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**Sense and Spirituality:
Seeing Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece***

by

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Sense and Spirituality:
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Dedication

Dedicated to my children, Sebastian Mallku and Nina Chaska.

To my beautiful wife, Ana.

Acknowledgements

This thesis took entirely too long because I never entered the study of art history for the proper reasons. That being said, I am happy that I have completed the thesis; an accomplishment that would not have occurred without the assistance of many people. My thesis adviser, Dr. Jeffrey Chipps Smith, encouraged me to pursue my ideas and read through several painful drafts. Thanks also to Dr. Glenn Peers, who served as a reader for this thesis. Special thanks also go to Graduate Coordinator, Maureen Howell, who assisted me tremendously in keeping up on my logistical requirements during my very long stay as an M.A. candidate. My sincerest appreciation goes to the Department of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin for assistance both financial and intellectual, during my course work in Austin. I am particularly grateful to the *David Bruton, Jr. Endowed Graduate Fellowship in the College of Fine Arts*, which generously supported my first semester. Lastly, I thank my wife Ana, who was more than supportive and patient in my completion of this thesis. Her encouragement allowed me to finally finish.

May 8, 2009

Abstract

Sense and Spirituality: Seeing Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*

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This thesis emphasizes the senses of the audience in reception of Jan van Eyck's heroic *Ghent Altarpiece*. This pivotal work may have demanded the viewer engage in a hierarchy of devotion ranging from intimate and private to public and liturgical. Jan van Eyck engages in a strategy of representation that focus and specify various aspects of vision to create a multivalent devotional experiences for the viewer. This thesis compares some of the visual uses of frames in miniatures and how they relate to altarpiece formats and hierarchies of vision. Reception of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is also discussed in relation to Augustine of Hippo's theory of tri-partite vision as well as his theory of cross-modal uses of the sense in dialogues of spiritual truth. Sound is also a vital component of the devotional experience of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Issues of music and speech acts are discussed to underscore the multivalent devotional uses of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

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Introduction

The *Ghent Altarpiece*, located in the Church of St. Bavo in Ghent, is one of the largest and most complex polyptych altarpieces of its time (Figs. 1 and 2). Finished in 1432, Jan van Eyck completed one of Europe's most ambitious artistic undertakings. Because of its impressive scale and complicated subject matter, many have doubted that Jan alone planned this or have sought to clarify the possible participation of Hubert van Eyck, Jan's older brother. The general consensus was that Hubert began the *Ghent Altarpiece* and Jan completed it after Hubert's death. An accompanying quatrain has generally been translated as such: "The painter, Hubert van Eyck, greater than whom no one was found, began (this work); and Jan, his brother, second in art, having carried through the expense of Jodocus Vijd invites you by this verse, on the sixth of May, to look at (or, possibly, "to protect") what has been done."¹

The life of Jan van Eyck has substantial documentation in comparison to his older brother Hubert, about whom we know very little. Although Jan's early life remains unclear, much of his professional life is existent in records. He started off as a court painter to John of Bavaria, count of Holland. Later appointed *varlet de chambre* to Philip the Good of Burgundy, duke of Burgundy, on May 19th, 1425, Van Eyck would remain in the employ of the Burgundian court until his death in 1441.² Philip the Good sent Jan on various diplomatic and secret missions. Jan was also permitted to accept private

¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, (New York, 1971), p. 206.

² Panofsky, 1971, p. 178.

commissions from various patrician families. Payment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* would come from one such family.

Little information exists about Jodocus Vijd, depicted devoutly praying in the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior along with his wife, Elizabeth Borluut. They were respected citizens of Ghent and had a private chapel, or perhaps several in the Church of St. Bavo. Jodocus Vijd was active in city government and served occasionally as an emissary for the Burgundian duke. In 1433 he was elected the principal alderman of the city. The Borluut clan included well-established members of the wool guild.

The original location of the *Ghent Altarpiece* remains somewhat unclear due to various expected and unexpected relocations of van Eyck's work. The current location in the first chapel in the ambulatory on the south of the Church of St. Bavo has long been thought to be the Vijd family chapel. Other indications place the Vijd's chapel directly below the current location in a semi-subterranean lower church.³ Both locations share a nearly identical orientation and have similar lighting. The *Ghent Altarpiece* is documented in its current location for centuries, but it is difficult to ascertain where it was originally intended to be. The tumultuous history of its location makes matters more difficult. During times of unrest, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was taken apart and stowed away, beginning during the iconoclastic riots of 1566. Napoleon's army captured the altarpiece at the end of the eighteenth century and transported it to Paris. Hitler's troops had possession of the *Ghent Altarpiece* during World War Two. The history of this monumental altarpiece after its creation is complicated. It is my assumption, following

Erwin Panofsky's argument, that the *Ghent Altarpiece* was originally displayed in St. Bavo's crypt church from May 6th, 1432 to August 19th 1566, at which time the *Ghent Altarpiece* was removed for fear of destruction at the hands of iconoclasts.⁴ Sometime around 1587, the *Ghent Altarpiece* was re-installed at its present location.⁵ The crypt chapel is not entirely underground and shares a similar lighting than the chapel above it. The height of the crypt church from floor to keystone in this location is 5.35m- a tight fit, but more than enough to accommodate the *Ghent Altarpiece*, which has a height of approximately 3.5 m.⁶ What originally engaged me in pursuing this research was the generally accepted view that the lighting of the chapel corresponds to the depicted lighting in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Whatever location is elected, the correspondence of actual and depicted light is maintained.

This thesis focuses closely on the meanings of the quatrain's explicit invitation to "look...at what has been done." The *Ghent Altarpiece*, an impressive milestone of naturalism, heralded a fundamental shift in perceiving objects. Van Eyck presents a radical break from medieval aesthetic considerations and proposes a daring naturalism that often merges representation and reality. In pursuing an aggressive attention to detail, an impressive empirical construction of space, and the use of the frame as a device that challenges the viewer's role in relation to the image, van Eyck left a body of work that would have far reaching influence for later artists. The *Ghent Altarpiece* signals an

³ Panofsky, 1971, p. 207.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Panofsky 1971, p. 209.

emerging relational shift between the viewer and the object. Some scholars have noted how van Eyck's new visual strategies changed dramatically in fifteenth century Netherlandish painting.⁷

Van Eyck employed the frame as a means for negotiating the relationship between the image, the world, and the viewer.⁸ In the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, this notion of the intermediary function of the frame is quite apparent in its physical structure and organization, as well as in the representation of the niches housing the grisaille St. Johns as well as Jodocus Vijd and his wife (Figs. 3 and 4). Typically, frames define boundaries separating fictive representation from the natural world;⁹ however, this is not the case with the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Van Eyck adroitly integrates the realities of the actual Vijd chapel into his pictorial realm. The actual daylight shining on the *Ghent Altarpiece* is mimicked in the picture. The altar's wooden frame appears literally to cast strong shadows into the painting's architectural spaces as best observed in the middle register of the exterior (Fig. 5). Van Eyck undermines the security of a clear boundary between viewer and representation with his consideration of light that allows the actual physical and the fictive worlds of the altarpiece flow together.

This illusionistic complicity engages the viewer's senses, especially sight.

However, sight is also used as a segue-way to other senses for the viewer as sound and

⁷ In particular see James Marrow, "Symbol and Meaning in the Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance," *Simiolus* 16 (1986), pp. 150-169; Julien Chapuis, "Early Netherlandish Painting: Shifting Perspectives" in *From van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, eds. Maryan Ainsworth and Keith Christensen, Eds. Ex. Cat. (New York, 1986).

⁸ Marrow, 1986, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*

perhaps even smell are both witnessed and experienced in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Van Eyck's outstanding acuity in representing the world about him elicits an emotional response from the viewer by physically demonstrating a broad spectrum of types of seeing and types of witnessing. The *Ghent Altarpiece's* frame and original setting create a visual zone of engagement that merges the viewer and object into the same world.¹⁰ This perceptual unification as we shall see, affects the viewer's devotional practices.

The fifteenth century ushered in a dramatic shift of spiritual practices as different forms of private, as opposed to liturgical, devotion gained in popularity. With an increased focus on the individual's relationship with God or Christ, art objects often become veritable substitutes for visions and supernatural interventions. Certain forms of lay piety, with roots in Franciscan and Dominican mysticism, lead to the acceptance of the idea that art objects could serve as the physical manifestation of a psychological state.¹¹ Mostly this relationship emphasizes a deeply psychological and private manner of worship, which emphasized the individual's meditation and spiritual dialogue with Christ. Van Eyck's astounding naturalism implicates more than the viewer. It also facilitates a demonstrable shift in what might be called a *quality of location* where the devotee could witness him or herself as existing in a spiritually charged space that was experienced through the senses. Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* is an example of this culmination of perception, which not only offers a powerful individual experience with the image, but also demonstrates the ability to change the quality of space surrounding

¹⁰ Marrow, 1986, pp. 16-17.

the viewer through a complex system of visual and perhaps audible cues and staging. This system includes van Eyck's use of light and reflection, aggressive foreshortening to make the *Ghent Altarpiece* appear as if areas are projecting into the viewer's space, and aspects of limiting and defining the viewer's space in relation to more spiritual worlds. The latter is accomplished mainly through depicted and actual architectural devices such as the frame of the altarpiece itself or fictive interiors in the Ghent Annunciation register (Fig. 5), which dramatically define and specify boundaries of secular and spiritual worlds. These representational aspects of the *Ghent Altarpiece* charge the viewer's space with an intense liminality that a worshiper could understand as well as physically see and witness.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* functioned as centerpiece to various official ecclesiastical services. Might van Eyck be attempting a very ambitious undertaking to harmonize the Church's mediated practices such as daily mass with *devotio moderna* practices of a more private and personal nature? Although both aspects of liturgy and private devotion were highly regimented, the *Ghent Altarpiece* existed to accommodate both. While this altarpiece was most likely used for masses and formal liturgical ceremonies, its primary purpose may have been for the donors' private devotion. Van Eyck's realism is a tool to elicit specifically devotional responses through the viewer's participation. He accomplishes this through an overarching theme of transformation that speaks both to Eucharistic and liturgical services, but simultaneously addresses the viewer's imagination

¹¹ Sixten Ringbom, "Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 73 (1969), p. 166.

in engaging in private devotion. Van Eyck's realism entangles the viewer's senses in a way that normal sight is rendered nearly impossible. The *Ghent Altarpiece* demands multiple aspects of vision and also hearing. The dedicatory quatrain's invitation "to see what has been done" calls for a new manner of engagement.

Sight and Reflection in the Work of Van Eyck

Among all human senses, sight is the most powerful and direct for establishing an experience with the miraculous or divine. While other senses certainly play a prominent role in relaying the experience of divine intervention or that of faithful meditation, vision usually trumps all other experiences.¹² There is a long tradition of exploiting the visual for devotional or liturgical purposes since the beginning of Christianity. One can observe in the arrangement of shrines and reliquaries throughout Christendom that particular emphasis on the senses was a major foundation of fostering a religious experience for supplicants. Jan van Eyck's impressive naturalism exists as more than an exercise of virtuosity. It is possibly a presentation of a dramatic shift focusing on personal devotional practice. While it is not my intention of implying that all of van Eyck's work should be inspected under this ecclesiastical framework, certain implications of the representation of reflections throughout various paintings hinge upon establishing a very intimate relationship between viewer and object. Specifically, Jan van Eyck paints reflections into many of his works that create an interchange between the world and painted representation. Van Eyck's preoccupation with reflection as method of bundling represented space and actual space occur in several works throughout his career. One of van Eyck's best-known instances of this real world entanglement is the inclusion of the mirror in the *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* (Fig. 6).

¹² See Cynthia Hahn, "Seeing is Believing: The Construction of Sanctity in Early-Medieval Saints' Shrines," *Speculum* 72 (1997), pp. 1079-1106.

Completed in 1434, the *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* has attracted innumerable and often conflicting iconographic readings. At present there is no consensus on the identity of the figures and the painting's precise meaning.¹³ My interest focuses solely on the representation of the convex mirror located in the back wall behind the two figures in the portrait. Surrounded by a ten-sided frame with small concave lunettes depicting the passion of Christ, the reflection of the mirror refocuses the viewer's attention to the Arnolfini bedchamber. In addition to essentially doubling the depicted space, the viewer, through viewing the reflection is capable of seeing an area of the bedchamber that is not directly referenced in the painting of the actual space. Two aspects reinforce this situation.

The first is the resolute uniformity of depicted light in the painting that streams into the room from the left hand side through the windows. The placement of amber beads hanging from the left of the mirror as well as the highlights on the glass lunettes which cover the scenes of the passion emphasize the regularity of light. Within the reflection the viewer observes a cohesive and holistic space with a depiction of light that presumably parallels that of the bedchamber. This accomplishment is even more impressive considering the complexity of the space. The viewer is obligated to differentiate between the surface of the wall, particularly the flattening tendency of the text, along with the shallow space represented with the beads hanging from the wall as

¹³ Various arguments and counterarguments of identification abound, but for a canonical interpretation of this painting as a wedding certificate see Erwin Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait," *Burlington Magazine* 64 (1934), pp. 117-127. For a brief overview of scholarship and problems of interpretation, see Lorne Campbell, *National Gallery Catalogue: The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools* (London, 1998), pp. 198-201.

well as the concave mirror surface and frame. Surrounding this area is the projection of the extended arms of the subjects, which aggressively establishes the foreground of the painting and the depiction of a chandelier that occupies the space between the subject and the mirror. Given the compositional placement of forms that assists in creating a holistic space, van Eyck has a preoccupation with depicting light as an overarching unification to spatial integrity in many of his paintings.

In presenting the reflection of the convex mirror, van Eyck describes the interior of the room as well as the doorway and perhaps a hallway beyond, which are not directly depicted in the painting of the main characters (Fig. 7). There are also two figures that occupying the threshold of the bedchamber. The male figure in front appears to be descending a step and has his left arm raised as if greeting the couple. The man behind him wears a conical red cap. This reflection immediately extends the representation of space in the painting outside of itself and extends it into the viewer's domain. In this instance, the awareness of the viewer's relationship to the painting becomes explicit and the reflection can be understood as a strategy to conjoin internal and external space, both represented and actual. This convex mirror becomes a section of the real world bound literally by the passion of Christ as seen in the lunettes in the mirror's frame.¹⁴

This same strategy is executed in van Eyck's *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele* (Fig. 8) although not through the utilization of a mirror. This painting depicts Canon George van der Paele in a religious trance as he witnesses an apparition of the

¹⁴ Meyer Schapiro, "'Muscipula Diaboli,' The Symbolism of the *Mérode Altarpiece*," *Art Bulletin* (1945), p. 187.

Virgin and Child along with that of Sts. Donatian and George.¹⁵ An ageing van der Paele, who commissioned the painting, kneels with spectacles in hand and clutches a prayer book. The Virgin Mary and Christ Child occupy the center of the painting with St. Donatian of Reims holding a wheel with five candles in the far left of the painting, while on the far right, a very relaxed St. George appears directly behind van der Paele. One of the painting's captivating characteristics is van Eyck's elaborate variety of reflective surfaces. The reflection of the Madonna and Child is repeated four times on the volutes of St. George's helmet. Particular attention is placed on the reverse of St. George's shield. Besides reflections of the banner and the Virgin Mary, a diminutive depiction of a man in a red turban, likely the artist, may be seen (Fig. 9).¹⁶ Although not as specific and overt as the convex mirror in *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* the polished armor of St. George substitutes as a visual device that not only establishes a scene by offering a glimpse of its double, but implies the presence of a figure that participates outside of the representation.

¹⁵ See Ludwig Baldass *Jan van Eyck* (London, 1952), pp. 58 for explanation of this painting as devotional vision. For a brief biography of George van der Paele see Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism*, (Seattle, 1991), pp.48-63. Harbison's analyzes this painting as a negotiation of secular opulence and spiritual diligence.

¹⁶ David G. Carter, "Reflections in Armor in Canon van der Paele Madonna," *Art Bulletin* (1954), pp.60-62.

Projection and Foreshortening

The above reflections betray a preoccupation with the boundaries of a painted world. The viewer and artist are aware of the surroundings of the image in situ. Foreshortening is another method that van Eyck employs to assert the painted world into the location of the viewer. The figure of Adam, located in the upper left panel of the *Ghent Altarpiece* interior appears to transgress the frame of the panel in the lower right corner (Fig.10). The foreshortened foot of Adam, placed nearly on the edge of the panel, not only appears to push forward beyond the surface of the panel, but it appears to step beyond the physical frame of the panel as well. Referred to as “worm’s eye view” by Panofsky, two other occurrences of this projection are demonstrated in the closed *Ghent Altarpiece*.¹⁷ For purposes of this section, I will use foreshortening to describe the areas of the *Ghent Altarpiece* that appear to be extending forward in front of the picture plane. The unique characteristic of this foreshortening, sometimes referred to as *in sotto di su*.¹⁸ is generally utilized in ceiling painting to make it appear as if one is looking up and seeing recessional space. The foreshortening in the *Ghent Altarpiece* is not at that level of height to technically be *in soto di su*, but it is an inventive use of foreshortening that appears to consider the viewer’s vantage point and eye level.

The upper left and right lunettes of the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior display the Old Testament prophets, Zacharias and Michaeas (Figs.11 and 12). In a similar fashion of the

¹⁷ Panofsky, 1971, p. 223.

foot of Adam, van Eyck foreshortens the prophets' books that appear to reach over the surface in the upper right side of their surrounding frames. While the actual frames obviously restrain the paintings, both books project beyond the painted crossbeam on which the two prophets are depicted. This addition of the painted architectural support appears to exist almost parallel to the painting's surface creates a foil that allows these objects to not only project but emphasizes the viewer's subservient location in space. These are three examples of moments where van Eyck utilizes an aggressive foreshortening to visually rupture the surface of the altarpiece to create a sense of continuity between the representation and the viewer.

¹⁸ Penny Howell Jolly, "Jan van Eyck's Italian Pilgrimage: A Miraculous Florentine Annunciation and the Ghent Altarpiece," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (1998), pp. 369.

A Brief Overview of Light, Shadow, and Space

Jan's impressive foreshortening of Adam and the prophets' books functions in concert with light that intrudes into the painted world of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The depictions of shadows and highlights penetrate the depictions of several panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. In the middle register of the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior, the framing edges of the panels appear to cast shadows (Fig. 5). If the placement of foreshortened figures and objects demonstrate an opportunity to compromise the painting surface as a device of pictorial limitation, the painting of cast shadows caused by the actual frame functions similarly. The difference is with the use of a unified light source; van Eyck is able to rupture the frame's integrity through making it appear that actual light from the Vijd Chapel penetrates into the painted world. The entire frame of the *Ghent Altarpiece* exists as a portal between the real and painted world. This utilization of a direct and unifying light source from a consistent source in the Vijd Chapel nearly unifies the entire exterior altarpiece and the panels of Adam and Eve depicted in the interior.

The phenomenon of light has been a cornerstone of Christian thought and artistic metaphor almost from its inception. Many fifteenth century artists accentuated the observational aspects of light and its sources ranging from the sun, fire, or the play of cast shadows and lights as it passed through or reflected off of various surfaces. The depiction of light in medieval times had a rich and varied system of graphic presentation. Naturalistic representations were simply not required, although artists did engage in the

use of conventionalized and iconic utilizations of light that were generally understood by an audience and also possibly underscored larger religious significance.¹⁹

Millard Meiss contends that while fifteenth century painters delighted in pursuing more naturalistic representations of light, an important motivation was metaphoric, particularly in expressing a Christian dogma and beliefs. While it is extremely tempting to articulate a symbolic intention that springs from Christian thought, Meiss speculates that the opposite occurs. He argues that an increasing demand for naturalistic execution of light obliged artists to utilize this increasing realism in analogies for Christian doxy.²⁰

A specific discussion of the representation of light occurs in two of van Eyck's paintings. The first is *Virgin in a Church* (Fig.13) where the viewer is confronted with a Virgin and Child of heroic scale in comparison with the depicted architecture. In this early work, the depiction of light is utilized as a unifying device that streams in from the upper left clerestory windows as well as a portal from the left. Two very discreet bodies of cast light appear next to the Virgin, who for the most part appears in a diffused light. The lighting is much more direct in the upper level of the architecture. The frame of this painting was originally inscribed with a well-known hymn of van Eyck's time. The text, placed and broken around the sides of the frame read as follows:

“MATER HEC EST FILIA

PATER HIC IST NATUR

¹⁹ See Millard Meiss, “Light as Form and Symbol in Some Fifteenth-Century Paintings,” *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945), pp. 175-181.

²⁰ Meiss, 1945, p 176. Meiss clearly expresses this in his footnote #2, where he counters Tolnay's discussion of the *Dijon Nativity*. He theorize that the use of light is founded in later medieval religious thought is motivated in an inspection of nature.

QUIS AUDIVIT TALIA
DEUS HOMO NATUS ETCET”²¹

Meiss extrapolates that the inscription specifically refers to the fifth stanza of the hymn that is as follows:

“Ut vitrum non laeditur
sole penetrante
sic illaesa creditur
virgo poste et ante.”²²

Van Eyck utilized the symbolic nature of light frequently in his paintings, Meiss indicates, and was fond of referencing text and external other sources. However, the main thrust of Meiss argument attempts to rehabilitate iconological studies within a framework that accounts for an emerging predisposition toward naturalism. In the opening of his article, Meiss borders on apologizing for van Eyck’s lack of artificial perspective, which he characterizes as “a desire to raise the status of the craft (painting), and an insistence on the theoretical and mathematical modes of thought necessary to it.”²³

The search for a perspectival system in van Eyck’s paintings is well established, albeit somewhat intermittently.²⁴ The most recent proposal, the Hockney-Falco thesis, while stimulating debate in the use of optical devices in Renaissance paintings, ultimately

²¹ Meiss, 1945, p. 179. Meiss translates this stanza as “This Mother is the Daughter, This Father is Born, Who has heard of such a thing? God born a Man, etc.”

²² Meiss, 1945, p.180. “As the sunbeam through the glass Passeth but not staineth Thus the Virgin, as she was, Virgin still remaineth.” Meiss uses this translation of the passage with citation to J.M. Neale.

²³ Meiss, 1945, p.175.

²⁴ James Elkins, “On The Arnolfini Portrait and Lucca Madonna: Did Jan van Eyck Have a Perspectival System?,” *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991), pp. 53-62.

bears no concrete proof of the use of concave mirror projection or camera lucida technology. Prior to the release of Hockney and Falco's book, *Secret Knowledge: Rediscovering the Lost Techniques of the Old Masters*, David Carleton coined the term "elliptical perspective" in his 1982 essay "A Mathematical Analysis of the Perspective of the Arnolfini Portrait and Other Similar Interior Scenes by Jan van Eyck."²⁵ Carleton concludes that van Eyck engaged in the use optical devices, though in a manner that was certainly not as sensationalized as the Hockney-Falco thesis, which believes that certain paintings from the fifteenth to eighteenth century were simply too good to have been painted unassisted.

Unfortunately Carleton's thesis of a consistent van Eyckian perspective does not function in a mathematically consistent or clearly defined fashion.²⁶ Jan van Eyck's paintings can easily fall through the cracks in regards to a unified spatial construction or consistent perspective. While no incontrovertible theories have been posited to eccentric perspectival theories, van Eyck's paintings do not construct space in a fashion that seems mathematically arbitrary or random. Van Eyck may have had an awareness or partial understanding of Italianate artificial perspective, but no evidence is in existence to substantiate a mastery and or rejection of it. Little recourse remains other than to

²⁵ David L. Carleton, "A Mathematical Analysis of the Perspective of the Arnolfini Portrait and Other Similar Interior Scenes by Jan van Eyck," *Art Bulletin* 64 (1982), pp.118- 124.

²⁶ Elkins, 1991, pp.59-61. Specifically, Elkins discusses the dialogue between Carleton and John Ward, who concluded that van Eyck operated in a purely empirical sense in regards to constructions of interior spaces.

postulate that van Eyck constructed his space empirically.²⁷ While much of the discussion of van Eyck's "empirical" process centers around compositional arrangement and attention to various orthogonal lines and potential vanishing points, it is not unreasonable to assume that light became a consequence of van Eyck's observations in ordering, constructing, and unifying space. This is best demonstrated by Jan's attention to projected shadows.

One of the most dramatic utilizations of cast shadows corresponding to the physical location of the *Ghent Altarpiece* occurs in the middle register of the closed altarpiece (Fig. 5). This annunciation consists of four panels arranged horizontally with Gabriel occupying nearly the entire far left panel and the Virgin solidly occupying the panel on the far right. The two interior panels depict a sparse but contemporary setting for the annunciation to unfold. Van Eyck employs an empirically rigorous depiction of cast shadows to create a holistic space. There is no precedence in the North for such an engaged and detailed use of shadow. Discussions of shadow projections do not become prevalent until well into the fifteenth century.²⁸

It is easy to contemplate the cast shadows as solely being the result of van Eyck's empiric approach to representing space particularly in light of the role that cast shadows has in scientific application. In many instances, it appears to be fairly marginalized in regards to perspective. In the unfolding of the history of shadows, one begins to see an

²⁷ Erwin Panofsky, "Once More 'The Friedsam Annunciation and the Problem of the Ghent Altarpiece'," *Art Bulletin* 20 (1938), p.423. Also see Elkins, 1991, pp. 61- 62 for maintaining that Panofsky's description of a van Eyckian system continues to be the most practical solution, though not perfect.

ever-increasing role of scientific empiricism perhaps culminating in Galileo's observations of the moon's surface. Van Eyck's utilization of projected shadows may have a very geometric sensibility to it that is often overlooked in order to criticize the more linear aspects of his perspective. He may have a very rigorous perspective in his paintings, but shadow and light create a holistic space instead of line. The temptation here is to discuss this use of "realistic" shadows as carrying a dialogue of scientific progress or fidelity to naturalism. The depictions of cast shadows seemingly created by light falling through the actual panel frames of the center portion of the middle register in the bare room of the annunciation, raises the bar in portraying a naturalistic space. If Adam's foot and the two books of the Old Testament prophets, Zacharias and Michael, are thought to embody the demonstration that the action of the painting can tumble into the real world, van Eyck's use of shadows in the Annunciation portion demonstrate the painting as a sponge that imbibes the environment of the real world. The physical frames of the *Ghent Altarpiece* become portals where the viewer's perception becomes porous and penetrative into an otherwise invisible spiritual world. In spite of the *Ghent Altarpiece's* enormous scale, the manner of veneration clearly exploits the psychology of the individual.

²⁸ For a brief overview of the history of projected shadows, see Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, "The Perspective of Shadows: The History of the Theory of Shadow Projection," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 38 (1975), pp. 258-287.

Sight, Visions, and Light: A Look at Miniatures

An established method for private devotion was the use of books of hours and prayer books. While the reception of a book is different from the way one relates to an altarpiece, certain aspects of it appear to be the same. Architectural representations surround images of particular importance and were often times incorporated into the decorative margin pattern in codices and books of hours.²⁹ These motives function in a similar manner as the frames in the *Ghent Altarpiece*. While the experience of a devotional book is more intimate, the frames still psychologically engage the senses. In many of these instances a reader would have had to engage in different aspects of vision.

The manipulation of the frame in miniatures underscores the multiplicity of visual perception in devotional practice. *Feast of Dives* in the *Spinola Hours* superimposes tracery over the sumptuous palace of Dives while the beggar Lazarus lays outside tended by angels (Fig. 14).³⁰ As told in the Gospel of Luke, Dives feasts in luxury with knowledge that Lazarus awaits crumbs from his table.³¹ Executed by the Master of James IV of Scotland, *Feast of Dives* presents a coherent unified pictorial space that is interrupted by the superimposition of tracery over Dives' palace. Possibly completed around 1510-1515, this work postdates the *Ghent Altarpiece* some eighty years. This

²⁹ Robert G. Calkins, "Sacred Image and Illusion in Late Flemish Manuscripts," *Essays in Medieval Studies: Proceedings of the Illinois Medieval Association* 6 (1989), p. 4. Calkins addresses the overall development of illuminated manuscript borders and how the increasing move toward naturalism culminating in various 16th century examples of Offices and Hours.

³⁰ Fol. 21v.

³¹ See Luke, 16: 19-31.

miniature is a sophisticated example of a larger tradition of increasingly illusionist and visually clever use of tracery and frames within the margin. This demand for naturalism progresses rapidly from fairly humble origins to visual punning with frames and space specifically in the 15th century. While the *Ghent Altarpiece* may not specifically be responsible for this, the formal borrowing of frames and even forms suggests a link in devotional practices between altarpieces and miniatures.

While the tracery emphasizes the flatness and surface of the page, it also serves as a device that allows the viewer to view through the outer retaining wall of the building. The niche tracery essentially permits x-ray vision that contrasts the comfort and wealth of Dives with the despondence and poverty of Lazarus. They also quite literally reference what would have been an established practice of depicting tracery in altarpieces. Where these niche tracery motifs are displayed begin to serve as visual cues that demonstrate different aspects of the visual sense. Interaction between the secular realm and the divine realm is clearly indicated by the angels that surround Lazarus and comfort him beneath the text base of the tracery. In certain instances, most notably the angel to the right of Lazarus' head, the tracery and text appear as solid object that physically overlap. The smaller figure, Lazarus' soul, appears in front of the tracery.

The neighboring page of the *Spinola Hours* depicts Lazarus' soul as it is embraced in heaven with Dives firmly planted in hell (Fig.15).³² In this image, referred to as *Soul of Lazarus*, the niche tracery, symmetrically placed, accentuates the figures of God and angels comforting Lazarus' soul in heaven. In comparison to the niche tracery

in *Feast of Dives*, the visual implications are not one of penetration or seeing through, but establish more of an insistence upon planar expansion of the visual field beyond the confines of the frame. This demonstrated by the wings of an angel that push outside of the tracery's confines. The blue and white speech scrolls emanating from the top fall gracefully down, with the white speech scroll highlights the flatness of the imposed tracery. The lower portion of the blue speech scroll appears to project slightly off of the base directly above the text, implying a certain shallow space beyond the tracery. The presentation of the image here is entirely in reference to the supernatural both inside and outside of the tracery, but the insertion of the niche frame functions as almost a cinematic close-up of Lazarus and God.³³

The move of decorative margin patterning to frames that in many ways begin to take on more pictorial and naturalistic participation of these motifs within the images, strongly indicate that many of these devotional books were altarpiece substitutions.³⁴ Other aspects of books reinforce certain qualities that are very much akin to the functioning of altarpieces such as opening and closing. The action of manipulating a devotional book mirrors the opening and closing of an altarpiece. The two *Spinola Hours* images easily attest to this even in the placement of the floating frames which would meet and cover when the book was closed just as the wings of an altarpiece snugly fit the central panel or fold like a book. These two images, which would have been seen

³² fol. 22.

³³ Calkins, 1989, p. 8.

³⁴ Calkins states that such architectural tracery was often a direct influence of altarpieces as well as the more personal aspects of devotional practices it entailed.

together, engage not only as narrative and pedagogic diet, but illustrate that there are differing qualities of vision. *The Feast of Dives* centers upon worldly vision of an extraordinary character by emphasizing the ability to see through concrete reality, while *Soul of Lazarus* concerns itself with a higher visionary realm that may bound aspects of perception like a frame, but pictorially expands beyond it.

Various pages from *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, engage in using the frame to enhance the visual senses in a very complicated manner. The *Raising of Lazarus* clearly utilizes three aspects of vision: the viewer is able to read the text, see the surface of the page, and understand that the action of the underlying image occur within the frame (Fig.16).³⁵ *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry* was commissioned in 1410, but left incomplete and ultimately finished at the end of the 15th century. The Limbourg Brothers began the commission, but died before its completion. Jean Colombe eventually completed the book between 1485 and 1490. The *Raising of Lazarus* postdates the completion of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by easily 30 years. What I believe these images demonstrate is an occurrence of psychological engagement in devotion that is specifically referencing altarpieces as thresholds between sight and visionary sight, and secular and mundane spaces. This becomes obvious in considering the form of the frame in the *Raising of Lazarus*. The “T” is a common format for altarpieces. The framed images in various books of hours directly refer to panels or formats of altarpieces that would be readily understandable and recognizable. The “T” shape, which originates in altarpieces, becomes pivotal in discussing the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. This will

be taken up later. As it relates to vision, miniatures establish the formats of altarpieces as templates to organize multiple aspects of earthly and spiritual visions.

Mary of Burgundy before an Open Window with the Virgin and Child in a Church in the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, depicts a hierarchy of vision on the page (fig.17).³⁶ In considering the window as a framing device, one clearly sees a simultaneous representation of both a spiritual and secular nature. In the foreground Mary of Burgundy sits in a private chamber reading her hours and beyond the open window we see an unfolding scene of Mary of Burgundy witnessing the Virgin and Child with attendants or family. This double portrait emphasizes the accessibility of the two worlds through devotion of a private nature. The inclusion of a rosary directly in front of the open window implies a vision accessed through private devotion. One of the unusual compositional characteristics of this image is the substitution of what generally would be pattern and tracery to that of a convincing foreground where the frame of the window serves as the separation of foreground and background. One can discuss this as a great act of artistic virtuosity, but the attention to naturalism stresses the importance and necessity of multiple aspects visual perception. In this case, Mary of Burgundy is witness to the Virgin, but she also visually engages with a devotional book. The window as representation becomes a framing strategy that demonstrates the possibility of fantastic visions and how they can exist seamlessly in a profane world.

³⁵ Folio 171r.

³⁶ Folio 14v.

Perhaps Mary of Burgundy is not before an open window, but rather in front of a private altarpiece. This is emphasized by the repetition of the window shape in the chamber of Mary of Burgundy and the altarpiece that directly frames the head of the Virgin in the church. The image as a whole is indicative of a spiritual world that is accessible through a secular existence and devotional focusing of the senses. The *Ghent Altarpiece* demanded even more engagement through the senses as van Eyck utilized light, reflection, and foreshortening, to create an experience where the spiritual world tethered itself into the confines of the viewer's space much more assertively than an open window, or even the page of a book.

Rogier van der Weyden completed the *Bladelin Altarpiece* around 1445. This altarpiece, though substantially more intimate in scale, carries a frantic preoccupation with establishing a hierarchy of vision, witnessing, and presentation.³⁷ Containing no less than four types of annunciations in it, the *Bladelin Altarpiece* weaves a complex relationship of figures engaged in different types of visualization of religious events. In many aspects, one can argue that *Ghent Altarpiece* is a predecessor to this preoccupation with visuality, but for our purposes, I would like to discuss the left panel of the *Bladelin Altarpiece* (Fig. 18). Containing five figures in front of an open window, Rogier has astutely expressed a range of visual engagement with the miraculous appearance of a Virgin and Child occurring in the landscape beyond. The man, obviously entranced by the miraculous event, kneels and focuses intently. The woman, behind him stands and

³⁷ Bret Rothstein, "Vision, Cognition, and Self-Reflection in Rogier van der Weyden's *Bladelin Triptych*," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 64 (2001), pp. 37-55.

also witnesses the supernatural event unfolding. The three figures on the right appear more engaged in observing the immediate surroundings of the architecture. Their primary visual engagement focuses more on seeing. There is an aspect of witnessing with the three figures on the right, but one that is more mundane. It is a witnessing of people in devotion. Hypothetically, a viewer would be engaged in this crowd and easily self-conscious of his or her own visual engagement. In the words of Bret Rothstein, seeing becomes “a category of experience that both denotes the apprehension of visible phenomena and, simultaneously, signifies spiritual operations that can occur in the total absence of sensory stimulation.”³⁸

If windows can be understood as a metaphor for altarpiece, it can also be proposed that the private chamber becomes significant as a theoretical architecture of spirituality. It can be an illustration of a location where the devotee has access to spiritual dialogue. In the *Ghent Altarpiece* light pours into the painting. Figures appear to be walking out of the picture into the viewer’s space. In this portion of the *Bladelin Altarpiece* the Virgin and Child emanate rays through the window toward the actively devout-inversely to the *Ghent Altarpiece*’s representation of shadows. The altarpiece as a threshold is a two way street. Events of the spiritual world flow out of it; events of the secular world can penetrate into that spiritual world.

Next to Mary in the middle register of the *Ghent Altarpiece* two trefoils of light appear. The play of these two discrete highlights occurs in an antechamber that is

³⁸ Rothstein p. 37

apparently enclosed by a dado, easily interpreted as an interior *hortus conclusus*.³⁹ The light tendrils depicted on the left panel of the *Bladelin Altarpiece*, function similarly in that a supernatural light penetrates the window pane from the Virgin and Child apparition. The most likely argument is that these two highlights are caused by a supernatural occurrence from outside of the altarpiece, or from an undisclosed area in the cityscape beyond. It does not necessarily imply that the cityscape is a representation of a New Jerusalem. It could be an apparition that would only be recognizable by someone engaged in intense devotion. If one argues that the cityscape is rather mundane, it may emphasize the possibility of interchange between secular and spiritual domains.⁴⁰ Mundane spaces always carry potential for a spectacular miraculous event. Van Eyck's completed works after 1432 contend with similar pictorial problems of landscape representation contained within depictions of interiors. *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* completed in 1435 exhibits van Eyck's impressive coordination of interior and exterior space (Fig.19). The composition of this painting parallels much of the middle register of the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior. In *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* the symbolic content of the landscape is better realized both formally and symbolically. Van Eyck clearly designates the landscape beyond the Virgin on the right side as a heavenly realm on the while a secular realm is depicted behind Chancellor Rolin.⁴¹ The lighting aspect in many

³⁹ Lotte Brand Philip, *The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van Eyck* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 86 -88.

⁴⁰ This is suggested as a possibility only. I do not wish to imply that the exterior cityscape beyond is incapable of being understood as symbolic of a holy city.

⁴¹ For formal considerations of the landscape in van Eyck's paintings as well as being influenced by his miniature work see Katherine Crawford Luber, "Recognizing Van Eyck: Magical Realism in Landscape Painting," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 91 (1998), pp. 7-23. For commissioning practices of

ways parallels that of the *Ghent Altarpiece* such as a locational consideration of the light. *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* also has a light source coming from the right that unifies the space of the loggia interior with the landscape beyond depicting a light of higher intensity and quality. The change of light may have to do more with formal considerations of the transition of foreground to background in the devotional portrait of the Chancellor, which is extremely well developed. The *Ghent Altarpiece* being a huge polyptych had no need to present that type of transition of space in a solitary frame. The qualities of light can be expressed as an important description of types of space in the altarpiece format.

Spaces and the *Ghent Altarpiece*

Matthew Botvinick discusses painting as inspiring the devotional imagination in his “The Painting as Pilgrimage: Traces of a Subtext in the Work of Campin and His Contemporaries.”⁴² In bringing up this article, I wish to underscore the relative normalcy in substituting the viewing of a painting - Botvinick discusses the Campin’s *The Mérode Altarpiece*, among others - and the notion that unlike today’s viewers, a 15th century viewer may have easily been able to experience a painting as a substitution for an actual experience of pilgrimage (Fig.20). Through a discussion of *ersatz pilgrimage* and *pilgrimages by proxy*⁴³ among others, Botvinick outlines the practice of substituting the actual act of pilgrimage and imagining one through a particular experience with representations of pilgrimage sites and events. While this would appear to make painting as ultimately a devotional act, it does not imply that there was only one way of properly regarding painting of the time. However, Botvinick does explain very cogently that mystical experiences were likely when witnessing certain paintings and sculptures. This was often utilized for commercial gains by various pilgrimage sites through the doctoring of various pieces and relics with contraptions and mechanical devices that could create extraordinary experiences for a devotee. Many times statues and paintings spoke, wept, or bled.⁴⁴ Images were capable of fantastic actions.

⁴² Matthew Botvinick, “The Painting as Pilgrimage: Traces of a Subtext in the Work of Campin and His Contemporaries,” *Art History* 15 (1992), pp. 1-17.

⁴³ Botvinick, 1992, pp.12-13.

⁴⁴ Botvinick, 1992, p. 10.

Pilgrims are specifically represented in the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* at the lower register as a group arriving at the Eternal Mass (Fig.21). While the primary motivation of the *Ghent Altarpiece* most likely was not a pilgrimage by proxy painting, aspects of location and movement play a pivotal role in setting the devotional stage. If we consider the capabilities of altarpieces as images, specifically that they can be vehicles that contain vestiges of visionary realms or proxy pilgrimages, then the reception of the *Ghent Altarpiece* may have been spectacularly real. Van Eyck needed a unifying principal that avoided the formal fracturing of depicting frames that denote specific examples of vision in the *Spinola Hours* images previously discussed. *Mary of Burgundy before an Open Window with the Virgin and Child in a Church* in the *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, demonstrates this unified experience of secular existence and spiritual reality. While tracery references may have become more isolated as a strategy to figuratively punch holes into the vellum of many manuscripts, *Mary of Burgundy before an Open Window with the Virgin and Child in a Church*, is a unification of both spiritual and secular locations in a manner that the tracery is substituted with a window. Tracery motives in illuminated manuscripts specifically reference altarpiece formats because altarpieces may have been thought of as portals into the celestial realm.

The Vijd family chapel is an actual space of devotion that parallels Mary of Burgundy's private chamber. More engaging is the possibility that the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* functions in a similar fashion in its construction of space. The quality of light changes beyond the windows, displaying a cityscape beyond. However, the viewer would be aware of the commonality of light in the Vijd chapel and that of the

painted Annunciation register. The inconsistent lighting of the urban landscape beyond the windows of the *Annunciation* panel further delineates a zone of complicity where the viewer participates as a devotional subject.

In the *Bladelin Altarpiece* van der Weyden depicts an altarpiece within an altarpiece. The two windows share an identical shape and identical purpose to the altarpiece on which it is painted. If one can apply a similar argument of self-referencing to the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the intention of its original location may be contained within the organization of its exterior, which is in the crypt of St. Bavo. The exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* could be an image similar to an architectural cross section. The Vijd's pray in their private chapel at the bottom. The upper register becomes a cross section of the remainder of St. Bavo Cathedral. The idea of the altarpiece as a cross section of the church would have been very easy for the medieval mind to grasp.

The "T" shape often times represented the interiors of chapel spaces. The strategy has many formal components, such as emphasizing verticality, but they clearly become referential to Gothic church architecture by 1410 in carved Netherlandish retables.⁴⁵ The Vijd's or any observer might have understood the entirety of the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a particular cross section of the Cathedral of St. Bavo. It also strongly indicates that van Eyck was not improvising a quick solution to account for the lack of height in the crypt space. The "T" format of the altarpiece utilized a well-established model of discussing space. Readily understandable as a cartographic description of architecture, van Eyck

⁴⁵ Lynn Jacobs, *Early Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces, 1380-1550: Medieval Tastes and Mass Marketing*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 132. Jacobs points out that earlier antecedents may have been 13th

overlays an impressive naturalism that describes space in a more pictorial sense. Two very distinct types of space are described. The shape of the *Ghent Altarpiece* speaks to architecture, while the registers themselves contend with the viewer's environs. A complex hierarchy of vision is expressed in the narrative structure of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

century. The "T" shape as a reference to Gothic Architecture was well established in carved retables by the early 15th Century in the Netherlands.

Text and Prayer

Moments where God or angels intervene in the world are transformative and powerful. Part of the devotional experience pursued a moment where the devotee and spiritual figures could have a connection. This was often achieved through intense personal meditation and prayer. The text in the *Ghent Altarpiece* Annunciation indicates that private prayer was a likely use. While an abundance of text is superimposed throughout the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the textual interaction between the archangel, Gabriel, and the Virgin is unusual. The figure of Gabriel issues forth text that is applied directly to the surface of the painting in a thin transparent glaze that begins with “Aue Gracia Plena Dns Tecum (sic).”⁴⁶ The first two words appear in the panel depicting the archangel with the remainder of the phrase on the neighboring panel. Opposite Gabriel is the Virgin Mary with the words “Ecce Ancilla Dni (sic)” inverted and facing upwards and read from right to left from the viewer’s perspective.⁴⁷ While speech scrolls and text are fairly common, the imposition of semi-transparent text on the surface of a painting is extremely rare during the time of production of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

The specific text in the *Ghent Annunciation* registers exist as participatory elements within the picture that hold equal bearing with the various objects as well as the two protagonists, Mary and Gabriel (Fig. 5). They are executed in a fashion that is unique in relation to the other depictions of text that van Eyck typically employs. Speech

⁴⁶ “Ave Gracia Plena Dominus Tecum” “Hail! Full of Grace the Lord is with You” Translation from Valentin Denis, *Jan van Eyck: The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (Milan, 1964) ,IV, VII.

scrolls of the prophets and Sibyls, text embroidered on the clothing, or placed upon stone pediments or inscribed into the existing frame serve specific supporting rolls, but they are always understood as descriptive of the world in which they exist. Speech scrolls, although somewhat fantastic if they were considered as actual occurrences, still serve a secondary role of prophetic proclamations that have already taken place. What is particularly striking about Gabriel's announcement and Mary's response is that they are active engagements and exist as live speech acts. One can imagine Vijd and his wife, Elizabeth Borluut praying before the *Ghent Altarpiece* and literally seeing their petitions being sent to God.

If we return to the "T" format of the exterior, the verticality of the act of reciting prayer becomes evident. Engagement of prayer from devotional books is a common topic in several van Eyck paintings. The speech act is necessary to accomplish this and van Eyck's devotional portraits insist upon displaying an accompanying spiritual vision. The engagement of prayer with the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior emphasizes on spoken words that take a tangible form. They can be seen as objects sent to the Virgin. The Virgin, with her text being upside down, responds directly to God above. Praying coupled with the verticality of the "T" format illustrates a hierarchy of transformation that culminates in the Incarnation. It also begins to conflate senses, such as hearing and seeing.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior specifies this as the moment when Logos becomes the Lamb of God. Light, speech, and text become intertwined for powerful reflection and

⁴⁷ *Ecce Ancilla Dominus* "Behold the Handmaiden of the Lord" Translation from Denis, 1964 V.

consideration of the Incarnation. “Tractate XVIII” in Augustine’s sermon’s of the Gospel of John discusses the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Augustine begins to discuss the Word as being capable of seeing and hearing arguing that since the Word is God, and Word created man, then it only holds that the Word both sees and hears.⁴⁸ If a general theme can be placed upon the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the Incarnation of the Word is rather apt. The role of the Word activates if recited in the presence of the exterior *Ghent Altarpiece*. It becomes more devotionally powerful by engaging sight and hearing. Van Eyck’s strategy goes beyond unifying the painted world of the *Ghent Altarpiece* with the actual world and demands the viewer to cross-modally understand the experience. That is to say van Eyck’s painting demands an attention that involves listening and seeing, possibly specific recitation as well. In following Augustine’s *Confessions* as well as other treatises, cross modal sense permits a search of higher spiritual truth. “If the Son hears and sees, are we yet to search for eyes and ears in separate places?”⁴⁹ Augustine concludes with a resounding no. Throughout this tract and in *Confessions* Augustine emphasizes the categorical separation of the five senses. In his sermon on the Gospel of John, Augustine explicitly states that one must go beyond this discreet categorization in order to truly apprehend a relationship with God. “Diverse are the things that are referred to thy heart, yet are there not diverse members there. In they flesh, thou hearest in one place and seest in another; in thy heart, where thou seest, there

⁴⁸ Augustine of Hippo, “On the Gospel of John, Tractate XVIII,” in Philip Schaff, *St. Augustine on Homilies on the Gospel of John and Soliloquies on the First Epistle of John and Soliloquies: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church Part 7*, 2004, p. 120.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

thou hearest.”⁵⁰ Could not viewing the *Ghent Altarpiece* be inherently devotional? It is not enough to praise van Eyck for his ingenious painting of light to correspond to the Vijd chapel. A larger strategy is being employed; one that makes merely viewing the *Ghent Altarpiece* in entanglement of the senses that becomes very similar to Augustine’s call to return to the Heart. Experiencing the *Ghent Altarpiece* is an opportunity to fully engage in all the senses. One must hear with the eyes and see with the ears. The experience of perception in front of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is perhaps the closest thing that a viewer could have with a spiritual dialogue of the Heart.

⁵⁰ Augustine in Schaff, p. 121.

Sense and Devotion

Van Eyck's specific style of naturalism in the *Ghent Altarpiece* addresses thresholds where representation and reality meet and attempt to extend into each other. I would like to compare this idea of visual threshold and accessibility to practices of devotion. The *Ghent Altarpiece* is an instrument that enables the viewer's senses to elicit a religious experience for the individual. The act of seeing a painting may become a rich metaphor of the spiritual experience. Pursuit of that experience was a major preoccupation in the fifteenth century, particularly in the Netherlands. With the rising prominence of the laity, various schools of thoughts specifically engaged in spirituality that stressed the individual's intimate relationship with Christ in lieu of an experience that was solely mediated by the clergy. *Devotio moderna*, while not a school in the specific sense, had many adherents in the Netherlands. Generally these groups existed within the folds of the Catholic Church, but sometimes they became extremely reform oriented and occasionally many would be labeled heretical. Church fathers and modern adherents of *devotio moderna* shared similarities on the importance of private meditation and engaged several dialogues of how the senses and experience of it would unfold.

Augustine of Hippo provides a major interpretation of sense apprehension that was an instrumental foundation for defining spiritual engagement and relationships for a Christian devotee. In his *Confessions*, Augustine offers the reader an autobiographical glimpse into his own worldly struggles and how he overcame them in finding Christian salvation. In the telling of his story, Augustine structures his narrative through metaphors

of the senses, in particular sight and hearing. Although many other themes occupy *Confessions*, the utilization of the senses plays a major role in rectifying the separation between God and the devotee. Augustine argues that all senses are *a priori* and in a general sense fashioned by a creator and endowed in an individual. External stimulation is discreetly categorized dependent on the organ of sense that is appropriate to it.⁵¹ This characteristic is endowed upon beasts as well and Augustine elaborates upon mortal senses through a discussion of memory, which he likens to an immense cavern with categorical organization in which the sense experiences can be stored and retrieved at will. Augustine emphasizes the internal process of memory's function and states that it largely consists of images that can be accessed intellectually.⁵² For concepts and laws such as numbers and dimensions, emotional sensation, and various other things that may not hold to specific images, Augustine contends that while these categories may have a certain amount of investment in physical senses, memory is still capable of knowing these things through contemplation independent of images.

Platonism informs Augustine's argument in many ways, particularly in a seeming separation between sacred and profane realms. One can easily see this within Augustine's larger discussion of the body and soul, which is addressed substantially in *Confessions*. However, a drastic rift between body and soul creates difficulty in establishing a possibility of attaining a spiritual relationship, and so Augustine is forced

⁵¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, X, vii, 11.

⁵² Augustine, *Confessions* X, viii, 13-ix, 16.

to make some modifications to allow for establishing a relationship with God and to avoid a scenario where spiritual and mundane realms are in competition with each other. The first aspect clarifies the relationship between body and soul. Augustine's general view is that there is a proper order to the soul and body. The soul is a master that controls the corporeal instruments. Memory is a cavern that stores our past experiences and sense information, intangible sensations and abstractions, as well as the ability to be only aware of God's presence.⁵³ Where Plato describes these intangibles, such as geometry or mathematics, as residue from an unknown previous presence, Augustine expands memory to an ever-present impression of God. Even though a devotee can be lead astray by carnal focus of the senses-Augustine often refers to this as cupidity-the soul is present but suffers from an improper relationship with the senses. Caritas, the opposite of cupidity, would be the establishment of a proper relationship and offer an opportunity to set a proper hierarchical relationship between the individual and God as well as set proper relationships in the various levels of sight and other senses.

While a discreet categorization of the senses exists, they radically and dramatically transfer into near synaesthesia when Augustine addresses dialogues concerning divine Truth. Augustine writes, "For you are the abiding light by which I investigated all these matters to discover whether they existed, what they were, and what value should be attached to them. I listened to you teaching me and giving

⁵³ This does not permit a communion with God or Christ however.

instructions.”⁵⁴ While this may seem to be a simple categorical error of discussing a divine light of truth that can be heard, it is a small part of a larger dialogue in which Augustine engages, particularly in his commentary on the Gospel of John (*Tractatus in Ioannem evangelium*), where he asks “If the Son hears and sees, are we yet to search for eyes and ears in separate places?”⁵⁵ Certainly, this more aggressive expression of a synaesthetic convergence underscores a typical symbolic function for the symbolic discourse of the divine. Senses as they exist in people are largely governed by reason, but reason alone is not enough to experience Truth as described by Augustine. For these purposes, Augustine weaves the senses to symbolically and metaphorically describe encounters of the Divine Truth.

Sight and hearing also implicate issues of continuity and discontinuity. Basic aspects of these two senses, particularly in the general understanding of them from many Church writers, bear witness that sight was largely an active act and hearing was mostly receptive. In a world of the senses dominated by reason, this causes a rapid discernment of separation and unity. If one holds that the eye searches and actively seeks, than the opposite occurs with hearing, which is the reception of sound from a separate entity. A divine experience of truth does not negate this but rather creates a merging of different senses and their different qualities of continuity. In regards to painting reception, one could argue that a parallel situation occurs with apprehension of an image. A viewer would by nature be instantly informed that she is separate from the image, essentially

⁵⁴ David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse*, (Urbana and Chicago, 1992), p. 57. Quote from *Confessions*, X xl 65.

fully aware that all that was being looked at was a picture of something in the world. In art historical scholarship this can come as nearly a given, especially in iconographic and iconological studies of paintings that assume the viewer is a passive contemplator. This is not to dismiss the importance of contemplation, rather the question is posed to offer a possible intention of an artist who may have wanted to break away from an inherent discontinuity in the act of beholding an image and fabricate a scenario where the viewer becomes inextricable from that which is viewed.

Confessions as a whole is an opportunity for Augustine to superimpose his own biography on a template of spiritual growth that is often described as one of pain, ignorance, and submission to God's love. As Augustine's life continues, his proximity to God increases. His tribulations focus upon the difficulty in maintaining or achieving a sense of continuity with Christ. While van Eyck himself might not have specifically read *Confessions*, these Augustinian ideas, in particular concerning sense apprehension, were under intense reconsideration with Christian mysticism that was well established during the time of fabrication of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

The Brethren of the Common Life was one such community that diligently examined the importance of the sense in devotional practices. Geert Grote founded this group at the end of the fourteenth century. Although widely resisted by the local clerics of the Catholic Church, Grote and his followers eventually received Papal support. This community would have been well known at the time of the dedication of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and is a reasonable source to discuss aspects of devotion that were well

⁵⁵ Chidester, 1992, pp. 58-61.

practiced in the fifteenth century. In particular Grote has sermons and lectures that address the role of perception and images in private devotion. Grote's "A Treatise on Four Classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: A Sermon on the Lord's Nativity" retells many of Augustine's views expressed in *Confessions*.⁵⁶ The importance of utilizing various senses in relation to meditation plays a major role in this sermon, but specifically to words and images. "And when words signifying beauty or beautiful and proportionate things or attractiveness are joined beautifully to these signs of visible things, then they draw the affections still more."⁵⁷ This reiterates the importance of cross modal perception as being a cornerstone of the spiritual experience. This speaks also to the role of text on the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* and how they are intended to be words that inspire a spiritual engagement.

⁵⁶ Geert Grote, "A Treatise on Four Classes of Subjects Suitable for Meditation: A Sermon on the Lord's Nativity," *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings* (Mahweh, NJ, 1988), trans. John van Egen, pp. 98-118.

⁵⁷ Grote, p. 115.

The Function of Light in the *Ghent Altarpiece* Interior

With the exception of the Adam and Eve panels, the lighting of the open *Ghent Altarpiece* appears dramatically infused with brilliant sunlight instead of the comparatively somber lighting of the closed presentation (Fig. 2). Lotte Brand Philip, in her book, *The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van Eyck*, reconstructs the so-called lost sculptural elements of the *Ghent Altarpiece* likening the entire unit to “a kind of religious miracle machine.”⁵⁸ Proposing that the *Ghent Altarpiece* was encased in an automatic and movable structure capable of being reconfigured in ninety-eight different symmetrical views, Philip counters Panofsky’s assertions, that the *Ghent Altarpiece* is iconographically sloppy and visually awkward.⁵⁹ While the somber palette of the exterior emphasizes the luminosity of the interior, the differing quality of light is an indication of shift of devotional space as well as a strategy to fuse the painted elements of the *Ghent Altarpiece* with what may have been an elaborately structural framework that accompanied it.⁶⁰ The entire structure of the painted panels and its enormously impressive canopy and framing mechanism must be imagined in order to harmonize the discrepancies in the painted portions alone. The highly keyed illumination of the majority of the interior panels, excluding the panels of Adam and Eve that flank the upper

⁵⁸ Philip, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Philip undertakes an intriguing recreation of the sculpted elements of the *Ghent Altarpiece* now lost or destroyed that were, as she argues, sculpted by Hubert. While the specifics of the sculpted aspects of the *Ghent Altarpiece* might be debatable, it offers an approximation of how impressive the scale and iconographic richness that the accompanying stone and wooden housing were.

register, can be easily explained as depicted light emanating from the mechanical and sculptural program created around the painting itself, in this instance Philip describes the lost frame as a tabernacle that illuminates the painted panels.⁶¹

The specifics and scope of Philip's argument is problematic and untenable. It is a difficult sell to propose that the *Ghent Altarpiece* was 15th century automaton that could shift configurations depending on the liturgical holiday. However, it is equally untenable that the *Ghent Altarpiece* was appreciated as a discreet painted object. It may be quite a leap to imagine the fantastical sculptural program described by Lotte Brande Philip, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that there was a more modest sculptural accompaniment to the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Unfortunately, the ceiling height of the crypt chapel where it was originally placed leaves little if any room for an accompanying sculptural program of even modest proportions. It is possible, but would be very miniscule.

The somber lighting of Adam and Eve serve as a formal device that plays on the phenomenal lighting of the dim crypt chapel as a manner to separate and reinforce the "T" shape of the golden heavenly architectural spaces containing singing figures, a Deësis, and the entire lower register of the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The quality of light in the Adam and Eve panels would visually merge into the chapel space while the shimmering quality of the remaining upper panels would establish itself as a Heavenly Light. The "T" shape would have been easily recognized as architectural. The juxtaposition of the somber Adam and Eve niches would make the rest of the interior as an apparition. Adam and Eve still function as literal piers that buttress a Heavenly

⁶¹ Philip, 1971, pp. 60-61

architecture, but without the elaborate sculptural accessories maintained by Lotte Brand Philip.⁶² Various qualities of light depicted in the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* need not indicate an inconsistency or ad-hoc assembly on van Eyck's part. The varying qualities of light become a larger organization of the panels that indicate different aspects of devotion. The painting of the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a whole is predicated on the very conditions that Panofsky believes caused it to be thrown together from pre-existing pieces.

If the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* expresses the possibility of shadows from the real world falling into the world of the painting, the interior is its inverse. From the shimmering quality of the Heavenly Kingdom in the upper register to the Adoration of the Lamb in the lower register, the interior primarily contends with phenomena from the painted world penetrating into the crypt chapel. The tendrils of light emanating from the dove at the top of the middle panel in the lower register indicate a change of devotional practice to one that is Eucharistic (fig.22). These beams of lights as well as the entirety of the opened *Ghent Altarpiece* require a contemplation that includes not only the painted images, but also the entire ceremony of liturgical practice that would accompany it. The beams of light frame the suspensorium that may have been utilized in Eucharistic celebration. The lowering of the suspensorium would also result in "a fusion of the heavenly with the with the earthly event. The *Ghent Altarpiece*, in front of which the same earthly rite was performed, originally showed a similar fusion of image and

⁶² Philip, 1971, p. 60. This aspect of the argument remains sound even if the scale of the canopy is difficult to ascertain. It is possible that a huge canopy was constructed when the *Ghent*

reality.”⁶³ Even in the representation of the Fountain of Life, a small draining stream seems to flow down to the bottom of the panel in a nicely manicured recess that would allow the viewer to imagine it falling upon the actual altar. The spatial organization of the lower panels, which appears incongruent to the spatial complexity of the upper register, makes more sense considering that the observer would have been aware of a very direct participatory role that unifies the act of liturgy with the *Adoration of the Lamb*.⁶⁴

In looking upon the exterior *Ghent Altarpiece* as strictly a vertical axis that emphasizes the literal ascent of private devotional prayer and meditation, an inverted aspect of this becomes apparent when the *Ghent Altarpiece* is open and Mass is being commenced. The culmination of the Eucharistic ceremony is aggressively emphasized with a physical descent of the suspensorium to a literal beholding of the Transubstantiation of the Host and Wine. The two primary events celebrated both contend with a bracketing of transformation that is visibly expressed in manners that fuse the painted world with the actual environment. The *Annunciation* and its transformation of Light and Logos into the flesh of Christ with the Transubstantiation literally occurring in front of the *Adoration of the Lamb* panel are prescient moments that serve as fixed locations that mediate ascents and descents. The *Ghent Altarpiece* interior is understood as a sacramental event! The descent of the spiritual realms comes down and literally pours out into the Vijd family

Altarpiece was relocated in the church level chapel, but that goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁶³ Philip, 1971 p. 66. Philip emphasizes this argument for the larger purpose of reconstructing a massive framing structure that is now lost to us.

⁶⁴ Philip, pp. 66-68.

chapel. A complementary action occurs in the *Ghent Altarpiece* exterior, where the actual light of the chapel and devotional prayer penetrates and ascends into spiritual worlds. Both situations ultimately speak of accessibility with each other, whether it is through personal devotion or sacramental participation. The agency of action is shifted depending upon the state of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. When closed, private devotion becomes the agency of the interaction. When the *Ghent Altarpiece* is open and communion is present, God is the apparent agent. The believer witnessing Transubstantiation is the passive recipient. The depictions of light and sound firmly establish this.

Other Devotional Aspects of the Top Register: A Look at Cain and Abel

The First Parents occupy a threshold between the environs of Vijd's personal chapel and the kingdom of God. Light and architecture, both of the actual chapel and the depicted architecture of the frame and canopy, is clearly utilized here to demonstrate accessibility between different realms for the believer via devotion. The entire upper register of the interior *Ghent Altarpiece* illustrates a progressive spiritual liminality. The panels of Adam and Eve serve as a historical parenthesis that parallels devotional practice. As the viewer moves toward the center of the upper register through what has been called the angelic choir she approaches a Deësis with Christ flanked by John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary presiding over the Eternal Mass not only occurring in the entire lower panel of the interior *Ghent Altarpiece* but ostensibly occurring in any secular execution of the rites of Eucharist. In an overarching sense, the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* depicts a vast passing of time between original sin and redemption of Christ, but undoubtedly there are layers and different qualities of time that can be argued especially in relation to the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

In a similar fashion, the upper register also illustrates a devotional progression from sin to redemption. As the first engagement of sin, the moment after the taking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge makes perfect sense as a reflection upon man's state of sin. The grisaille lunettes above the depictions of Adam and Eve reinforce this notion of sin, but also become particularly motivating in thoroughly assessing and taking full inventory of sin in devotional practice. Above the panel of Eve is a representation of

Cain slaying Abel (Figs. 23 and 24). The intriguing content of these depicted statues is that Abel appears to be screaming at the moment preceding his murder.

The story of Cain and Abel has an interesting history with certain details of the story being addendums of particular folklore traditions. Philip contends that the significance of the story of Cain and Abel was popular as a pre-figuration of Christ's Crucifixion, as well as the triumph of Ecclesia over the Synagogue.⁶⁵ This reading of the significance of Cain and Abel is fairly mainstream, but there are details of van Eyck's two depictions that are not as typical and perhaps beg for further marginalized meanings.

In the lunette painted above the figure of Eve, Cain is shown in the act of murdering Abel with the jaw-bone of an ass.⁶⁶ While this aspect of the Cain and Abel myth is fairly recognizable to those in our own time, the inclusion of this murder weapon was most likely derived from more regional sources, particularly English and Hiberno-Saxon of the north.⁶⁷ Within these traditions, Cain and Abel often represent aspects of tithing in its improper or proper form.⁶⁸ Abel sacrifices with love and intention while Cain begrudgingly offers his sacrifice to the Lord. The inclusion of Cain and Abel may be a moral check to the sincerity to those tithing as well as a visual demonstration that

⁶⁵ Philip, 1971, pp. 101-103.

⁶⁶ *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* also depicts Cain slaying Abel with the jaw-bone of an ass in the columns on the left side of the loggia.

⁶⁷ See Meyer Schapiro, "Cain's Jaw-Bone that Did the First Murder," *Art Bulletin* 24 (1942), pp. 205-212. Oliver F. Emerson "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *PMLA* 21 (1906), pp. 831-929. Pearle F. Braude, "'Cockel in oure Clene Corn': Some Implications of Cain's Sacrifice," *Gesta* 7 (1968), pp 15-28. How the conflation spread to the continent is unclear. The depiction of the jaw-bone in the *Ghent Altarpiece* is one of the earlier depictions present on the continent suggesting that at least van Eyck was familiar with some of the traditions coming from England.

⁶⁸ Emerson, 1906, pp. 838-840.

aligns proper tithing to proper sacrifice. The viewer is confronted with a choice to follow the correct spiritual act and carry God's favor, or falsely tithe and be overcome with sin.

Cain's slaying of Abel with the jaw-bone of an ass does not exist in any ecclesiastic or rabbinical sources. The most likely sources are early medieval literary sources, and mystery plays, such as the Townley cycles, but there are representations of Cain murdering with the jaw-bone of an ass from the twelfth century to well into the sixteenth century in England and Ireland⁶⁹ Whatever prompted the use of a jaw-bone as a murder weapon seems rather unclear, though many assume it is a conflation between Cain and Samson.⁷⁰ One manner to view such a conflation is through irony that might have been understood with mystery plays. There is a powerful aspect of Cain's choice of murder weapon being similar to the object of Abel's sacrifice. While it is unclear and largely speculative that the *Vijd* or *Borluut* had a direct contact with England, the conditions were at least favorable that van Eyck may have had access to English images as well as emissaries because of Philip's then political alliance with Henry V.

Similarly, the Cain and Abel motif offers a manner of properly engaging in devotion or improperly engaging in devotion for the wrong reasons. In a certain manner, the figure of Cain exists as a counter to Christ and proper devotion. Metaphorically speaking, Cain is generally viewed as the son of Satan by Church Fathers.⁷¹ As such, Cain represents everything about the spiritual condition of man: firstly, he has fallen from

⁶⁹ Schapiro, 1942, p. 205.

⁷⁰ Schapiro counters that it may not be and attempts to reconcile the appearance of the jaw-bone in miniatures as pre-existing Anglo-Saxon mystery plays and written folk traditions. He posits that Jaw-Bone is a linguistic conflation, not a conflation of narrative.

grace, and secondly, he has not mastered sin. The inclusion of Cain and Abel serve as a starting point for both the road to redemption and the road to damnation. Observing Cain's right foot, one sees that it is foreshortened and appears to penetrate beyond the surface of the painting like that of Adam's foot. One could venture that the commonality of sin with Cain and Adam is expressed with this foreshortening. Adam was guilty of eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Cain sins through murder. The inclusion of the jaw-bone of an ass as murder weapon points to a similarity of consumption in both cases of sin. In both cases the element of mortality is underscored.

One can also understand the jaw-bone as an agent of elocution. As presented before, aspects of the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* perhaps signaled a transformation of logos into Christ. The devotee would be able to correspond hearing the recitation of prayer and visually seeing it be lifted to God with the orientation of text in the Annunciation register. The Cain and Abel lunettes also could manifest itself in an opposite manner. More specifically, the story becomes heretical speech transformed into an animal's jaw-bone and used to murder. God alone hears those victims; the transgressor lacks that ability. The Cain and Abel story may reflect this. This small vignette warns the viewer to not to worship the object, but to ensure and remind that there devotional offering to God, not the painting, is sound.

Heresy is introduced with the myth of Cain and Abel through a New Testament connection from Matthew and Jesus' parable of weeds among the wheat.⁷² Pearl F.

⁷¹ Emerson, 1906, pp.835-838. also Braude, 1968, p. 17.

⁷² Matthew, 13:24-30.

Braude in her essay “‘Cockel in oure Clene Corn’: Some Implications of Cain’s Sacrifice” demonstrates a possible visual connection with the myth of Cain and Abel to acts of heretical thought. Church Fathers and Christian commentators often associated this parable with heretical doctrine and heresy.⁷³ Opening her argument in a discussion of *The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel* capital at Moutier St. Jean, (Fig.25) Braude immediately points out that Cain’s sacrifice is captioned “CAIM CUM LOLIO.”⁷⁴ “LOLIO” would seem to directly identify Christ’s parable of the weeds sown among the wheat with Cain and Abel’s sacrifice to God.⁷⁵ The representation carries not only a demonstration of proper tithing, but associates false doctrine among the faithful. The larger theme of sowing discord might be better demonstrated in the election of depicting the jaw-bone in van Eyck’s depiction of Cain murdering Abel.

Although perhaps a negative and harsh warning against heresy, false tithing, or evil itself, the Cain and Abel lunettes do offer a road of salvation through proper meditation. Assuming that redemption is to be found, the Adam and Eve panels of the *Ghent Altarpiece* commence a visual representation of a spiritual progress toward redemption. As previously stated, Adam and Eve occupy almost an architectural function of buttressing the outer flanks of the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in relation to some type of hypothetical canopy that was above it. In absence of that, the format of the *Ghent Altarpiece* easily becomes understood as architectural with Adam and Eve at the point of entering. The First Parents occupy a transitional area of the threshold of the Kingdom of

⁷³ Braude, 1968, p.18.

⁷⁴ Braude, 1968, p.15.

Heaven. The upper register charts a progress toward the Deësis presented in the center. Sight and sound combine in a manner that describe the spiritual progression in terms of space and surrounding.

Music and Devotion

This maneuvering and application of reflection that externally references outside of the frame in the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* occurs in the panels commonly referred to as the Heavenly Choir, located adjacent to the Adam and Eve panels. This is a frequent strategy employed by the artist in many of his other works. The inner left panel depicts eight figures in front of a choir podium engaged in song (Fig. 26). The inner right panel consists of six figures, of which two are clearly playing musical instruments (Fig. 27). These figures and the space they occupy obviously are meant to depict a location that certainly is beyond the threshold of Adam and Eve's relatively earthly niches. However, a seemingly contradictory aspect of the lighting can be found within blue gem cloak brooch of the foremost singer (Fig.28). Van Eyck frequently utilizes highlights to intensify luminosity, but he furthers this by allowing the reflection of a window space, presumably of the Vijd family chapel itself, within a blue gem clasp of one of the singers. This reflection, a well-documented practice in many of van Eyck's other works, presents the awareness of the environment of a witness. The entire space of the musicians becomes an intermediary between a higher level of spirituality and the environment of the viewer.

Another peculiar aspect of these two panels is the insistence on classifying these figures as angels. In a vast majority of the scholarship, the Heavenly Choir is assumed to be supernatural or angelic. Panofsky vigorously disputes this, claiming that the singers

and musicians are a mortal choir firmly grounded and lacking wings.⁷⁶ Speculating that this indicates that the two panels were originally intended for an ambry or utilized as an organ cover, Panofsky seeks to mount evidence that the *Ghent Altarpiece* as a whole lacks the structural and iconographic integrity to have been planned.⁷⁷ Perhaps one of the reasons the Heavenly Choir is read as angelic or supernatural is the homogenous quality of light in all but the Adam and Eve panels. If a visual conclusion is to be drawn, one easily can posit that this translates to a unified quality of space. The Heavenly Choir is easily comprehensible as being depictions of angels due to the commonality of location with the interior Deësis. Both conclusions have their merits.

Rather than elect a side in discussing the singing and musical figures represented in these panels, perhaps a middle road can be forged. The “Heavenly” choir is also a “Mortal” choir. In having these figures exist as both, they become indicative of making the entire space liminal and certainly other visual cues suggest the transformative quality of proper meditation. An aspect of location is described with intense almost golden shimmering quality of the remaining upper registers. The blue jewel clasp on the foremost singing being reflects a window that would have been in the environs of the worshiper in the Vijd chapel. This reflection functions as an interlocutor, negotiating these two qualities of space and location. This reflection in the blue clasp is easily overlooked. One would have to concentrate intently to notice it at all or have prior

⁷⁶ Panofsky, 1971, p. 218.

⁷⁷ Panofsky, 1971, p. 221.

knowledge of it being there. Although speculative as to why this was placed in the painting, one reason could be to serve as a device to hone concentration.

With these musical figures, song and music are lifted as proper devotional aspects that link our world with higher realms of spirituality. This may explain a reason for van Eyck to present these figures in ambiguous terms. The location emphasizes a Heavenly Kingdom, even more so if we imagine an accompanying canopy. As previously stated, the *Ghent Altarpiece's* inverted "T" format alone would have been implicitly understood as architectural to a medieval viewer. The Heavenly Choir in the *Ghent Altarpiece* solidly stands on a ground, albeit one of a supernatural quality. While these figures might be able to jump, no flight would seem likely. With proper meditation, these angels seem almost transformative; mortal one second, supernatural the next. Hypothetically, worshipers in the Vijd chapel may have either had access to a choir for occasional services, or possibly music from services in the main area of St. Bavo's could have been heard in the private crypt chapel, giving the *Ghent Altarpiece* an appearance of singing.

The apparent illusion of a rood screen for the *Ghent Altarpiece* is difficult to deny with the inclusion of the Choir in the upper register. Rood screens were potent areas of negotiated space and may not have been seen as visual or physical impediments to Church services or activities. Jacquelin E. Jung describes the rood screen as functioning both as an organization of social space, particularly between lay and learned clergy, but describes it as a site of passage.⁷⁸ In utilizing Victor Turner and Edmund Leach, Jung

⁷⁸ Jacqueline E. Jung, "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of Choir Screens in Gothic Churches," *Art Bulletin* 82 (2000), p. 630.

presents the idea that choir screens socially divided space within Gothic churches, but also functioned as a liturgical unifier of Mass.⁷⁹ Choir screens for Jung were often times liminal spaces that partook in being a threshold space between the choir itself and the nave of churches. Stressing these “frontier” areas, Jung argues that they become endowed with sacredness and transformation in many different manners.⁸⁰ The upper register of the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is strictly organized with areas of thresholds, from Adam and Eve visually functioning as buttressing piers, to the reflection of the Vijd chapel window existing within the golden illumination of what might have been a modest canopy or gold leaf application. Further inside the upper register the figures of the Virgin and John the Baptist flank and exist as a portal to Christ himself in the center. In this regard, the singing figures can also be viewed as embodying a spiritual transformation that is done through a holy speech act expressed musically.

Depicting musicians playing instruments is a fairly straightforward endeavor; often times entailing little more than physically attaching the instrument to the body in an appropriate manner. Van Eyck’s figures with musical instruments, located on the right, are meticulously rendered and naturalistically portrayed as playing music. The remarkable realism aside, these figures are not anything out of the ordinary in comparison to the singing figures located in the left panel. Van Eyck’s attention to the physiognomic expressions in the singing figures faces appear to have little precedent, and certainly not to the scale of an altarpiece. There are uncommon images found in miniatures that depict

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

singing, only one of which I have found that possibly predates the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

Although not to the detail of van Eyck's singing figures, an early 14th century image from a *Bible Historiale*, clearly utilizes facial expression in the depicted figures to indicate singing (Fig. 29). This manner of depicting singing still appears to be extremely rare even in miniatures. Singing, when depicted, is more commonly indicated contextually or through the inclusion of speech scrolls. Van Eyck has offered figures physically engaged in the act of singing. It is unnecessary for the viewer to read an indication of music; in the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, one observes it. Just as the depicted light corresponds to the environmental lighting of the Vijd family chapel, the aural sense of the viewer is engaged with what could have easily been actual choir singers in the environs of the chapel or beyond.

Choirs were very much part of acceptable liturgical music. Organs as well would have been acceptable for use in Mass. However, the stringed instruments would have been considered inappropriate for liturgical uses.⁸¹ In many cases angels and heavenly beings are depicted as playing various stringed instruments such as harps or lutes. The *Ghent Altarpiece* depicts musical figures playing these instruments and it becomes a rather easy conclusion to describe them as angelic or supernatural. The singing figures are assumed to be a part of a larger group of a heavenly choir. Issues of transformation are discussed in other aspects of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, in particular the Incarnation with

⁸¹ See Richard Pestell, "Medieval Art and the Performance of Medieval Music," *Early Music* 15 (1987), pp. 57-68. The instruments utilized in liturgical services is contentious. The predominant view is that most discussion centers on singing and the organ as appropriate for liturgical services. However, there are several criticisms of musical accompaniment made during the Middle Ages. This implies that at certain

the exterior and the Transubstantiation in the interior. The possibility exists that these musical figures underscore a devotional music as being heard by both God and Man. The buttressing of Adam and Eve serve as a secular bracket to the celestial interior Deësis. The two extremes are moderated by depictions of musical beings. Both God and man hear the music they play.

Christopher Page discusses the use of polyphonic vocalizations in liturgical music. Likening this musical practice to *a cappella* singing, Page suggests that human voices would have created layers of sounds through extended vocalizations of non-textual parts of musical scores.⁸² Being that all of the instruments except the organ displayed in the *Ghent Altarpiece* would have been generally inappropriate for liturgical use, these vocalizations perhaps followed the same roles as stringed and wind instruments would in secular music of providing various harmonies and polyphonies.⁸³ Trained singers would have most likely utilized polyphonic solutions similar to modern *a cappella* to substitute the textures and layers of sound that many stringed instruments normally would have accomplished.

The wings of the upper register of the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* are organized symmetrically as brackets. That is to say that Adam and Eve appear as a set as well as the musical figures. A devotee would have heard musical accompaniment during liturgical services or church activities inside and outside of the Vijd chapel. In hearing

places and times, musical instruments may have been played in church, although the practice may have been generally frowned upon.

⁸² Christopher Page, "Going Beyond the Limits: Experiments in Vocalization in the French Chanson, 1340-1440," *Early Music* 20 (1992), pp.448-449.

⁸³ See Page's note 17.

music in the environment, the viewer can visually project song into the representations of singing figures. The *Ghent Altarpiece* appears to sing. The singing figures on the left in this case can stand in for a mortal choir, while the figures playing instruments could be heard as musical angels. What is being heard is somewhat more difficult to ascertain. The articulation of the singers' mouths appears to be engaged in layering of different tones and harmonies.

The Church dealt with polyphonic music ambivalently, going through various stages of aggressive extirpation followed by relative laxity of enforcement. Augustine is cautious, if not suspicious of music at best. However, other ecclesiastic thinkers were enthusiastic supporters. During the time of the fabrication of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, the arguments for and against the role that music would hold in liturgy was contentious, and many offered up varying opinions. Most notably Egidius Carlerius and Johannis Tinctoris, who were well respected theorists of the 15th century, brought up many views in the defense of music. Tinctoris' career mostly occurs at the end of the 15th Century. Carlerius would have been middle aged at the time the *Ghent Altarpiece* was dedicated. Most notable of Tinctoris' defenses is presenting an apotropaic role of music in frightening off the Devil.⁸⁴ Carlerius contends that music was capable of conveying images of angels and saints.⁸⁵ Choir accompaniment in the Vijd Chapel allowed the viewer to witness a transformation of the singing figures depicted in the *Ghent Altarpiece's* upper register from mortal choir to startling visions of actual angels. This

⁸⁴ Honey Meconi, "Listening to Sacred Polyphony," *Early Music*, 26 (1992), p. 376.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

further explains the presence of stringed instruments in that they represent not only angelic musicians, but also pay homage to the recent visibility of polyphonic music.

In considering statements that defended music, particularly polyphony, for enabling actual visions to occur, one should consider the criticisms of motets and polyphonic works that were brought up. The first was its perceived unintelligibility due to Motets having simultaneous lines of dialogue being sung. While mortals may have difficulty comprehending the words in such pieces, God would have been able to hear them perfectly well.⁸⁶

In a broader sense, the singing figures of the interior and the *Annunciation* of the exterior of the *Ghent Altarpiece* are both situations where the viewer engages with both the visual and aural. The exterior annunciation has been previously discussed in terms of a visual demonstration of the incarnation of the *Logos* to Christ, but more specifically as a visual presentation of devotional prayer that could appear to manifest as Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin. The viewer has the possibility of experiencing something akin to an actual spiritual vision with van Eyck's pictorial strategy of also implicating other senses, such as hearing. This is almost directly expressed with the singing figures of the interior as they could easily be understood as corresponding to an actual choir that would have been in the Vijd Chapel during service, or perhaps located in an area where the choir could be heard but not seen. The *Ghent Altarpiece* in these instances could appear to be literally singing. The unification of depicted light and the lighting of the chapel is only a discreet and incomplete strategy by itself. Van Eyck implicates the other

senses to force a cross modal engagement of the viewer's senses. The devotee can see that which is heard and vice versa. Spoken words appear on the painting, images of angels begin to sing.

Conclusion

These same devotional possibilities occur on the interior of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. While the significance tends to focus on its liturgical uses, the *Ghent Altarpiece* offered a complete contemporary devotional regimen that ranged from private devotion to public ecclesiastical function. Much can be praised about van Eyck's realism and attention to detail, but the realism becomes a mode of presentation that not only implicates the world outside of the painting through light and reflection, but also implicates it through sound. This complication of the senses activates a spiritual psychology where sight and hearing are joined to enable a richer deeper experience.

The role of the viewer's senses parallels the visual strategy of balancing the real world and the depicted world. The surface of the *Ghent Altarpiece* is a fulcrum between the real and painted world. Specifically, the *Ghent Altarpiece* presents the immanent incarnation of the Word to Christ on the exterior, and the liminal aspect of transubstantiation in the interior. The viewer's state is identical to a balancing of secular and spiritual concerns where the senses are specifically tuned to behave like Augustine's notion of the heart. The heart becomes a portal that negotiates the profane and spiritual world for the believer. In demanding the use of both hearing and sight in the *Ghent Altarpiece*, van Eyck creates not only a modern miracle machine as Lotte Brand Philip describes, but a complete and total devotional experience. Modern Devotion informs this experience and one can speculate that such practices would have been rather well known. Van Eyck had to contend with more issues than normal for a commission of this scale.

The *Ghent Altarpiece* had to serve a liturgical purpose for mass. It had to memorialize Vijd and Borluut. It had to account for recent trends in private devotional practices. Van Eyck's attention to detail in the *Ghent Altarpiece* is phenomenally impressive. He harmonizes public, liturgical, and private use of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. The manifestation of the senses as they relate to secular and spiritual experiences is a complex and tightly organized system that van Eyck would continue to explore in later works. The attempt to create a devotional experience that harmonizes multiple types of seeing and hearing begins with the completion of the *Ghent Altarpiece*.



Figure 1

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 2

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 3

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 4

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 5

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 6

Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife*, 1434, London, The National Gallery

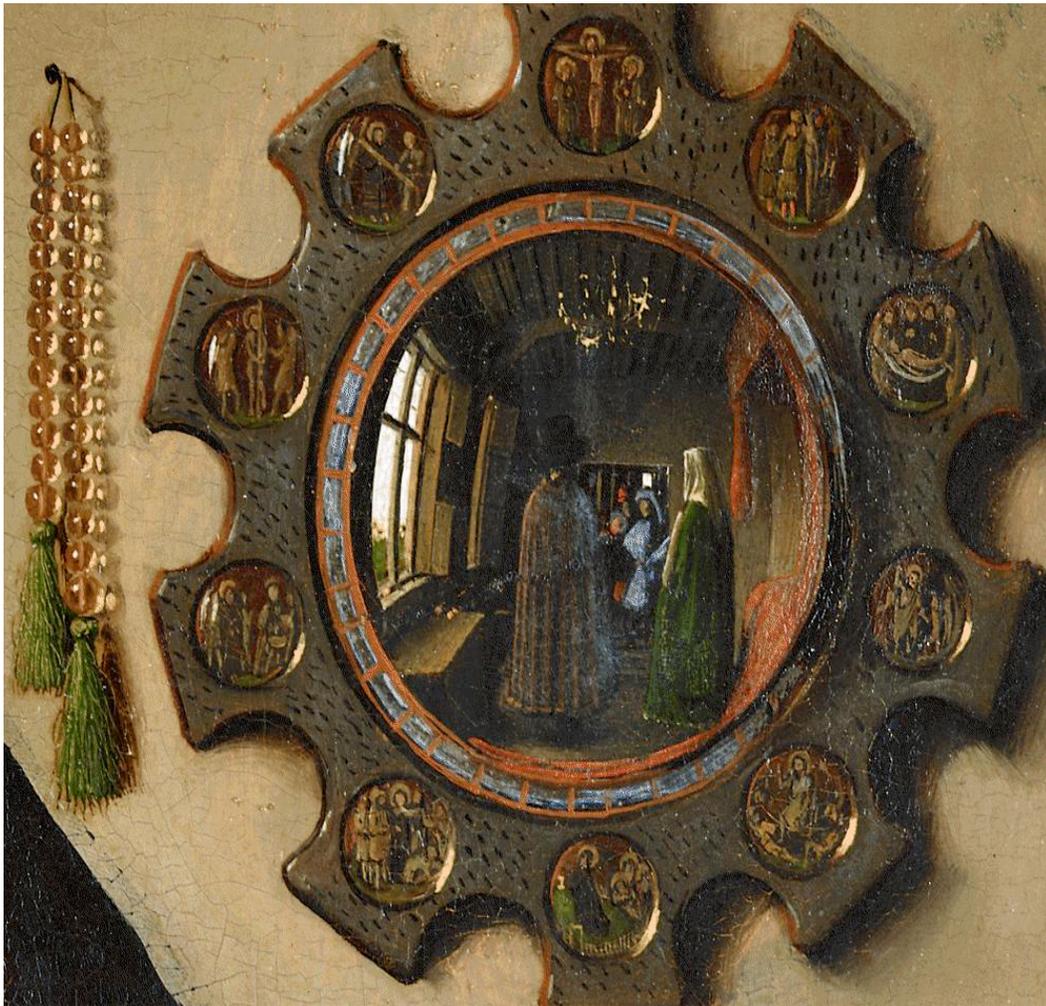


Figure 7

Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife* (detail), 1434, London, The National Gallery

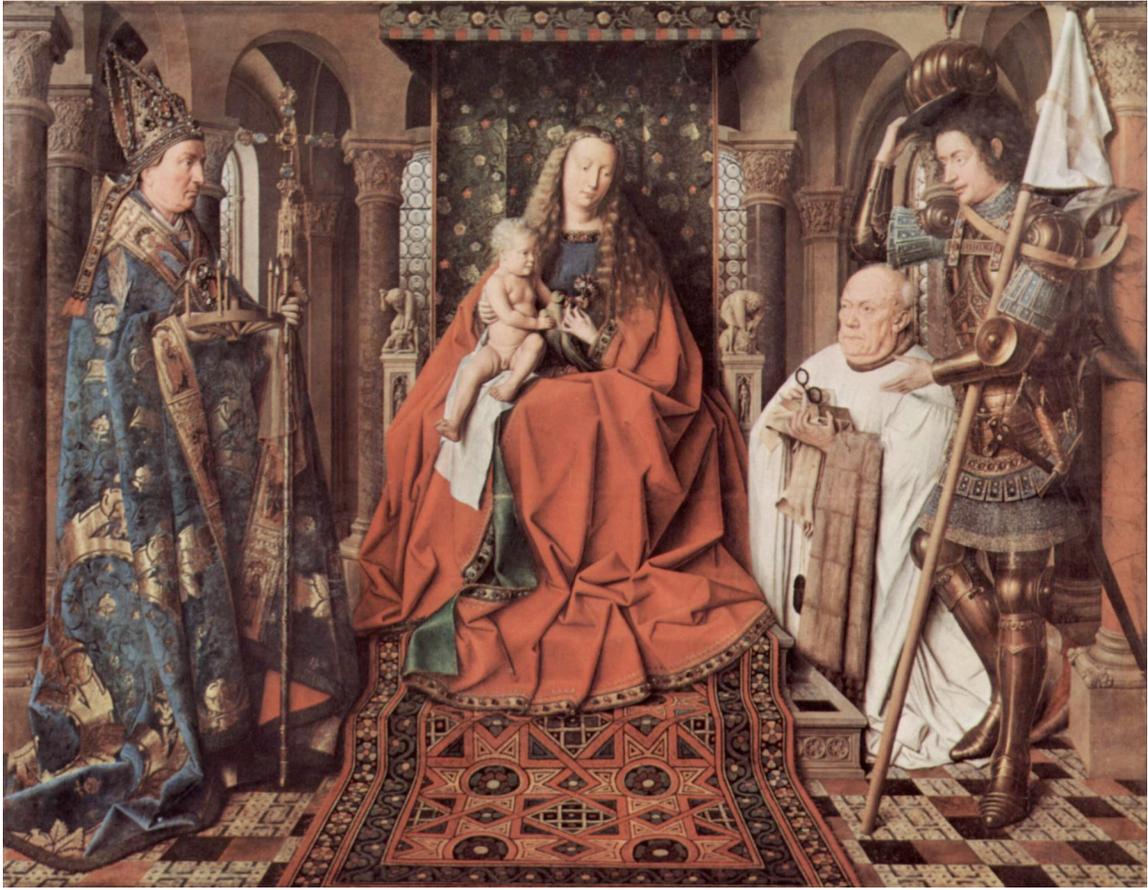


Figure 8

Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele*, 1436, Het Groeninge Museum, Bruges



Figure 9

Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna with Canon van der Paele* (detail), 1436, Het Groeninge Museum, Bruges, photo from Carter (1954) Fig. 4



Figure 10

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 11

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 12

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (exterior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 13

Jan van Eyck, *Virgin in a Church*, 1430's, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



Figure 14

Master of James IV of Scotland et al. *Feast of Dives* from *Spinola Hours*, 1510's, J. Paul Getty Museum



Figure 15

Master of James IV of Scotland et al. *Lazarus's Soul* from *Spinola Hours*, 1510's, J. Paul Getty Museum



Figure 16

Limbourg Brothers, et al. *The Raising of Lazarus* from *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, 15th century, Musée Condé, Chantilly



Figure 17

Vienna Master, *Mary of Burgundy before an Open Window with the Virgin and Child in a Church* from *Hours of Mary of Burgundy*, 1470's, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

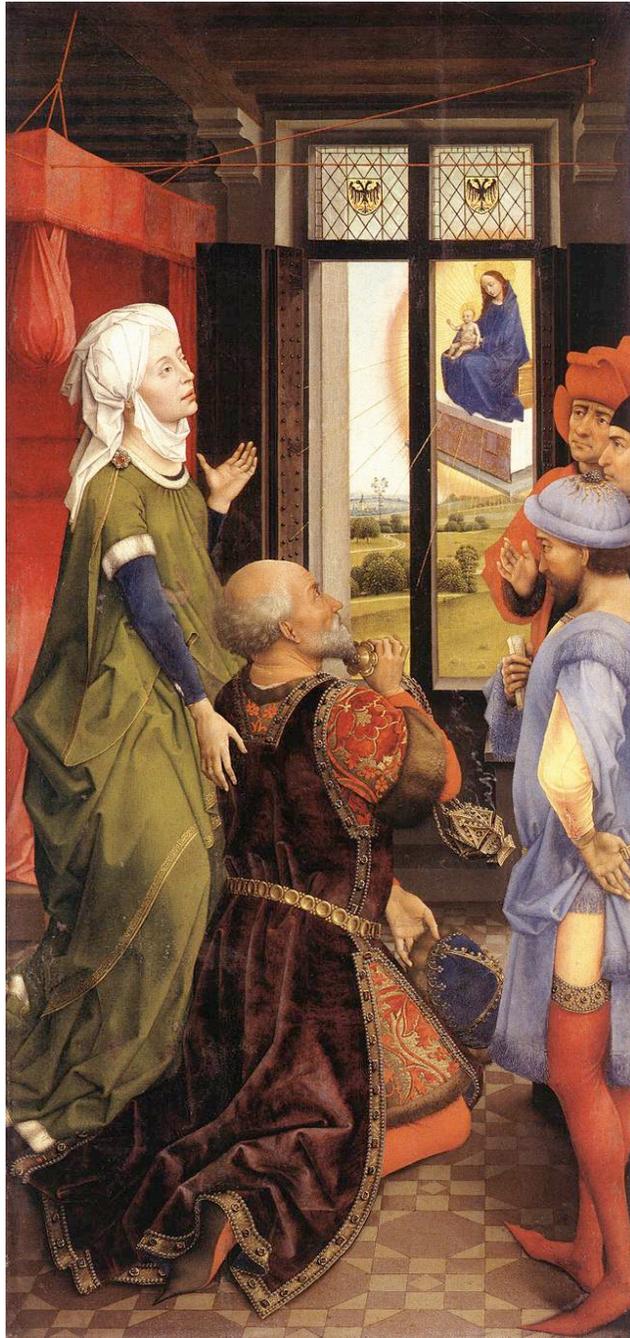


Figure 18

Rogier van der Weyden, *Bladelin Altarpiece* (detail), 1445-1450, Staatliche Museen, Berlin



Figure 19

Jan van Eyck, *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin*, 1435, The Louvre, Paris



Figure 20

Robert Campin, *Mèrode Altarpiece*, 1425-1428, Metropolitan Museum, New York



Figure 21

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral

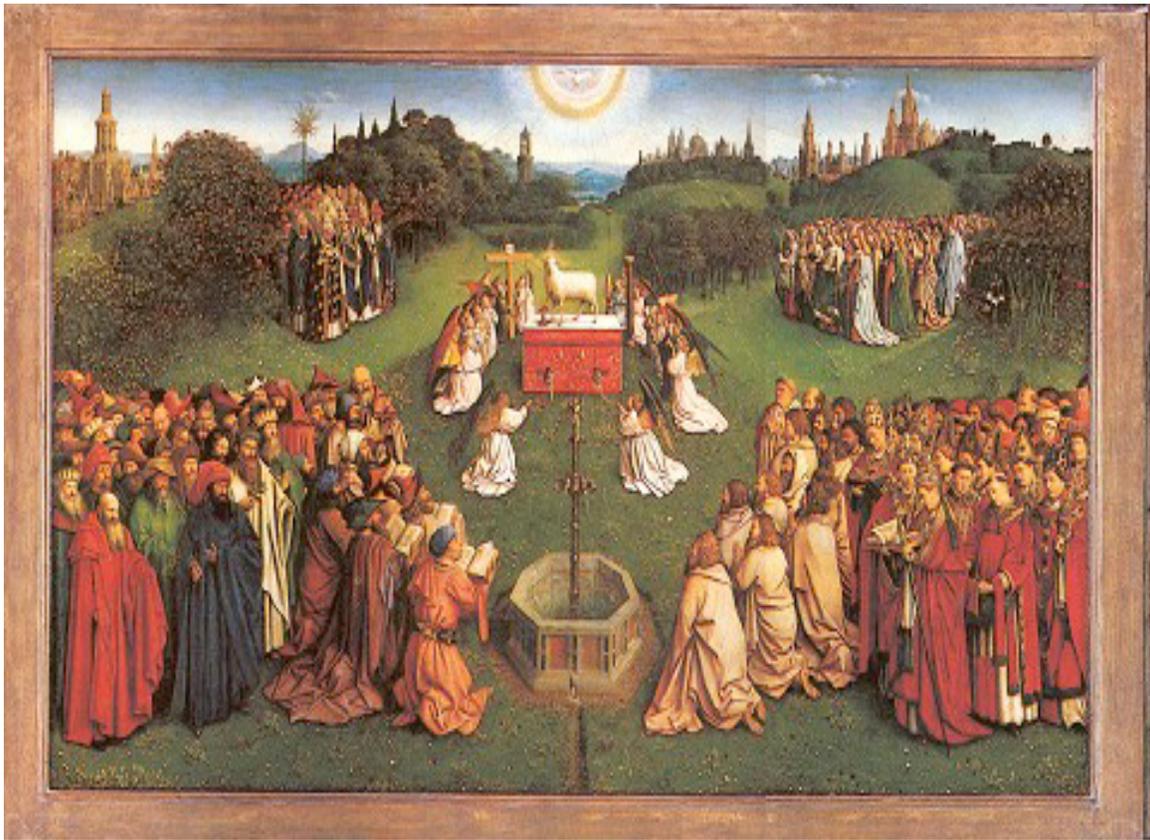


Figure 22

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 23

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 24

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 25

The Sacrifice of Cain and Abel, Moutier –Saint jean, c. 1130, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, photo from Braude (1968) Fig. 1



Figure 26

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral



Figure 27

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral

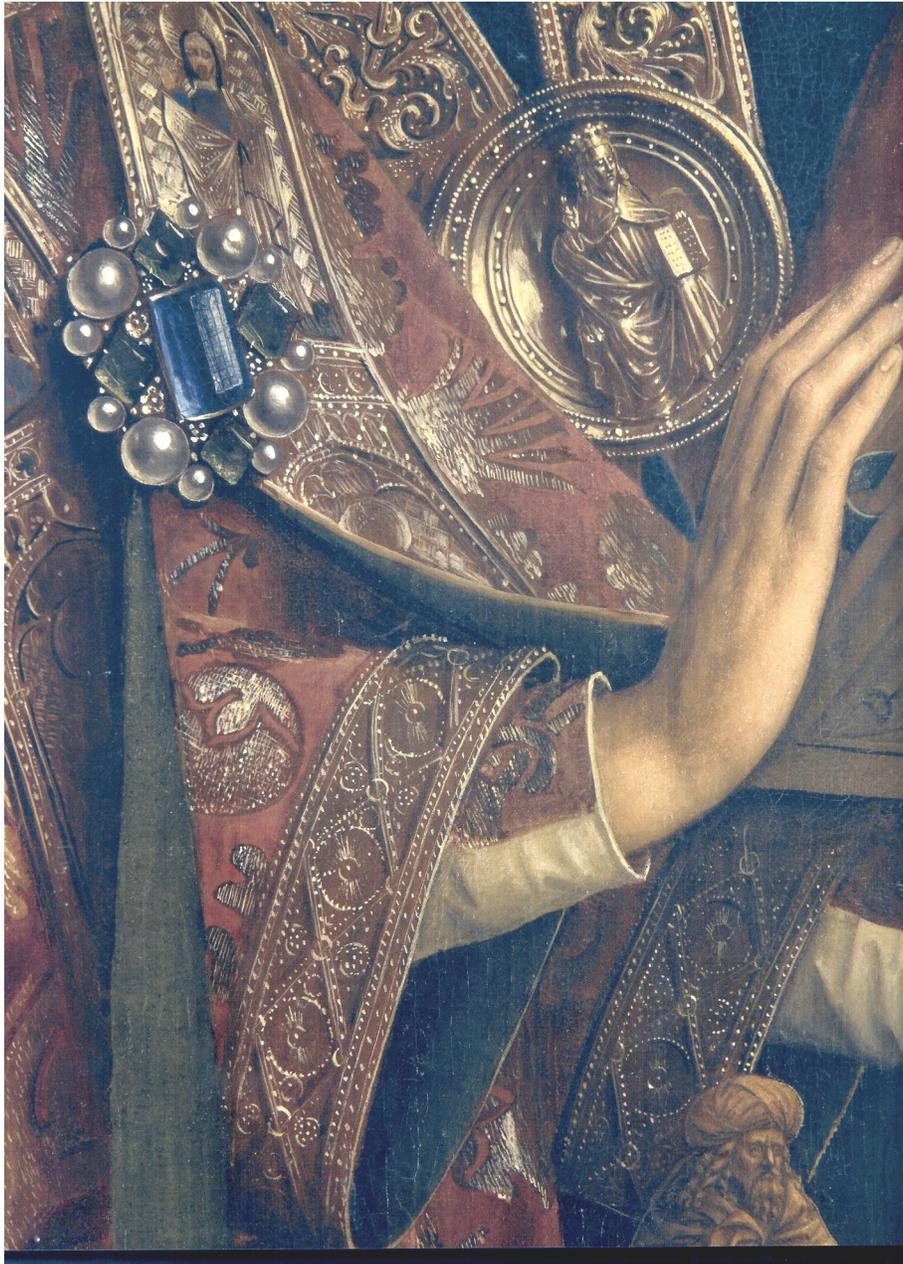


Figure 28

Jan van Eyck *Ghent Altarpiece* (interior detail of Fig. 26), 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral

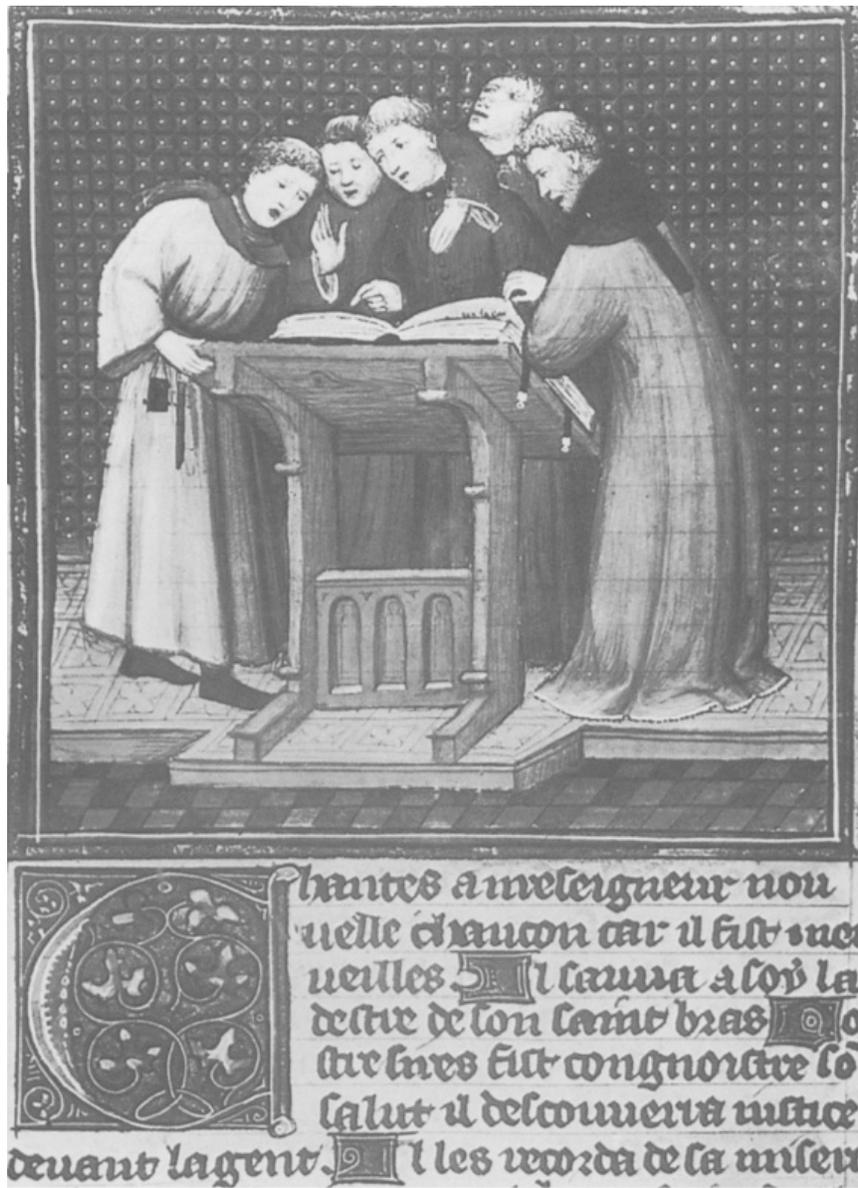


Figure 29

Choir and Choirmaster from Bible Historiale, late 14th century, from Page(1992) Fig. 1.

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Vita

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