

2017

BOOK REVIEW: John Marciani, ed., Hans Memling: Portraiture, Piety, and a Reunited Altarpiece (London: The Flemish Research Centre for the Arts in the Burgundian Netherlands, Musea Brugge, and The Morgan Library & Museum, New York in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016)

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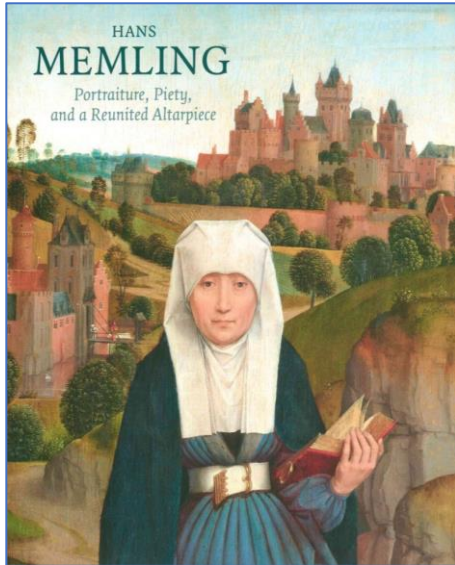
Recommended Citation

Nuechterlein, Jeanne. "BOOK REVIEW: John Marciani, ed., Hans Memling: Portraiture, Piety, and a Reunited Altarpiece (London: The Flemish Research Centre for the Arts in the Burgundian Netherlands, Musea Brugge, and The Morgan Library & Museum, New York in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016)." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 6, 2 (2017): 114-124. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol6/iss2/15>

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PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VI, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2017)



Book Review: John Marciani, ed., *Hans Memling: Portraiture, Piety, and a Reunited Altarpiece* (London: The Flemish Research Centre for the Arts in the Burgundian Netherlands, Musea Brugge, and The Morgan Library & Museum, New York in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2016), 112 pages, 55 illustrations (mostly color), \$30 (paperback), ISBN: 9781911300083.

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The six essays in this compact, but well-illustrated publication investigate various facets of a small exhibition that brought together the dismembered parts of one of Hans Memling's earliest works, the c. 1467-70 *Crabbe Triptych* (**figs. 1-2**). The Museo Civico in Vicenza owns the central panel depicting the Crucifixion with Mary and St. John at the left and, at the right, a kneeling portrait of the donor, abbot Jan Crabbe of the Cistercian abbey of Ten Duinen in Flanders, presented by St. John the Baptist and St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The two wing panels were split in the late 18th or 19th century to enable each side to be sold separately, and the Groeningemuseum in Bruges now owns the exterior faces, a demi-grisaille representation of the Annunciation in the form of the figures Gabriel and Mary as almost-sculptures standing in niches. The Morgan Library and Museum owns the interior wings, whose landscape setting continues that of the central Crucifixion panel. The left wing depicts St. Anne with the donor's mother, Anna

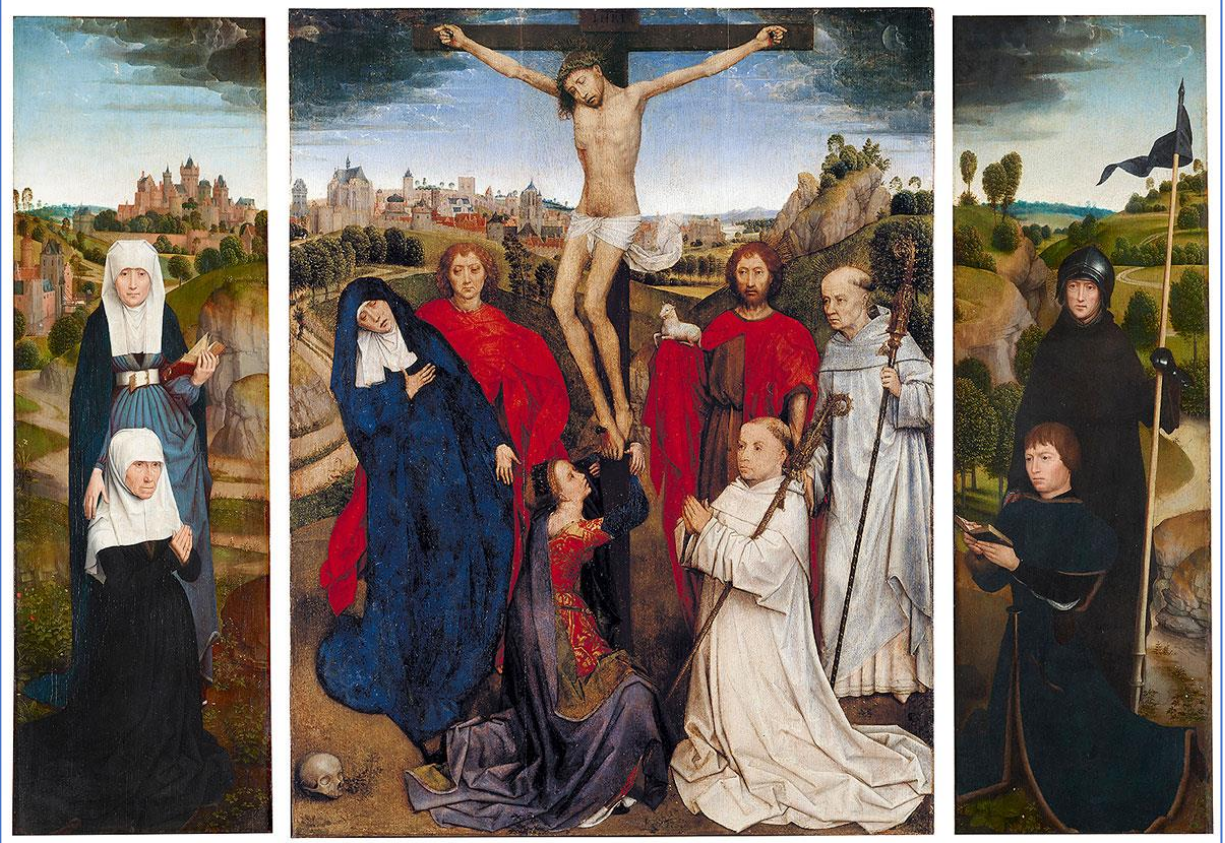


Figure 1 Hans Memling, *The Triptych of Jan Crabbe*, c. 1467-70. Oil on panel. Center panel: Image courtesy of Pinacoteca Civica di Palazzo Chiericati, Vicenza. Left and right panels: © The Morgan Library & Museum, Photography by Graham S. Haber.

Willemzoon — a remarkably sensitive portrayal of an 80-year-old woman — and the right panel shows the donor's half-brother, Willem de Winter, presented by St. William of Maleval. The exhibition temporarily reunited the different parts of the altarpiece, complemented by a choice selection of related panel paintings, manuscripts, and drawings from the Morgan and other collections in New York. The interior panels have been conserved since previous reproductions in color,¹ with a significant transformation in appearance, so the photographs in themselves (including numerous details) constitute a valuable record.

¹ Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling: the Complete Works* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), cat. no. 5; and Till-Holger Borchert et al., *Memling's Portraits* (Ghent and Amsterdam: Ludion, 2005), p. 23.



Figure 2 Hans Memling, *The Triptych of Jan Crabbe* (closed), Annunciation Panels, c. 1470. Oil on panel Musea Brugge © <http://www.lukasweb.be/> – Art in Flanders vzw. Photography by Hugo Maertens.

The first of the six essays, by John Marciari, summarizes how the interior wings entered John Pierpont Morgan's collection in 1906, their place in his library (where they still remain), and the subsequent dispersal of much of the rest of his painting collection. The *Crabbe Triptych* is then situated within Memling's oeuvre through brief discussion of other works in the exhibition: three of Memling's independent portraits, his early *Annunciation* in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and another Bruges panel owned by the Metropolitan, an epitaph by the Master of the Legend of St. Ursula featuring St. Anne with the Virgin and Christ Child. Three illuminated manuscripts from the Morgan Library highlight the exchange of pictorial ideas in the 15th-century Netherlands between panel painting and manuscript painting, including the use of grisaille. The final essay by Ilona van Tuinen investigates the nine early Netherlandish drawings from the Morgan and Metropolitan collections shown in the exhibition. Though none are by Memling himself — in fact no autograph drawings by him survive, other than the underdrawings of his paintings made visible by infrared reflectograms — they effectively highlight the materials and roles of drawing in the 15th and early 16th centuries, as far as can be judged by the rather scarce surviving evidence.

Till-Holger Borchert's essay deftly reviews Memling's life and works, highlighting his origins in Germany, his probable work as a journeyman in Rogier van der Weyden's Brussels workshop before moving to Bruges, and his subsequent patronage networks. Noël Geirnaert then reviews the fascinating life of the triptych's patron, Jan Crabbe, an able administrator who prevailed in a dispute with duke Philip the Good and duchess Isabella of Portugal over his appointment as abbot of Ten Duinen (Isabella wanted her nephew to get the job instead). By cultivating a wide-ranging network, including members of the international Medici bank, Crabbe accumulated wealth and status both for himself and his abbey. He commissioned richly illuminated manuscripts of Italian humanist literature as well as northern devotional texts and paintings; one of his most important probable commissions, beyond the Memling triptych, was Hugo van der Goes'

c. 1480 *Death of the Virgin* for the church of Ten Duinen (now in the Bruges Groeningemuseum).

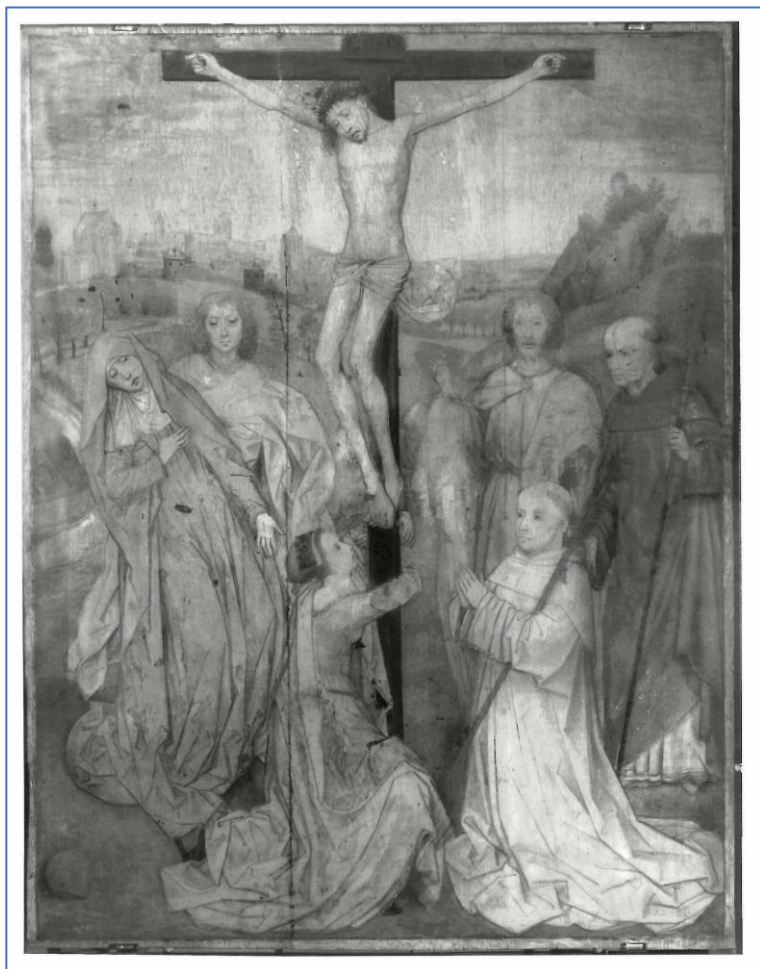


Figure 3 Overall IRR of the Crucifixion, in the band 1-1.7 microns (Osiris scanning device). Photo: after Marciani, *Hans Memling*, p. 83.

The remaining two essays, written respectively by Maryan W. Ainsworth and by Gianluca Poldi and Giovanni C.F. Villa, investigate the infrared reflectograms (IRR) and x-rays that illuminate the complex process behind the triptych's making. X-rays highlight any lead white mixed into the paint layers, thus making visible the changes made over the course of painting, while IRR shows carbon, and thus can reveal carbon contained in initial drawing layers. Due to recent advances in infrared technology, new IRRs can now yield more

information than previously available, and the results in this case are discussed in both essays. Two different styles of underdrawing appear within the central Crucifixion panel: (**fig. 3**) the figures of the Virgin and St. John in the left half show a particular indebtedness to Rogier van der Weyden's technique and figural style, while the right half with Crabbe and his two patron saints shows a somewhat different style as well as some revisions to the initial concept. Poldi and Villa note that there appear to be at least two, if not three different media used for the central panel underdrawing: probably a fine brush, sharp

chalk, and possibly some silverpoint (p. 88). Ainsworth argues that the outer wings with the Annunciation figures were underdrawn by Memling himself in his assured post-Rogier manner, (**fig. 4**) but the overlying painting appears to be by workshop assistants. Although no underdrawing evidence can be found on the interior wings — either because any underdrawing was lost in the process of splitting the panels, or because it was done in a substance that does not show up in IRR — x-rays prove that St. Anne in the left panel was originally to be accompanied by the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, although Mary and Christ were then painted out midway through the process, presumably because they did not fit well in the composition, crowding the donor's mother.

While well-written throughout and providing important contextual information, the catalogue could have discussed much more overtly how much remains unclear about the making of the triptych, whose dating as “c. 1467-70” throughout the publication rests on stylistic grounds. Poldi and Villa do not present any hypotheses about the potential timing and sequence of production, or about the likely balance between master and workshop assistants: in a manner typical of technical experts, they merely present factual observations about the visible changes and the materials used. Ainsworth's essay, on the other hand,



Figure 4 IRR of the Angel and Virgin of the Annunciation (Osiris scanning device). Photo: after Marciani, *Hans Memling*, p. 77.

helpfully brings together a wider array of information to discuss the triptych as a whole, but although she notes that “this triptych came together in a series of stages that possibly stretched over a few years” (p. 73), it is difficult to understand quite what these stages might have been. She cites, without refuting, a previous scholar’s suggestion that the right half of the central Crucifixion panel might have been painted before 1465 (i.e. before Rogier’s death) and the left half later (p. 74); she then notes that “Crabbe himself, who is slightly larger in scale than any of the other figures, appears to have been somewhat awkwardly inserted into the foreground of an already fully formed composition. These factors, as well as the less refined execution of the head of Crabbe, likely indicate workshop assistance.” (p. 76) On the face of it, that statement implies an analogous situation to the Campin-group *Merode Triptych* painted some forty years earlier, where a pre-existing central panel was later revised and wings added to adapt it to a particular patron, with the left wing itself showing two different stages of work. (Whether this was all done in the same workshop, or if the wing(s) are by another artist, has been subject to debate.)²

In a previous publication, before the most recent technical studies, Borchert proposed that Memling only painted the *Crabbe Triptych*’s wings, adding them to an existing central panel made by an artist closer to the style of Rogier van der Weyden.³ His essay here implies (without explicitly stating) that the recent technical studies have changed his opinion, but questions remain. The IRRs of the central panel show that Crabbe was always present in the underdrawing, and Poldi and Villa clearly indicate that the only changes in that underdrawing concern the figures of St. John and St. Bernard, not the

² See Maryan W. Ainsworth and Keith Christiansen, eds., *From Van Eyck to Bruegel: Early Netherlandish Painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), cat. no. 2; and Stephan Kemperdick and Jochen Sander, eds., *The Master of Flémalle and Rogier van der Weyden* (Frankfurt: Städel Museum, 2008), cat. no. 4.

³ Till-Holger Borchert, “Hans Memling: Ausstellung in Groeningemuseum, Brügge; Dirk de Vos, *Hans Memling. Das Gesamtwerk* (review),” *Kunstchronik* 49 (January 1996): pp. 17-28 (pp. 26-27).

donor himself. So when Ainsworth speaks of Crabbe being awkwardly inserted into a fully formed composition, she must mean that most of the conception of the central panel (or at least the composition of particular figures) was reproduced from pre-existing workshop models, instead of being conceived fully afresh, although the presence of two different underdrawing styles remains puzzling. How much of this work took place in the “c. 1467” of the triptych’s date, i.e. in its initial phases? Borchert suggests (p. 49) that the *Crabbe Triptych* (presumably while still in progress) could have inspired the Medici’s banking manager Angelo Tani, who would have known Crabbe, to commission from Memling the *Last Judgment* triptych, now in Gdansk, typically dated c. 1467-72, although Barbara Lane has argued that Tani might have initiated his commission one or two years earlier.⁴ Whichever was begun first, did Memling decide in these years to focus most of his personal attention on Tani’s very large triptych, thereby relegating parts of Crabbe’s smaller triptych to assistants?

The variations in quality and condition across the panels further complicate these questions. The central panel shows more disturbance to the paint surface than the wing panels, with the inner wings at the Morgan remaining in the best condition overall; Ainsworth implies that these variations are largely a result of the different histories of the panels after their separation (pp. 73-74). Poldi and Villa, however, suggest that the quality of the ground layer in the central Crucifixion was inconsistent (“perhaps not adequately smooth or thick”), and this has led to some of the paint loss and uneven crackling in its paint surface (p. 81). Their proposal implies that the better-condition wing panels might indeed have been a later addition, perhaps at a point when the workshop had learned to take more care over the panel preparation. At the same time, it seems surprising that Memling would have tolerated any poor-quality ground at all: this was a factor whose central importance for the work’s longevity was generally understood very well by early

⁴ Barbara G. Lane, *Hans Memling: Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges* (London: Harvey Miller, 2009), pp. 129-32.

Netherlandish workshops.⁵ Even more surprising is the “less refined execution of the head of Crabbe” noted by Ainsworth, compared to the exceptional quality of the portraits of his mother and half-brother in the wings. Is the impression of lesser refinement merely a by-product of the faulty technique that led to damage in the paint surface, or was his head actually executed by assistants? Why would a patron, especially one of such status and discernment as Crabbe, be content for his own portrait to be carried out to lesser standards than those of his relatives?

Even if there can be no certain answers to such questions, it is frustrating that they appear to be simply evaded in this catalogue rather than directly addressed, particularly since the *Crabbe Triptych* is one of Memling’s earliest extant works, and it vies with the *Last Judgment* triptych as the earliest surviving example of his use of continuous landscape across the three panels, an important visual format addressed in Lynn Jacobs’ *Opening Doors*.⁶ It thus seems particularly important to evaluate the planning and execution of the wings in relation to the central panel, and what role Crabbe as patron might have played in that process. Bizarrely for the catalogue of an exhibition whose purpose was to reunite the various parts of the triptych, none of the essays address its visual structure as a whole — other than Marciani’s interesting but brief discussion of the role of the exterior demi-grisaille (pp. 34, 36) — or its potential functions. It evidently ended up as an altarpiece in the chapel of the Ten Duinen refuge house in Bruges, which was commissioned by Crabbe around 1478 and completed in 1479 (Marcioni, p. 26; Geirnaert, p. 67), but none of the essays venture to speculate where the triptych might have been before then, or how it was used. Was it necessarily intended from the outset as

⁵ Hélène Verougstraete and Roger van Schoute, “Frames and supports in Campin’s time,” in *Robert Campin: New Directions in Scholarship*, ed. Susan Foister and Susie Nash (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), pp. 87-93.

⁶ Lynn F. Jacobs, *Opening Doors: the Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2012), pp. 160-63.

an altarpiece? Could it have been used before that non-liturgically as a devotional triptych? How could such shifts in function affect our understanding of its meanings?

In addition, it would have been fascinating to reflect on the familial relations implied by the choice of portrait figures. Geinaert notes (p. 63) that Crabbe had a sister and brother living at the time of the triptych's making; why would they not be included while his half-brother was (the son of his mother Anna's second marriage)? Geinaert further notes very briefly that the triptych commission happened around the time of Anna's gift of land to her son Crabbe in 1468. Why no further discussion anywhere about the possible connection between this transaction and the painting? Geirnaert also refers rather obliquely to a significant event in 1448 when Anna "was abducted and forced into a third marriage with Cornelis Boudinszoon, a servant of the nobleman Zweer van Kruiningen, who was complicit in this arrangement," a situation from which she "regained her freedom" a few months later (p. 63). Why skirt around that this was in effect a rape, and say nothing of her appeal to the Flanders court for justice, the initial success of her case, and the duke's reversal of the perpetrators' punishment a year later? Peter Arnade and Walter Prevenier have discussed this intriguing case in relation to structures of power and violence against women in the Burgundian Netherlands,⁷ themes that could bring new perspectives onto the iconographies, functions, and patronage of panel painting. While Geinaert's essay presents a fascinating overview of Crabbe's life, it seems typical of the catalogue as a whole that this event is relegated to a short statement and quickly passed over. It appears that nothing could be admitted into the publication that strayed too far beyond the resolutely factual. Other potentially fascinating themes are also left unexplored, for instance how the roles and meanings of the panels changed over time as they became separate objects owned by art collectors.

⁷ Peter J. Arnade and Walter Prevenier, *Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble: Pardon Letters in the Burgundian Low Countries* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 146-53, 168-71.

The result is a curiously restricted view onto an important painting. Although a highly professional contribution to the state of knowledge, the catalogue comes across as conceptually timid and predictably circumscribed. At a time when medieval studies generally display a great deal of self-reflection and methodological change, texts like this give the impression that the study of early Netherlandish painting remains stuck in twentieth-century approaches, lacking adventurous thinking and innovation. Still, there is no denying that the rigorous scholarship and technical documentation in this catalogue provide essential groundwork for further investigation. 🐼