

Hugo van der Goes and the Devotio Moderna

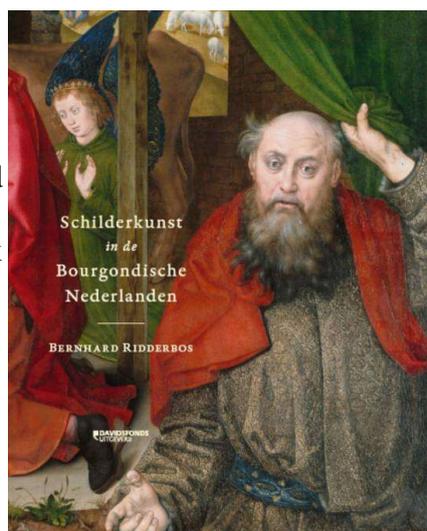
Karel Vereycken, December 25, 2020



Van der Goes' Portinari triptych, detail : the shepherds

Dutch historian Bernhard Ridderbos' fine book *Schilderkunst in de Bourgondische Nederlanden* (Painting in the Burgundian Netherlands, Davidsfonds, Leuven 2015) is a feast for the eyes and the mind.

Ridderbos, already irritated by the skilful propaganda campaign waged for centuries by Italian bankers for whom "the" Renaissance was only Italian and for whom the flammingo were only "Primitives", starts his book by setting fire (not without reason) to a work that remains a benchmark, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919), by Johan Huizinga (1872-1945).



For this influential Dutch historian and rector of the University of Leyden:

“Van Eyck's art, in its ability to depict holy things, attained a high degree of detail and naturalism, undoubtedly marking a point of departure on the strict art-historical level, but in reality signifying an end in terms of the cultural-historical level. The extreme tension between of the divine was

reached here; yet, the mystical content of his of his imagination was about to leave these images, leaving the pleasure to form."

Denying the clearly pre-Renaissance spirit of the Flemish painters of the early XVth Century, for Huizinga their naturalism was nothing more than "*the ultimate deployment of the late medieval spirit.*"

Yet, as I sought to demonstrate in April 2006, in my presentation at the Sorbonne's international colloquium on "*The search for the divine through geometric space*", **Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck** and other Flemish painters, often portrayed as reluctant to use the perspectivist models developed by the Italian **Leon Battista Alberti**, as evidenced by the rather imposing presence of convex mirrors in their works (*Werl triptyche, Arnolfini wedding*), were inspired by the complex mathematical and geometric work of the great Arab scientist **Ibn Al-Haytam**.

Better known in the West by his Latin name **Alhazen**, his work in optics, notably on light and convex mirrors, can be found in the notebooks of **Leonardo da Vinci**, an avid reader of Ghiberti's *Commentaries*.*

Freed from the castrating prison of self-censorship, Ridderbos delves deeper into iconography, economic, social and cultural contexts. Without leading the reader astray into a morass of details and sterile hypotheses, he sheds some very interesting light on the hows and whys of artistic creation in this period.

Those of you who have never taken the time to read either **Erwin Panofsky's** monumental work, or the imposing monographs published in Belgium by the Fonds Mercator in Antwerp, recounting in extenso the lives of great Flemish painters such as Robert Campin, Rogier Van der Weyden, Jan Van Eyck, Hans Memling, Thierry Bouts, Hugo Van der Goes and Gérard David, will thank Ridderbos for not only extracting the quintessence, but also for relating them to one another.

Sponsors

Firstly, it shows the extent to which artists were subject to strict strict "product specifications". Such and such a monastery guild or lord would place an order. They determined the size of the work, the subject and the people to be portrayed. Several theologians, specialists in the theme to be treated, were eventually appointed to advise and accompany the painter in his depiction of religious subjects. The artist began by making a drawing on his panel. It was only once validated by the client, often after numerous modifications, that the artist went ahead and applied the colors. Political developments could also oblige artists to redo their design. Gérard David, for example had to change all the aldermen's portraits on his work, following the election of a new team...

Rivalries

Ridderbos goes on to show how the rivalries of princes, churches and city-states, often in search of prestige (today's famous "soft power"), benefited Flemish artistic life. Princes, dukes, kings and foreign bankers vied with Flemish painters to show off their skills and to make a name for themselves.



Portinari triptych (1475), by Hugo van der Goes.

To improve his status and reputation, a Medici banker (Angelo Tani) commissions a triptych from **Hans Memling**, a *Last Judgment* (1466-1473), largely inspired by Van Der Weyden's work of the same name for the Hospice de Beaune.

When his colleague (Tommaso Portinari, the Medici's representative in Bruges) learned of this, he commissioned another triptych, a *Nativity* (1475), much larger and even more splendid, from **Hugo Van der Goes**.

This "*Portinari triptych*" was unveiled in Florence in 1483 and inspired a whole series of Italian works, notably those by the Italian painter **Domenico Ghirlandaio**.

After working for the city of Leuven, **Rogier Van der Weyden** was offered a much better salary by the city of Brussels, both cities seeking to become the capital of the region.

When he painted a large altarpiece on Justice (*Justice of Trajan and Herkenbald*, ca. 1450) for the City Hall, the city of Leuven, not to be outdone, commissioned a similar work (*La justice d'Otton III*, 1473) from **Thierry Bouts** several years later, prompting another city, Bruges, to commission a similar work (*The Cambyse Judgment*, 1498) from **Gérard David**, a disciple and close associate of Van der Goes' workshop.

Of course, Ridderbos does not limit himself to tracing this sociological dynamic. He analyzes how these painters interacted with each other, taking on board the technical and iconographic contributions of their colleagues.

While mobilizing the best of themselves, they also they brought something entirely new to the table. It's a process not dissimilar to the compositional contribution of Ludwig van Beethoven, who himself climbed "*on the shoulders of the giants*" that Bach, Haydn and Mozart had been before him.

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Remains of the Rouge Cloître Abbey in Auderghem near Brussels.

In Chapter VII, page 179, the author makes a special effort to highlight the work of Hugo Van Der Goes, a remarkable painter who has been somewhat hastily relegated to the shadow of Van Eyck, Van der Weyden and Memling. Probably born around 1440 in Ghent, Van der Goes was admitted to the city's painters' guild in 1467 and became its dean in 1474. Three years later, he was at the pinnacle of professional recognition and social success.

It was then that he abandoned bourgeois life to join the great reform movement known as Modern Devotion. To this end, Van Der Goes became a lay brother with the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, more specifically those of the Rouge-Cloître (Rooklooster) abbey in the Forêt de Soignes near Brussels. There, he enjoys certain privileges, such as being allowed to continue painting.

Deventer

The Modern Devotion was above all an educational movement. In Deventer, it founded a renowned school for the poor and orphans. **Rudolf Agricola** and his successor **Alexander Hegius** taught Greek and Latin to a whole generation of humanists, the most famous of whom was **Erasmus of Rotterdam**. The famous German cardinal-philosopher, mathematician and jurist **Nicholas Cusanus** (1401-1464) held the efforts of Deventer's teachers in high esteem.

In 1469, five years after his death, and no doubt in conformity with his last wishes, part of his inheritance was used (from 1470 to 1682) to capitalize up a dedicated fund, the **Bursa Cusana**, enabling some twenty pupils, half of them from Cusanus' hometown, to further their education. The pietism of modern devotion, centered on interiority, is best expressed in **Thomas van Kempen's** (a **Kempis**) little book (1380-1471), *The Imitation of Jesus Christ*. This emphasizes the example of Christ's passion as taught in the Gospel, a message echoed by Erasmus.

Van Der Goes, personally inspired by the spirit of this approach, emerges, together with Antwerp painter **Quinten Matsys** he never met, as "the most Erasmian-minded" of all Flemish painters. It

was thanks to this spiritual commitment that he was able to bring out a dramatic dramatic tension in his works, translated by the souls, the emotional animation and expressiveness of the characters.

The shepherds

One immediately thinks of the magnificent shepherds in the *Portinari Triptych* (figure opening this article). This work was commissioned by one of the wealthiest bankers of the time, yet it is not the three Magi in the foreground, but the humble shepherds who arrived long before them, who were the first to recognize the child as God's son coming to live among the humans.

In a marked departure from the way Italian painter Andrea Mantegna had portrayed them twenty years earlier – as ragged, shaggy, dirty, toothless wretches - Van der Goes emphasizes their dignity and highlights their transformations.

Moreover, the shepherds' expressions embody the three spiritual stages defined by another inspirer of modern Devotion, the Flemish mystic Jan Van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381): the active life, the inner life and the contemplative life where Man enters into spiritual communion with God. **

Nicodemus's hat



The Lamentation of Christ (after 1479), by Hugo van der Goes, Vienna Museum.

Another example is his painting *The Lamentation of Christ* (after 1479), currently in the Vienna Museum. At first glance, there's nothing revolutionary about this depiction. It shows the mother of

Christ being held by John as she collapses over the mortal remains of her son. It's in the foreground that two figures deserve our attention.

Relying on the *Geestelijke Opklimmingen* (Spiritual Ascents) written by **Gerard Zerbold de Zutphen (1367-1398)**, an author of the modern Devotion close to Groote, Ridderbos identifies their role in this work.

On the right, we see **Nicodemus** wearing a red hood. According to the Gospel of St. John, Nicodemus was one of the first Pharisees to secretly become a disciple of Jesus. Here, we see him in the midst of an existential crisis, not to say agony, with a frightened look at his rich hat on the ground.



Nicodemus' hat, topped with a crown of thorns!

But on closer inspection, we discover that the hat is crowned with a crown of thorns! The metaphor thus reflects modern devotion, which demands that we not only follow the rites faithfully, but also "*live in imitation of Christ*", i.e. rise to such a level of love for Christ and humanity that we can freely offer our possessions, our wealth and even our lives to the true, the just and the beautiful.

Finally, to complete the picture, on the left, still in the foreground, is the figure of Mary Magdalene, another disciple of Jesus who followed him to his last days.

A repentant prostitute, Mary Magdalene perfectly completes the metaphor, setting herself up here as the very example of the work of introspection and personal self-perfection demanded by the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life.

The message is powerful: you can't just adore or admire Christ! You have to change your lives! A message that has lost none of its relevance today...



Detail from the Portinari Triptych by Hugo van der Goes.



Commemorative plaque at the Rooklooster in Ouderghem near Brussels.

Notes:

* Ibn Al-Haytam (Alhazen) (965-1039) wrote some 200 works on mathematics, astronomy, physics, medicine and philosophy. Born in Basra, after working on the development of the Nile in Egypt, he travelled to Spain. He is said to have carried out a series of highly detailed experiments on theoretical and experimental optics, including the camera obscura (darkroom), work that was later to be found in **Leonardo da Vinci's** studies on light. Da Vinci may well have read the lengthy passages by Alhazen that appear in the *Commentari* of the Florentine erudite and sculptor **Ghiberti**.

After **Gerbert d'Aurillac** (the future Pope Sylvester II in 999), Bishop of Rheims, brought back from Spain the decimal system with its zero and an astrolabe, it was thanks to **Gerard of Cremona (1114-c. 1187)** that Europe gained access to Greek, Jewish and Arabic science. This scholar went to Toledo in 1175 to learn Arabic, and translated some 80 scientific works from Arabic into Latin, including Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Apollonius' *Conics*, several treatises by Aristotle, Avicenna's *Canon*, and the works of Ibn Al-Haytam, Al-Kindi, Thabit ibn Qurra and Al-Razi. In the Arab world, this research was taken up a century later by the Persian physicist Al-Farisi (1267-1319).