



Kerkfabriek
van de Sint-Baafskathedraal
Gent

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PRESS RELEASE

MINISTERS BOURGEOIS AND GATZ GIVE THE GREEN LIGHT TO PROCEED WITH THE EXTENSIVE RESTORATION OF THE GHENT ALTARPIECE

The Church Wardens of Saint Bavo's Cathedral, commissioners of the restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers, received on November 3 a letter from the competent ministers in which they commit to freeing up additional funds for a thorough restoration campaign of the lower tier of the interior panels. This second phase of the restoration is to be completed by 2019, in time for the "Van Eyck Year" in 2020.

Extensive treatment during the first phase

Restoration began on 14 September 2012 and was awarded to the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels). It soon appeared that the condition of the painting was more complex than initially thought: large parts of the original layers had been painted over during the course of many centuries. Following the advice from the International Commission of Experts, it was decided that this first phase (restoration of the outer wings, the panels visible when the altarpiece is closed) was to involve a more thorough treatment in which the original paint layers of Van Eyck were again to be exposed. Additional funds were provided.

On 12 October 2016, the restored outer wings were returned to the cathedral, gaining the praise of the international community. The result of the restoration may be called 'breathtaking': the painted areas have recovered their depth, the folds of the garments and their shadows provide a swirling movement to the panels and the newly exposed original colours reinforce the mastery of Van Eyck. This thorough restoration campaign was without a doubt the right choice.

Extensive restoration desirable

The Church Wardens, KIK-IRPA and the International Commission of Experts are unanimous in their view that a thorough restoration of the interior panels (phase 2 and 3) is desirable. The Council for Major Art Works (Topstukkenraad) therefore issued on 3 October a favourable opinion to the competent ministers in the Flemish Government. *"Taking into account the opinion of the Council for Major Art Works and given the magnificent results of the extensive restoration of the outer wings, the Flemish Government therefore judges that the interior panels ought to be restored in the same way as the outer wings. After all, the Mystic Lamb is an outstanding work of art with high symbolic value in Flanders."* (From the letter to the President of the Church Wardens of Saint Bavo's Cathedral).

Restoration of the lower tier (phase 2) as well as of the upper tier of the interior panels (phase 3) in a similar way obviously has financial consequences. The remaining funds of the initial grant will be used to execute the phase 2 restoration. Additional funding of 150.159, 34 Euro will still be needed. The Baillet Latour Fund is committed to bearing 20% of these additional costs. For the Flemish Government, this represents an additional cost of 120.127,47 Euro. **Geert Bourgeois, Flemish Minister-President in charge of Immovable Heritage, and Flemish Minister of Culture Sven Gatz** now provided their assent: 40% of the balance to be funded by the Agency for Immovable Heritage and 40% to be funded by the Department of Cultural Heritage.

As for the later phase 3 restoration (the upper register of the interior panels) additional funds should be sought and a new grant application will have to be submitted by the Church Wardens.

Leverage project 2020

In their letter the ministers request that the extensive phase 2 restoration of the altarpiece be completed by the end of 2019, in time for the “Van Eyck Year”. The year 2020 was named the “Van Eyck Year” in Ghent, featuring an exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK) and the opening of a new visitors’ centre for the Ghent Altarpiece in St Bavo’s Cathedral. Both projects are funded by Tourism Flanders via the leverage project “Flemish Masters” of Flemish Minister for Tourism, Ben Weyts.

At its meeting on 18 September 2017, the International Commission of Experts expressed its praise for the proficiency of the conservation team of KIK-IRPA and conveyed its gratitude to all parties involved in this project of global proportions: the Wardens of the Cathedral, the Province East Flanders as guardianship authority, the Flemish Government and the patrons: Gieskes-Strijbis Fund and Baillet Latour Fund.

The Baillet Latour Fund will invest in total 784.276 euro. The Gieskes-Strijbis Fund (Netherlands) supports the scientific research (240.000 euro).

Minister-president Geert Bourgeois and the Minister of Culture Sven Gatz thank all those involved *“for the thoughtful way in which this unique Flemish and international masterpiece was attended to in recent years.”*

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- This press release may also be found at www.kerknet.be/restauratielamgods
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