

## The conservation treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by the Van Eyck brothers (1432)

*Elaborate press kits on the conservation treatment, the rediscovery of the original Lamb and a statement on its appearance are available on the KIK-IRPA's press page:*

<http://www.kikirpa.be/EN/136/371/Press.htm> or [www.kikirpa.be](http://www.kikirpa.be) > Press

**Images for publication (Lukas – Art in Flanders): [bart.desitter@meemoo.be](mailto:bart.desitter@meemoo.be)**

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The first two phases of the conservation treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* by the Van Eyck brothers took place between October 2012 and December 2019. They were carried out at the request of the **Churchwardens of St Bavo's Cathedral** by the **Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA)** at the **Museum of Fine Arts Ghent (MSK)**. Two exhibition rooms were redesigned as a conservation studio with a glass wall that allowed visitors to view the treatment in progress. **80% of the treatment was financed by the Flemish government** (Flanders Heritage Agency and Department of Culture, Youth and Media, 40% each) **and the remaining 20% by the Baillet Latour Fund**.

### Phase 1: October 2012 – October 2016 (completed)



Before treatment

After treatment

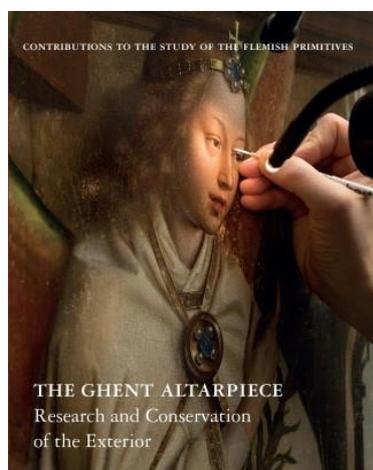
When the restoration of the panels of the closed altarpiece started in October 2012, it had been planned to remove the relatively recent retouching and oxidized modern varnish, consolidate the paint layers and conserve the supports. **The restorers, however, gradually discovered that the paint layer was covered by very large zones of overpaint, the existence of which had been unknown for centuries.** These later additions dated from the middle of the 16th century. This means that the exceptional quality of the closed Ghent Altarpiece hadn't been visible for nearly 500 years!

Detecting the overpaint hasn't been straightforward: they were hidden beneath yellowed varnish, their quality and state or conservation varied significantly, they covered entire zones of the original composition which they imitated, and their age cracks were similar to those in Van Eyck's underlying paint layer.

Additional research by the restorers and laboratories of the KIK-IRPA and by the universities of Ghent and Antwerp revealed **that the overpaint, which covered around 70% of the surface, could be removed without damaging the original paint layer.** The advice of the International committee of experts to uncover the original was accepted by all parties involved. Such a large-scale removal of overpaint, however, demanded additional time and a large amount of expertise and patience to remove the paint centimeter per centimeter with a scalpel under a binocular microscope. But the result lived up to the expectations: Van Eyck's original beneath the overpaint was in good condition, with only few zones with losses or other damage. The restorers then started retouching, which was carried out progressively and with much care in order to obtain a harmonious result for all the panels and to restore the subtle modeling of Van Eyck.

The treatment has led to unique iconographic and aesthetic revelations. The panels are now much closer to their original appearance and show **new iconographic elements.** The restoration has also revealed **the beautiful painting technique of the Van Eyck brothers,** with their unequaled sense of observation and thorough insight into the interaction between light and materials, leading to a unique illusion of three-dimensionality on a flat surface. **The role of both brothers in the creation of the Ghent Altarpiece is confirmed by the authenticity of the quatrain on the frames of the exterior wings.** In October 2016, the restored panels and frames returned to St Bavo's cathedral. The conservation treatment was unanimously praised, both in Belgium and internationally.

### ***The Ghent Altarpiece. Research and Conservation of the Exterior***



The scientific results of phase 1 of the conservation treatment are published in the richly illustrated book *The Ghent Altarpiece. Research and Conservation of the Exterior*, edited by the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives of the KIK-IRPA.

Bart Fransen and Cyriel Stroo (eds.)

Hardback, c. 450 p.

*Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives*, vol. 14

ISBN 978-2-930054-38-4

Available through Brepols Publishers

[http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod\\_id=IS-9782930054384-1](http://www.brepols.net/Pages/ShowProduct.aspx?prod_id=IS-9782930054384-1)

## Phase 2: November 2016 – end of 2019 (completed)



Before treatment



After treatment

The treatment of the lower register of the opened polyptych began in late 2016 and was applied to the **central panel with *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*** and the side panels with *The Knights of Christ*, *The Hermits* and *The Pilgrims*. The left side panel with the copy of the *Just Judges* from 1951 had already received a conservation treatment in 2010. Extensive examination revealed that, **on *The Adoration*, around half of the original painting was covered by old overpaints**. On the side panels, some very old brown varnishes were obscuring the details and depth effect, while around 10% to 15% of them were covered by overpaints. These largely followed the composition, but were far less refined. They had been introduced in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century to adapt the painting to the fashion of the time, and to mask some local damage. **The underlying original painting by the Van Eycks turned out to be extremely well preserved, with only around a five percent loss of paint. This was uncovered in its entirety and the old damage was replenished by meticulous retouches**. The original gold-coloured polychromy on the frames was also restored. A conservation treatment for the wooden supports will ensure their long-term stability.

There are no words to express the result. Liberated from the thick layers of yellow varnish and the coarser overpaints, we can discover the Van Eycks' sublime virtuosity in abundance. In a naturalistic style that exceeds all reality, we can see a wondrous three-dimensional lighting effect, a display of materials that approaches the trompe-l'oeil and a level of individual detail for all the characters, animals and plants that bears witness to unparalleled dedication. **The heavenly scene, which is interpreted as a panoramic snapshot with an endless amount to discover, is restored to life once more thanks to this restoration**. Notable features include the original figure of the Lamb

and various minutely-detailed buildings, whose overpaints have been entirely removed. The reconstruction of damaged zones in this architecture was carried out on the advice of historians and archaeologists specializing in medieval Ghent.

The **interdisciplinary team of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA)** worked closely with a range of institutions on the examination and the restoration. It was supported by the Universities of Ghent and Antwerp, among others, and was supervised by an international committee of experts. The many hundreds of hours that the team spent on identifying and removing the overpaints have lent them an unmistakable expertise. **The overpaints were taken off centimetre by centimetre using a surgical scalpel and under a stereo microscope.** Well-trained manual skill and visual acuity for the overpaints and the fragile original layer of paint are indispensable for this.

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

### ***Uncovering the original Lamb***



Left : before treatment | Right : after overpaint removal

Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent © Lukasweb.be-Art in Flanders vzw, photo KIK-IRPA

The Lamb was overpainted in the middle of the sixteenth century as part of a larger intervention carried out to cover up small damages and early, clumsy restorations, and to give the masterpiece a fresh appearance. During a restoration in 1951, the removal of green overpaint surrounding the head exposed the original, smaller ears, creating the impression that the Lamb had four ears.

**The brothers Van Eyck have chosen to represent the Lamb of God with human-like staring eyes, more human features and an intense gaze. They have chosen to do so, although they were perfectly capable of reproducing the natural appearance of a lamb.** This kind of representation of the Lamb of God with a human gaze was common in the middle ages, as can be seen for instance in the mosaics in the Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

At the time of the overpainting in the middle of the sixteenth century, its human appearance was changed to a more naturalistic and passive expression. The discovery of the original Lamb carries huge art historical significance, and has ignited fresh debate among theologians and art historians concerning its meaning and the possible reasons for the change of appearance in the overpaint.

The Van Eyck brothers' original Lamb was in good condition with minimal paint loss. The restoration was supported by an international commission of twenty experts, as well as many world

renowned researchers in museums and universities. Removal of the overpaint was preceded and guided by thorough examination using the latest state of the art technology. **The choice for removing the overpaint was carefully weighed out, and it was fully supported by all involved.** Images circulating on social media show the original Lamb freed from overpaint, before minimal inpainting of small paint losses.

### Phase 3: After the Van Eyck year 2020-2021 (planned)



The intensive treatment of the **upper register of the open altarpiece** is planned after the Van Eyck year 2020-2021. The churchwardens of St Bavo's will launch a European tender and submit a new subsidy dossier to the Flemish government.

Images: [clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be](http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be) and © Sint-Baafskathedraal Gent, [Lukasweb.be](http://Lukasweb.be)-Art in Flanders vzw, foto KIK-IRPA

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

The Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers, movable heritage that is an integral part of St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, is protected by the regulations for monuments (Onroerenderfgoeddecreet). As movable heritage of exceptional importance, the polyptych is also protected as a Flemish masterpiece (Topstukkendecreet). The Ghent Altarpiece is not only considered to be Van Eyck's absolute masterpiece, but also that of the entire oeuvre of the Flemish Primitives. Moreover, the polyptych is still kept in the cathedral for which it was painted. **The Flemish Government financed 80 % of the restoration costs, both of phase 1 and of phase 2: 40 % was paid by the Heritage Agency and 40 % by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media. The remaining 20 % was financed by the Baillet Latour Fund. The total cost of the first two phases was 2 189 514,88 €.**

Project	Conservation of the Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers
Commissioner	Church administration of St Bavo's cathedral, Ghent
Project manager	Architectenbureau Bressers bvba
Contractor	Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), Brussels
Cost of phases 1 and 2	1 410 592,54 €
Additional cost phase 1	149 113 € (treatment of the frames) 479 650 € (uncovering of the original paint layer)
Additional cost phase 2	150 159,34 € (uncovering of the original paint layer)
Public subsidy	Flander Heritage Agency Department of Culture, Youth and Media
Sponsor	Baillet Latour Fund
Sponsor additional research	Gieskes-Strijbis Fund, the Netherlands
Location	Museum of Fine Arts Ghent (MSK)
Conservation studio	City of Ghent, sponsored by ArcelorMittal, Meyvaert Glas and the Baillet Latour Fund
Subcontractors	Jean-Albert Glatigny, Collection Care Mobull, Eeckman Art & Insurance, Meyvaert Glas
Scientific research	KIK-IRPA, Ghent University, University of Antwerp
Touristic-educational program	Province of East-Flanders
Substitute panels (photos)	KIK-IRPA

Location partners:



Conservation and research partners:



Partners touristic-educational program:





Fund Fonds  
**Fonds Baillet Latour**



## L'excellence en mouvement

Le Fonds Baillet Latour a vu le jour en 1974, à l'initiative du Comte Alfred de Baillet Latour. Son objectif ? Promouvoir, encourager et récompenser l'excellence, principalement en Belgique, et en plaçant **l'homme au cœur de son action**.

### ■ Bâtir un avenir meilleur

Depuis plus de 40 ans le Fonds cherche à soutenir des initiatives remarquables par leur rayonnement, leur incitation à l'excellence humaine ou encore par leur approche innovante pour répondre aux défis de la société de demain.

Son soutien est générateur de retombées concrètes, précises et porteuses d'avenir dans quatre domaines d'intervention : **la santé, l'éducation, la culture et le sport**.

### ■ Faire la différence

Le Prix de la Santé, celui du Grant for Medical Research ou encore celui de l'Environnement, les Chaires Universitaires et Olympiques, la restauration d'œuvres emblématiques du patrimoine mobilier belge, le soutien à la pratique musicale et sportive de haut niveau, ou encore l'accompagnement d'initiatives à caractère sociétal et d'éducation citoyenne favorisant notamment l'intégration des jeunes ... le Fonds contribue continuellement au développement de **projets qui font la différence**.

### ■ Dynamisme et bonne gouvernance

Résolument tourné vers le futur, le Fonds Baillet Latour est mû par un souci de discrétion naturelle, alors que les centaines de réalisations qu'il a soutenues depuis sa création en font un acteur largement reconnu et incontournable de la vie civile. En toile de fond de cet engagement, c'est un mode de fonctionnement d'une imparable rigueur qui garantit sa bonne gouvernance.

Son Secrétaire général et son Président assument de concert sa gestion journalière - c'est-à-dire la présélection, l'encadrement et le suivi des projets -. C'est ensuite à son Conseil d'Administration, entouré d'experts de renommée internationale, qu'appartient la validation de ses interventions et **engagements**.

Go further

Envie d'en savoir plus ? L'ensemble des projets que le Fonds Baillet Latour soutient, et des réalisations remarquables qu'il récompense, sont à découvrir sur son site : [www.fondsbailletlatour.com](http://www.fondsbailletlatour.com). Bienvenue !

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

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

Here-below you'll find a small selection of the thousands of images takes in the context of the restoration. These, and many others are available via Lukas-Art in Flanders: [bart.desitter@meemoo.be](mailto:bart.desitter@meemoo.be). Lukas uses the following abbreviations: AR = after restoration | BR = before restoration.

**PHASE 1 (the closed altarpiece)**

Photos 1-2

Detail of the drapery folds of Elisabeth Borluut

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



1. Before treatment



2. After treatment

### Photos 3-4

Detail of the head of Joos Vijd with part of the architecture and the room's illusion of space

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



3. Before treatment



4. After treatment

### Photos 5-8

The Erythraean Sybil. From left to right: before treatment, during varnish removal, during removal of the overpaint and after treatment.

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



Photos 9-10

Detail of the head of St John the Baptist in grisaille

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



9. Before treatment

10. After treatment

Photos 11-12

Detail of the head of Elisabeth Borluut

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



11. Before treatment

12. After treatment

## PHASE 2 (lower register of the open polyptych)

Photo 1



Lower register of the open polyptych, during final retouching and in the restored frames. From left to right: The Just Judges (copy of the stolen panel, by Jef Van der Veken, 1951, treated in 2010) | The Knights of Christ | The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb | The Hermits | The Pilgrims

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

Photo 2



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

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

Photo 3

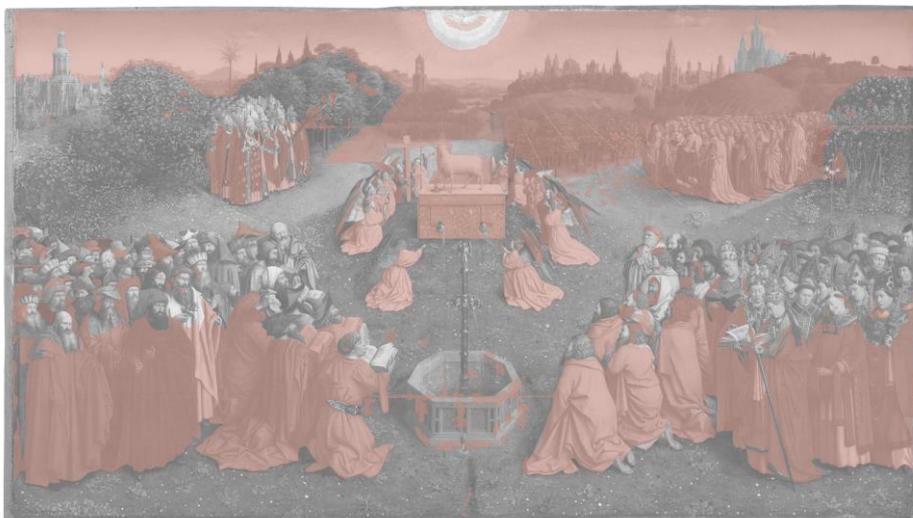


Diagram with overpainted parts (in red). The overpaints were removed during this restoration, revealing the underlying paint layer by the Van Eycks.

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

Photo 4



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

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

Photo 5



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

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

Photo 6



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

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

Photo 7



Detail of the Choses Ones and the Prophets, during final retouching (7a) and before treatment (7b)

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

Photo 8



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

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

Photo 9



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

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

Photo 10



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

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

Photo 11



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

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

Photo 12



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

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

Photo 13



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

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

Photo 14



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

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

Photo 15



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

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

Photo 16



The Hermits, during final retouching and in its restored frame

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

Photo 17



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

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Photo 18



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

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

Photo 19



The Pilgrims, during final retouching and in their restored frame

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

Photo 20



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

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

Photo 21



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

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

Photo 22



The Just Judges, copy of the stolen panel, by Jef Van der Veken, 1951, after conservation by the KIK-IRPA in 2010

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

Photo 23



Research with the 3D digital microscope of Ghent University  
Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

Photos 24 & 25



Retouching of the original gilded frames

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

### Photos 26-29



### Overpaint removal

Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussels

### Photos 30-38





Retouching of the paintings  
Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel  
Photo 39



The restoration and research team with the international committee of experts  
Credit line = © KIK-IRPA, Brussel

## Closer to Van Eyck : The Ghent Altarpiece in 100 Billion Pixels

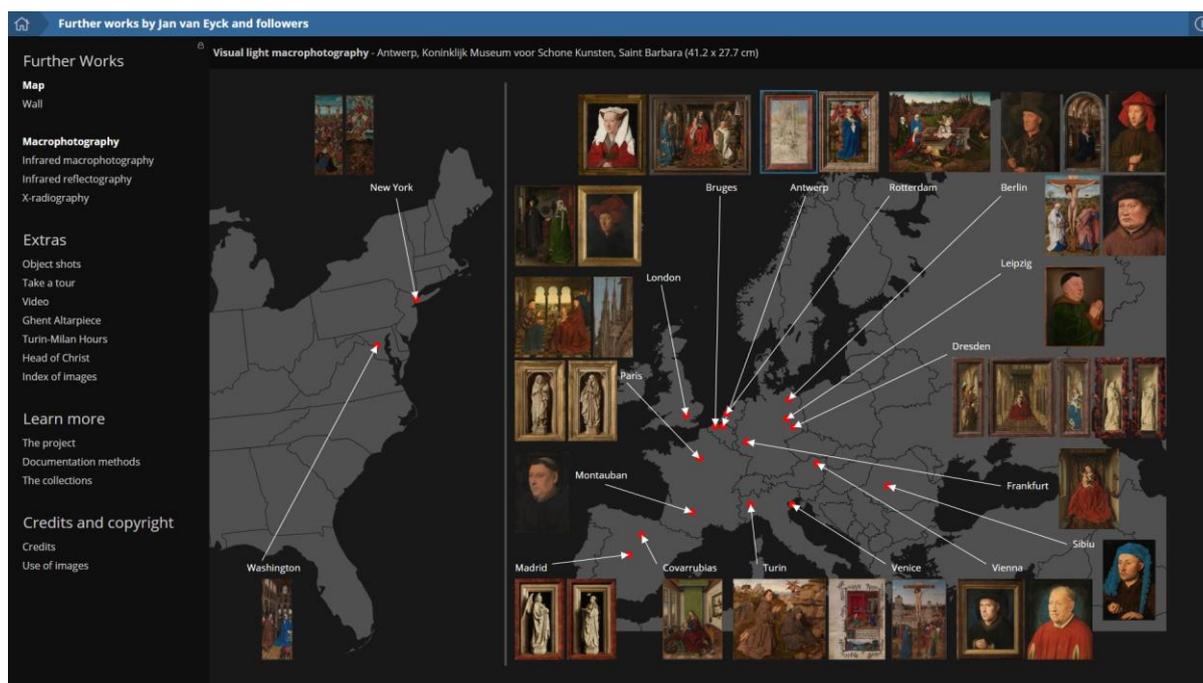
The ultra-high resolution photos and the scientific images taken in the course of the restoration are available in open access on the website [closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be](https://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be). You can zoom into the intricate, breathtaking details of this masterpiece.

**The website *Closer to Van Eyck*** is coordinated by Professor Ron Spronk (Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada; Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands) and financed by The Getty Foundation and the Gieskes-Strijbis Fund. The Flanders Heritage Agency and the Flemish Department of Culture, Youth and Media financed the photographic documentation. 'Closer to Van Eyck' was realized in collaboration with the church administration of St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), Universum

Digitalis (UD), the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), VUB/imec and Lukas – Art in Flanders. The website received Agoria's e-Gov Award 2018 for User-friendliness. <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be>

## VERONA (Van Eyck Research in Open Access): the entire oeuvre of Jan Van Eyck online

<http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be> > Further works by Jan van Eyck and followers



The VERONA project of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) has launched a new chapter in the research of paintings by Jan Van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441) and his atelier, thanks to the production of high-quality, standardized image material. This is accessible in open access on the website *Closer to Van Eyck*. The paintings were photographed using macro photography (with normal light, grazing light, infrared light and UV fluorescence) and, in some cases, also X-ray photography and macro-XRF scanning.

The VERONA project is financed by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO) in the framework of the BRAIN programme (Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks) and received the support from Musea Brugge and the collaboration of *Closer to Van Eyck*. <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be> > [Further works by Jan van Eyck and followers](#)

**Photo's for publication** are available on [www.kikirpa.be](http://www.kikirpa.be) > [press](#) ; or feel free to take screenshots on the website <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be> > [Further works by Jan van Eyck and followers](#) (creditline = closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be)

**Project partners:** Closer to Van Eyck; Kenniscentrum vzw, Brugge; Universiteit Antwerpen; Universum Digitalis; Vrije Universiteit Brussel

**Museum partners:** Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten | Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie | Bruges, Groeningemuseum | Covarrubias, Museo de la Colegiata | Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister | Frankfurt, Städel Museum | Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Künste | Londen, The National Gallery | Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza | Montauban, Musée Ingres Bourdelle | New York, Metropolitan Museum | Paris, Musée des Arts décoratifs | Paris, Musée du Louvre | Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen | Sibiu, Muzeul National Brukenthal | Turin, Galleria Sabauda | Turin, Palazzo Madama - Museo Civico d'Arte Antica | Venice, Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro | Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie | Washington, National Gallery of Art

## **Exhibition *Facing Van Eyck: The Miracle of Detail*. BOZAR, Brussels, until 14 March 2021**

*Facing Van Eyck. The Miracle of Detail* looks at Jan van Eyck's extraordinary works through a contemporary lens. Thanks to pioneering digital techniques and new scientific research at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), you can get closer to Van Eyck and his secrets than ever before. Take an immersive dive into Van Eyck's pictorial microcosmos by zooming in on landscapes, architecture, textiles, human figures and everyday objects, and unveil fascinating details hardly visible to the naked eye. Benjamin Glorieux composed a Van Eyck-inspired piece especially for the exhibition - a sensory experience that fascinates both the eye and the ear.

A richly illustrated film focuses on Jan van Eyck's devotional images and links him to the Byzantine icon. By delving deeper into the reception and appropriation of Byzantine models in Van Eyck's work the film explores the religious and artistic exchanges between East and West in the 15th century.

A new way of looking at Jan van Eyck's oeuvre through 20 digitized works that show you the radicality and freshness of his fascinating visual language!

**<https://www.bozar.be/en/activities/159475-facing-van-eyck>**