

## Statement of the International Commission for the Conservation of the Ghent altarpiece

3 October 2023

The experts of the International Commission for the Conservation of the Ghent altarpiece share a deep respect and commitment to this masterpiece with everyone responsible for its care, including the Flemish government and its administrations for monuments and cultural heritage; the Church Wardens of Saint Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent; the members of the Steering Committee and the Advisory Board; the conservation/restoration team and scientific specialists of KIK-IRPA; as well as many national and international colleagues specialized in scientific and historical analysis who generously share their expertise.

In the report by em. Prof. dr. H el ene Verougstraete, which was shared with us by the project administrators, Bressers Architects bvba, Ghent, we also hear a commitment to the well-being of the altarpiece. However, we also note that em. Prof. Verougstraete's deeply felt concerns seem to have originated in numerous misunderstandings of the conservation process. Unfortunately, em. Prof. Verougstraete's understanding of the conservation procedures followed does not seem to have used the detailed conservation report available on the website Closer to Van Eyck but seems to be based entirely on the publication of 2021. This publication focused on new art historical interpretations of the altarpiece after conservation treatment; for this reason, it offers only a summary description of the conservation treatment itself. Em. Prof. Verougstraete's report does not cite the conservation report, which could have resolved these questions. Fortunately, the detailed report by Dr. Griet Steyaert, Kathleen Froyen and Dr. H el ene Dubois, which Bressers Architects also shared with us, clarifies these misunderstandings with detailed evidence of the decision-making process and the conservation methods used, referencing the full conservation report as well as the many scholarly publications that lay out the research findings and conservation process.

Em. Prof. Verougstraete lays out some of the stages of a well-planned conservation project (Part I, p. 14)—including regular communication and detailed discussions with the International Commission and with the Advisory Board on which she serves—and suggests that these procedures have not been followed during the conservation of the Ghent altarpiece. We are not certain how the misunderstanding came about—the idea that the team was not following these procedures—but all of these procedures and more have been integral throughout this project.

The membership of the International Commission was chosen to include specialists in art conservation, art history and conservation science, most of whom have particular expertise in the work of Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries. We—and the conservation team—have benefited from the diverse perspectives offered by experts from many different specialties.

As members of the International Commission, we can confirm that the conservation team has followed a meticulous process of research and documentation. The team informed us of their findings during formal meetings and often during more informal visits between the regular meetings. Detailed documentation was shared with us before each Commission meeting and during our time together, including the results of examinations with the traditional methods mentioned in em. Prof. Verougstraete's report (microscopy, X-radiography) but also many other more recently developed methodologies (including Macro X-ray Fluorescence scans, Macro X-

ray Powder Diffraction, Reflectance Imaging Spectroscopy). During these meetings we also studied the paintings in person, held extensive discussions with the conservation team and gave advice on the treatment decisions to be made. At the close of each meeting, we prepared a report synthesizing the discussions: our understanding of the evidence presented, our opinions on the questions that had been presented to us, and our recommendations and support for the next steps planned in the conservation process.

Throughout this project the International Commission has been grateful for other colleagues who also oversee and support the project, in particular the Advisory Board, including em. Prof. Verougstraete, which received each of our reports and after careful consideration joined us in approving the next steps in the conservation process. Each stage of the conservation treatment proceeded only after approval by, and with the support of, these advisory groups.

Em. Prof. Verougstraete's report lists what she believes are failings of the conservation project. Because the report by Dr. Griet Steyaert, Kathleen Froyen and Dr. H el ene Dubois addresses these issues in detail and clarifies the misunderstandings that gave rise to these challenges, we will not repeat the evidence here. However, we can share some observations made during meetings of the International Commission with the conservation team.

The treatment has always been carried out in a measured, careful way with regular consultation with the International Commission. For example, in March of 2017 the Commission met for the first time during Phase 2 of the project. At this point, the conservation team had been able to remove varnish and inpainting applied in the 1950s and had begun to remove older, non-original varnish layers, revealing older repaints that now could be discussed with the Commission. Our recommendations were to next remove all nineteenth-century varnish and repaints as well and to carry out scientific analysis to better understand the still-older overpaint. After this work was completed, we met again in September of 2017 and with the oldest overpaint now clearly visible and thoroughly documented, we recommended a major revision to the original treatment plan: focusing the time remaining before the 2020 exhibition on the painstaking work of removing the sixteenth-century overpaint on the lower tier of the altarpiece's interior, wherever this could be safely carried out, to reveal the original surface. In May of 2018, when we gathered for the third meeting of Phase 2, we saw the remarkable results after removal of the oldest overpaint revealed the Van Eycks' original brushwork.

The Coxcie copy of the Ghent altarpiece was not overlooked but has always been an important document, often discussed during these meetings. Our conversations are informed by research carried out during Phase 1 of the project treating the outer wings, and we recognize that this copy records the state of the altarpiece *after* an extensive campaign of overpainting carried out in the sixteenth century. By contrast, it is only through the project's exhaustive research followed by skilled conservation treatment that we now have an understanding of how the altarpiece originally looked when Jan van Eyck completed it in 1432.

The question of authorship was never ignored in our discussions with the conservation team. Material evidence showed that many years had passed before the sixteenth-century overpaint was added, making it clear that the overpaint cannot be attributed to Jan van Eyck. Paint samples showed that layers of varnish and some surface dirt lay between the original surface and this overpaint. In detailed study of the altarpiece with the conservation team we recognized that the distinctively textured sixteenth-century overpaint had been brushed over old losses and age cracks in the original. However, once we began to see the original surface, the question of

attribution—to Hubert, Jan or to other associates—was often part of our discussions with the conservation team. We were delighted that additional funding was secured for members of the team to continue researching this question during 2020.

In discussing methods of overpaint removal with the conservation team, the safety of the original paint surface was of course the top priority. The International Commission includes members who are among the most respected painting conservators working today, and all members recognize the remarkable skills of the conservators on the team. After studying the paintings and holding discussions with the team, we agreed that the safest technique would be mechanical overpaint removal (a well-established conservation technique described by em. Prof. Verougstraete as “scratching” or *krabben*). We agreed that in any areas that might be at risk during this process the overpaint would be left in place. In close examination of the paintings’ surfaces we saw that this overpaint removal was not causing damage but revealed early damages filled with the overpaint (which seem to have been misunderstood as recent damage in the Verougstraete report).

In discussing inpainting decisions after overpaint removal, we were impressed by the team’s careful research and planning. In developing their approach to a difficult area of extensive old damage on the horizon, the team’s treatment choices were guided by repeated consultations with a group of experts specialized in the history of regional architecture. The plan to reconstruct one of those buildings was discussed extensively in one of our meetings. The chosen solution, which has disturbed em. Prof. Verougstraete (Part I, p. 10), was not arbitrary, but was based on the evidence of original paint that remained in areas of old damage and developed in consultation with these experts, testing possible solutions through digital reconstructions of the damaged areas.

The conservation treatment of the Ghent altarpiece by Hubert and Jan van Eyck has been one of the best documented and most accessible conservation treatments in recent memory. We applaud the openness and timeliness with which KIK-IRPA has shared the findings of the research and the results of the treatment: not only with specialized colleagues through scholarly publications, but also with a much wider audience. The treatment has been carried out in public view in a specially designed open conservation studio and explained in regular public talks. On the “Closer to Van Eyck” website, art lovers and specialists alike can find technical reports, art historical publications, and can directly study the paintings before, during and after treatment in high resolution and in multiple modalities (infrared reflectography and X-radiography as well as visible light).

This has not always been the approach taken during the conservation treatment of renowned works of art. In previous generations, the details of treatments of this significance often were not released publicly out of a concern that art lovers with limited expertise in technical studies might misinterpret what they found. While we recognize this risk, we feel that continued openness is the best approach for the icon of our shared heritage that is the Ghent altarpiece. We continue to support the skilled and sensitive work of the KIK-IRPA conservation team and believe strongly that it would be inappropriate to make any changes to the conservation/restoration team based on misunderstandings of the conservation process. We are confident that through open discussions the value of this important project will be clear.