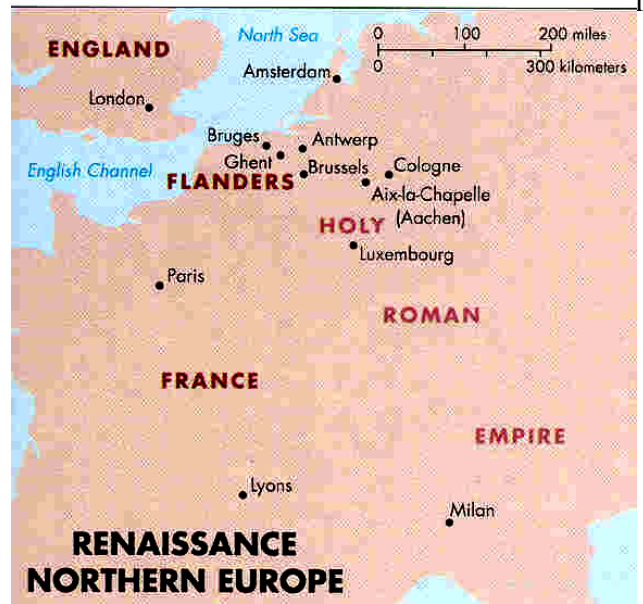


Excerpted from Gene A. Mittler, *Art in Focus*. New York: MacMillan, 1994, 389 – 399.

With Sight and Feeling: Fifteenth-Century Art in Northern Europe

The fifteenth century saw commerce and industry thrive in northern Europe just as in Italy. This contributed to the growth of cities and a vigorous middle class. The people of this new middle class did not exhibit the same interest in the spiritual life as had their medieval ancestors. Their thoughts were fixed on the here and now rather than on an eternal life after death. They placed their faith in a future on earth and preferred to enjoy the pleasures and material possessions of this world instead of preparing for spiritual rewards in the next.



Renaissance Painting in Northern Europe

Throughout the century, most artists in northern Europe remained true to the traditions of the Late Medieval period. This was especially true in architecture. The construction of churches and government buildings in the Gothic style lasted into the next century. However, the progress of painting in the North during this time was more complicated.



Fig. 17-1. Robert Campin (Master of Flamalle), *Joseph in His Workshop*, right panel from *The Merode Altarpiece*, C. 1425-28. Oil on wood. 25 3/8 x 10 3/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Continuation of the International Style

The change from a medieval art style to a more modern art style began later and progressed more slowly in northern Europe than it did in Italy. Northern painters showed little interest in the classical art of ancient Greece and Rome. While Italian artists were busy studying ancient art, northern artists carried on and developed further the International style. For this reason, their paintings continued to show a great concern for accurate and precise details. Artists spent countless hours painting the delicate design on a garment, the leaves on a tree, or the wrinkles on a face. At the same time, symbolism, which was so important in Gothic art, grew even more important. Many of the details placed in a picture had special meanings. For example, a single burning candle meant the presence of God; a dog was a symbol of loyalty; and fruit signified the innocence of humanity before the Fall in the Garden of Eden.

Development of the Oil-Painting Technique

Up to this time, European artists were accustomed to using **tempera**, a paint made of dry pigments, or colors, which are mixed with a binding material. A binder is a liquid that holds together the grains of pigment in paint. Typically, this binder was egg yolk, although gum and casein were also used. Tempera paint was applied to a surface, often a wooden panel, which had been prepared with a smooth coating of **gesso**, a mixture of glue and a white pigment such as plaster, chalk, or white clay. This painting method produced a hard, brilliant surface, which was used for many medieval altarpieces.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the northern artist's concern for precision and detail was aided by the development in Flanders of a new oil-painting technique. **Oil paints** consist of a mixture of dry pigments with oils, turpentine, and sometimes varnish. With such a mixture, artists could produce either a transparent, smooth glaze, or a thick, richly textured surface.

The change from tempera paint to oil was not a sudden one. At first, oil paints were used as transparent glazes placed over tempera underpaintings. The solid forms of figures and objects were modeled with light and dark values of tempera. Then oil glazes were applied

over them, adding a transparent, glossy, and permanent surface. Later, artists abandoned the use of an underpainting and applied the oil paint directly to the canvas, often building up a thick, textured surface in the process.

One of the more important advantages of the oil-painting technique was that it slowed down the drying time. This gave artists the chance to work more leisurely. With the new technique, there was no need to hurry as the Italian artists had while working in fresco. Thus, artists had time to include more details in their pictures. Also, the layers of transparent glazes added a new brilliance to the colors so that finished paintings looked as if they were lit from within. The artist usually given credit for developing this new painting technique was the Flemish master Jan van Eyck (yahn van ike).

The Flemish Influence: Jan van Eyck

The art of Jan van Eyck and his successors made Flanders the art center of northern Europe. Throughout the fifteenth century, the art produced by Flemish artists was a great influence on other artists in Europe, from Germany to Spain. Nowhere, however, did it reach the lofty heights achieved by van Eyck and two other Flemish artists, Rogier van der Weyden and Hugo van der Goes.

Jan van Eyck was mostly a product of the late Middle Ages, although he went beyond the older traditions of the exceedingly detailed International style to introduce a new painting tradition. Like other northern artists, he did not turn his back on the International style as did many Italian artists at this time. Instead, he used it as a starting point. As a result, his break with the past was not as sudden as that of Italian artists such as Masaccio.

Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride

One of van Eyck's best-known works is a painting of two people standing side by side in a neat, comfortably furnished room (Figure 17.3). The room is modest in size and illuminated by a subdued light entering through an open window at the left. But who are these people and what are they doing? The man is Giovanni Arnolfini and the woman at his side is his bride. You are witnessing in this extraordinary painting their marriage ceremony.

Giovanni Arnolfini was a rich Italian merchant who lived in Flanders. Since he was from the city of Lucca, it is probable that he became wealthy by selling the beautiful silk brocade for which that town was famous. Like many other Italians in Flanders, he no doubt sold other luxury goods as well and may have worked as a banker. When Giovanni Arnolfini decided to marry Jeanne de Chenay in 1434, he looked for the best artist available to paint a picture of their wedding. He found that artist in Jan van Eyck, who made him, his bride, and their wedding immortal.



Figure 17.3 Jan van Eyck Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride. 1434. Oil on panel, 33 x 22.5". National Gallery London England



The wedding couple solemnly faces the witnesses to the ceremony. Giovanni raises his right hand as if he is saying an oath, while his bride places her right hand in his left. Her frail body seems lost in the full, green, fur-lined dress. Her curving posture may look odd, but at that time it was considered quite fashionable to stand that way. Both figures look real but frozen in their poses. The face of the bride is white and smooth as a china doll's. However, Giovanni's is much more natural. Given the opportunity to examine the actual painting, you would be able to see the stubble on his chin.

Van Eyck's picture is rich in detail; every part of it is painted with a precision rarely equaled in art. In the mirror on the far wall of the room are shown the

reflection of the room, the backs of Giovanni and his bride, and two other people standing in the doorway. These two people face the bride and groom and are probably the witnesses to the exchange of vows. Above the mirror is a Latin inscription that reads, "Jan van Eyck was here." Many scholars contend that van Eyck is one of those witnesses seen in the mirror.

Numerous symbols can be found in Jan van Eyck's painting of the wedding ceremony. The couple have removed their shoes as a sign that they are standing on holy ground. It is holy because of the blessed event taking place there. The burning candle in the chandelier tells you that God is present at the solemn ceremony, while the little dog between them represents the loyalty that the husband and wife pledge to each other. Innocence is suggested by the fruit on the table and windowsill. From the finial of the bed's headboard hangs a whisk broom, symbolizing care of the home.

Adoration of the Lamb

Van Eyck's painting of the *Adoration of the Lamb* (Figure 17.5, right) is the central lower panel of a large (14.5 x 11 feet) altarpiece containing twelve panels. It shows angels, saints, and earthly worshipers coming from all directions through a green valley toward a sacrificial altar. A lamb, one of the

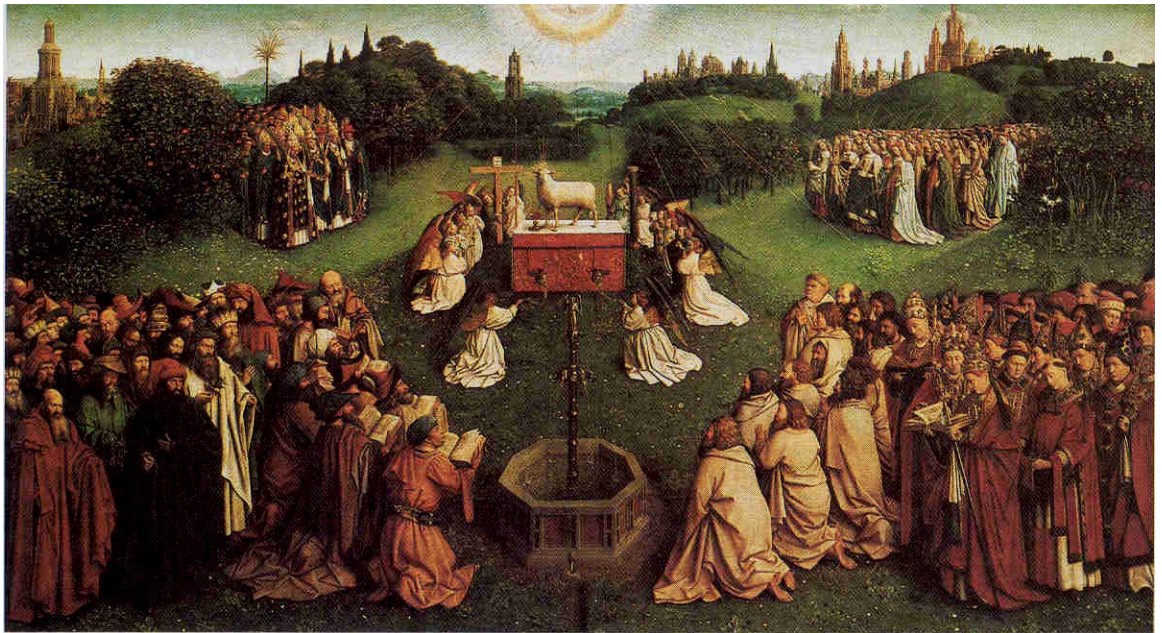


Figure 17.5 Jan van Eyck. *Adoration of the Lamb*, central panel from *The Ghent Altarpiece* 1432 Tempera and oil on wood St. Bavo, Ghent, Belgium. Notice how the arrangement of figures directs your attention to the lamb on the altar, as well as how van Eyck used hue to create the illusion of deep space.

symbols of Christ, stands on this altar. Blood from the lamb flows into a chalice. In the foreground is

a fountain from which flows the pure water of eternal life. Most likely this painting was inspired by a passage from the Bible that refers to Christ as the Paschal, or sacrificial, Lamb. The symbolism in the picture conveys the belief that eternal salvation is possible for all because of Christ's willingness to sacrifice his life on the cross, and that his death made possible the water of salvation received by the faithful at baptism.

The scene is carefully organized so that the lamb is the obvious center of interest. The placement of the angels kneeling at the altar and the prophets and other worshipers around the fountain serves to lead your eye to this center of interest. Other groups of saints and worshipers move toward it from each of the four corners of the painting. The two groups in the foreground form wedges that point to the center of interest.

Like Masaccio, van Eyck controls the flow of light and uses atmospheric perspective to create the illusion of deep space in his work. However, unlike that in Masaccio's work, the light in van Eyck's painting is crystal clear. It allows you to see perfectly the color, texture, and shape of every object. Van Eyck was less interested in telling the viewer how he felt about things. Instead, he took pride in demonstrating his ability to see very clearly and pass on to others with his paint and brushes the wonders he discovered in the world around him.

The details in van Eyck's picture are painted with extraordinary care. The soft texture of hair, the glitter and luster of precious jewels, and the richness of brocade are all painted with the same concern for precision. Every object, no matter how small or insignificant, is given equal importance. This attention to detail enabled van Eyck to create a special kind of realism—realism in which the color, shape, and texture of every object were painted only after long study.

Even with all the advantages of modern science, it is still not known how van Eyck was able to achieve many of his effects. Somehow, by combining a study of nature with a sensitive use of light and color, he was able to produce paintings that others admired but could not duplicate. No painter has ever been able to match van Eyck's marvelous precision and glowing color.

Northern Art Combines Emotionalism and Realism

Gradually, northern fifteenth-century art developed into a style that combined the realism of Jan van Eyck with the emotionalism and attention to design found in works done during the late Gothic period. This style is best seen in the works of another northern artist.

Rogier van der Weyden

Jan van Eyck had been concerned with painting every detail with careful precision. Rogier van der Weyden (*roh-jair van der vy-den*) continued in this tradition, but also added some new ideas of his own.

Descent from the Cross

In Rogier's painting of the *Descent from the Cross* (figure 17.6), you will see more emotion and a greater concern for organization than you will find in van Eyck's pictures. In this instance, organization is achieved through use of repeating curved axis lines. Observe how the two figures at each side of the picture bend inward and direct your attention to Christ and his mother. In the center of the picture, Christ's lifeless body forms an S curve, which is repeated in the curve of his fainting mother. Unlike van Eyck, Rogier made no attempt to create a deep space. Space is restricted as if to compress the action across the surface of the painting. Rogier managed to group ten figures in this shallow space without making them seem crowded. By placing these figures on a narrow stage and eliminating a landscape behind, he forces you to focus your attention on the drama of Christ's removal from the cross. The figures and the action are brought very close to you, forcing you to take in every detail. This enables you to see that the faces clearly differ from one another just as the faces of real people do. Every hair, every variation of skin color and texture, and every fold of drapery is painted in with care.



Rogier does not stop there. Equal attention is given to the emotions exhibited by the different facial expressions and gestures. No two people react in the same way. In fact, the entire work is a carefully designed and forceful grouping of these different emotional reactions to Christ's death. Yet, one of the most touching features is also one of the easiest to miss. The space between the two hands—Christ's right and Mary's left—suggests the void between the living and the dead. It may seem like a minor point, but once you notice those hands, so close and yet so far apart, you are not likely to forget them or their meaning.

Portrait of a Lady

Rogier van der Weyden was a very popular artist, and many people wanted their portraits painted by him. One of those people was a young woman, unknown to us today, whose portrait (Figure 17.7) Rogier painted some twenty years after the



Figure 17.7 Rogier van der Weyden. *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1460. Oil on oak. Approx. 13 3/8 x 10 5/8". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C

Descent from the Cross. The woman's face, framed by a white, starched headdress, stands out boldly against a dark background. Light flows evenly over it, revealing a pleasant, but not beautiful, woman. The headdress is thin and transparent, allowing you to see the line of her shoulder. You might not think so at first, but this is a remarkable portrait. Look at it closely. Now, what does this painting tell you about the personality of the woman? Rogier provided you with clues to answer questions like these. The lowered eyes, tightly locked fingers, and frail build all suggest quiet dignity. The young woman is lost in thought, her clasped hands seemingly resting on the frame. She must have been wealthy but does not flaunt her good fortune. A gold belt buckle and rings are the only signs of luxury. Even though it is not known who the woman was, Rogier has left us with a vivid impression of the kind of person she must have been.

Rogier's Influence

Rogier van der Weyden performed a valuable service by preserving the Gothic concerns for good design and vivid emotion. Those concerns could have been lost in the rush to use van Eyck's new oil-painting technique to produce highly detailed pictures, but Rogier's paintings set an example for other artists. When he died in 1464 after being the most famous painter in Flanders for thirty years, his influence was second to none outside Italy.

Hugo van der Goes

One of the artists who continued in the direction taken by Rogier was Hugo van der Goes (*hoo-go van der goose*). Hugo combined the emotionalism of Rogier with the realistic detail of Jan van Eyck. In addition, he made his own unique contribution: He was not afraid to alter or distort nature or the proportion of people or objects if it would add to the emotional impact of his picture.

Hugo van der Goes rose to fame as an artist in Bruges, one of the wealthiest cities in Flanders. At the peak of his popularity and while he was still a young man, he entered a monastery near Brussels where he remained the rest of his life. Hugo however, did not retire to a strict life of prayer and meditation when he entered the monastery as did other men who chose the monastic life. Apparently, he was regarded as something of a celebrity because of his talent as a painter and enjoyed special favors. He continued to work as a painter and enjoyed a great many luxuries not available to other monks, but he suffered from fits of depression and thought that he was destined to everlasting punishment in the next world because of his sinful ways. Hugo van der Goes, the unhappy genius, died in 1482 only seven years after entering the monastery.

The Portinari Altarpiece

Hugo's most ambitious work was an altarpiece completed in 1476 for the Italian representative of the Medici bank in Bruges. This huge work is known as the Portinari Altarpiece after the name of this banker. It is especially important because it was sent to Florence soon after it was completed. There it was a great influence on late-fifteenth-century Italian artists who were deeply impressed by Hugo's ability to portray human character and feeling.

Unlike van Eyck, Hugo decided not to organize the space in his picture so that it would look real. Instead, he took liberties with space to increase the emotional appeal of his picture. In the central panel of his altarpiece showing *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (Figure 17.9), he tipped the floor of the stable upward. This not only gives you a better view but makes you feel as though you are an on-the-spot witness to the event. However, a clear view of Hugo's version of the Nativity leads



Figure 17.9 Hugo van der Goes. *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, central panel of *The Portinari Altarpiece*. c. 1476 Approx. 8'3" x 10'1" Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy

to some strange discoveries. Where is the joy and gladness usually associated with the birth of Christ? Joseph and Mary both seem strangely withdrawn, even sad. This was odd behavior for such a joyous event. Could it be that they are thinking ahead to the suffering in store for their son? Of course you cannot know for sure what Joseph and Mary are thinking, but one thing is certain: Hugo's picture succeeds in arousing your curiosity. He makes it difficult for you not to think ahead in time to the tragic events awaiting the Christ Child.

More strange discoveries await you in Hugo's painting. Notice the unusual differences in the sizes of the figures—the angels closest to you should be much larger than the figures farther back in space. Instead they look much smaller. Also, the three shepherds at the right are about the same size as Mary even though they are farther away. It is unlikely that these differences in size are due to this artist's lack of skill. There must be some other explanation. Could Hugo have been trying to paint this scene as if he were seeing it in a dream or a vision? This is a possibility, since the figures in a dream would not have to follow the rules of logic. Large and small figures could be placed next to each other or could even float about in space.

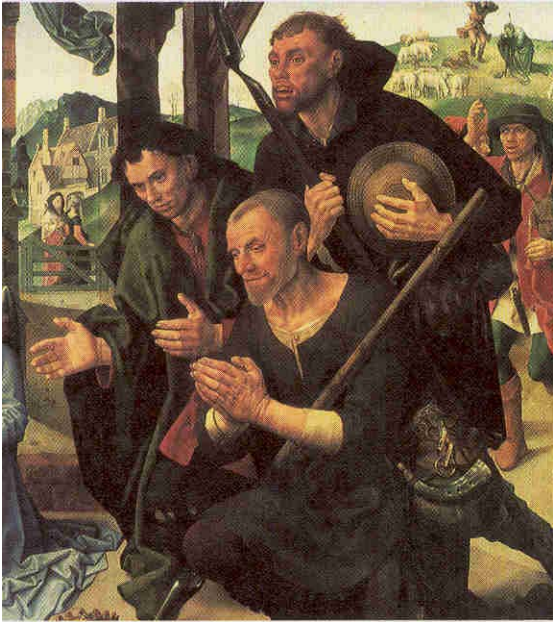


Figure 17.10 Hugo van der Goes *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (detail)

One of the most fascinating things about Hugo's painting is his portrayal of the three shepherds (Figure 17.10). More than anything else, their behavior and expressions set this painting apart from countless other Nativity scenes produced since the early Christian period. It was Hugo's painting of these shepherds that later caused so much excitement among the Italian artists who saw this picture. They had never seen figures painted like this before. Hugo's shepherds are not saints, or angels, or elegant noblemen. They are ragged, coarse peasants from the lowest level of society. They represent the great masses of common people in the world who are as interested in salvation as anyone else. Their crudeness, curiosity, and blind faith contrast with the quiet dignity and grace of the adoring angels. One of the kneeling shepherds clasps his hands reverently, while another spreads his in wonder. Meanwhile, the standing shepherd presses forward to peer over their heads, his mouth open in amazement. In different ways, each of these shepherds shows his surprise at finding himself witnessing a grand and glorious event. It is an event, however, that they cannot fully understand. With these poor, rough shepherds, Hugo presents a new kind of piety. It is a piety expressed by the ordinary uneducated people of the world, a piety based on blind faith rather than on knowledge and understanding.

In the manner of Jan van Eyck, the *Portinari Altarpiece* is enriched by the addition of symbols. A sheaf of wheat in the foreground symbolizes the bread of the Eucharist. The bouquets of iris and columbine are traditional symbols for the sorrows of Mary. The shoe at the left, you will recall, is the same symbol in van Eyck's *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*. It is a reminder of God's words to Moses from a burning bush on Mount Sinai: "...put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

The donkey and the ox standing behind the manger also had a symbolic meaning in this painting. In medieval times these two animals were often used to illustrate the different ways in which people reacted to Christ. The donkey was used to symbolize those who failed to recognize Christ as the Savior, while the ox represented those who did. In earlier works, the unconcerned donkey was sometimes shown eating or, at other times, even tugging on the swaddling clothes of the Christ Child. This symbolism was used to show that it was either too ignorant or too stupid to understand the meaning of Christ's birth. In contrast, the enlightened ox was frequently shown kneeling in adoration before the Child. In this painting, the donkey is idly eating the straw in the manger, while the ox is solemnly surveying the miracle of Christ's birth.

The art of Hugo van der Goes marks the end of a period. The innovations of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden began to lose ground by the end of the fifteenth century. They were replaced by new ideas spreading northward from Renaissance Italy.