



Statement international commission (March 26, 2024)

What follows is a statement from the international commission, presented by expert Dr. Melanie Gifford. Following the statement you will find a list of all members of the commission.

Ghent Altarpiece Restoration Project

International Commission of experts - statement

Dr. Melanie Gifford

I'm speaking to you as a member of the International Commission of experts advising on the Ghent Altarpiece conservation and restoration project. The members of our committee have a range of specialties: we are art conservators, art historians and conservation scientists and almost all of us have particular experience in studying, analyzing or preserving paintings by Jan van Eyck. Some of us have conserved other works by Van Eyck – carefully removing discolored varnish and old repaints left by earlier restorers to uncover the artist's original brushstrokes. Others have carried out scientific analysis of Van Eyck's paintings – learning through technical imaging and microscopic analysis how the artist built up his paintings. Others have mounted exhibitions and published scholarly books and papers, sharing Van Eyck's art with lay audiences and exploring its nuances with specialists. All of us are deeply, personally familiar with the ways Van Eyck created his remarkable paintings.

Our group's experience has been built in many international museums, including, for example, the National Gallery, London; the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the Groeningemuseum in Bruges ; the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden; the Louvre, Paris; the Suermondt-Ludwig Museum Aachen ; and the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Antwerp and Brussels. Members are also based in universities, including Queen's University, Canada; Princeton University, United States; and the Universities of Brussels, Leuven and Ghent.

In our advisory role, we consult throughout the project with the remarkably skilled and deeply experienced conservation-restoration team from KIK-IRPA. We meet with the team roughly once a year (or more often, if needed) to share our experience and to discuss treatment decisions in real time. Decision-making in this project is a very collaborative process. During the normal course of their work, the team constantly discusses the project – among themselves and with their scientific and art historical colleagues. In these informal settings, they regularly share their observations and explore possible approaches to the treatment. In the more formal setting of the scheduled meetings, these discussions continue with the International Commission of experts. Before each meeting, the conservation-restoration team shares an advance report with our committee, updating us on all their discoveries and the progress they have made since our last meeting. In particular, this advance report highlights the crucial treatment choices that we'll need to address at our next meeting.

The day of the International Commission's meeting always has a packed – and exciting – schedule. As we gather over coffee, we catch up with colleagues and eagerly anticipate the new discoveries we're about to share. Our formal meeting begins with a detailed update from the conservation-restoration team. Then, for the rest of the morning, we spend an extended period in the studio with the paintings themselves. Here we study the altarpiece closely, often with magnification and comparing the paintings to technical images. Clusters of committee members form and reform as people crisscross the studio, moving from painting to painting. The team points out their latest findings on each painting and we consider the evidence of tiny cleaning tests. We discuss, we argue, we make discoveries – it's always exhilarating. In the afternoon, we return to the studio for a group discussion centered on the paintings themselves, not PowerPoint images. Commission members ask more questions about the discoveries the team has made and challenges they have faced; they share from their own experiences with examples of similar challenges and how they have met them. Together, we weigh the possibilities and the potential drawbacks of each course of action. Together, we plan the next stages of the treatment. At the end of the day, the members of the commission make a preliminary synthesis of our discussions and recommendations. Together, we confirm our approval of the work that has been completed and our agreement on our recommendations for the next steps.

After the day of the meeting, our deliberations continue. There is a period of reflection and emailed discussion as the entire commission prepares a statement that distills our findings. We finish by offering our recommendations to the Steering Committee, the Advisory Board, and the Cathedral Council, who then authorize the guidelines for the next stage of the project.

I hope it's obvious from what I've said so far: conservation-restoration treatments are not undertaken lightly. But a decision like the one faced in the treatment of the Ghent Altarpiece – whether to remove the work of early restorers – is never, ever, an easy or obvious choice. While it was clear that the 19th- and 20th-century varnish and restorations that had darkened over the years could be safely removed, the decision to remove older overpaint required long consideration. Careful examination and detailed analysis of every painting in the altarpiece was required before we came to agreement in Phase 1 of the project, and again for Phase 2 and Phase 3, that the 16th-century overpaint might be removed. First, the advance research showed that the overpaint had been added long after Van Eyck's lifetime, after layers of dirt and old varnish had built up on the paint surface – and that this overpaint covered up a great deal of the original paint. Crucially, cleaning tests showed that it would be possible to remove the overpaint safely without damaging the original paint. Finally, the examination and analysis showed that the original paint was in good condition. This is essential, because we know that sometimes such extensive overpaint was added to hide severe damage in the original paint. But we were delighted to learn that removing the overpaint would uncover only limited old damages that are typical in a work of this age. Because today's art conservators approach their work in a completely different way than the restorers of earlier centuries, who painted over the original paint surface when they tried to "refresh" the altarpiece, we knew that the conservation-restoration team would inpaint only the areas of lost paint. They would work with easily reversible materials, guided by the evidence of the original paint nearby.

For centuries, the world has treasured the Ghent Altarpiece for its innovative and beautiful design. But until now, in many parts of the altarpiece we have not been able to see the actual paint surface. Once we realized that in many areas we were not looking at the delicate paint strokes of the Van Eyck brothers, but at a 16th-century reinterpretation of the paintings, we came to agreement. In each phase of the project, the International



Commission, with the Steering Committee, the Advisory Board and the Cathedral Council, have fully supported the work of our colleagues on the KIK-IRPA conservation team. It is essential to take off as much of the overpaint as can be removed safely and no overpaint should be removed if it risks damage to the original paint. A visual work of art must be seen to be understood. We believe that removing the overpaint to uncover the original paint can open a new era of scholarship, recognizing the individual gifts of both Hubert and Jan van Eyck.

The opportunity to see the Van Eycks' subtle brushwork after it had been hidden for almost 500 years has astonished the art world. Today, high-resolution images available on the website, "Closer to Van Eyck," make it possible for anyone to compare the paintings as they looked before the restoration and after the overpaint had been removed to reveal the original. Those of us who have witnessed this transformation as members of International Commission have been deeply moved. I will never forget a meeting during the first phase of the project where, for the first time, we were shown small areas where the restorers had made test cleanings. In the portrait of the altarpiece's donor, Joos Vijd, the paint surface that we had seen all our lives depicted the folds of the red coat with simple gradations from lighter to darker red. But as we looked closely through the tiny opening in the overpaint to see the original paint below, we recognized Van Eyck's unmistakable brushstrokes below the surface. Just as in the *Virgin of Canon van der Paele* and other works that we know so well, a fine line of reflected half-light glimmered within the shadowed fold.

For each of us who serve on the International Commission of experts advising on the Ghent Altarpiece conservation-restoration project, this work is an honor and a responsibility that we take seriously. We have immense respect for the skill, knowledge and experience of the KIK-IRPA team, which we have seen at first hand over so many years now. At each of our meetings with the team, we feel profound admiration for their remarkable work as they uncover the masterpiece that is the Ghent Altarpiece. At each meeting, we see the potential for remarkable results to come and we fully support the work of each new stage of the project.

We are deeply grateful for the leadership of the Cathedral Council and the Flemish government, and for the additional support of The Baillet-Latour fund and the Gieskes-Strijbis fund, which is vital for this undertaking. We look forward to the further discoveries that we know will be made in this final phase of the program to conserve the Ghent Altarpiece.

Members of the international commission for the restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece (phase 3):

Dr. Maryan Ainsworth, Art Historian, formerly Curator of Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Till-Holger Borchert, Art Historian, Director, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen.

Dr. Veronique Bücken, Art Historian, Curator of Paintings, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.



Dr. Lorne Campbell, Art Historian, formerly Curator, National Gallery, London.

Sophie Caron, Art Historian, Curator of Paintings of the 15th and 16th century, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Christina Ceulemans, Art Historian, formerly Director, KIK-IRPA.

Livia Depuydt, Conservator-Restorer, Head of Conservation-Restoration of Paintings, KIK-IRPA.

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Jill Dunkerton, Conservator-Restorer, National Gallery, London.

Susan Farnell, Conservator-Restorer, independent, Flemish Primitives specialist.

Dr. Melanie Gifford, Independent researcher, Conservator-Restorer and Art Historian, formerly National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Dr. Babette Hartweg, Conservator-Restorer, Head of Conservation-Restoration of Paintings, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

Lizet Klaassen, Conservator-Restorer and Art Historian, Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp.

Prof. dr. Maximiliaan Martens, Art Historian, Professor Art History, Ghent University.

Dr. Uta Neidhardt, Art Historian, Curator of Dutch and Flemish Paintings, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

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