



Figure 1 *The Mystic Lamb (1432), Jan van Eyck.
Closed Wings.*

On Making a film of THE MYSTIC LAMB by Jan van Eyck

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Accompanying sample clip of the Annunciation panel, closed wings middle register from DVD is available free on YouTube [here](#).

Full Length DVDs are also available. Details at the end of this article.



Figure 2 *The Mystic Lamb (1432), Jan van Eyck. Open Wings.*

The Mystic Lamb by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441)

The Mystic Lamb (1432), or the Ghent Altarpiece, in St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, is one of the most magnificent paintings of the Early Northern Renaissance. It is an immense triptych, 5 meters long and 3 meters wide, and was originally opened only on feast days, when many people and painters would make a pilgrimage to be present at the sacred ritual. They could see – when the wings were closed – the annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, which

they knew as the Mystery of the Incarnation. But when the wings were opened they would witness and themselves participate in the revelation of the new order: the Lamb of God, the story of Christendom, and the redemption of the World.

Jan van Eyck



Fig. 3. Self-Portrait by Jan van Eyck (1433). National Gallery, London.

Jan van Eyck (1390 – 1441) is known as the founder of Early Netherlan-

dish Painting. He was born into a family of painters who lived in Maaseik, a small town on the River Meuse, downstream from Maastricht. So great was his reputation that a hundred years later Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, declared him to be the inventor of oil painting. Rather, he refined oil painting by applying transparent colors in several thin glazes upon a white ground, creating a wholly new translucence of color – as if lit from within. His earliest unsigned paintings show him to be a miniaturist of phenomenal precision, and he later brought this skill into the service of his passionate explorations of human consciousness.

In 1422, van Eyck entered the service of John of Bavaria, Count of Holland, in the Hague. On the Count's death in 1425, he became "Court Painter and Chamberlain" to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgandy, in Lille – "to make such paintings as will please the Duke" – a position he held for the rest of his life. As Court Painter he had access to the Duke's large library and the most inquiring minds of the time, and he traveled widely in the course of his work, officially to Portugal and Spain, visiting Santiago de Compostella, and perhaps also Florence; and, unofficially, "on distant journeys to foreign parts...for some secret affairs", suggesting a voyage beyond Christian spheres of influence. It is also known that the Duke thought him the best painter in the world, defended his pay against the protests of accountants, and doubtless protected him from zealous representatives of church doctrine.

In 1430 he settled in Bruges and married Margaret, and they had two children. She appears in his paintings both as herself, and as the inspiration for his tender paintings of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus at her breast or on her lap. He painted both portraits and devotional works for patrons, often with the Virgin Mary at their heart, in her aspect of Sophia. His work points to a man of

profound education – in theology, the classics, architecture and geometry. As well as his native Flemish he knew Greek, Latin and French, and the many inscriptions on the frames of his paintings suggest that, for him, word and image complemented each other.

Verses from the *Song of Songs*, for instance, surround the Virgin Mary in *The Mystic Lamb*, rising on the arch behind her like a halo, as they do on the



Figure 4 *Mary as Image of Wisdom*

frames of two other paintings of the Madonna: the “Madonna van der Paele” and the “Dresden Madonna”. These texts identify the Virgin with heavenly light, and deepen and confirm his depiction of her as the illumination of divine wisdom – the “mirror of God”, not a mere “second Eve”, humbly redressing the sins of the

first. What is exhilarating about van Eyck is that he begins with the Christian story and then opens it out, bringing to it his own intelligence and compassion, and subtly bypassing, indeed implicitly transforming, the customary opposition between “spirit” and “nature” prescribed by the Church. His art is a unique synthesis of his love of the natural world and a personal religious symbolism which permeated all aspects of his life.

He was the first Flemish painter to sign his paintings in Latin or Flemish, adding his own motto in Greek lettering – ALS IXH XAN – As I Can. (1)



It is suggestive that a man of such extraordinary precision has chosen the Greek *Chi* (X) to replace the Flemish K in the word “IXH”, since at the time the *Chi* would call up the *Chi Rho* as the symbol for Christ, such that the “I” (Ego) of *IXH* has at its center the “Non-I”, the dedication of the painter to the impersonal source beyond and within him – “Not I but the Christ who lives in me”, as St. Paul phrases it. (2)

Making a film on The Mystic Lamb

This film – *The Mystic Lamb* – began life as part of an earlier film, *The Mystery of Jan van Eyck*, which itself came about as an improbable moment of chance and a reckless disregard of practicalities, not least of them, that I didn’t

know how to make a film at all.

I had long known van Eyck's Adam and Eve from *The Mystic Lamb*, in the course of research on the myth of the goddess, because, quite simply, there was nothing like it, however hard you looked for it.

There was no other depiction of Adam and Eve without either guilt at their sin or shame at their nakedness or remorse for the fallibility of their own natures, or else displays of their propensity to sin, notably in the realm of "lust" when the distinction between Eve and the snake sadly tended to dissolve. In the official doctrines of the Christian Church (when taken literally) Adam and Eve (and especially Eve) had brought death upon themselves, and



Figure 6 Adam and Eve

therefore upon all human beings who came from them, and the earth was cursed in consequence. Van Eyck uniquely, in heart-warming contrast, had drawn the figures of Adam and Eve with unsurpassable tragic dignity, as human beings like ourselves, asked to contemplate their own mortality from the depths of their hu-

manity. The closest in sensibility was Masaccio's moving portrayal of Adam and



Not for Reproduction
Figure 7 Masaccio, Adam and Eve, Santa Maria del Carmine, Brancacci Chapel. Florence. c. 1425.

Eve being cast out of paradise, painted in c.1425, seven years before van Eyck completed his painting, and which it is possible he had studied. But Masaccio sees his Adam and Eve – also naked – bowed over in grief, in their first awareness of irreparable loss – not later, as it were, standing upright, profoundly meditating on the human condition.

So that was probably why, one day in 2005, I was looking at a silver-point portrait of Cardinal Albergati, sketched in 1435 by Jan van Eyck, (when the Cardinal came to Bruges to try to negotiate an end to the Hundred Years War). Most unusually, the portrait had writing beside it, which appeared to be jotted notes in Flemish by the painter himself as to the colors it needed – “an ochre-toned grey for the hair, *dark yellow* for the eyeballs

around the pupils *blueish* at their edges, *yellowish* for the white of the eyes”. On an impulse I phoned the Kupferstichkabinett in Dresden, where the painting was

housed, to check the translation, which the curator kindly gave me, adding casually, “We’re putting on an exhibition of Jan van Eyck’s Art in 6 months and we need a film on van Eyck. I don’t suppose you know anyone who could make one, do you?”

That conversation – to cut a challenging six months short – ended in a desperate non-stop dash by car from



Figure 8 Portrait of Cardinal Albergati

England to Dresden through night and day to deliver a film exploring van Eyck’s paintings, called *The Mystery of Jan van Eyck*, arriving just one hour before the opening ceremony, when all the chairs were already laid out in rows in an open cobblestone courtyard, and many people were already sitting on them. (The film was subsequently translated into German and ran for 3 months in a room of its own).

But in the beginning neither I, nor a small computer company I knew, who later took the name of Kingfisher Art Productions, had ever made a film before, but we loved the work of Jan van Eyck and were incapable of not having a go at it (the double negative is closer to the actual experience!). One person in particular was very well-versed in three Adobe computer programs – Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Premiere and Adobe After-Effects – and we had experimented with ani-

mating a few frames on myths of the moon from color pictures I had to cut out of a book on the moon. A film of a painting in those early days meant to me a camera, a tripod, a film crew, sound engineer, recording studio, a presenter, and I don't know what else. But it was soon clear that the most beautiful and true pictures of the paintings – those with the highest resolution – had already been taken by the museums or cathedrals to which they belonged, and we did not have either the expertise or the equipment to improve on what was already there.

So the idea was to purchase the highest quality photographs and to try to bring them to life on the computer in such a way as to recreate the experience of being present with a painting, in the way we all are when we are deeply immersed in it – standing before it, meditating on it, reaching for a perspective, being overwhelmed, letting it speak to us, capture and enthrall us – just as though it were a baffling dream or a poem, which of course it is. The aim was somehow to be the eyes of that person in relation to, as it were, the “Eye of the Painting”, and find a right relationship between them. Where does the painter want us to go first, and why? How does he draw us in, let us go, move us on, and is he moving us to here, or there, or where? These questions are implicitly asking, what is the *inherent* movement of the painting, the particular image which sends us to the next image – “those images that yet / Fresh images beget”, as Yeats says in his poem *Byzantium*. (3)

The continual challenge of the script, which is to become a “voice over” the images (already, strictly, a violation of the images), is of course to point but not direct, to be suggestive not intrusive, and so to be as discreet and invisible as possible with the primary aim of letting van Eyck speak for himself. But the trouble is that the point of view of this “narrator” cannot help but be implicitly everywhere:

not just in the script but also in the direction of the camera, the dwelling on one image rather than another, the pace at which it moves – in other words everything. Without an actual presenter in front of the painting, as we are more used to in television, it is even more important to “leave room” for other ways of feeling into the painting, other ways of imagining it. This is one of Coleridge’s metaphors for the imagination, to “leave room”, in the sense that the chrysalis leaves room for the antennae to come. (4) Without this there is always a danger of turning image into concept, symbol into allegory and drama into meaning, and of not trusting that the psyche of a viewer will tune in where it wants to go. The discipline is then to point to what can be seen or inferred or implied without going too far away – staying with the image, or sticking to the image, as James Hillman would say (5) – and simply allow all the symbols, especially the symbol of the Lamb of God, to act upon us. For “whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory”, in Yeats’s lovely phrase (6), and so is accessible to all of us.

In a way it was like trying to mime the movements of the mind, with the great advantage that the technology allows us to follow them and even add to them – going very close up when we want to (when the painting calls us) and returning to the whole when we’ve lost our place (“where does that fit in?”), and going back over it again and again until an ease, or better, a peace descends upon it, or enough peace to move on, this time at least. As with any art we are asking: can we find the inner logic to it, the way it moves our consciousness?

But, rather as in a meditation or in reading a poem, we have first to get ourselves out of the way. This is Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief for the moment”, and Keats’s “Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in

uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". (7) And yet, being practical, the rational mind has reasonably to know where it is before it can let go and relax – ("who's he, what's going on, what's the general idea?) So we came to: let's set the scene, give the names of anyone who has one, translate the writing from Latin or Flemish, and hazard a holding framework which doesn't predetermine anything much. Then perhaps we can sink down into the deeper meaning and let it act upon us so we can see through the drama to its essence: in other words, to try to see with the archetypal eye.

In making decisions (about the script, the voice-over, the choice of what to focus on, the pace of the moving image, the need for rest or a return to the whole for orientation, the longing to see more closely, the volume of the music) you have to follow how you feel in each particular moment, trust an intuition enough to try it out even if it's wrong, notice when your attention lapses – (why did you want coffee now, tidy the desk, etc.). As in any reflection on art or dream work or analysis while we are engaged in it, two levels of the mind distinguish themselves – becoming aware when changes happen inside us and asking why while still carrying on changing: aware, for instance – but only afterwards - that you forgot where you were, became rapt in the beauty of the image, lost the sense of time. Or, conversely, start to hurry, go into the passive voice (get things done) lose the focus, drift off, sigh, feel it's impossible, know it doesn't feel right but not know why – all these promptings from unconscious to conscious tell you whether you have found and honored the inner life of the painting, or lost it and are spoiling it – but not always how or why. Then you have to go back over it – and such a small "it" as a series of tiny movements in a single phrase of thought, like, say, the speed at which one image merges into another (rather like the breath at the end

of a line of a poem). Was the move too fast, too slow, was the music intrusive, are you hanging onto the way you did it the last time, why does your concentration always break at this point, how many times does it have to break before you realize it doesn't work? It doesn't matter why. It doesn't work, that's all.

All that was my job (script, design and voice-over). But to give some idea of the process we have to go back to the beginning, to the initial shock of encountering the technology through which these ideas had to become real. This was the job of the Computer Genius (Job Description: "Technology"), and our separate talents had quickly to find a way to relate to each other before we both gave up in friendly despair! We soon realized that we were dealing with two different kinds of language – each, to begin with (and sometimes to end with), utterly incomprehensible to the other. Of the, let's say (from my point of view), "No, no, don't zoom in on the Virgin Mary like an express train, you'll knock her over backwards" vs Computer Genius: "that's not fast / the programme can't do that / if I go any slower I won't be moving at all," etc. It seemed to me sometimes that computers tend to speed our minds up beyond what is necessary for understanding, and I heard with delight of something called "Slow Art", which gave us back time to *receive* from Art, always a slower process.

Every move on the computer which you decide is wrong, which is initially almost all of them (as though you were writing something which could be blithely corrected at one delete), has to be patiently re-rendered by the program Adobe After-Effects, which takes at least half an hour, or more, by which time the original feeling – fleeting enough to begin with – has entirely gone and you wonder what was wrong with it in the first place. (So does the Computer Genius). Until you see it again. Some "shots" had to be done a hundred times, and then syn-

chronized with the music, which was added last, though this often meant that it changed the tone and made a further adjustment necessary.

The music comes from the time van Eyck lived – Gilles Binchois and Guillaume Dufay – composers whom van Eyck would have known personally: the first generation of “polyphonic” composers of the Netherlandish School. Binchois, like van Eyck, worked at the Court of Philip the Good in Bruges, and some degree of cross-fertilization is likely. There is an interesting parallel between the then-new freedom of simultaneous lines of independent melody in music – harmonies of point against point, note against note – and Jan’s own expressively free and contrapuntal play with reflections of perspective and light.

In addition to all the technical complications, when we began the six month race to the film’s deadline, we lived and worked in different countries. But there was FTP – File Transfer Protocol – which meant that a file too large to be sent by email could be transferred across the world – what we now know as a Dropbox. So for a while each “take” came across the airwaves and back again, and back and back again... And then there is all the technological work to make the images clear and to trace out the lettering so it is legible – using Adobe Photoshop – long before you get to the stage of relating the voice-over to the images and both to the drama of movement and music and all of that to the living experience of the painting.

Technological Details of the Project

The painting of the *Mystic Lamb* is made up of 24 panels on oak wood, each one a meditation on the main theme.

To obtain the highest quality images each one of 24 panels has to be individually photographed.

Each individual triptych panel was traditionally photographed as a “platen”, i.e. a technical camera slide, the preferred type of camera for art reproduction. The slides or transparencies are almost “Letter” or “A4” sizes.

These were then scanned (translated) into digital files of the highest possible resolution, in order to capture as much information as technically possible into a graphic format which computers can handle.

The individual panels were then “stitched” together with help of a graphic computer program, called Adobe Photoshop, into one single digital graphic image.

This, now massive, image was then animated in a “virtual studio” computer program Adobe After Effects (Adobe Premiere was first used, but it didn’t have the range of After Effects). “After Effects” uses the motions of a “virtual camera” to mimic the “eye” of the beholder.

Voice—overs were separately recorded and assembled in the virtual studio which was After Effects. The music tracks were added last.

The film was then rendered (printed) into the desired format. This means that, for every second of the film, the computer generates 30 images, and adds a tiny bit of voice and music. “We”, as beholders of the film, cannot notice the shift from one individual image to the next one, and so see it as one smooth motion.

The Mystic Lamb

The Mystic Lamb, also called *The Adoration of the Lamb*, is unanimously

agreed to be Jan van Eyck's masterpiece. It was one of many paintings in the first van Eyck film, but anyone who has ever seen this altarpiece in St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, would understand why it needed an hour's film all to itself. It was begun by his elder brother Hubert and, after Hubert's death in 1426, completed by Jan in 1432. There is a dedication inscribed along the four lower frames of the painting, which honors both brothers and the donors, probably written – in Latin quatrains – by Jan himself:

“The painter Hubert van Eyck, greater than whom no one could be found, began this work. Jan, his brother, second in art, completed the heavy task at the wish of Judocus Vijd, who by this verse places under your protection what was completed on the sixth of May 1432.”



Figure 9 *The Annunciation Scene. Middle register, closed wings.*

No other work by Hubert has survived, but Jan has over 17 paintings to be found in Belgium, France, Germany, Rumania, and England, and in America in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

When the wings of the Altarpiece are closed, the drama focuses on the An-

nunciation of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. This, the middle register of the closed wings, is the clip [that is shown on YouTube](#).

The scene has been set, so to speak, with the few details of authorship, place and provenance, as a shortened version of the paragraph above. Moving in with the “virtual camera” to the Angel Gabriel and reaching him as he speaks, is the first movement of the film, which then follows his words across the spare quiet room towards Mary, whose reply is written in reverse and upside down, so only she and the Holy Spirit, hovering above her head in the form of a dove, may read it. Then the “camera” moves closely in to Mary, rapt in her own vision...

(At this point it is better to see the film clip than read on).

What can't be shown in a film that tries to follow the movement of the painting are the asides which might be interesting in themselves but would disrupt the flow of energy and take us out of the intense participation of the symbolic mind. For instance, Xrays of the Altarpiece show that, in the Annunciation scene, Angel and Virgin were first designed by Hubert, more traditionally, to stand in separate niches like icons. Hubert's more formal, static drawings were painted over by Jan, here as elsewhere, giving us an insight into his more dramatic imagination. Jan removed the niches, added a beamed ceiling, and then placed angel and virgin at opposite sides of an empty room, dressing them in almost identical flowing robes, so creating a dynamic tension between them which draws us into their relationship, wondering what it is...

Similarly, a decision has to be taken to omit discussions of technique in the film itself, so as not to pitch us back into the rational mind (thinking *about* it, and so risking losing the personal relationship with the art). But in this discussion we can pause and consider the way van Eyck creates his perspectives and meanings:

through juxtaposition, echoes, allusions, reflections of light through windows, re-



Figure 10 *Mary's washing basin*

lections in the water in Mary's washing basin, illusory sunbeams as in the candle on the wall, light coming from no visible source at all. For Jan, as for many of his contemporaries, physical light was the reflection of divine light, so light and its myriad and mutually reflecting reflections were as eloquent as thoughts and after-thoughts. For instance, most unusually, in three places in *The Mystic Lamb*, he has painted reflections of the actual natural sunlight coming through the southern windows of the chapel located to the right of the Altarpiece. The line of sunbeams, alighting on the

picture, lights up the clasps of the mantle of Christ, the red ruby of John the Baptist, and the blue sapphire of a singing angel. So the windows of the chapel can themselves be seen in the painting, uniting the inner and outer worlds so deftly

that a distinction can hardly be drawn between them. This harmonizing of the sources of light must have been important enough to be added after the altarpiece was installed.

Many such touches throughout his work show us how concerned the painter was to reveal the physical world as essentially at one with the divine world, most vividly disclosed in its beauty. His reverence for the



Figure 11 Jewelled clasp on Christ's mantle showing the reflections of natural sunlight coming from the upper right window of the chapel where the altarpiece was housed.

beauty of nature and his tactile feeling for the intricate fabric of earthly life come together – in flowers, jewels, brocades, carpets, tiles, the folds of a robe, the gleam of silver armor, the sheen of marble, shadows in a face – all the minute particulars of character and circumstance, rendered in an overwhelming



Figure 12 Flowers in an earthly paradise

brilliance of color and texture. One devoted monk has counted 43 different kinds of flowers in *The Mystic Lamb*, all flowering together in the imaginative landscape of an earthly paradise. (7) And

these are flowers blooming in their own right, not allegories of right conduct or symbols of a superior spiritual reality. The whole of the natural world was for him the divine world made manifest. Reality and symbol were not, then, two separate ways of looking at life but, luminously, one and the same.

Returning to *The Lamb*, it is as though everything around the figures belongs to them: the “pregnant” vases beside Mary, the pure washing basin with its crisp clean towel, and, most obviously, the subtle inscriptions on pillars and books – the “power of God”, the “vision of God,” written in the open book which Mary has just laid aside. “What is within surrounds us”, Rilke says. (8)

Following this idea, the Virgin, enclosed in this moment in the inner world of her state of mind, has no window behind her. In significant contrast, on the



Figure 13 *Through the Window*

side of the angel the window opens onto the street, showing a city bustling with everyday life, easily recognizable as the city of Bruges or Brugge, where van Eyck lived for the last two years of his work on the triptych. At a cursory glance it could seem charmingly decorative, a welcome change from Nazareth or a scene from nature, yet its astonishing realism has distinctly symbolic designs on us.

As a former miniaturist, van Eyck conjures up the actual city of 1432, with its gate, surrounding walls

and high gabled houses, filling it with men and women on an ordinary day, walking, talking, passing each other in the street, chatting from their windows. There are birds on the rooftops and birds fly in formation overhead. (It is impossible to see this detail with the naked eye, so how on earth could he actually paint it?).

So minute yet so distinctive, this street scene strikes us as the only external movement taking place in the temporal present of the painting. Yet the subtle placing of the window close to the Angel invites us to include “real life” in our perception of what is sacred and new. The effect of this is to transform the frame of reference of the Annunciation scene, so that it can extend potentially to anyone, in any place, in any time – a democracy of Annunciations or, as we might say, an archetypal inclusion – including, perhaps, even a painter gazing out of his window at the city below.

In other words, the vibrant presence of the city allows van Eyck to render



Figure 14 *Impregnation of vision*

the specific character of the Christian story of annunciation *transparent* to the archetype of the creative imagination, here announcing itself, in the rapt figure of Mary, to a state of mind prepared to receive it. This is “*virgin*”, in its original symbolic meaning: closed to all that is not sacred. It is an “*impregnation*” of vision, in which Mary – as an

image now of the sacred dimension within all of us – has her eyes opened and so

is compelled into a new vision of what is possible, rendered here in the imagery of conception and birth. The essence of annunciation – whether from an angel, a muse, a dream, an intuition, an urgency from the Self, or just a simple but intolerable anomaly – is that this is how we seem to move to a new level or depth of ourselves: shocked out of our habitual selves into imagining a new way to be. “To you the compelling image...,” Rilke writes to Holderlein, “when you uttered it, a line snapped shut like fate...” (9)

Let us follow, without further asides, how van Eyck expands this conception, taking us into a timeless “now” which brings past and future together in one

endless moment of transformation.

Above Angel and Virgin, the upper panels show figures from the Old Testament and pagan antiquity, who foretold the birth of a savior: Prophets Zacharias and Micah on the outside, the Cumaean and Erythraean Sibyls in the middle.



Figure 15 *The Cumaean and Erythraean Sibyls.*

Erythraean Sibyls in the middle.

All four figures are drawn in direct relationship to the Virgin – the writing

on the bandarolles anticipates and welcomes her – generously weaving the wisdom of earlier ages and faiths into the sacred story, gathering the past into the eternal present.



Figure 16 *John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*

In the center of the lower register, painted in grisaille as statues, are John

the Baptist on the left, the one who came before, pointing to the lamb he is holding, and John the Evangelist on the right, the author of the Book of *Revelation*, one of the inspirations of the painting, the one who came after. Standing on marble plinths, like sculptures gleaming in the dark, these figures are given substance and permanence, becoming icons of the sacred story, essential stages in our understanding.



Figure 17 *Joos Vyd and Elizabeth Borluut.*

Only the living donors – Joos Vyd on the left and his wife Elizabeth Bor-

luut on the right - are painted in glowing red colors as living persons, as though their prayers summon into being the original mystery. These citizens of Ghent, who commissioned the altarpiece and were well-known for participating in the life of their city, are painted as portraits in their own right, as “real” as the city behind the angel through the window above them. Yet they are not simply witnesses for their own time and their own foundation. Van Eyck has taken their individual piety and made it symbolic of a universal hymn to the sacred. Kneeling beside the saints, in almost identical sandstone niches, the donors become part of the story of the painting. All four niches are framed by the same graceful sculptural forms, slender columns and trefoil arches. But while the statues, in their subdued marble hues, belong to the mystery of the original story, the living donors, in such contrasting blaze of color, call the sacred drama into the present through their act of devotion, closing their hands in prayer – *imagining* incarnation.

When the wings open, what was conceived within will be disclosed: the birth of the new.

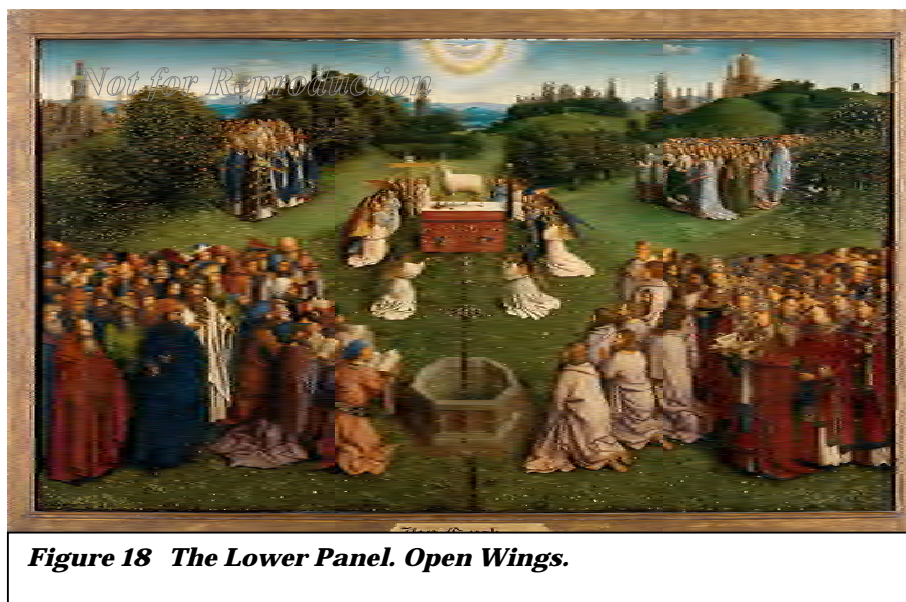


Figure 18 *The Lower Panel. Open Wings.*

In the lower panel, in the midst of a flowering meadow, the Lamb of God stands on an altar, facing us directly, his blood streaming into a chalice. “*Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world*”, the inscription on the altar says, and below: “*Jesus the Way, the Truth and the Life*”. Kneeling angels surround him, holding instruments of his passion.



Figure 19 The Mystic Lamb

Below the altar is the fountain of the waters of life, its healing waters flowing down to the frame and so out to the ends of the earth. On the basin's rim are inscribed fragments from the Book of Revelation: “*Here is the source of the Waters of Life, springing forth from the throne of God and of the Lamb*”.

A “*great multitude of people, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues*” (10), converge on the Lamb. In the left foreground are patriarchs and prophets from the Old Testament and pagan antiquity, who believed a saviour would come. Virgil, the Roman poet who guided Dante through Hell and Purgatory in his *Divine Comedy*, stands robed in white

and crowned with laurel, holding a bough in leaf (the golden bough of the *Aeneid*?). Isaiah, in a dark blue gown and a red turban, stands next to him, he who prophesied “*There shall come forth a rod out of Jesse*”. The patriarchs kneel in the front, raising their Bibles, as though in offering to the Lamb.

In the right foreground, the twelve apostles in simple beige cloaks, bare-headed and bare-footed, kneel in devotion beside the fountain. St. Peter, closest to the altar, gazes upwards, opening his hands in wonder. The older St. Paul and the younger apostle, John, kneel next to him. Behind the apostles, in almost wry contrast, stands the polished hierarchy of the Church, in sumptuously jeweled tiaras and rich red robes. In



Figure 20 Pope Gregory

the front row, the three Popes who were rivals at the end of the western schism, stand together. On the outside, in profile, Martin V; in the middle, the anti-Pope Alexander of Pisa; and on the inside Gregory XII, who withdrew in Martin's favor, ending the schism. Here, in the presence of the Lamb, Pope and Anti-Pope read from the same book in peaceful reconciliation.



Figure 21 St. Stephen and St. Livinus

On the outside of the second

row is St. Stephen in his tonsure, carrying in his lap the stones which killed him. Behind his left shoulder are the pincers and tongue held by St. Livinus, Patron Saint of Ghent, who had his tongue pulled out in Flanders. These figures are the icons of the Church, models of virtue, who gave their lives for their faith.

In the right distance come the blessed women saints, with wreaths of flowers upon their heads, holding the palm fronds of martyrs, victorious over death. In the front row, St. Dorothy has brought her basket of roses, and next to her is Catherine of Alexandria, robed as a princess. St Barbara offers up a model of the tower in which she was imprisoned, and St Agnes cradles a lamb in the folds of her mauve gown. These saints, their heads bowed like nodding flowers, are testament to a state of mind, symbolized by the white lily of purity in full bloom beside them.



Figure 22 *The Lily beside the Blessed Women Saints.*

In the left distance are the Confessors of the Church, holding palms of victory—Popes in tiaras, Cardinals in mitres, Abbots, and Monks, all robed in blue.

Behind them rise the towers and church spires of a city, which has become the New Jerusalem of Revelation. The grace of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovers above them all, radiating divine light like sunlight.

This paradisaical landscape extends into the wings, where four more groups are coming to worship the Lamb—their names written on the frames beneath them. Those on the left serve Christ in the world, riding their horses, their castles rising behind them in the distance. Those on the right have renounced the world for their faith—hermits and pilgrims, treading the stony ground with bare feet.



Figure 23 *The Left Wing: The Just Judges and the Soldiers of Christ*

On the far left are the just judges or righteous rulers, and next to them the soldiers of Christ, reining in their horses as they sense the Lamb. Clothed in



Figure 24 *Detail of St. George on his horse*

ceremonial armor and crowned with laurel, they evoke the atmosphere and ideals of the Crusades, which took place in the 14th century, a hundred years before. The middle knight on a white horse, bearing

the banner and shield of St. George – a red cross on a silver field – may be St. George himself. The man with a warrior's crown and a grey beard, may be the Emperor Charlemagne who ruled Europe at the beginning of the 9th century. The figure at the back in a large blue hat may be Philip the Good, having a word with his rival Charles VII, the crowned King of France. The chestnut horse in the front, his bridle decorated in red, bends his head almost to the ground, where horses' hooves have been trampled the heavy clay soil.



Figure 25 *The Right Wing. The Holy Pilgrims and the Holy Hermits.*

On the far right are the holy pilgrims, led by a towering St. Christopher in a scarlet covering. In legend he was a giant who carried the baby Jesus to safety across a river, and so became patron saint of travelers and pilgrims. Behind St.

Christopher is a pilgrim in brown who wears badges from the three great pilgrimages: A scallop shell on his hat from Compostella, a medallion next to it from Jerusalem, and a patch of fabric, pinned to his breast with the face of Christ upon it, from Rome.

The holy hermits, with tough weather-beaten faces, have come to rest in front of a rock. The hermit with a long grey beard, leaning on a stick and holding

an amber rosary, wears a faded tau cross on his dark cloak, an emblem worn by St. Anthony of Egypt in the fourth century.



Figure 26 *Detail of St. Anthony and fellow hermit*

Mary Magdalene stands at the back, holding her jar of oil – the oil with which she anointed the feet of Christ. Mary of Egypt, an Anchoress from the fifth century, stands next to her. The landscape has changed for the pilgrims and hermits. No longer trees and flowers from the north, but warm Mediterranean groves of cypresses and palms, pines, orange trees and olives – the land where the pilgrim-

ages began, which end now in the presence of the Lamb.

In this magnificent pageant, Hubert and Jan van Eyck are telling the story of Christendom for the people of their time, many of whom could not read. They would have understood that, though they can look into the face of the Lamb, not one of the figures inside the picture looks towards the Lamb, who is elevated on a grassy mound slightly above them all. Yet all of them see the Lamb in their hearts as they worship him. Ultimately, then, the worshippers are shown as immersed in an inner vision, whose awe and wonder are given form in the Christian symbols of their faith.

Thus the symbolism tells a timeless story, offering a vision of a world transformed. People from different ages and faiths, people who opposed each other in life, now come together in peace, united in adoration of the Lamb. In this grassy summer meadow, teeming with flowering shrubs, fruits and flowers, seemingly without end, plants from all over the world come into bloom together in a celebration of creation as divine. The beauty of the whole scene – its luminous play of balance and harmony – becomes a symbol of heaven on earth, or rather perhaps, earth as paradise.

The upper panel expresses this vision through the relationship of human and divine. Christ sits enthroned in the center, at one with God, raising his hand in blessing as “King of Kings” and “Lord of Lords” – the words embroidered on the hem of his robe. His triple crown glistens with rubies and sapphires – the tiara which proclaims him as father of his church, high priest to his people. A halo of light streams from his head.

In the arch behind him is inscribed:

“This is God, the most powerful, because of his divine majesty.

The most high, the best, because of his sweet goodness.

The most liberal provider, because of his boundless generosity.”



**Figure 27 Christ Enthroned.
Upper Register Open Wings.**

Christ alone faces us, engaging us directly, with his infinitely loving Byzantine gaze. The crystal scepter in his left hand, overflowing in a fountain of black and white pearls, is transparent to everlasting light – suggesting a kingdom both invisible and everywhere present – perhaps the “water of life, clear as crystal” in *Revelation*?

Pelicans and vines surround him – patterns of gold woven into the blue brocade cloth. The pelican, feeding her chicks with blood from her breast, evokes Christ’s sacrifice of himself for humanity. The name – Jesus Christus – is written in red on the bandarolles above them. Grapes hanging from the vine recall the wine of the Last Supper – the blood to be shed in sacrifice. The word *Sabaoth* – “Lord of Hosts” – is threaded into his stole – one of the titles for God in the Old Testament is threaded

stole. *“Rex Regum et Dominus Dominum”* – *“King of Kings, and Lord of Lords,”* words from *Revelation* – are picked out in pearls on the hem of his robe – The golden crown beneath his feet embodies his union of earthly and heavenly kingdoms. On the step below the throne is written:



Figure 28 Pelican feeding her chicks

“Life without death on his head – Youth without age on his face – Joy without sorrow on his right – Security without fear on his left.”

So he who was man in his earthly sacrifice is here divine in his essential nature, beyond the dualisms of incarnate life.

On either side of Christ are the human figures through whom his divinity was manifested and recognized.

On his right, the Virgin Mary, crowned mother and bride, reads from her book as the “reflection of eternal light” – the text from the *Wisdom of Solomon* inscribed in the arch behind her:

“For she is more beautiful than the sun and beyond all the order of stars. Being compared to the light she is found before it. She is the reflection of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God.”

Her deep sky-blue robe, sparkling with rubies and pearls, portrays her as heaven’s queen. Her jeweled crown is woven with flowers – lilies, columbines, lily of the valley and roses

– flowers of the Beloved in the *Song of Songs*, and now flowers of Christian virtue – purity, humility, tranquility and love. The twelve stars surrounding her crown give her also the grandeur of “the woman clothed with the Sun” in *Revelation* – she who “has on her head a crown of twelve stars.” The beauty of the Virgin is the beauty of wisdom – She who conceives, nurtures and reveals the eternal in creation.



Figure 29 *The Virgin Mary. Upper Register. Open Wings.*



On the left of Christ, in perfect symmetry, is John the Baptist, still pointing to Christ, a green mantle with a jeweled border thrown over his rough camel-hair shirt.

In the arch behind him is inscribed: *“This is John the Baptist, greater than man, like unto the angels, the summation of the law, the propagator of the Gospels, the voice of the apostles, the silence of the prophets, the lamp of the world, the witness of the Lord.”* In the book upon his knee the word *“Consolamini”* is visible – “Comfort ye,” from the Book of *Isaiah*. The “voice crying in the wilderness” in *Isaiah* was interpreted in the Gospels as prophesying the coming of John the

Baptist, making him the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New. As a visionary, he bears witness to the divine in new form, seeing through the man Jesus to the Christ within.



Figure 31 *Angelic Singers and Angelic Musicians*

On either side of Mary and John, angelic musicians praise the Lord, singing in unison from a single score, accompanied by the organ, with the harp and viol waiting to play. The angels have no wings as though they belong naturally in life – a choir both angelic and human. “*Songs of supplication, songs of praise, songs of thanksgiving*” – is written below the singers. “*Praise him with winged instruments and organs*” – is written below the musicians. The organist, in a flowering brocade gown, plays upon an organ of the time, her fingers striking a chord. As in any choir, sopranos can be distinguished from altos, tenors and

basses by the expressions on their faces and the shape of their mouths. In the carved oak lectern below, Archangel Michael is slaying the seven-headed dragon of the apocalypse – as though forever enacting what happens when the angels

sing.

In the outer wings stand Adam and Eve, in all the poignancy of their naked humanity. Eve, pregnant with the human race, is holding the fruit of the Fall which brings death. The inscriptions point, in familiar doctrine, to the expulsion from Paradise: “*Adam casts us into death*” is written below Adam. “*Eve has afflicted us with death*” is written below Eve. Yet van Eyck has given Adam and Eve an inherent beauty and a tragic dignity unknown before his time. Adam and Eve stand freely in their narrow concave niches, becoming three-dimensional figures like ourselves. Adam’s right foot extends over the edge – as though he is stepping out of the dark depths of the past towards us – as though they are one of us. We are invited to identify with these, our archetypal parents, our hu-



Figure 32 Adam and Eve

man consciousness bearing, inevitably, the wound of its origin – the memory of a

lost paradise, a longing for reunion with the divine.



Figure 33 *Cain and Abel.*

Above them, sculptural figures of Cain and Abel enact the sins of jealousy and murder which call for redemption. Above Adam, Cain, clutching his sheaf of corn, glares savagely at Abel who is offering up his lamb. Above Eve, Cain, wielding the jawbone of an ass, is poised to strike Abel, who is forced backwards onto the ground, screaming. Cain's foot, as Adam's, continues over the edge – moving into everyday life – implicating us in the moral universe.

Adam and Eve appear to be contemplating the tragedy of their human condition, which is to be transformed... through Christ.

As the wings close, Adam and Eve are folded back into the figure of Christ as God, from whom, it is implied, they came.

As we return to the closed wings of the beginning, it would seem that the

revelation is similarly folded back into the hearts of the praying donors whose prayer, we might imagine, it originally was.

When the wings close, the Prayer ends.



Figure 34 *The Wings Closed.*

The Mystic Lamb draws as many thousands of people to see it today as it ever did, people coming from different religions or from none, even though it takes as its narrative one of the most familiar symbols of Christ – the “Lamb of

God.” This must be because it is translucent to the sacred or the eternal, or translucent to the archetype, as we might say, allowing us to see through temporal forms to their essential nature.

The turbulent history of the Altarpiece would seem to support the idea of it as a “sacred object”, something which lets us through to the realm of the sacred. (In the Eleusinian Mysteries *Hiera*, sacred objects, were ceremoniously shown to the participants as part of the process of transforming their vision of the relation between life and death). The Altarpiece has been stolen and bartered many times, by many invaders, the panels often taken apart to save them. It was hidden in a church tower when Protestants tried to burn it in 1566, seized as booty in the Napoleonic Wars, lifted by a local vicar and later found in a Berlin auction, concealed in a junkman’s wagon in World War I, and stolen by Goering in World War II, when it ended up in a converted salt mine in Austria, with many thousands of other artworks, due to be blown up – already hot wired with seven 1000 pound aircraft bombs – before the Allies arrived. Only the heroism of the salt miners who defused the bombs saved it. In the 19th century, it was officers of the Church who robbed the Altarpiece of its integrity: the panels of Adam and Eve were removed to cover up their genitals, and copies with serious fig leaves were hung in their place. In 1934, both the lower left inner panels of the Open Wings were stolen. The panel of the Soldiers of Christ was returned as proof of the theft, but the panel of the Just Judges is still missing. Ironically, it seems that the painting has been more vulnerable to predators not because of its material worth but because it is extraordinary art.

Yeats helps us to understand this: “All art is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ,” he says. (11) Wherever art begins – wherever it is variously

assumed to come from – it reaches us through the imagination which shapes it, giving it “a local habitation and a name.” (12) And imagination, for Yeats, “divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts.” (13) Which is to say, more prosaically, that art takes us beyond our ego’s preoccupations, and beyond reason which binds us to the senses, and even beyond the dualism of life in time. Art heals us of egocentricity and partiality by showing us a vision of a shared and universal humanity which reconciles our contraries and oppositions, even though we may not fully understand how or why.

Jung has given us a framework to understand the “Lamb of God” as a symbol of the Self. But however it is understood, this disclosure of resurgent life is a healing symbol of a unified vision, available in principle in all religious traditions and in all so-called secular life – available, that is, to everyone as a symbol within all of us, beyond all traditions, because it feels to be true, and yet it is a mystery ...

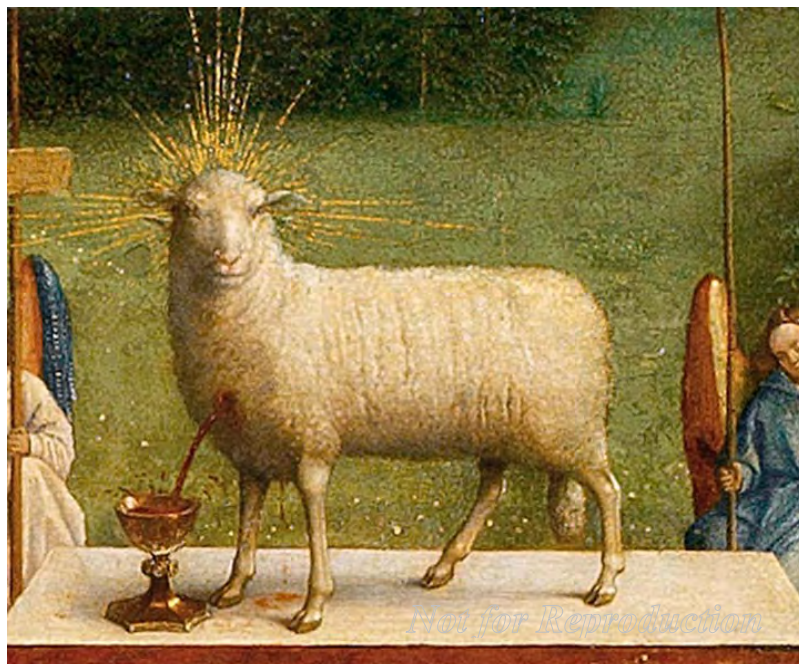


Figure 35 *Detail of the Mystic Lamb*

FOOTNOTES

1. Elisabeth Dhanens, *Hubert and Jan van Eyck*, Antwerp, Mercatorfonds, 1980, *passim*.
Peter Schmidt, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2005.
2. St Paul, *Galatians*, 2: 22.
3. W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1965, p. 281.
4. S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. George Watson, Everyman's Library, London, Dent, 1965, Ch. X11, p. 139. "They and they only can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar; these only who feel in their own spirits the same instinct which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucre for antennae yet to come."
5. James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology*, New York, Harper & Row, 1976, *passim*: "We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, requiring that images be translated into concepts." (P. 39).
6. W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1961, p. 50.
7. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIV, pp. 173-4.
Keats, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M.B. Forman, 4th edn., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 71.
8. Alfons Dierick, *Van Eyck, The Mystic Lamb*, Gent, Daphne, 1971.
9. R. M. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton, New York and

London, W.W. Norton & Company, p.65.

10. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans., Stephen Mitchell,

London, Picador Classic, 1987, p. 141.

11. *Book of Revelation*, 7: 9–17.

12. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 112.

13. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, 7–17.

14. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p.112–3.

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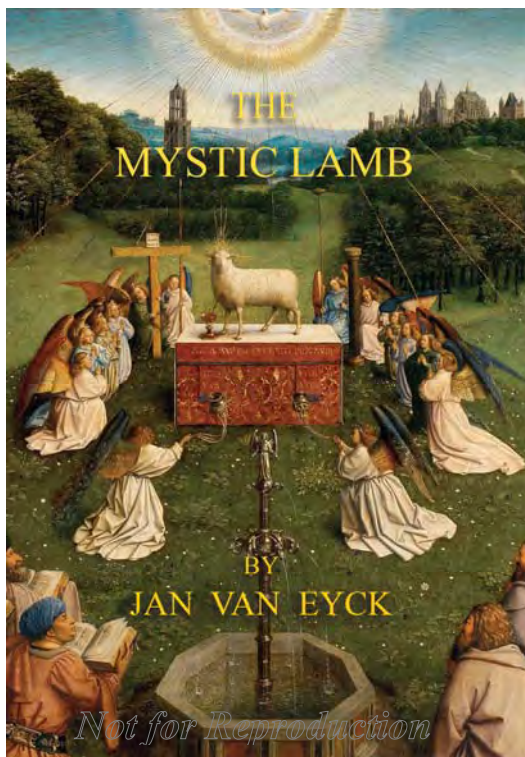


Figure 36 *The Mystic Lamb.*

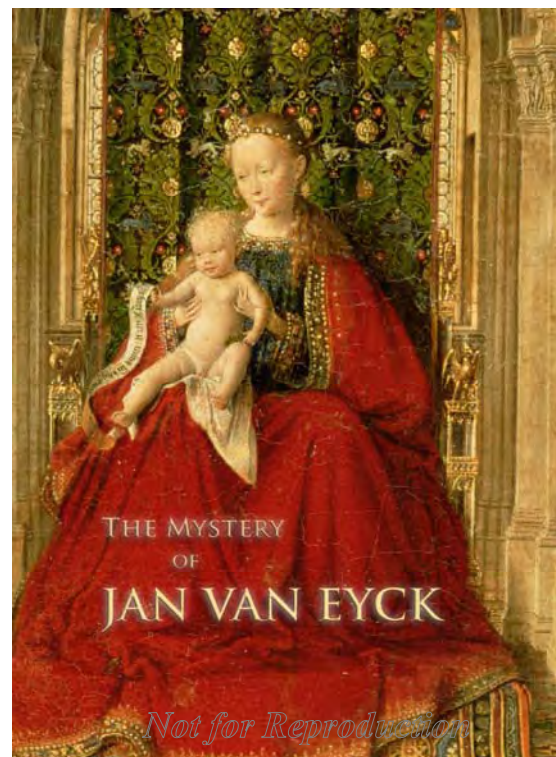


Figure 37 *The Mystery of Jan van Eyck*

http://www.filmsmediagroup.com/id/26859/The_Mystic_Lamb_The_Ghent_Altarpiece_in_Vivid_Detail.htm

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