

THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION OF THE EXTERIOR

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Epilogue: Implications and Perspectives

Cyriel Stroo and Maximiliaan Martens

The exterior wings of the *Ghent Altarpiece* are a splendid example of Van Eyck's convincing imitation in oil of the visual world. They display his abilities to create an entire *trompe l'œil* universe merely using paint. That capacity became a value in its own right. No other artistic medium of the period could compete with the sophisticated optical properties of oil on panel. For the first time in centuries, this optical splendour can now be fully appreciated again. The underlying artistic skills remind us of the words of the Burgundian Duke Philip the Good, who expressed his appreciation for the inimitable qualities of his court artist: '*nous trouverions point le pareil a nostre gre ne si excellent en son art et science*'. Indeed, a brilliant intellect as well as a virtuoso artist.

Until the present conservation treatment, the outer panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* had been overpainted to a considerable extent, to the point of obliterating the Eyckian technique and aesthetics. And yet, surprising as it may seem, this had never been observed before the start of the intervention. Modern neuroscience has taught us that we only see what we are expecting to observe, even though we consider ourselves knowledgeable about the subject. On 17 March 2014, the members of the International Commission were unanimously surprised at the extent of the old overpaintings and at the same time amazed by the exceptional quality of the original coat of paint that was revealed after having been exposed in test zones.

Even the experienced eye of the connoisseur or the restorer can be deceived. Recognizing old overpaintings is also less straightforward than one might think. Renewed observations after the removal of the highly oxidized varnish layers, supplemented with the information obtained through Macro X-ray Fluorescence scanning (MA-XRF) documentation and detailed investigation with the high-resolution microscope, brought the conservators and the experts new insights. Further development, study and interpretation of all scientific imagery now available undoubtedly offers promising perspectives for the future.

By removing the overpainting, the composition on the exterior panels was restored into its original three-dimensional unity, conceived as such from the outset. The polyptych's chromatic richness and the coherent rendering of light and space have regained their original visual impact. Especially the suggestion of volume and the spaciousness of the ensemble gained strength due to the virtuoso play of deep shadows and bright light accents, and not the least by the surprising *trompe l'œil* effect of the frames conceived as a stone framework. As stated elsewhere in this book, it consists

of 'a refined imitation of dressed stonework, using silver leaf covered with coloured glazes ranging from yellow to red, and heightened with small touches of colour and articulated by joints painted in black and white'. The unveiling of the original polychromy of the frames may be seen as the discovery of the missing link between the ensemble of individual paintings and the stone walls of the Vijd Chapel as architectural shrine of the altarpiece.

To put it in the words of one of the experts, Dr Maryan Ainsworth: 'The paintings live and breathe again in the time of the Van Eyck brothers.' The artist's sharp observation skills and accurate execution, as well as his knowledge, curiosity and ingenuity about the reality he painted are now unveiled after having been hidden for centuries. The results of the conservation/restoration treatment are of fundamental importance to the advancement of our knowledge of Eyckian aesthetics and painting technique, especially considering the exceptional scale of the work. And last but not least, the discovery of the quatrain's authenticity is nothing less than a *coup de foudre* in the discourse of art-historical research, for a long-standing debate can finally be concluded as we now can be sure that the quatrain was applied simultaneously with the polychromy of the frames. This has the very important implication that the information given in the quatrain – Hubert van Eyck started the work, his brother Jan finished it, on the request of Judocus Vijd, on 6 May 1432 – are historically reliable and authentic facts that cannot be disputed anymore. Nevertheless we are far from overseeing all the consequences for art history, as Hubert's contribution still needs to be identified. In any case, as Griet Steyaert and Marie Postec argue in this book, Hubert's hand is not to be found on the exterior wings. However, our new insights into the extent of the overpainting make it understandable why connoisseurs in the past experienced such difficulties in the division of Hubert's and Jan's hands. We eagerly look forward to the results of the research being conducted during the following phases of the project to gain further insight into this and similar questions that have puzzled art historians for nearly two centuries.

In the course of the ongoing research, the subtleties of Eyckian technique may also be mapped out in greater detail. We are continually getting a better understanding of how Van Eyck managed to keep the final result and the desired effect in mind during every phase of the execution, from the first concept to the finishing touches, or, in other words, how the end result is being build up from the moment of initiating the creative process, for example by exploiting the ground and the diversified underdrawing. The *Ghent Altarpiece* can be understood as Van Eyck's very statement about the essence of the art of painting, a showpiece of highly sophisticated pictorial technique.

The amount of overpaint on the *Ghent Altarpiece's* outer wings had a drastic and unfavourable impact. It dulled the strength and subtlety of the Eyckian aesthetic vision. Certain garments and backgrounds were almost completely masked, while the intensity of light and brightness of the colours were subdued. The original texture was obscured, the sense of space curtailed and colour harmonies were disturbed. 'Edits' and changes to the figures of Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut are exemplary in this regard. In several places the arrangement of the folds in Elisabeth Borluut's robe was modified in the overpaint. The original, highly inventive drapery takes the shape of graceful arabesques that seem to follow an inner logic. Its richly diversified structure

of playful, rhythmic volumes in places recalls the drapery style of around 1400. Some dented and curved original folds seem to be indebted to the style and repertoire of André Beauneveu, as they appear in the robes of the prophets in the *Psalter of the Duke of Berry* (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms. fr. 13091). These were transformed into a greatly simplified angular pattern and therefore perhaps perceived as more 'rational'. After removal of the overpaint the cloth of the robe appears lighter, softer and more subtle. Such overpainting was not simply meant to repair damage to the original paint. It was purposely conceived, most likely from a different aesthetic experience and other artistic values. It therefore reveals much about the critical reception of Van Eyck's art in the course of past centuries. For the modern beholder it seems inconceivable that the delicate workings of light in Van Eyck's work could have been totally misunderstood. But then again, why had this never been noticed before the current treatment?

The study of nature, meaning and time of application of these old overpaintings must actually be further explored, although an important step has been made to this end in the contribution by Hélène Dubois. These interventions cannot be accurately dated at present. The oldest overpaintings must be anterior to the copy carried out by Michiel Coxcie for Philip II of Spain in 1557 and 1558, since Coxcie copied the overpainted surface. The interventions may be related to some historically documented campaigns, such as the cleaning by Jan van Scorel and Lancelot Blondeel, which according to Van Vaernewijck was initiated on 15 September 1550. A Jan-Baptist de Bruyn, who restored the altarpiece in 1617–18 and the work of the 'painter Noveliers' who was reimbursed in 1612 for his travel expenses in relation to a restoration of the altarpiece, are also possible candidates for an extensive intervention. In addition, the effect that was intended with these overpaintings also deserves more in-depth research.

A final point that deserves attention is the set-up of the conservation/restoration project, with its different committees and advisory boards. It allowed a steady follow-up of results delivered by interdisciplinary research and lead to a decision-making process that made a systematic, well-argued and durable treatment possible. Removing centuries-old layers of overpaint is far from evident within the framework of the current professional ethics of scientific conservation. The combination of a treatment executed with utmost care, the thoughtful application of (new) analytical methods of investigation, and the constant consultation of the conservators among themselves and with a wide range of experts, led to an overall consensus to reveal Van Eyck's work as much as possible in its original state. We are aware that such a dramatic shift in the professional ethical paradigm of scientific conservation cannot be justified merely by pointing out the general consensus among the committee members. It needs to be consolidated by a robust theoretical framework. What is more, this reflective endeavour will be continued during the following phases of the conservation and restoration treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

We hope that this restoration campaign and the publication of its results may help future researchers to ask more and better questions. It is to be hoped that the answers to these questions will produce an even more balanced picture of Van Eyck's techniques, methods and materials.