glowing surface and barely any trace of wear. The slightly brownish varnish layer does not disturb the appreciation of the fine mod-

Fig. 56. Michiel Coxcie, *Virgin Enthroned*, Munich, Alte Pinakothek







elling, colours and details. The *Deity Enthroned* (fig. 57) displays traces of wear and restorations and is covered with a dark brown oily varnish.<sup>8</sup> The *Adoration of the Lamb* suffered grave damages during World War II and its very skilful restoration involved the removal of the wooden support and the transfer of the entire composition

Fig. 57. Michiel Coxcie, *Deity Enthroned*, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie SMB

Fig. 58. Michiel Coxcie, *Baptist Enthroned*, Munich, Alte Pinakothek





to a new board.<sup>9</sup> The paintings on the reverses of the shutters, kept in Brussels, are in fair condition, with more damages and abrasions in the *Evangelist*. The right side of the drapery of the *Virgin Annunciate* displays some damages, rather extensive retouching and some wood is missing along the join. The obverses of the panels, particularly the *Angels*, are much worn in places and the skies are stained by older restorations.<sup>10</sup>

### Coxcie's copying procedure of the Ghent Altarpiece

The copy was an ambitious technical undertaking. Although Coxcie had executed other skilful reproductions,<sup>11</sup> the monumental dimensions of the polyptych and its intricate installation in a massive ornamental structure set in the very limited space of the Vijd chapel<sup>12</sup> demanded careful planning to ensure a safe and flawless execution.

According to Lucas De Heere (1559), who must have witnessed the process, Coxcie worked industriously for two years in the chapel: 'Twee iaren daer met besigh zijnde in dees capelle./ Hy bewaerde sijn eere van int beghin/ Totten hende toe, als een oprecht werck-gheselle'.<sup>13</sup> Although most of the work must indeed have been carried out in the chapel, it seems unlikely that the painter worked only there. Some of the floor space of about 40 m<sup>2</sup> must have

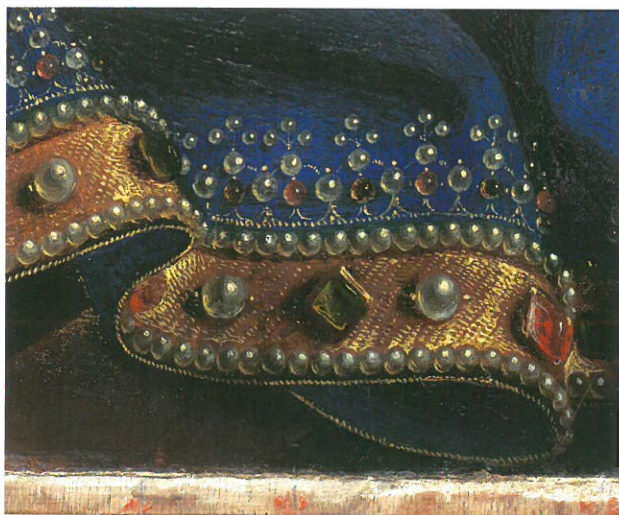
been, at least for some of the period, occupied with an adaptable scaffold or a platform to copy the central panels. The wings of the altarpiece could have been dismantled by opening the hinges and taking down the panels one by one to be copied, therefore not hampering the liturgical use of the altarpiece. However, the large central panels, which at the time were probably crowned by a canopy, would have been solidly fixed in place and it seems unlikely that they would have been dismantled. The preparation of the panels and of the frames by coating them with chalk grounds would have been carried out elsewhere, by assistants or by specialist craftsmen.<sup>14</sup>

The making of the cartoons and the transfer of the designs to the prepared panels, as well as the application of underpaint, could have been carried out either in the chapel, in a studio elsewhere, or in the "Camere" ordered by the dean of the chapter at Coxcie's request, explicitly for the copying of the retable ("om de tafele van Adam ende Eva daer inne te conterfeytene").<sup>15</sup> The design and location of the "Camere" is not known and it seems unlikely that it would have been built in the restricted space of the chapel. It might also have been used as a safe place of storage for Coxcie's painting tools and materials as well as paper, tracings, cartoons and panels that were not yet painted or that were drying. Interestingly, the account refers to two types of wood: "scuttebard", planks used for example for partitions and without structural function, and "zolderberd", beams used for horizontal supporting structures such as attics or roofs.<sup>16</sup> Would this imply that the "Camere" had a ceiling and an attic, perhaps for storage? Although there is no clear reference to another structure, the wood could have been used to build a stable, possibly mobile working platform, wide enough to enable the artist to carry out his work safely and comfortably right next to the central panels. In any case, the construction of a complex edifice would justify the twelve working days billed by the carpenters.<sup>17</sup>

### Supports and grounds

Coxcie ordered oak panels of excellent quality, with a straight grain, that have remained in good structural condition.<sup>18</sup> The dimensions of the panels of original and copy are very close.<sup>19</sup> As in the case of the original, the chalk

Fig. 59. Detail of the unpainted edge along the panel of Michiel Coxcie's *Virgin Enthroned*, Munich, Alte Pinakothek





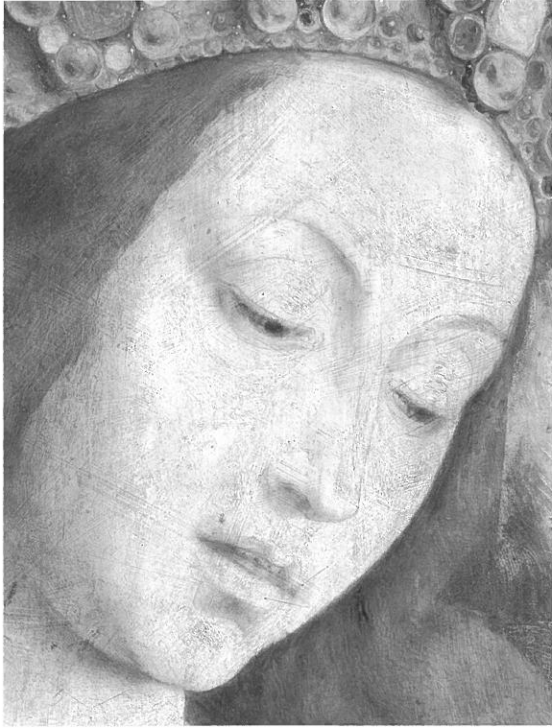


Fig. 60. Detail in IRR of Coxcie's *Virgin Enthroned*, Munich, Alte Pinakothek

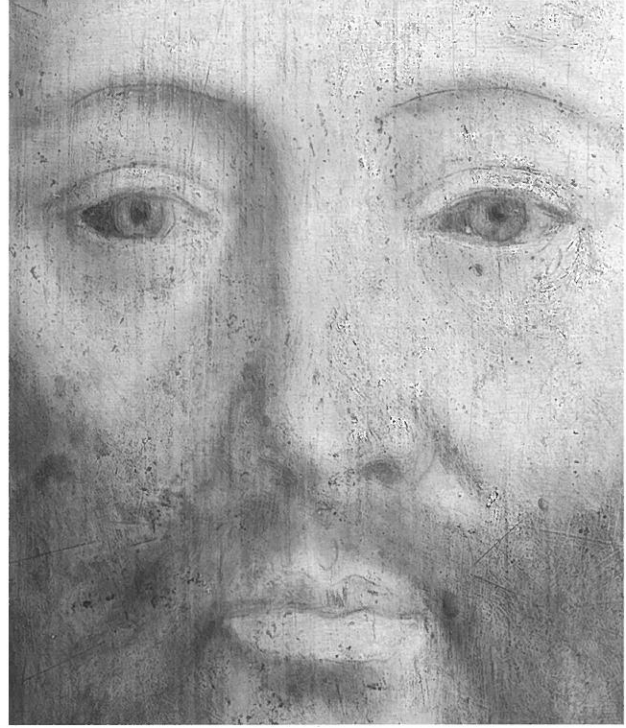


Fig. 61. Detail in IRR of Coxcie's *Deity Enthroned*, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

Fig. 62. Detail in IRR of Coxcie's *Knights of Christ* (Brussels, RMFAB). The decisive underdrawing of the royal portraits contrasts with the traced profile of the knight below



ground was applied to the framed panels, in the manner traditionally employed by early Netherlandish painters. A narrow strip of uncovered wood all around the edges of the panels as well as a raised barb of preparation became visible when the original frames were removed (fig. 59). Unfortunately, none of the original frames has survived.<sup>20</sup>

Coxcie used a thin layer of priming tinted with lead white and a little reddish earth pigment to isolate the ground and slightly tone down the chalky whiteness of the surface.<sup>21</sup> This layer was applied with a brush, causing locally a slightly streaky surface texture visible in Infrared Reflectography (IRR) because of the accumulation of infrared absorbing pigments in the hollows (fig. 60).<sup>22</sup>

#### Tracings to cartoons

IRR of Coxcie's panels give essential clues to the artist's method. It shows a simple drawing of stiff outlines (fig.

61), indicating that the design was mechanically transferred with a hard instrument, such as a stylus, from paper cartoons coated with pigment on the reverse.<sup>23</sup> A few shadows were indicated with simple hatching or zig-zags, and details were added free-hand with a black drawing material that



left loose particles on the surface where they were caught on the raised parts of the brushstrokes of the priming (fig. 60). Coxcie did not, however, simply transfer a traced copy of the original: IRR reveals that, already at the underdrawing stage, the copy differed from the original in many subtle ways. Other areas are identical to the original, indicating that Coxcie traced Van Eyck's compositions, probably on paper, made translucent by applications of oil, and fixed across the surfaces of the paintings.<sup>24</sup> As for the preparation of cartoons for stained glass, fresco or tapestries, all techniques that Coxcie had mastered many years earlier, the artist would have pasted sheets of paper together to achieve the desired dimensions for the tracing. The cartoon was drawn on the basis of this tracing, partly reproducing the original but also introducing a variety of changes. This amended version was then mechanically transferred to the primed grounds of the new panels before painting.<sup>25</sup> A careful comparative examination of Coxcie's underdrawing with Van Eyck's paintings shows important and subtle changes introduced even at this early stage. Some folds are omitted, the position of some of the arms, hands and fingers are modified and the proportions of the figures are slightly altered to make them more elegant. Elements that Coxcie excluded straight away, such as the awkward position of the *Prophet Micah's* right arm or the banderols (figs. 54, 55) do not figure in the underdrawing and are therefore unlikely to have been reproduced in the cartoon.

Coxcie already introduced his self-portrait and the portraits of the Philip II and Charles V at the underdrawing stage and not as an afterthought. The lively drawings contrast with the faint, mechanically transferred contours of the knights. (fig. 62).

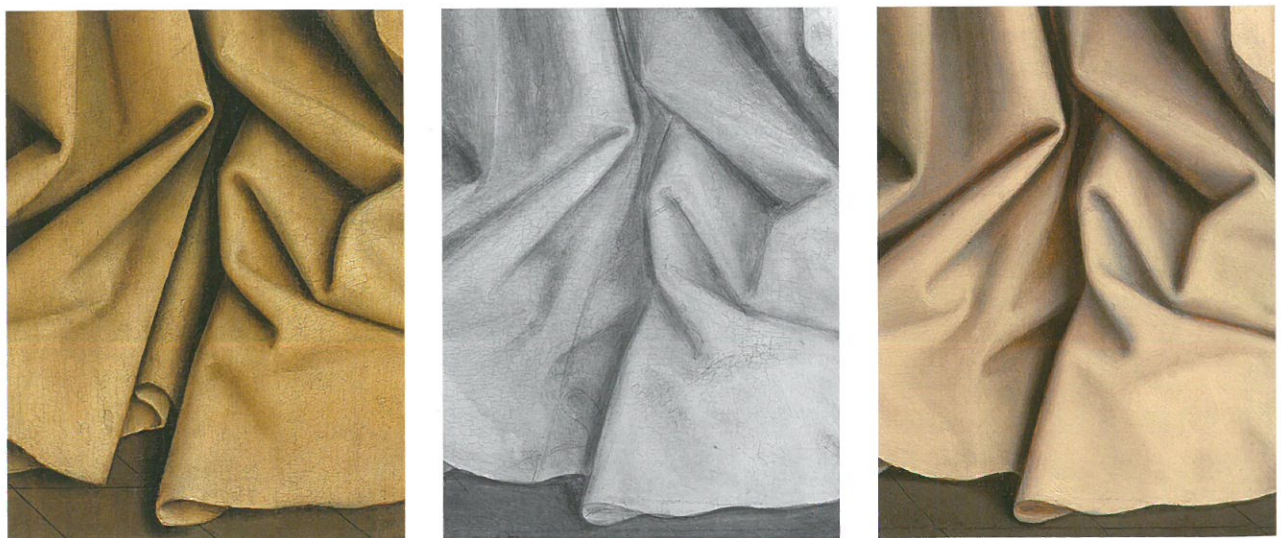
Another copying system has left its traces on Coxcie's panels: little dots of red wax divided by the sharp imprint of a thread, placed on the unpainted edges and locally overlapping the original paint on the barbs (fig. 59). These wax dots were therefore positioned after painting and corresponded to grids of threads stretched across the painted surfaces, possibly used by later artists to reproduce Coxcie's copies.<sup>26</sup>

### Changes introduced in the course of painting

The painter altered the imperial crowns of the royal portraits at the painting stage. He elongated his initial design of for Charles V's rounded inner headdress, inspired by the figure in profile in Van Eyck's original, and transformed Philip's II into a dainty crown. Coxcie carried out some adaptations in the clothes and proportions either straight away, during the application of the underpaint, or later in the painting process. In that case, two painted versions are visible in the IRR.

In the *Annunciation*, the changes tend to simplify the prototype by eliminating details and reducing the com-

Fig. 63. Detail of the same area of the *Virgin Annunciate's* robe. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning), and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing the underdrawing, c) Photo in normal light (Photos Freya Maes, © MRBAB/KMSKB)





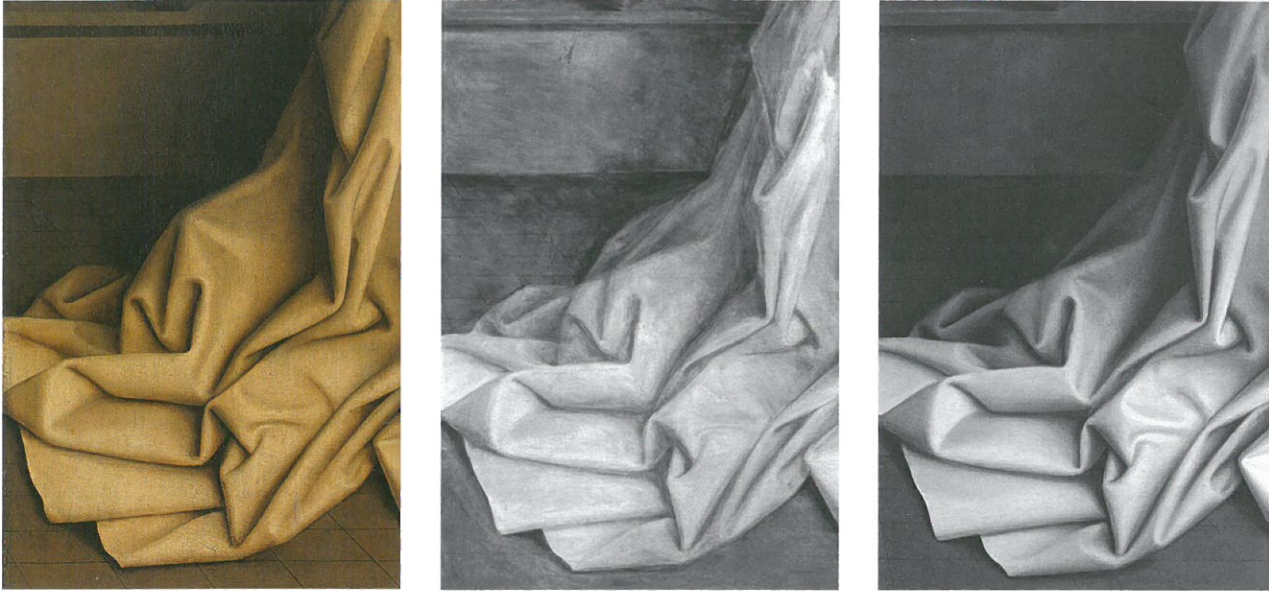


Fig. 64. Detail of the same areas on the left side of the *Virgin Annunciate's* robe. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning), and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing changes introduced during painting, c) Photo in normal light

plexity of ornaments, clarifying the background by altering the proportions of the architecture and correcting the perspective. Many changes were already introduced in the cartoon: the frontal cross of the *Archangel* is smaller, his wings are more imposing and naturalistic, soft and strikingly coloured.

In the *Virgin Annunciate*, Coxcie did not paint a straight tubular fold at the bottom of the robe, although he had re-

produced it in the underdrawing (fig. 63 a–c). On the left edge of the robe, for example, he copied some folds in the underpainting stage and reduced their volume later on (fig. 64 a–c). This approach is also noticeable in the *Archangel's* drapery: on the left side, the drapery is reproduced at the underdrawing stage, the shape adapted in the underpainting and, again, in the last phases of painting (fig. 65 a–c). The drapery and the lily's stem under the

Fig. 65. Detail of the same area on the left side of the *Archangel's* robe. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning), and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing the underdrawing and underpainting, c) Photo in normal light

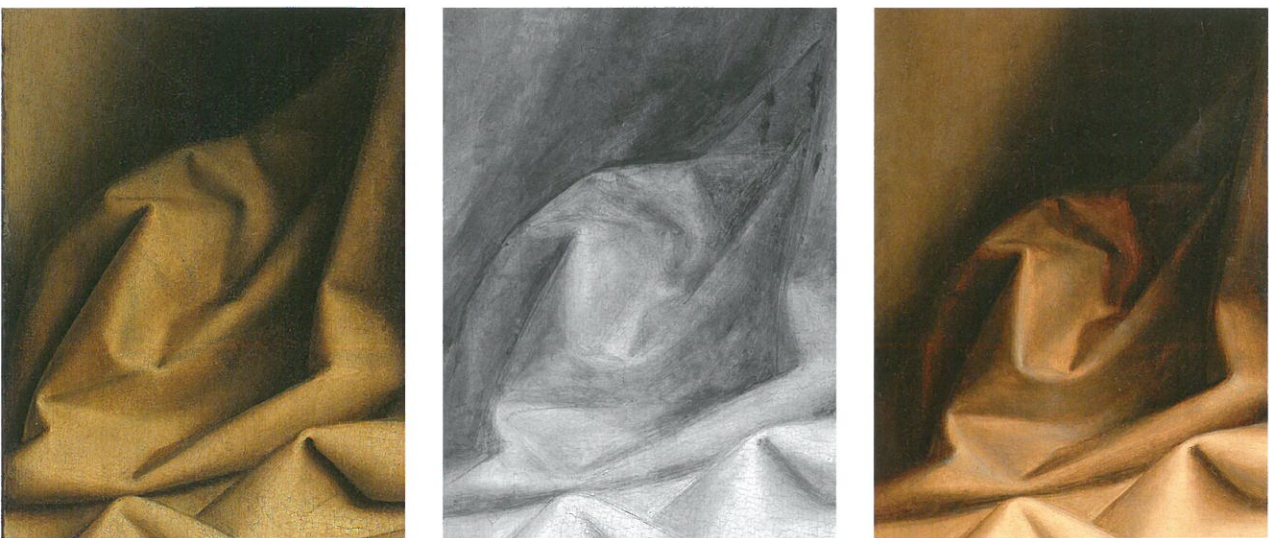






Fig. 66. Detail of the *Virgin Enthroned*. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning) and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing the underdrawing and changes introduced during painting, c) Photo in normal light

*Archangel's* hands are alike in Van Eyck's version and in the underdrawing of the copy, but Coxcie slightly altered these details as he painted. Compared with the original, the figure is to some degree displaced to the left, and there are

small changes in the folds that are already planned in the underdrawing.<sup>27</sup>

The *Virgin Enthroned* (figs. 53, 56) illustrates well the changes Coxcie introduced to render the silhouettes more elegant and in keeping with contemporary canons. IRR reveals compositional changes that were introduced in the course of painting in order to elongate the proportions and make the figure more slender and graceful (fig. 66 a–c). From the outset, the artist redesigned the left side, lowering the elbow to reduce the bulk of the drapery. The right hand from the prototype was reproduced from the cartoon but Coxcie lowered its position and painted a curving belt that was hidden behind the arm in the original and suggesting voluminous folds in this area. During the course of painting, he lowered the hand further, accentuated the angle of the wrist and positioned the belt higher to suggest a slender torso. As in other figures, the arm and wrist are larger in the copy than in the prototype. Coxcie also changed the position of the left hand, in keeping with the right, on top of the underlayer of the robe. The lower part of the drapery, from the knee downwards, is very close to the original.





Fig. 67. Detail of the *Baptist Enthroned*. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning) and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing the underdrawing and changes introduced during painting, c) Photo in normal light

The facial features were slightly altered in the course of painting: the forehead became more prominent on the right, the edges of the nose softer, the neck rounder through the addition of highlights, the eyebrows thinner and longer, smoother, showing no individual hairs. The jewelled borders were made wider in places and a thin white chemise peeks out of the robe around the neckline. The jewellery is carefully copied but the gems and brooch are painted slightly larger and elongated in the copy, as in the two other enthroned figures.

Coxcie introduced fewer changes to the *Baptist* and *Deity Enthroned*. The position of the *Baptist's* head is straightened and the volume of his hair reduced. The knotted belt is larger and more suggestive of the articulation of the body that is hidden under the bulky green cloak in Van Eyck's original. There again, some changes have been introduced in the cartoon and some during painting (fig. 67 a–c). Coxcie also drew the fingers of the right hand in different positions but chose to paint it in conformity with the anatomically awkward original. The shape of the drapery is basically very similar, but Coxcie altered the position of the tassels and increased the size of the book clasp and red leather binding. Except for the slightly larger central jewels, the shape and the size of the ornaments are similar but they are much less detailed than the original, relying on browns, ochre, and cream



rather than yellow to suggest the gold, and reducing the highlights considerably. This is also the case in the *Singing* and *Musician Angels* and even more strikingly in the *Deity Enthroned*: here the jewels and gold ornamental edgings of the mantle are painted loosely, with much less care and with few highlights. The mitre, the sceptre, and particularly the letters on the steps and the crown are poorly executed; they have little substance and volume, and there are barely any highlights present. The pearls and jewels on the crown are underdrawn in detail but their execution is again very weak, in stark contrast with the original (fig. 68 a–c).<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, *The Virgin Enthroned*, with its richly reproduced and enlarged jewellery, stands out in the upper tier of the altarpiece, an obvious emphasis that could be



linked to the focus on her persona in the developing Counter-Reformation.<sup>29</sup>

Date and authorship of the overpaint:  
the role of Coxcie's copy

Considering the extent of alterations introduced by Coxcie in the copying process, motivated by the desire either stylistically to update the original, or to introduce iconographical modifications, Coxcie's copy must be used cautiously as a reference of the appearance of the altarpiece in 1557. The application of IRR is very helpful in detecting the underdrawing and visualising the cartoon that he prepared from the original.

The need to understanding Coxcie's copying process became acute when early, extensive overpaint was discovered during the conservation-restoration treatment of the reverse of the shutters of the Ghent Altarpiece. About 70% of the surface was covered by overpaint, particularly difficult to detect because it generally follows the contours

of the original with a few simplifications, and displays a similar network of age cracks. The presence of thick, dark, crazed and uneven varnish layers hampered the surface examination before treatment and the IRR and RX gave perplexing information as original and overpaint were both imaged in these documents. Differences in the folds of the draperies observed therein were first interpreted as compositional changes carried out during the painting process. The overpaint also covers earlier repaints and local restorations and some damages, perhaps partly caused by a brutal cleaning mentioned by Marcus van Vaerne-wijck,<sup>30</sup> but the underlying original is mostly in relatively good condition, with some draperies displaying a few important losses.

The discovery of this state, which had deceived experts for centuries, was carefully revealed to the international commission of experts, who encouraged the removal of the overpaint if this operation was technically possible without causing damage to the original. The cautious process led to the rediscovery of Van Eyck's extraordinary skills and sensibility. Such ancient restorations must be fully docu-

Fig. 68. Detail of the *Deity Enthroned*. a) by Van Eyck (before cleaning), and by Michiel Coxcie: b) IRR image showing the underdrawing and changes introduced during painting. c) Photo in normal light

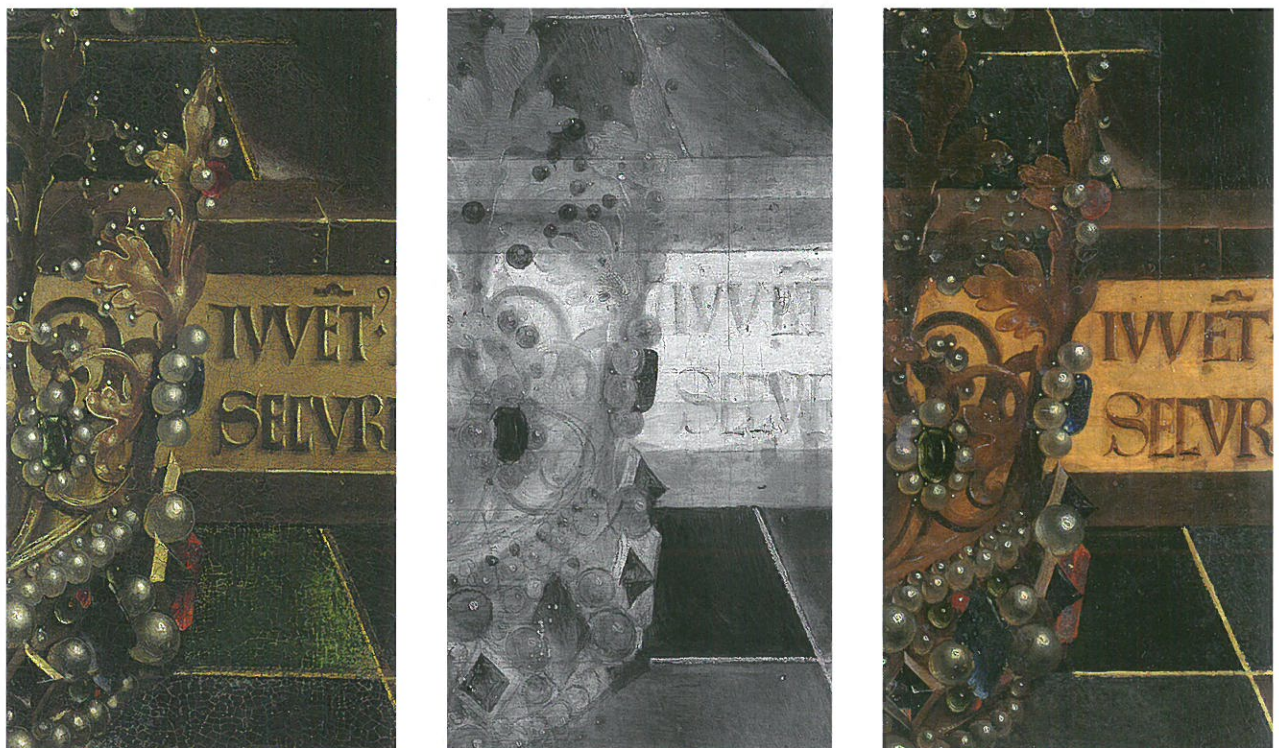






Fig. 69. X-radiograph detail of the red drapery of Van Eyck's *Deity Enthroned*



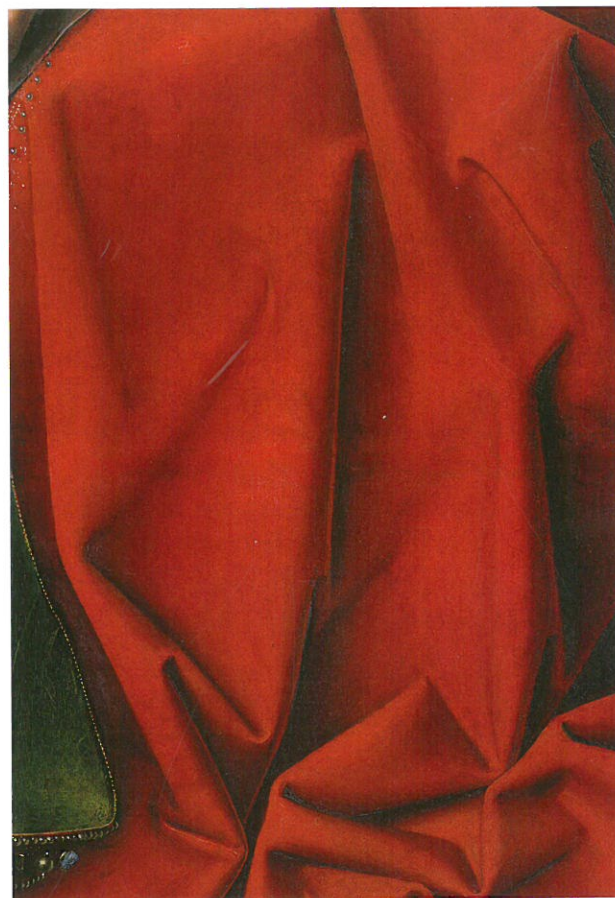
Fig. 70. Detail of the red drapery of Van Eyck's *Deity Enthroned*

Fig. 71. Detail of the Virgin's drapery in Jan Van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*; Brugge, Groeningemuseum

mented and characterized to keep an insightful record of the material history of the altarpiece, and Coxcie's copy is an essential visual source to aid this research.<sup>31</sup>

The attribution and dating old restorations is complex and scholars who have explored this problem have come to different conclusions. During the restoration and the examination of the polyptych under the direction of Paul Coremans in 1951, it was suggested that several areas of the inner side, the *Adoration of the Lamb*, the enthroned figures, particularly the *Deity*, and the *Singing Angels* had been overpainted early on, presumably in 1550 by Jan van Scorel and Lancelot Blondeel.<sup>32</sup> This conclusion is based on Marcus Van Vaernewijck's testimony that these renowned artists washed and cleaned the painting in many places<sup>33</sup> and that many features of the ancient overpainting, such as the dark clouds around the dove in the *Adoration of the Lamb* are reproduced in Coxcie's copy.<sup>34</sup> The representation of the tower of Utrecht cathedral was thought to be a later addition to the *Adoration*, and considered to support the assumption that Van Scorel, a canon from Utrecht, painted this area. Authors rediscovering early Netherlandish paintings in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Sulpiz Boisserée, associated early restorations with Van Vaernewijck's reference to the two masters' intervention.<sup>35</sup>

The complex paint structures of red and green draperies in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, studied under the microscope in



cross-sections, have been revealed as alternating applications of opaque and translucent paint layers. Intermediary, un-pigmented layers separating the paint applications were considered by Coremans to be varnish layers separating the original from the overpainting. Due to the





Fig. 72. IRR detail of the red drapery of Coxcie's *Deity Enthroned*



Fig. 73. Detail of the red drapery of Coxcie's *Deity Enthroned* in normal light

short period allotted for the conservation treatment, the researchers could not conduct a thorough examination of the paintings on the reverse of the panels. The paint build-up of the donor's draperies was analysed and noted as unusually complex but there were no suggestions of possible repaints in these areas.<sup>36</sup> J.R.J. Van Asperen De Boer, who conducted a technical study of the polyptych over several years, refined Coremans's analyses, but he found it difficult to conclude, on the basis of available research, that so many prominent areas were overpainted.<sup>37</sup> He observed many changes introduced in the course of painting, particularly in the *Angels* panels and in the *Adoration*, and suggested that Jan van Eyck introduced these changes as corrections, following suggestions by scholars and theologians.<sup>38</sup> He also suggested that some parts might have been overpainted very early on, perhaps by restorers other than Van Scorel and Blondeel, and in any case before 1557, since these details are reproduced on Coxcie's copy. Other changes would have been introduced later, such as the face of the second *Singing Angel*, which he thought had been repainted between 1557 and 1625.<sup>39</sup> Van Asperen made no references to overpainting on the reverses of the panels. Furthermore, the interpretation of laboratory analysis carried out at KIK-IRPA in the 1980's rejected Paul Coremans's and Jean Thissens' identification of overpaint.<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Dhanens, a scholar dedicated to archival research, also questioned the attribution of the early restorations to Van Scorel and Blon-

deel since Van Vaernewijck mentioned only washing the retable. She also raised the possibility that Coxcie made alterations to the altarpiece during his two-years-campaign of copying, although no written source refers to such an intervention.<sup>41</sup>

It is of course possible that Coxcie retouched the original paintings, but the absence of references to such an operation in the otherwise informative testimonies of De Heere and Van Vaernewijck is rather puzzling. Extensive research is needed on the early restorations before this hypothesis can be evaluated, particularly as the conservation-restoration treatment progresses and the interior of the polyptych is examined anew. Coremans's evidence as well as later studies will be tested in this context.

A re-assessment of the scientific images aided by digital technology already indicates that the robe of Van Eyck's *Enthroned Deity* is extensively overpainted, as Coremans suggested on the basis of the analysis of paint samples.<sup>42</sup> The X-radiograph (fig. 69) shows folds of different shapes and in different positions: the fabric follows the round shape of the knee. In the drapery on the right, a fold is marred by open drying cracks, caused by defective drying of Van Eyck's paint. These are obliterated in the paint layer visible to the naked eye (fig. 70). Technical features typical of Van Eyck, such as the strong highlights along the folds, separating the different tones of the dark shadows and strikingly sculpting the forms, as in the Virgin's robe in the *Virgin and Child with Canon van der Paele*



(fig. 71), are covered over to achieve rounder forms with softer transitions. Moreover, a comparison between Coxie's copy and its IRR shows that he reproduced the overpainted drapery at the underdrawing stage (fig. 72), and further altered the folds on the left during painting (fig. 73). The overpaint in this zone must therefore be older than 1557, unless, although this is less likely, it is by Coxie himself. Coremans's conclusion on early extensive overpaint in this area can be supported here and will be fully explored during the conservation-restoration of the panel. It remains to establish whether the early extensive overpaint observed on most panels corresponds to the same intervention.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

The comparison of the original painting and Coxie's copy shows how the painter reinterpreted the original at different stages. Coxie traced overpainted surfaces and made cartoons where he subtly simplified the compositions and modified many details to bring the figures better into keeping with contemporary canons of proportion and beauty. He further modified the copy as he painted and introduced new iconographical features.

As the conservation-restoration treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* progresses and overpaint is removed, researchers strive to date and attribute the oldest and most extensive interventions. Blondeel and Van Scorel have been cited repeatedly in this context and archival references to other artist-restorers, such as David Noveliers (1612) or Jan-Baptist De Bruyn (1617–18), are also considered.<sup>44</sup>

Different sources of information are equally relevant for this study: historical context, stylistic and technical evaluation, characterization of approaches to restoration, comparisons with other early restorations, and analysis of materials. It is thought that the analysis of painting materials alone will not provide proofs of authorship, since different artists made use of similar pigments since the identification of materials unique to one particular artist's practice has not been firmly established. Coxie's copy, if it is examined with due caution and if account is taken of the changes in appearance that have occurred throughout its history, certainly provides essential evidence for the understanding of the material condition of the altarpiece in 1557.

- 1 The reports of the preceding examination and conservation phase (2010) and information on the parties involved in the current project are accessible on the website: <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be>.
- 2 The conservators treating the paintings carefully document traces of previous interventions as part of their work. The contextual interpretation of this information and of material analysis by the laboratories at KIK-IRPA, Universiteit Gent (UGent) and Universiteit Antwerpen (UA) in close collaboration with the team is carried out within the frame of my PhD project: "The Ghent Altarpiece and its material history. A contribution of the analysis of its condition by combining technical examination with the investigation of historical sources" (doctoral thesis supervisor: Prof. Maximiliaan Martens, UGent – GOA project: "Archeometrical study of the Ghent Altarpiece"). I am particularly grateful to my KIK-IRPA colleagues Bart Devolder, Griet Steyaert, Livia Depuydt, Jana Sanyova, Cécile Glaude and Alexia Coudray for their keen analysis and suggestions, to Ruben Suykerbuyk for his generous input and to Maximiliaan Martens and Lorne Campbell for editing and advice.
- 3 On the history of the altarpiece, see Suykerbuyk in this volume and Perez de Tudela 2013, pp. 103–104.
- 4 For the motivations for the alterations, see Suykerbuyk, 2013/14. On the copy of *Adam and Eve*, see Suykerbuyk in this volume.
- 5 Thomas 2014 and Dubois, Syfer-D'Olne 2006.
- 6 Van Vaerenwijck 1568, fol. 117 v. For the complete transcription of the sources, see Ruben Suykerbuyk's article in this volume. The blue pigment mined in Hungary, acquired by Venetians trading with Turkish invaders, would have been azurite (Gettens Fitzhugh 1993, p. 25) rather than ultramarine that was imported from Afghanistan (Plesters 1993, p. 39). Van Vaerenwijck also noted that the natural material was used rather than the man-made version; artificial azurite was used in Europe at the time (Eastaugh, Walsh, Chaplin, Siddall 2004, p. 56), while artificial ultramarine is a 19th century industrially produced pigment (Plesters 1993, pp. 56–57). Analysis of samples of the Brussels panels at KIK-IRPA showed that azurite was used in the underlayers of the sky in Coxie's *Annunciation*, and ultramarine in the finishing glaze. Coxie is likely to have layered the blue colour in this way in the *Virgin Enthroned's* drapery as well: the rippled surface texture and the thickness of the layer also indicate the use of azurite. This paint build-up, common at the time was also used by Van Eyck, see Coremans 1953, pp. 70–71 and 99, and Brinkman, Kockaert, Maes, Thielen, Wouters 1990, pp. 39–41.
- 7 Jonckheere 2013 a. The central panels, on loan from the Gemäldegalerie (Berlin) and from the Alte Pinakothek (Munich), were photographed in high resolution and documented with infrared reflectography in Leuven by Sophie De Potter and Jean-Luc Elias (KIK-IRPA). We are particularly grateful to conservator David Lainé, to Goedele Pulinx and Peter Carpreau (M Leuven) as well as Babette Hartweg (Gemäldegalerie) and Jan Schmidt (Alte Pinakothek), for their generous help in organizing this work. The double-sided wing panels were documented after the exhibition, in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, by Freya Maes with the support of Véronique Bücken and Sabine Van Sprang, who are also gratefully acknowledged. Information on pigment use could be gathered from Thomas 2006 (*passim*) and from Alexia Coudray's and Jana Sanyova's analysis of the paint samples of the Brussels panels archived at KIK-IRPA since their 1976–1980 conservation-restoration treatment. This analysis was supported by the Gieskes-Strijbis Fonds.
- 8 Thomas 2014.
- 9 Wendler 2014.
- 10 Greenish overpaint containing cobalt blue was removed from the sky on all panels during the 1976–1980 restoration campaign at KIK-IRPA.
- 11 Suykerbuyk 2013/14.
- 12 Dhanens 1969/72 proposed a hypothetical reconstruction of the altarpiece, based on, among other things, the archaeological examination of the chapel. Interesting suggestions and comparisons were made by



- Brand Philip 1971. Recently a different reconstruction was published by Steyaert 2015.
- 13 De Heere 1565, p. 38. De Heere's ode to the retable was probably posted in the chapel in 1559 (Dhanens 1965, p. 104, Kemperdick 2014, p. 9). See Suykerbuyk in this volume.
- 14 Contemporary sources show that craftsmen specialized in the preparation of panels were active in the sixteenth century and became well established in Antwerp in the 17th century (Van Hout 1998, p. 204). This cumbersome operation, generating chalk dust during smoothing the surface down, is unlikely to have been carried out in close proximity to the altarpiece.
- 15 Ghent, Rijksarchief, Sint-Baafs en Bisdom Gent, nr. 5776, K 62, fol. 25v and 26 (Fabrieksrekening Sint-Baafskerk door Jan Temmerman, 24/6/1556-23/6/1557). For an analysis and full transcription of the account, partially published by De Schryver, Marijnissen 1953 p. 36 and Duverger 1954, p. 66, see Suykerbuyk in this volume.
- 16 Dictionary of Early Middle Netherlandish online: <http://www.wnt.inl.nl/>; with thanks to Paulo Charruadas (ULB).
- 17 Although there is no mention of this, Coxcie could also have used another location in Ghent to carry out some of the work.
- 18 This to the exception of the *Adoration*, as mentioned above. The supports of the *Virgin* and the *Baptist Enthroned* have not been altered and original tooling marks can be observed on the reverse. During the first half of the 19th century, the panel of the *Deity Enthroned* was provided with supporting battens inserted into the wood (see Thomas 2014).
- 19 The dimensions of the large panels with the enthroned figures are 2 to 4 cm smaller than the originals, in height and width. The wing panels could not be taken out of their fixed frames to be measured, but the surface of the painted area is almost identical to the original.
- 20 The current frames of the *Deity Enthroned* and of the *Adoration* were designed by Schinkel, who also drew the double-sided hollow box-frames of the six Van Eyck wing panels for their exhibition in the Gemäldegalerie in 1830 (Von Roenne 2007, pp. 72-74 and Stehr, Dubois 2014, pp.127-128). The frames of Coxcie's six wing panels, acquired by the Belgian state in 1861, were probably replaced in 1864 when they were prepared to be assembled on the altar of the Vijd chapel with Van Eyck's central panels and Lagye's copies of *Adam* and *Eve*: see the photograph of this installation in Kemperdick, Rößler 2014 b, p. 97.
- 21 Analysis of samples from the Brussels panels carried out by Alexia Coudray, KIK-IRPA. The priming of the *Deity Enthroned* has a similar composition (Thomas 2014, p. 140).
- 22 The Munich and Berlin panels were documented in IRR by Sophie Depotter from the KIK-IRPA, using a Lion systems NIR-600 camera featuring an InGaAs sensor with a spectral range of 900-1700 nm, at a resolution of 640 x 512 pixels, combined with an external filter of a spectral range of 1100-1700 nm and a SWIR 35 mm lens. For the Brussels panels, Freya Maes used an Osiris camera with InGaAs sensor (spectral range of 900-1700 nm) and a 75 mm Macro lens.
- 23 This technique was often used to transfer designs to the support before painting. An intermediary sheet of paper, coated with pigment could have been used to preserve the original cartoon. For discussions on tracing techniques materials and historical sources, see Currie, Allart 2012, pp. 947-949.
- 24 This technique was possibly used by Gossaert who made tracings of the heads of Van Eyck's enthroned figures for his *Deesis* (Madrid, Museo del Prado), Ainsworth in Cat. New York/London 2010, pp. 213-217. On the use of transparent sheets for tracing, see Currie, Allart, p. 946-947. Coxcie's use of a tracing was already suggested by Syfer-D'Olne, Dubois 2006, p. 238, who examined the Brussels panels with IRR. Thomas 2014, p. 139 noticed simple contour lines in the IRR of the *Deity Enthroned* and suggested the use of tracings for the main shapes. However, many more details were reproduced.
- 25 The frequent use of working cartoons by artists is well established both by the study of historical sources and technical examination of paintings. However, only a few cartoons have survived in the North, as opposed to Italy: Currie, Allart 2012, pp.936-937. Coxcie was certainly familiar with these techniques, often practised in Italy, where he worked for several years. He painted frescoes in Italy and at Binche (Leuschner 2013). On the fabrication of cartoons, see Bambach 1999, pp. 39-50.
- 26 These wax dots were identified on the *Enthroned Virgin* and *Baptist* that could be examined out of their frames. Several partial copies of the altarpiece are recorded in Spain: see Perez de Tudela 2013, n. 40, p. 114.
- 27 Research on old overpaint on the *Annunciation* will be discussed in later publications.
- 28 For a comparison of the central clasp, see Kemperdick 2014, Fig. 44, p. 50.
- 29 On Coxcie as the painter of the Counter-Reformation, see Jonckheere 2013 b.
- 30 Van Vaernewijck 1568, fol. 119, mentions that a scene representing hell, painted in distemper on a predella or 'voet's, was destroyed by unskilful cleaners, perhaps painters: 'Item een helle heeft den voet van deser tafel gheweest, door den zelve Meester Joannes van Eyck van waterverve geschildert, de welke zommighe slechte schilders (zoo men zecht) haer hebben bestaen te wasschen, oft zuveren, ende hebben dat miraculeus constich werc, met hun calvers handen uitgevaecht de welcke met de voorn. tafel, meer weert was dan 't gout dat men daerop ghesmeedt zoude connen legghen'. The date of this treatment is unknown but, although the sources do not make this clear, it is generally assumed that it happened before Van Scorel and Blondeel's intervention of 1550 (see for example De Schryver, Marijnissen 1953, n. 10, p. 22 and 35).
- 31 Martens 2015, Van Grevenstein 2015 and Postec et al. 2016. Future publications will detail the research undertaken to reach these conclusions.
- 32 Coremans 1953, pp. 98-99 and 101-117, mentioned in particular the red and green draperies of the *Singing Angels* (pp. 98-99), the cloths of gold and the tiles near the enthroned figures and the *Deity's* red drapery, the step with inscriptions and the crown, the faces of the enthroned figures (pp. 102-105), and large areas in the *Adoration* (pp. 106-117).
- 33 "(...) ooc Meester Lanchelot van Brugghe ende Meester Jan Schoore Canonic van Utrecht ooc trefflicke schilders, sij te Ghendt ghecommen, ende begonden dees tafel te wasschen, anno XV. Hondert vijftich, den vijftiensten Septembris, met zulcker liefden, dat zy dat constich werk in veel plaetsen ghecust hebben(...)". Vaernewijck 1568, fol. 117v.
- 34 The dark clouds around the dove in the *Adoration of the Lamb* that were removed to reveal a halo-shaped rainbow were thought to have been copied by Coxcie (Coremans 1953, p. 109). Indeed, older photographs of Coxcie's painting document faint clouds in this area. Unfortunately the painting was badly damaged at the end of World War II (Wendler 2014) and because of its condition it is difficult to compare this area in the two versions. With many thanks to Ute Stehr and Babette Hartweg for discussing this case with me. During the present restoration of the altarpiece, Bart Devolder and Livia Depuydt noted similarities between overpainted areas in Van Eyck's *Annunciation* panels on the reverse of the wings and Coxcie's copy of these panels. These important discoveries will be discussed in future publications.
- 35 In 1825 the enlightened collector associated early masterly restorations of the extensive damages that he observed on the central panels in Ghent with Van Vaernewijck's reference to Blondeel and Van Scorel: "Ich bemerkte nämlich, und vorzüglich an dem Mittelbilde, die Anbetung des Lammes darstellend, mehrere Stellen, die offenbar durch unvorsichtiges Waschen stark gelitten haben, und andere noch wichtigere, welche in einer etwas leichteren neuern Art als die der Brüder van Eyck gemalt scheinen, aber mit einer solchen Meisterschaft behandelt sind, daß ich sie keinem Renovator zuschreiben konnte; und so verlor ich mich in Vermuthungen aller Art, bis ich das Buch des Vaernewyck kennen lernte. Er berichtet [...]. Diese Nachricht erklärt vollkommen den räthselhaften Zustand jenes Gemäldes. Die Berufung zweyer ausgezeichneter Künstler zur Wiederherstellung desselben beweist, daß die Beschädigung sehr bedeutend müsse gewesen seyn; beyde, besonders



Schoreel, damals der vorzüglichste Maler in den Niederlanden, waren auch allerdings fähig in einem Gemälde der Brüder van Eyck ganze Stellen auf das befriedigendste zu ergänzen", Boisseree 1825, S. 170. In 1832, Sulpiz also reported that Van Scorel and Blondeel's retouchings were still visible on the wing panels in Berlin. Sulpiz Boisserée to his brother Melchior, Berlin, May 1, 1832, in: Firmenich-Richartz 1916, pp. 529–530. Many thanks to Ute Stehr, Gemäldegalerie, and Dr. Johannes Rößler, Universität Bern, for this reference, published in Stehr, Dubois, 2014, p. 132. As noted by De Schryver, Marijnissen 1953, p. 48. Boisserée had no knowledge of references to old restorations that followed Blondeel's and Van Scorel's intervention.

36 Coremans 1953, pp. 73–74.

37 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, pp. 172–178.

38 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, pp. 155–163.

39 Van Asperen de Boer 1979, p. 157. The date of 1625 refers to the partial copy on canvas kept in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Antwerp, as suggested by Duverger 1954, pp. 61–62.

40 Brinkman, Kockaert, Maes, Thielen, Wouters 1990, pp. 26–49, for the conclusions on overpaint, see pp. 35–37.

41 Dhanens 1975, pp. 114–115.

42 The site *Closer to Van Eyck* is particularly helpful for these comparisons: <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/>

43 This issue is presently under investigation for the reverse side of the shutters by comparing the technique and materials of the overpaint on several panels.

44 De Schryver, Marijnissen 1953, p. 23–38. Dhanens 1976, pp. 24–26 discovered the archival reference to De Bruyn and thought that this Brussels-based painter was the likeliest candidate for an extensive restoration campaign.