

RESTORED AND RAVISHING: MAGNIFICENT GHENT ALTARPIECE GIVES UP ITS CENTURIES-OLD MYSTERIES

It has been called “the most influential painting ever” and “the world’s most coveted masterpiece”. It is also the most frequently stolen. And now, after a four-year restoration to clean away six centuries of dirt and varnish, the Ghent Altarpiece looks the way it did originally – electric, radiant, gorgeous and glorious.

The altarpiece, also known as The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, was unveiled in St Bavo’s Cathedral, Ghent, today. The work, in its entirety or just in part, has been stolen six times, and found itself at the centre of no fewer than 13 crimes and mysteries, several of which remain unsolved – until now, that is, thanks to the restoration.

The altarpiece was likely begun by Hubert van Eyck in 1426, but he died that year so there has always been a question over whether any of his hand survives in the work. It was completed by his younger brother, Jan, and rapidly became one of the most famous artworks in the world, a point of pilgrimage for educated tourists and artists, something it continues to be today.

Its fame has not always been a positive thing. Just about anything bad that could happen to an artwork has befallen this altarpiece. It was stolen during the Napoleonic wars, the first world war and the second, barely rescued before being all but blown up by a renegade SS officer while being stored in a secret salt mine in Austria. It has been the object of suspected forgeries, was nearly destroyed in the 16th century by iconoclasts, and was sold illegally by an errant vicar. In 1934, one of its 12 panels was stolen and has never been recovered.

<https://tinyurl.com/gqcylwf>

The altarpiece’s enormous influence is down to several factors. This was the first major oil painting to fully showcase the capabilities of the medium, oil allowing far more subtlety than egg-based tempera paints. It revels in artistic realism, from identifiable plants and highly detailed portraits <https://tinyurl.com/7srq2dr> (right down to Adam’s nostril hair), to reflections in a horse’s eye and light refracted through a ruby.

There is also its vast size and scope. A hugely complex work of Catholic iconography, the altarpiece boasts 100 figures, and features an Annunciation scene on its exterior wing panels (viewed when the altarpiece is closed, as it would be on all but holidays). Then there are the portraits of the donors,

representations of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, not to mention Old Testament prophets and sibyls.

When open, its central panel shows a sacrificial lamb, representing Christ, on an altar bleeding into a grail. <<https://tinyurl.com/h3jkh4b>> It is surrounded by scores of figures in an idealised, heavenly landscape. Above them sits Christ Enthroned (or perhaps God the Father), with Mary on his right and John the Baptist on his left. The other panels show an angelic choir, Adam and Eve, as well as various well-wishers coming to adore the Mystic Lamb, from pilgrims to holy hermits, knights and judges. It all adds up to something of an A-Z of Catholicism.

A study in 2010 <<https://tinyurl.com/z343ckv>> determined that the altarpiece needed conservation – to remove varnish and to adjust the colours of older retouches. A €1.3m grant followed <<https://tinyurl.com/zwy4krl>> and now – with the restoration one-third complete – the discoveries are astonishing, casting light on a touching story of fraternal love and admiration.

“The surprises begin with the frame itself,” says Bart Devolder, onsite co-ordinator of the project. “Not all of it survived, but the portions that did were cleaned to reveal silver leaf topped by transparent glazes that imitate stonework.” The clean-up made the once-dull frame glow again. It now feels part of the painted panels, not just a functional border. “They add a three-dimensional effect,” says Devolder, “that looks strikingly modern.” <<https://tinyurl.com/zd57k2q>>

On the frame is a famous inscription. Some believed it to be an addition made in the 16th century, perhaps even a forgery meant to look like part of the original painting. The words name the donors, give the date of completion and describe the altarpiece as having been begun by Hubert van Eyck, and finished by his brother, Jan, who is “second in art” – as in second-best – to Hubert. Jan lived in the rival Belgian city of Bruges and perhaps it rubbed a bit raw that Ghent’s iconic artwork had been painted by an “outsider”. Some suspected that this inscription – suddenly raising up Hubert, a local artist – was the work of Ghent “nationalists”.

In fact, when the inscription was first uncovered during an 1823 restoration, it shocked the art world. Everyone was familiar with Jan van Eyck: in England in the latter half of the 19th century, his works sold for more than any other painter. But no one had heard of Hubert. Was this a long-lost master? To date, there is not a single painting that can be 100% attributed to him.

“Our restoration confirmed that the inscription was original,” says Devolder. So if it wasn’t a later addition, he points out, “it can now be said with certainty that the Ghent Altarpiece is by Hubert and Jan van Eyck, though it is still unclear whether any of Hubert’s paint is visible on the surface.” It also makes this the only work firmly attributable to the mysterious Hubert. The inscription was almost certainly added by Jan and his self-categorisation as “second in art” was probably more about brotherly love and humility than any objective ranking of artistic greatness. <<https://tinyurl.com/zmmm35v>>

How many painters were involved in the work? Scholars have long guessed at the answer, but science can now confirm their assumptions. Computer analysis points to several hands being involved. This is not a great surprise, since Jan, like most artists of his time, ran a studio and works attributed to him were, in fact, collaborative products. The next breakthrough would be to prove that Hubert’s strokes feature among those “hands” – but that is currently impossible simply because there are no other known works by Hubert to allow comparison.

The timeline of the work’s creation has also been something of a mystery. Was the altarpiece painted in several phases, over nearly a decade, rather than between 1426 and 1432 as is commonly thought? Devolder believes he has the answer: “Two panels, one from the painting of Eve and one from the panel of the hermits, were dendrochronologically tested and shown to have come from the same tree trunk.” This points overwhelmingly to the shorter timespan, since it is unlikely that different panels would come from the same tree and remain in Jan’s studio for a full decade, before being used in different sections of the same painting.

But the most shocking of these new discoveries is how much of Jan’s painting has been covered up for centuries. “We estimate that 70% of the exterior wing panels contain overpainting,” says Devolder. “Removing this reveals what Jan himself intended.” While some of this concerns the finer details – such as reinforcing the highlights in flesh tones to bring back depth – there are some major elements that appear altered, such as the wall in the Annunciation scenes and the draperies worn by the Eritrean Sybil and the two donors (behind which painted spiders’ webs were also revealed).

These finds are of radical importance to our understanding of how the work was painted, as well as our interpretation of it as a symbol-filled puzzle, with each detail providing a clue to the meaning of the whole. If it now turns out that

certain details were never part of the original, then the work must be reassessed.

The fact that such a wealth of information has been revealed by the restoration of just one-third of the altarpiece is making many wonder what might be further revealed. Funding for the project has already been increased. The Ghent Altarpiece, it seems, has only just begun to give up its mysteries. _Noah Charney_GuardianUK