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An Optical Revolution and an “Unfortunate” Exhibition: “Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution,” Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

AN OPTICAL REVOLUTION AND AN “UNFORTUNATE” EXHIBITION:
“VAN EYCK: AN OPTICAL REVOLUTION,” MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
GHENT, BELGIUM (1 FEBRUARY–30 APRIL 2020)

“Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution”, the largest Jan van Eyck exhibition in history, opened on 1 February 2020 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent. Only about 20 works of this Flemish master, who definitively changed the Western art of painting in the 1420s and 1430s, have been preserved worldwide. Half of his oeuvre travelled to Ghent, together with work from van Eyck’s studio and copies of paintings that have since disappeared and more than hundred masterpieces from the late Middle Ages.

The altarpiece “Adoration of the Mystic Lamb”, displayed outside St Bavo’s Cathedral for the first and last time in history, was at the heart of the exhibition. The significance of this cultural event was immediately appreciated by the public. The second day of the exhibition was so crowded that even the museum staff themselves were surprised, while after the closure due to coronavirus, on 12 March 2020, a couple of million euros was reimbursed to all ticketholders.

The Ghent Altarpiece and the History

The “Ghent Altarpiece”, or the “Adoration of the Mystic Lamb”, is a large and complex fifteenth-century polyptych altarpiece, a masterpiece of European art, signed by brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck and completed before 1432. The altarpiece was commissioned by Joost Vijdt, a wealthy merchant from Ghent and his wife, Lysbette, for the church of St John the Baptist (which has become St Bavo’s Cathedral), where it remains. It is composed of a total of 24 framed panels, which offer the viewer two different scenes, depending on its open or closed position. It represents a “new conception of art”, in which the idealisation of the medieval tradition gives way to a rigorous observation of nature and human representation. The two panels depicting Adam and Eve, whose nudity was considered shocking, especially in the context of a cathedral, were sold to the Belgian state in 1861 and

deposited at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels.

History has not been kind in its treatment of this so important artwork, something which was repeated recently. One art historian describes the altarpiece as “the most frequently stolen work of art in history” for having been the object of thirteen thefts in six centuries. In 1940, a decision was made in Belgium to send the altarpiece to the Vatican for safekeeping. The altarpiece, en route to the Vatican, was in France when Italy declared war and aligned itself with the Axis forces alongside Germany. The altarpiece was transferred to Pau, in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, for the duration of the war. In 1942, Hitler ordered that the altarpiece be seized and brought to Germany to be stored in a castle in Bavaria. After air raids by the Allies, keeping the altarpiece in the castle had become too dangerous, and it was moved to the Altaussee salt mines in Austria. The Belgian and French authorities protested against the seizure of the altarpiece, and the head of the regiment responsible for the protection of works of art within the Wehrmacht was dismissed, after having spoken out against this confiscation. At the approach of American troops, a senior German official gave the order to blow up the mine, which also sheltered other works of art. Eight 500 kg bombs were placed in the mine, but a disagreement within the general staff made it possible to avoid the disaster. The altarpiece was found by the American Monuments Men in the Altaussee salt mines at the end of the war and returned to Belgium. A ceremony took place at the Royal Palace of Brussels; no French official was invited, because

officials of the Vichy regime had accepted the transfer of the altarpiece to Germany.

Between 2012 and 2016, the Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage restored eight outer panels in the Museum of Ghent. During the exhibition, the eight restored outer panels of the closed altarpiece, together with the not yet restored representations of Adam and Eve, returned to the Museum of Fine Arts while the ten remaining panels remained on display in St Bavo’s Cathedral. Now the outer panels will rejoin the interior panels in the cathedral, where they will remain indefinitely. Given that the panels were on show separately in the museum’s galleries, the complete display in the cathedral remains a unique experience.

Art and Politics

It is no coincidence that the optical revolution that the court painter and the diplomatic traveller Jan van Eyck started in painting took place in the Burgundian Netherlands. In the fifteenth century, it was the most urbanised region north of the Alps, a region where trade and industry flourished. Ghent and Bruges, the cities in which both Hubert and Jan were most often associated, were authentic metropolises in the fifteenth century, which had 60,000 and 40,000 inhabitants, respectively. The network of production, trade, consumption and cultural exchange favoured the development of a creative environment in which the arts flourished and where the spectacular innovations of van Eyck were welcomed with enthusiasm.

In van Eyck’s work, the visual dialogue between painting and other disciplines, such as sculpture and goldsmithing, reflects the climate of the period.

Jan van Eyck can certainly be described as a court painter. From 1422 onwards, he resided in the circle of Dutch count Jan of Bavaria and, after his death, joined Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy, who was an illustrious patron of the arts. In addition to his function as court painter, van Eyck was also given a diplomatic role; the artist was commissioned to travel to Portugal in order to paint a portrait of Infanta Isabella, the future bride of Philip, and to accompany his master on several secret missions. While on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, van Eyck met John II, king of Castile, and Mohammed, sultan of Granada. Through his patron, van Eyck was able to expand his academic knowledge. The development of his naturalistic painting style was undoubtedly fuelled by the presence of libraries and intellectuals at the court.

The Optical Revolution

The optical revolution, in more ways than one, brought about by the Flemish master six hundred years ago continues to fascinate. The oil painting technique, greatly improved by van Eyck, inspired painters throughout Europe and continues to resonate to the present day. In addition, van Eyck's art is based on the observation of reality in such a way that it seems as if he sees the world with different eyes than his predecessors. Portraits have never been as lifelike as with van Eyck (fig.). His painting of natural phenomena, such as clouds and the moon, or of the splashing water in a fountain, is unprecedented.

Van Eyck seeks not only to imitate, but to create illusions too. The portraits of the commissioners of the Ghent Altarpiece seem so lifelike as if they were actually



Jan de Leeuw,
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

sitting in niches. Van Eyck's observations also show a deep-rooted interest in the painting of light, so crucial to his optical revolution. People or interiors become three-dimensional through the absence of light in the shadows or through the light that shines on them.

A Thematic Discovery

No less than 13 galleries were filled with the greatest art of the late Middle Ages. The outer panels of the altarpiece and the other works by van Eyck guided the visitors through the units of the exhibition.¹ “Fall

¹ The exhibition was made possible through the collaboration with the Flemish Community–Department of Culture, Youth & Media, the City of Ghent, Visit Flanders, St Bavo's Cathedral, the Ghent University Art Historical Department, the Henri Pirenne Institute for Medieval Studies at Ghent University, the Flemish Research Centre for the Arts in Burgundian Netherlands, and the Royal

and Redemption”, with the towering figures of Adam and Eve, “Saints in a Landscape”, “Mother and Child”, “The Word of God” and “Architecture”, which occupies a pivotal role in van Eyck’s oeuvre, “Imitating Sculpture”, with the two saints John painted in grisaille, “The Individual”, with the age-related characteristics and even facial distortions of the expressive portraits, and “The Divine Portrait”. I suppose that the exhibition curators took the necessary precautions not to offend religious feelings. In the units of the exhibition, they preferred to emphasise the presence of the divine in general (for example, “The Word of God”, “The Divine Portrait”) and they avoided direct references to the Christian religion. Hence the designation, for example, “Mother and Child”, which focuses on Madonna and Child representations. Let us not forget that in Ghent there are often small-scale terrorist attacks, which also occurred on the second day of the exhibition.

Throughout the galleries, van Eyck was brought together with over a hundred masterpieces from his studio and by his greatest contemporaries and followers. To sketch the fine-meshed artistic context and the cross-pollination in the Burgundian Netherlands of the fifteenth century, all art forms were represented:

painting, miniature, drawing, sculpture and tapestry. Furthermore, van Eyck’s optical revolution was placed in a broader perspective, by confronting him with his great Italian contemporaries Gentile da Fabriano, Fra Angelico, Pisanello, Masaccio and Benozzo Gozzoli, for a comparison that had never been undertaken to this extent. More than a hundred international loans, from the Vatican Museums, Louvre, Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome, National Gallery of Art in Washington and J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, were among the many collections that contributed to the Ghent exhibition as well as at least half of the 20 known works by van Eyck.²

Never before this “unfortunate” exhibition could one come closer to the master van Eyck, his genius and his legacy.

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Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA). The exhibition was compiled by Maximiliaan Martens, Till-Holger Borchert, Jan Dumolyn, Johan De Smet and Frederica Van Dam, with the cooperation of Matthias Depoorter. Directing the project were Johan De Smet and Ellen Wyns.

² The exhibition website (<https://vaneyck2020.be>) contains details on the exhibition themes, the masterpieces on display, the life and revolution of Jan van Eyck in six languages as well as wonderful digital photos. Till-Holger Borchert, Director Museums Bruges and one of the curators of “Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution”, offers a guided tour at <https://vaneyck2020.be/en/van-eyck-from-home/>.