

Press Release

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A NEW HOME FOR THE GHENT ALTARPIECE IS REVEALED

A new era in heritage experience is unveiled on 25 March 2021 in Ghent's St. Bavo's Cathedral

As part of one of the most ambitious restoration projects undertaken in Flanders, St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent is set to reveal a revolutionary new visitor experience on 25 March 2021. At the same time, the world-famous Ghent Altarpiece by Jan and Hubert Van Eyck will be moved to a new location.

The Cathedral crypt has also been extensively adapted for visitors to experience the artwork's remarkable history, via new visual technology. The Ghent Altarpiece is widely recognised as one of history's most influential works of art. Its breath-taking splendour is made up of twelve panels, painted recto verso, with its most iconic panel, 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb', at its centerpiece. At the time of its completion in 1432, the van Eyck creation, intended for public viewing, provided colour, brilliance and vividness that astounded the peers of its time. Today, thanks to an extensive modern-day restoration project, the exquisiteness and magnificence created by the van Eyck brothers over 500 years ago, can continue to be admired by the public, in its original home, at a new setting in the Cathedral.

The Ghent Altarpiece moves to a new setting at St.Bavo's Cathedral

Over the centuries, the Ghent Altarpiece has been moved from several locations both within and outside the Cathedral. The masterpiece has also been subject to numerous historic restorations, but the most recent work carried out by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) provided a much needed, sympathetic repair and restoration to the polyptych's central image and lower register panels. These also formed part of the recently acclaimed "Van Eyck – An Optical Revolution" exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum Ghent (MSK) in 2020.

A bespoke glass case has been designed to house the polyptych and will re-create the optimum conditions for acclimatisation, necessary for the preservation of this masterpiece.

In the 1980's the masterpiece was moved for safety and conservation reasons from its original location, the Vijd Chapel in the ambulatory, to the Villa Chapel which was close to the Cathedral's main entrance. In 2005 audio guides were introduced. This often led to an overcrowded chapel, especially when groups entered, resulting in a visitor experience which was less enjoyable. To overcome this problem, the visitor experience needed to be

re-thought. The main aim was to separate the interpretation of the Ghent Altarpiece from its presentation. The Cathedral crypt provided the perfect venue for the interpretation aspect, but it also required a contiguous path to then view the Ghent Altarpiece. As such, a return to the Villa Chapel wasn't a viable option.

It turned out to be a difficult balancing act in harmonising the religious function of the Cathedral, as a place reserved for service, with the cultural-touristic function.

A new location had to be found. Consideration had to be made to ensure there was enough space to accommodate the new glass case with an unhindered view of its interior and exterior panels. With space constraints in the Vijd Chapel, the move to the Sacrament Chapel was chosen for its proximity to its original home in the ambulatory, but also because its tranquil setting is more conducive to an intimate encounter with the painting, with a bigger surface area.

For more background information on the climatological challenges of conserving the Ghent Altarpiece click [HERE](#) and on the conservation treatment by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) [HERE](#)

The Cathedral Visitor Centre - a new era in heritage experience

As part of the visitor experience, the Cathedral has undergone a bold and challenging restoration process to create an appropriate and suitable space to offer visitors a place to view the full context of this renowned artwork. The Cathedral Crypt has been preserved, renovated, and redesigned and will act as the starting point for the Ghent Altarpiece visitor experience.

Using a ground-breaking concept in the field of museology, St. Bavo's Cathedral will launch a new era in its presentation of heritage in its ancient setting. Visitors will be given the aid of a personal virtual digital assistant to lead them from chapel to chapel, prior to viewing the main painting. In each of these chapels, Augmented Reality (AR) glasses or an AR tablet will allow them to view a scene, enhanced with an additional layer of virtual experience, superimposed to create a life-like visual effect. The experience will be further enhanced with the powerful and evocative commentary of storytelling, transporting visitors back through time to the period when the Ghent Altarpiece was painted to offer a potted history of its chequered past.

For further in-depth information about the virtual experience created by Alfavision, Global market leader in Virtual Reality & Mixed Reality experiences for museums and visitor centres click [HERE](#)

St. Bavo's Cathedral becomes fully accessible

The architectural restoration for this project was undertaken by Bressers Architects, a local Ghent-based firm.

To realise the need for modern-day optimal full accessibility, in an ancient building like the Cathedral, required the expert intervention of innovative and forward-thinking planning. Not only was full accessibility required for both the crypt and the choir but also the apsidal chapels, including the Sacrament chapel. This required the addition of a new elevator and stairs but also demolition and redesign of some of the Cathedral's ancient stone walls. Sympathetic integration with the look of the existing building was undertaken to enable the accessibility of a much larger part of the Cathedral, previously only available to the lower part of the church. To make the extensive restoration works possible, a sum of €30 million euros was raised with the support of the Flemish Government and other sponsors. This included the restoration work in the crypt and coronary chapels, the erection of the new circulation volume, the new display case for the Ghent Altarpiece and its climatization, together with the installation of its new high-tech visitor experience.

For more information on the architectural project and Bressers Architects click [HERE](#)

“OMG, Van Eyck was here” celebrated in the city of Ghent in 2021

The new visitor centre at St Bavo's Cathedral forms part of several other “van Eyck” related events planned for Ghent in 2021. Its opening, postponed from 2020, coincides with a contemporary city-wide celebration of all things related to Van Eyck, entitled “OMG, Van Eyck was Here”. As well as a visit to the Ghent Altarpiece, a series of events including visual arts, theatre, design, fashion, gastronomy, music and themed city walks will be celebrated in the city this year.

For more information about Van Eyck themed activities in Ghent this year, click [HERE](#)

Online tour of the New Visitor Centre:

Due to current travel restrictions, a visit of the opening of the new visitor centre on 25 March 2021 will not be possible in person. However, an exclusive online viewing will be available press from 23 March 2021. A tour of the new visitor centre is planned to offer as complete an insight as is possible from a digital viewpoint, together with the opportunity to book individual interviews with the curator and other experts. Further information will follow in due course. Please **contact us** if you are interested to know more about the exclusive tour.

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For further information about the new visitor centre at St. Bavo's Cathedral, visit www.sintbaafskathedraal.be.

This project forms one of the premier events of the Flemish Masters project initiated by VISITFLANDERS.

www.flemishmasters.com, www.vaneyckwashere.be