



*Stealing*

THE MYSTIC LAMB



THE TRUE STORY OF  
THE WORLD'S MOST COVETED  
MASTERPIECE

NOAH CHARNEY





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Stealing  
*the*  
Mystic Lamb

*The True Story of the World's  
Most Coveted Masterpiece*

NOAH CHARNEY



PUBLICAFFAIRS  
New York





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TO URŠKA,  
the love of my life,

*and to*

HUBERT VAN EYCK,  
who taught me the joys of gnawing on one's own foot

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# PROLOGUE

## *The Wolves and the Lamb*

They found him in a whitewashed cottage nestled in a dark German forest. Hermann Bunjes was an expert who had been an SS officer until he deserted the Nazi army. Gaunt and pale, Bunjes was hiding from three antagonists: the Allies, the Nazi army, and the German people, who feared and hated the SS to such an extent that his greatest worry was falling victim to their vigilante justice.

Captain Posey and Private Kirstein surveyed the small refuge where Bunjes lived with his young wife and baby. Though the front line raged mere kilometers away, the cottage was a tranquil contrast to the chaotic final months of the Second World War. It was full of flowers and art history books. Photographs were pinned to the walls—black-and-white prints of French Gothic art and architecture: Notre Dame de Paris, Cluny, La Sainte Chapelle, Chartres.

Posey and Kirstein, American officers of the Monuments and Fine Arts Division, a group of art historians, architects, and archaeologists charged with protecting art and monuments in conflict zones, were war-zone art detectives. They were assigned to General George Patton's Allied Third Army, gathering clues as to the whereabouts of stolen art. Since the start of the war, they had heard rumors of the wholesale looting of artwork from Nazi-occupied territories. It was clear that thousands of works of art had been seized by Nazi troops, but they did not know whether there was an overall plan or destination for the loot.

They had been given a list of major artworks that had disappeared since the start of the war. The list included the masterpieces from museums such as the Louvre and the Uffizi: Davids from France, Botticellis from Italy, and Vermeers from the Netherlands. These works were symbols of state, of empire, of patrimony. Their value was incalculable, their destruction irrevocable. At the head of the list was *The Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck.

Also referred to by the subject of its central panel, "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb," *The Ghent Altarpiece* was perhaps the most important painting in the history of art. It was certainly the most frequently stolen and, it could be argued, the most desired. It had proved particularly elusive. Posey and Kirstein had been seeking it since rumor of its theft reached them in Paris, more than a year before. Through their research, they had learned of the many crimes involving van Eyck's masterwork. It had been the victim of every conceivable transgression that could imperil a work of art. Over the course of five centuries it had been involved in thirteen crimes, both attempted and successful, and had rarely remained intact in its place of origin for more than a few years at a time.

Its history of disappearances was all the more amazing considering that the Renaissance altarpiece consisted of twelve painted oaken panels that combined to weigh around two tons. An enormous triptych the size of a barn wall (14.5 by 11.5 feet), it had been painted for a church in the city of Ghent by the young Flemish master Jan van Eyck between 1426 and 1432. It was the first major oil painting in history, and it inspired centuries of artists to take up oil as their preferred artistic medium. It was

also considered the fulcrum between the art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the origin of artistic realism.

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*The Ghent Altarpiece* was the coveted trophy of both Hitler and Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring. Both men sought to outmaneuver one another to capture it for their personal collections. Its fame and beauty aside, they saw the work as a symbol of Aryan supremacy and idolized the artist who created it as an exemplary figure in Teutonic history. They were undoubtedly aware of its recent past. Panel 11, owned, questionably, by the king of Prussia and on display in Berlin before the First World War had been returned to Ghent under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, a source of outrage to the German people. If Hitler could recapture the altarpiece, then he would right a perceived wrong against Germany.

Rumor had it that Hitler was also convinced that the painting contained a coded map to locate Catholic treasures, the so-called *Arma Christi*, or instruments of Christ's Passion, including the Crown of Thorns and the Spear of Destiny. Hitler believed that the possession of the *Arma Christi* would grant their owner supernatural powers. Hitler and other Nazi officials were fascinated by the occult and assembled a research group, the Ahnenerbe, to study and seek out supernatural phenomena and magical objects. Hitler financed expeditions into Tibet to capture a yeti (the so-called abominable snowman) for military use; to Iceland to look for the entrance to Thule, a mythical land of giants and telepathic faeries, which was the real place of origin of the Aryans, according to Hitler's belief; and in the search of religious relics whose magical properties could ensure Nazi triumph, including the Holy Grail and the Ark of the Covenant. As the prospect of a Nazi victory looked more precarious, Hitler escalated his efforts to find supernatural means to turn the tide.

But Göring outmaneuvered Hitler's agents and reached *The Ghent Altarpiece* first. Against the führer's direct orders, one of Göring's henchmen had stolen van Eyck's masterpiece from a castle in the south of France, at the foot of the Pyrenees, and brought it to Paris. Then it disappeared. The whereabouts of *The Ghent Altarpiece* were unknown to both Allies and most Nazi officials. Posey and Kirstein had gathered frustratingly contradictory tidbits of information on its location—until now.

A Harvard-educated scholar of thirteenth-century French sculpture, Hermann Bunjes had worked as an art advisor to Alfred Rosenberg, chief of the ERR (Einsatzstab Rosenberg), the Nazi art-looting division—the existence of which, at this point, was still unknown to the Allied army. He had also been a personal art consultant to Göring, who had used the disorder of war to steal thousands of works for his private collection. Bunjes had deserted the Nazi cause in disgust. The tipping point had been a dinner at the elite Aeroclub in Berlin, when Bunjes realized that his meal was being served on silver stolen from the Jewish baron Edmond de Rothschild.

Bunjes had records of what art had been stolen by the Nazis and where it was hidden. Drinking cognac in his cottage, he shared all he knew about the Nazi art-looting program and Adolf Hitler's master plan to steal the world's art treasures. For the first time, the Monuments Men had a sense of what they were up against—and of the fate of tens of thousands of the world's most important and beautiful works of art.

Bunjes began to tell Posey and Kirstein about the citywide supermuseum Hitler was planning in his boyhood town of Linz, Austria, which was meant to house every masterpiece in the world. Aside from a place to view and study art, this museum would function as a gallery of defeated nations, the treasures stripped from them as countries fell before Hitler's storm troopers. In lieu of the severe

pike-pierced heads of deposed and decapitated rulers, Hitler would fill his supermuseum with the artistic masterpieces that Europe had been unable to defend.

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Bunjes seemed to think that the Allies already knew of Hitler's dream to create this supermuseum. He thought that Posey and Kirstein were aware of the lists of masterpieces sought by the führer, by Göring, and by the ERR. Posey and Kirstein tried to disguise their surprise as the revelations kept flowing.

Finally, Bunjes revealed the secret hiding places of the stolen Nazi art. On a map of Europe, he indicated scores of secret Nazi art depots in castles, monasteries, and mines throughout Nazi-occupied territory. The biggest cache of all, he said, was in an abandoned salt mine in the Austrian Alps, at a place called Alt Aussee. It had been converted into a high-tech underground storehouse for all of the looted art destined for the supermuseum at Linz. The stolen collection already numbered over 12,000 works, including masterpieces by Michelangelo, Raphael, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Titian, Breughel, Veronese, Dürer, and Leonardo. Among the works in the mine was, it seemed, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. A mystery remains to this day as to whether it, or an exact copy, was stolen by the Nazis and stored in the mine. But the work that the Nazis prized above all was Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*.

Bunjes knew the local SS gauleiter, August Eigruber, who was in charge of the Oberdonau district which included Linz and Alt Aussee. Eigruber was an exceptionally ruthless and fanatical Nazi. An ironworker before the war, he was a founding member of the Upper Austrian Hitler Youth, rising to become its head by the age of twenty-nine. Early in the war Eigruber had served with wild enthusiasm as an executioner at the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp, which he had helped to establish. His complete loyalty was to Hitler—he sported an identical smudge moustache—and he mistrusted the commands of intermediaries and emissaries, whom he considered weak, hesitant, and overly merciful. He saw his appointment as head of the Oberdonau district, which encompassed Hitler's own hometown, as a reward for his staunch, iron-stiff commitment to the führer.

Hitler had declared that under no circumstances should the art under Nazi control ever return to the Allies. Eigruber had received a direct order from Hitler's secretary, Martin Bormann, instructing him to prevent the Alt Aussee treasure house from being captured by the Allies, if necessary, by sealing the mine shaft, locking the art inside but not damaging it. However, Eigruber willfully and secretly misinterpreted this order. He was determined to prevent the Allies from recovering the art—at any costs. Bunjes worried that he would blow up the art in the mine, despite his orders, if a Nazi defeat looked imminent. Messages relayed from Austrian Resistance members in Alt Aussee confirmed the fears.

Posey and Kirstein knew that General George Patton's Third Allied Army was making its way towards Alt Aussee, but it might arrive too late. They were unaware that a parallel, secret operation was under way. A courageous Austrian double agent was about to lead a team of covert operatives on a daring mission to stall the Alt Aussee mine's destruction. It was feared that if the Allies failed to reach the mine in time, every one of the thousands of artistic masterpieces stored inside would be destroyed.

The ability to defend art has been seen as an indication of a nation's strength or failure since biblical times. Great artworks have been the battle flags of warring factions, captured and recaptured by individuals and armies. During the Second World War, an unprecedented number of these battle flags simply disappeared from the homes, castles, churches, and museums of Europe. It was the job

the Monuments Men to find these works of art and, above all, one monumental twelve-panel painting.

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Since its completion in 1432, *The Ghent Altarpiece* has disappeared, been looted in three different wars, and been burned, dismembered, copied, forged, smuggled, illegally sold, censored, attacked by iconoclasts, hidden away, ransomed, rescued, and stolen time and time again. For some of its admirers the treasures hidden within *The Ghent Altarpiece* were tangible. For others, the treasures were of a more ethereal nature, revealing hidden truths about philosophy, theology, the human condition, and the nature of the Godhead. The altarpiece has been seen as so symbolically powerful that it must be destroyed and so literally powerful that its possession and deciphering might change the course of world wars.

This is the story of the most desired and victimized object of all time.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Mysteries of the Masterpiece

As the oak door to the chapel swings open, one is first struck by the scents: the cool, ancient stone of the walls of Saint Bavo Cathedral, the smell of frankincense, and then the surprising notes of oak wood, linseed oil, and varnish. The cathedral in Ghent, Belgium, abounds with stunning religious art, but one artwork stands out among the rest. After six hundred years of nearly constant movement, *The Ghent Altarpiece* is at last back in the cathedral for which it was painted.

Jan van Eyck's masterpiece has been involved in seven separate thefts, dwarfing the next runner-up, a Rembrandt portrait, lifted from London's Dulwich Picture Gallery on a mere four occasions. From the enduring questions surrounding the movement, through theft and smuggling, of the altarpiece as a whole to the mystical symbolism of its content, the altarpiece has haunted scholars and detective hunters and protectors, interpreters and worshippers.

It is one of art history's great unsolved mysteries.

Those who stand before the altarpiece cannot but feel overwhelmed by its monumentality. *The Ghent Altarpiece* comprises twenty individual painted panels linked in a massive hinged framework. It is opened on its hinges for religious holidays but remains closed for most of the year, at which point only eight of the twenty panels, which were painted on both recto and verso (front and back sides), are visible. The subject matter of the verso panels, visible when the altarpiece is closed, is the Annunciation: The angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear the Son of God. Portraits of the donors who paid for the altarpiece, and their patron saints, also grace the back.

The altarpiece has a puzzle-box appearance, and inside its treasures lie patiently in wait for decipherers. When open, the altarpiece's center displays an idealized field full of figures: saints, martyrs, clergy, hermits, righteous judges, knights of Christ, and an angelic choir, all making a slow pilgrimage to pay homage to the central figure—a Lamb on a sacrificial altar, standing proudly, which it bleeds into a golden chalice. This scene is referred to as "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb." The precise iconographic meaning of the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb panel and the meaning of the dozens of obscure symbols within it have been the subject of centuries of scholarly debate.

Above the vast field of the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, in the upper panels, God the Father sits enthroned, with Mary and John the Baptist on either side. The figure has a hand raised in blessing, his hand painted with an astonishing realism: veins bulge and tiny hairs curl out of the pore-scored skin.

At his foot, a crown is clustered in light-reflecting jewels; the fringe of his cloak is woven in gold threads, and above his head arch rune-like inscriptions. Individual hairs were lovingly painted into his beard, and his almond eyes express a power and a weariness that are altogether human.

The level of minute detail in so enormous an artwork is unprecedented. Until the altarpiece was painted, only portrait miniatures and illuminated manuscripts contained such detail. Nothing like this intricacy had ever been seen before on such a grand scale, by artists or admirers. The great art historian Erwin Panofsky famously wrote that van Eyck's eye functioned "as a microscope and a telescope at the same time." Viewers of *The Ghent Altarpiece*, Panofsky explained, are privy to God's vision of the world, capturing "some of the experience of Him who looks down from heaven, but can not number the hairs on our head."

In *The Ghent Altarpiece* jewels shine with refracted light. One can see individual hairs on the manes of horses. Each of the altarpiece's hundred-plus figures have been given personalized facial features. Each figure's face is unique and retains the detail of a portrait—sweat, wrinkles, veins, and flared nostrils. Details range from the mundane to the elegant. Viewers can make out tufts of grass, the wrinkles in an old worm-eaten apple, and warts on double chins. But they can also see the reflection of light caught in a perfectly painted ruby, the folds of a gilded garment, and individual silvery hairs amid the chestnut curls of a beard.

The secret weapon that permitted such detail was oil paint. Because oil paints are translucent, artists can build up layer upon layer, without covering up what lies beneath. The preferred medium before van Eyck's time, egg-based tempera, was essentially opaque. One layer blotted out the previous one. Oil allowed for a great deal more subtlety and was also easier to control. Van Eyck used some brushes that were so small as to contain only a few animal hairs for bristles, permitting an entirely new level of intricacy. The result is a visual feast, a galaxy of painterly special effects that at once dazzle and provide days of viewing interest, prompting viewers to examine the painting from afar and up close, to decipher as well as to bask in its beauty.

*The Ghent Altarpiece*, the young van Eyck's first major public work, was also the first large-scale oil painting to gain international renown. Though he did not invent oil painting, van Eyck was the first artist to exploit its true capabilities. The artistry, realistic detail, and use of this new medium made the artwork a point of pilgrimage for artists and intellectuals from the moment the paint dried and for centuries to come. The international reputation of the painting and its painter, particularly taking into account its establishment of a new artistic medium that would become the universal choice for centuries, makes for a strong argument that *The Ghent Altarpiece* is the most important painting in art history.

It is a work of art that centuries of collectors, dukes, generals, kings, and entire armies desired to such an extent that they killed, stole, and altered the strategic course of war to possess it.



Both the art and the artist are cloaked in mysteries.

*The Ghent Altarpiece* has been known by various names since its creation. Artworks were rare

given specific titles until hundreds of years later. Most of the titles by which artworks are known today were given by art historians to facilitate reference. In Flemish, the altarpiece is known as *Heilich Lam Gods*, “The Lamb of God.” It has also been referred to by nicknames, such as *The Mystic Lamb* simply and perhaps perceptibly, considering the frequency with which it has been imperiled, *The Lamb*.

Jan van Eyck painted *The Mystic Lamb* between 1426 and 1432, a tumultuous time in European history. King Henry V of England married Catherine of France, then died two years later. Joan of Arc was executed in the midst of the raging Hundred Years’ War. Brunelleschi began to build the dome of the cathedral of Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore. Donatello’s marvelous *Saint George* statue had recently been completed, a work that would influence sculpture much as *The Ghent Altarpiece* would influence painting. The very year that *The Lamb* was begun, Masaccio painted his celebrated Brancacci Chapel in Florence, which became a pilgrimage point for artists in subsequent centuries—what van Eyck did for panel painting, and Donatello did for sculpture, Masaccio did for wall painting. Soon after the completion of *The Lamb*, Leon Battista Alberti wrote his influential *Treatise of the Art of Painting*, mathematically and theoretically codifying the artistic rendition of perspective. A decade later, Gutenberg invented printing with movable type.

The fame of the altarpiece comes from its artistic beauty and interest—and also its importance in the history of art. This importance was constantly reasserted through the centuries, as one generation after another of artists, writers, and thinkers extolled the virtues of the painting, from Giorgio Vasari to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to Erwin Panofsky to Albert Camus.

The painting both enchants the eye and provokes the mind. Elements of the work, such as the microscopically detailed crown that sits at God’s feet, are painted with raised, textural strips of real gold leaf, which catch the light like sparks on the painting’s surface. Beyond the dazzle, the painting is filled with disguised symbols linked to Catholic mysticism. It exhibits detail far greater than any of the works of van Eyck’s painter predecessors. The personalization of human figures, the stark naturalism of inanimate objects like that gilded, jewel-encrusted crown, forecast movements such as Realism by four hundred years.

In considering how to situate *The Ghent Altarpiece* in the history of art, one might pursue two different arguments, each of them convincing. One might argue that *The Ghent Altarpiece* was the last artwork of the Middle Ages, or one might state that this was the first painting of the Renaissance.

It was the last artwork of the Middle Ages because the form of the frame, the painted architecture, and the figures are Gothic in style. The extensive gilding, an effect added later by a gilder after the artist had completed his work, is also a Gothic characteristic. The gold makes the painted figures leap off the panels, lending them a halo of light and a striking delineation against the gilded sea behind them. Actual gold leaf, pounded so thin that it would disintegrate if touched by an oily fingertip, was applied by static electricity. A badger-fur brush was rubbed in the gilder’s own hair, creating static strong enough to pick up the gold leaf, which was affixed to the gesso by egg-white glue. Gilding would be dropped in favor of naturalistic landscaped background later in the fifteenth century, so its selective presence suggests an allegiance to the medieval style. The mastery of perspective, as well as the integration into the painting of Neoplatonic artistic theory, the preferred philosophy of the Humanists who sparked the Renaissance, are all absent. This was, therefore, the last major artwork of the Middle Ages.



And yet one might easily argue that the masterpiece represents the first painting of the Renaissance. Though there is gilding, the work also abounds with naturalistic landscapes and backgrounds characteristic of postmedieval painting. The altarpiece was created during the height of Humanism, the rediscovery of classical Hebrew and Greek texts, and the particular idolization of the ancient Athenians. Its realism, unprecedented in the Middle Ages, was inspired by this Humanism. Part of the Renaissance Humanist philosophy was an empowerment of human capability and human lives. On someone who embraced the value of humanity would bother to create an artwork full of such loving detail. During this era of the Christianization of pagan art and ideas, works of art reflected an attempt to reconcile the dominant Catholic religion with the contradictory philosophies and science expressed in newly discovered and translated classical texts. This Christianization of pagan imagery is integral to *The Mystic Lamb*. The fact that this painting was, in the decades after its creation, the most famous painting in the world among painters, and the fact that it effectively established the new artistic medium of the Renaissance, oil painting, demonstrate how it directly shaped Renaissance art and iconography.

Both cases are sound. There is a scholarly tendency to want to categorize at all costs, inserting artworks into particular “-isms” and overlooking the organic history of art, the way various styles overlap and intertwine. But part of the pleasure and wonder of great art is its mystery, its elusive qualities that haunt and intrigue us. Rather than relegating *The Ghent Altarpiece* to the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, the painting can be viewed more accurately as the fulcrum between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in art as well as thought—and it is all the more interesting because of its hybrid nature.

What is it a painting of? This seemingly simple question has a complex answer. Most religious paintings of the fifteenth century were inspired by, or precisely illustrated, a particular passage in the Bible, the Apocrypha, or biblical commentaries. *The Ghent Altarpiece* refers to many biblical and mystical texts, but is a synthesis rather than a precise illustration of any one of them. One must excavate the various layers of theological references and iconography before linking together the individual pieces into a constellation.

Pictures of this period were often puzzles. They led the viewer through a maze and only hinted at what lay at the center. It has often been said that a great portrait should reveal a hidden secret about the person portrayed that the person would prefer remained secret—the artist is privy to it and weaves the secret into the pigment, hiding it in plain sight for determined viewers to find, if they know how to look.

What is subtle and enigmatic in portraiture is magnified in religious painting. The subtlety of the theme on which knowledgeable viewers may meditate was also considered an advantage. Mystical secrets of Catholicism were not for novices, but rather for those with extensive knowledge of the Bible and commentaries and also Greek and Latin pagan sources. For example, van Eyck’s contemporary, the Italian monk Fra Angelico, painted a small fresco in each cell in the monastery of San Marco in Florence. The cells for novice monks contain simple biblical scenes, easy to understand, provoking more of a gut reaction, such as sympathy, with a Crucifixion or a Pietà. The scenes depicted are increasingly complex in the cells that Fra Angelico painted for the elder monks. The levels of theological complexity culminate in difficult concepts such as the Holy Trinity, images that would require wisdom, experience, and extensive reading in order to understand fully.

In religious paintings for public spaces, too, what one might describe as “mystery paintings” were

favored. They would often include varying levels of complexity, depictions of biblical scenes that are easily recognizable for the simpler viewers, alongside erudite images, which often contained hybrids of various theological texts, references to mythology or pagan ideas, and time-and-place-specific references, what we might call “inside jokes” today, which were obvious to contemporary viewers but are like a foreign language to a twenty-first-century audience.

There was also a pleasure in deciphering. In a time before the printing press, one of the great pleasures of an educated life was to contemplate pictures over the span of hours, months, or years. Works such as *The Mystic Lamb* had a religious function, decorating and referencing the Mass that took place in the church at the altar beneath it. But they were also sources of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, something to be debated with friends. Viewers showed their erudition by noting references in the painting, by identifying the various philosophical concepts raised by the painting, and by discussing how various ideas and images might be woven together into a sum that reveals a greater truth. Renaissance art conveyed ideas in images, painted stories, and pictograms, artists toying with ways of presenting concepts through the inherently silent, mostly textless medium of painting. Faces, landscapes, still lifes, and bodies had to tell stories. The great artists could use this mute medium to plumb emotional and theological mysteries.

The images in *The Ghent Altarpiece* are varied and theoretically diverse. The painting incorporated more than one hundred figures, many inscribed textual phrases, references and cross-references to biblical passages, apocryphal theologies, and even pagan mythology. Complicated symbolic works such as this one began with an overall iconographic plan that was designed by a scholar, a great theologian—rarely by the artist himself. The artist would be told the scheme of the painting, which figures should be included, which phrases, and perhaps even their relation to one another in the composition. It was up to the artist to execute the concept of the scholar. The more accomplished the artist, the less the art would be dictated to him.

In this case, Jan van Eyck was a relatively young up-and-comer. This would be his first major work for public display. Therefore he would have received a considerable amount of guidance. Under most circumstances, the implementation of individual concepts and the arrangement of figures were at the discretion of the artist, while the theme, any text, portraits of donors, and especially the number of figures would be expressed in the written contract. Painters were often paid by the number of faces they were asked to paint, so this was an important factor. The contract for *The Ghent Altarpiece* is lost, and we can only guess what it contained and how much of a free hand the artist was given in its conception. Likewise, no record remains of the scholar who designed the theme, although a probable candidate has been suggested. The scholar must have been inordinately well-read—a knowledgeable Humanist. One can imagine how difficult it must have been to summon up by memory or painstaking research the many phrases and cross-references employed in this work, without the benefit of a computer, a concordance, or even the access that the invention of printed type would provide twenty years later.

What may strike some viewers as a simple painting of a room is in fact a masterpiece of minute details, each with a specific liturgical or symbolic reference. Paintings of this period did not contain details without a reason. The enormous material expense of the purchase of smooth, flat panels, precious pigments to make the paint, the wood-carved frames, and the cost and time of the artist’s work was so high that only the very wealthiest individuals and institutions—princes and kings and bishops and the wealthiest merchants—could commission art. Artists themselves could rarely afford the material

paint anything that had not been commissioned. It would be another two hundred years before the first artists began to paint “on spec,” in hopes of a sale through a gallery. Four hundred more years would pass before the first ready-mixed tubes of paint were available for purchase. In van Eyck’s day, artists created what they were paid for. Every detail was significant.

Art historians use iconography, the study of symbols in art, to determine the literary source that inspired paintings. Most religious works of the premodern period illustrate literary concepts or stories. Knowing the literary source reveals the theme of the painting, which might otherwise remain elusive. For religious works, the sources most often used are the Bible or *The Golden Legend*, the medieval biography of saints written circa 1260 by the monk Jacobus da Voragine, which was the second-most popular book (behind the Bible) through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. A woman carrying her eyes on a silver platter might not have obvious meaning, until we know the literary source, *The Golden Legend*, and understand that the image comes from a biography of Saint Lucy, whose eyes were put out during her martyrdom.

A procession of the pantheon of saints, related to the All Saints sermon, moves slowly towards the Lamb on the altar at the center of a vast field. The theme of this central panel of *The Ghent Altarpiece* called “The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb,” is drawn from *The Golden Legend* as well as the Revelation of Saint John. Therefore in the imagery of the altarpiece we find a series of interrelated theological themes, nested like Russian dolls, mutually referential while deepening the religious and iconographic mystery surrounding the painting. In the twenty-six individual scenes depicted across the twelve oak panels, we are presented with an A to Z of Christian mystical theology, from the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-28) to the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb in the final book of the New Testament, Revelation.

To unlock the mysteries of *The Ghent Altarpiece*, then, we must first approach its component parts by examining their content and symbolism and asking what the individual panels portray. Among its many mysteries are saints disguised as statues, floating prophets, and text written upside down.



When the altarpiece is closed, the verso (back) of eight of the panels is visible, illustrating the Mystery of the Incarnation. The panels are divided into two registers, each four panels across. The upper register depicts an open room in which the Annunciation takes place, the moment that God sends the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she will bear the Son of God (Luke 1:28-38). This scene is painted across all four panels, with Old Testament prophets and sibyls floating above the painted “ceiling” of the Annunciation room.

The panel on the left shows the angel Gabriel with a lily in hand, a flower that symbolizes Mary’s virginity and purity and that Gabriel means no harm. Gabriel speaks the words of the Annunciation which have been painted in gold onto the panel, emanating from Gabriel’s mouth: *Ave Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum* (“Hail [Mary], full of Grace, the Lord salutes you”). Gabriel’s body fills the room, which he seems to float rather than stand. The room itself is contemporary to the painting, not biblically accurate, with exposed wooden crossbeams on the ceiling and a naturalistic light source

sunlight flooding through the open windows, which casts Gabriel's shadow against the back wall.

Mary kneels on the right-hand side of the upper register, receiving the annunciated words of Gabriel. Her response to Gabriel's words, *Ecce ancilla domini* ("Behold the slave of the Lord"), is written upside down. This may seem odd, until we realize that this reply is not for us, but rather for God and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, above Mary's head, and God, presumably high above Heaven and gazing down at Mary on earth, would need the response to be inverted in order for the text to be clearly legible. This contrivance appeared with some frequency in northern Renaissance Annunciation paintings, most famously and first here. The Latin phrase uttered by Mary is often mistranslated as "Behold the hand-maiden of the Lord," a politically correct alteration of the literal translation, in which Mary offers herself as a slave.



*The Angel Gabriel approaches Mary with a lily in hand*

The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends upon her, signaling her impregnation with the future Christ. Her hands are crossed on her chest in a gesture of humility. She kneels on the floor as a further reference to her humility—*humilitas* in Latin, meaning "close to the earth." A gorgeous

rendered glass decanter, through which the window sunlight is cast, alludes to a medieval theological explanation for how Mary could become pregnant with Jesus yet still be a virgin. The rationale was that if a ray of light can pass through glass without breaking it, then Mary can be a pregnant virgin. This unusual validation worked to quiet the murmuring masses in the Middle Ages. Even back then, the virgin pregnancy sounded a bit suspect.

The prophet Micah is in the crawl space above Mary. He indicates a passage in the Old Testament inscribed in a waving painted banner, in which he predicted the coming of the Jewish messiah, a prophecy that medieval Christian theology appropriated as a prediction of the coming of Christ: "Of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel." Van Eyck, like many artists, enjoyed paying homage to past artworks by quoting visual references to them. He chose to pose Micah identically to the 1417 sculptural relief of God carved by Donatello for the niche above his revolutionary statue of Saint George, which was on the façade of the church of Orsanmichele in Florence. This statue was considered the most important sculpture of its time, and Florence became a point of pilgrimage for fellow artists, who traveled across Europe to admire Donatello's work. The admiring artists often referenced his work in theirs. Such visual, formal references by one artist to another appear frequently, and they form an inside joke for art historians, who take perhaps inordinately great pleasure in recognizing such references. But in many cases, as in this instance, they also serve up a clue that would otherwise have eluded scholars.



*Mary kneels as the Holy Spirit descends upon her in the Annunciation*

There is no clear evidence that Jan van Eyck ever traveled to Italy. But he would have needed to see the Donatello relief in order to reference it in his own painting. Because Gutenberg had not yet invented moveable type, copies of an artwork, image, or text had to be made by hand, one at a time. In order to see an artwork, one had to travel to its location. Visual references such as this are strong indicators that the artist saw the referenced work in person.

The prophet Zechariah is also depicted in what appears to be the crawl space above the painted ceiling, beneath the rounded top of the panel. A fragment of his messianic prophecy is inscribed in Latin, on a banner swirling over his head: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout out behold, thy King cometh unto thee” (Zechariah 9:9).



*Detail of the windows and the view of fifteenth-century Ghent, from the Annunciation panels. The window, a part of the cathedral complex, still exists.*

The two central panels of the upper register show the open room in which the Annunciation takes place, with a view through the windows at the back to a contemporary, but unidentified, cityscape. Two women, known as the Erythraean and Cumaean sibyls, float above the room, in the same space occupied by the prophet Zechariah. A sibyl is an Old Testament female prophet, whose words were interpreted as foreshadowing the coming of Christ. Fragments of their prophecies are inscribed on swirling painted banners. The inscription on the banner of the Erythraean sibyl quotes from Virgil, a pagan Latin author dubbed by the church as one of the “good” pagans who, perhaps inadvertently, forecast the coming of Christ: “He speaks with no mortal tongue, being inspired by power from on high.” The Cumaean sibyl’s banner flows with a quotation from Saint Augustine: “The King Most High shall come in human form to reign through all eternity.”

Patterns involving clusters of three architectural elements refer to the Holy Trinity. One such motif can be found in the small trefoil, a window resembling a three-leaf clover, inside a sculptural niche crowned in a gothic pointed arch. Hanging in the niche is a bronze water pot above a shallow basin, a reference to the consecrated wine poured out at Mass. A towel hangs in the sculptural niche. The decoration on the towel is reminiscent of the uniforms of altar boys. As with all altarpieces, the painting was literally meant for display above an altar, at which Mass would be performed. More than an object of beauty, it was also a meditative aid. Van Eyck cleverly inserted cross-references between the painted content of the altarpiece and the actual clergy performing Mass in front of it.



*Saint John the Evangelist, painted in a gray-scale to suggest that this is a statue of the saint, not the saint himself*

The bottom register of the closed altarpiece is, like the upper register, four panels across. The lower-middle panels depict Saint John the Baptist in the center left and Saint John the Evangelist in the center right. Both Johns are painted in a style called “grisaille”—a scaled monochrome, employed



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