

2. "VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH ST. BARBARA, ST. ELIZABETH OF HUNGARY AND A DONOR (JAN VOS)"

JAN VAN EYCK AND WORKSHOP

24 MAY – 1 SEPTEMBER 2013

EUROPE, IN THE OPENING DECADES OF THE 15TH CENTURY. While Florentine artists were laying the first foundations of the Renaissance, Flemish painters were trying to achieve a convincing way of representing reality: objects, landscapes and people, with all their emotions, feelings and character. The most important painter in this revolution was Jan van Eyck, who was born into a family of painters in Maaseik, in around 1390. He died in Bruges, on 9 July 1441.

In the most famous of all the biographical collections compiled about Renaissance artists, *Vite de' Piú eccellenti architectti, pittore, et scultori* (Florence, 1550), Giorgio Vasari attributed Jan Van Eyck with the invention of oil painting, which is not exactly true. But there is no doubt that important progress was made at Van Eyck's workshop in the use of linseed and walnut oils, improving their applicability, transparency and drying speed. Such progress was essential for achieving greater subtlety when capturing the effects of light and a gradation of colours, as well as for obtaining transparencies that produced a brighter and more luminous final result. As early as 1456, another Florentine, Bartolommeo Fazio, wrote about "the illustrious men of his time", devoting several pages of his work to the praise of Van Eyck. Fazio underlined the artist's erudition and technique, but above all he applauded "the light that seems real", the beauty of his figures, the shines and the surfaces that reflect things "as if we were seeing them in a real mirror". Van Eyck's fame was due to both his technical mastery and his capacity to represent reality, not only in his compositions and landscapes, but also in the tiniest details of the faces, plants, architecture and adornments. The biographer Karel van Mander (*Schilder-Boek*, 1604) awarded Van Eyck the status of being the genuine initiator of Northern European painting, just as Vasari had awarded Cimabue and Giotto the heroic role of bringing back Italian painting from the darkness. In 1521, Albrecht Dürer went to Ghent, purposefully to see the altarpiece painted by the Van Eyck brothers, noting in his diary his impression of "a stupendous painting, full of intelligence".

Van Eyck was the first artist since antiquity to



Virgin and Child with St. Barbara, St. Elizabeth of Hungary and a Donor (Jan Vos)

Jan Van Eyck and workshop

1441-1443

Oil on wood, transferred to canvas, transferred to Masonite press-wood with oak veneer and cradled
Panel: 48,4 x 62,3 cm; painted surface: 47,4 x 61,3 cm

The Frick Collection, New York

Baron Rothschild, Paris (c. 1830); Rothschild family, Paris (until 1954)

entirely supplant the world of the artisan.

The painter of John of Bavaria, Jan van Eyck was already in Bruges in May 1425, when he was appointed the painter of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, and also became his valet de chambre. As such, he took part in several missions, some of which were shrouded in great secrecy. On one of these missions, he was sent to Italy and the Holy Land. On another, in 1428, he came to Portugal to paint the portrait of the daughter of Dom João I, Princess Isabel, the future Duchess of Burgundy. Van Eyck spent ten months in Portugal, participating in the wedding of Dom Duarte to Leonor of Aragon and visiting Santiago de Compostela and Granada. This trip was not without some artistic interest for

the painter: decorative tiles, architectural details and some specific features of the Mediterranean flora can be seen as examples in his painting of a certain exotic fascination that the south of Europe aroused in him. Besides his portraits of the princess (today, only one of these is known to exist, in the form of a watercolour copy), Van Eyck also painted a portrait of one of the ambassadors, Baudoin de Lannoy. In Portugal, he may have painted the small parchment glued to wood which represents *Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata*, from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which remained in a Portuguese collection until 1830. Another of his paintings was known as *The Portuguese Beauty*. It must also be stated that it was in Lisbon or Sintra that Van Eyck met the Valencian painter, Luís Dalmau, who belonged to the retinue of the bride of Dom Duarte, and whom he later met again in Flanders, when he was finishing the Ghent altarpiece.

Van Eyck's position at the court of Burgundy was important, not only as a social model for his contemporary and future colleagues, but also because this position afforded him a reasonable amount of social and economic freedom, which certainly enabled him to engage in technical research, and, above all, to enjoy a certain independence in relation to the market. In this way, he was able to carefully choose the clients that he worked for, and who were prepared to respect the lengthy deadlines that he set for the creation of extremely time-consuming works, which necessarily proved to be very expensive.

Above all, he painted portraits of personalities from the Court of the Duke of Burgundy, or rich Flemish and Italian traders, who particularly appreciated his work. In his religious painting, the donors almost always appeared in a direct relationship with the holy figures that were depicted in his work.

This model – of bringing the devout figure and the object of his or her devotion closer together – was created by Jan van Eyck (or, at least, disseminated by him), through the transfer of models previously used in illuminations to altarpieces. This is a kind of visualisation of the prayer made by the donor, accentuating the evocative power of his spiritual practice.

The painting that shows the Carthusian monk Jan Vos, the abbot of the Convent of Val-de-Grâce, close to Bruges, praying to the Virgin and Child, flanked by St. Barbara and St. Elizabeth of Hungary, is a good example of this type of “Eyckian” image. It is known that the painting was only completed in 1443, two years after Van Eyck's death, but the fact that the donor entered the convent from which the painting originates while Van Eyck was still alive has led most critics to accept that the great artist was responsible for the general conception of the painting and that he began the first work upon it. The painting was then continued at his workshop, which was kept running by his brother Lambert until 1450. The work repeats many characteristic features of Van Eyck's greatest works: the model of the floor, the pattern of the carpet, and, above all, the relationship between the painting's foreground and background, with the landscape stretching from the urban space to the distant line of the horizon. Such precious detail painted in a cold refinement is a constant feature of his work. In a phrase that later became famous, the historian Erwin Panofsky noted that “Jan van Eyck's eye functioned as a microscope and telescope at the same time”, so that the spectator is forced to divide attention between a point of view of some width and another of extreme proximity. He also ended by saying that neither of these instruments “is any good for observing the human heart”.

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