

Hans Memling in Bruges

Hans

Memling

IN BRUGES

Foreword

Bruges and Hans Memling. Hans Memling and Bruges. The city and the painter are inextricably linked. However, Memling did not hail from Bruges, but from the German town of Seligenstadt. With its trade in luxury goods and numerous potential customers, the Flemish city offered an irresistible attraction to the young and ambitious artist, who settled there in 1465. Exceptionally productive, he would go on to create a unique place for himself in the local art market. But that is not the only reason Bruges and Memling continue to be mentioned in the same breath today. Seven of his works can still be found in the city, in St John's Hospital Museum, four of which were painted for that very location. These are signature pieces that form the nucleus of an iconic oeuvre. In other words, anyone who wishes to see Memling at the height of his powers has to come to St John's.

This book has been published to mark the refurbishment of the museum, which reopened in December 2023. Memling's paintings are one of the highlights of the renewed presentation, as you would expect with art of such an exceptionally high calibre. His work has never lost its powerful effect on those who view it. You can read all about it in the pages of this book – but there is one particular moment in the history of St John's Hospital as a museum, almost two hundred years ago, that deserves special mention in this foreword. It says a great deal that the first museum in a city of such cultural wealth as Bruges was the hospital museum, which opened its doors in 1839 and dedicated its main hall entirely to Memling's works. When the chapter house of the convent adjacent to St John's Hospital was first opened to the public, it displayed six works by Memling (the *Donor Portrait of Francisco (?) de Rojas* was added to the collection later). The visitors' books have been preserved and show that Memling attracted the interest of artists and royalty alike. The painter was also one of the first early Netherlandish masters to become the focus of art-historical research in the nineteenth century. A major exhibition devoted to *Les Primitifs flamands* at the Provincial Court in Bruges in 1902 saw the definitive public breakthrough of Hans Memling and his fellow fifteenth-century artists.

Interest in Memling and his contemporaries has never really ebbed since that first presentation at St John's Hospital in 1839. Many exhibitions would follow, both in Bruges and elsewhere, with his oeuvre at their centre. Art-historical studies are regularly devoted to him too – including important contributions by curators of the various museums in Bruges, such as Dirk De Vos, Hilde Lobelle-Caluwé and Till-Holger Borchert. The author of the book you are about to read is Anna Koopstra, curator of early Netherlandish painting at Musea Brugge. *Decoding Memling*, Musea Brugge's most recent project, launched in April 2023 with the aim of systematically examining Hans Memling's paintings in the Musea Brugge collections using cutting-edge technical art-history methodologies. The goal is to discover even more about *how* the paintings were made; preliminary insights are integrated in this book. The results of this ongoing research will be processed in greater depth later, and made permanently available to the public via the *Closer to Memling* website.

This book offers revealing interpretations of all Memling's works in Bruges, backed by fascinating information on their cultural background. We are confident that this will whet the reader's appetite to visit the St John's Hospital Museum or that it will pique their interest for even more Memling. We very much hope you enjoy reading it.

Anne van Oosterwijk
Director of Collections, Musea Brugge





10	Introduction
14	Hans Memling (active 1465–1494)
20	<i>Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (St John Altarpiece)</i>
44	St John's Hospital: From the twelfth to the twenty-first century
55	Painting in the Burgundian Netherlands
64	<i>Annunciation</i>
72	<i>St Ursula Shrine</i>
97	Bruges and the world, 1450–1500
104	Memling's patrons
112	<i>Triptych with Sts Christopher, Maurus and Giles (Moreel Triptych)</i>

127	Memling then and now
132	<i>Triptych with the Adoration of the Magi (Floreins Triptych)</i>
146	<i>Triptych with the Lamentation of Christ (Reins Triptych)</i>
161	'The most accomplished and excellent painter of the whole Christian world'
167	Memling as portrait painter
172	<i>Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove</i>
184	<i>Portrait of a Young Woman or Sibylla Sambetha</i>
190	<i>Donor Portrait of Francisco (?) de Rojas</i>
198	Conclusion
202	Further reading

Introduction

To many people in Bruges, Hans Memling (c. 1435–1494) is the name of a celebrated fellow townsman from a past age. Art lovers, meanwhile, know of him because his works are found in the most renowned museums in Europe, North America and Australia. Because of this, Memling's paintings – only a few of which are in private collections – can nowadays be seen by more people than their original owners would ever have thought possible. Even in his own day, the painter's reputation extended far beyond the bounds of the city in which he lived and worked. All the same, Memling is inextricably linked with Bruges. His name has become synonymous with the city.

The medieval St John's Hospital, now a museum, has played an important part in the artist's reputation and fame. No fewer than seven of Memling's works can be found there. Four of them, including the monumental *St John Altarpiece* (dated 1479) and the exceptional *St Ursula Shrine* (1489), were commissioned by the friars and nuns who were jointly responsible for the day-to-day running of the hospital. The fact that these now famous works continue to be displayed at the same site for which they were created almost five and a half centuries ago is especially remarkable in the Low Countries, where so many historic buildings and works of art have been lost over time. In the course of those centuries, Memling's paintings could be seen not only by the

religious community itself at the hospital, but also by the patients and visitors who spent time there and who, considering their particular circumstances, could draw hope from them. The works were admired by fellow painters too. The earliest biographer of Netherlandish artists, Karel van Mander (1548–1606) from Haarlem, mentions Memling's paintings at St John's Hospital in his famous *Schilderboek* (Book of Painters), published in 1604. All of which makes the twelfth-century hospital, one of the oldest buildings of its kind in Europe, an exceptional place where past and present meet.

In addition to the works in the St John's Hospital Museum, the Musea Brugge collection has two other Memlings, which can be seen at the Groeninge Museum. One is a triptych in which the politician and merchant Willem Moreel had himself painted with his family, while the other depicts the Annunciation and once featured on the exterior of a triptych commissioned by Jan Crabbe, abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Ten Duinen. Viewed in art-historical terms, the nine panels in Bruges represent the core of Memling's oeuvre, which runs to some ninety works. Only two of his paintings are signed and dated. Both can be found in the St John's Hospital Museum.

Of the nine Memlings now in Bruges, seven have never left the city since the moment they were finished, with the exception of two brief hiatuses. The first

occurred in 1794 after the French Revolution and Napoleon's annexation of the Low Countries, when a number of masterpieces (including the *Moreel Triptych*) were confiscated and taken to Paris to hang in the newly appointed Musée Napoléon. Then, in 1942, during the Second World War, art was moved from Bruges and stored elsewhere for safety including in the castle of Lavaux-Sainte-Anne near Rochefort. They returned, unscathed, on 17 May 1945.

From the moment they left his studio, Hans Memling's works have spoken to the imagination. When the modern discipline of art history emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, they were some of the first works to be studied. Such is the power of Memling's oeuvre that the riches – both material and intellectual – of his paintings, combined with his virtuosity and ingenuity as an artist, continue to yield fresh information and insights. His work still fascinates and will undoubtedly continue to do so long after we are gone.

Unsurprisingly, a great deal has already been written about Memling. This book draws on the most recent art-historical research, while also placing certain emphases of its own. It focuses on the nine paintings in the Musea Brugge collection, but other panels by Memling are also discussed in order to provide context, as are works by other artists. Concise but substantive chapters introduce the reader to the paintings and the ideas that shaped them. What do we see? What did the commissioner of the work want to see? What role does the artist play in what the viewer sees and thinks, and which of the artist's choices and decisions were decisive? In addition to the texts dealing with the works themselves, there are short chapters on subjects such as the hospital, the city of Bruges, Memling's working methods and his patrons, which sketch the context in which the painter lived, how he worked and for whom. The appreciation and study, both past and present, of Memling's works are also discussed. To keep the publication as accessible as possible, the individual texts can be read in any order and there are frequent cross-references to other topics explored in the book. This publication does not set out to discuss Memling's oeuvre or artistic practice in their entirety, nor does it offer a comprehensive overview of the history of St John's Hospital. There are already several excellent publications on these subjects, to which the reader is referred to in the suggestions for further reading in the back of the book.

The immediate prompt for this book was the reopening of the refurbished St John's Hospital Museum in December 2023. Since the building was inaugurated as a museum in 1839, 184 years ago, successive restoration campaigns have been carried out on the hospital interior. The building as it is today and the magnificent twelfth-century hospital are connected by the wealth of material heritage to be found there, of which the Memlings are a key part (the hospital was once known simply as the 'Memling Museum'). The time was ripe in 2023 for a new presentation that aims to return the medieval hospital building to its original character and grandeur. The aim is to give visitors the best possible experience of this unique historical site and the hospital's function at the very heart of Bruges society, and provide an impressive stage for the exceptional tangible and intangible heritage that has been preserved here for so long.





Hans Memling

(active 1465–1494)

While Hans Memling has become synonymous with Bruges, he was not actually born there. He became a *poorter* of the city on 30 January 1465, which means he registered as a citizen with full rights to live and work in Bruges. There were several ways to achieve this: by birth or marriage, by living in the city for at least a year and a day, or by paying a fee. Memling opted for the latter, paying 24 shillings, which was roughly equivalent to a month's wages for a craftsman. The fact that he could afford the one-off payment suggests he had already completed his apprenticeship and become an independent master. Memling probably made a conscious decision to move to Bruges because of the favourable conditions it could offer him as a painter. Nor will it have been a coincidence that he settled in the city six months after the death of Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399–1464). Although Van der Weyden was based in Brussels, of all the artists in the Low Countries it was he who received the most prestigious commissions from the court, city and senior clergy of Bruges – especially after the death of Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441) (see 'Painting in the Burgundian Netherlands'). The affinity between the two artists' works and their working methods (see 'The most accomplished and excellent painter') is such that Memling is thought to have been employed in Van der Weyden's workshop in Brussels, albeit as a journeyman (a freelance worker who has already served an apprenticeship) rather than as a pupil. The latter relationship was presumed by the Italian artist and architect Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) in his *Lives of the Greatest Painters*,

Sculptors and Architects, published in 1550. Memling was probably born in the second half of the 1430s, though we do not know the precise year.

In Bruges

We know where Memling came from thanks to the annual register of *poorters*, which recorded each new citizen of the city. With one or two gaps, the records for the period 1418 to 1794 have survived and are now in the municipal archives (fig. 1). The entry for Memling states that he was born in (actually near) Seligenstadt ('Zaleghen Stat'), located in the diocese of Mainz. It is also recorded that his father's name was Hamman. The fact that he was registered as 'Jan van Mimmelinge' tells us that he did not have a recognisable Flemish surname. What's more, it immediately resulted in a variety of different spellings and a degree of confusion on the part of early, influential Italian authors such as the previously mentioned Giorgio Vasari and the merchant Ludovico Guicciardini (1521–1589), whose history of the Low Countries was published in 1567. Guicciardini – like the Ghent poet and historian Marcus van Vaernewyck (1518–1569) – referred to Memling as 'German Hans', a name that would add to his appeal among German art-lovers in the nineteenth century, during a period of patriotic appropriation of artists. Memling himself signed his works with the same Dutch form of his name that we still use today.

with twelve stars, was identified with the Virgin Mary (and the child with Christ). Below this and to the right, we see the Archangel Michael defeating the dragon in a symbolic parallel with Christ's victory over death. This latter theme explains why a depiction of the Apocalypse was deemed appropriate for a hospital. It reflected the situation of those who found themselves in the institution and their need to maintain hope even though – or perhaps precisely because – the End Times (their own) were in sight. The Last Judgement theme served a similar purpose, which is why it formed the subject of the polyptych *The Last Judgement* that Rogier van der Weyden painted c. 1445–50 for the hospital founded by Chancellor Nicolas Rolin in the town of Beaune in Burgundy. Memling's approach to the dramatic Apocalypse scene results in a serene and positive composition, light rather than heavy in colour, balanced and hopeful. For the patients being treated in the hospital, who could see the triptych from their beds, the painting offered comfort and the hope of salvation with its simultaneous views of the world outside, the inner spiritual world and the hereafter.

The commissioners

The triptych dedicated to the two saints John was commissioned by male and female members of the religious community who ran the hospital. They are depicted on the exterior of the side panels. It was customary for the shutters of an altarpiece to be opened only during the celebration of Mass, which means that apart from Sundays and feast days, it was these Augustinian friars and nuns who were visible most of the time. The commissioners or donors of the triptych are situated in shallow, detailed stone niches with illusionistic (illusionistic because they are painted) decorations and shadows that heighten the impression of depth. The wooden frames themselves are also painted to resemble a different material, in this case marble. The friars and nuns are rendered in colour, making them just as lifelike as the saints pictured in the open altarpiece. This is also in keeping with the balance that Memling maintains throughout the visual programme. The four figures are shown deep in prayer and turned slightly towards each other. Their pious devotion does not have a specific visual focus in this instance; they are depicted as if taking part in the Mass that will be celebrated before the open triptych.

We know their names from the patron saints who accompany them and from archival documents. Kneeling on the right of the left shutter is Antheunis Seghers, master of the hospital from 1469–70 until his death in 1475. The hermit Anthony Abbot, his name saint, stands behind him. Brother Jacob de Ceuninck kneels in front of St James the Greater, identifiable by the scallop shell on his hat and his pilgrim's staff and bag. Jacob was responsible for the monastic community's finances between 1469–70 and his death in 1490. The other shutter contains two hospital sisters, each dressed in a black veil, white coif and white habit beneath a black scapular covering their chest and back. Among these black and white robes, the green of St Agnes's costume stands out; she can be identified by the lamb (*agnus* in Latin), which she keeps on a string. The saint accompanies Sister Agnes Casembrood, the prioress, a post she took up in 1459–60, having joined the community in 1445–46. The other sister is Clara van Hulsen, who died in 1478–79 after fifty-one years serving the hospital. Her patron saint, Clare of Assisi, stands behind her.

These four friars and nuns held the most senior positions at the hospital when Memling received the commission. But their respective namesakes were also invoked as protection from a range of ailments and afflictions. James, for instance, was the patron saint of pilgrims and pharmacists, and was prayed to by sufferers of rheumatism. Agnes, patron of young girls, was also invoked against leprosy. Clare's aid was sought in cases of persistent fever and eye conditions, while St Anthony Abbot offered protection against plague and skin diseases. He was especially revered for his efficacy against ergotism or *ignis sacer*, also known as St Anthony's fire – a disease caused by ergot poisoning, usually after eating rye infected with fungus. The urgency of this threat at the time is demonstrated by a letter of protection found in the Bruges municipal archives. Dated 26 May 1489, it was issued by the friars of St Anthony's Hospital near Bailleul. The letter assures Brother Jan Floreins (commissioner of the *Adoration of the Magi Triptych*, see the eponymous chapter) and the rest of the community of St John's Hospital in Bruges that St Anthony will grant protection against the affliction that bears his name to all their relatives and goods, and in particular to the estate of Ter Donk in Maldegem, which belonged to the administrative authority outside the city known as the Franc of Bruges.

Exceptional work, exceptional circumstances

Construction of the apse of the hospital church began in 1473-74, and it was probably this that prompted the commissioning of such an undoubtedly costly triptych from Hans Memling. Since Antheunis Seghers, one of the friars depicted on the shutters, died in 1475, Memling must have received the assignment before that date. It took him several years to complete; the altarpiece was delivered in 1479. The hospital extension was inaugurated in 1477 by Ferry de Clugny, Bishop of Tournai since 1474. Bruges belonged to the diocese of Tournai, and, to a lesser extent, that of Utrecht. De Clugny might have played a decisive role in securing the commission for Memling, as he is thought to have ordered a large *Annunciation* panel from the artist (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) for a funerary chapel in the cathedral of Autun, a city in the south of the Burgundian territory. That work is generally considered to be an early painting by Memling, done not long after he had established himself as an independent master in Bruges. The *Annunciation* draws heavily on a composition by Van der Weyden, making it an important link between the two artists.

From 1459, St John's Hospital came under the joint authority of the city of Bruges and the diocese of Tournai. In the context of that mutual relationship, the commissioning of a large and complex altarpiece by the friars and nuns of the hospital community was an unusual act. We do not know why a relatively modest community should have ordered such a large and ambitious work from Memling – although the painter had been active in the city since 1465 and had certainly made a name for himself, if the importance of the clients he served is anything to go by. The relatively recent change in the community's status, making it part of a regular monastic order, would have increased its autonomy relative to the civic authorities, while also cementing its relationship with the diocese – an important factor given the constant vying for power between city and Church. These specific circumstances combined with the choice of the leading panel painter of the moment to produce an exceptional work.

It is significant that the commission for the altarpiece cannot be found in the meticulously kept accounts of St John's Hospital, suggesting that it was the friars and nuns themselves – probably with the support of one or more benefactors – who paid for it. It would

undoubtedly have cost them a substantial amount, given the reputation of the artist and the highly specific requirements of the patrons. This too would have reflected the autonomy and agency of the monastic community at St John's Hospital that were pursued under the leadership of Seghers and Casembrood.

Even more to admire

Nowadays, the imposing work has been stripped of its role during the liturgy of the Eucharist. However, this also means that twenty-first-century admirers get to view the painting from very close by. The reason for the triptych's substantial size was so that worshippers could see it all the way from the hospital wards, even though it would not have been possible to make out all the details from so great a distance. Indeed, such is the meticulousness of its execution that only study under high magnification and use of advanced imaging techniques reveals quite how brilliantly it was painted. The *St John Altarpiece's* wealth of detail and the grandeur of its narrative ambition invite us to keep on looking. The work is a veritable showcase of everything painting can achieve: the ability to transport the viewer emotionally and to show something that all but transcends human imagination.













Nieuwen Conde

Struiken

Maende Visch parrn Strade

Nieuwekerk
Nieuwen Markt
61

Nieuwen

den Conkerijnschen Wegh

Ancker
Plaatse

68
Walplaatse

Wijnant
Plaatse

47

Oost Meersch

West Meersch

12

Royal Canal

3

16

56

68

47

42

83

11

85

89

93

97

101

105

109

113

117

121

125

129

133

137

141

145

149

153

St John's Hospital: From the twelfth to the twenty-first century

St John's Hospital (fig. 2 and 3) had already existed for several hundred years by the time Hans Memling settled in Bruges in 1465. Founded around the middle of the twelfth century, it was one of the earliest institutions in the city to care for local people and to receive travellers, such as pilgrims. The hospital's original patron saint was John the Evangelist; it was only in the fifteenth century that John the Baptist was added, probably because of the saint's immense popularity at the time.

Reflecting the meaning of *hospitalis* (hospitable) and *hospes* (guest), St John's offered care to the poor, the sick and those in need. What this meant in practice was that the hospital took in ill travellers and pilgrims, but also homeless people. The 'guests' were drawn from Bruges and the surrounding area, as well as elsewhere in Flanders, Brabant, Hainaut, Holland and Zeeland, and even further afield, including northern France, Burgundy, Germany and Scotland. All were allowed to stay at the hospital – preferably for just one night – where they could count on a bed, food, warmth and rest. People with contagious diseases such as leprosy were not admitted, but they could go to the leper house (dedicated to Mary Magdalene) outside the city walls. Plague was rightly feared too.

Charitable institutions such as St John's sprang up all over Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in response to urbanisation and the problems this brought, including the spread of disease. Hospitals met the welfare needs of individuals struck by adversity.



Mendicant orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans made a particular contribution to the development of hospitals, although a great many were also founded by individual benefactors, mainly aristocrats. St John's Hospital is unusual in that it was not originally linked to a monastery or church, but was set up by the civic authorities; from the outset, it was an institution provided by and for the people of Bruges.

When the hospital was founded, it was located just within the first city walls, as shown on the famous plan of Bruges drawn up by Marcus Gerards in 1562 (fig. 1). A convenient spot on the outskirts of the town and close to the water, it was connected by Mariastraat to

Fig. 1 Marcus Gerards, map of Bruges (detail), 1881, lithograph on paper (after the original copper engraving of 1562), 190 × 110 cm, Bruges City Archives, Bruges

Fig. 2 St John's Hospital, Bruges, front view



the city centre (the Oude Burg and, further east, the counts' *castrum* – the administrative centre – as well as the Church of St Donatian) and to the Markt, the main square and commercial focus. The Mariapoort city gate and the roads to Ghent and Kortrijk were close by too. The Church of Our Lady, Bruges's second oldest parish church after St Saviour's, stood on the opposite side of Mariastraat.

The hospital building dates from around the mid-twelfth century and is one of the best preserved medieval charitable institutions in Europe. In its earliest form, it was a rectangular construction running parallel to the street. This was extended in the early thirteenth century, beginning with the first of



Fig. 3 St John's Hospital, Bruges, rear view

Fig. 4 St John's Hospital, Bruges, attic

the three large wards (the central one). When the north and then the south wards were added, the orientation of the hospital complex shifted, placing it perpendicular to Mariastraat. The thirteenth-century porch on that street provided direct access to the ward with its three bays, giving it the feel of a large hall. The simple, open floor plan resembled the nave of a church, with the central ward measuring no less than 42 metres long and 12 metres wide. The attic houses one of the oldest wooden roof structures in Belgium (fig. 4). The church is located in the north aisle, where a chapel dedicated to St Cornelius was built in the fourteenth century. A wooden statue of the saint dating from the same period is located above the chapel entrance (fig. 5). Relics of Cornelius and other saints meant that the chapel, tended by the Guild of St Cornelius, became a destination for pilgrims. The apse of the church was remodelled in 1473–74 and its new choir was consecrated in 1477 by Bishop Ferry de Clugny. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the three wards and the church formed a single unit.

The thirteenth-century wards had separate sections for men and women. By the second half of the fifteenth century, there were around a hundred beds capable of accommodating up to a hundred and fifty people (some shared a bed), arranged in long rows against the pillars and columns. The open layout meant that everyone could at least hear Mass being celebrated and had the opportunity to receive communion (whether physically or spiritually). Both the church and the cemetery were accessible from the wards.



Fig. 5 Anonymous, *St Cornelius*, c. 1350–1364, polychromed and gilded wood, 166 cm high, Musea Brugge, Bruges, inv. O.SJo157.V



Painting in the Burgundian Netherlands

In 1369, Philip the Bold (1342–1404), Duke of Burgundy and the youngest son of the French king, married Margaret of Male (1350–1405), daughter of the Count of Flanders. In the century that followed, a large, contiguous territory developed, stretching from the duchy of Burgundy in the south (with its capital in Dijon) to Flanders, some five hundred kilometres to the north, and on into the county of Holland. The Burgundian possessions roughly coincided with modern-day Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and the French departments of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, (parts of) Lorraine and, of course, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté (Burgundy) itself. It was expanded under Philip the Bold's successors, John the Fearless (1371–1419), Philip the Good (1396–1467), Charles the Bold (1433–1477) and the latter's daughter, Mary of Burgundy (1457–1482). In 1477, Mary married the Austrian Maximilian of Habsburg (1459–1519), who would be crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1508. Their marriage brought the House of Habsburg into the Burgundian line of inheritance. Between 1384 – when Philip the Bold inherited the title of Count of Flanders from his father-in-law – and 1482, the Low Countries were ruled by the dukes of Burgundy. Mary's death in 1482 brought her husband Maximilian to power, as he became regent to their young son, the future Philip the Fair (1478–1506), who was heir to the throne. What had previously been the Burgundian Netherlands now became the Habsburg Netherlands.

The county of Flanders with important cities including Bruges, Ghent and Ypres played a key role in the Burgundian realm. To the north, Flanders bordered the county of Holland; to the east, the duchy of Brabant, which included the cities of Antwerp, Brussels, Leuven and, furthest to the north, 's-Hertogenbosch. These were wealthy towns that owed their prosperity to, among other things, the wool and cloth trade. To the south lay the counties of Hainaut, with cities such as Mons and Tournai, and Artois with its capital of Arras, an important bishopric and centre of the tapestry industry. At its peak, this small, urbanised region was the most densely populated and prosperous in western Europe.

Fifteenth-century Flanders flourished culturally under the dukes of Burgundy, who were passionate patrons and collectors. The arts attained an extremely high level of refinement; they were a matter of piety and prestige, but also an important political tool. Not that this applied only to the Burgundians; European dynasties in general vied to secure the services of the finest artists for their court.

Philip the Bold, the first in the Burgundian line, set the example when he founded the Carthusian monastery of Champmol, just outside Dijon, in 1383 to serve as a mausoleum for him and his family. It was almost completely demolished between 1798 and 1815, leaving only parts of the buildings and the heritage they contained, among them the tombs of the ducal family.



Some of the first sculptors and painters we know by name were employed at Champmol and many of them were drawn from the northern Burgundian territories.

One was the Haarlem-born sculptor Claus Sluter (c. 1350–1406), who worked at Champmol between 1395 and 1404 with his cousin Claus de Werve, also from Haarlem. Sluter's creations included a stone Calvary group, of which only the base – the *Well of Moses* – has survived (fig. 1). It is still in its original location, now the site of a psychiatric hospital. The monumental and, above all, lifelike prophets depicted on the sculpture heralded a new kind of realism. Smaller sculptures were also popular, such as altarpieces featuring a central element of sculpted or carved groups of figures and shutters with painted scenes. After seeing several carved altarpieces of this kind in Dendermonde and at the Bijloke Abbey in Ghent, Philip the Bold commissioned Jacques de Baerze (active in Dendermonde in the 1380s and '90s) to produce one for Champmol. The painted shutters (now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon) were the work of Melchior Broederlam (c. 1355–c. 1411), who was active in Ypres. Before entering the service of Philip the Bold, he had been employed by the Count of Flanders, Louis of Male (1330–1384), father of Margaret of Male.

Fig. 1 Claus Sluter, *Well of Moses*, 1395–1404, limestone with traces of polychromy and gilding, Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon

The most famous painter of this generation was Jan Maelwael (died 1415), from the duchy of Guelders, whose surname translates literally as 'paints well'. In 1397, Maelwael was appointed court painter and *varlet de chambre* (valet) to Philip the Bold, an honorary title that indicates the special personal relationship that existed between the ruler and his court artist. While the absence of signed works means that no specific paintings can be securely attributed to Maelwael, he is widely believed to have been responsible for a small group of notably high-quality paintings on panel, including the *Large Round Pietà* (fig. 2). Archival documents show that Maelwael polychromed (painted) the stone statues that originally topped Sluter's *Well of Moses*. We also know that the artist was the uncle of Herman, Paul and Jean (Johan) de Limbourg (all active 1399–1416) – the friars from Nijmegen who produced several of the magnificently illuminated manuscripts in the collection of Jean, Duke of Berry (1340–1416), brother of Philip the Bold. The famous full-page miniatures they executed on vellum (the highest-quality, supple parchment made from the skins of young animals) for the book of hours known as *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry* (Musée Condé, Chantilly) are among the most innovative painted scenes we know and are regarded as important precursors of the new realism that Jan van Eyck would introduce.

The artistic context of the Burgundian court, where the finest artists worked, collaborated and



Fig. 2 Attributed to Jan Maelwael (Jean Malouel), *Large Round Pietà*, c. 1375/1425, oil, tempera and gold on panel, 65 cm diameter, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. MI 692



enjoyed access to the most precious of materials, brings us naturally to the greatest name in fifteenth-century painting, Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441). Having been in the Count of Holland's service in the Hague in 1422, he became a *varlet de chambre* of Philip the Bold in 1425. We know that the duke greatly admired the artist and sent him on a number of diplomatic missions. Van Eyck's work is viewed as the starting point for a new art – one so extraordinary that painting before him has come to be known as 'pre-Eyckian'. The concepts and innovations that he perfected in his panel paintings also appear around that time in other media, such as sculpture, book illumination, goldsmithing and tapestry, resulting in works of art that excelled in their invention, ingenuity and technical skill. However, above all, Van Eyck's works in particular impress and fascinate viewers with their display of observational skills and a realism not previously encountered in panel painting.

Van Eyck was also the first artist to leave behind a small group of signed paintings, allowing his oeuvre to be studied as a whole. His earliest dated work is the *Ghent Altarpiece* or *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (fig. 3). According to the inscription on the frame, it was finished in 1432 and was painted jointly by Jan and his older brother Hubert, although the latter's contribution remains uncertain. The famous polyptych was not created for Philip the Bold, but was commissioned by the Ghent nobleman Joos Vijd and his wife Elisabeth Borluut for their chapel in the Church of St John the Baptist in Ghent (which became St Bavo's Cathedral in 1559). Thanks in part to a nomadic ducal court, cities such as Ghent, Bruges and Brussels became artistic milieux in which a combination of knowledge, power and the availability of materials, people and money encouraged the emergence of all sorts of innovative ideas. Works of art were commissioned not only by

Fig. 3 Jan (and Hubert?) van Eyck, *Ghent Altarpiece*, dated 1432, oil on panel, 375 × 515 cm (open), Cathedral of St Bavo, Ghent



Fig. 4 Anonymous, after Rogier van der Weyden, *Portrait of Philip the Good*, second half of the fifteenth century, oil on panel, 39.7 × 30.1 cm, Musea Brugge, Bruges, inv. OOOO.GROo2o3.I

senior courtiers, but also by the civic authorities, municipal institutions, monasteries, churches, prelates and a growing group of private individuals – members of the urban patriciate such as Vijd and Borluut, and wealthy burghers.

City-based artisans, including painters, had to follow certain regulations. The various professions were organised into corporations or guilds, a system established in the thirteenth century to regulate the inflow of new members, guarantee the quality of the supplied products and protect members from outside competition. As well as defending the trade's economic interests, craft guilds also offered pastoral care; for example, when a guild member died, the corporation would look after his family. Religious brotherhoods performed a similar function in promoting social cohesion.

Which professions belonged to a particular guild differed from one city to another and often depended on the materials used. In Bruges, for instance, only painters were allowed to work with oil paint, which set them apart from the *cleederscriviers* (literally 'cloth writers'), who were painters working on canvas with water-based paints such as natural size (glue) or egg tempera, but not oils. Illuminators, who created miniatures for books, were closely related as a professional group to the painters. They also worked with paints (albeit not with oils), pigments and sometimes gold and silver leaf, but used parchment and paper as their support. Some artists were skilled in more than one medium. Painters played a central role due to the fact that they also supplied designs for execution by sculptors, goldsmiths and printmakers, for example, which frequently brought them into contact with their counterparts in other disciplines. Court artists such as Van Eyck held a special position and were not subject to the rules of the urban painters' guild.

The other leading figure in fifteenth-century Flemish painting was Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399–1464). Born in the French-speaking city of Tournai, he was not a court artist, but city painter of Brussels. One of his most famous works was a series of four paintings depicting the *Justice of Trajan and Herkenbald* – the former a Roman emperor, the latter a magistrate of Brussels. The series was an appropriate subject for the town hall, where the aldermen dispensed justice, just as their equivalents did in other cities in the region. The paintings were lost when Brussels was bombarded



by the French in 1695, but the content of the series was preserved in the form of a tapestry (Bernisches Historisches Museum, Bern). Coudenberg Palace in Brussels was a central location for the Burgundian court from 1430, and Rogier painted several portraits of important figures close to the court. He also painted a likeness of Philip the Good himself, but that work, sadly, is known only in the form of copies (fig. 4). Van Eyck and Van der Weyden occasionally worked for the same patrons, including the Burgundian chancellor Nicolas Rolin (1376–1462). Rolin had his portrait painted by Van Eyck in 1436, alongside the *Virgin and Child* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), while Van der Weyden supplied the *Last Judgement* polyptych (Hôtel-Dieu, Beaune) for the hospital in Beaune that Rolin and his wife founded in 1445–50.

A third figure who helped lay the foundations for early (that is, fifteenth-century) Netherlandish painting was Robert Campin from Tournai (1378/79–1444). Campin has also been identified with the Master of Flémalle, the creator of three life-size panels featuring

Fig. 5 Robert Campin, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1435, oil and tempera on panel, 40.7 × 28.1 cm, The National Gallery, London, inv. NG653.1



the *Virgin and Child*, *St Veronica* and the *Holy Trinity* (Städel Museum, Frankfurt). Van der Weyden worked in Campin's workshop in Tournai between 1427 and 1432. The likenesses that Campin made of a husband and wife in 1435 represented a huge advance in portrait painting in terms of their plasticity (fig. 5 and 6).

The generation that came after Van Eyck, Van der Weyden and Campin was that of Memling and his contemporaries. Petrus Christus (active 1444–75/76) was the leading painter in Bruges when the German artist arrived there in 1465. We know him by the Latinised version of his name with which he signed his works (the Middle Dutch form was 'Pieter Christus'). Christus grew up in Baerle in Brabant before settling in Bruges in 1444, three years after the death of Jan van Eyck. Almost half of Christus's known oeuvre was either created for an Italian client or soon found its way to Italy or Spain. In the ten years or so during which both men were active in Bruges, Memling and Christus clearly targeted the same market, although, unlike Memling, Christus also worked for the civic

Fig. 6 Robert Campin, *Portrait of a Woman*, c. 1435, oil and tempera on panel, 40.6 × 28.1 cm, The National Gallery, London, inv. NG653.2

authorities and might have painted miniatures too. Another painter, Gerard David (c. 1455–1523), settled in Bruges in 1484, by which time Petrus Christus had been dead for about ten years. He was a colleague of Memling's until the latter's own death in 1494. In 1515, David is listed as a member of the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp, highlighting that city's growing importance, as well as David's adaptability and foresight when it came to a changing art market. Contemporaries involved in the production of books include Willem Vrelant (active 1449–1481/82), whose portrait Memling incorporated in a side panel of an altarpiece, and Colard Mansion (active 1457–1484). Mansion, alongside the English printer William Caxton (c. 1422–1492), played an important part in the transition from handwritten to printed books. Given that they were working in roughly the same period, it seems highly likely that Mansion and Memling were acquainted. Jan Provoost (1462–1525/29) moved from Hainaut to Bruges in 1494, the year in which Memling died, and went on to become the most important artist in the city during the first three decades of the

sixteenth century. His contacts with Bruges's intellectual milieu of humanists and rhetoricians enabled him to create a highly original oeuvre. A fine example is the *Diptych with Christ Carrying the Cross and a Portrait of a Franciscan Friar* from 1522 (fig. 7). The back of one shutter features a skull combined with a rebus.

Two other well-known contemporaries of Memling moved in some of the same circles, even though they were active in other cities. Hugo van der Goes (died 1482/83) became an independent master in Ghent in 1467 and later, as a lay brother, continued to paint at the Rode Klooster (Red Monastery or Cloître rouge) in the Forêt de Soignes near Brussels. Towards the end of the 1470s, Van der Goes painted a monumental triptych for Tommaso Portinari (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence). The artist had died by the time it was shipped to his patron's family chapel in the Santa Maria Nuova hospital in Florence. Another key work by Van der Goes, the *Death of the Virgin* (fig. 8), is thought to have been created for Jan Crabbe, abbot of Ten Duinen (Abbey of the Dunes) in Koksijde. Portinari and Crabbe were also clients of Memling, having



Fig. 7 Jan Provoost, *Diptych with Christ Carrying the Cross and a Portrait of a Franciscan Friar*, dated 1522, oil on panel, 49.8 × 40 cm (left panel incl. original frame), 49.9 × 40 cm (right panel incl. original frame), Musea Brugge, Bruges, inv. O.SJ0191.1

Fig. 8 Hugo van der Goes, *Death of the Virgin*, 1475–1482/83, oil on panel, 147.8 × 122.5 cm, Musea Brugge, Bruges, inv. OOOO.GRO0204.1



come into contact with the artist relatively early in his career. Finally, Dieric Bouts (died 1475) came from Haarlem but lived and worked in Leuven, the city in Brabant that houses the Low Countries' oldest university, founded in 1425. His *Last Supper Triptych* (also known as the *Holy Sacrament Altarpiece*) was commissioned by the Fraternity of the Holy Sacrament for its

chapel in St Peter's Church in Leuven (where the work can be seen to this day). The written contract between Bouts and the brotherhood has – very unusually – survived. Bouts and Van der Goes are linked, incidentally, by the *Martyrdom of St Hippolytus* triptych in St Saviour's Cathedral in Bruges (fig. 9). Hippolyte de Berthoz, a senior official at the Burgundian court (who



was also recently identified as the commissioner of a triptych by Hieronymus Bosch), ordered the altarpiece from Bouts. Following the latter's death, the work was completed by Van der Goes.

Incidentally, our modern focus on paintings somewhat distorts the nature of art production in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In a similar manner,

our understanding of this output is shaped by what has survived – a great deal has been lost along the way. Amid the magnificent tradition of artists from which he stemmed, Memling stands out as a specialist panel painter who left a rich and varied body of work, several of them signed, and about whose life and career we are relatively well informed.



Fig. 9 Dieric Bouts and Hugo van der Goes, *Triptych with the Martyrdom of St Hippolytus*, c. 1470–74 and c. 1475–80, oil on panel, 90.5 × 90 cm (central panel), 91 × 40 cm (side panels), Cathedral of St Saviour, Bruges

Colophon

Texts

Anna Koopstra

ISBN 978 94 6466 689 2

D/2023/11922/68

NUR 642

Image research

Marijn Everaarts

Anna Koopstra

Translation

Ted Alkins

© Hannibal Books, 2023

www.hannibalbooks.be

Copy-editing

Cath Phillips



HANNIBAL

BOOKS

Project management

Stephanie Van den bosch

Design

Tim Bisschop

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Printing

die Keure, Bruges, Belgium

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders for all texts, photographs and reproductions. If, however, you feel that you have inadvertently been overlooked, please contact the publisher.

Binding

Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium

Publisher

Gautier Platteau



Cover images

Details from: Hans Memling, *Triptych of John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (St John Altarpiece)* (open), dated 1479, oil on panel, 193.2 × 97.1 cm (left panel incl. original frame), 193.5 × 194.7 cm (central panel incl. original frame), 193.3 × 97.3 cm (right panel incl. original frame), Musea Brugge, Bruges, inv. O.SJ0175.1