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## The Ghent Altarpiece and the Legend of Saint Christopher

One of the most important masterpieces of Early Netherlandish painting, the *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432/35, oil on panel, was completed by Jan van Eyck (ca 390–1441) for the chapel of Joos (Jodocus) Vijd and his wife Elisabeth Borluut in the St. John Baptist Cathedral (modern St. Bavo's Cathedral) in Ghent. The VERONA project (Van Eyck Research in Open Access) of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) has made it possible to start a new research on the Ghent Altarpiece thanks to high-quality images, including macrophotography, infrared photography (IRP), infrared reflectography (IRR), X-ray photography, as well as other materials and reports which are accessible on the website *Closer to Van Eyck*, supported by the Getty Foundation [11; 23]<sup>1</sup>.

The discussion about the iconographic program of the Ghent Altarpiece is still going on [15, p. 155]. The relationship between iconography and the patronage of Joos Vijd and Elisabeth Borluut has been studied by Elisabeth Dhanens and other authors [4; 5; 8; 9; 18; 20]. Some scholars adhere to Erwin Panofsky's interpretation in the context of the iconography of All Saints [16, p. 18]. Bernhard Ridderbos developed the theory that while the images on the lower interior side panels were used as references to the Vijd family, the Beatitudes, which the donors hoped to attain, acquired a specific significance in the Adoration of the Lamb: the groups in this panel were intended to symbolize the Beatitudes, with accompanying texts on the lost frame, and the subject of the New Heaven and New Earth was chosen as a central theme of the interior, and all the parts of the exterior can be taken as preparation for the opened altarpiece [20, p. 39]. The aim of this study is an iconographic and stylistic analysis of the image on the Ghent Altarpiece (closed) which has not been studied previously. The methodology of the study includes comparative iconographic analysis and is based on the discourse of the social history of art dedicated to the problem of donor's identity.

The panels of the upper register of the Ghent Altarpiece (closed) are dedicated to the Annunciation scene. It takes place in the interior with a city view [2, p. 31], panel XIV, 120.3×45.9 cm (Fig.1). Two parts of the cityscape are separated by a column of bifora window. In the left part, there is a street behind a high facade with two towers. The buildings are constructed with timber framings and gable roofs. The street is filled with walking or lively conversing citizens. On the right side, the buildings are of other type: in the foreground, there is a large three-story building with a crenellated fronton roof and many windows; it is accompanied by a large adjacent house with a gable roof. In between the buildings, there is a church steeple with a weathercock which rises on top of the cross. In the depths of the street, to the left of the three-story building, there is a tall tower with a statue in a niche above its portal. Since 1824, researchers have believed that this cityscape reproduces the view from the top floor window

<sup>1</sup> Closer to Van Eyck. Available at: <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be> (accessed 15 January 2023).



Fig. 1. Jan van Eyck. Ghent Altarpiece (closed), detail of the panel XIV. Interior with City View. 1432/35. St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Macrophotography after restoration. Closer to Van Eyck. Available at: <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/#viewer/s=3&l=1&id1=656e3c9a83c3e382206cf5d8f1260f44&rep1=0&scale1=0.0494768&centerX1=341.7&centerY1=2011.4>



Fig. 2. Follower of Jan van Eyck. St. Christopher, ca. 1460–1470. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Cat. 342, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917  
Wikimedia commons. CC BY-SA 3.0. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint\\_Christopher\\_after\\_Jan\\_van\\_Eyck.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Christopher_after_Jan_van_Eyck.jpg)

of the house that belonged to the altarpiece's donor, Joos Vijd. The view was facing Vierwegscheede (cross of the four ways) towards ancient Waelpoorte (city wall gates) in Ghent; later it was suggested that this was a view of the Nieuwe jaarplaetse (New Fair Square) in Bruges [14, p. 116]. Some authors believe that this is not a real cityscape [13, p. 81]. The discussion about which street is actually depicted here is in fact still ongoing. Erwin Panofsky wrote that the idea of viewing landscapes or a city perspective through windows, which allows to “combine two adaptations of the eye (long focus and short focus) as well as two kinds of light (perfect ‘interior light’ and perfect ‘outdoors light’) into a ‘total vision’ which could never be obtained in practice yet is, in a sense, more ‘real’ than reality”, Jan van Eyck, apparently, borrowed from the Master of Flemalle [17, pp. 204, 401]. Studies have shown that 20% of Jan van Eyck's works include a cityscape; later on, the frequency of the urban landscape in the works of Netherlandish masters has increased [7, p. 72]. In the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the urban

landscape type depicting the everyday life of city dwellers in Netherlandish painting was largely supplanted by idealized and deserted cityscapes. Earlier, in the first half of the century, a prevailing oblique view enabled masters to show the heart of the city from above, revealing visitors, merchants, workers, counters, signs, and traffic.

The author's attention was attracted by a small image (less than half of a square centimeter of painting surface) within a rectangular vertical frame above the portal of a three-story building. It can be seen both in normal macrophotography and infrared reflectography (Ill. 113). High-resolution photos allow us to identify St. Christopher carrying the Christ Child across a river. The episode can be recognized by the feet of a large figure draped in a red himation with widely spaced legs, though they are not shown since St. Christopher was ankle-deep in the water. During the restoration some weary parts were retouched as little as possible, while the details of the houses in the background of the cityscape received further retouching [1, p. 98]. Therefore, the darkening silhouette of the Christ Child sitting on St. Christopher's shoulders, with his fingers folded in a blessing gesture of an elongated right hand, is visible more confidently on macrophotographs taken prior to the last restoration (Ill. 113).

Another Jan van Eyck's painting *St. Christopher* became very popular. It was used, for example, by such masters as Dirk Bouts (triptych *Adoration of the Magi*, 1467–68, Old Pinakothek, Munich) and Hans Memling (*Triptych of Willem Morel*, 1484, The Groeningemuseum, Bruges) [3, p. 156]. Unfortunately, Jan van Eyck's *St. Christopher* has been lost, but a painted copy (Follower of Jan van Eyck, *St. Christopher*, ca. 1460–1470, oil on panel, 29,5×21,1 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Fig. 2) and a drawing (Follower of Jan van Eyck, *St. Christopher*, ca. 1440, pen and brush on paper, 19×14 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris, Fig. 3) have been preserved. It is noteworthy that such stylistic details as the outline of scarlet drapery with characteristic angles in the areas of the right elbow bend and the left side of St. Christopher's figure, which are not characteristic of many other images of St. Christopher, coincide in the Ghent Altarpiece and in the copy from Philadelphia.

Medieval culture gave rise to the cult of intercessors who protected the believer from the plague, sudden death, and other troubles. One of the most popular is St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, who protects against sudden death. *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de



Fig. 3. Follower of Jan van Eyck. *St. Christopher*, ca. 1440. Louvre Museum, Paris. Wikimedia commons. CC BY-SA 3.0. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:-Saint\\_Christopher\\_\(after\\_van\\_Eyck\)\\_Louvre.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:-Saint_Christopher_(after_van_Eyck)_Louvre.jpg)



Fig. 4. The Buxheim Saint Christopher, ca. 1450. The John Rylands University Library, Manchester. Wikimedia commons. CC BY-SA 3.0. Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St-christopher-buxheim-1423.jpg>

Voragine, a well-known source of late medieval iconography [24, pp. 396–400], tells how a man of great height with an ugly face named Reprobus (“rejected” in Latin) wanted to serve the most powerful lord<sup>2</sup>. Desiderius Erasmus wrote in his *Praise of Folly*: “And next to these are they that have gotten a foolish but pleasant persuasion, that if they can but see a wooden or painted Polypheme Christopher, they shall not die that day” [10, p. 81].

The history of European engraving includes, presumably, one of the earliest dated woodcuts (dated of 1423) that has come down to us. It is now believed to have been printed in Southern Germany around 1450 and to be a copy of an earlier one — the *Buxheim Saint Christopher* hand-colored xylography, 28,85×20,7 cm. (Schreiber no. 1349, The John Rylands University Library, Manchester [22, p. 63], Fig. 4). A vivid evidence of the existence of similar images is the painted woodcut in the interior of *The Annunciation* by Robert Campin or his pupil (oil and tempera on panel, 61×63,7 cm) in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels (Fig. 5). In the context of the study, this example is particularly interesting because, as on the

Ghent Altarpiece, other artwork with the episode of the legend of St. Christopher is included in the entourage of the Annunciation scene. There is a figure of St. Christopher (or, less likely, St. Judoc) marching at the head of a group of pilgrims to worship the Holy Lamb on the right-side internal panel XII of the lower register of the Ghent Altarpiece (open). But the depiction in the Annunciation scene is not the image of the saint only but of the legendary

<sup>2</sup> At first, he served a king, but found that he was in fear of falling under the power of the devil. The giant began to serve the devil who appeared in the form of a terrible warrior but found that he was afraid of the cross. Then he went in search of Christ to serve him. Finally, he met a hermit who told him to fast and pray in order to serve Christ, but Reprobus replied that he could not. Then the hermit invited him to settle by the stormy river in which travelers who tried to cross it died and to carry them on his shoulders with a hope that Christ would someday appear to him. The man did just that, and once he heard the voice of a boy asking to carry him across the river. He walked with a pole across a river with the boy on his shoulders and felt terrible heaviness and was frightened. When he carried the boy, he told him that the boy endangered him because he was so heavy that even if he held the whole world on his shoulders he would hardly have felt even heavier than. To this, the boy replied that Christopher (“Christ bearer” in Greek) carried not only the whole world on his shoulders, but also the Creator Himself, since he is Christ, and as a proof of this he ordered to put his staff there, which is like a palm tree that blossomed when St. Christopher returned to the hut.



Fig. 5. Robert Campin? Annunciation (detail), ca. 1415–25. The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels. Wikimedia commons. CC BY-SA 3.0. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maestro\\_di\\_flemalle,\\_forse\\_robert\\_campin,\\_annunciazione,\\_05\\_camino.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maestro_di_flemalle,_forse_robert_campin,_annunciazione,_05_camino.JPG)

episode with him. This episode is depicted by Lieven van Lathem in the *Prayer Book of the Charles the Bold* and in the *Trivulzio Hours* miniatures<sup>3</sup> [19, pp. 174–175], and this image is also extremely small: “The group of pilgrims on the far-right panel of the Ghent Altarpiece is also severely reduced in Lieven van Lathem’s miniature: the giant St. Christopher, who steps gingerly through Van Eyck’s fictive paradise, stands as a proxy for all pilgrims in the miniature. He appears in the distant middle ground of the miniature, crossing the river with the Christ child on his shoulders, just under the Lamb of God. Whereas the giant dominates the right foreground of Van Eyck’s open polyptych, he is reduced to the size of a flea in the miniature, visible only to the alert” [21, p. 204].

The author of this paper agrees with the opinion that “the presence of details escaping our perception may have complied with the donors’ wish that the Ghent Altarpiece should fulfill a function similar to that of the masses in the Vijd chapel” and that “if such details suggest that the painting contains some hidden meanings, this should not be a justification for approaching it as if it conceals all sorts of symbolic allusions, without any relation to the donors” [20, p. 33].

Thanks to the high-resolution macrophotography, it is noticeable that many of the windows of the three-story building are closed, the window on the upper floor on the left in the lancet three-blade pediment is half open, and one can see linen hanging for drying (Ill. 114). In the window of the ground floor, there are two sedately talking men, one of them is in a red chap-

<sup>3</sup> Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Ms. 37 (89.ML.35), f. 43r, 1469; The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Ms. A009, f.59v, Southern Netherlands, ca. 1470–75.

erone. Another man comes out from the portal with a pilgrim's staff in a fancy red chaperon. It is curious that the townspeople scurrying around on the right side of the urban landscape are dressed differently: most of them wear black chaperones and hats, and no one wears red chaperones. The contrast between the left and right parts of the cityscape could be seen in architecture, habitus (the style and color of hats, behavior manner) of the characters, and even in the behavior of birds flying in the blue sky (Ill. 115). If on the left side, above the street, they fly alone in different directions and also sit apart and take off from the two-tower facade, then on the right side of the cityscape, a flock of migratory birds organized in a wedge flies high in the sky, and some of them have already sat on the battlement pediment, and one already found shelter in the open dormer window (Ill. 114). Another "bird" is the vane-cockerel on the cross of the church. Birds here are similar to people, a flock of migratory birds is associated with a group of pilgrims. This can be seen by discovering that there is a sky on all the internal panels of the lower register of the Ghent altarpiece (open state), but birds can be seen in the sky on the two right panels dedicated to hermits and pilgrims only. Everything indicates that the building in the foreground is a large hospice for pilgrims located near the busy center of the city, and the image of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers and pilgrims, seems to have an explicit meaning here, although images of the saint were ubiquitous in the urban landscape of Flanders and St. Christopher was not associated with this type of institutions. The juxtaposition of parts of the urban landscape is intended to emphasize a kind of "zoning", the division into burghers and pilgrims<sup>4</sup>. St. Christopher is the patron saint of Joos Vijd's elder brother Christoffel, whose death had made Joos the only remaining family heir. The donors of the Ghent Altarpiece had founded a hospice for pilgrims in Beveren-Waas and the foundation was realized by their heirs after Joos Vijd's and Elisabeth Borluut's death [4, p. 86]. The image of the episode of the St. Christopher legend could be an attribute of the pilgrim shelter, the largest building in the foreground of the cityscape in the Annunciation scene, as the representation of the donors' devotional intension. Jan van Eyck used the finest optics of his painting in landscapes as an artistic means of expression to represent the donor's identity. In his *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (ca. 1435, Louvre Museum, Paris), Jan van Eyck shows a hill covered with vineyards right above the hands of the Chancellor of Burgundy Rolin who was known for his winemaking endeavors. Later he founded the Hospices de Beaune and donated some of his best vineyards [25, p. 37]<sup>5</sup>.

The iconographic and stylistic analysis of the images available in high resolution, taking into account the data of the restoration documentation, made it possible to identify the previously unknown image depicting the episode of the legend of St. Christopher on the Ghent altarpiece (closed) and to find out its possible role in signifying the pilgrim shelter, associated, in turn, with the devotional intentions of the donors. Thus, the details of the urban landscape in the surroundings of the sacred scene in Jan van Eyck's painting served as an artistic means of expression to represent the donor's identity as a benefactor for personal piety. This technique, which Jan van Eyck employed repeatedly, had already been used in the Ghent altarpiece. It allows to take a fresh look at the functioning of this monumental polyptych.

<sup>4</sup> There were beguines, begards, and other lay religious communities in the context of the *Devotio Moderna* movement [12]. Liège is considered to be one of the cradles of the beguinal movement in southern Low Countries and the city had more than twenty "convents" scattered throughout the urban parish territory and a single "courtyard" beguinage structured around the church of Saint Christopher [6, p. 359].

<sup>5</sup> Another sample of the entourage element as a sign of a donor's activity in the Early Netherlandish painting is, for example, the depiction of the two small crossbows in the Rogier van der Weyden's *Deposition* (c. 1435, Museo del Prado, Madrid) painted for the Confraternity of the Archers of Leuven.

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**Title.** The Ghent Altarpiece and the Legend of Saint Christopher

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**Abstract.** One of the most important masterpieces of Early Netherlandish painting, the Ghent Altarpiece dates to 1432/35. It was completed by Hubert and Jan van Eyck for the chapel of Joos Vijd and his wife Elisabeth Borluut in the St. John the Cathedral (now St. Bavo's Cathedral) in Ghent. The purpose of the paper is to introduce into scientific circulation and interpret the image on the Ghent Altarpiece identified by the author. The focus is on the representation of charitable activities of the donors. Specifically, the study examines an image of an episode from the legend of St. Christopher set in a city landscape depicted on the panel XIV of the Ghent Altarpiece (closed view). The methodological basis of the study includes the method of comparative iconographic analysis and is based on the discourse of the social history of art. The iconographic and stylistic analysis of the image found on the inner panel of the Ghent Altarpiece made it possible to clarify its role as possible attribute for denoting the pilgrims' hospice associated with the activities of the donors. St. Christopher served as the patron saint of the donor's deceased brother Christoffel, leaving Joos as the only remaining family heir. The donors founded a hospice for pilgrims in Beveren-Waas and the foundation was realized by their heirs after Joos Vijd's and Elisabeth Borluut's death (see Buylaert, Verroken, 2019). A detailed analysis revealed two parts of the cityscape separated by a column of biforia, their symbolic contrast is expressed in architecture, behavior of birds, and habitus of pilgrims and townspeople. In the same way, the *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (ca. 1435, Louvre Museum, Paris) shows a hill covered with vineyards right above the hands of Rolin, the Chancellor of Burgundy, who donated one of his best vineyards to the Hospices de Beaune (see Ward, 1994). The technique, repeatedly used by Jan van Eyck to represent donor's identity, had already been employed in the Ghent Altarpiece. It allows to take a fresh look at the functioning of this polyptych in the context of the social history of art.

**Keywords:** The Ghent Altarpiece, Jan van Eyck, St. Christopher, iconography, patronage

**Название статьи.** Гентский алтарь и легенда о святом Христофоре

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**Аннотация.** Один из важнейших памятников раннеидерландской живописи — Гентский алтарь Хуберта и Яна ван Эйков был окончен в 1432/35 гг. для капеллы супругов Йооса Вийдта и Элизабет Борлют в соборе св. Иоанна Крестителя (ныне св. Бавона) в Генте. Цель работы — ввести в научный оборот и интерпретировать впервые идентифицированное автором изображение на Гентском алтаре. Актуальность темы исследования связана с изучением иконографической программы произведения с учетом идентичности заказчика. Объектом исследования является репрезентация благотворительной деятельности донаторов. Предметом исследования является изображение эпизода легенды о святом Христофоре в городском пейзаже на XIV створке Гентского алтаря (закрытый вид). Методологическая основа исследования включает метод сравнительного иконографического анализа и опирается на дискурс социальной истории искусства. Иконографический и стилистический анализ открытого изображения с учетом внутренних створок алтаря позволил выяснить его роль как возможного атрибута приюта паломников, ассоциирующегося с благотворительной деятельностью заказчиков в целях личного благочестия. Св. Христофор был соименным святым патроном Кристофеля, умершего брата заказчика, оставившего Йооса единственным наследником семьи. Заказчики обеспечили учреждение такого приюта в Беверен-Ваас, созданного после их смерти наследниками, см. Buylaert, Verroken (2019). Детальный анализ выявил символический контраст частей городского пейзажа, разделенных колонкой бифория, выраженный в архитектуре, поведении птиц и габитусе паломников и горожан. Аналогично, в «Мадонне канцлера Ролена» (ок. 1435, Музей Лувра, Париж) изображен покрытый виноградниками холм прямо над сложенными в молитве руками бургундского канцлера Ролена, пожертвовавшего один из лучших виноградников основанной им «Бонской богадельне», см. Ward (1994). Исследование показало, что Ян ван Эйк использовал пейзаж для репрезентации идентичности заказчика уже в Гентском алтаре, что позволяет по-новому взглянуть на функционирование этого полиптиха в контексте социальной истории искусства.

**Ключевые слова:** Гентский алтарь, Ян ван Эйк, св. Христофор, иконография, патронаж



Ill. 113. Jan van Eyck. Ghent Altarpiece (closed), detail of the panel XIV. The Episode of the Legend of St. Christopher. Macrophotography before restoration. Infrared reflectography during restoration. Macrophotography after restoration. 1432/35. St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Closer to Van Eyck.

Available at: <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/#viewer/s=1&l=4&id1=107e-a1e4a9d973fcc3007aacbeeeed-d6&rep1=0&scale1=0.0066713&centerX1=3866.5&centerY1=17132.0&id2=c6d-6c59071bca528bdeff6c2e5c12bec&rep2=0-&scale2=0.0066713&centerX2=3866.5&centerY2=17132.0&id3=656e-3c9a83c3e382206cf5d8f1260f44&rep3=0&scale3=0.0016678&centerX3=15465.9&centerY3=68527.8>



Ill. 114. Jan van Eyck. Ghent Altarpiece (closed), detail of the panel XIV. Image on the building. Open windows: linen hanging for drying and a bird in the dormer window. Macrophotography after restoration. 1432/35. St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Closer to Van Eyck.

Available at: <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/#viewer/s=0&l=2&id1=656e3c9a83c3e382206cf5d-8f1260f44&rep1=0&scale1=0.0148707&centerX1=1548.6&centerY1=7431.2&id2=656e-3c9a83c3e382206cf5d8f1260f44&rep2=0-&scale2=0.0041500&centerX2=5609.5&centerY2=26251.2>



Ill. 115. Jan van Eyck. Ghent Altarpiece (closed), detail of the panel XIV. Contrast between left and right part of landscape: local and migratory birds, architecture, citizen and pilgrims. Macrophotography after restoration. 1432/35. St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Closer to Van Eyck.

Available at: <http://clostertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/ghentaltarpiece/#viewer/s=0&l=3&id1=656e3c9a83c3e382206cf5d-8f1260f44&rep1=0&scale1=0.0148707&centerX1=1264.1&centerY1=6887.0&id2=656e-3c9a83c3e382206cf5d8f1260f44&rep2=0-&scale2=0.0148707&centerX2=1265.6&centerY2=7742.9>