

## Van Eyck's Optical Lore in the Sixteenth Century

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Since the start of the restoration campaign of the Ghent Altarpiece in 2012, restorers have been painstakingly removing layers of dirt, varnish and overpaint that accrued on the polyptych over six centuries.<sup>1</sup> The meticulous process of restoration resulted in the rediscovery of the polyptych's original Eyckian style, which was aimed at producing a sophisticated naturalism through the skilful imitation of optical effects. Today, this rediscovery not only has a tremendous impact on our aesthetic appreciation of the famous polyptych but literally ignites a conundrum in Eyckian scholarship. Questions raised in the past by historians of science about the scientific origins of naturalism in Renaissance modes of visual representation, have now fully entered the art-historical study of Eyckian naturalism.<sup>2</sup> Illustrative of this trend is a recent scientific discovery made by a cross-disciplinary team of conservation scientists, computer scientists, mathematicians and engineers under the supervision of art historian Maximiliaan Martens. They found that the rendering of the numerous painted pearls in the Ghent Altarpiece is consistent with the light conditions in the Vijd chapel – demonstrating its maker's thorough understanding of optics.<sup>3</sup> In the present book, Maximiliaan Martens expands this previous finding by arguing that Van Eyck developed a deductive method of painting for the depiction of optical effects by combining an empirical process of observation with scientific insights in late-medieval optics.<sup>4</sup> Both these scholarly findings corroborate an earlier research hypothesis formulated by Marc De Mey – a cognitive scientist – in 2008. Specifically, De Mey suggested that the convincing representation of the

optical properties of reflecting and refracting surfaces in the Ghent Altarpiece was grounded not merely in an interest but rather a profound understanding of the scientific matter.<sup>5</sup>

### MEDIEVAL VERSUS MODERN OPTICS

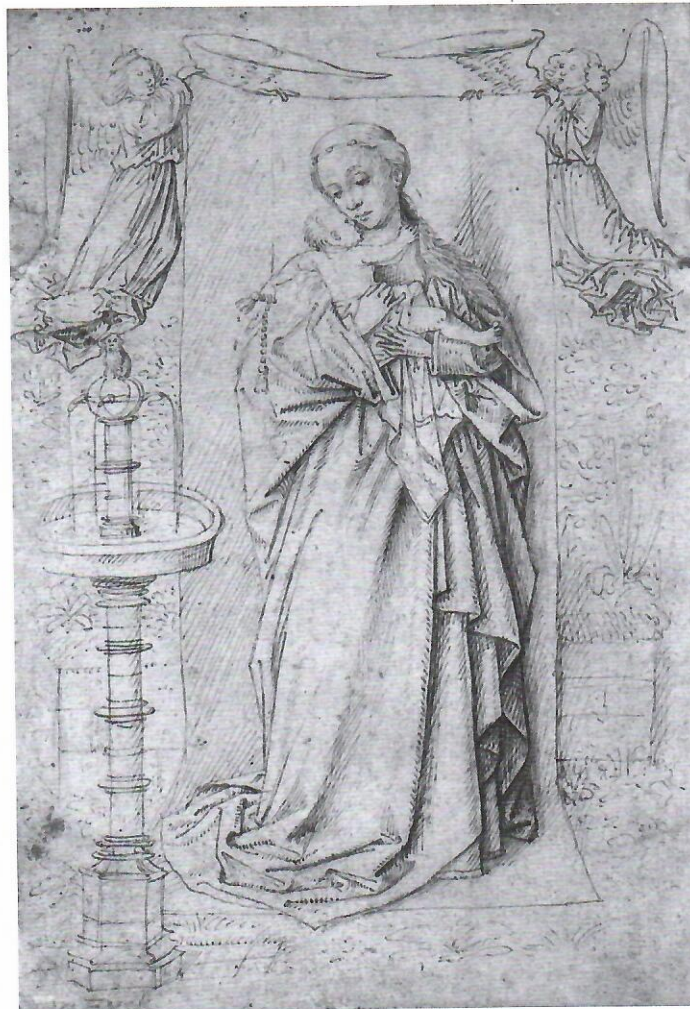
The Ghent Altarpiece can truly be considered the starting-point of the Northern Renaissance. In the famous polyptych, the Van Eyck brothers broke new ground by merging for the first time in the history of sacred imagery the spiritual world of Christianity with mankind's material world. That is to say, the polyptych's central iconographical theme, the Christian history of salvation, is portrayed with an unprecedented interest in the general laws of nature, and especially in optics. Not only is a wide variety of plants depicted with a breath-taking verisimilitude, but the play of light on every conceivable material, from wood and marble to gold brocade, pearls and gems, is portrayed with an unprecedented scientific accuracy.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this light, the Van Eyck brothers seemingly allocated with technical finesse and erudition the religious content of their polyptych to the realm of human sense perception.

At present, we specifically admire the scientific accuracy of Eyckian naturalism. An equal admiration was given by the Neapolitan court scholar and chronicler Bartolomeo Fazio, who in his treatise *De viris illustribus* (1456) praised Jan van Eyck for his knowledge of geometry, or the optics

of visual perception.<sup>7</sup> Our modern scientific understanding of optics, however, obscures the metaphysical meaning underlying the meticulous representation of optical effects in the Ghent Altarpiece.<sup>8</sup> The modern scientific discipline of optics differs from its medieval comprehension due to a shift in analytical focus that had occurred by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> Instead of studying the physical behaviour of the human eye and light, the central problem of medieval optics was the question of how we obtain knowledge through the sense of vision.<sup>10</sup> Solving this question was not limited to describing the mechanism of physical vision and its cognitive aspects as *species*.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, this medieval explanatory model of physical vision generated through analogical reasoning the organizing principles for the discussion of the highest good attainable in Christianity: spiritual vision.<sup>12</sup> The metaphysical concept of spiritual vision encompassed the interaction of the human soul with God in the state of post-resurrection salvation. In sum, the central aim of medieval optics was to extrapolate from scientific knowledge about the human sense of vision a nuanced account of spiritual vision.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is true that Kepler's scientific model of retinal imaging led to modern optics, it seems fair to say that during the Late Middle Ages Roger Bacon (c. 1214–c. 1294), John Pecham (c. 1230–1292) and Witelo (1220–after 1278) revolutionized the spiritual lore of optics from its inception in Greek antiquity to its incorporation in Christianity. At the heart of this late-medieval optical revolution lies the introduction of Alhazen (Hasan bin al-Haitam)'s theory of visual perception from the Near East into Europe.<sup>14</sup> Alhazen's intromission model replaced around 1260 the prevailing theory of extramission held by Plato (c. 427–347 BCE), Euclid (active 300 BCE) and Ptolemy (c. 100–170). As a consequence, physical sight was no longer regarded as a visual flux induced and formed by the human eye. In lieu of the extramission model, the human eye became an image-producing instrument that captures external rays of light (i.e. intromission). This paradigm shift in late-medieval optics had major implications for the age-old metaphorical analogy between physical and spiritual vision established by the church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, these implications were particularly potent because the Christian liturgy, mysticism and popular piety were organized around the metaphorical usage of physical and spiritual vision.<sup>16</sup> The problem, however, did not emanate from the unreliability of visual perception in itself, as it had always been regarded as a source of uncertainty for cognition from antiquity onward. Instead, as Richard Newhauser explains it, late-medieval optics had the effect of rendering the veracity of sight accidental, and thus making physical vision as a model for the description of spiritual vision very tricky.<sup>17</sup> After all, Alhazen's intromission model described the act of visual perception as a fleeting impression, or sensation, which can only result in a coherent image in the human brain when light rays reached the eye directly without being internally refracted or externally distorted by optical illusions. Thus, if the point of view from which a visible object was seen could change its perception, there was no way to be sure that the spiritual vision of God by the blessed souls in heaven was not merely accidental.

In order to guarantee that this was not the case, a new interpretation of the age-old metaphorical analogy between physical and spiritual vision was needed. Therefore, by the end of the thirteenth century new parallels were drawn between physical and spiritual vision on the basis of late-medieval optics and the early fifth-century doctrinal principle of the direct spiritual vision of God (*Visio Dei*).<sup>18</sup> Three types of spiritual vision were differentiated according to whether it is the direct,



7.2 Gerard David, *The Madonna at the Fountain*, c. 1510. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen Berlin.

refracted or reflected vision of God.<sup>19</sup> Only the third type, reflected vision, was possible during life. However, just as objective reality can only be visualized in the human mind and not in the eye through the reasoning faculty, reflected vision is only completed by a process of internalization, or self-reflection.<sup>20</sup> This meant that humans had to transcend physical seeing by turning inward for contemplation. Ultimately, the aim was to see in their own minds an image of their soul, as if looking in a mirror. And, in turn, man could discern in this image a reflection of God's glory (*Imago Dei*), which was considered analogous to the optical principle of secondary reflection.<sup>21</sup>

## JAN VAN EYCK AND SPIRITUAL VISION

In a similar vein, as Marc De Mey interprets it, Jan and Hubert van Eyck depended on the three types of spiritual vision with all their scientific and metaphorical associations in the Ghent Altarpiece.<sup>22</sup> First of all, the Van Eyck brothers' refined naturalism in itself functioned as an apt metaphor for the direct vision of God's glory. Second, the depiction of internal refraction of light in, for instance, the pearls and beads adorning the garment of the *Enthroned Deity* can be connected to the second category of spiritual vision: refracted vision. Third, and finally, the multiple light reflections carefully depicted in, for example, the harnesses and shields of the *Milites Christi* can be associated with the concept of reflected vision. Throughout the



7.6 Jan Gossart, *Deësis* (*The Holy Virgin, Christ Giving his Blessing and Saint John the Baptist*), c. 1525–30. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Ghent Altarpiece as well as in other paintings by Jan van Eyck, such as the *Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele* or the *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Nicolas Rolin*, the entire range of complex internal and external mirroring effects described in late-medieval optical theory can be discerned.<sup>23</sup> Hence, it does not seem far-fetched to conclude that the Van Eyck brothers' innovative contribution to the art of painting was the development of a scientific and intrinsically visual metaphor for the metaphysical concept of spiritual vision.

In an analogous manner, it seems fair to suggest that the Van Eyck brothers also found a solution to an age-old paradox between the contemplative function of sacred images and the classical doctrine of mimesis, most fully developed within the context of the visual arts by Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) in his *Naturalis Historia* (Natural History).<sup>24</sup> The paradox emanated from the fact that sacred images needed to help Christians to overcome sensuous things with an eye to the contemplation of spiritual things, while the artistic rule of mimesis urged artists since antiquity to develop techniques of illusion to imitate the world of the senses perfectly.<sup>25</sup> As such, the rule of mimesis subverted the contemplative function of sacred imagery. However, by perfecting the pictorial techniques of illusion to represent optical phenomena associated with spiritual vision, the Van Eyck brothers allegorized the artistic doctrine of mimesis in accordance with the contemplative function of sacred imagery. Hence, the mimetic quest of Christian artists such as

the Van Eycks was not limited to the perfect imitation of the physical realm of sense perception on the basis of technical progress. Thus, in line with the function of theological and pastoral discourse, it seems that the Van Eyck brothers' aim in the Ghent Altarpiece was to distinguish spiritual things more subtly for laypeople by representing physical things as apt metaphors.

## SPIRITUAL VISION AND THE IMAGE DEBATES

In the century following the Ghent Altarpiece's production – the period that saw the onset of the image debates – the metaphorical analogy between physical and spiritual vision became the subject of heated controversy, which eventually resulted in violent waves of iconoclasm. Religious reform movements, ranging from Lutheranism to biblical humanism, fervently restated the age-old Christian criticism of sacred images.<sup>26</sup> At the heart of their indictment lies the moral claim that sacred images incite corporeal sins, such as greed and lust, due to their dependency on the vagaries of the sense of vision. While Erasmus (1466?–1536) – the prince of biblical humanism – pleaded for moral instruction of laypeople about the issue, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and his followers wanted to strip sacred images from their spiritual aura through a total ban of images in devotional practice.<sup>27</sup> They keenly invoked the authority of the first two of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and thus God's laws which prohibited the making and worshipping of sacred images because it was idolatry.<sup>28</sup> The reply of the Roman Catholic Church on the image debates, formulated during the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent (1563), addressed these moral accusations by reframing the metaphorical connection between physical and spiritual vision. The Tridentine resolutions restored the metaphorical value of images in religious life, by stipulating that: 'The images of Christ, of the Virgin Mother of God, and of the other saints, are to be had and retained particularly in temples', not because 'any divinity, or power, is believed to be in them, ... as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols; but because the honour which is shown them [refers] to the prototypes which those images represent ... And the bishops shall carefully teach this, that, by means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in (the habit of) remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images ... because the miracles which God has performed ... are set before the eyes of the faithful ... to cultivate piety.'<sup>29</sup>

Sixteenth-century Netherlandish painters, on the other hand, had to address the moral accusations concerning the fickleness of the sense of sight in optical terms because painting is intrinsically visual. The strong sensuous character of Eyckian naturalism in particular required careful consideration. Judging from a couple of copies made by sixteenth-century painters after the Ghent Altarpiece, the sensuous character of Eyckian naturalism was reconsidered in various strategic ways. For instance, Michiel Coxcie (1499–1592) in his full-scale copy of the Ghent Altarpiece (c. 1557–59) commissioned by Philip II, merged the classicizing style of the Italian High Renaissance with Eyckian naturalism. Coxcie respected the original composition of his Eyckian model but idealized the physiognomy and proportions of the figures while simplifying complex forms of drapery folds and optical effects.<sup>30</sup> By adopting the Italian cinquecento style, Coxcie reveals an artistic attitude in absolute

agreement with Neoplatonic notions of artistic creation. According to Neoplatonism, the artist obtains his inspiration from God through divine illumination and contemplation, and he translates into his works what is first conceived in his mind rather than what he sees before his eyes.<sup>31</sup> To Coxcie, his copy definitely contained spiritual truths and was thus not completely subject to the realm of sense perception. Moreover, Coxcie made this point not only by adopting the Italian cinquecento style but also by portraying himself with the Renaissance symbol of divine inspiration: the laurel wreath of Apollo.<sup>32</sup> He offered an argument against Erasmus's and Luther's moral accusations by making it clear that his painted image did not wholly belong to the realm of sense perception but contained true knowledge for inner contemplation, just as Scripture.

Although this is still hypothetical, the overpainting campaign of the Ghent Altarpiece, undertaken in about 1550 – only a few years before Coxcie made his copy in the Vijd chapel – reveals a similar strategic way of dealing with the sensuous potency of Eyckian naturalism.<sup>33</sup> Opaque overpaints were applied in areas that were in very good condition to simplify, add or even conceal certain forms, colours and details. Refined tonalities of colour and lighting effects of the landscape, flesh tones and drapery folds were completely muted by these overpaints. It is tempting to think that this particular treatment was meant to subdue the polyptych's sophisticated naturalism.<sup>34</sup> However, the question whether this intervention served the same ends as Coxcie's reinterpretation of Eyckian naturalism requires further study.<sup>35</sup>

Jan Gossart (c. 1478–1532), in turn, fully preserved the naturalistic style of the Van Eyck brothers in his partial copy of the three principal figures in the Ghent Altarpiece's interior. To this end, Gossart made a few compositional changes associated with heavenly visions and miraculous images of biblical figures. Indeed, the compositional placement of the three holy figures against a golden background recalls the ancient Byzantine icon type of the *Deësis*.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Gossart's remodelling of the central figure – Christ in glory – evokes the legend of the miraculous image imprinted on Saint Veronica's veil.<sup>37</sup> Since such heavenly visions and miraculous images were living appearances sovereignly initiated by God himself and not lifeless images made by humans, they are considered a legitimate exception to the Old Testament law against sacred imagery.<sup>38</sup> Gossart therefore adopted a pictorial strategy that was not only an argument against Protestant prohibition of sacred images but also a spiritual sanction for Eyckian naturalism.

In contrast with the examples discussed above, a partial copy of the Ghent Altarpiece's *Adam* and *Eve*, now preserved in Zaragoza, completely abandoned Eyckian naturalism.<sup>39</sup> In this particular case, the artist drastically modified his model in the Italian classicizing style, seemingly to admonish laypeople of the sinful perils of the senses. In this partial copy, *Eve* is represented as a sensuous *Venus*, who exerts her seductive powers over *Adam*, as well as the willing beholder. It would seem that this resolute stylistic change was made in response to the moral discourse on sacred images and corporeal sins advanced by Luther and Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541), among others.<sup>40</sup> This is no coincidence, because uncontrolled sensuous desire had led to the expulsion of *Adam* and *Eve* from Paradise (Genesis 3:1–7) and mankind's fall from grace.<sup>41</sup> Other means developed by sixteenth-century painters, who copied Jan van Eyck's works, to urge laypeople to gain control of their senses could be less invasive. For instance, it could be limited to the incorporation of biblical references or iconographical signs of spirituality, such as harp- and lute-playing angels, the Virgin's heavenly crown or devotional books referring to God's word.<sup>42</sup>

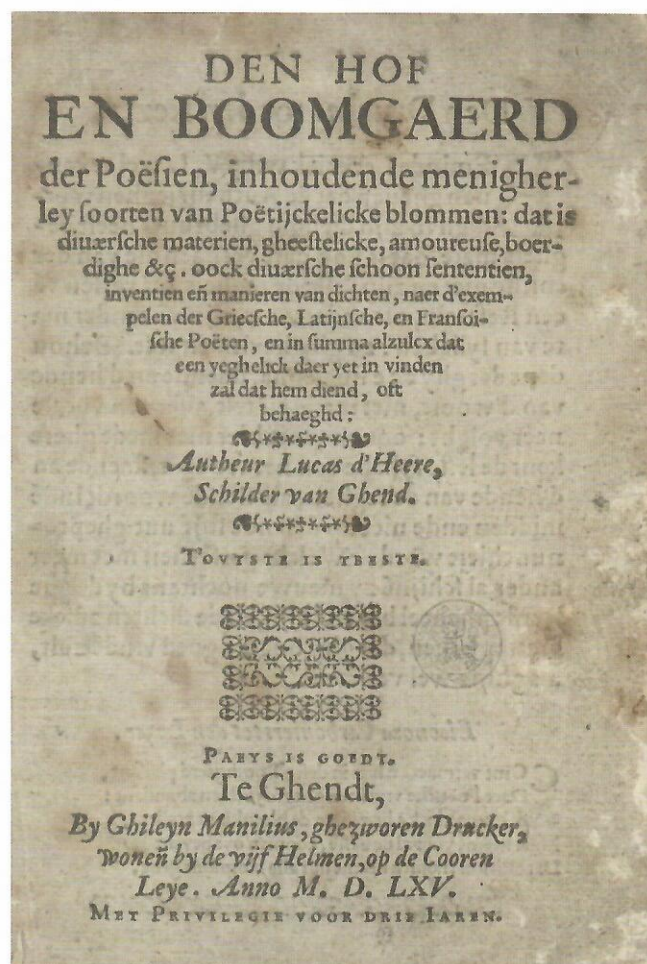
## LUCAS D'HEERE AND HIS ODE TO THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

When picking up the issue of the sensuous character of Eyckian naturalism, the Ghent painter and poet Lucas d'Heere (1534–1584) found a kind of middle ground between the moral and metaphorical discourses of the reformed and Catholic parties. D'Heere, however, did not deal with the issue through his painterly practice like his fellow painters Michiel Coxcie and Jan Gossart but formulated a verbal solution: an ode to the Ghent Altarpiece.<sup>43</sup>

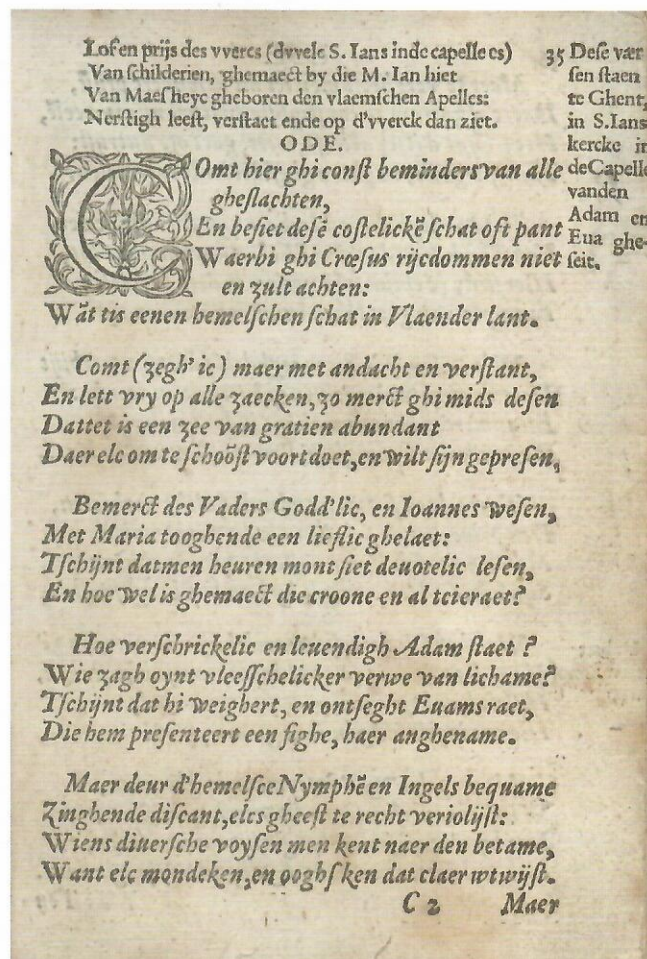
The ode was published in 1565 in an anthology, *Den hof en boomgaard der poësie* (The Orchard of Poetry), which was distributed in a limited edition among a close circle of humanistic and artistic confidants.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, D'Heere's ode quickly informed the first historiographical endeavours related to Netherlandish art undertaken within his intellectual network.<sup>45</sup> Besides D'Heere's recollection of the famous Vasarian commonplace of Jan van Eyck as the inventor of oil painting, two other statements made in the ode particularly drew the attention of fellow socialites, such as the Ghent-born historian and rhetorician Marcus van Vaernewyck (1518–1569) and the Italian merchant and historian Lodovico Guicciardini (1521–1589).<sup>46</sup> The first statement was D'Heere's recuperation of previously lost information contained in the polyptych's quatrain about Hubert van Eyck's involvement in the artistic enterprise of the Ghent Altarpiece.<sup>47</sup> More precisely, paraphrasing the polyptych's quatrain, D'Heere explained that Hubert van Eyck had begun the work in his particular way but that 'death (who finishes all) made him cease'.<sup>48</sup> The second statement that became a topic of particular interest was D'Heere's detailed description of the Van Eyck brothers' self-portraits among the polyptych's *Iust Judges*.<sup>49</sup> In particular, this information served D'Heere's fellow humanist and artist Dominicus Lampsonius (c. 1536–1599) to construct a canon and lineage of Netherlandish art history.<sup>50</sup>

The outcome of Lampsonius's literary undertaking was the *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies* (1572), which consisted of twenty-three engraved portraits of Netherlandish artists accompanied by poems of praise in Latin.<sup>51</sup> In Lampsonius's publication both Van Eyck brothers featured as founding fathers of the Netherlandish canon and the Ghent Altarpiece was presented as the summit of their artistic abilities. Of course, their alleged self-portraits in the Ghent Altarpiece functioned as models for the engravings accompanying Lampsonius's poems, while D'Heere's statement concerning Hubert's limited involvement in the creation of the polyptych was also reiterated. In order to present an account of technical progress in accordance with the classical teleological model of art historiography, Lampsonius keenly rephrased D'Heere's statement in his poem on Hubert van Eyck as follows: *Discipulus frater te superavit ope./ Hoc vestrum docet illud opus Gandense ...* – 'your brother, as your student, outdid you in ability. That work of yours in Ghent teaches this'.<sup>52</sup> And so, throughout the sixteenth century, the virtuoso Eyckian naturalism of the Ghent Altarpiece became associated with Jan van Eyck's outstanding skills and not so much with those of his brother Hubert, whom he had surpassed.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond D'Heere's elite network, the ode also circulated as it was posted in the Vijd chapel within the vicinity of the Ghent Altarpiece, where it found a more practical application for devotion.<sup>54</sup> In fact, from the Late Middle Ages, the practice of posting verse texts in religious spaces was meant to evoke spiritual or abstract concepts of Christian doctrine contained in visible objects or church rituals (such as the Eucharist and



7.19 Lucas d'Heere, Frontispiece of *Den hof en boomgaard der poësie*, 1565. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent.



7.20 Lucas d'Heere, 'Lof en prijs des wercks', an ode to the Ghent Altarpiece, in *Den hof en boomgaard der poësie*, 1565. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent.

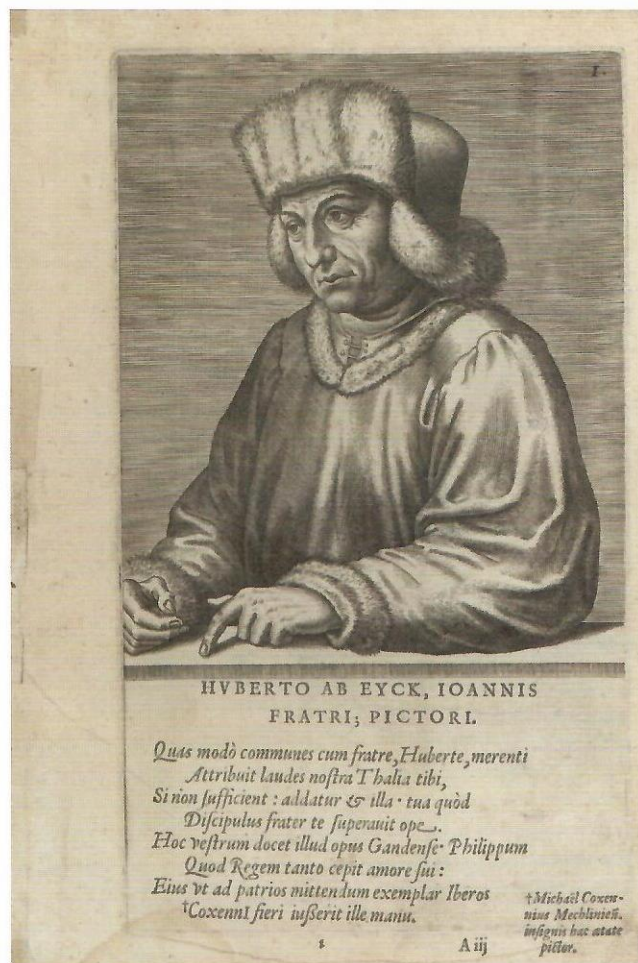
the host) to guide the faithful.<sup>55</sup> Such texts were intended to supplement preaching as part of the traditional ecclesiastical control over the laypeople's sense perception during devotional practice. This interactive approach of communication about spiritual concepts originated in the rhetorical activities of the *rederijkerskamers*. These chambers of rhetoric were literary societies, whose core business was the public dissemination of knowledge with a view to moral and intellectual edification through the production, recitation and staging of verse texts in the vernacular.<sup>56</sup> Lucas d'Heere seemingly had a similar interactive function in mind for his posted ode. His understanding of this interaction was not confined, as has been argued, to the evocation in the reader's mind of the altarpiece's interior when its wings were closed.<sup>57</sup> First, the polyptych's interior was frequently on display around the time D'Heere's ode was posted.<sup>58</sup> Second, the ode stipulates two preconditions for the physical vision of the interior panels. At the end of the ode's introductory stanza, D'Heere urges the visitors of the Vijd chapel to diligently read his verse text, and subsequently understand it before actually viewing the altarpiece's interior.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the visitors are requested in the ode's third stanza to 'come but with attention and intelligence'.<sup>60</sup> Visitors of the Vijd chapel had better take heed of both admonitions, for if they do, so D'Heere assures us, they will be able to grasp the painting's wealth of graces.<sup>61</sup>

The ode's preconditions seem to recall the process of internalization, as advocated throughout the Middle Ages by Saint Augustine and other Christian thinkers for contemplation.<sup>62</sup> This we can infer from the ode's following stanzas where D'Heere systematically considers the sensuous features

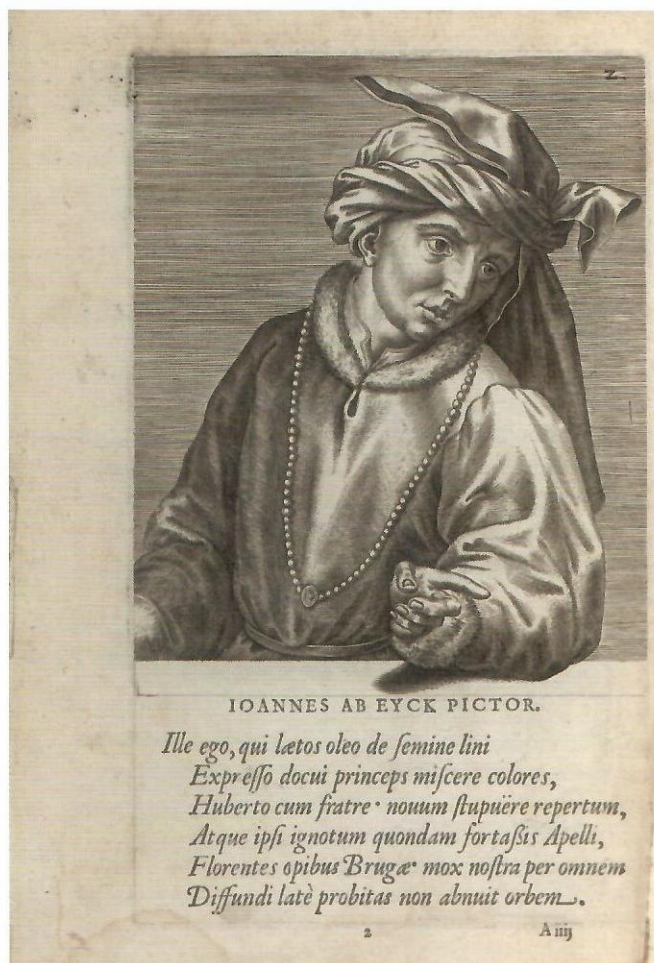
of the Ghent Altarpiece in conjunction with their moral but above all spiritual aspects. These sensuous features are the polyptych's naturalistic style and its maker's skills. In the following two sections, we discuss how D'Heere's consideration of the polyptych's sensuous style alluded to the late-medieval concept of spiritual vision. Finally, we will look at D'Heere's discussion of Jan van Eyck's artistic abilities. Here, D'Heere drew a connection with the art of rhetoric to single out the spiritual features of Jan van Eyck's abilities.<sup>63</sup>

## THE SENSUOUS FEATURES OF THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

In the ode's stanzas four to ten, Lucas d'Heere gives a systematic description of the altarpiece's interior – an *ekphrasis* as it is called in rhetoric – which through its illuminative liveliness and detail evokes Jan van Eyck's naturalistic style in words.<sup>64</sup> D'Heere starts with a description of the central figures of the upper register. For instance, he describes the figure of the Virgin as follows: 'Mary has a lovely look on her face; it is said that one can see her mouth reading devoutly.'<sup>65</sup> Apparently cognizant of the classical formulae *vultus viventes* (faces that live) and *vox sola deest* (only the voice is lacking), D'Heere encourages his readers to behold the polyptych in silence to contemplate its spiritual content.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, however, D'Heere interrupts his readers' silent contemplation by posing a question about the material qualities of the Virgin's crown and jewellery.<sup>67</sup> In so doing, the poet brings his readers back to the realm of sense perception. However, this appeal to the



7.21 Dominicus Lampsonius, *Portrait of Hubert van Eyck*, in *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*, 1572. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent.



7.22 Dominicus Lampsonius, *Portrait of Jan van Eyck*, in *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies*, 1572. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent.

senses is directly followed by a vivid reminder of the devastating outcomes of losing control over one's sensory faculties. Indeed, in the next stanzas, D'Heere steers the readers' sense perception in a targeted way towards the extremely lifelike representation of Adam, who, according to the author, seems to resist Eve's carnal lure.<sup>68</sup> If the reader, however, can break free from the constraints of sense perception, his soul awaits a heavenly reward. More precisely, in what follows, D'Heere evokes heavenly sounds through a brief yet animated description of the polyptych's singing angels and stresses that such sounds 'truly delight every soul'.<sup>69</sup> Although the ode discusses a visual image, D'Heere thus also pays attention to the interplay between the senses of seeing and hearing.

By characterizing the visual interaction with the altarpiece as a multisensory experience, D'Heere merged in his ode Augustine's auditory model of the pilgrimage aspect of Christian life with his metaphorical concept of spiritual vision.<sup>70</sup> Most likely, D'Heere obtained his understanding of Augustine's concepts from the allegorical plays of his fellow *rederijkers*.<sup>71</sup> For instance, such a full elaboration of the multisensory concepts of spiritual vision can be found in an allegorical play of the chamber of rhetoric 'De Groeiende Boom' (The Growing Tree) from Lier, which was performed during the 1561 *Landjuweel* festival, a rhetoricians' contest. The play recounted step by step mankind's long search for divine knowledge, but not as an actual pilgrim's march towards the heavenly Jerusalem as it is depicted in the *Adoration of the Lamb* panel of the altarpiece.<sup>72</sup> The play was conceived as a long wander around the world to gradually but surely discover the spiritual nature of the liberal arts.<sup>73</sup> The gratifying outcome of man's peregrinations was presented at the end of the play through an image of God's name, the tetragrammaton JHWH,<sup>7.23</sup> encircled by cherubs. Subsequently, the audience was invited to look at the image because – as the personification of 'Art', the play's protagonist, explained it: 'Knowledge of the liberal arts is like a mirror allowing mankind to truly see God's glory.'<sup>74</sup>

At this point, apart from D'Heere's adoption of the multisensory model, more analogies can be drawn between the allegorical play of 'The Growing Tree' and the ode to the Ghent Altarpiece. The ode can be considered an inversion of the play. After a vivid description of the Ghent Altarpiece's divine and human protagonists – who were all blessed with the direct vision of God in heaven or in Eden before the Fall – D'Heere states that the polyptych consists of 'mirrors, and not painted images'.<sup>75</sup> Here, of course, D'Heere also depends on the concept of the mirror as a metaphor for the reflected vision of God on Earth. In the following verses of the ode, this idea is amplified through a vivid description of the lower register. After all, the journey of the crusaders, princes, hermits and pilgrims to the heavenly Jerusalem in order to behold the Mystic Lamb symbolizing the physical appearance of God's spirit in Christ functions as an apt metaphor for spiritual vision.

### THE SPIRITUAL ORIGINS OF JAN VAN EYCK'S ART

In the final part of the ode, D'Heere allowed his readers to discover the spiritual origins of Jan van Eyck's artistic skills. This information ultimately prepared the readers for the actual viewing of the Ghent Altarpiece's interior ensemble in accordance with the ode's two preconditions. Such an intellectual preparation was necessary because, as D'Heere stated at the beginning of his ode, his readers will not just encounter a man-made painting but a 'divine gift'.<sup>76</sup> This of course raises



7.23 Lieven de Witte, *Tetragrammaton*, in Willem van Branteghem, *Iesu Christi Vita*, 1537. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



7.24 Marcus van Vaernewyck, Title page of *Die historie van Belgis*, 1574. Universiteitsbibliotheek, Ghent.

the question of how Jan van Eyck could have produced out of physical matter a divine gift? Unless Jan van Eyck had received divine sanction from God, it was virtually impossible and even blasphemous for D'Heere to make such a statement, especially in a text that was displayed in religious space.<sup>77</sup> D'Heere was, however, not the only one who gave expression to this idea. It was repeated with minimal variation by the aforementioned Lodovico Guicciardini and reformulated by D'Heere's friend and fellow rhetorician Marcus van Vaernewyck, who stated in his *Die historie van Belgis* of 1574 that the great Jan van Eyck was sent by God.<sup>78</sup>

Whereas throughout the Middle Ages the liberal arts were regarded as a divine gift, the art of painting was considered a manual craft.<sup>79</sup> Hence, D'Heere keenly drew analogies with rhetoric – one of the liberal arts – to raise the art of painting to the same level. Throughout the ode, D'Heere used the five canons of rhetoric to characterize the most laudable artistic qualities of the Ghent Altarpiece's maker. More precisely, he praised Jan van Eyck's use of colour, ability to repeat motifs with variation, and accurate execution, relating them to the rhetorical skills of *elocutio* (style), *memoria* (memory) and *pronuntiatio* (delivery).<sup>80</sup> However, these artistic skills did

not grant the Ghent Altarpiece its spiritual features. On the contrary, these features derived from Jan van Eyck's 'great intellect that is shown in the invention (*inventio*) and composition (*dispositio*), most clearly.'<sup>81</sup> More precisely, D'Heere continued, Jan van Eyck's achievement to produce such a beautiful painting in oil without being able to fall back on an existing model for his invention and composition was extraordinary. This specific achievement was all the more laudable because Jan van Eyck also had invented the medium of oil painting.<sup>82</sup>

In another poem from *Den hof en boomgaard*, 'Refereyn, an d'edele Violieren t'Andwerpen', a ballad to the Antwerp chamber of rhetoric 'De Violieren' (The Stock Flowers), D'Heere continued his comparison of the art of rhetoric and painting. Based on this poem, we can finally deduce the spiritual origins of Jan van Eyck's skills of invention and disposition. In the ballad, D'Heere again declared that painting is a divine gift. More precisely, as Jochen Becker explains, D'Heere described God in his ballad as the *primus artifex*.<sup>83</sup> This meant that God is the creator not only of the universe but also of the rules of his creation, which can be related to the rhetorical skills of *inventio* and *dispositio*.<sup>84</sup> Based on these rules God had defined the model of his own painting, which D'Heere considered the true origin of the art of painting. This belief was further elaborated in the ballad through a reference to chapter 31 of the Book of Exodus, in which God disclosed his first model to a craftsman bearing the name Bezalel. According to this biblical passage God had chosen Bezalel and 'filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills to make artistic designs' for the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>85</sup> To D'Heere, then, *mutatis mutandis*, mankind had received the art of painting from God, 'who was the first painter; for did he not (as Moses writes) make the pattern for the images?'<sup>86</sup> Or, put differently, the art of painting encompasses all that exists in God's mind and only divinely inspired painters could make this spiritual knowledge visible in physical images through invention and composition. This was the true origin of Jan van Eyck's invention and composition of both oil painting and the Ghent Altarpiece. Therefore, according to D'Heere, the Ghent Altarpiece does not belong to the realm of sense perception but is truly a divine gift worth contemplating.

## CONCLUSION

This essay discusses the devotional efficacy of the Ghent Altarpiece's sophisticated naturalistic style and its problematic reception in the sixteenth century. Drawing on recent scientific insights uncovered during the current restoration campaign of the famous polyptych, we concur with the conclusions of other scholars that Eyckian naturalism is grounded in profound knowledge of the late-medieval science of optics. Simultaneously, we argue that one needs to assess this knowledge of optics not from a modern but from a late-medieval point of view. Indeed, the Van Eyck brothers' application of the laws of optics in their artistic practice should be linked to the Christian concept of spiritual vision and its devotional associations. Finally, using Lucas d'Heere's ode to the Ghent Altarpiece, we argue that Eyckian naturalism might have sparked a potent reaction during the sixteenth century due to its sensuous features. The central premise of Lucas d'Heere – and this essay for that matter – is that Eyckian naturalism requires careful reflection and deliberation to help us understand that it was not necessarily in conflict with Christian doctrine on sacred images.