



THE GHENT ALTARPIECE AND THE INSCRIPTION ON THE CLOTHS OF HONOUR BEHIND MARY AND JOHN THE BAPTIST



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The damaged and overpainted red inscription repeated on each of the banderoles in the cloths of honour behind Mary and John the Baptist at the top of the Ghent Altarpiece has been generally considered illegible. Close inspection of the X-radiographs in 2011 by H  l  ne Verougstraete has enabled her to present a reading of the inscription, with the help of Bernard Coulie for the last two signs. Her findings, presented in 2012 to the *Eighteenth Symposium for*

the Study of Underdrawing and Technology in Painting (Brussels, September 19-21), were published in 2017 in the *Papers* of this meeting.¹ The present article completes the above study of the inscription, establishes its originality on solid foundations and examines its implications in terms of the iconography and the respective authorship of the two painter brothers. From this inscription, which contains the date of Lubrect's death, it can be deduced that the upper altarpiece was designed and painted by Jan after his brother's death. The upper part is an extension to Lubrect's programme. If Lubrect had designed the entire programme, including the upper part, he would have had a single wooden structure built for his project. But the fact is that we are in the presence of two structures: the frames of the upper and lower parts are constructed differently.² The wings need to be articulated independently in order to permit the narrative to take place properly.

The large figures of the upper altarpiece represent a Double Intercession by Mary and John the Baptist to Christ for the salvation of humankind and of the deceased Lubrect. Behind the large figures the cloths of honour carrying banderoles with an inscription are produced using the technique of 'applied brocade', which consists of affixing identical decorative sheets containing a motif in relief.³ The sheets of both Mary and Saint John are shaped using the same mould and juxtaposed on the support to realistically evoke a rich lampas weave silk. In those two cloths of honour each sheet presents, below a unicorn, a banderole with an inscription (fig. 1).

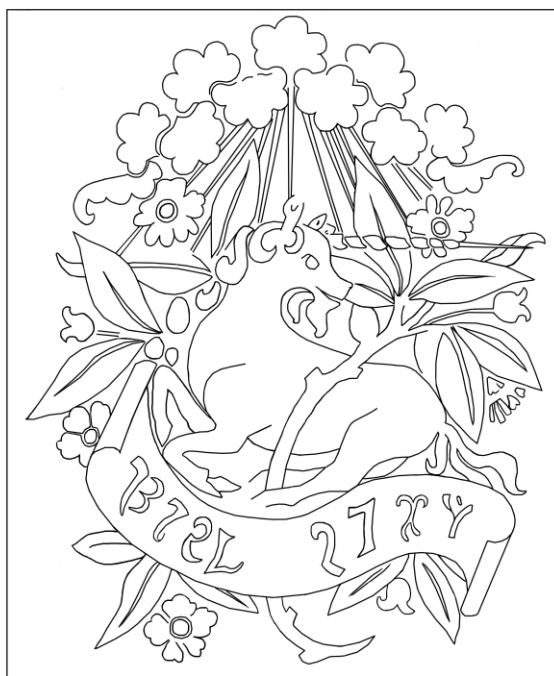


fig. 1: Reconstruction of the motif of a sheet of 'applied brocade' with the unicorn. The part to the left of the tree trunk is easy to reconstruct. To the right of this trunk, the image has been laboriously reconstructed from various documents. The purpose of this drawing is to help the reading of the pattern. It does not include the painted floral and foliage patterns that decorate the flat corners, areas that are today heavily overpainted. A sheet measures ± 18 cm high x ± 11.5 cm wide.

Originally the inscription was repeated ten times: twice in full and eight times partially, on six banderoles on Mary's side and four on John the Baptist's side (fig. 2).

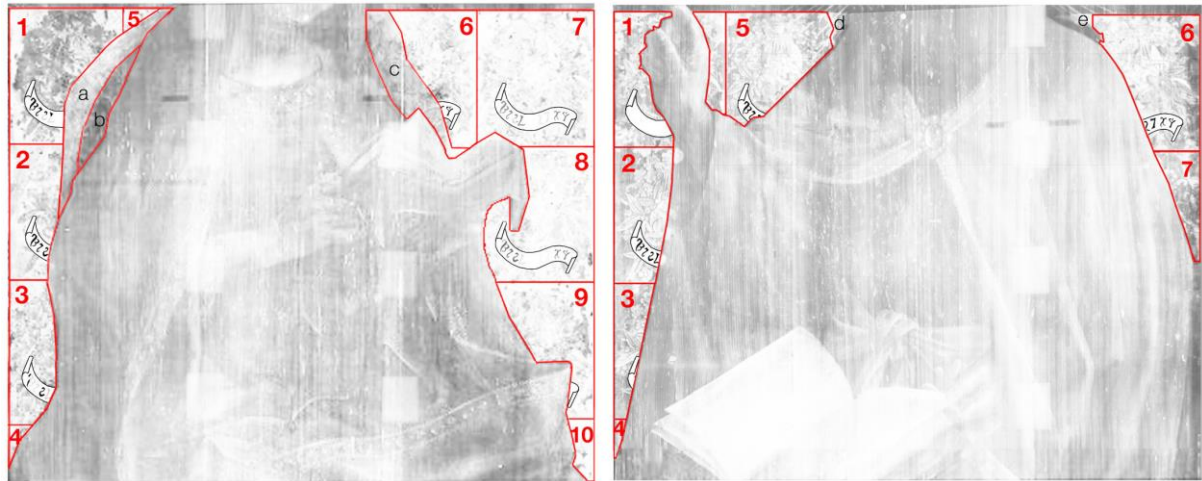


fig. 2: Distribution of brocade' sheets on the cloths of honour of Mary and John the Baptist. There are ten sheets (or partial sheets) on Mary's side and seven partial sheets on John the Baptist's side. Only the larger sheets have a banderole (or part of a banderole) with inscription.

Most banderoles are badly damaged (fig. 3). Even before the damage occurred, the reading of the inscription could have been difficult due to its scholarly use of signs and letters. Michel Coxcie when copying the Ghent Altarpiece in 1557-1559 could well have had difficulties with the reading. The scholarly abbreviations found there have been taken for fanciful, with some people viewing them as pseudo-Hebrew, or even 'Saracen'. In 1824, the historian Martin-Jean De Bast, a canon of Saint Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, spoke of 'fanciful characters'. This idea still lingers in people's minds today. After the restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece in 1950, the damaged, overpainted and illegible character of the inscription was taken for granted. In 2002 Donna Cottrell carefully examined the cloths of honour and drew the attention to many interesting aspects of the cloths. In the badly damaged red inscription she identified the X as a Greek Chi and thought the last letter was a P (the Greek Rho), the two letters being a variation of Christ's monogram.⁴

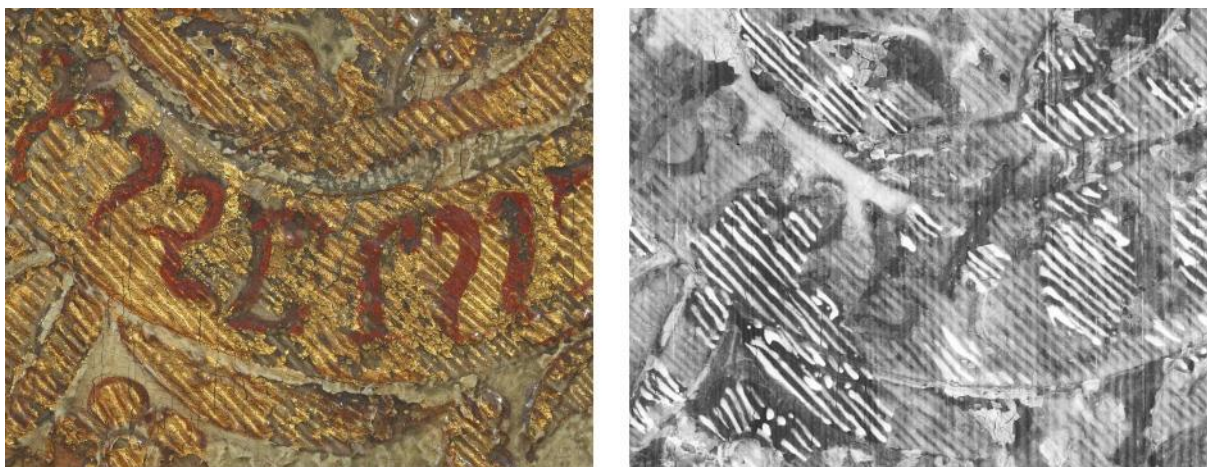


fig. 3: Mary's cloth of honour, detail, an inscription on a banderole: macrophotograph and X-radiograph (fig. 2: sheet 7). The macrophotograph reveals an inscription in red, partly original, partly retouched. The X-radiograph shows a fragmented image: a few old remains, lots of gaps and repairs. The strong white lines are a recent addition of hatching.

We will demonstrate that the inscription is original, executed in the mould which shaped the identical sheets of brocade that were juxtaposed on the panel before the main figures were painted. In some places the motif of the cloth was painted rather than made up of sheets, in particular where Mary's long, flowing hair appears in front of the cloth of honour. Here the use of sheet brocade with its relief would have defeated the need to provide depth. Great care has been expended to ensure the visual continuity of the cloth of honour, painted before the hair. Over time, this area of the painting has been damaged repeatedly, first by overcleaning, then by covering the damage with gold foil and paint. Further damage occurred when heat due to a fire or applied during a restoration process melted the wax. The heat affected the wax sheet only, not the area where the cloth had been painted. This damage, crucial for the appropriate evaluation of the inscription's originality, will be explained and documented in greater detail later.

The red inscription is indeed illegible. However, the X-radiographs reveal in three places a sharp and well-preserved inscription. If it lacks the elegance of an inscription executed with a pen or a brush, this is explained by the 'applied brocade' technique. What shows up dark in the X-radiograph is a hollow tracing in the wax brocade sheet, in which the painter would afterwards paint an elegant inscription in red colour. The red inscription itself does not show on the X-radiograph (with the exception of some red retouching here and there), only the

hollow tracing in the wax brocade sheet does. The most legible inscriptions on the X-radiograph are found in John the Baptist's cloth of honour (fig. 4): under his raised right hand, on the inside of his elbow and next to his left shoulder. From these we can reconstruct the complete inscription, a mixture of medieval Dutch (*Middelnederlands*), Arabic numerals and Greek abbreviations. The first letters can be identified as a 'B' and a lower case or cursive 'r' leading to the reading of 'Br'. This is followed by a kind of accolade which is an abbreviation. In 2012 H       Verougstraete thought the abbreviation was Latin, often used for the passive ending of the third person singular -ur.⁵ Recently Wim Verbaal pointed to the use of this abbreviation in medieval Dutch for an 'r' with a vowel that has been omitted.⁶ So together these signs point to the reading 'Brur' (Broer = brother). The word 'brur', itself an abbreviation, occurred as early as the first half of the 14th century.⁷ Following the initial letters an 'L' can be seen. The reading of the medieval Dutch name 'Lubrect' is logical after the preceding 'Brur'.

The last four characters can also be deciphered on the X-radiograph. There are two Arabic numerals 2 and 7, followed by two letters that can be read as XY with an abbreviation sign over the Y. Already in 2011 Bernard Coulie read those two last signs.⁸ He suggested that the first sign was standing for 'Christus' and the second for 'Jesus'. According to him, another reading would be to recognize in the second sign the Greek ligature '-ou', allowing the reading 'Xristou' [ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ], a Greek version of Jesus' Latin name in the genitive case (*Anno Domini*). The two last letters of the inscription indicate the Christian era, hence the Arabic numerals indicate a date: [14]27. Given the abbreviation on the central panel with Christ, which will be discussed later, it is logical to read in the letters XY a Greek version of Jesus' name in the genitive. Jan Van Eyck's use of Latin, Greek and Hebrew letters and signs in his works is well known.⁹



fig. 4: Cloth of honour of John the Baptist, details: left: X-radiographs; right: macrophotographs. Parts of banderoles with inscription (for the location of these details in the cloth of honour, see fig. 2, sheets 2, 5 and 6). The two top macrophotographs (right) show a sheet that has lost its polychromy. The lower documents illustrate the only half-banner sufficiently well preserved to allow the second part of the inscription to be read. The text painted in black in the macrophotograph (right) is an overpainting that distorts the text as it appears on the X-radiograph (left).

The meaning of this inscription is as follows: brother Lubrect, deceased in 1427. Jan Van Eyck chose the initial L to call his brother 'Lubrect'. This is one of the names given to the artist in the archive texts: *Meester Luberecht, Ubrecht, Hubrechte de schildere, Lubrect Van Eycke*.¹⁰ The date of [14]27 differs from that of 18 September 1426 engraved on a copper plate which is now lost but which was sealed in the painter's tombstone and is known from the transcriptions of Marcus van Vaernewyck (1568) and of Christiaan van Huerne (between 1616 and 1621). The mention of either 1426 or 1427 might be due to variations in dating the start of a new year. The date in the upper altarpiece implies an extension by Jan to the programme of his deceased brother. The inscription brings an additional argument in favour of the dual nature of the altarpiece, long defended by some.¹¹

In the central part with Christ, the gold brocade shows the motif of the pelican feeding its young with its own blood. Guillaume le Clerc pays ample attention to the pelican as an image for Christ.¹² On the brocade, the animal is surrounded by vines and grapes that again represent the Redeemer's blood. A banderole crowns the scene of the bird with the inscription YHC † XPS on it, as the X-ray photography shows. This original Greek-based inscription was later overpainted by the still-legible letters IHESUS XPS. Here too, Jan Van Eyck clearly hinted at his knowledge of exotic alphabets. Later generations soon no longer understood the first abbreviation, with the Y that Jan used as the Greek equivalent of the Latin J and the C an alternative form of the Greek sigma in addition to the S form as it is used in the second abbreviation (ς/σ). This was replaced by the more usual IHESUS where the C still shimmers through the first S. That is how it can be read on the copy Michiel Coxcie made around 1558. Unlike those next to Mary and John, the banderole with the inscription on the central panel is located above the pelican, crowning it, so to speak. In the case of Mary and John the Baptist, on the other hand, the banderole is located under the unicorn, another symbol of Christ. This seems to indicate a hierarchical relationship between the central panel and the other two. The wording on the banderole of Mary and John is subject to the image with the unicorn and does not crown it.

THE CLOTHS OF HONOUR AND THEIR MOTIFS

A cloth of honour (*drap d'honneur, dossier, dossier, dossello*)¹³ is a precious textile into which a large amount of precious metal has been worked, especially gold, but also silver. In an

ecclesiastical context, such cloths of honour were used during festive celebrations as a background for relics or for sacred objects. During official receptions they covered the seat where the monarch received his guests. In many cases the cloth extended in both directions, covering the seat itself and continuing upwards to the 'heaven' (*cielo*), a short canopy.¹⁴

A good example of the importance of the cloth of honour on such occasions is provided by the opening miniature by Rogier Van der Weyden in the *Chroniques de Hainaut* of Jean Wauquelin (1447) (KBR 9242) (fig. 5). The author offers his book to Philip the Good, who stands in front of a throne with a *cielo*. The cloth of honour extends down from the *cielo* to cover the entire seat. It is richly decorated with a motif executed in gold thread, motifs and colours of which recur in the clothes of Charles the Bold standing next to his father. They are the only gold brocade fabrics in the miniature, the use of which was reserved for the Church and princes.¹⁵ The image can be read as an expression of the Burgundian ambitions to a real royal crown for the young Charles. As the miniature shows, the purpose of covering the background with a cloth of honour in this way was to create a strong frontal view for the visitor and remove the depth. In this way all attention was concentrated on the person or object, which became more or less outside of space and outside of time.¹⁶ The motifs on the cloth often referred to the person or object that was emphasized: in this way the ensemble gave a coherent message for the viewer. In the miniature it is Wauquelin who has this front-on view, while for the observer of the miniature himself the focus is achieved in a different way, namely by the picking up of the gold brocade in Charles the Bold's clothing.



fig. 5: Rogier Van der Weyden, *Jean Wauquelin presenting his 'Chroniques de Hainaut' to Philip the Good*, frontispiece of the *Chroniques de Hainaut*, 1447, (KBR 9242) Belgian Royal Library.

The miniature also proves how important the cloth of honour was in painting, separating out the central characters from the figures surrounding them, as in the case of Philip and Charles here. The brocade that returns in the cloth of honour and in the clothing frames the duke and his son. None of the other persons present are associated with it. Only Nicolas Rolin, the duke's chancellor, overlaps slightly onto the cloth of honour on the edge, which can be read as a sign of the great trust that binds him to the monarch.¹⁷

In Flemish religious painting, the cloth of honour is an important element in the composition that brings together both the royal and the liturgical use. Jan Van Eyck uses it for almost all his Mary's, with the exception of the painting of Mary with Chancellor Rolin, which is in the Louvre. However, documents in the infrared reveal that a cloth of honour was drawn in an initial stage.¹⁸ Elsewhere, the cloth of honour emphatically serves also to separate Mary spatially from the place in which she is situated. This function is very clear, for example, in the Bruges work, the *Madonna and Child and Canon Joris Van der Paele*, where the two figures of Saint Donatian and the Canon themselves come to the edge of the throne on which Mary is seated, but do not penetrate into the space itself, demarcated by the cloth behind and over the throne and the carpet under Mary's feet (fig. 6). Both characters only touch Mary's red cloak where it reaches up to or beyond the edge of her sacred space. The red colour represents Mary's love that continues to extend to mankind and creation.



fig. 6: Jan Van Eyck, *Madonna and Child with Canon Joris Van der Paele*, Groeningemuseum, Bruges, c. 141 x 176.5 cm with original frame.

Another example is the small panel from Antwerp with the *Madonna at the Fountain* (fig. 7). Two angels hold up the cloth of honour behind Mary, which she fills almost completely without ever moving outside it. The cloth is also here under her feet, so that Mary does not even touch the grass with the wildflowers. Only at the front does a fold of her blue robe barely overlap onto the grass. In the cloth of honour, four animals have been incorporated in black and blue between the plant motifs elaborated in gold thread, all four referring to Christ and Mary: the lion of Judah (Apoc. 5.5), the phoenix of the Resurrection, the hare of the godly man and probably the lamb itself.¹⁹ The latter is difficult to say as it is nowhere fully visible.



fig. 7: Jan Van Eyck, *Madonna at the Fountain*, 1439, 24.5 x 18 cm with the original frame, Antwerp, Museum of Fine Arts.

When we now turn our gaze back to the three central panels of the upper register in the Ghent Altarpiece, we see there a similar use of the cloths of honour, albeit with slight deviations. For example, the cloths of honour are undoubtedly intended to cover the seat and front part of the thrones on which the three figures are seated. Especially with Mary and the divine person the cloth of honour continues to where it touches the tiled floor, but without continuing upwards to a *cielo*. We will come back to this.

On the cloths of honour behind Mary and John, the motif consists of a unicorn that turns its head with the horn backwards while irradiated with divine rays from the cloud above its head. The banderole is located under its hoofs. The unicorn's posture is more a genuflection than a gallop. It comes out from behind a small tree that bends over it and points in the same direction as the horn.

The unicorn is traditionally seen as a symbol for Christ. The story of how it allows itself to be caught by snuggling in the lap of a virgin where she waits for him in a forest, was read as an image for the Incarnation in which the uncircumscribable divinity bowed right down into the Virgin Mary's womb, allowing itself to be 'caught' in her womb and in the flesh.²⁰ The rays from the clouds above the animal indicate the unity in the Spirit of the Son with the invisible Father.

That the image is not only about Mary, but about Christ, is indicated by the unicorn's twisted posture. With his head and horn he points to the central figure, actually just as John the Baptist points with his finger to the central panel. The tree stands in the first instance for the forest where the unicorn lives but can perhaps also be seen as a reference to the tree of life, which according to tradition later gave the wood of the cross for Christ's redeeming death.

While the cloth of honour in the central panel refers in all its details to the figure of Christ in the foreground, those of Mary and John clearly have a different function. For both figures they strengthen the bond with the central panel. Their presence here is a function of the Deity made man and his redeeming role for humanity. But that does not end Mary and John's role. With the inscription, Jan wanted to indicate that they also mediate for his dead brother.

THE TECHNIQUE OF 'APPLIED BROCADE'

- *General remarks*

The precious fabrics of that time have been extensively studied. Scholars make a distinction between Flemish wools, Italian velvets, and lampas weave silks. Each category was characterized by the way in which it was employed. Lampas silks were used exclusively as cloths of honor, whereas wools and velvets were fashioned into garments and decorative items.²¹ The silk brocades were produced mainly in Italy (Genoa, Lucca, Florence, Venice...). The city of Bruges was one of the main importers.

Artists have evoked these precious fabrics. Most often they did so with a brush, sometimes with astonishing results.²² Sometimes they engraved motifs into the gesso applied to the wood panels. Onto the gesso they also superimposed brush strokes of gesso made sufficiently liquid to be drawn out with a brush (a technique called *a pastiglia*). Sometimes they even glued on real pieces of fabric. The painters also imitated those precious fabrics using a technique called 'applied brocade'²³, pasting sheets imitating brocade onto all kinds of works of art: easel and mural paintings, sculptures, furniture, architecture... This technique was in its heyday between the first quarters of the 15th and 16th centuries, in the Low Countries, along the Rhine, in southern Germany, northern Italy and Spain.

While the term 'brocade' originates from the sphere of fabrics, the adjective 'applied' refers to the action of gluing (applying) the sheet to a support (*brocart appliqué*, '*appliqué*' *brokaat*, '*appliqué*' *Brokat*, *brocado aplicado*). The term 'applied brocade' is a general term, that covers a wide range of techniques and recipes. For differentiating them, the adequate terms are often lacking, as is the case with many old techniques. Sometimes a term exists in one language only.²⁴

An 'applied brocade' was produced starting with a mould. There were several kinds of moulds and various recipes (often workshop secrets) for making a sheet of applied brocade. The mould, most often in wood, metal, or stone, allowed the identical multiplication of sheets. Into the mould a pattern was engraved/hollowed out with a burin or other tool. A mould could also consist of soft metal, for example lead or a lead alloy, that could then be pressed in using a stylus. This is the method that was used for the cloths of honour of the Ghent Altarpiece.

The artist's natural gesture to create oblique hatching in the mould was to trace this from the top right to the bottom left. But a left-right inversion of the pattern occurs when the sheet is detached from the mould and turned over to be glued on its final support. Any inscription in a mould had to anticipate this inversion. This applied to the Ghent Altarpiece.

Once the mould was ready, it was coated with oil or grease to prevent any adhesion of the future sheet. The sheet was then produced. With the sheet still on the mould, the four edges were carefully trimmed to ensure precise seams between the sheets. Then the sheet had to be cut to the size that suited its destination, which was done, if possible, with the sheet still on the mould. As far as we can make out from the rare written sources and surviving applied brocades, there were different ways to proceed to make the sheet. One way was to place a tin foil into the mould, followed by a wad of tow, which was then beaten with a mallet or small club to force the metal into the mould. After this, a filler was spread over the metal to fill up the hollows. The term 'pressed brocade' (*brocart pressé*, *geperste brokaat*, *Pressbrokat*) fits this technique and refers to the pressure exerted.

Another method used in the Netherlands, including for the Ghent Altarpiece, consisted of pouring into the mould a molten thermoplastic material, based on wax with the addition of other materials: resin, glue, chalk, pigments, etc.²⁵ Before being detached, the sheet was eventually reinforced on the back by various means, including paper, parchment, or metal foil (silver? tin?) as seems to have been the case in the Ghent Altarpiece. This process of pouring liquid material into the mould can be called 'cast brocade' (*brocart coulé*, *gegoten brokaat*, *Giessbrokat*). For about a day, the thermoplastic sheet remained flexible enough to be applied to the substrate, but it remained permanently heat sensitive.

Probably it was preferred to gild the sheet before gluing. The handling of gold leaf is delicate and requires proximity between gilder, gold leaf and surface to be gilded. If the gilding is done on the support, gold particles can get lost and thwart the subsequent pictorial execution. Rolf E. Straub cites the example of a sheet stuck by mistake to an architecture item, where the misplaced sheet was already gilded.²⁶ But examples are also cited of gilding after the metal sheet had been glued to the support.²⁷ The gold could be enhanced with glazes or colours before or after gluing the sheet onto the support. The flat areas and the seams were probably painted with the sheets already glued to the support, in order to ensure the visual continuity of the fabric.

Jan Van Eyck's 'cast brocade'

The technique of the 'applied brocade' of the cloths of honour of Mary and John the Baptist has been mentioned in the past.²⁸ The documents available on the *Closer to Van Eyck* site allow us to specify the stages of manufacture, first of the mould, then of the brocade sheet. A stylus drives the pattern into a mould, consisting of a flat piece of soft metal. The unicorn and the plant motifs occupy practically the entire surface, leaving the four corners as flat areas, along with the areas spared by the stylus between the hatchings or the contours of the motif. In the banderoles, the stylus spares the inscriptions, reversed left-right. Once the mould was ready, the artist probably coated it with fat or oil to prevent any adhesion of the future sheet. He then poured into the mould the waxy material that would form the sheet. He reinforced the sheet with a metal foil (tin?). Then he detached the whole, decorated the sheet with gold leaf and glued it onto the support (this operation restores the correct orientation of the motif and the inscription). The work was completed by a colour decoration.

The unicorn mould: a repoussé work made of outlines, accentuated areas and hatching — There must have been an independent drawing of the pattern with the unicorn. We have reconstructed this project in figure 1. No 15th century mould has been conserved. To understand what the mould looked like, we are reduced to examining the applied brocade sheet and its appearance on the X-radiograph. On John the Baptist's side, the X-radiograph reveals a well-preserved waxy mass, with a regular and smooth relief (fig. 8).

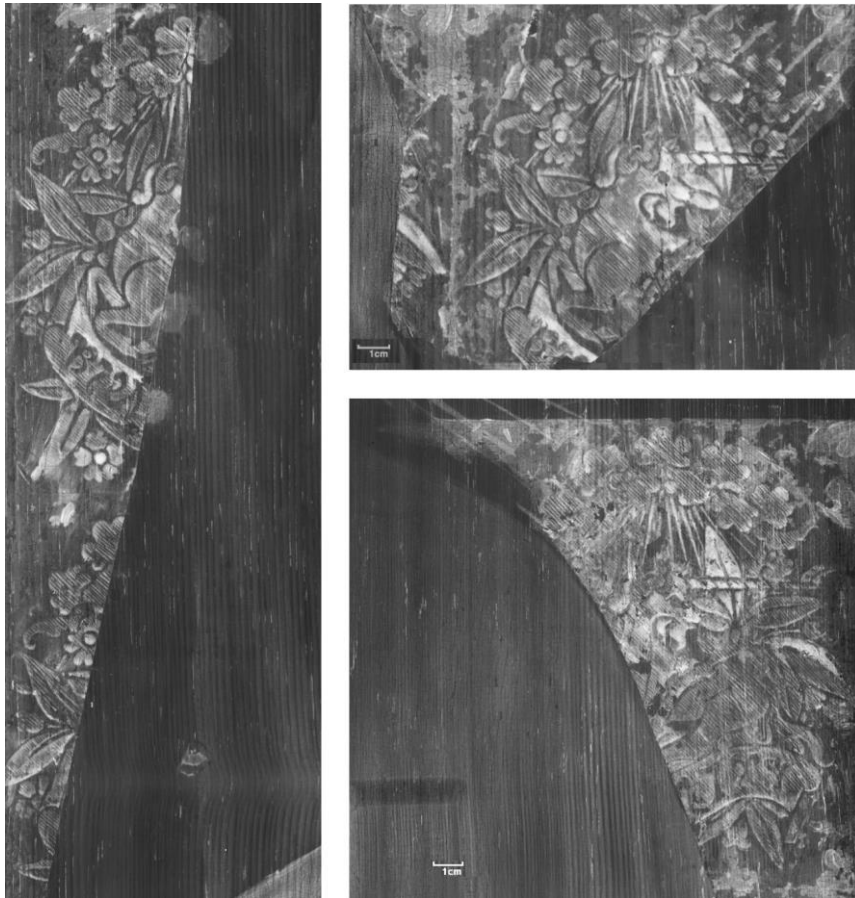


fig. 8: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, details in X-radiography (left: fig. 2, sheets 2 and 3, with the seam between the two sheets halfway up). Right: sheet 5 at the top; below: no. 6. Of all the sheets examined during this work, it is here that the relief is best preserved. These sheets have greatly contributed to the reconstruction of both the inscription and the unicorn motif.

There are no sharp lines suggesting engraving or incision with a burin in a hard metal or wood mould. The image corresponds to work done with the blunt-tipped stylus which embeds the motif in a soft metal, for example lead or lead alloy. This process is described in the literature.²⁹ The artist began by tracing the outlines. He made the hatching inside the outlines. He pressed some areas to accentuate their relief (fig. 9). Some contours are not closed (fig. 10). Note that the clear lines of the X-radiograph correspond to the work of the stylus. The dark areas on the X-radiograph are the flat areas of the sheet and the mould, not worked by the stylus.

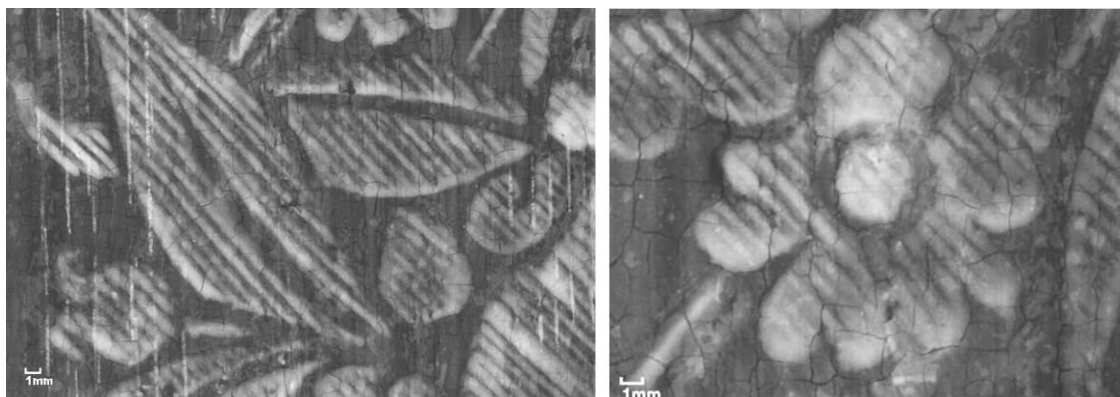


fig. 9: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, details, X-radiographs (fig. 2, sheet 2). The stylus first of all traced out the contours. The hatching is done inside these contours. The large horizontal leaf (left-hand document) has a clear contour at the bottom; at the top, there is no contour, as if the sheet disappeared behind the flower of which we can guess three petals. On the right, we see that the tip of the petals and the heart of the flower have been pressed harder by the stylus. The dark areas on the X-radiograph are flat areas, untouched by the stylus. Given the scale of the document ($1\text{ cm} = \pm 10$ hatchings), this is very precise work.



fig. 10: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, detail in ordinary light and X-radiograph (fig. 2, sheet 5). In the macrophotograph on the left, the heart of the flower and the tips of the petals are more prominent, as are some contours. To the left of the flower we see the brush strokes which have spread the waxy mixture into the mould. The brown appearance of the waxy mass perhaps combines the effect of old varnish and a weathering of the wax. The further the artist has pressed down the stylus into the mould, the thicker the wax, the whiter the radiographic image. The presence of pigments (probably including lead white) in the wax allows the contrasted image of the X-radiograph.

How was the inscription done on the banderoles? The homogeneity of the radiographic images precludes their having been realized in the dry, solidified wax: the inscription came into being already when the stylus imbedded the motive in the mould. It corresponds thereafter to a flat zone in the liquid material of the sheet, in reserve between either the hatchings or the outlines (fig. 11).

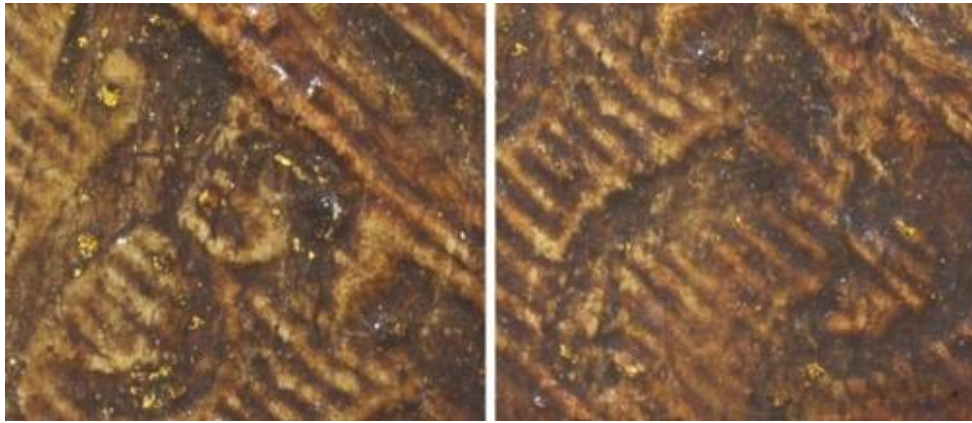


fig. 11: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, details, macrophotographs (fig. 2, sheet 2). On the left: first letter of the inscription: 'B'. The outlines of the letter are comparable to those observed in the foliage of figs. 9 and 10.

The homogeneity of the image attests to an inscription in the mould itself: the letter corresponds to a flat area. In the hollows of the letters, we see particles of gold leaf that seem to be original. A final red outline of the inscription, of which nothing remains here, had been made on gold leaf. On the right, the second letter: 'r', followed by the upper part of the abbreviation 'ur'. Hatching slightly overlaps the outline of the letter 'r'. This hatching demarcates a flat area. The stylus has paused to reserve a letter zone.

The slight overlap of the hatching in the letter 'r' shows that the stylus has stopped to spare the flat area of the letter. This means that the inscription was fairly approximate on leaving the mould. It was only the final red paint layer on top of the gilding that made the inscription sharp. Another observation confirms that the inscription originated at the mould stage: there are remains of the original gilding in the letters. In fig. 12, we can see in places remains of the original red colour of the inscription painted on top of the gilding. The lower loop of the letter 'B' retains the original gilding, while the red lake of the inscription is lost.

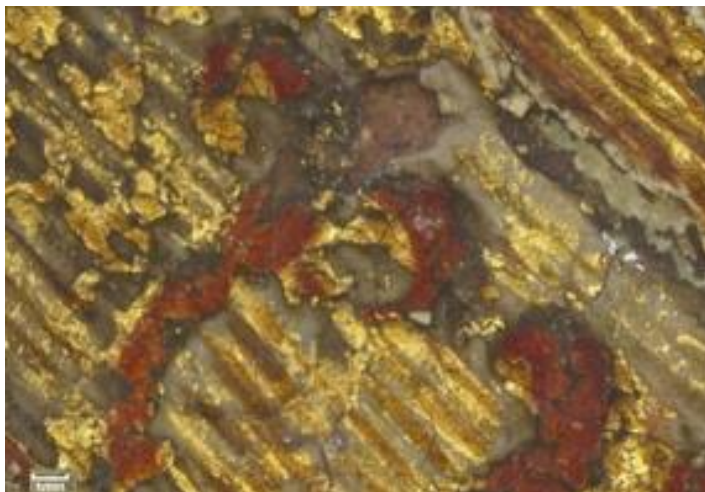


fig. 12: Mary's cloth of honour, detail, macrophotograph (fig. 2, sheet 7): part of a banner with the letter B. This detail reveals a succession of layers. The red glaze of the inscription appears to be original. It is confined to fragment islands of also original gilding. The original gilding remains in the lower loop of B, but there the red glaze is lost. Under the red and gold we see in dark the outline of the letter. Here the whitish waxy mass is almost absent. The dark appearance of the letter seems due to the presence of the metallic foil mentioned elsewhere. At the top, in the centre, a round gap reveals the beige-pink ground.

Cutting a sheet and placing it on the support — The cutting of sheets precisely to the required format is easy when this is rectilinear, for example to follow John the Baptist's mantle, and could be done with the sheet still resting on the mould. On the other hand, handling the thin sheet, once detached from the mould, was a delicate task. An irregular outline (the contours of

the John the Baptist's fingers, for example) gave rise to jerky irregularities that evoke the work of scissors. A repair patch, of ± 1 cm is visible next to the Baptist's elbow (fig. 13).



fig. 13: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, X- radiographs (fig. 2, sheets 6, 1, 5). From left to right: a: oblique seam between the John's coat and the 'applied brocade' cloth of honour; b: the jerky cutting out of the sheet around John's fingers. This jerky cutting evokes the presence of a metal sheet cut with a scissor; c: a small repair patch in the hollow of Saint John's elbow testifies to the precision of the work.

The particular case of the brocade painted under Mary's and John the Baptist's hair — A part of both cloths of honour is located below the hair (fig. 2: a, b, c, d and e). This underlying part is painted, rather than made up of wax sheets. The painting of these areas of the brocade is not, as has sometimes been suggested, a *pentimento* for example intended to widen or narrow Mary's silhouette. It reflects the concern to avoid a hatched relief under the light hair through which we glimpse the cloth of honour (fig. 14). To the left of Mary's face, the hair fell down to the elbow, lower than it does today (fig. 15). Over time, cleanings and overpainting have deteriorated the subtle effects of the transparency of the hair desired by the artist (fig. 16).



fig. 14: Mary's face and hair. The more one moves away from Mary's face, the lighter the hair, and the more the cloth of honour shines through. This effect of subtle transparency is now preserved only at the level of the face and neck. Further down, insensitive cleaning has erased the hair and exposed the underlying layer, the particularity of which was to prolong the pattern of the brocade in painting. The painter avoided an inappropriate hatched relief under the hair. Most overcleaned areas were overpainted.



fig. 15: Detail in infrared reflectography. Drawing of Mary's hair.



fig. 16: Mary's cloth of honour, detail at her right shoulder, macrophotograph and corresponding X-radiograph (fig. 2, sheet 1, zones a and b). Macrophotograph: in the lower right corner, heavily cleaned reddish-brown area with remains of dark colour, probably remains of Mary's hair. To the left of this area, the regular painted golden hatching, intended to show through under the hair. The more the hair moves away from the face, the more scattered it was, and the more it let the background show through. Left half of this document: badly damaged wax sheet.



X-radiograph: painted zone with regular hatching (right half of document), well preserved. This painted zone divides into two. A low density (dark) area (zone b), intended to be almost entirely covered by Mary's hair. Towards the centre of the document: more densities (zone a): the painted cloth of honour was intended to show through between the hair. The left half of the X-radiograph: 'applied brocade' in poor condition. The wax has melted under the effect of the heat. The thick white areas are overpaintings, including the outlines of the motif.

A number 7 is painted in a part of the cloth of honour intended to be covered by Mary's hair (fig. 17, to the right: X-radiograph). This painted number 7, which echoes the 7 in the other banderoles, was part of the early stages of pictorial execution, before the large figures. This proves that Lubrect's death preceded the execution of the upper altarpiece.



fig. 17: Mary's cloth of honour, detail of fig. 23 . In the macrophotograph (left), the leaf in the centre corresponds to an overpainting. The inscription in red (the number 27 and part of the following sign) does not match what one sees on the X-radiograph. On this one can see the well-preserved painted hatching, in which is inscribed the number 7, also painted.

The painted hatching rests against the seam of the sheet which occupies the right-hand part of the document; the applied brocade is badly damaged by heat which has melted the wax. On the contrary, the painted part has remained in good condition

The phenomenon aimed to avoid a relief under the hair is also observed on the side of John the Baptist, in a much more limited proportion (fig. 2, zones d and e). The irregular cut of the sheet is visible on the X-radiograph by differences in density and cracking. In these very small areas, the artist did not consider it necessary to paint the motif (fig. 18).

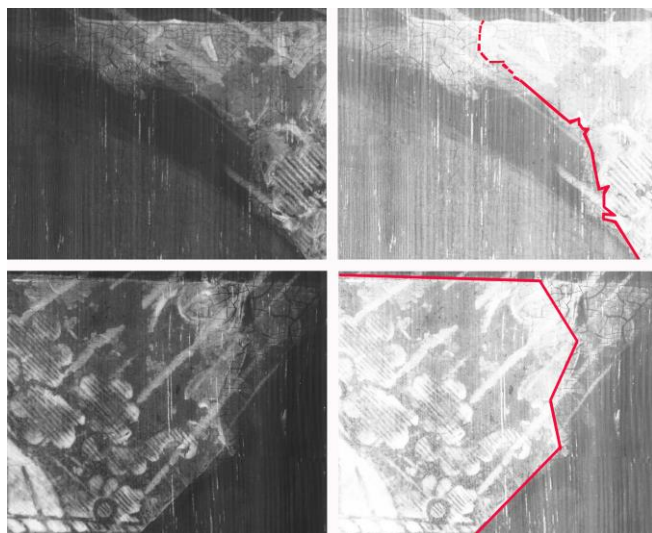


fig. 18: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, details of the hair falling on the shoulders (fig. 2, zones d and e). Left: X-radiographs; right: same document with in red the outline of the cutting of the sheet. Above: the Baptist's left shoulder. Below: his right shoulder. The cutting of the sheets made it possible to avoid a thickness under the hair.

The polychromy of the sheets — On Mary's side, the wax sheets have melted under the effect of heat, flattening their relief. The sheets are dotted with gaps, but the original gilding and colours remain in several places, despite much retouching. Elements of the original red glaze are still in place in some inscriptions as we saw in fig. 12. In addition, a red glaze underlined small details such as the hearts of the flowers and the unicorn's eye (fig. 19).

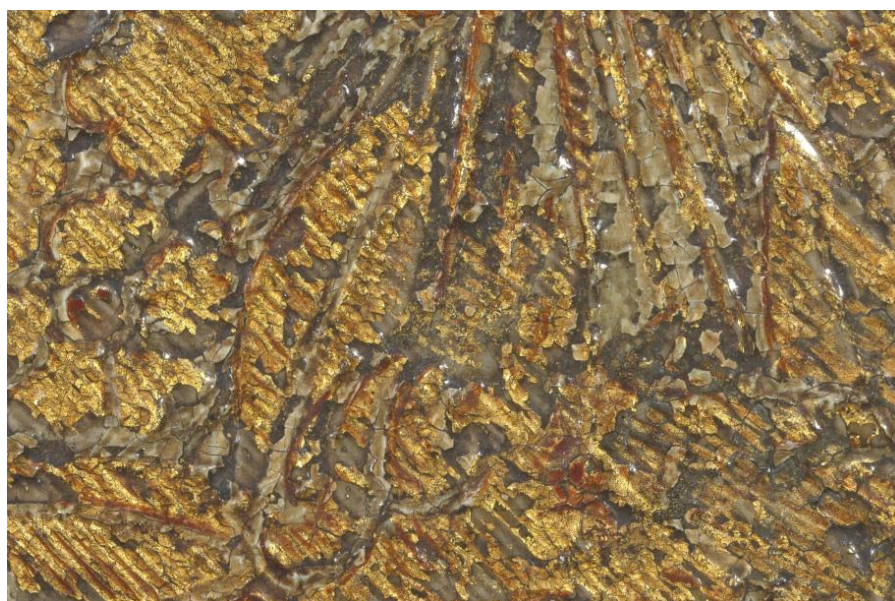


fig. 19: Mary's cloth of honour (fig. 2, sheet 7), original red glaze at the left is de hart of a flower. The other touch of red glaze, to the right below, is the eye of the unicorn. The white colour of the cloth is also visible here and there. Many gaps, and at their edges: dark grey that corresponds to an underlying metal foil.

The motifs were encircled in white or whitish blue on Mary's side and in red on that of John the Baptist, to evoke the colour of the fabric on which the gold threads were embroidered. In the copies of the famous altarpiece, the inscription is also painted in red (fig. 20).



fig. 20 : details with Mary's book and cloth of honour. On the left: Jan Van Eyck (1432), in the middle: Michel Coxcie (1555-1559), on the right: Carl Friedrich Schultz (1826). Neither copyist hangs a pendant from the tassel hanging in front of the cloth of honour. Michel Coxcie did not adopt the applied brocade technique, which he probably no longer knew. He glued a thin oval sheet of metal, completely hatched, to the ground. On it he painted the unicorn motif in gold. The pattern is surrounded by the white colour of the ground weave. In his later copy, Schulz copies the motif with a brush. The copies are useful for understanding the original and now heavily damaged pattern in the Ghent Altarpiece.

On John the Baptist's side the wax sheets are well preserved but have lost a large part of their polychromy. Judging from their dark brown colour, the loss could be very old (fig. 21). On the corners, the coloured backgrounds present different foliage on Mary's side and on John the Baptist's side. These corners are heavily overpainted. Michel Coxcie's copy can serve as a reference to judge the elegance the patterns would originally have had.



fig. 21: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, detail in the fold of the elbow (fig. 2, sheet 5). The polychromy has practically disappeared on the well-preserved relief of the sheet.

The stratigraphy of a sheet — The gaps allow us to observe various pictorial layers on Mary's side. Starting from the surface: first the colours, placed on the gold leaf. The gold seems to have covered the entire sheet because we find traces of it in the corners. The wax-based sheets are opaque and whitish, a colour that betrays the presence of lead white. Below the wax, at the edge of the gaps, a thin dark layer corresponds to a metallic foil (oxidized tin?), which was placed as reinforcement on the back of the waxy sheet when on the mould. The metallic foil displays a greater opacity to X-radiography than the gold foil. Metallic foils other than gold were beaten into thicker sheets, and therefore show up on the X-radiograph, unlike gold, usually too thin to show. Under the metallic foil, we see the beige-pink ground that covers the wooden support. The metallic foil is often retouched in light grey.

State of conservation — The poor general condition of the cloths of honour of the *Ghent Altarpiece* has been noted in the past.³⁰ The documentation on the *Closer to Van Eyck* site permits some clarification (fig. 22). It is necessary to distinguish between the state of the wax sheet and the state of the polychromy on the sheet. A wax sheet that has melted, lost its relief, and is pierced with gaps, can still have preserved its original polychromy in places. A sheet that has not been affected by the heat may have kept its relief but lost its coloured decoration. The condition of Mary's cloth of honour is not comparable to that of John the Baptist. In addition, neither presents a uniform state. This is explained by the difficulties that restorers encountered with the little-known technique of 'applied brocade', described in the literature only from 1963 onwards.³¹ Before this date, ignorance led to some confusion among restorers.³²

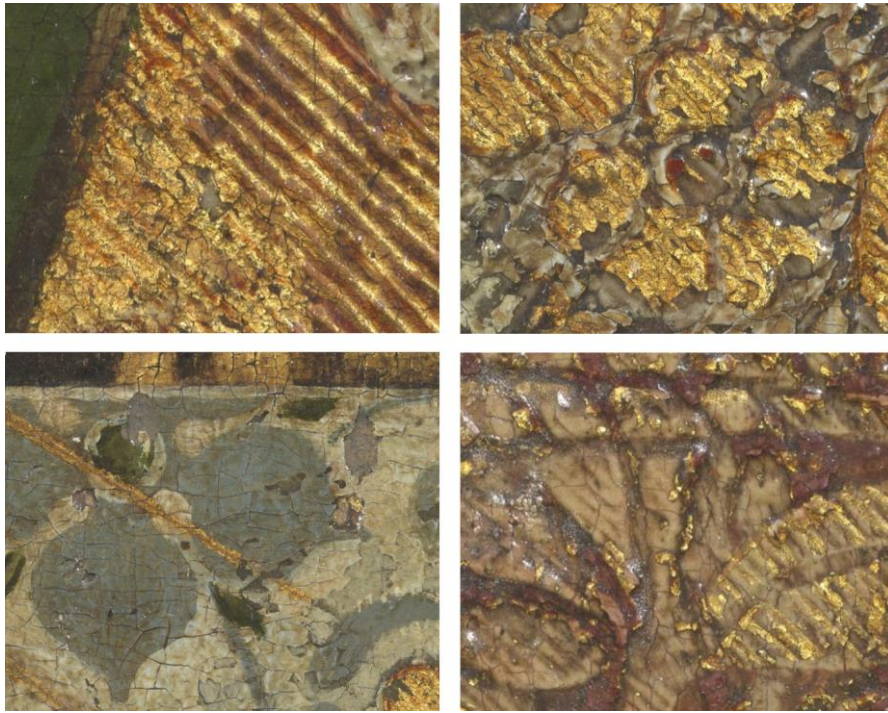


fig. 22: Four details in macrophotography: the first three are from Mary's cloth of honour, the last, in the lower right, from that of John the Baptist. Upper left (fig. 2, sheet 8): along the green fabric that protects the manuscript: remains of the original gold leaf, cracked and flattened next to the restoration in high relief, accentuated by brown lines.

Top right (fig. 2, sheet 7): remains of original red glaze in the heart of a flower. The gilded motifs are circled in white to recall the colour of the ground weave.

Bottom left: macrophotograph, detail of the flat corner of a sheet (fig. 2, sheet 6). In a gap, at the end of the right petal, remains of gilding on a dark layer. The gold leaf covered the entire sheet before being enhanced with glazes and colours. Bottom right (fig. 2, sheet 6): the unicorn's horn, the tree. Whitish mass of the hatched wax sheet. Remains of the original gilding form small islands; the gilded lines drawn with a brush are retouching. A red colour encircled the gilded motifs to recall the colour of the ground weave.

The oldest damage in the cloth of honour on Mary's side is due to a cleaning which aimed to expose, on both sides of the face, the painted parts of the cloth of honour. A restorer did not understand the painter's intention to cover the painted cloth with hair. This damage could predate the copy by Coxcie in 1557-1559, but this needs to be confirmed. The consequences of the inappropriate cleaning work around Mary's face required a camouflage repair job. To the right of the face, a new gold leaf covers the damage (fig. 23). The red painted numbers 27 that we see today are not original. Below the artist had painted only the already mentioned number 7. The bright gold band forms today an inappropriate luminosity between the hair and the now damaged cloth of honour. The contrast between the gold band next to Mary's hair and the damaged brocade might have resulted from the action of heat, due either to a restoration or to a fire: only the wax brocade was damaged by heat, and not the painted part.



fig. 23: Mary's cloth of honour, detail with two sheets (fig. 2, sheets 6 and 7). Mary's hair and the lifted page of the manuscript book adjoin a strip, the gilding of which is not original. We can guess what happened. A restorer laid bare the painted cloth of honour that he saw under the hair, and that he believed must be on the surface. This done, the painted part of the brocade did not fit well into the whole. It was necessary to camouflage it with fresh gold leaf, and to repaint the inscription. In this way, the gentle transition that Jan Van Eyck had planned between the hair and the sheet is lost.

On the left of Mary's face, on the shadow side, the painted brocade has also been over-cleaned. As said before, the hair initially covered a broader area, reaching down to Mary's elbow, as we can see in the preparatory drawing revealed by infrared reflectography (fig. 15). Deprived of the hair that was supposed to cover it, the over-cleaned area was left as it was (fig. 16). There are traces of the original gold hatching, delicately painted with a brush. Beyond the painted brocade, the wax sheets are damaged. The X-radiograph of the upper corner of the cloth of honour shows that little remains of the sheet. It can be seen on the X-radiograph that the long, regular streaks in the painted brocade, intended to be under the hair, survived better than the wax of the sheet.

Elsewhere in Mary's cloth of honour, heat has flattened the relief of the wax and weakened the adhesion of the sheets. The heat was increased by the conductivity of the metal foil under the wax. The largest gaps were filled by new hatchings in strong relief drawn with a brush, easily recognizable to the naked eye. On the X-radiograph they appear in very clear white.

These lines have been gilded. They are already visible on a document published by Max J. Friedländer in 1920-21.³³ Almost everywhere, especially where the wax is melted, streaks painted in brown attempt to create an illusion of relief. Under the wax sheet, the dark grey areas bordering the gaps and a few dark grey islands scattered on the ground are camouflaged by light grey retouching (fig. 24).

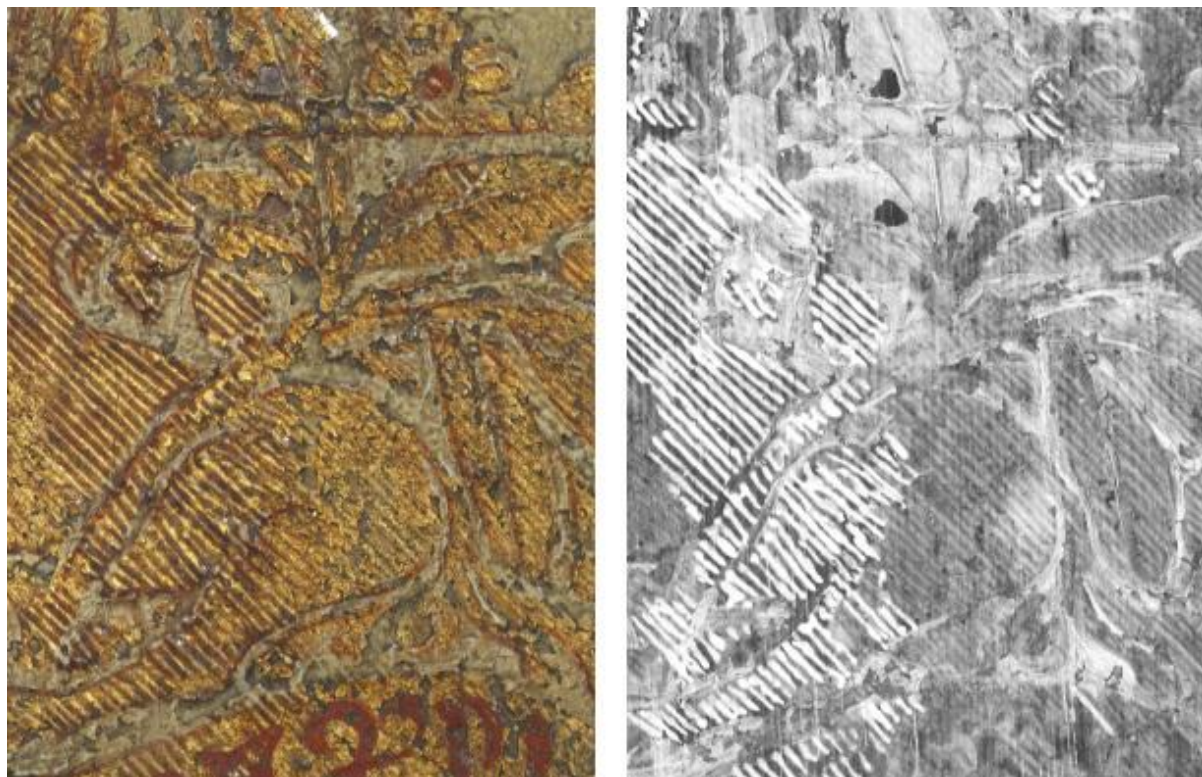


fig. 24: Mary's cloth of honour, macrophotograph and X-radiograph (fig. 2, sheet 7): body of the unicorn and tree. The restorations on the left contrast with the original damaged areas on the right.

At the bottom of Mary's cloth of honour, the brocade has been left dark, covered with old varnish. The X-radiograph shows, however, that the original brocade is still present. Taken as a whole, Mary's cloth of honour is either incomplete and flattened (the entire side to Mary's left and the upper part to her right), or very dirty (the bottom to her right).

On John the Baptist's side, the sheet in the upper left corner is damaged and overpainted (fig. 25). The relief of most of the other sheets is well preserved (fig. 2: sheets 2, 3, 5 and 6). On the other hand, the polychromy has practically disappeared leaving the wax bare. On the right, sheet 6 shows a little wear and heavy overpainting, but the wax sheet is well preserved (fig. 26). John the Baptist's cloth of honour seems to have escaped the heat undergone by Mary's cloth of honour.



fig. 25: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, detail (fig. 2, sheet 1). To the left of the Saint's raised hand overpainting covers the almost entire surface.



fig. 26: John the Baptist's cloth of honour, details of his left shoulder. The gilded overpaintings allow the hatched wax background to show through.

The origin of the degradation partly lies in the centuries-old ignorance of the heterogeneous and sophisticated technique of 'applied brocade'. The superimposed materials were sensitive to different restoration methods. Interventions on one level sometimes resulted in damage on another level. Restorers seem to have interrupted their work in the face of unexpected results. The damage differs from one place to another.

The pendant on damaged background — We see four red tassels hanging from the green cloth that protects the manuscript in Mary's hands (fig. 27). A pendant is suspended from each of the two upper tassels. The left-hand pendant is original and can be seen as a monogram for Mary (or even for *Ave Maria*) (fig. 28). The X-radiograph shows that the tassel on the right and its pendant are painted on a badly damaged background and are therefore not original (fig. 29). This pendant represents a letter A (and an inverted P?) that could be the signature of a restorer. Copyists Michel Coxcie in 1555 and Carl Schultz in 1826 copied the red tassels, but without attaching any pendant to the right-hand tassel. The restoration of the tassel and its pendant is illustrated in Max J. Friedländer (1920-1921) and dates probably back to the nineteenth century.



fig. 27: Green fabric with dangling tassels. Left: macrophotograph, right: X-radiograph. The X-radiograph attests to the degraded condition of the brocade. The old hatching in the sheet is hardly recognizable. The very white hatching corresponds to retouching. In the banner, we still recognize the inscription. The right-hand tassel is painted on a degraded area of the brocade.

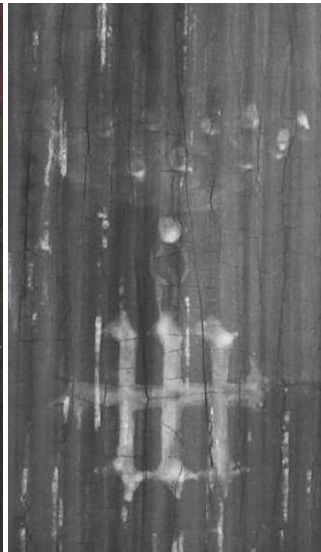
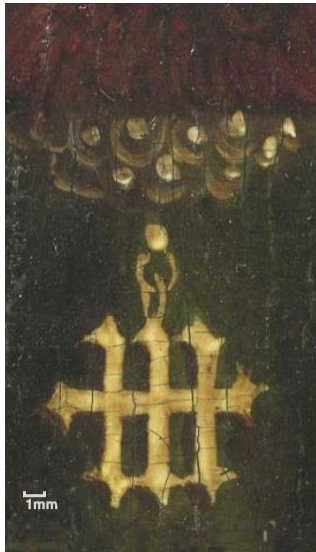


fig. 28: Detail of the pendant in front of Mary's garment, macrophotograph and X-radiograph. Original pendant under a tassel.

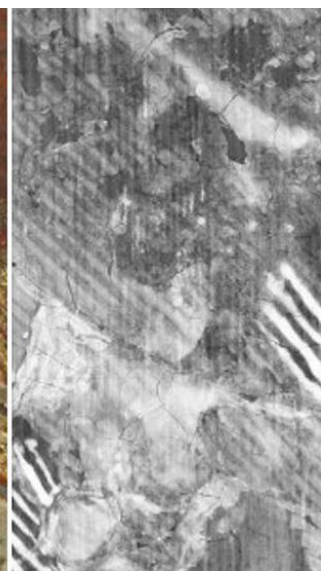


fig. 29: Mary's cloth of honour, detail of the pendant under a tassel with the letters A and an inverted P (?). Left: macrophotograph. Right: X-radiograph. The X-radiograph shows a strong degradation of the original layer under the pendant. The old hatching has practically disappeared. The very white hatching is retouching. The motif of the tassel and the pendant cover a damaged area and they are therefore not original (19th century?).

ICONOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS

Perspective and hierarchy — We recognize in the altarpiece certain pictorial conventions, having seen them in other Flemish Primitives. We interpret them by analogy. A part of this message-carrying pictorial language is well known, for example in the use of colours. Among less well-known pictorial conventions is the use of perspective.

It has often been said that the Flemish Primitives had no knowledge of geometric perspective, unlike the Italians who mastered it at the same time. Recently, the use of perspective by Jan Van Eyck has been meticulously described.³⁴ We believe that for many Flemish Primitives, perspective is significant. It serves to direct the eye towards the object of devotion, or organizes the hierarchy of characters and spaces, or instructs on the correct procedure to follow in opening a diptych or polyptych, allowing the user to approach the story in the correct order. For example, for diptychs: some open from left to right, others from right to left (fig. 30). The perspective was guiding the user.

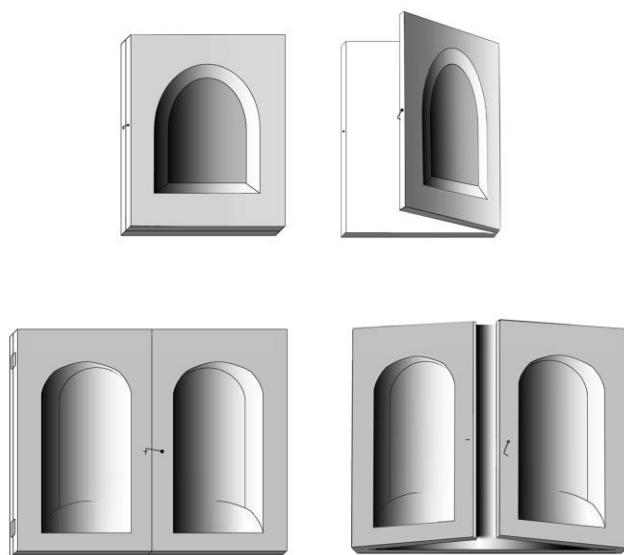


fig. 30: The perspective of a diptych niche is frontal and the lateral nature of the lighting is emphasized. The diptych is opened taking in the hand the shadowed size of the niche. The niches of a triptych are illuminated by a single light source; the perspective of each niche is oblique, as if the wings were ajar.

In the Ghent Altarpiece the variety of open spaces or closed niches, seen frontally or in oblique perspective, contribute to the pictorial language. The story takes place in *crescendo* in the hierarchically ordered terrestrial and celestial, temporal and timeless spaces, with a link between the two. Even the polychromy of the frames participates in the *crescendo*: the frames of the closed altarpiece have discreet colours. When open, the gilding shines with all its brilliance.

The two marble statues of the two saints John on plinths evoke their position in the church. They invite us to open the lower altarpiece to begin our journey through the story (fig. 31). The invitation is literal, explicit. The perspective of their niches is that of shutters already ajar, with oblique vaults to the left and to the right. The lowered vaults underline the saints' belonging to the low altarpiece. The perspective of the plinths is also oblique: one side section (the one adjoining the central uprights of the frames) being wider than the other. Even more explicit: the head of each Saint John tilts to the appropriate direction of the opening.



fig. 31: Jan Van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, the patron saints of the church, formerly Saint John's church. The perspective is as if the wings were ajar. The vaults are placed obliquely, the plinths each have one wider lateral face, located towards the centre of the frames. The two saint John's point with their heads towards the desired direction of the opening.

Beside them, Joos Vijd and Isabella Borluut are kneeling in spaces that respond to each other identically, their space is one: same oblique tiling, same angle of the walls behind them underlined by spiders' webs (symbols of the transience of life)³⁵, same space open towards the top: allowing Vijd to lift up his eyes towards the upper altarpiece.

The oblique perspective to the left and to the right on closed wings, inviting opening, is found in other Flemish Primitives. The closed wings of the *Jan Floreins Triptych* by Memling, 1479, presents at first sight a frontal perspective. Looking more closely we see that the columns painted against the frames are not symmetrical. We see them as if the wings were ajar (fig. 32).



fig. 32: The architectural items on the closed wings are painted in perspective, on oblique planes, as if the shutters were ajar. Hans Memling, *Jan Floreins Triptych*, 1479. Bruges, Groeninge Museum.

A similar use of perspective has been described in other works by Jan Van Eyck³⁶ (fig. 33), for example in the *Triptych of the Virgin and Child*, Dresden, 1437, where the perspective of the plinths and the space of the closed wings is that of slightly open wings, inviting opening. Perspective can guide the viewer's devotion. Inside the diptychs of the *Madrid Annunciation* and that of *Virgin with Saint John the Baptist* of the Louvre, both by Jan Van Eyck, the perspective of the bases of the statues is identical on each wing, but each time it is slightly lateral (we see the plinths as if they were a little to our left). It is Mary, the priority subject of our devotion, in front of whom we must stand. These are all minimal details but loaded with meaning.



fig. 33:

a. Jan Van Eyck, *The Dresden Triptych*, 1437, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, closed wings 33.1 x 27 cm with the original frame. The perspective is presented as if the shutters were slightly open. The side walls of the niches are in oblique planes. Each statue is seen on a base. The viewer sees four sides of the base, with one additional very small side, foreshortened, located in either side of the central uprights of the frame.

b. Jan Van Eyck, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado: open *Annunciation Diptych*, each element 38.8 x 23.4 cm with original frame. The perspective is unified but not quite centred. One very small side, foreshortened, is located to the right of both bases. We are invited to stand right and privilege the contemplation of Mary.

c. Jan Van Eyck (follower), the Paris Louvre open *Diptych of the Virgin and Child and John the Baptist*, c. 1440, each element 38.3 x 23.5 cm. Same instruction as in the Madrid diptych to focus the attention on Mary.

The receding lines of tiling can have hierarchical significance. The characters of the upper register of the Ghent Altarpiece when open are placed on varied tilings, with variously directed vanishing lines (fig. 34). If we extend these lines so that they converge on the horizon, the characters are placed at their correct hierarchical heights. In the painting *The Fountain of Life* conserved at the Prado in Madrid, dating from around 1445-50, the anonymous follower clearly understood Van Eyck's intended hierarchy and placed the characters on various levels of platforms (fig. 35).



fig. 34: The discontinuity of the perspective from one panel to another is an invitation to read a hierarchy in the figures. The unified beam created in the viewers' mind by the extended perspective lines places the figures in the desired hierarchy.



fig. 35: After Jan Van Eyck, *The Fountain of Life*, c. 1445-1450, 18 x 119 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

A description of the *Tableau vivant* (*toog*) of 1458 as part of the Joyous Entry of Reconciliation of Duke Philip the Good into Ghent describes a similar arrangement of the figures on a three-storey platform. In general, a hierarchy is also expressed by means other than perspective: a more honourable position at Christ's right hand, more or less elevated in space, on a plinth... The figure's size can also be revealing. The hierarchy of spaces, in the Ghent Altarpiece, is also defined by the golden arcades, the sky, the cloths of honour, the open or closed niches....

In the central panel with Christ, the brocade sheets have a staggered (*échelonné*) pattern, while those of Mary and John are aligned in straight rows. The arrangement of the sheets has a meaning. The sheets behind Mary and John demarcate a continuous sacred space. On the contrary, the staggered placing of the sheets behind Christ (one sheet in two is incomplete, being cut at the top) suggests that the motif is intended to continue indefinitely.

Light and shadow — The light in the altarpiece comes from the top right of the Vijd Chapel window, except for the city behind the Annunciation, lit differently as Peter Schmidt noticed.³⁷ Exceptionally, Jan Van Eyck painted on certain panels (of Adam and Eve, and those of the Annunciation) the shadow cast by the frame. Painting the shadow of the frame is in itself curious. And as the artist does not do it systematically everywhere, we are tempted to look for a particular meaning where he does. In the Annunciation, an oblique shadow projected on the ground by each upright of the frame unites the space when the altarpiece is closed (fig. 36).

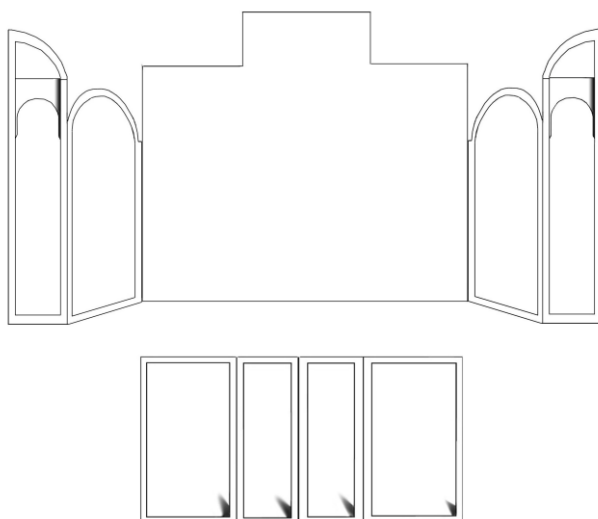


fig. 36: The shadows of the right upright of the frames of Adam and Eve and the shadows of the uprights of the frames of the Annunciation.

The architecture above Adam and Eve receives a glancing light, which projects a shadow against the straight uprights of the frames, similarly positioned for the two wings, as if these two wings were positioned in the same plane perpendicular to the window. It is an artifice, an instruction to present our ancestors in a different plane than the angels.

On the panels with the angels, Cecilia's seat and the organ cast shadows at an angle that indicates that they appear to be standing, not perpendicular but obliquely to the window. An incomplete opening of the altarpiece was imposed by the narrowness of the Vijd chapel.³⁸

The sacred space — The opened upper register thus restores the hierarchical position in a spatial sense as indicated by the perspective lines of the tiled floors. The three central panels, the *Deesis*, form, as it were, the back wall of a chapel or church (more about this later). Both panels with the angels open at a slight angle to the centre, giving the impression of side aisles. Adam and Eve are parallel to the central panels and perpendicular to the window. They are more or less on the outer edge of the sacred space proper.

A striking parallel with this opening of the altarpiece can be found in the (later) Capella de' Medici in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence (ca. 1457?) (fig. 37).



fig. 37: Capella de' Medici in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi in Florence (c. 1457?).

In the sacred part with a panel of the Nativity by Filippo Lippi, Benozzo Gozzoli has also painted the angels on the side walls where they form singing and music-making choirs. Moreover, on both walls on either side of the sacred part and parallel to the rear he painted bucolic scenes, albeit of a more classic character. These include shepherds of the same three ages as those of the three kings, along with the ox, donkey and a writing figure, possibly the evangelist Luke. Here too we have a succession of 'paradisiacal' (outside the sacred space) - singing angels (side walls) - the redeeming birth (back wall). As we will see, Jan's central panels in the upper register are also dedicated to Christmas and thus the Nativity. In addition, the Lamb of the Apocalypse is located in the Medici Chapel above the door that gives access to the chapel (fig. 38). In this way the scheme has much in common in both artists' designs.



fig. 38: The Lamb of the Apocalypse in the Capella de' Medici in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi.

The niches in which Adam and Eve stand are of the same height as the panels of the angels. They themselves are disproportionately larger than the angels but smaller than the seated central figures. Since both panels with the angels are in the upper and thus heavenly register the question arises how this can be reconciled with the presence of Adam and Eve. Here it is important to note that these are the first parents *before* the fall. So they are still in the earthly paradise that may best be understood as the reflection of the heavenly glory on earth. The (earthly) enclosure of the niche is indeed opposed to the (heavenly) openness of the panels with the angels. At the same time, Adam and Eve stand in their niches in contrast to the three central sitting figures separated from the apses or niches behind them by the cloths of honour. By his outward movement, Adam as it were steps out of the earthly paradise. Which indeed his physical directedness towards Eve implies.

The panels with Adam and Eve illustrate the story of the fall and loss suffered by humankind. On the lectern at which the angels are singing, Michael's fight against the dragon is depicted in relief. Satan will avenge his defeat by bringing down the human race. Driven from paradise, man will lose his calling to be greater than the angels (which explains the disproportion towards the angels) and jealousy and violence will set in, as the much smaller figures of Cain and Abel above their parents suggest.

Redemption — The sacred space in the three central panels has nothing to do with this world of fall, violence, pride and jealousy, which is directly and indirectly evoked in the side panels of the opened upper register. Here the reverse movement takes place, that of Redemption. John has a bible on his knees, opened to a passage from Isaiah, the first word of which is clearly visible: *Consolamini*, a bible passage read on Christmas night (Isaiah 40.1). *Consolamini, consolamini, populus meus, dicit Deus vester* [Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God].³⁹ It is an announcement of the Salvation that Christ brings, a passage that John recognizes as applying to himself as the 'voice crying in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3 / Matthew 3:3). By emphatically pointing to the central figure, John indicates that in the Divinity we can recognize the Son, the redeeming Word, who puts an end to the spiral of the Fall as it has been set in motion on the side panels.⁴⁰

Mary on the other side of the central panel is the mirror image to John in several respects. Both are seated against the same cloth of honour that also connects them in the same sacred space. While John looks up and points to Christ on the central panel, Mary looks down at the book she is holding in her hands. And while John holds his book lying on his knees unprotected and almost casually, Mary holds hers up in a cloth. This indicates that it is a more sacred object, and she is therefore reading in a gospel book. While with John the Old Testament has completed its task (Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled), the gospel Mary reads remains topical.

It is more difficult to determine which text she has in front of her than with John. Clearly visible is the large initial M, which does not seem to indicate the beginning of a chapter but rather of a paragraph. It is less prominently decorated than the opening word by John, which also indicates the opening of the reading. Considering that Mary is holding the book and that it is a Gospel text, it seems plausible to assume that she has the *Magnificat* in front of her. This also corresponds liturgically with the period before and after Christmas and the realization of the Incarnation. That Mary would be reading the psalms, as supposed by Luc Dequeker,⁴¹ seems unlikely for both of these reasons.

The fact that Mary does not look up to the central figure also fits within this context. The Gospel expresses the deeds of the Word of God made flesh. She herself is the gate through which this Incarnation could come about. Where John is concerned with the physical reality and deeds of the human being Jesus Christ, in Mary it is above all the Word that has been formed into a human being in her and from her flesh and blood. Theologically, the weight of Mary in the central triptych is clearly heavier than that of John, as is also evident from the crown on her head. This takes over the red and white of the gemstones from the crown at the feet of Christ, but then in the rose and lily, the flowers of love, martyrdom and purity.⁴²

Church and heaven — As already mentioned, with the three characters on the central panels, the cloth of honour does not continue above their heads into a *cielo*. In place of these, gilded arcades can be seen in perspective with inscriptions referring to the figure on each panel. Mary and John the Baptist both sit under two-tier arcades, Christ under a three-tier arcade. They evoke, as it were, three niches in front of which the cloths of honour are stretched. The elaboration of the arches is strongly reminiscent of the copies of the lost triptych of the *Madonna of Ypres*, also known as the *Triptych of Nicolas van Maelbeke* (fig. 39). In particular, the silverpoint drawing of it conserved in Nürnberg shows round arches between the different bays that are articulated in a similar way.



fig. 39: Unknown artist, 15th century, *Maelbeke Madonna*, copy after a lost Jan Van Eyck painting, after 1438, Bruges Musea.

Unknown artist, 15th century, silverpoint drawing with the *Maelbeke Madonna*, Nürnberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum.

This gives the impression that the three central figures are each, as it were, in or against the apses of the three compartments of a basilica-shaped church, with the nave rising higher than the two aisles. This reinforces the sacred nature of the space in which the three figures are located, separating them from the other panels in the upper register. As indicated above, this separation is also reflected by the changing tile floor and the different perspective.

The panels with the angel choirs are of the same height as the arcades behind and above Mary and John. The total space in which they all find themselves must therefore be seen as heaven. That explains why the cloths of honour do not run higher to form a *cielo*. Since the five central panels are situated in heaven itself, there can be no heaven above the figures. They themselves are heaven, and the arcades do not border them upwards, but give shape to this idea of a heaven which is embodied in the three central figures.

TWO BROTHERS AND TWO ALTARPIECES

One or two altarpieces? Joos Vijd's commission — The inscription on the banderoles of the upper altarpiece sheds light on an old debate: how could a simple bourgeois from Ghent afford such an ambitious commission? Obviously, Lubrect could not have been in charge of a programme that included the date of his own death and a prayer for his own soul, neither could Vijd have commissioned that part of the Altarpiece from Lubrect. By his upwards gaze, Vijd seems to accept the extension of his initial probably modest commission. Was his support other than moral?

From 1950 onwards the two registers were united to form a single altarpiece. As early as 1965, then again in 1980, Elisabeth Dhanens proposed a scheme spacing the two registers apart.⁴³ Other art historians have also defended this duality.⁴⁴ Arguments in support of this hypothesis are drawn not only from the archives but also from the many different material characteristics of the two registers⁴⁵: the general design of the joinery, the joints adopted for the construction of the frame, the uneven distribution of the wings, the closing systems, the hinges, nuances in the profiles of the frames and in the execution of the polychromy on the reverse. The combination of the two registers in a single metal frame in 1950 was done for security reasons. Before that, there was a gap in between. This space was known since 1861-1865, when a montage was done with the newly acquired wings of the copy by Michel Coxcie. The reader is reminded that Van Eyck's wings had been sold in 1816, except for those with Adam and with Eve. How were the altarpieces displayed before 1861 or before the French Revolution? Little is known about this. In the 16th century, the archives speak of *twee stickx* ⁴⁶ [*twee stukken* = two pieces], terms which probably designate the two altarpieces. When the Revolutionary Commissioners came to dismantle the Ghent Altarpiece in 1794 in order to transport the central parts to Paris, they first took down the lower altarpiece, then the upper one, which suggests that the two registers were not linked to each other.⁴⁷ Later, in Paris, the panels were cut at the top to facilitate their reframing. Adding to this the earlier

amputation of the wings, which were sagging under their own weight at the end of the 16th century, we understand that the altarpiece's present 'skyline' has nothing original about it. The new presentation of the masterpiece in Saint Bavo's Cathedral reintroduces a gap between the two registers. This does justice to the historical truth: that of two altarpieces made one after the other, starting with the lower one, then the upper one. Independent rotation of the lower and upper wings is again possible. The complex content can be deployed in stages, respecting all the hierarchies desired by the artist.

Lubrect's part and Jan's part — Besides what the quatrain tells us in terms of signatures and date, it also conveys Jan's emotion at the death of his older brother by the hyperbole *Pict[or] [H]ubertus eeyck ♦ major quo nemo repertus [♦]*... "The painter Hubert Van Eyck, greater than whom no one has known"... This is of no help in specifying where Jan took over from his late brother. However, the date of Lubrect's death (1427) on the banderoles permits the attribution to Jan of the entire upper altarpiece. Lubrect started the Adoration altarpiece. Jan finished it and placed the altarpiece of the Double Intercession on top of it. The unity of these two altarpieces has never been obvious to the viewer, neither formally nor iconographically. This is due to the passage from one painter to another and the extension of the programme that Jan conceived after his brother's death. Jan can reasonably be credited with the formal design and pictorial execution of all wings in the closed altarpiece: the majestic representation of the figures, the unity of composition, and the adoption of the complex pictorial language mentioned above invite us to recognize his hand. It would then be in the low open altarpiece that the brothers succeeded each other. The passage from one artist to another inevitably had to be vertical in the places where Jan took over. In taking over, Jan was also able to change certain elements of the initial composition, perhaps in order to align them with his extension to the programme. This conclusion is in concordance with the recent discoveries by the restorers in the central panel of the open lower Altarpiece. They describe in detail spectacular discrepancies in the quality of some heads, as well as superposition of paint layers, which they convincingly attribute to the change of hands from Hubert to Jan.⁴⁸ Had Lubrect planned the wings? In the gilded frames of the lower wings adjacent to the central part there are traces of ample hinges. Long gone, those hinges have no equivalent in the upper altarpiece where the original hinges were small. The large hinges and iron fittings that existed on the Annunciation side, photographed in Berlin in the 19th century, have sometimes been considered original. They are very old (16th century?) but not original. They serve to reinforce a frame, the structure of which had been weakened by sawing the upper part of the

frame, altering the cohesion of the strong initial construction with tenon and mortise joints. Moreover a pivotal axis located on the outer front edges of an altarpiece frame is an anomaly, indicative of a repair to the frame.⁴⁹

In search of unity — The stones on the frames of the closed Altarpiece are represented by the artist by means of silver leaf covered with glaze and decorated with oblique notches, possibly evoking the grey stone of the choir of the Saint John's church (currently Saint Bavo's Cathedral) that presents similar oblique notches. Bart Fransen has observed an alternating arrangement of the joints between the stones, creating an ashlar masonry which establishes a link between the two registers. The author explains that the perfect fit cannot be accidental.⁵⁰ Further studies will certainly deepen our understanding of Jan's desire for the articulation between the two altarpieces.

The heavenly Intercessors appear to have successfully completed their Intercession, for the 'great multitude' (Apoc. 7: 9) as Luc Dequeker pointed out.⁵¹ We now know that they also interceded for †Lubrect, whose name we have successfully identified in the cloths of honour behind the two Intercessors.

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Wim Verbaal studied biology at Wageningen Agricultural College (NL) and then Classical Philology at Ghent University (B), where he defended in 2000 his thesis on writing strategies and the position of the reader in Bernard of Clairvaux. Since 2005 he has been professor of Latin language and literature at the University of Ghent. He chairs the Henri Pirenne Institute for Medieval Studies (Ghent), heads the Scientific Research Network *Literature without Borders* and is associated with the Centre for Medieval Studies (Odense/York) and the online journal *Interfaces*. He is a member of the scientific and editorial committees of Corpus Christianorum, Sacris Erudiri and Toronto Medieval Texts. His research includes poetics and its development in medieval

¹⁷ Wright, *Honour*, 181.

¹⁸ Bart Fransen, Susan Jones and Christina Currie, “Miroir du Prince, 1425-1510. La commande artistique des hauts dignitaires bourguignons. Jean Van Eyck, Rogier Van der Weyden, Claus de Werve...”, *Dossier de l’art*, n° 288, 22-25.

¹⁹ The many bestiaries written in the Middle Ages can be used to identify the animals and their Christological significance. The baseline text is the Latin *Physiologus* which goes back to a late antique version but has been continuously adapted and expanded. For the late Middle Ages, it is especially *Li bestiaires devins* by Guillaume le Clerc that appears to have been a decisive text. Written in the first decades of the 13th century it quickly met with great success that continued well into the 15th century. *Bestiari tardoantichi e medievali*, ed. Francesco Zambon, (Firenze-Milano: Bompiani, 2018), 1285-1529. For the hare, on the other hand, see Hrabanus Maurus († 856) in his *De rerum naturis*: Patrologia Latina vol. 111. col. 205.

See also Peter Schmidt, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, (ed. Sterck & De Vreese, Gorredijk, 2021):149.

²⁰ Zambon, *Bestiari*, 1370-1375.

²¹ Cottrell, “Unraveling”, 181.

²² Esther E. Van Duijn, “Gold-brocaded Velvets in Paintings by Jan van Eyck. Observations on Painting Techniques,” in *Van Eyck Studies*, 402-415.

²³ Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*. Wivine Wailliez, “Lampas, Velvet and Cloth of Gold,” in Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*, 145. Mojmir S. Frinta, “The Use of Wax for Appliqué Relief Brocade on Wooden Statuary,” in *Studies in Conservation*, 8, n° 4 (Nov. 1963): 136-149. Thomas Brachert, “Pressbrokat Applikationen, ein Hilfsmittel für die Stilkritik,” *Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft (Jahresbericht 1963)*: 37-47. Rolf E. Straub, “Tafel- und Tüchleinmalerei (Geprägte Brokatimitationen),” in Hermann Kühn, Heinz Roosen-Runge, Rolf E. Straub, and Manfred Koller, *Reclams Handbuch der künstlerischen Techniken*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun. GmbH & Co., 1988): 125-260. Christiane Schricker, *Die plastische Imitation von Brokatstoffen in der Fassmalerei* (München, 2002): 4-28. www.moebel-holzobjekte.de/documents/brokat.pdf The Liber illuministarum known as the Tegernsee Manuscript, ca. 1500, conserved at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, gives instructions for producing Pressbrokat. Pamela Betts and Glen Gates, “Dressed in Tin: Analysis of the Textiles in the Abduction of Helen Series,” in *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum*, 74, (2019). <https://journal.thewalters.org> Geelen, Het geperstbrokaat, in *Closertovaneyck: Rediscovering the Ghent Altarpiece* (<http://data.closertovaneyck.be/legacy>) Extras /Reports /Anne Van Grevenstein, *Conservatie en materieel onderzoek*, 2011: 55-58.

²⁴ Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*.

²⁵ Thomas Brachert, “Pressbrokat Applikationen,” *Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft (Jahresbericht 1963)*: 44-45.

²⁶ Straub “Tafel- und Tüchleinmalerei,” in Kühn et al., *Reclams Handbuch*, vol. 1, 178.

²⁷ Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*, 172.

²⁸ Geelen, “Het geperstbrokaat,” in *Closertovaneyck (legacy website)*, Extras /Reports /Anne Van Grevenstein, *Conservatie en materieel onderzoek...*(2011): 55-58. Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*, 64, 383-393.

L’Agneau Mystique au Laboratoire. Examen et Traitement, Paul Coremans dir., in *Les Primitifs Flamands. III. Contributions à l’étude des Primitifs Flamands* (Antwerp: 1953), plate XIII, the only sample removed from the brocade appears to be lost today. The elements identified are essentially translucent layers, lead white and drying oil, lead white with red (madder) and blue (azurite) grains, and lead white mixed with calcium carbonate.

²⁹ Straub, “Tafel- und Tüchleinmalerei”, 178. Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*, 13-16.

³⁰ Myriam Dewaide in Ingrid Geelen, “Het geperstbrokaat,” in *Closertovaneyck (legacy website)*, 55-59.

³¹ Frinta, “The use of wax”. Brachert, “Pressbrokat”, 37-47.

³² Serck-Dewaide, “Foreword,” in Geelen and Steyaert, *Imitation*.

³³ Max J. Friedländer (mit einer Einführung von), *Der Genter Altar der Brüder Van Eyck*, XVI Tafeln in Lichtdruck (Kurt Wolff Verlag, München, 1920-1921).

³⁴ Renzo Leonardi, “Jan van Eyck and his ‘Stereoscopic approach to Painting’ ”, in *Van Eyck Studies*, 326-348.

³⁵ Hrabanus Maurus, *De rerum natura*: Patrologia Latina, vol. 111, col. 236.

³⁶ Verougstraete, “Articulated works with instructions for use,” in Verougstraete, *Frames*, 157-186.

³⁷ Schmidt, *Adoration*, 51.

³⁸ J.R.J. Van Asperen de Boer, “A note on the original Disposition of the Ghent Altarpiece and the Beaune Polyptych,” in *Oud Holland* 117 (2004): 107-118. Luc Dequeker, “The Adoration of the Lamb. Philips the Good and Van Eyck’s Just Judges,” in *Van Eyck Studies*, 59.

³⁹ Schmidt, *Adoration*, 75-79 rightly points out the importance of the liturgical context for the interpretation of the polyptych.

⁴⁰ Schmidt, *Adoration*, 123-129.

⁴¹ Dequeker, "Philip the Good," in *Van Eyck Studies*, 55. Schmidt, *Adoration*, 154 suggests a breviary, that for the same reasons seems unlikely. The cloth in which she is holding the book suggests a liturgical and sacred object.

⁴² Mary is viewed as martyr for the pains she suffered for her son. Her martyrdom is based on Simeon's prophecy in Luke 2: 34-35 and connected with her love. For the Marian symbolism of the flowers see Schmidt, *Adoration*, 154-157.

⁴³ Dhanens, *Het retabel van het Lam Gods*. Dhanens, *Hubert and Jan van Eyck*.

⁴⁴ Verougstraete and Van Schoute, *Cadres*, 284. Hugo Van der Velden, "The Quatrain", 11.

⁴⁵ Verougstraete, "Le rapprochement progressif" in *Van Eyck Studies*, 157-179.

⁴⁶ Roger Marijnissen and Antoine De Schrijver wondered about the meaning of these words in *L'Agneau Mystique au Laboratoire*, ed. Coremans: 38. Churchwardens' accounts 1584-1585.

⁴⁷ *L'Agneau Mystique au Laboratoire* : 41. Arch. Nat. Paris Section Moderne, D3, 59, file 569, contemporary copy: *lesquels tableaux ont été descendus et encaissés pour être transportés à Lille....Représentant la dispute du St. Sacrement...Les trois panneaux supérieurs ne furent enlevés que le lendemain.*

⁴⁸ Griet Steyaert, Marie Postec, Jana Sanyova, Hélène Dubois et al., *The Ghent Altarpiece. Research and Conservation of the Interior: the Lower Register*. Contributions to the study of the Flemish Primitives, (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, 2021): 33-109.

⁴⁹ Verougstraete, *Frames*, 222.

⁵⁰ Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece. Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, dir. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo, Contributions to the study of the Flemish Primitives, (Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage, Brussels, 2020): 328-9.

⁵¹ Luc Dequeker, "The Adoration of the Lamb. Philip the Good and van Eyck's Just Judges," in *Van Eyck Studies*, 54-55.