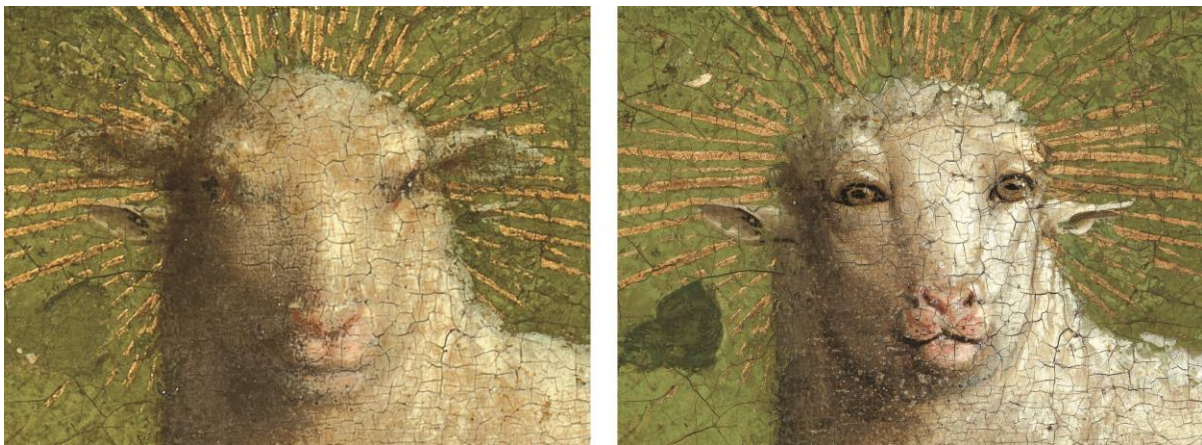


Presentation of the original Lamb in the *Ghent Altarpiece* by the Van Eyck Brothers



L: before treatment | R: after overpaint removal

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Press conference | 19 June 2018 | Ghent Museum of Fine Arts (MSK)

Programme

9u30

Reception with coffee at the entrance hall of the MSK Ghent

10u00

Welcome by **Cathérine Verleysen**, director a.i. MSK

Annelies Storms, Alderwoman of Culture, City of Ghent

Hilde De Clercq, General Director a.i. KIK-IRPA

Hélène Dubois, Head of restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece, KIK-IRPA

Koenraad Jonckheere, Art history professor, UGent

Final word by canon **Ludo Collin**, rector of St Bavo's Cathedral

10u30

Photo and film opportunity and interviews at the outside of the Ghent Altarpiece atelier

11u30

End

Restorers of the KIK-IRPA uncover Van Eyck's original Lamb

After intensive research, the restoration team of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels) has removed the old overpaint that masked the main figure of the *Ghent Altarpiece* for nearly five centuries. As such, the well-known Lamb – an impassive and rather neutral figure, with a wide forehead and large ears – has given way to Van Eyck's original. With its intense gaze this medieval Lamb, characterized by a graphically defined snout and large frontal eyes, draws the viewer into the scene of His ultimate sacrifice.

Old overpaint

The Lamb was overpainted in the middle of the sixteenth century as part of a larger intervention carried out to cover up small damages and early, clumsy restorations, and to give the masterpiece a fresh appearance. During a restoration in 1951, the removal of green overpaint surrounding the head exposed the original, smaller ears, creating the impression that the Lamb had four ears.

Multidisciplinary research, carried out by KIK-IRPA in collaboration with scientists from the universities of Ghent and Antwerp, revealed that around 45% of the paint surface of the central panel with the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb was overpainted in the sixteenth century. Apart from the Lamb, the overpainted areas mostly concerned the sky, the buildings and hills in the background, the draperies, and the altar cloth. Only 3% of the Van Eycks' original paint layers has been lost, and overpaint can be carefully removed.

The real Van Eyck

While removing the overpaint – a delicate operation carried out under the microscope with surgical scalpels – the restorers discovered a subtly shaded sky with streaks of clouds above graceful mountains. The original buildings, overpainted with greyish layers, were painted in a variety of colours, with a beautiful play of light. Even previously hidden buildings are emerging from beneath the much simpler overpaint at the horizon. Solid-coloured garments make place for luminous draperies with complex folds defined by delicate highlights and deep shadows.

A spectacular restoration campaign

The current phase of the campaign – the treatment of The adoration of the Mystic Lamb and its side panels – will be completed for the Van Eyck Year 2020. Following overpaint removal, losses will be inpainted, and the paintings varnished. At the end of 2016, the restored panels and frames of the exterior side panels were praised highly upon their return to St Bavo's Cathedral. After the Van Eyck

Year, the upper register of the open altarpiece will be treated: the final stage of an unprecedentedly spectacular restoration campaign.

Hilde De Clercq, acting general director of the KIK-IRPA: “the revelation of the original paint layers of the *Ghent Altarpiece* opens a new era of viewing pleasure and historical research. The KIK-IRPA, with its trademark multidisciplinary approach, is very proud to fulfill a key role in the rediscovery of the sublime paintings of the Van Eycks. The uncovering of the original Lamb is a symbolic highlight in this fascinating process.

Change of guard in KIK-IRPA’s restoration team

During his six years as on-site coordinator of the *Ghent Altarpiece* project, Bart Devolder impressed colleagues and visitors alike with his remarkable skills. But the US were watching and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse... We wish Bart the best of luck as the brand-new Conservator of Collections at the prestigious Princeton University Art Museum! In Ghent, he will be expertly replaced by restorer Kathleen Froyen. H  l  ne Dubois is the head of the restoration project and is currently also working on her PhD dissertation at the university of Ghent on the material history of *the Ghent Altarpiece*.

The restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck is financed by the Flemish government (80%) and by the Baillet Latour Fund (20%). Research is supported by the KIK-IRPA, BELSPO, the Gieskes-Strijbis fund and the universities of Antwerp and Ghent.

To see the panel of the *Adoration*, visit the Ghent Museum of Fine Arts during weekends. During weekdays the restorers are continuing overpaint removal. For this intervention, the panel must be laid flat and is not visible for the public.



Koenraad Jonckheere, Ghent University: the *Mystic Lamb*

Conservation-restoration campaigns and the associated multidisciplinary research often raise important discoveries. The collaboration of conservators, chemists and art historians teaming up around objects allows for new insights into how a masterpiece was made, how it changed throughout history, and on the original intention of the artist. Teaming up with Ghent University through a multidisciplinary research project involving the faculties of Science and Arts and Humanities (GOA project, *Archaeometrical study of the Ghent Altarpiece*, 2012-2017), the team of experts and restorers were able to somewhat demystify the Mystic Lamb.

Indeed, when the conservation project of the *Adoration of the Mystic lamb* started in 2012, expectations were high but no-one could predict that this restoration would be such a revelation of the Van Eycks' original vision.

The removal of overpaint from the reverse of the wings, which are now back in the cathedral, brought to light Van Eyck's extraordinary stylization of reality. Portraits appear even more unprecedentedly faithful reproductions of human beings, but simultaneously the artist transformed reality into ambiguous and fascinating renditions. The folds of fabrics become intricate prismatic shapes, Platonic solids almost and the uncannily precise rendition of stones and furs, or the reflection of light are almost unsettling.

This masterly vision is further revealed by the removal of extensive layers of opaque overpaint that were likely applied in the middle of the 16th century. The aim seems to have been to hide abrasions, local damage and old restorations, i.e. to make the altarpiece look as if it was perfectly preserved. This 'renovation' respected the original contours of the draperies and architecture although the original colors were slightly modified, the shapes simplified. It was probably carried out by Lancelot Blondeel and Jan van Scorel who, according to the Ghent chronicler Marcus Van Vaernewijck "came to Ghent and started to wash this painting, the year 1550, the 15th of September, with such love, so that they have cleansed this precious work in many places".¹

In her PhD research at Ghent University, H el ene Dubois proposes that this restoration took place in the context of important building works in the church, which were financed through a donation of the Emperor Charles V. Blondeel and van Scorel were very famous artists at the time, who were well-connected to the Habsburg court. Their careful overpainting campaign subtly adapted the

¹ (...) « ooc Meester Lanchelot van Brugghe ende Meester Jan Schoore Canonic van Utrecht ooc trefflicke schilders, sijn te Ghendt ghecommen, ende begonden dees tafel te wasschen, anno XV. Hondert vijftich, den vijftiensten Septembris, met zulcker liefden, dat zy dat constich werk in veel plaetsen ghecust hebben(...)» Marcus Van Vaernewijck, *Den Spieghel der Nederlandscher audtheyt...*, Gent, 1568, f° 117 v.

shapes to the taste of the time and to some sort neutralized the Van Eyck's intense and humanized identification of the Lamb into an expressionless animal, seemingly unaffected by what was about to come.

The theological connotations of both versions are yet to be studied, but what was intensely debated already in the 15th century, and certainly in the sixteenth century was the nature of the Lamb. The biblical sources used for the *Adoration*, such as the Apocalypse of the Gospel according to John, probably have influenced the original intense rendition of the Lamb of God. What the implications were, needs to be studied, but what seems clear is that this painting was an object in a contemporary societal debate.

Photos for publication | Contact bart.desitter@viaa.be for the HR images



Foto / photo 1



Detail hoofd van het Lam voor behandeling

Détail de la tête de l'Agneau avant traitement

Detail head of the Lamb before treatment

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Foto / photo 2



Detail hoofd van het Lam na het verwijderen van de overschildering

Détail de la tête de l'Agneau après l'enlèvement du surpeint

Detail head of the Lamb after overpaint removal

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Foto / photo 3



L: Detail hoofd van het Lam voor behandeling | R: na het verwijderen van de overschildering

À gauche : Détail de la tête de l'Agneau avant traitement | à droite : après enlèvement du surpeint

L: Detail head of the Lamb before treatment | R: after overpaint removal

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Foto / photo 4



Detail van de Maagdgroep tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Détail du groupe des Vierges pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

Detail of the group of Virgins during overpaint removal

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Foto / photo 5



Detail van de Apostelgroep tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Détail du groupe des Apôtres pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

Detail of the Apostle group during overpaint removal

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Foto / photo 6



Detail van de lucht tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering. De originele wolken komen tevoorschijn in de lichtblauwe lucht aan de linkerkzijde

Détail du ciel pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint. Les nuages originaux réapparaissent dans le ciel plus clair côté gauche

Detail of the sky during overpaint removal. The original clouds appear in the lighter blue sky (left hand side)

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Foto / photo 7



Totaalaanzicht tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Vue d'ensemble pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

Overall view during removal of the overpaint

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Foto / photo 8



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

During removal of the overpaint

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Foto / photo 9



Onderzoek met de 3D digitale microscoop van de UGent

Examen avec le microscope numérique 3D de l'université de Gand

Research with the 3D digital microscope of Ghent University

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Foto / photo 10



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

During removal of the overpaint

© KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 11



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

During removal of the overpaint

© KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 12



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

During removal of the overpaint

© KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 13



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschildering

Pendant l'enlèvement du surpeint

During removal of the overpaint

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