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Composed for the Patrons: Selection, Complexity, and the Grammar of Symbolism in the Ghent Altarpiece

Viktoriia Fetisenko
vic.fetisenko@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Ghent Altarpiece — a marvelous artwork by the Van Eyck brothers, commissioned by the couple Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut for their private chapel. This study asks: How did the patrons' intentions influence the selection and complexity of the symbolism program in the altar in the context of their recurring private devotion and liturgy in the Vijd Chapel?

This paper draws on argumentation on the iconological method alongside technical restoration reports that document consistent changes in artwork: in particular, the replacement of rays with a halo, the modification of the empty space in front of the Lamb into the Fountain of Life. Combined with the altarpiece's family allusions and revisions made during the painting process, these changes are read as a layered hierarchy of accessibility, a model this paper introduces, "Three Levels of Accessibility" (visual, biographical, and textual) whose fit with the private chapel is consistent with the patrons' involvement in shaping the iconographic program.

The study also analyzes and raises the hypothesis of a hidden portrait of Duke Philip the Good among one of the horsemen in *Just Judges.* This reading is treated as a secondary line of evidence based on reading the Cumaean Sibyl on the altar's outer side of the wings as a hidden portrait of the duke's wife, Isabella of Portugal. If correct, it would be a further example of patron involvement, that goes beyond family symbolism and also functions as a diplomatic tool.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that the complexity of the altar's symbolism reflects the combination of the chapel's practical liturgical function and the patrons' involvement. Building on the Three Levels of Accessibility model introduced above, the study proposes why some symbols are invisible to the naked eye of an ordinary viewer.

INTRODUCTION

A painting commissioned by a wealthy couple for their own private chapel raises an obvious question: Why did two people who had no heirs invest so much money in a single work of art, and what did they hope to gain from it? This paper argues that Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut, the patrons of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, did not simply pay for an existing theological concept but also actively influenced the selection and complexity of its symbolism, down to details that seem intended for anyone but themselves.

The altarpiece was designed to please a very specific audience: Not a casual visitor, but two people who would return to it in prayer for the rest of their lives. The private setting of the Vijd Chapel likely shaped a hierarchy of meaning for its viewers. This paper explores three levels of accessibility, and argues that the link between the artwork and its location reveals what motivated patrons.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* is a large-scale polyptych consisting of twenty-four painted panels mounted on twelve double-sided oak wings (Fig. 1). This masterpiece was completed in 1432 for the Vijd family chapel at St. John's Church in Ghent, now St. Bavo's Cathedral. When closed, the altarpiece shows twelve outer panels with the Annunciation and portraits of the donors. But opened, it shows a massive two-register composition of twelve inner panels, filled with more than two hundred figures. At the center of this ensemble is the Lamb of God on the altar, surrounded by a host of apostles, prophets, and righteous men. A Latin inscription on the frame states that the work was begun by Hubert van Eyck, referred to in the inscription as "the greatest who ever lived," and completed by his brother Jan, "second in art," at Joos Vijd's request, with 6 May 1432 given in the inscription.

Little is known about the lives of the van Eyck brothers. Jan van Eyck (d. 1441) served as court painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (d. 1467), from 1425 onward and is considered one of the key figures in the development of oil painting in the Netherlands; even less is known about Hubert, and it is precisely because of the lack of archival evidence about him that researchers still debate the exact division of labor between the brothers. The altarpiece was commissioned by the couple Joos Vijd (d. 1439), a wealthy Ghent merchant, and Elisabeth Borluut (d. 1443), for the chapel they built at their own expense on the south side of the church.[1] The childless couple had no direct heirs, and the altar seems to have served both as a means of liturgical intercession for the souls of the family and as a unique monument to their memory.[2]

The history of the work itself, following its completion in 1432, proved to be tumultuous. In the 16th century, some of the panels were nearly destroyed during iconoclastic riots. During the Napoleonic Wars, several panels were taken to Paris; after World War I, under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany returned to Belgium the panels that had previously been housed in a Berlin museum.[3] On the night of April 11, 1934, the lower left panel, *The Just Judges*, was stolen from the altar and has never been found. Today, a copy made by restorer Jef van der Veken between 1939-1945 hangs in its place.[4] During World War II, the altar was removed by the Nazis, first to Neuschwanstein Castle and later to a

[1]Dhanens, "De Vijd-Borluut Fundatie en het Lam Godsretabel, 1432–1797" (1976), 24–26.
[2]Ridderbos, Bernhard. "Art and Compensation: Joos Vijd and the Programme of the Ghent Altarpiece." In Van Eyck Studies (Paris-Leuven-Bristol: Peeters, 2017, 135–150)
[3]Noah Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World's Most Coveted Masterpiece* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 37–40, 56–62, 88–92.
[4]Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*, on the 1934 theft of the Just Judges panel and Van der Veken's 1939–1945 replacement.

salt mine in Altaussee, from where it was rescued by the Allies in 1945 and later restored under Paul Coremans.[5]

The *Ghent Altarpiece* remains one of the most thoroughly studied works of European painting. Still, for decades, traditional art historical methods reached their limits regarding the piece's complex layers and authorship. Only with the advent of modern technologies did a true breakthrough become possible, allowing scientists, for the first time, to remove centuries of historical overpainting without touching the surface. The technical restoration carried out between 2012-2020 by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage of Belgium (KIK-IRPA) significantly clarified the attribution of individual sections and revealed details invisible to the naked eye.

Yet, scholars still debate on how to read these conclusions. While most studies view the altar's symbolism as either a general theological concept or as a familial allegory, but rarely analyze how exactly these two ideas overlap in the context of the donors' private prayer practice, and it is precisely this gap that my research addresses. It aims to connect these two strands through the figure of the viewer who returns to this piece in prayer. Instead of treating the viewer as a passive observer, this approach highlights how their physical presence inside the cramped liturgical space shapes what they can see. Which is also important for understanding the patrons themselves, Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut. The proposed three-level model outlines what a viewer can and cannot perceive while in the chapel.

This specific long-standing, still-unfinished history of research is what provides the context in which the role of Vijd and Borluut's patronage in shaping the altar's symbolism is examined below.

METHODS

This approach is based on Michael Baxandall's thesis that a 15th-century painting is a "deposit of a social relationship" between the patron and the artist. That is, the finished piece can be viewed, in part, as evidence of the terms of this relationship.[6] This paper draws on three types of evidence: archival documents, technical restoration reports, and iconographic analysis of the whole symbolic composition, as well as the separation of decisions made by the patrons, such as the painting's size, its orientation in the chapel, and the order of the liturgy, since only they had this knowledge in advance and it was created specifically for their private chapel. Other decisions, such as basic canonical figures and biblical scenes, were made in coordination with a theological advisor, as was common at the time, in accordance with Ridderbos's own remark that the program was "composed with the help of one or more theological advisors."[7] While style and technical choices are generally attributed to Jan van Eyck. Because archival records remain limited, I do not view decisions that fit into a single category as proof of patron influence. Rather, when a choice coordinates several at once, and not to a single one, this study reads it as a

[5]Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, ed. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020), 308–43.
[6]Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1.
[7]Ridderbos, Bernhard "The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage," Oud Holland 135, no. 1 (2022): 8.

consistent sign of patron's active involvement. Consequently, I exclude features that stem purely from convention or the advisor's program. Here I refuse to count them alone as evidence of patron influence.

To test this approach, I will use a better-documented example of patron influence from the same century. I compare the *Ghent Altarpiece* with the *Portinari Altarpiece*, which Florentine banker Tommaso Portinari ordered in the early 1470s to intending it for his family chapel at Sant' Egidio in Florence Unlike in the case of the Vijd chapel, the Portinari commission of Masses has an extensive documentary record: the document that endowed the Masses states were commissioned by Portinari for "the love of God and for the his soul" soon after the birth of his first son, reflecting a banker's concern for his soul.[8] While in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece* we arrive at conclusions based on the evidence of compositional changes and re-drawing, here we see what a patron's motives looks like when it is better documented: this comparison suggests that the kind of patron involvement argued for here is not unusual for the period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Few works within the canon of Early Netherlandish art have attracted as much historiographical attention as this masterpiece, matching its own scale and grandeur.[9] Yet, amid this immense body of literature, the specific question of why a wealthy figure like Joos Vijd (d. 1439) and his wife, Elisabeth Borluut (d. 1443), commissioned a work whose staggering cost and complex theological program represented such unprecedented ambition has long been overshadowed by debates regarding Eyckian authorship and theological iconography. In this review, I focus on three aspects: How scholars reconstruct Vijd and Borluut and their social status; how researchers interpret the role of Vijd's Chapel (dedicated to Saint John the Baptist) in regular private Mass; and to what extent the altar program reflects the donors' own intentions and preferences.

The exhibition catalog *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* treats this altarpiece primarily as a milestone in Van Eyck's technical evolution, rather than as a commission influenced by its patrons' biographies.[10] Maryan Ainsworth situates it within a broader 15th-century model where the viewer actively interprets the painting, but without linking this model specifically to patronage.[11] Andrew Brown and Graeme Small provide the political context, courtly and urban ceremonies, which helps understand the era but leaves the altarpiece itself unaddressed.[12]

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[8]Diane Wolfthal, "Florentine Bankers, Flemish Friars, and the Patronage of the Portinari Altarpiece," in Cultural Exchange between the Low Countries and Italy (1400–1600), ed. Ingrid Alexander-Skipnes (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 1–21.
[9]Julien Chapuis, "Early Netherlandish Painting: Shifting Perspectives," *in From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed. Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 3–22.
[10]Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, eds., *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998).
[11]Maryan W. Ainsworth, "Religious Painting from about 1420 to 1500" in *From Van Eyck to Bruegel*, ed. Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 79–85.
[12]Andrew Brown and Graeme Small, *Court and Civic Society in the Burgundian Low Countries,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Some art historians, such as Erwin Panofsky, even suggested that Vijd was not the original commissioner of the entire ensemble, and that several panels were first conceived as independent works and only later combined into a single program.[13] I argue that the program was planned as a cohesive whole from the outset and reflects the family's social status. What remains to be clarified, however, is why the family sought to express that status through such a commission.

Why Joos Vijd commissioned the *Ghent Altarpiece* is still debated, and is closely tied to his family history and social status. Such commissions are rarely seen by current scholars as mere expressions of piety. In fact, they treat them as intentional strategies for social positioning and reputation rehabilitation. The altarpiece's program is argued to be coherent and consistent, and is fundamentally based on Vijd's personal history as the third son in his family.[14] His father, Clais Vijd (d. 1404), held the high office of castellan of the Land of Beveren, but in 1390 he was accused of fraud and dismissed by Duke Philip the Bold, damaging the family's social status. Joos himself never served at the duke's court, and his political career in Ghent developed slowly. He was elected alderman, a member of the city's municipal council and judiciary (traditionally known as a schepen), five times between 1395 and 1433, mostly to minor seats, before finally reaching the highest rank on the council, first seat of the Keure, in 1433.

To fully understand this social dynamic, it is essential to consider Joos Vijd's marriage to Elisabeth Borluut. Elisabeth came from one of Ghent's most influential patrician families and had deep political and economic roots stretching back for centuries. Their late fourteenth-century alliance consolidated Vijd's position within the local elite. Alongside their wealth and high social position, it is notable that their marriage remained childless. Since his sisters, Elisabeth and Mabelie, had already been provided for through separate marital alliances, Joos became the only male heir to the main family estate after his brothers died. Having no direct descendants of his own, he bore the entire weight of the family legacy. Ridderbos argues that this combination, his father's humiliation, his modest public role, and his lack of heirs, caused social identity insecurities that the commission of such an ambitious work was meant to compensate for.[15]

Buylaert and Verroken demonstrate that the couple did not belong to the typical urban patriciate, as long assumed, but represented the growing convergence of city elite and the nobility.[16] The image of Vijd as a typical Ghent patrician is a relatively late construct, born of the nineteenth-century narratives regarding the transition from feudalism to bourgeois capitalism. In fact, as early as 1383, Vijd already held a fief, and his father, despite his disgrace, died one of the wealthiest men in Flanders.[17] In this interpretation, the

[13]Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 205–257.
[14]Ridderbos, "Art and Compensation," 137.
[15]Ridderbos, "Art and Compensation," 139–142.
[16]Frederik Buylaert and Erik Verroken, "Een Adellijk Altaarstuk: De Sociaal-Historische Context van het Lam Gods," in *Het Lam Gods — Van Eyck: Kunst, Geschiedenis, Wetenschap en Religie*, ed. Danny Praet and Maximiliaan P. J. Martens (Veurne: Hannibal, 2019), 52–62.
[17]Frederik Buylaert and Erik Verroken, "Een Adellijk Altaarstuk: De Sociaal-Historische Context van het Lam Gods," in Het Lam Gods — Van Eyck: Kunst, Geschiedenis, Wetenschap en Religie, ed. Danny Praet and Maximiliaan P. J. Martens (Veurne: Hannibal, 2019), 63–64.

altar is not compensation for weakness, but a statement of the noble family's importance, made at the critical moment when the family line was about to die out for lack of heirs to continue the dynasty.

While these scholars use the same archival sources yet reach different conclusions about Vijd's motives, I suggest that this commission was a deliberate attempt to connect two realities through Jan van Eyck, the court painter to Philip the Good. In this way, Vijd created a shared cultural monument combining Burgundian court prestige with Ghent's civic pride, a diplomatic tool to ease political tensions while strengthening his own standing. Most importantly, as a childless patron who faces the prospect of his dynasty dying out, the ensemble allowed Vijd to combine public political ambitions with an intimate, urgent need for both the preservation of his lineage and spiritual salvation. Penny Howell Jolly offers a more overtly political account, connecting the altarpiece's unveiling on 6 May 1432 to the baptism of the infant son of Duke Philip the Good and Isabella of Portugal, in the same church. She proposes that the Cumaean Sibyl on the closed wings is a disguised portrait of Isabella herself, based on a surviving preparatory drawing.[18] That made Vijd's commission also a diplomatic gesture in the context of Ghent's reconciliation with its Burgundian rulers. Jesse Hurlbut adds a civic aspect, pointing out that the representation of John the Baptist presenting the Lamb actually duplicates the official seal of Ghent city council, which both the Vijd and Borluut families were connected to, and notes that the subject of the altarpiece was reenacted as a "living tableau" during Philip the Good's ceremonial entry into Ghent in 1458.[19] There are, however, doubts about this association with the 1432 baptism based on technical evidence that the fountain in the lower section was added later; it is argued that a structure made for regular religious use doesn't fit well with a temporary dynastic celebration.[20]

Beyond these major celebrations, the altarpiece served as an element of private devotional practice for the patrons, Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut, who established their own chapel for Mass, which they hoped would provide them with spiritual salvation. Elisabeth Dhanens showed that the couple funded the south side chapel of St. John's Church so that continual prayers could be held for both themselves and their ancestors (Fig. 2). Her analysis of the founding charter, dated May 13, 1435, states that those Masses were to take place within this space on a regular basis, creating this space into a permanent location for liturgical prayer.[21] Since this charter appeared three years after the altarpiece was unveiled in 1432, the liturgical order of the chapel's earliest period is undocumented. Also, winged altarpieces of this type were usually closed on ordinary days and opened only on Sundays and feast days.[22] This is why I view the altarpiece's display as a variable rather than a constant, and below I analyze what this means for the

[18]Penny Howell Jolly, "More on the Van Eyck Question: Philip the Good of Burgundy, Isabelle of Portugal, and the Ghent Altarpiece," Oud Holland 101, no. 4 (1987): 237–240.
[19] Jesse D. Hurlbut, "*The Mystic Lamb of Ghent: Alderman's Seal, Altarpiece, and Tableau Vivant*" in Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power, ed. Susan Solway (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 379–380, 385–386.
[20]Bernhard Ridderbos, "*The Ghent Altarpiece: Iconography and Patronage,*" Oud Holland 135, no. 1 (2022): 12–14
[21]Elisabeth Dhanens, "De Vijd-Borluut Fundatie en het Lam Godsretabel, 1432–1797," Academia Analecta: Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Schone Kunsten 38, no. 2 (Brussels: Royal Flemish Academy for Science and the Arts, 1976), 51–64.
[22]Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, ed. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020)

patrons. Ridderbos and, in more technical detail, Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny trace how the composition responded to this function. The unusual placement of the Lamb high in the composition created an empty space for the priest during Mass, allowing him to visually participate in the heavenly liturgy (Fig. 3). This practice was later abandoned and the space filled instead with a fountain explaining the panel's unity and the connection between the Lamb and John the Baptist (Fig. 4).[23] While the priest had obscured this fountain during the service, his actual presence at the altar served as an earthly, living extension of the painted Fountain of Living Water, symbolizing the flow of divine grace. When the wings were open, once the liturgy was over, the fountain became visible to the donors, allowing them to engage in their own private devotions before it. The composition's complexity, the Lamb's placement, and the fountain, which symbolically connects the heavenly and earthly liturgies, all had their purpose, for they were dictated by the altar's liturgical function for the patrons' private Mass.[24]

This connection to the patrons runs so deep that scholars argue that several groups of saints in the Adoration of the Lamb panel are hidden allusions to the Vijd family. Elisabeth Dhanens first proposed that these groups of saints in the Adoration of the Lamb correspond to specific Vijd relatives, a reading others have since developed.[25] Ridderbos notes that the Just Judges correspond to Vijd's position as an alderman, since aldermen administered justice (Fig. 5).[26] The Knights of Christ refer to his knighted brothers, Clais the Younger and Christoffel. The Hermits symbolize his father, Clais Vijd, a benefactor of the Carthusian monastery in Rooigem, where he was buried. The Pilgrims, led by Saint Christopher, allude directly to Christoffel, matching his name; his death left Joos as the family's sole heir (Fig. 6).

An article by M. A. Rogov on Saint Christopher's iconography adds another detail. Examining paintings from the same era, he analyzes an Annunciation attributed to Robert Campin (or his circle), where macro photography identified an inconspicuous figure of the saint measuring less than a square centimeter in the scene of the Annunciation (Fig. 7).[27] This supports the idea that artists at the time used family symbolism on purpose, and suggests Saint Christopher's prominent appearance in the *Ghent Altarpiece* is not accidental but a deliberate, scaled-up use of a widespread family code tailored to Joos Vijd, directly tied to the altarpiece's meditative aspect, since such hidden details were intended for donors who understood the message of the figures referring to them.

The donors' portraits on the outer wings also follow this logic (Fig. 8). Joos appears alongside John the Baptist, the parish's patron saint, and Elisabeth alongside John the Evangelist, author of the Book of Revelation, whose text underlies the altar's interior iconography. Buylaert and Verroken point out that this

[23] Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior, ed. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020), 317–318.
[24] Ridderbos, "Art and Compensation," 141–142.
[25] Elisabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 100–106
[26] Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 15, drawing on Elisabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).
[27] Mikhail A. Rogov, "The Ghent Altarpiece and the Legend of Saint Christopher," Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art 13 (2023): 159–168.

pairing accentuates the couple's unity as joint patrons, even though they were later buried apart: Vijd, presumably, in a Carthusian monastery, and Borluut in an Augustinian convent linked to her family.[28]

Panofsky's argument that *The Just Judges* and *Pilgrims* lack canonical hagiographic status and therefore require some other explanation only demonstrates that these groups are atypical.[29] It does not prove that they are necessarily family allegories. Although no source that has been evaluated provides documentation or an archive that identifies these figures as portraits of the Vijd family.[30] The entire hypothesis, however persuasive, rests on biographical coincidence and compositional logic. Yet the lack of direct archival evidence doesn't invalidate this interpretation: In Early Netherlandish art, many allegorical representations were coded messages meant exclusively for patrons, and the clear parallels between the Vijd lineage's tragic history and the specific iconographic changes suggest that this is unlikely to be merely accidental. Therefore, the internal consistency of composition alone makes it reasonable to interpret family as being a central theme of the altarpiece. Boris Uspenskij's structural analysis provides a valuable perspective: He distinguishes between an "internal," heavenly orientation within the sacred scene and an "external" orientation tied to the actual viewer, situating the foreground groups, including the *Just Judges*, within this second, worldly zone.[31]

One further question scholars have sought to answer is whether Vijd and Borluut directed the program from the very beginning. Panofsky, and later Hugo van der Velden, suggest that the lower register was originally conceived as a separate work for the Ghent City Council.[32] Only after Hubert van Eyck's death (d. 1426), Jan van Eyck's older brother and the initial master of the polyptych, in this view, did Joos Vijd purchase the unfinished panels and commission Jan to combine them into his own altarpiece, adding further panels such as Adam and Eve. This theory relies on an anonymous quatrain, carved directly onto the frame of the altarpiece, traditionally attributed to the painters themselves, which suggests that Jan was finishing his brother's work at Joos's request and expense, implying that Joos was not the original patron (Fig.9).[33] If this is the case, the donors had significantly less influence on the original design than is commonly believed. Ridderbos refutes this argument, citing Pascale Fraiture's dendrochronological analysis: The panels' wood comes from the same trees, indicating a single purchase of material for a single project from the outset.[34] Admittedly, the uniformity is not necessarily inconsistent with the possibility that Hubert was working on several commissions simultaneously using the same stock of planks. The Vijd family's deep involvement with the workshop also began well before the project reached

[28]Buylaert and Verroken, "Een Adellijk Altaarstuk," 58–59.
[29]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 15, discussing Erwin Panofsky.
[30]Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 209–210.
[31]Boris Uspenskij, "The Composition of the Ghent Altarpiece", 185, 191.
[32]Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 205–207; Hugo van der Velden, "The Quatrain of the Ghent Altarpiece," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 35, no. 3/4 (2011): 5–7
[33]Van der Velden, "The Quatrain of The Ghent Altarpiece," 5–39
[34]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 10, Pascale Fraiture, *Central Panels of the Ghent Altarpiece, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Ghent, St Bavo Cathedral: Report of Dendrochronological Analysis*, Brussels: Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), 2011.

completion, as Hubert van Eyck's tomb sat right inside the Vijd Chapel long before the work was finished, which proves the family was involved from the very start.[35]

I will argue that the artwork was conceived for Vijd as a cohesive whole from the outset, a view supported by the altarpiece's complex iconographical program and the Vijd family's socio-political ambitions, which together suggest that the donors shaped the project's conceptual framework from an early stage. Therefore, this paper argues that the *Ghent Altarpiece* operated as a structured visual strategy to secure the couple's spiritual salvation while codifying their family legacy and social status.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Three Levels of Accessibility in the Ghent Altarpiece

This section presents the model around which the paper is structured; in the following paragraphs, I will explain it and evaluate its relevance to the arguments I raise. The details of the altarpiece have a specific aim: they form a structured hierarchy of accessibility that can be visualized as three separate levels. This framework builds upon Panofsky's broader thesis on "hidden symbolism" in 15th-century Netherlandish painting: The symbolic meaning here is not openly proclaimed but is embedded in the realistic surface of the work in such a way that the viewer must discover it for themselves through prolonged contemplation.[36] The *Ghent Altarpiece* takes this principle to the extreme, extending it across three distinctly different levels of access that I propose to categorize as follows. The first level—the figures of the saints, the Lamb, and the heavenly liturgy, is accessible to all visitors to the chapel: It is designed to be understood at a glance and requires no prior knowledge. The second level—the family allusions in the groups of the Judges, Knights, Hermits, and Pilgrims, already discussed above, is accessible not visually but biographically: Only those familiar with the history of the Joos family can perceive it.[37] The third level exists not in the figures but in the text, and that is precisely why it is the most important for the argument of this work: Excerpts from the Book of Wisdom in the Virgin Mary's book, just like the inscription "Consolamini" in the Book of John the Baptist, both on the inner panels of the opened altarpiece, cannot be read with the naked eye by anyone standing in front of the altar, even though these quotations were chosen too thoughtfully to be considered devoid of deeper meaning.[38] As captured in recent macro-photography, the microscopic legibility of these passages underlines that their function lay in their presence rather than in being read by the viewer (Fig.10).

The third level is most important to this paper's argument, since it raises a question the first two levels do not address: If the text cannot be fully interpreted even by an attentive viewer, then why include it at all? This paradox calls into question the assumption that such subtle details are meant to directly reflect the

[35]Maximiliaan P. J. Martens, "The Creators: The Role of Hubert Van Eyck in the Ghent Altarpiece," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Art, History, Science and Religion*, ed. Danny Praet and Maximiliaan P. J. Martens (Veurne: Hannibal, 2020), 126–127,
[36]Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1:131–148.
[37]Dhanens, Elisabeth. Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece. New York: Viking Press, 1973
[38]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 30–31

patrons' own theological education. Instead, the patrons did not need to know the exact text of the "Book of Wisdom"; it was enough for them to know the text was present and to support the compositional principle whereby the chapel rewards repeated viewing rather than instant understanding. Thus, these hidden details are tied less to a one-time viewing of the painting than to the act of returning to the altar over many years, allowing its complexities to unfold over time.

This unfolding of meaning was directly connected to how the altarpiece was viewed depending on the day. On ordinary days, the closed altarpiece had a subdued color palette: the Saints John, executed in the "grisaille" technique and imitating sculpture, were framed by colored portraits of Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut—the only portraits of living people on the exterior at eye level. On Sundays and feast days, opening the work showed a colorful interior, with an exquisite color tone and a composition full of figures, including majestic figures of saints, which could impress the visitor. This pattern does not weaken the argument that patrons influenced the program, but it does alter what that argument can suggest: the program was designed for two types of viewing—frequent, which kept the patrons regularly in view, and more grand, which made the unveiling of the altar a special event. I view this as an argument in support of patron-oriented design. The third-level interpretation includes a testable claim: the presence of similar unreadable texts in works created without the patron's involvement would argue against this reading. Yet Van Eyck's mastery can explain how such detailed texts were created; however, the argument concerns why they were included in this particular chapel, even though no one could read them.

The Involvement of the Vijd-Borluut Couple in the Symbols of the Altar

This paper argues that the regular Mass, which Vijd and Borluut financed through their own chapel, and the hidden symbolism on the altar panels are not two separate facts, but a single concept tailored to the needs of a specific couple. The analysis combines an iconographic interpretation of written sources with a visual analysis of the work itself, following Müller's understanding of iconology, namely as an attempt to go beyond recognizing the subject matter to reconstructing the context that determined the choice of these particular forms rather than others.[39] The central question is how, through which specific material and compositional decisions, the will of the donors reached its embodiment in the finished work.

The iconographic program for the altar was not formulated in advance as a set of detailed specifications, but rather took shape gradually through discussions between the donors and the theological advisor, continuing to be refined even during the actual painting process.[40] This fluid development is visible in two specific compositional changes made during the creative process. First, the space above the Lamb was originally intended to be filled with rays symbolizing the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, but compositional constraints made it impossible to distribute the rays evenly between the two groups of angels on either side of the altar. This concept was replaced with a halo without a dove. Second, the spring in front of the Lamb, which had already been painted, was later replaced with a fountain, and it was this final version

[39]Marion G. Müller, "Iconography and Iconology as a Visual Method and Approach," in *The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, ed. Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 283–297.
[40]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 31, on the substitution of rays for a halo, and of the painted spring for the Fountain of Life.

that established an ongoing, rather than a one-time, connection between the scene's heavenly liturgy and the earthly liturgy that took place in the chapel on a regular basis, which the open interior faced on Sundays and feast days.[41]

Both examples matter for this paper's argument for the same reason: They suggest that even after a theological program was concluded, there remained room for its revision—an authority that was exercised more than once. The record does not state who initiated these changes; I argue that the direction of the revisions is consistent with patron involvement. The theological advisor was certainly responsible for the consistency of sources and texts, but the sequence of technical changes can also be explained by the need to reconcile the finished idea with how the altar was to function over time, in a specific chapel in front of specific people. However, these two changes are not entirely the same. The replacement of the rays was due to a compositional issue, which refers more to the artist than to the patrons, and may also indicate that the work passed from Hubert to Jan. Meanwhile, the replacement with fountain links the altar's theme to its function in that specific chapel, and it is this second change that most likely points to the patrons. This question directly raises the issue of the extent to which the finest details of the program can reflect the wishes of the donors, given their lack of formal theological education.[42] Yet, the donors' wishes did not necessarily have to take the form of theological formulations: Practical knowledge of how the chapel would function in regular liturgical use was sufficient, and it was precisely this knowledge, unlike theological erudition, that belonged exclusively to Vijd and Borluut.

It is also telling that both changes move in the same direction: From decisions that would require additional explanation for the viewer to decisions that are more understandable without outside commentary. The halo without the dove is more unambiguously interpreted as a symbol of divinity; the fountain with the inscription about the Lamb and John the Baptist is more self-explanatory, whereas the abstract scene would have required a verbal explanation. The inscription itself, however, could not be read from the chapel, so it mattered through its presence, as the texts of the third level did, while the clarity of the change came from what the viewer could see. If such clarifications were made for the sake of clarity specifically for the viewer of the open interior, including the donors, this is consistent with the thesis that changes to the program occurred under the pressure of practical necessity, rather than solely due to theological logic.

The second, purely physical piece of evidence supporting the donors' involvement is simpler than it might seem, and at the same time more convincing. It concerns the altarpiece's original display, which demonstrates that the donors commissioned a work that turned out to be almost too large for their own chapel, and at the same time hired an artist whose reputation allowed him to be called the finest painter of his time.[43] This combination, the excessive scale of the commission and the choice of this artist, is difficult to explain purely through theological logic: No theological program in and of itself requires a

[41]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 30.
[42]Ridderbos, "Iconography and Patronage," 31.
[43]Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, ed. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020), 308–43

work of such magnitude that it barely fits in the chapel for which it was commissioned. Instead, this combination fits well with what is already known about the Vijd family's social circumstances: A childless couple, concerned with their own social identity and the preservation of their family's legacy, had a direct incentive to commission a work whose scale exceeded purely practical needs.

The chapel's cramped physical dimensions, in turn, directly influenced how the work appeared to the viewer who prayed before it repeatedly. Fransen and Glatigny have shown that the modest dimensions of the Vijd Chapel most likely necessitated arranging the side panels at an angle to one another when the altar was open, while the outer panels remained parallel to the central section: This arrangement softened the difference in scale and perspective between the upper panels, which would otherwise have been harder to overlook at close range (Fig.11).[44] Angling the side panels inward accommodated the altarpiece within the narrow chapel. This position optically compressed the large upper figures, making them look natural at close range. In other words, the same spatial experience that allowed the donors to contemplate the altar repeatedly, up close, in a cramped room, also created compositional challenges and dictated their partial resolution. The private, rather than public, nature of the chapel here emerges not merely as the context in which the altar was placed, but as a physical factor that directly influenced the composition's final appearance.

It is worth noting that this combination, the excessive scale of the vision and the cramped physical space, in itself attests to the donors' order of priorities: Vijd and Borluut, it seems, first decided on the scale of their ambition, commissioning the finest artist of their time, and only then worked out the details of execution in accordance with the physical constraints of the chapel, which they themselves had built. This sequence, ambition first, adaptation second, is more natural for private patrons.

The Lamb as a Dual Symbol: From City Emblem to Liturgical Center

The symbolic status of the central figure on the altar is more complex than is generally acknowledged. Scholars who view the Lamb solely as a Christological symbol (Jesus Christ) overlook an earlier, purely urban tradition. Ghent's official seal combined the image of the Lamb of God with John the Baptist long before the altarpiece was created, and it was this secular, rather than theological, composition that most likely inspired the central scene (Fig.12).[45] This observation adds an argument for this paper: The central image of the altar was based on the visual language that Vijd himself, as a member of the Council of the Eschevens, had used in his own public, civic life long before the altar was commissioned, as a diplomatic gesture in relations with the Duke of Burgundy, thereby making the altar the city's main landmark.

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[44]Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, ed. Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020), 308–43

[45]Jesse D. Hurlbut, "The Mystic Lamb of Ghent: Alderman's Seal, Altarpiece, and Tableau Vivant," in *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power*, ed. Susan Solway (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 377.

The boundary between the religious and civic significance of this image, therefore, was already blurred before Van Eyck and had been established by the patron. Hurlbut describes a striking later event that demonstrates that this civic interpretation was, in fact, put into practice. During Philip the Good's ceremonial entry into Ghent in 1458, a recognized instrument of Burgundian civic diplomacy, the inner panels of the altarpiece were recreated as a *tableau vivant* along the route of his procession.[46] A contemporary chronicle notes that the duke, who arrived on horseback, wore black to evoke his heraldic Flemish lion, visually blending in with the horsemen in the painting. Of course, this later reconstruction does not prove that Van Eyck originally intended to represent the duke. However, it shows that contemporaries were already inclined to identify the black-clad horseman in the *Just Judge*s procession as the duke, which indirectly supports the hypothesis discussed below.

The Hidden Couple in the Painting: Isabella and Philip

This part offers a more hypothetical view than the family allusions mentioned above and should be viewed as a secondary argument. The hypothesis developed in this section of the work concerns the figure among the horsemen in the panel of the *Just Judges*: The only one looking directly at the viewer, while the rest of the figures are turned toward the scene (Fig.13). Traditionally, this panel has been associated with self-portraits of the van Eyck brothers: The established interpretation, based on a description by the Flemish biographer Karel van Mander, identifies the other two horsemen, the older one, shown in profile and wearing a fur hat, as Hubert, and the one next to him, wearing a turban-like headdress, as Jan.[47] The logic by which these identifications generally relies not only on van Mander's description, but also on a recognizable technique employed by Jan van Eyck himself: In the portrait that many believe to be his self-portrait, *Man in a Red Turban* (1433), the direct, almost confrontational gaze at the viewer, combined with the unusually large signature *"Als ich can"*, which is the primary basis for this identification. The same technique can be seen in Van Eyck's use of mirror reflections in *The Arnolfini Portrait* and in the shield in the painting of Canon van der Paele. Harbison links this tendency to portray a straightforward, likeness-based self-image with Van Eyck's greater commitment to an almost documentary realism, in which even secondary or background figures were depicted with the same detailed accuracy as the main subject.[48] Since the direct gaze at the viewer has become a sort of Van Eyck signature that has since appeared in his other works, it is not surprising that researchers automatically interpret the horseman in *The Just Judges* in the same way. However, this detail, the direct gaze, suggests a new idea to me and lends itself to an alternative interpretation.

For this figure, I propose an alternative identification—Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, based on three tentative observations. First, the figure's black attire, in contrast to the brightly dressed other horsemen, is consistent with the Duke's well-documented habit of wearing black as a sign of mourning

[46]Jesse D. Hurlbut, "The Mystic Lamb of Ghent: Alderman's Seal, Altarpiece, and Tableau Vivant," in *Medieval Coins and Seals: Constructing Identity, Signifying Power*, ed. Susan Solway (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 389–394.
[47]Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb*, on the traditional identification of two riders in the Just Judges panel as self-portraits of Hubert and Jan van Eyck, an identification traced to the sixteenth-century biographer Karel van Mander.
[48]Craig Harbison, *Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 10–14.

for his murdered father since 1419, a habit not found in any of Van Eyck's authentic self-portraits: Both in *Man in a Red Turban* and in his depictions in other paintings, the artist invariably portrays himself in dark, but not entirely black, mourning attire of the ducal style.[49] Piponnier and Mane note that black cloth was an expensive, high-status color at the Burgundian court precisely because of the difficulty of dyeing it evenly, which meant that Philip's consistent choice to wear black was perceived by his peers as an intentional and recognizable display of status, rather than simply attire for mourning.[50]

Second, the facial features—the elongated face, slender nose, and chaperon, correspond not to Van Eyck's own appearance, but to the official portrait style of the duke, attributed to the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (Fig.14)[51]. Third, this identification is consistent with the structural logic that the altarpiece demonstrates elsewhere. Penny Howell Jolly has shown that the figure of the sibyl on the outer panel of the altarpiece likely conceals a portrait of the duke's wife, Isabella of Portugal, based on a comparison of the sibyl's costume with a preparatory sketch of the bride that Jan van Eyck himself executed from life during a diplomatic trip to Portugal in 1428–1429 (Fig.15) and (Fig.16).[52] If we accept this identification, a structural question arises: Is it plausible that the altarpiece, constructed around the logic of paired portraits, the male and female donors on the outer panels, accompanied by John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, hides a portrait of the duchess, but not of the duke himself? The altarpiece's compositional grammar, which consistently pairs figures, makes the duchess's solitary presence the structural anomaly; the figure of the horseman, who disrupts the procession's spatial logic with his direct gaze at the viewer, suggests a natural place for his counterpart.

The argument in favor of the duke, therefore, is based on the costume and facial features, which are the same type of evidence that proponents of the self-portrait theory rely on. At the same time, the panel currently on display at St. Bavo's Cathedral is a copy by Jef van der Veken (1939–1945), since the original was stolen in 1934 and has not yet been found; therefore, neither of the two identifications can be considered definitively proven based solely on facial features.[53]

A similar debate surrounds the identification of Isabella as the sibyl on the outer panel. Ridderbos refutes Jolly's specifically political interpretation, according to which the sibyl allegedly urges Ghent to reconcile with the duke regarding the events of 1432, by advancing a compelling chronological argument: The window of opportunity during which one could speak of an expected heir to Burgundy lasted only three months.[54] This criticism is valid about the specific political message that Jolly proposes, but it does not

[49]Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, trans. Caroline Beamish (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 73.
[50]Piponnier and Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*, 73
[51]On the Dijon portrait type, see Jan Verheyen et al., "A Multi-Disciplinary Analysis of the Portrait of Philip the Good in Dijon," *Heritage Science* 12, article 309 (2024)
[52]Penny Howell Jolly, "More on the Van Eyck Question: Philip the Good of Burgundy, Isabelle of Portugal, and the Ghent Altarpiece," *Oud Holland* 101, no. 4 (1987): 237–253, esp. 241–243.
[53]Charney, *Stealing the Mystic Lamb: The True Story of the World's Most Coveted Masterpiece*. New York: Public Affairs, 2010, 212–215.
[54]Jolly, Penny Howell. "More on the Van Eyck Question: Philip the Good of Burgundy, Isabelle of Portugal, and the Ghent Altarpiece." Oud Holland 101, no. 4 (1987), 244–246.

apply to the device of the hidden portrait as such: If Isabella is indeed hidden on the reverse side, the device has already been used in this work at least once, and the only question is whether it has a counterpart. This hypothesis remains a secondary consideration for the study: If even such a politically sensitive figure as the duke could end up on the altar at the donors' discretion, this would be a further example of their involvement in the iconography, beyond the family allusions, where Vijd's personal interest is already evident. I contend that this idea likely came from Van Eyck, not Vijd: as a court painter, he had access to private information about the duke and duchess. But Van Eyck couldn't have included a recognizable portrait of the duke in a private family painting without first reviewing and approving it, whether with Vijd or with the court, and the record does not show which. Therefore, the origin of the idea and the decision to include it are, in this sense, two different questions, and it is this second question that would support the argument regarding the patrons' influence, if the decision was Vijd's.

The Symbol of Adam and Eve

The monumental figures of Adam and Eve on the interior panels of the upper register, visible only when the wings were open, deserve special attention in the context of the couple's private meditation; according to all available evidence, the couple was childless throughout their lives (Fig.17). Eve is shown with a high forehead, thin eyebrows, and a rounded belly protruding forward that protrudes in a manner that suggests fertility, which was a typical Burgundian fifteenth-century iconography, implying her role as the future "mother of all living".[55] In her hand she holds not an apple, but a citron, an exotic fruit with rough, wrinkled skin associated with temptation. Directly above her figure, in high relief, the scene opens with the story of Cain killing his brother Abel with a donkey's jawbone (Fig.18).

This visual combination had to have carried a deeply personal meaning for specific donors. For a man who had lost both his brothers and remained childless, placing a symbol of fertility above the homicide and the loss of the heir would have been more meaningful than just an abstract thought. This interpretation cannot be confirmed by documentary evidence, since there is no document that attests to donors' personal experiences; however, it accords with everything that is known about their biographies and thus adds another argument for an intentional, personal selection of symbolism. This is an example of the second level: a meaning that depends on knowing the couple's biography.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that the influence of Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut on the *Ghent Altarpiece* was not limited to financing a pre-existing theological concept—it can be suggested down to the level of details, some of which could not be grasped at a single glance, and some of which could not be interpreted at all, even by a careful contemporary observer. The central model of this study, the Three Levels of Accessibility, together with the distinction between the meaning of a detail and the very decision to include it, provides a way to explain this complexity without attributing to the donors' knowledge they

[55]Harbison, *Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, 215–222, on fifteenth-century Burgundian conventions for depicting fertility and Eve as "mother of all living."

most likely did not possess: Vijd did not need to be versed in theology to approve the principle whereby the chapel rewards repeated viewing rather than instant understanding. Although one approach attributes the program's complexity to Vijd's personal background, recent socio-historical research suggests that the family's social status was far more complex than previously thought. However, neither approach takes into account how the private nature of the chapel, not only its dedication but also the very reality of its recurring, repeated use, affected the degree of complexity that its symbolism might have possessed. This is, I think, the aspect of patronage art that merits attention beyond the limits of one altar: When a work was made for a known patron and a private setting, researchers should ask not only what is depicted, but to whom, and not just in a rhetorical sense, the image is meant to be visible.

After all, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was not a painting that could be seen and understood once and for all, but an object that Vijd and Borluut designed so that it could never be fully grasped. Its true ambition has more to do with this design element than with the work's massive scale or even the talent of its craftsmen. We are used to looking for the boundary of a work of art within its frame. Here, that boundary was purposely drawn beyond elsewhere—at the limits of human vision.

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IMAGES



Figure 1. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, The Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, oil on oak panel, 375 cm x 520 cm, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 2. Vijd Chapel (Chapel of Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut), Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium, founded c. 1430s.



Figure 3. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (central lower panel of the Ghent Altarpiece), 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 4. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Fountain of Life, detail from the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.

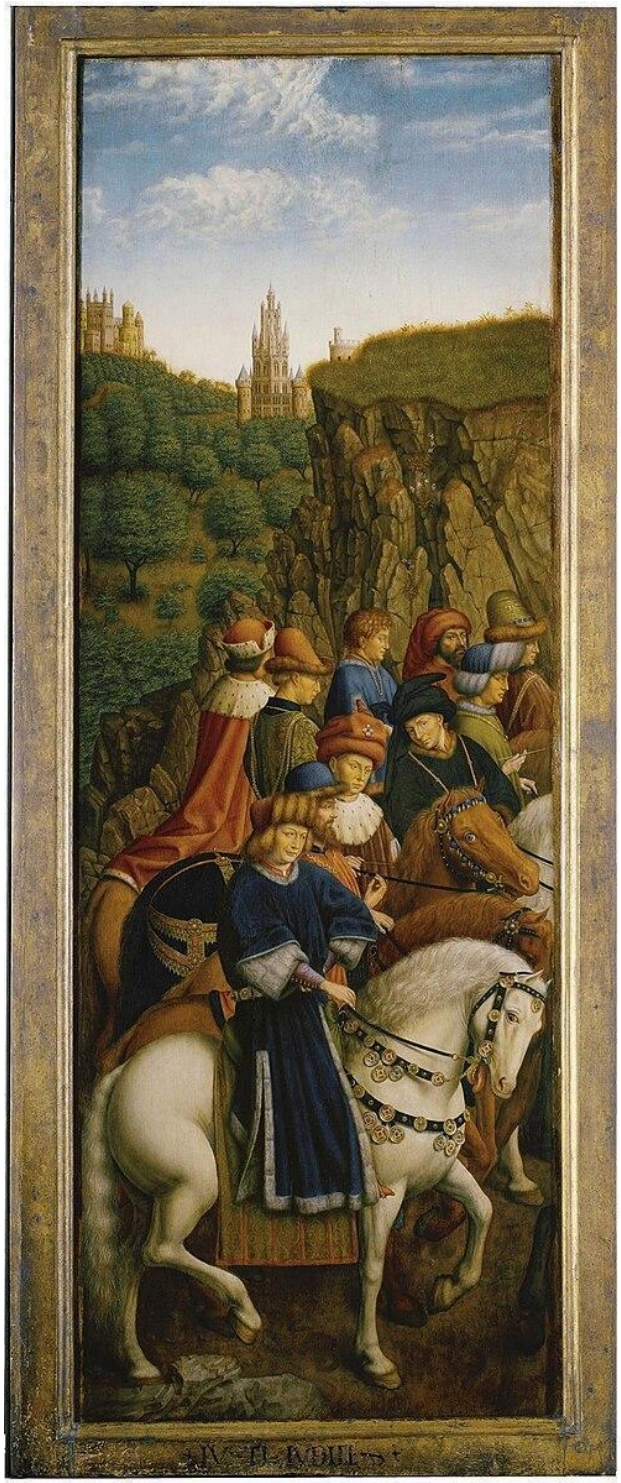

Figure 5. Jan and Hubert van Eyck (reconstruction copy by Jef Van der Veken, 1939–1945), The Just Judges, detail from the Ghent Altarpiece, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 6. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, The Pilgrims Led by Saint Christopher, detail from the Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.

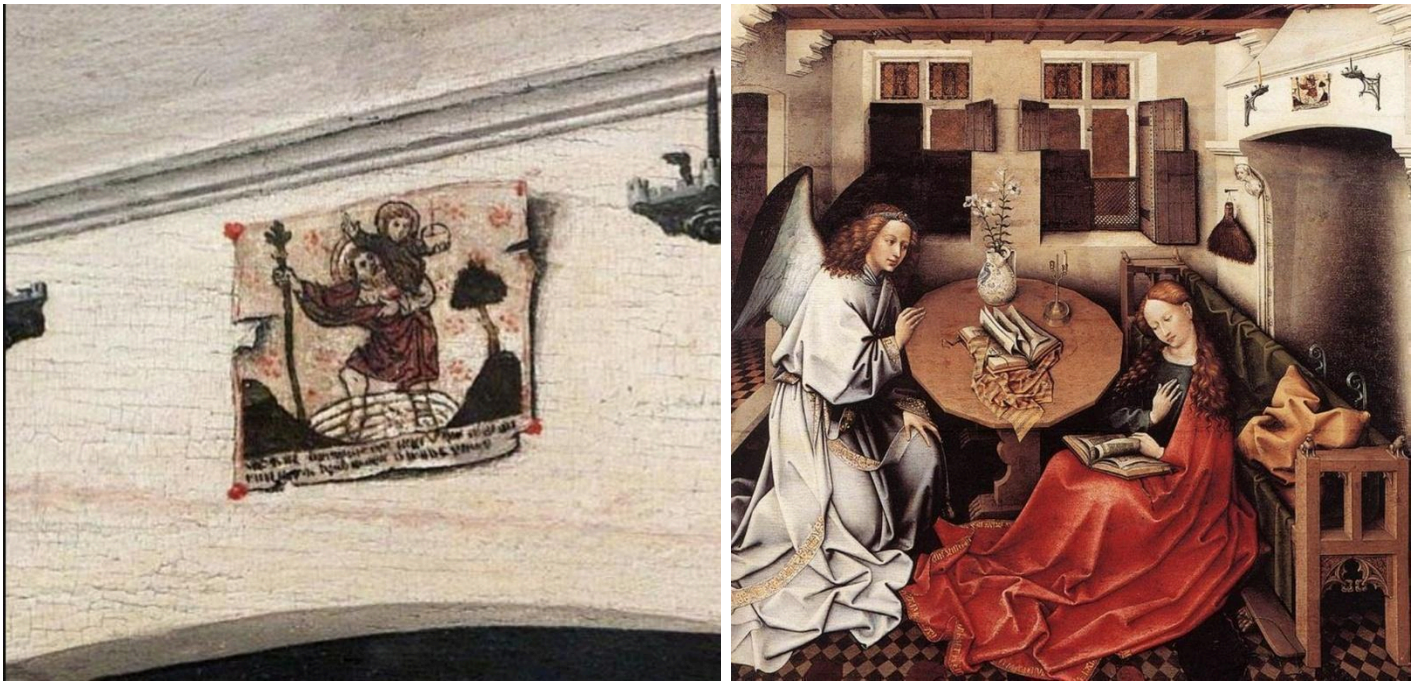

Figure 7. The Annunciation (version of the central panel, at one time attributed to Jacques Daret, a pupil of Campin's) ca. 1425-1430, oil on oak panel, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts



Figure 8. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Donors Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut (outer wings of the Ghent Altarpiece), 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.

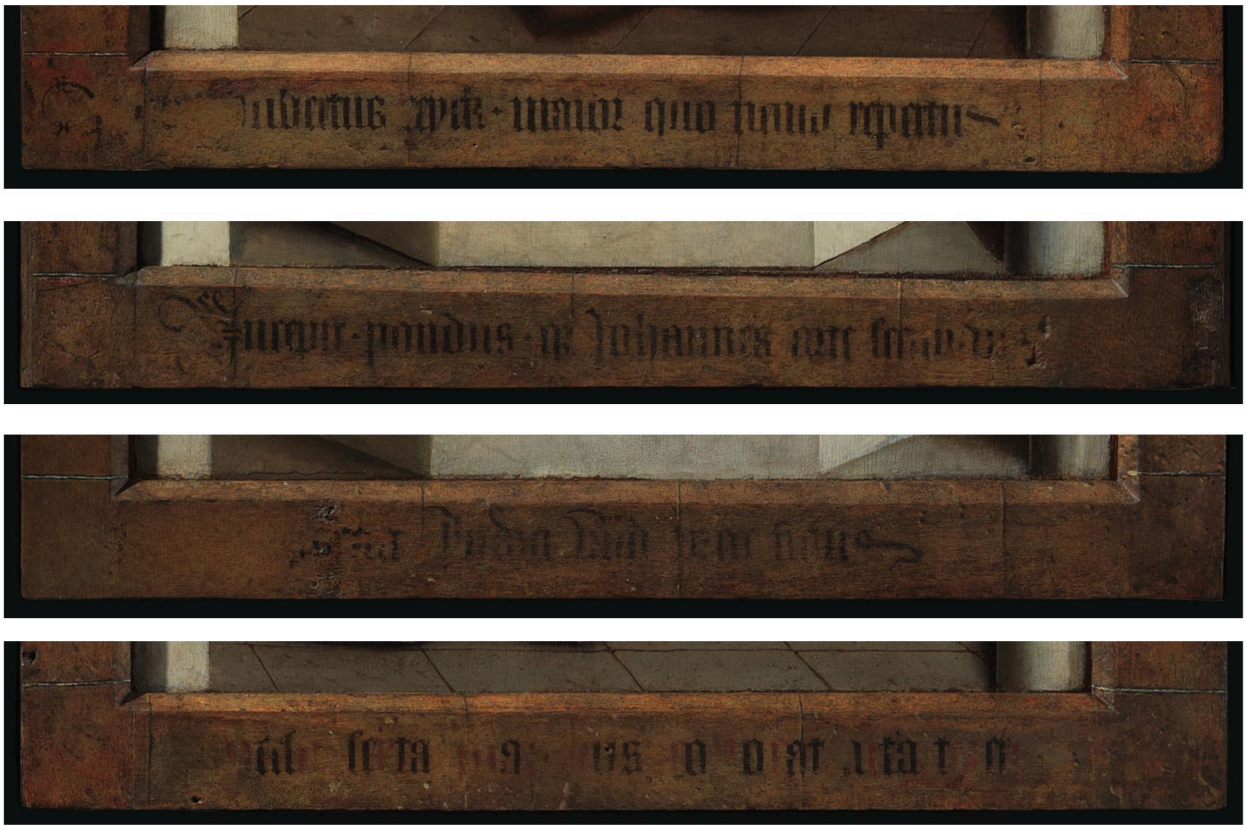

Figure 9. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Detail of the quatrain inscribed on the original frame of the Ghent Altarpiece (frame now lost; recorded in a later transcription), Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 10. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, macro-photographic detail of the inscribed text in the Book of Wisdom (Virgin Mary panel) and the "Consolamini" inscription (Book of John the Baptist panel), Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 11. Reconstruction of the Vijd Chapel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, showing the angled arrangement of the side panels relative to the central section when the altarpiece is open. After Bart Fransen and Jean-Albert Glatigny, "Imagining the Original Display," in *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior* (Brussels: KIK-IRPA / Brepols-Harvey Miller, 2020)



Figure 12. Seal C. Seal and counterseal ad legationes for Ghent, 1276. Wax, D: 9.1 cm (3 19/32 in). Archives départementales du Nord, Lille, Musée 188. [Photograph by Jesse Hurlbut]



Figure 13. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *The Just Judges*, detail showing the three horsemen, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 14. Rogier van der Weyden , Portrait of Philip the Good (left) 1450, oil on oak panel, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France; Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Detail of the Just Judges panel from the Ghent Altarpiece (right), 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 15. Jan van Eyck, closed wings of the Ghent Altarpiece, detail of the Cumaean Sibyl, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 16. Jan van Eyck, preparatory portrait sketch of Isabella of Portugal, 1428–1429, pen, brush and ink on paper, drawing survived via later copies (original lost), 45 x 41 cm, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Lisbon, Portugal.



Figure 17. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Adam and Eve, outer panels of the upper register, Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.



Figure 18. Jan and Hubert van Eyck, detail of the grisaille relief above Eve depicting Cain killing Abel, Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, oil on oak panel, Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium.