

Collectors' Focus

Followers of Van Eyck

Emma Crichton-Miller

The painters of the 15th-century 'Northern Renaissance' have long been admired for their exquisitely refined, realistic and penetrating work. Rarity and interest from new territories have assured the continuing buoyancy of the market

The Flanders tourist board has declared 2020 the 'Year of Van Eyck'. The board's Flemish Masters programme has been moving back in time since 2018, from Rubens through Bruegel to arrive at the fountain-head of Flemish painting, Jan van Eyck (c. 1395–1441). Exhibitions in Ghent ('Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution' at the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, 1 February–30 April) and Bruges ('Jan van Eyck in Bruges', Groeningemuseum, 12 March–12 July) coincide with the completion of the second phase of the restoration of the masterpiece of early Netherlandish painting, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. The altarpiece was painted for St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, by Jan van Eyck in collaboration with his brother Hubert, who died in 1426, six years before the work was completed, in 1432.

Jan van Eyck was the greatest of a cluster of artists who transformed painting from late gothic iconic stiffness into dramatic liveliness – the others are Robert Campin (1378/79–1444), Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1399–1464), Dieric (or Dirk) Bouts (c. 1415–75) and Petrus Christus (c. 1410–75/76). A distinctive handling of oil paint on wood panel enabled these artists to render with exquisite refinement and realism the textures and brilliant colours of clothing, jewels, flesh, objects and interiors, and the changing effects of light and shadow, bringing psychological depth to their compositions and a version of spatial perspective. While their subject matter is largely religious – often diptychs or triptychs – these artists also pioneered secular portraiture. After 1384, under the dukes of Burgundy, the wealth and prestige of Flanders, with its cities Bruges and Ghent, grew greatly, encouraging the ambitions of a generation of artists. From the first their work astonished those who saw it, contributing to a revolution in painting today known as the Northern Renaissance. A slightly later generation – Gerard David (c. 1460–1523), Hans Memling (1430/40–94). Hugo van der



1. *The Virgin and Child with Saints Thomas, John the Baptist, Jerome and Louis*, c. 1472, attributed to Hugo van der Goes (c. 1440–82), oil on panel, 110.8 x 125.2cm. Christie's New York, \$9m

Goes (c. 1440–82) and Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450–1516) – extended the achievements of the earlier masters, with Antwerp becoming a significant centre. David's death marked the end of this period, after which Italian influences contributed to the evolution of a distinctly Flemish mannerist school.

Since their rediscovery in the 19th century – the acquisition of Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by the National Gallery in London in 1842 caused great excitement – works by these early Flemish artists and their followers have been highly prized. Vast

numbers, however, were destroyed during the iconoclastic rampages of the 16th century. As Andrew Fletcher, head of Old Master Paintings at Sotheby's Europe, puts it, 'This is the rarest of all the fields we deal with in the Old Master field and therefore the most sought after.' It is no accident, he remarks, that both Sotheby's and Christie's opened their December sales with early Netherlandish paintings. Sotheby's had for sale a tender gold-ground *Virgin and Child*, attributed to the School of Bruges, first half of the 16th century, which soared to £212,500 on an estimate

of £60,000–£80,000. Meanwhile, Christie's offered a similarly old-fashioned *Virgin and Child* by a follower of Van der Weyden, which achieved £81,250 (estimate £30,000–£50,000), alongside a majestic *Salvator Mundi*, inspired by Van Eyck's Ghent altarpiece, by Ambrosius Benson (c. 1495–1550), which fetched £431,250 (estimate £300,000–£500,000).

The difference in price is partly a reflection of the value of a name. With just 20 Van Eycks known to survive, and most works unsigned, 'this field is very challenging in terms of identifying artists,' says Maja Markovic, an Old Masters specialist at Christie's London: 'There are incredible bodies of work by incredible artists who have no name, or only a "not-name".' Where you do have a name, big prices can be achieved, such as the astonishing \$9m paid for the magnificent though damaged *Virgin and Child with Saints Thomas, John the Baptist, Jerome and Louis* attributed to Hugo van der Goes (Fig. 1): on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1998, this altarpiece, with rare preparatory underdrawing preserved, was sold in April 2017 in New York on an estimate of \$3m–\$5m. Markovic says, 'This is a connoisseurs' market, very cerebral, because although you can appreciate the paintings aesthetically, the more you understand the way the workshops operated, how the paintings were created and for whom, the thinking behind the iconography, the better you can understand their value. Collectors value the complexity of the composition and the quality of execution.' In the last five years, she has seen 'significant new interest from

the Far East, Russia and mainland China', in part because both Sotheby's and Christie's have toured masterpieces to these territories: 'People need to see the works in the flesh.'

Good prices have recently been achieved for *Double portrait of a husband and wife, half-length, seated at a table, playing tables* (1532), a bold genre painting by the slightly later Antwerp-based Jan Sanders van Hemessen (c. 1504–56), from the collection of Frank Stella – \$10m on an estimate of \$4m–£6m at Christie's New York in May 2019 – and an exceptionally rare secular *Portrait of a Lady, half-length, with a dog* by Adriaen Isenbrant (c. 1500–51), which fetched £611,250 in London in July, six times the top estimate (£70,000–£100,000).

Hemessen has also performed well at Sotheby's. An extraordinary *Portrait of Elisabeth, Court Fool of Anne of Hungary* attributed to him leapt from a top estimate of £600,000 to £2.2m at Sotheby's London in July 2017. Fletcher suggests that small-scale, simple compositions with starkly differentiated colours have particular appeal. He cites a *Virgin and Child* by Jan Gossaert (called Mabuse, c. 1478–1532), which sold for £4.6m in London in 2015 (estimate £4m–£6m), and a slightly larger portrait of Mary of Burgundy, by an unknown Netherlandish or South German artist, dated late 15th century, which sold for £2m (estimate £1m–£1.5m) at Sotheby's London in July 2018, underbid by a client from Asia. In New York on 29 January Sotheby's is offering a beautiful half-length *Madonna and Child, half-length, with extensive landscape seen through windows*,

from 1480–85, by the unnamed Master of the Bruges Legend of Saint Ursula (c. 1436–1504), estimate \$700,000–\$900,000 (Fig. 3).

Nick Mullany of London-based Mullany Haute Epoque Fine Art agrees that 'high on the desirable list are what have been described as "little jewels". Small, exquisite, finely detailed Virgin and Child and female saints such as Barbara, Catherine and Margaret seem to be more appealing than grander-scale crucifixion or descent from the cross scenes.' He has to offer a beautiful little triptych, *Landscape with Madonna and Child, Joseph and Mary Pregnant and the Rest on the Flight into Egypt* by Adriaen Isenbrant and workshop, from around 1520 (Fig. 2). Jan Muller, of Jan Muller Art and Antiques in Ghent, will exhibit a number of early Netherlandish paintings at Brafa 2020 in Brussels before launching in March the exhibition 'In the Wake of Van Eyck'. Pictures include a tondo depicting *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin and Child*, attributed to the early Antwerp mannerist Jan de Beer (c. 1475–1527/28), whose graceful, daring and much copied *Annunciation* (with flying angel; c. 1515) sold in New York in October 2019 for \$1.2m, four times its high estimate of \$300,000. Muller comments, 'In Antwerp, after 1500, there was a huge production of paintings, mostly by unnamed artists. Occasionally today you can find a signature which confirms the name, but even not-names like the Master of the Half-Lengths and the Master of the Antwerp Adoration are sought after.' He adds, 'I do not like to sell these primitives. I am too much in love with them myself!' **A**

3. *Madonna and Child*, 1480–85, Master of the Bruges Legend of Saint Ursula (c. 1436–1504), oil on panel, 41 x 27cm. Sotheby's New York, estimate \$700,000–\$900,000



2. *Landscape with Madonna and Child, Joseph and Mary Pregnant and the Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, c. 1520, Adriaen Isenbrant (c. 1485–1551) and workshop, oil on panel, 24 x 20cm. Mullany Haute Epoque Fine Art, price on application

