

VAN EYCK



MASTERS OF ART

VAN EYCK

Alexander Adams

PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

Front Cover: *The Ghent Altarpiece (Adoration of the Mystic Lamb)*,
1432, St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent (detail, see page 53)
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A member of Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe GmbH
Neumarkter Straße 28 · 81673 Munich

1st edition 2026

produktsicherheit@penguinrandomhouse.de

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Editorial direction: Anja Besserer
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Production management: Pia Schwarzmann
Design: Florian Frohnholzer, Sofarobotnik
Typesetting: Fotosatz Amann GmbH & Co. KG, Memmingen
Separations: Reproline mediateam
Printing and binding: Livonia Print, Riga
Typeface: Cera Pro
Printed in Latvia
ISBN 978-3-7913-9460-2
www.prestel.com

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INTRODUCTION

As with Homer, we attribute to Jan van Eyck (c. 1390–1441) and his brother Hubert the double honours of both founding and perfecting an art form. In its moment of birth a great art form was originated, reached its zenith and doomed all subsequent practitioners to the ignominy of failing to match the peerless originator.

Yet, perhaps inevitably, it is not so simple. Of the Early Renaissance great painters, there are many innovators. There is the formal inventiveness of Masaccio, the emotional drama of Giotto and the spiritual transcendence of van der Weyden. What we get with Jan van Eyck (who will be called “van Eyck” in most of this book) is a magical sense of presence, clarity and wonder at the visible world. In order to explain the brilliance and subtlety of their paintings, Vasari attributed to the van Eyck brothers the invention of oil paint. This claim Carel van Mander, chronicler of Early Netherlandish artists, repeated. Yet, for two hundred years we have known that oil painting was practised before the van Eycks and in the South Netherlands. Both the van Eycks and Robert Campin used oil painting to replace the stiffer, less versatile tempera painting, where egg yolk is the pigment binder. When pigment is blended with linseed or walnut oil, the resultant paint is slow drying—meaning it can be blended with adjacent paint—and could achieve translucency, which permits subtle colour effects. If others painted in oils before him, van Eyck’s breakthrough could not have been primarily technical.

Innovations in materials accompanied insights into colour and perspective that allowed unprecedented naturalism. Within his lifetime, van Eyck was noted for a devotion to geometry and optics that allowed him to excel and made his art a lodestar for artists who followed. In 1953, Erwin Panofsky described van Eyck’s approach as embodying a new spirit of materialism, associated with increased scientific interest in the natural world. Not content with conventions, van Eyck went directly to nature as the foundation of his art. This view of Netherlandish art of the Early Renaissance proved immensely influential. The combination of technical advances, an increased appetite for a scientific understanding of nature and renewed interest in the ancient pre-Christian world is what we describe as the European Renaissance, of which van Eyck is a primary practitioner.

Ultimately, a combination of technical inventiveness in materials, advances in perspective and geometry, an intensive commitment to observation and a wholly personal dedication to perfection—though not to naturalism per se—elevates van Eyck above those who followed and all who preceded. His skill as a painter of imagination and narration (easily overlooked) will be touched upon in this account.

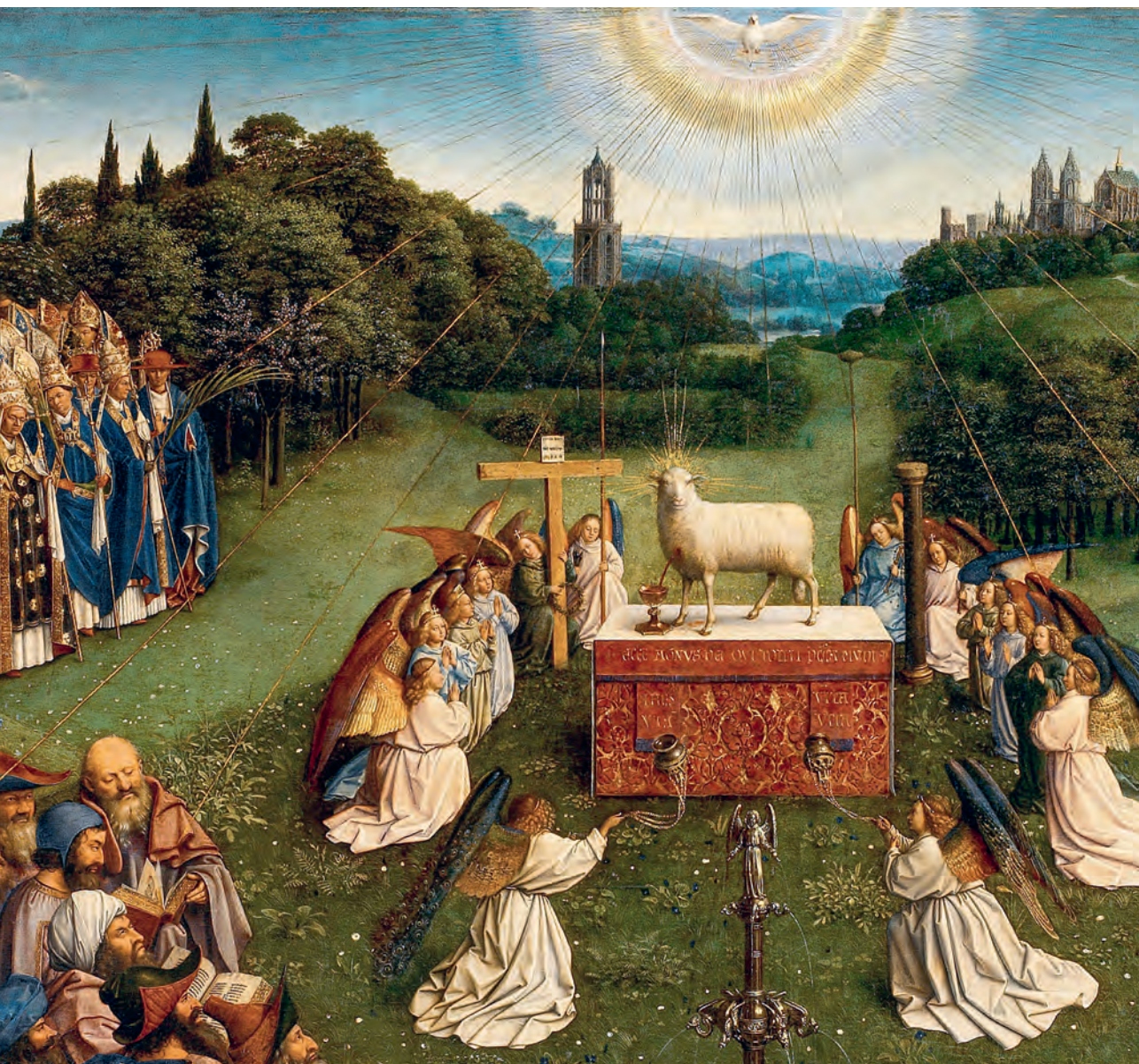
This book reproduces all of the oil paintings and drawings generally considered to be by van Eyck. There are also copies of lost originals by the master and pieces towards which van Eyck's workshop contributed. His masterpiece, *The Ghent Altarpiece*—a canonical work of art that is a keystone of Western culture—is grand and profusely intricate but we have selected just a few details, even though the entire book could be filled with more of them.

This account will refer to the "Low Countries" and "South Netherlands" and use the adjective "Netherlandish" (rather than Flanders and the Flemish) as this denotes the early period of the region. The van Eycks are "Flemish primitives", as early art historians put it.

Many histories of art start with van Eyck. His body of work is not only high in quality, distinctive and relatively sizeable, it is also signed and dated—he was one of the first artists to sign paintings. Aside from van Eyck's invaluable inscriptions that date paintings, we have no documents that date pictures indirectly, so all pictures undated have had their chronological order inferred by circumstantial deduction. It is worth remembering that questions of authorship and authenticity are modern matters that were not apprehended the same way in the Early Renaissance. Commissions were given to artist workshops in expectation that resultant pieces would conform to the workshop's style and quality, not that the master had to paint pictures personally. Untangling attribution of specific paintings is too complex for a general survey, therefore only the most salient arguments will be presented.

The book summarises new arguments regarding transfer of information between different centres of learning. That research—plus fresh insights from scientific analysis—add to our understanding of the rich and remarkable revolution that the van Eyck brothers so exemplified.

Author's note: Departing the Masters of Art series convention, we have sequenced the Works chapter according to the chronology in which we deduce van Eyck made his paintings, regardless of whether the work is an original or a copy. A couple of works have been grouped out of sequence to help the reader better understand van Eyck's artistic development.



LIFE





The story of Jan van Eyck cannot be other than a partial story of the van Eyck family and collaborators. We have to infer matters relating to Jan and his workshop from known facts about associates because of an absence of detailed biographical information about him and because his training and legacy are tied to his relatives. During his lifetime, Jan's reputation was linked to that of his brother Hubert, who was eulogised in the inscription upon the definitive work of the van Eyck family: *The Ghent Altarpiece*. Comprehending workshop practice in the South Netherlandish lands and how that was intertwined with family obligations and guild affiliation is invaluable to our appreciation of van Eyck. Acknowledging that this shooting star of individual genius is also a representative of a family and workshop is critical, however paradoxical that may appear.

An estimated year of c. 1390 is currently agreed for Jan van Eyck's birth, discounting previous suggestions of around 1380–5. Testimony that Jan van Eyck was born in Maaseyck is considered convincing. Closer to the Bishopric of Cologne than Bruges, Maaseyck was under the jurisdiction of francophone Liège, demonstrating the complicated patchwork of cultures in the Low Countries. Maaseyck and nearby towns on the river Maas (Meuse) were home to artisans of high calibre, meaning Jan could have seen good visual art when young.

Jan's generation of his family were artists, although we do not know his father's profession. An account of the heraldry on Jan's tombstone (now lost) suggests a noble origin, but this conflicts with the family being engaged in the artisanal trade. Jan

had an elder brother Hubert van Eyck (c. 1385/90–1426), who would become a respected painter in Ghent and is known to have died on 18 September 1426. Another brother Lambert van Eyck (active 1431–after 1442) was a painter. Sister Margaret van Eyck (c. 1370/90–1430?) may have been a painter of illuminations, but we have scant information about her. Painter Barthélemy d'Eyck (c. 1420–1470), called the Master of the Aix Annunciation, is presumed to have been a relative but an exact relationship with Jan has not been ascertained.

The first available written documents concerning Jan van Eyck place him in The Hague from at least November 1422 until January 1425, serving John III of Bavaria-Straubing (1374–1425) as court painter and *valet de chambre* (personal servant). Called John the Pitiless, John was first the Prince-Bishop of Liège (1389–1418), then Duke of Bavaria-Straubing and Count of Holland and Hainaut (1418–1425). John earned his epithet "pitiless" due to his brutal punishment of Liègois rebels following his army's defeat of the 1408 uprising in Liège. The bishopric of Liège encompassed the district of Maaseyck, which is perhaps how John came to encounter the youthful Jan, whom he would summon to the seat of government in 1422.

This raises the question of where Jan and Hubert trained. We have no documents or anecdotal history that places the brothers in an artist's studio and no record of either being part of a painters' guild, although their titles attest to them having completed apprenticeships. No historian has been able to nominate a suitable predecessor in the region who might have trained them. It has been

suggested that if Hubert were significantly older than Jan, he might have trained his younger brother. That does not answer the question of who trained Hubert.

As accounts of Western art sometimes start with van Eyck, it is too easy to assume that van Eyck was the beginning of the north European artist workshop system. Actually, the system had developed in the Dark Ages or early Medieval period; the guild system was already established and expanding when van Eyck was born. Craftsmen often learned their trade and gained the status of a master before setting up a business that would include other family members, who could be trained to master status or work in subsidiary roles. Every artist was required to undergo an apprenticeship of two to six years in the workshop of a guild member, usually commencing in their early teenage years. They started with menial tasks, such as collecting, delivering, cleaning, feeding fires and so forth before being instructed in preparing panels, grinding colours and drawing on tablets. After extensive practice in drawing, they were given exercises in painting before being delegated to undertake simple parts in paintings, gaining knowledge and skill.

They were encouraged to develop skills but it was understood that they would imitate the workshop style so that they could integrate with colleagues. Consistency of style and quality were essential in single pictures and among the overall output of a studio. Only after completing this training and submitting a masterpiece to the guild for approval were pupils granted "master" status

and (upon payment of an annual fee) allowed to open their own workshop, undertake commissions and instruct pupils themselves. Court artists were exempted from these rules.

Tradition has it that St Luke was the first Christian artist, who drew the Madonna and Child. Hence the guild of painters and sculptors adopted St Luke as their symbolic patron. Rogier van der Weyden's enchanting depiction of St Luke (page 10) is one of many pictures in which painters depicted themselves paying homage to Virgin and Christ child. Rogier was a little younger than van Eyck and quickly refined his approach to resemble van Eyck's, demonstrating a willingness to surpass the style his own master taught him.

In 1422 the Binnenhof (royal court) was being decorated, so it is supposed that van Eyck would have played a role in designing, overseeing and participating in this work. Courtly buildings were decorated with paintings—both murals and portable panels—carvings and tapestries, as well as custom-made stained glass, tiles for floors and walls and designs for furnishings. He is recorded as "court painter" but these responsibilities would have included decoration, restoration and scrutiny of transactions related to this work, as well as supervising pupils and contractors.

We have only a handful of pictures that might have come from this period. The most often cited are illustrations from the *Turin-Milan Hours*, an illuminated manuscript that has been split between archives in Turin, Milan and Paris (page 14). Of multiple individual artists who worked upon the book, Hand G is considered to be van Eyck.