



Jan van Eyck's Mystic Lamb

Jules Cashford

For the last ten years a team of dedicated picture restorers have been cleaning one of the masterpieces of Early Northern Renaissance painting - a massive triptych of 24 panels on oakwood in St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, known as the Ghent Altarpiece or more colloquially as 'The Mystic Lamb.' The painters were two brothers, Hubert and Jan van Eyck. The painting was begun by Hubert, the elder and, after Hubert's death in 1426, completed by Jan in 1432. The closed wings explore the mystery of the Incarnation, and the open wings disclose the birth of the new order: the redemption of the world.

Only the central panel of the open wings is finished. Yet already a new vision appears, as though just freshly painted, and this is the face of the 'Lamb of God' - which seems to have completely changed. Or rather, the cleaning has revealed what Jan van Eyck actually painted over 500 years ago.



Imagine the restorers' amazement when, after three years of meticulous work, an entirely new image shone forth from beneath five centuries of over-painting, the smoke of candles, and simply the passage of time.

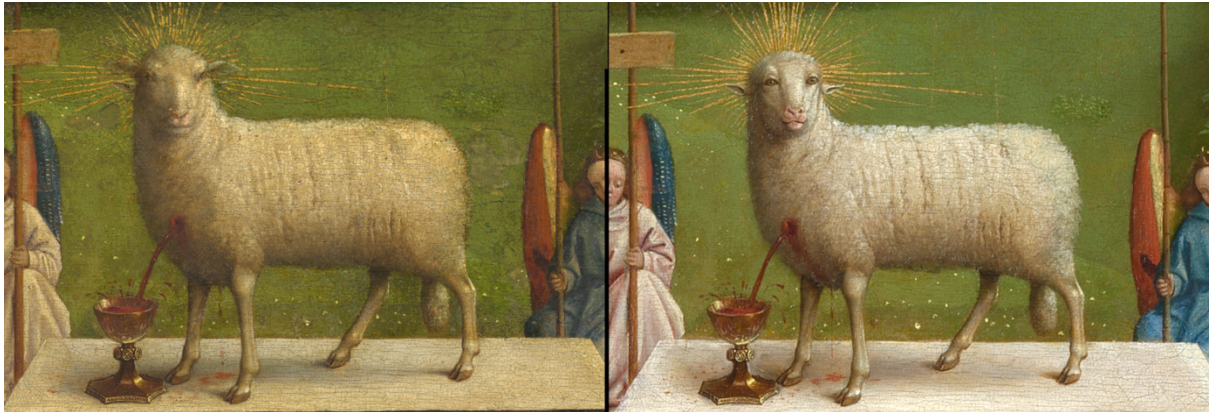
Within a hundred years the original face had been painted over, giving us the gentle Lamb we have seen ever since: the compassionate face we know well through scripture – instantly identifiable, doctrinally exact, by now almost a consoling idea: *'Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world,'* the inscription on the altar beneath him says. This gentle Lamb forgives us but does not, in that moment, implicate us.

In astonishing contrast, the new, which is to say *original* Lamb, with his mesmerizing eyes and steadfastly intense expression, appears to be asking us a question from the heart of the universe. 'Who are you?' the unflinching, yet still compassionate, gaze asks us. 'What is the truth of you?' It is remarkable that in this entire altarpiece only the Lamb and, in the panel above him, Jesus as the Christ, look at us directly.

What makes this Lamb so compelling is that the expression on his face is not just human; it is more than human, disclosing a sublime humanity such as we imagine belongs in the depths of the psyche.

Yet while Van Eyck has created an extraordinary Lamb, he is also not wholly a Lamb. His ears are placed where human ears belong: below the eyes, but flattened sideways, pointing outwards, listening. The 16th century restorers had added two more ears in the 'right' place above the eyes, and made the originals fainter though still visible - as though not daring to paint over them entirely - leaving the Lamb, rather curiously, with four ears. The new restoration has removed the two 'respectable' ears and

revealed the two strangely disturbing ears in their original place, where they take on a resonance all of their own.



We can now see the distinctly triangular relation between his ears and eyes on one plane, focusing us downward through the long prominent nose to his full-lipped eloquent mouth, as though the Word requires a unity of seeing, hearing, and speaking: ‘He who has ears to hear let him hear,’ Jesus says (*Matthew*, 11:15). While in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* we read: ‘He who drinks from my mouth will become like me, and I will become like him, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.’ (*Logion* 108). This confusion of our habitual certainties takes us out of the mind, and we may find ourselves imaginatively in the Lamb’s place looking back upon ourselves: Is this how he, ‘Lamb of God,’ ‘Nature Divine,’ ‘Divine Nature,’ sees us, sees human beings, sees me?

We may remember that, beyond any doctrine, we are in the presence of an archetypal image, a symbol arising out of the depths of our humanity and beyond, out of the Soul of the World – one which has ultimately come to heal, even from ills we do not know we have. The unrelenting image challenges us with the old Socratic command to ‘know thyself:’ ‘They know not what they do,’ Jesus said of his own crucifixion

(*Luke*, 34), while in the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* he said: ‘Whoever knows the All but fails to know himself lacks everything.’ (*Logion* 67).

Wondering on synchronicity, could it be more than a coincidence that this particular Lamb of God reappears now, in our time of need - the original intention of the painter breaking through after hundreds of years? Is this discerning face on the body of a Lamb evocative of a new union of Humanity and Nature, one where we understand, as earlier people did, that consciousness belongs to nature as well as to human nature? ‘Do you *know* what you are doing to Our Earth?’ those eyes may also be asking, reflecting the questioning of our own unconsciousness.

This startling and commanding vision of the ‘Lamb of God,’ suddenly shining forth out of centuries of obscurity, might allow us now to extend the meaning of crucifixion to the Sacred Earth, recalling the ancient wisdom of the *Vedas*, ‘Thou art That.’

As Jesus said in the *Gospel of Thomas* (rediscovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945, and so not ‘edited’ by the early Roman Christian Church):

‘I am the All... Cleave a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up the stone and you will find me there.’ (*Logion* 77).

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