

The Road to Van Eyck

*A Panorama of Northern European fine art in the first half of the 15th-
century*



Jan van Eyck: The Annunciation. c. 1430-1435.

Oak, transferred on to canvas in St Petersburg after 1864, 92.7 x 36.7 cm. Washington DC, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection. Source: www.boijmans.nl.

Jan Van Eyck seemed, in the eyes of later generations, to light up suddenly as a supernova, his unique genius turning the art of painting and setting profoundly new standards of beauty. Was it really so? Is he really an inventor without forbearers

or, can we root his oeuvre within his time? A current exhibition in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen attempts to answer this question by bringing together some ninety artworks created around the time of Jan van Eyck's birth.

Jan van Eyck was born not much before 1400, most likely in Maaseik in the historical region of Flanders (including today's Belgium, The Netherlands, and some parts of France). His elder brother, Hubert, was already a renowned painter by the time Jan began his apprenticeship (in his brother's workshop?), although the few remaining sources do not allow to assess Hubert's achievements with certainty. At that time, Flanders was one of the most densely urbanised areas in Europe. The prosperity of Flanders, a land which is relatively poor in natural resources, was based on the well-organized production and Europe-wide trade of fine woollen and linen cloth. The rich cities of Bruges, Ghent, Ypres and Antwerp held a key economic position and were the originators of many new ideas. In van Eyck's time, this region belonged to the Dukes of Burgundy, an extremely influential noble family. The Burgundian dukes were famous of their sumptuous courts ornate with works of the greatest sculptors, painters, illuminators, goldsmiths, glaziers and tapestry-weavers of Dutch, Flemish, French and German origin. Under their rule, the arts flourished and a new naturalist style emerged that gradually replaced the previously prevailing International Gothic style. Jan van Eyck was one of the leading artists of this new style, commonly referred to as Early Netherlandish art or the art of the Flemish Primitives.

However, the new style was far more than an artistic wave. It was the expression of a profound change in mentality that can be traced in almost every aspects of life and was preceded by a period of intensive crises. In the 1300s severe famines and mass starvation hit Western Europe, partly because of a climate shift and partly because the population exceeded the agricultural capacity. The strike of the Black Death added to the toll, as well as the outbreak of the Hundred Years' War, and various rebellions in the towns. The Church was undergoing deep crises (Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism), black magic and devil worship flourished and various popular religious movements arose (pilgrims, flagellants, Lollards, Devotio Moderna, Hussites...). From the 1400s national monarchies got gradually stabilized and life became more stable (except for religious matters; as the

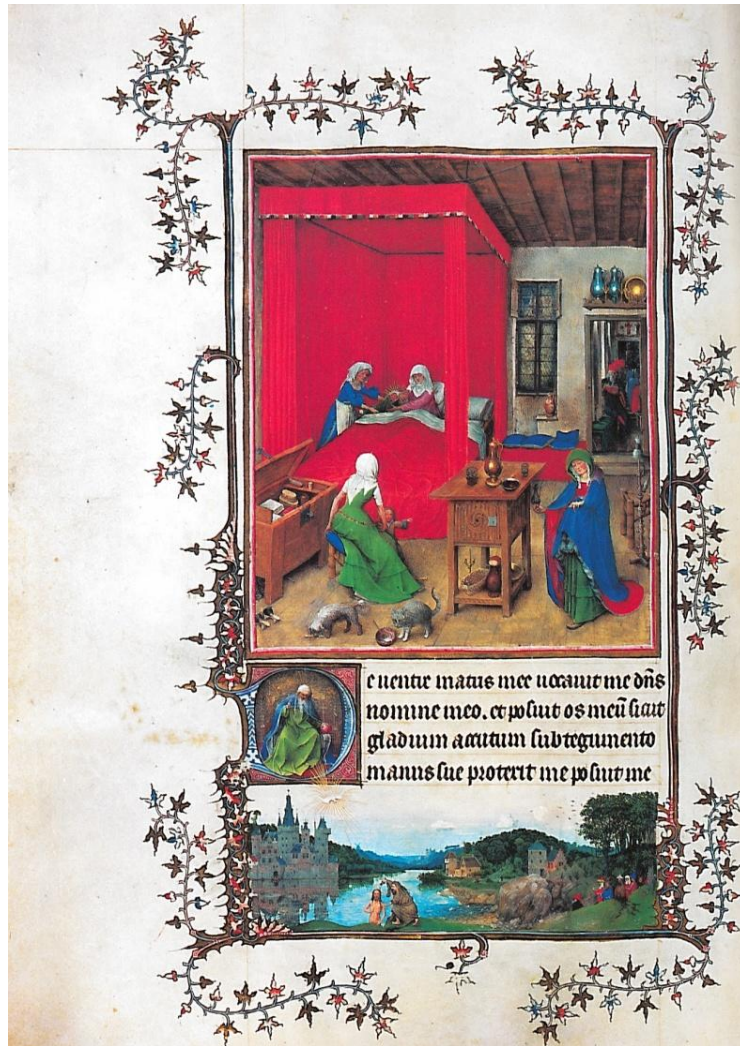
Church opposed to all renewal attempts, the reformation and religious warfare became inevitable).

From this political and social turmoil there emerged a new European character, intimately linked to the growing urban centres. It placed value on individual achievements and personal genius and experienced itself -uniquely in the God-created universe- as bestowed with the freedom of choice. The first sprouts of the modern Self were cropping up. The shift of values resulted in several revolutionary changes in the art of painting.

As the esteem of the human element increased, there increased the importance of depicting its actual physical appearance and its actual surroundings. Painting became naturalistic, and the Van Eyck brothers were the first great masters of the new art. Looking at their artworks, we perceive an obvious joy in the faithful representation of interiors and everyday objects. They attest a deep reverence towards creation in a broad sense, including creation of objects through men. It is as if the spiritual had turned away from a far, beyond-human realm and had infused into the immediate surroundings of the people. Although naturalism in painting emerged first in northern Italy, namely, in the art of Giotto, nowhere else did it reach such perfection as in Flanders. Northerner artists achieved absolute perfection in rendering the material, the texture, and the outlines of things as well as of figures and their artworks were sought throughout Europe. In the course of the 15th century more works produced in Flanders moved to Italy than vice versa. At the current exhibition we can see a couple of artworks created for the wide market –lower quality for lower price– which may have originated in the same workshop that created more elaborate works as well. In spite of the former abundance, sadly, only two to three dozen panel paintings remained that were painted in Flanders around the years 1400.

The increasing importance given to the representation of real places brought with it the discovery of linear perspective. In the pre-Eyckian period landscapes were composed of independently existing landscape elements, which served as indications of certain locations where a particular story happened. In the new painting, the figures were placed in virtual spaces that convincingly imitated the feeling of real

places or, from the mid-15th century, were more and more often faithful depictions of real places. The new way of rendering space appeared in Flanders and in North Italy at around the same time, seemingly independently. The Italian Renaissance artists approached this question with a quasi-scientific study of the rules of perspective; first constructing a framework of perspective lines and then placing the figures carefully in the resulted virtual space. North of the Alps artists proceeded more directly, so to say more through trial and error. Their great invention was the aerial perspective, that is, perspective through the gradations of tones, which conveys the feeling of immense distances. A beautiful example is the bas-de-page of the illumination below.



Jan van Eyck and various French and Netherlandish illuminators: The so-called Turin-Milan Hours, c. 1380/1400 until c. 1450.

Vellum, 26.4 x 20.3 cm. Turin, Palazzo Madama – Museo Civico d'Arte Antica.

Source: www.boijmans.nl.

One of the big surprises of the current exhibition is the consideration that Jan van Eyck also worked as a book illuminator. The outstanding quality of some of the miniatures in the so-called Turin-Milan Hours (Turin Prayer Book), probably commissioned by Philip the Good of Burgundy, provoked this suggestion. The above vellum looks very much like a scaled-down panel painting of Jan van Eyck. The central image, showing the birth of John the Baptist, and especially the *bas-de-page* depicting the baptism of Christ as well as the initial with God the Father – are all executed with the same breathtaking finesse that characterizes van Eyck's paintings.



Jan van Eyck: Portrait of Baudouin de Lannoy, c. 1435-1440.

Oak panel, 26 x 19.5 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie. Source: www.boijmans.nl.

The inner motive to represent individuals lead to the development of portraiture. In Gothic artworks, mostly biblical stories were depicted. In rare cases were nobles painted; these portraits are highly generalised and almost always shown in the way that required the least personal rapport: from profile. The new art brought an increasingly faithful representation into the portraiture and Jan van Eyck is known as one of the first great European masters of portrait painting. He had been sent to Portugal, in order to paint a portrait of the Infanta Isabella, who was to become wife to Philip the Good. Instead of profile, Van Eyck painted his portraits in a three-quarters view or even full face, often with one hand resting on the edge of the

niche that the person occupies – the latter served as a *trop l'oeil*. It was certainly not his invention¹, nevertheless, became widely copied after his works.

Also the person of the artist became important. From the 1400s, we find signed and dated works in increasing number, as well as written documents referring to artists with their full names.

Among the technical inventions easel painting and the use of oil as a binding medium are the most important. Both originated in Flanders. Jan van Eyck excelled in painting technique as well; Honour and Fleming note on his special ability to handle oil paint: “The transparency of the pigments gives his paintings a unique jewel-like quality to which no reproduction can do justice. They seem to emit light from within.” Although oil was already in use long before Van Eyck appeared on the scene, he brought the handling of oil paint to an unprecedented perfection. He was able to render the brilliance of gold with purely painterly means, so that the use of gold leaves in the painting became unnecessary. Other great innovators of the time, such as Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden, or the ‘Master of Flémalle’ come nowhere near to Van Eyck regarding the feeling for the effects of light².

Taken together, all the revolutions traditionally attributed to Jan van Eyck can already be traced in pre-Eyckian painting, however, in a fragmentary, rather uncertain way.

The below triptych, first time presented on a public exhibition, is an outstanding work from the pre-Eyckian period. It is traditionally conceived, although the architectural elements on the two side wings as well as the gestures and color tones of John the Baptist on the right wing, are painted with great mastery and appear fresh and new.

¹ Fransen, 2012

² Kemperdick and Lammertse, 2012



Bruges (?), Triptych with the Anointing of Christ's Body c. 1410-1420.

Oak, centre panel 31 x 31.9 x 1.9 cm; wings 31 x 12.8 cm each. Private collection.

Source: www.boijmans.nl.

Jean Malouel, uncle of the Limbourg brothers Pol and Jean, is a well-known master of the period. *The Virgin with Angels and Butterflies* is an exquisitely beautiful painting, one of the main attractions on the exhibition, and also known as the earliest extant Franco-Flemish painting on canvas.



Jean Malouel (?): *The Virgin with Angels and Butterflies*, c. 1410.

Canvas, 107 x 81 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie. Source: www.boijmans.nl.

The artistic inventions spread very quickly. From the 1440s onwards, soon after Van Eyck's death, his innovations became widely used. Copying of paintings was an established custom in the training of painters as well as for the reproduction of masterpieces. Van Eyck's works were widely copied (of which we can see examples on the current exhibition) in drawing as well as in painting. Although he was innovatory in many respects, Jan van Eyck's works also evidence a medieval belief in the harmonious unity and stability of the world: his figures are static and radiant with eternal beauty. In the art of the somewhat later Rogier van Weyden, though he was echoing Jan van Eyck's work at an early stage, we see more of our modern concept of the human element: the figures of van der Weyden are less static³

³ Kindly pointed out by Rien Monschouwer in the course of a personal conversation.

and his portraits are more of an interpretative character compared to the descriptive style of Jan van Eyck.

*

Putting up the present exhibition required a tremendous effort from both the organizers and the public. Private individuals raised some €700.000 for the purpose, without their help, it would have not come into being. In spite of the obvious public interest, visitors untrained in art history may face great difficulties when confronted with the celebrated artworks of six hundred years ago. This became apparent to me when a friend, with whom I visited the exhibition, asked me about the reason for dressing a large map at the entrance. I got surprised at this question and answered that it was the rightest way to present the differences of the political situation of then and now and to see the close ties between certain areas of France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands and help us to imagine the free movement of artists and artworks between these countries... Some time later it occurred to me that what I found evident, and what surprised this friend coming from a traditional religious background was the overwhelmingly intellectual approach that the current exhibition is set with.

But how could we surpass the boundaries established by our own culture? How could we show these pieces, deprived of their original context, in a way that it would somehow evoke the feelings and ideas they had been able to evoke? It is easy to enjoy Van Eyck, because we partly share his world view but it can be tremendously difficult to enjoy the works of many of his contemporaries. I think some additional information either in pictorial or musical form on the late medieval monastery and court life might have helped to get more in tune with the presented artworks.

Due to the scarcity of remaining 15th century artworks and their world-wide dispersal, a broad international cooperation including more than fifty museums in

twelve countries and years of work was required for putting up the exhibition. It is therefore a unique occasion to see these masterpieces together, in the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam, until 10 February, 2013. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, substantial catalogue.

References:

Fransen, Bart (2012): Jan van Eyck and the Portraiture of his Predecessors. *In: The Road to Van Eyck*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2012.

Honour, Hugh and Fleming, John (2005): *A World History of Art*. Seventh edition, Laurence King Publishing, Great Britain.

Stephan Kemperdick and Friso Lammertse (2012): *The Road to Van Eyck*. *In: The Road to Van Eyck*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2012.