

Ghent Altarpiece (Open Interior View)

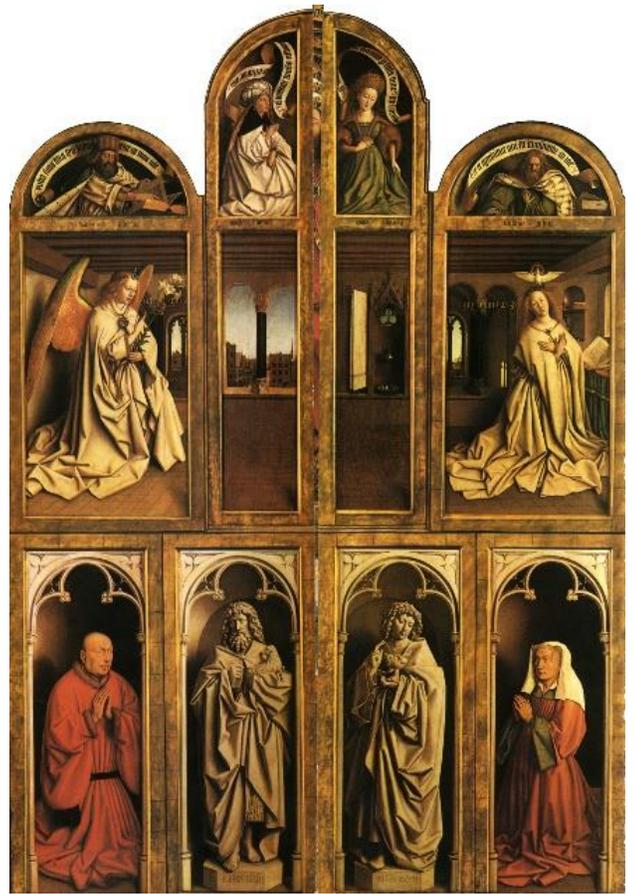
St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium



Constructed and painted in the years between 1420 and 1432 by two Dutch brothers, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, the Ghent Altarpiece -- also known as The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb -- has been called "the world's most coveted masterpiece" and "the most influential painting ever." This stunning work, which has more than 100 figures painted within it, has two side panels on hinges which act as doors, allowing the overall work to be seen in two different views: -- one with the panels closed, and one with the panels fully opened. The altarpiece remains closed a majority of the time, only being opened on special holidays. In the closed view, one's eyes feast on images of the prophets Micah and Zechariah looking down upon the fulfillment of their prophecies -- the moment of the Incarnation as the Angel Gabriel speaks to the Virgin Mary, as well as statue-like paintings of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist.

Also pictured on the closed view, to the bottom right and left, are the aging Ghent benefactors Jodocus Vijdt his wife Lysbette who commissioned the Eyck brothers to create the altarpiece.

When the altarpiece is opened, it extends fifteen feet across. In this open view, there are a total of 12 distinct panes. Top and central is a regal image of “The Almighty” enthroned, and with his hand raised in blessing. The hem of his royal robe is decorated with priceless pearls and the inscription “Rex Regum et Dominus Dominantium” (*King of King, and Lord of Lords*). The Virgin Mary, sits to his right reading a book, which honors her in her title, “Seat of Wisdom.” John the Baptist sits to his left, uttering “Ecce Agnus Dei” (*Behold the Lamb of God*) as he points to the one whom he humbly adores. This heavenly trio are flanked by panes showing beautiful singing and music-making angels in rapt praise of God. The two outermost top panes (not shown here) depict Adam and Eve immediately after they have eaten the forbidden fruit (still in Eve’s hand) – both downcast and newly uncomfortable in their nakedness. The bottom five panes show a panoramic, very detailed, lush heavenly landscape with a gathering of eight groupings of saints, sinners, clergy and soldiers, all approaching the altar to adore the Lamb of God. Landmarks of Jerusalem are visible in the background. The adorers to the left of the altar depict personalities from the Old Testament, and adorers to the right are those of New Testament times and forward. Upon the altar is a mortally wounded lamb, pouring forth its blood into a chalice. Latin words inscribed on the altar state: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” and “Jesus the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Fourteen angels surround the altar on their knees in adoration, some swinging incense censers, some holding the instruments of Christ’s passion. Directly above the lamb is a luminous dove, representing the Holy Spirit. At the bottom center, a “Fountain of Life” is painted to appear to drain its saving waters onto the actual altar above which this altarpiece is hung.



The groupings of figures are each a study in and of themselves, as are the altar, the lamb, and the angels, for they speak to the viewer not only of redemption history, but also of the most Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, where we hear the soul-saving words “Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”

Pope Benedict XVI once stated, “Art and the saints are the greatest apologetics for our faith.” The Ghent Altarpiece is a richly detailed piece of “apologetics,” reflecting much of what is written in Holy Scripture. Study this masterpiece on your own a bit more, and see how it might deepen your understanding and appreciation of the Mass. Learn who the various figures pictured are (St. Mary Magdalene, St. Christopher, Virgil and even an antipope are just a few!), learn why figures are dressed the way they are, why some read from books, why the various figures stand in their particular pose or use a specific hand gesture, see what the faces of the angels tell us, learn what the colors and lighting convey, learn what the various inscriptions mean and what biblical passages this piece draws upon. Every detail is fraught with meaning and can teach an interested viewer much. Let this beautiful masterpiece be “a great apologist for your faith” – take some time to absorb its riches!! (Also highly interesting is the history of the Ghent Altarpiece over the past six centuries, for it is one of the most stolen and recovered art masterpieces ever. Find out who stole it during World War II and how it ended up for a while in a salt mine!)

Watch a you tube video where two art historians discuss this masterpiece at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udgNvPpDb2I>.

Read a good general overview of this masterpiece online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghent_Altarpiece

Read about the restoration work being undertaken on this piece at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/oct/12/ghent-altarpiece-restoration>