

The Northern Renaissance and its Wider Influences

Background Notes

Dr Lydia Hansell — 21 February 2024



Figure 1: Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, dated 1432, oil on Baltic oak, open 365 x 487 cm, St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent.

'Flemish painting will, generally speaking, please the devout better than any painting of Italy, which will never cause him to shed a tear, whereas that of Flanders will cause him to shed many; and that not through the vigour and goodness of the painting, but owing to the goodness of the devout person. It will appeal to women, especially the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill, as for example saints and prophets. They paint stuffs and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of the trees, and rivers and bridges which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and many figures on that. All this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without skilful choice of boldness and, finally, without substance or vigour. Nevertheless, there are countries where they paint worse than Flanders'. So suggested Michelangelo, as reported by Francisco de Hollanda in his 'Four Dialogues on Painting' c. 1540.

Despite Michelangelo damning with faint praise work produced in the Burgundian Netherlands, the Italian reception of Northern Renaissance art was generally positive. This is made abundantly clear in encomia by Cyriacus d'Ancona (1449) and Bartolommeo Fazio (1456) who praised, in particular, works by Jan van Eyck (d. 1441) and Rogier van der Weyden (d. 1464). Fazio waxed lyrical about van Eyck's exceptional skill remarking, of a now lost triptych made for the Genoese merchant Battista Lomellini, that: 'Jerome [is] like a living being in a library done with a rare art for if you move away from it a little it seems that it recedes inwards and that it has complete books laid open on it, while if you go near it is evident that this is only a summary of these.' He also described the likeness of the patron as, 'lacking only a voice.' Giovanni Santi, an Umbrian painter (d. 1494) similarly remarked that, 'Jan van Eyck and ... Rogier van der Weyden were

gifted with great excellence; in the art of painting and lofty mastery they were so excellent they many times surpassed reality itself.’

Michelangelo’s insistence, then, on the primacy of perspective, proportion, harmony and symmetry suggests work produced by eminent Netherlandish painters such as van Eyck, van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes and Hans Memling to be somehow inferior. Much has been made of the lack of single point linear perspective deployed in works by these painters. Yet Netherlandish artists were more than capable of creating the illusionistic effects they desired without this device (and were praised effusively by Italian patrons and writers for doing so). Equally, the very format of Northern paintings, often multi-panelled altarpieces, designed to be opened and arranged at different angles, meant that linear perspective was not necessarily required to achieve similar effects. One of van Eyck’s greatest works, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, described by the German artist Albrecht Dürer in 1521 as ‘a very splendid, deeply studied painting’, demonstrates the extraordinary scale and ingenuity of Northern works, which relied on so much more than criteria advanced by the Florentine Renaissance (Fig. 1).

Of the more immediate examples to subvert the Vasarian trope that artistic influence flowed outwards from Florence was a commission for the Florentine banker, Tommaso Portinari. The eponymous *Portinari Altarpiece* (c. 1475) by Hugo van der Goes arrived in Florence in 1483 where it required six men to haul it through the streets to its intended destination in the Church of Saint Egidio in the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. (Fig. 2). Soon after its arrival, it was quoted emphatically by the Florentine artist Domenico Ghirlandaio in his *Adoration of the Shepherds* for the Sassetti chapel in Santa Trinita (Fig. 3).



Figure 2: Hugo van der Goes, interior of the *Portinari Altarpiece*, c. 1474-8, oil on Baltic oak panel. *Tommaso and Maria Portinari and their children represented by Saints Anthony, Thomas, Mary Magdalene and Margaret to the Nativity*, open 253 x 586 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 3: Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Altarpiece of the Adoration of the Shepherds with portraits of Francesco Sassetti and his wife Nera Corsi*, 1485, from the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinita, Florence, panel and fresco,

Ghirlandaio's work reflects the challenges of trying to directly translate van der Goes' visual language, and indeed the physical form of the altarpiece. Not only are the donor portraits of Sassetti and his wife divorced from the central, single panel altarpiece of Ghirlandaio's *Adoration*, but the composition as a whole seems more coolly rational and unresolved than van der Goes' highly individualised portraits and virtuosic attention to detail.

The *Portinari Altarpiece*, enormous in scale (5 metres when open) and unusual in its winged triptych format, would have seemed distinctly foreign to those who saw it in Florence. But for Portinari, who valued the unique talent of Netherlandish artists, it was an unambiguous statement of his taste and success. Just as Lomellini had commissioned van Eyck, and Portinari van der Goes, so too did Angelo Tani, another Medici banker, recognise the cultural capital of Netherlandish art. Tani commissioned Hans Memling to execute a triptych depicting the Last Judgement (painted between 1467-1471). While it was on its way to Florence by sea, however, it was seized by pirates. It is now in Gdańsk, Poland. The risks inherent in the transport of these commissions clearly captures the appetite of Italian patrons for such works and goes against the traditional narrative of the supremacy of the Italian Renaissance.

In fact, Michelangelo's suggestion that Northern Renaissance artists merely imitated reality ignores their supreme ability to innovatively create an illusion of reality. That Italian patrons specifically sought to commission works by Netherlandish artists suggests that they greatly valued the combination of verisimilitude and virtuosic skill with which they imbued their work. Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* is a striking example of this 'constructed reality' (Fig. 4). Van Eyck was unsurpassed in his rendering of an array of materials, from brass, pearl, glass, fur, hair and wood. This talent does not, however, make the interior space inhabited by the Arnolfini a construct of simple observation. Instead it is highly artificial and

complex, designed to showcase, to maximum effect, van Eyck's skill as a painter.



Figure 4: Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, oil on Baltic oak, 1434, National Gallery, London.

Like van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden was also honoured by Fazio less for his ability to imitate reality and more for the emotional impact his works elicited. In a triptych showing the Descent that he had seen in the collection of the Duke of Ferrara, Fazio notes that, 'the grief and tears are so represented that you would not think them other than real'. It does not seem improbable that van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (1443) would have garnered praise for the same realism that so moved Italian patrons of Netherlandish paintings (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, before 1443, oil on Baltic oak, 220 x 262 cm, Prado, Madrid.

Just as van Eyck employed devices to create an illusion of reality, so did Rogier run counter to prevailing Albertian and Vasarian ideals to exert a maximum expressive effect. In his *Descent*, the monumental figures are distorted in service of a more experimental and innovative effect. The altarpiece was commissioned by the crossbowman's guild of Leuven around 1435 and the disconcerting contortions of the protagonists can be explained not by Rogier's inability to render anatomy correctly and harmoniously, but rather by the demands of the guild to commemorate their patronage: the pose of the Virgin, mirroring that of the dead Christ, as well as the Magdalene's strangely artificial hand gesture refer to the patrons since they all resemble the shape of a crossbow. While the actual crossbows in the image are barely perceptible and hang from the corners of the skilfully constructed gold box, the guild's identity is forever immortalised.

Michelangelo's suggestion, then, that Netherlandish art lacked what Florentine artists and writers praised runs counter to the reality of the burgeoning trade between Italy and the North. The sheer number of Italian patrons who recognised the value of paintings by the likes of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden – and indeed many other types of objects from the Burgundian Netherlands – speaks volumes about the importance of reappraising the idea of unreciprocated influence between these two centres of artistic achievement.

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