

PRESS RELEASE | Ghent, June 27th 2013. The Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA, Brussels), currently carrying out the conservation-restoration campaign of the Ghent Altarpiece by the Van Eyck brothers, presents the results of the first nine months of treatment and research.

On October 2nd 2012 the eight outside wings of the polyptych were transported to the conservation studio at the Museum of Fine Arts of Ghent, which was purpose-built for the project. The first phase of the campaign then began. After thorough documentation with high resolution photography under visible and UV-light, as well as photographs of details, cleaning started on the eight painted panels. The most recent yellowed layers of varnish, primarily synthetic ketone varnish applied after the 1950s, were progressively removed. After this first cleaning phase the international committee of experts accompanying the project unanimously advised to continue with the removal of the old varnish and overpaint. This has facilitated the consolidation of underlying lifting paint layers, as well as the removal of overpaint, retouching and further varnish layers that risk becoming insoluble on further ageing. The cleaning will bring us closer to Van Eyck's original paint layers and their exceptional visual qualities. The panels will temporarily appear more worn since old retouching and overpaint will be revealed and subsequently removed. In the next step of the treatment the old lacunae will be carefully retouched.

KIK-IRPA also studied the original frames, which the Flemish Primitives and Jan Van Eyck in particular often conceived as an inseparable part of his paintings. Using cleaning windows, it was determined that the polychrome layer, a stone imitation, is not always overpaint and, against expectations, is still in relatively good condition over large parts of the surface. This discovery made it possible for us to uncover this (original?) polychromy of the frames, which are largely retouched and overpainted, and to restore them. The polychromy technique was studied as well. But one of the main points of interest of the frames for art historians is the quatrain. The first cleaning windows revealed that remains of the original quatrain are in fact different in form to the historical transcription. Further removal of overpaint from the polychromy and the quatrain may yet yield valuable information on the period in which the inscription was written, aside from the aesthetic importance for the altarpiece.

Dendrochronological research by Pascale Fraiture (KIK-IRPA) of the two panels of Adam and Eve, which complete her study of the whole altarpiece, reveals that wood from the same tree was used for the panel of Eve and for that of the Pilgrims. This strengthens the hypothesis that the panels of the upper and lower registers were manufactured and hence possibly also painted in the same phase, providing new information for our understanding of the genesis of the altarpiece.

Another intriguing discovery is that of the features of a face in the sky of the panel of an interior with a city view. Infrared reflectography and Photoshop editing helped to better visualize this face. Since the drawing is underneath the original paint layer, it dates from the time of Van Eyck. At this moment, however, it is not clear who drew it, nor the precise intention.

Furthermore, we are pleased to announce that after completion of the conservation treatment, the website 'closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be' will be expanded thanks to financing by the Getty Foundation and the Gieskes-Strijbis Fund, and will include a documentary film on the current campaign.

Lastly, the Province of East Flanders, in charge of the promotion and valorization of the campaign, has announced three new initiatives. Today, June 27th, a second temporary exhibition on the Ghent Altarpiece will open in the Cultural Centre of the province, the Caermersklooster. In addition, a catalogue for the successful exhibition at the same location, 'Lamb of God revealed! History and research', is now published. Finally, together with the other partners, a free folder has been produced that highlights what there is to be discovered at the three Ghent locations involved with the Ghent Altarpiece and its restoration: the Caermersklooster, the Museum of Fine Arts and St. Bavo's Cathedral.

