

Press kit: Restoration and research of the lower register of the open  
*Ghent Altarpiece* by the Van Eyck Brothers, St Bavo's Cathedral,  
Ghent



The lower register during final retouching, in its restored frame  
Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent © Lukasweb.be-Art in Flanders vzw, foto KIK-IRPA

Press conference | 17 December 2019 | Ghent Museum of Fine Arts (MSK)

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## Programme

### 9.30 am

Reception with coffee

### 10.00 am

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

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

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

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

### 10.45 am

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

Reception

## Press release: Overwhelming beauty: the *Ghent Altarpiece* restored

**17 December 2019, Ghent. After three years of painstaking restoration by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), the lower register of the opened *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb polyptych altarpiece* is once again displaying its splendour from 1432, when the Van Eyck brothers' masterpiece was completed. 'Breathtakingly beautiful' and 'a joy to behold' were among the first reactions when the thick layers of yellow varnish and the overpaints that had covered the original painting for centuries were removed. The restoration of this jewel of world heritage in Ghent, commissioned by St Bavo's Cathedral and carried out in a temporary studio at the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK), has brought back the original vividness, richness of detail and brilliant colours for all to see: the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* is overwhelmingly beautiful.**

The treatment began in late 2016 as the second of three phases and was applied to the central panel with *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* and the side panels with *The Knights of Christ*, *The Hermits* and *The Pilgrims*. The left side panel with the copy of the *Just Judges* from 1945 had already received a conservation treatment in 2010. Extensive examination revealed that, on *The Adoration*, around half of the original painting was covered by old overpaints. On the side panels, some very old brown varnishes were obscuring the details and depth effect, while around 10% to 15% of them were covered by overpaints. These largely followed the composition, but were far less refined. They had been introduced in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to adapt the painting to the fashion of the time, and to mask some local damage. The underlying original painting by the Van Eycks turned out to be extremely well preserved, with only around a five percent loss of paint. This was uncovered in its entirety and the old damage was replenished by meticulous retouches. The original gold-coloured polychromy on the frames was also restored. A conservation treatment for the wooden supports will ensure their long-term stability.

There are no words to express the result. Liberated from the thick layers of yellow varnish and the coarser overpaints, we can discover the Van Eycks' sublime virtuosity in abundance. In a naturalistic style that exceeds all reality, we can see a wondrous three-dimensional lighting effect, a display of materials that approaches the trompe-l'oeil and a level of individual detail for all the characters, animals and plants that bears witness to unparalleled dedication. The heavenly scene, which is interpreted as a panoramic snapshot with an endless amount to discover, is restored to life once more thanks to this restoration. Notable features include the original figure of the Lamb and various minutely-detailed buildings, whose overpaints have been entirely removed. The reconstruction of damaged zones in this architecture was carried out on the advice of historians and archaeologists specializing in medieval Ghent.

The interdisciplinary team at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) worked closely with a range of institutions on the examination and the restoration. It was supported by the Universities of Ghent and Antwerp, among others, and was supervised by an international committee of experts. The current treatment is by no means their first effort: the same team of restorers, specialist chemists, experts in imaging and art historians had already brought the restoration of the panels for the closed *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb polyptych altarpiece* to a stunning conclusion in 2016. The many hundreds of hours that the team spent back then on identifying and removing the overpaints have lent them an unmistakable expertise. In the current phase also, the overpaints were taken off centimetre by centimetre using a surgical scalpel and under a stereo microscope. Well-trained manual skill and visual acuity for the overpaints and the fragile original layer of paint are indispensable for this.

The restoration opens a new chapter in the art history of the Flemish Primitives. Only now, having been hidden for centuries, can the original creation by the Van Eyck brothers finally be studied. This has helped dispel a stubborn myth: the tower of the Cathedral in Utrecht, which is flaunted on the mid-horizon, is not a sixteenth-century addition, but was part of the original composition.

The restored panels will be on view at the MSK until half January 2020. Since the panels will be photographed during that time and will not always be visible, we advise to visit during weekends or between Christmas and New Year.

## The *Ghent Altarpiece* in St Bavo's Cathedral

### *Return of the panels to the Cathedral*

From 24 January 2020 onwards, the restored panels of the lower register will be on view in the Villa chapel in St Bavo's Cathedral. At the occasion of the return of the central panel, the exhibition 'The return of the Lamb' will open in the Cathedral on 24 January at 4.30 pm, with an educational section and works by contemporary artists Kris Martin, Lies Caeyers and Sophie Kuijken. When the exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) closes, the panels of the closed altarpiece will return to the Villa chapel. All panels of the altarpiece will once again be reunited.

### *Visitor Centre*

The polyptych will remain in the Villa chapel until the opening of the new visitor centre on Thursday 8 October 2020. The visitor centre (with a guided tour in the crypt in 'augmented virtual reality' about the history of the cathedral and the polyptych) is a project of Visit Flanders in the framework of the Flemish Masters project. The polyptych will then be moved to its new place in the Sacrament chapel in the ambulatory. Tickets to the visitor centre can be bought on a new website from 1 May 2020 onwards.

### *Funding of the restoration*

In 2016, extra budgets were required to restore the lower register of the open Ghent Altarpiece in the same thorough manner as the panels of the closed altarpiece. The churchwardens of the cathedral received the approval of the Flemish authorities to use the budgets allocated for phase 3 (upper register) for phase 2. They received an additional funding from the Flemish Government of 120 000 euro. An additional 20 % was provided by the Baillet Latour Fund. The total cost of phase 2 was 898 556 euro, 80 % of which was paid by the Flemish Government and 20 % by the Baillet Latour Fund.

### *Phase 3: the final part of the restoration*

Phase 3 (the restoration of the upper register of the open altarpiece) will require new financing. The churchwardens will submit a new subsidy dossier and a new European tender will be launched. Phase 3 should start after the Van Eyck year 2020.

## Images of phase 2 on 'Closer to Van Eyck' and publication of the scientific results of phase 1

The scientific images and ultra HR macro photos of phase 2 of the restoration will be uploaded to the website [clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be](http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be) in the course of the Van Eyck year 2020. Entirely open-access, the website provides a valuable tool for both scholars and the general public. It is financed through a grant of The Getty Foundation and the Gieskes-Strijbis Foundation and won the e-Gov award 2016 for user-friendliness. The Getty Foundation also supported the overall conservation of the Ghent Altarpiece through its Panel Paintings Initiative by funding a condition assessment and

emergency stabilization of the altarpiece. The scientific results of phase 1 of the restoration will be published at the end of January 2020 in the book *The Ghent Altarpiece: Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, edited by the KIK-IRPA's Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives.

## The role of the Flemish Government: Flanders Heritage Agency and Department of Culture, Youth and Media

The Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers, movable heritage that is an integral part of St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, is protected by the regulations for monuments (Onroerenderfgoeddecreet). As movable heritage of exceptional importance, the polyptych is also protected as a Flemish masterpiece (Topstukkendecreet). The Ghent Altarpiece is not only considered to be Van Eyck's absolute masterpiece, but also that of the entire oeuvre of the Flemish Primitives. Moreover, the polyptych is still kept in the cathedral for which it was painted. The Flemish Government financed 80 % of the restoration costs, both of phase 1 and of phase 2: 40 % was paid by the Heritage Agency and 40 % by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media. The remaining 20 % was financed by the Baillet Latour Fund.

## Quotes

Flemish Prime Minister and Flemish Minister for Culture Jan Jambon: *"The result of the restoration of the central panel with the representation of the Mystic Lamb and the three side panels is amazing. The beautiful colors, the detailed rendering of materials and the sophisticated symbolism on the painted panels bear witness to an even greater technical, artistic and intellectual quality than previously thought. As Minister of Culture, I am therefore very proud that together with my colleague from Immovable Heritage, I have been able to make a major contribution to making these panels of the unique masterpiece of the Van Eyck brothers shine again for the general public."*

Flemish Minister of Immovable Heritage Matthias Diependaele: *"St Bavo's Cathedral and the Ghent Altarpiece by Van Eyck help to tell the story of rich and powerful Ghent - and by extension Flanders - during the Middle Ages. The Ghent Altarpiece is an integral part of our Flemish history and identity, and is one of our most famous works of art in Flanders. We must therefore transfer this unique heritage in good condition to everyone who comes after us."*

First deputy Kurt Moens from the province of East Flanders: *"Thanks to this restoration, you can once again enjoy the full colour richness that was established 500 years ago by Jan Van Eyck. Standing face to face with the Mystic Lamb is a particularly intense encounter, something that every Fleming should experience at least once in his life. The Van Eyck Year 2020 is the perfect opportunity for this."*

Ghent's Alderman for Culture Sami Souguir: *"100 years after the panels of the Ghent Altarpiece were reunited, the masterpiece receives a well-deserved restoration. The mythical character, vivid colors and the penetrating look of the lamb will shine again as in the early years. It is no coincidence that during the Van Eyck year, the restored panels can be admired for the first time again in St Bavo's Cathedral. After all, the Van Eyck brothers painted the Ghent Altarpiece especially for the cathedral. Truly an experience that can't be missed!"*

The international committee of experts: *"This team's unique expertise is the project's greatest asset. It would be impossible for a new team to replicate the intimate understanding of the altarpiece that these conservators have built over seven years of close collaboration."*

Visit the KIK-IRPA's press page for more information: <http://www.kikirpa.be/EN/136/371/Press.htm>

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**Images for publication** | Contact [bart.desitter@viaa.be](mailto:bart.desitter@viaa.be) for the HR images

Images of the Ghent Altarpiece and of its restoration are available through Lukas-Art in Flanders ([bart.desitter@viaa.be](mailto:bart.desitter@viaa.be)). On behalf of the churchwardens of St Bavo's Cathedral, Lukas-Art in Flanders manages and diffuses all images of the cathedral in general and the Ghent Altarpiece in particular. Since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2019 it is part of VIAA, the Flemish Institute for Archiving.

Foto / photo 1



Onderste register van het geopende veelluik, tijdens finale retouche en in de geresatureerde lijsten. Van links naar rechts: De Rechtvaardige Rechters (kopie van het gestolen paneel door Jef Van der Veken, 1945, behandeld in 2010) | De Ridders van Christus | De Aanbidding van het Lam Gods | De Kluizenaars | De Pelgrims

*Registre inférieur du polyptique ouvert, pendant la retouche finale et avec les cadres restaurés. De gauche à droite : Les Juges intègres (copie du panneau volé, par Jef Van der Veken, 1945, traité en 2010) | Les Chevaliers du Christ | L'Adoration de l'Agneau mystique | Les Hermites | Les Pèlerins*

Lower register of the closed polyptych, during final retouching and in their restored frames. From left to right: The Just Judges (copy of the stolen panel, by Jef Van der Veken, 1945, treated in 2010) | The Knights of Christ | The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb | The Hermits | The Pilgrims

Credit line = Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent © Lukasweb.be-Art in Flanders vzw, foto KIK-IRPA

Foto / photo 2



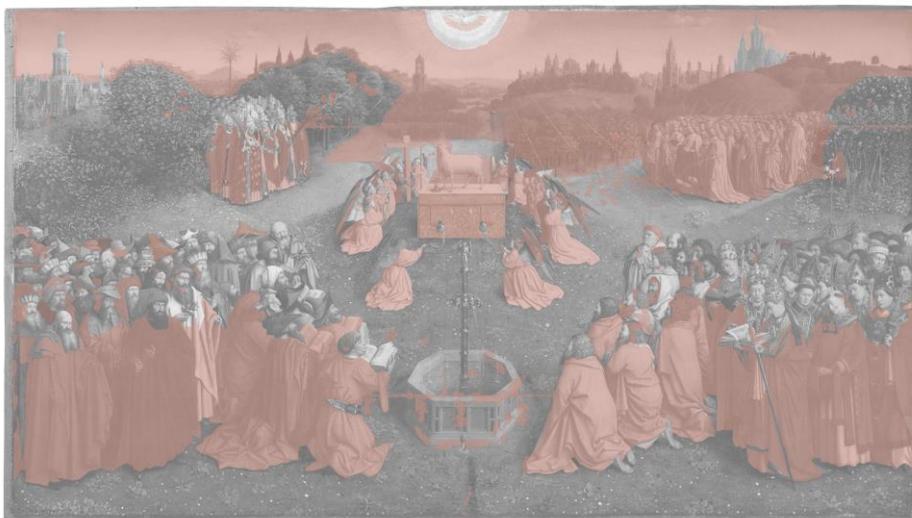
De Aanbidding van het Lam Gods, tijdens finale retouche, met gerestaureerde lijst

*L'Adoration de l'Agneau mystique, pendant retouche finale, avec cadre restauré*

The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, during final retouching, with restored frame

Credit line = Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent © Lukasweb.be-Art in Flanders vzw, foto KIK-IRPA

Foto / photo 3



Schema met de overschilderde delen (in het rood). Alle overschilderingen werden tijdens de huidige restauratie verwijderd, waardoor de onderliggende verflaag van de Van Eycks opnieuw zichtbaar is.

*Schéma avec les parties surpeintes (en rouge). Tous les surpeints ont été supprimés durant cette restauration, rendant la peinture originale des Van Eyck de nouveau visible.*

Diagram with overpainted parts (in red). All the overpaints were removed during this restoration, revealing the underlying paint layer by the Van Eycks.

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel



Foto / photo 4



Detail van het Lam, tijdens finale retouche (4a) en vóór behandeling (4b)

*Détail de l'Agneau, pendant la retouche finale (4a) et avant traitement (4b)*

Detail of the Lamb, during final retouching (4a) and before treatment (4b)

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Foto / photo 5



Detail hoofd van het Lam, tijdens finale retouche (5a) en vóór behandeling (5b)

*Détail de la tête de l'Agneau, pendant la retouche finale (5a) et avant traitement (5b)*

Detail head of the Lamb, during final retouching (5a) and before treatment (5b)

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Foto / photo 6



Detail van de Apostelen, tijdens finale retouche (6a) en vóór behandeling (6b)

*Détail des Apôtres, pendant la retouche finale (6a) et avant traitement (6b)*

Detail of the Apostles, during final retouching (6a) and before treatment (6b)

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Foto / photo 7



Detail van de Joden, tijdens finale retouche (7a) en vóór behandeling (7b)

Détail des Juifs, *pendant la retouche finale (7a) et avant traitement (7b)*

Detail of the Jews, during final retouching (7a) and before treatment (7b)

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Foto / photo 8



Detail van de Martelaren, tijdens finale retouche (8a) en vóór behandeling (8b)

Détail des Martyrs, *pendant la retouche finale (8a) et avant traitement (8b)*

Detail of the Martyrs, during final retouching (8a) and before treatment (8b)

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Foto / photo 9



Detail van de Maagden, tijdens finale retouche (9a) en vóór behandeling (9b)

Détail des Vierges, *pendant la retouche finale (9a) et avant traitement (9b)*

Detail of the Virgins, during final retouching (9a) and before treatment (9b)

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Foto / photo 10



Detail van de vegetatie, tijdens finale retouche (10a) en vóór behandeling (10b)

*Détail de la végétation, pendant la retouche finale (10a) et avant traitement (10b)*

Detail of the vegetation, during final retouching (10a) and before treatment (10b)

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Foto / photo 11



Detail van de gebouwen aan de horizon, tijdens finale retouche (11a) en vóór behandeling (11b)

*Détail des bâtiments à l'horizon, pendant la retouche finale (11a) et avant traitement (11b)*

Detail of the buildings at the horizon, during final retouching (11a) and before treatment (11b)

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Foto / photo 12



Detail toren van de kathedraal van Utrecht, tijdens finale retouche (12a) en vóór behandeling (12b)

*Détail de la tour du cathédrale d'Utrecht, pendant la retouche finale (12a) et avant traitement (12b)*

Detail of the tower of the Cathedral of Utrecht, during final retouching (12a) and before treatment (12b)

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Foto / photo 13



De Ridders van Christus, tijdens finale retouche en met de gerestaureerde lijst

*Les Chevaliers du Christ, pendant la retouche finale et avec le cadre restauré*

The Knights of Christ, during final retouching and with its restored frame

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Foto / photo 14



Detail van de Ridders, tijdens finale retouche (14a) en vóór behandeling (14b)

*Détail des Chevaliers, pendant la retouche finale (14a) et avant traitement (14b)*

Detail of the Knights, during final retouching (14a) and before treatment (14b)

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Foto / photo 15



Detail van de voorgrond, tijdens finale retouche (15a) en vóór behandeling (15b)

*Détail de l'avant-plan, pendant la retouche finale (15a) et avant traitement (15b)*

Detail of the foreground, during final retouching (15a) and before treatment (15b)

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Foto / photo 16



De Kluizenaars, tijdens finale retouche en met de gerestaureerde lijst

*Les Ermites, durant la retouche finale et dans le cadre restauré*

The Hermits, during final retouching and in its restored frame

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Foto / photo 17



Detail van de Kluizenaars, tijdens finale retouche (17a) en vóór behandeling (17b)

*Détail des Ermites, pendant la retouche finale (17a) et avant traitement (17b)*

Detail of the Hermits, during final retouching (17a) and before treatment (17b)

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Foto / photo 18



Detail van de voorgrond, tijdens finale retouche (18a) en vóór behandeling (18b)

*Détail de l'avant-plan, pendant la retouche finale (18a) et avant traitement (18b)*

Detail of the foreground, during final retouching (18a) and before treatment (18b)

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Foto / photo 19



De Pelgrims, tijdens finale retouche en met de gerestaureerde lijst

*Les Pèlerins, pendant la retouche finale et dans le cadre restauré*

The Pilgrims, during final retouching and in their restored frame

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Foto / photo 20



Detail van het landschap, tijdens finale retouche (20a) en vóór behandeling (20b)

*Détail du paysage, pendant la retouche finale (20a) et avant traitement (20b)*

Detail of the landscape, during final retouching (20a) and before treatment (20b)

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Foto / photo 21



Detail van de voorgrond, tijdens finale retouche (21a) en vóór behandeling (21b)

*Détail de l'avant-plan, pendant la retouche finale (21a) et avant traitement (21b)*

Detail of the foreground, during final retouching (21a) and before treatment (21b)

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Foto / photo 22



De Rechtvaardige Rechters, kopie van het gestolen paneel door Jef Van der Veken, 1945, na conservatiebehandeling in 2010 door het KIK

*Les Juges intègres, copie du panneau volé, par Jef Van der Veken, 1945, après le traitement de conservation par l'IRPA en 2010*

The Just Judges, copy of the stolen panel, by Jef Van der Veken, 1945, after conservation by the KIK-IRPA in 2010

Credit line = Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent © Lukasweb.be-Art in Flanders vzw, foto KIK-IRPA

Foto 23



Onderzoek met de 3D digitale microscoop van de Universiteit Gent

*Examen sous le microscope numérique 3D de l'université de Gand*

Research with the 3D digital microscope of Ghent University

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 24 & 25



Het retoucheren van de originele vergulde lijsten

*La retouche des cadres originaux dorés*

Retouching of the original gilded frames

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 26-29



Tijdens het verwijderen van de overschilderingen

*L'enlèvement des surpeints*

Overpaint removal

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 30-38





Het retoucheren van de schilderijen

*La retouche des peintures*

Retouching of the paintings

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Foto / photo 39



Het restauratie- en onderzoeksteam met het internationale expertencomité

*L'équipe de restauration et de recherche avec la commission internationale d'experts*

The restoration and research team with the international committee of experts

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel



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