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*Fasciculus
Temporum*

Arte Tardo-medieval
do
Museu Nacional
Het Catharijneconvent
de Utreque

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LATE-MEDIAEVAL ART FROM THE NORTHERN NETHERLANDS

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The territory covered by the mediaeval Netherlands roughly corresponds to the present kingdoms of Belgium and The Netherlands. This area is divided up into two parts by the great Meuse and Rhine rivers, cutting through the land on their way to their mouths in the North Sea. The provinces north of these rivers are called the Northern Netherlands, those to the south are known as the Southern Netherlands. Today, most of the latter form part of Belgium, with the exception of the northern part of the former Duchy of Brabant and parts of Limburg, which belong to The Netherlands.

The mediaeval Netherlands formed a bizarre patchwork of counties, dukedoms and cities which fell under the authority of various secular rulers. All these were united under the ecclesiastical power of one episcopate: that of the Bishop of Utrecht, who was also secular ruler of the regions of Sticht and Oversticht. In the course of the 15th century, most of these different units of power were gradually joined together under the rule of the Dukes of Burgundy, a process which eventually reached its completion under the Hapsburgs, in the early 16th century. The rivers not only functioned as a division, but also as a connection with the centres upstream. In this respect, the busy river Rhine should be mentioned as a means of communication between the Northern Netherlands and the Rhineland regions. This enabled German influences to spread through the country. Indeed, there were no distinct boundaries between the Northern Netherlands and

the regions which now form the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, but a gradual transition. The Eastern Netherlands' regions, for example the county, later duchy, of Guelders, and Oversticht, governed by the bishop of Utrecht, even showed more cultural characteristics in common with the Rhineland, than with Holland or Utrecht. The county of Holland - with the connected provinces of Zeeland and Hainault - mainly maintained relations with Flanders by sea, which accounted for the noticeable Flemish influence. "Dutch" mediaeval art can be split up into three categories: that of the Southern Netherlands, that of the Northern Netherlands and that of the Eastern areas, which are usually defined by the term "Lower Rhine".

LOWER-RHINE ART

Lower-Rhine art flourished particularly in the cities and towns on the river Ujssel and the lower reaches of the Rhine, east of Utrecht. This was bourgeois art, typical of an urban culture in which trade and industry played an important role. Paintings from this area are remarkably rare. It would appear that painted panels were mostly commissioned in Cologne, or were imported from the western provinces. Sculpture, on the other hand, has been preserved in plenty. From the archives as well, we know of the productive workshops in the cities, which turned out high-quality sculpture.

In the late 14th and the early 15th century, the city of Nijmegen must have been a painters' centre. There lived the highly talented painters' family Maelwael (better known under the French name Malouel), a few members of which moved to France at the end of the 14th century, to offer their services to the splendour-loving aristocracy there. The Limbourg brothers, known for their work in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (Chantilly, Musée Condé, ms. 65), also came from Nijmegen. Unfortunately, nothing is left of the early artistic activities of either artists' family in their native country. Here, it is only in the archives that their names can still be retraced.

The UJssel region is also important because this was the cradle of an influential religious movement, which had a great impact on cultural life in the Netherlands, the Northern regions in particular. This was the *Devotio Moderna*, whose founder, Geert Grote (1340-1384), came from Deventer. He tried to reform religious life by placing the emphasis on intense personal experience of devotion. He rejected pomp and circumstance and advocated sincerity in the practice of religion. Grote encouraged his followers to read religious texts in order to enhance their spiritual life. By prayer and meditation, they had to envisage the earthly life of Christ with all its austerity and deprivation. Jesus' example had to be followed, the cross imposed from Above had to be borne patiently. This mentality is clearly reflected in the collection of tracts by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), one of the most prominent followers of Geert Grote. Later brought together into the *Imitatio Christi* (The Imitation of Christ), this compilation of tracts became one of the most influential written works

of Western Christianity. In his ideas, Geert Grote was in certain ways a forerunner of the later Reformation, even though he never showed any inclination towards breaking with Rome and in many respects remained anchored to the mediaeval church. As later Luther and like-minded reformers, Grote had a sharp, moralizing eye for abuse and lapse within the church but wanted to reform the system from the inside. He gathered his followers together in community houses, where, without taking any vows, they had to lead a collective life based on the Gospel.

There were communities for both women and men, whose members were called Sisters or Brethren of the Common Life. However, the absence of a monastic rule made them suspicious in the eyes of the church authorities, with the result that many of these houses were later transformed into real cloister communities. Moreover, other monasteries and convents were founded, which also put the ideas of the *Devotio Moderna* into practice. The movement had a beneficial, reformatory effect on other orders as well, for example, on that of the Franciscans. It also had an influence on the religious life of the ordinary believers.

All this had an impact on culture in general as well. Thus, in the Netherlands, an exceptionally large number of meditation and prayer books were written in the vernacular, books which were used by both laymen and clergymen. Geert Grote himself completed a translation from Latin of the most popular mediaeval prayer book, the book of hours (Cat. No. 4-5). Such prayer books were often illuminated with beautiful ornamental borders and various series of miniatures (see p. 167). These were usually the products of secular

workshops, but the religious communities also applied themselves to this kind of embellishment work. The copying of the books, however, generally took place within monasteries, convents (Cat. No. 3) and houses of the Common Life. Illustrations helped the believer to empathize with the life and suffering of Christ. Indeed, as the 1984 exhibition on Geert Grote at the Catharijneconvent made it very clear: "Seeing enhances reflection", what our eyes perceive will also direct the spirit. The homely atmosphere evoked by many of the representations (Cat. Nos. 17, 62) brought Christ close to the believer.

ART FROM HOLLAND AND UTRECHT

Virtually all surviving mediaeval art from these two provinces dates back to the second half of the 15th and the early part of the 16th century. An exception is the art of book illumination. In comparison with the other forms of art, relatively many of such works have been preserved. An important source of commissions was the court of Albrecht of Bavaria (d. 1404), Count of Holland, Zeeland and Hainault, which resided in The Hague. This was a true centre of culture, where poets, theologians, musicians and rhetoricians added lustre to court life. Many significant manuscripts were commissioned here, among which the exceptionally beautiful book of hours of Margaret of Cleves (d. 1411), the second wife of the Count of Holland. This magnificent artefact is now one of the highlights of the Museum Calouste Gulbenkian (ms. LA 148). A slightly less beautiful, but very similar manuscript is preserved at the Catharijneconvent, and for the duration of this exhibition (Cat. No. 2), it is being displayed in the vicinity of Margaret's book of hours. The

artists came to the court from various regions, but not from The Hague itself. Indeed, in those days The Hague could hardly be called a city, because it really only consisted of the Count's court, with a small settlement around it. Today, the oldest court buildings, among which the Binnenhof and Ridderzaal, constitute the core of the Dutch parliament. The miniaturists who illuminated the above-mentioned books of hours were no Hague artists either. Perhaps they came from Utrecht, which was the centre of book illumination in the Northern Netherlands until around 1470. The role of the Hague court was relatively short-lived. Its final hey-day came in the early 1420s, when Jan van Eyck joined the court of the then Count of Holland, John of Bavaria (d. 1424). Unfortunately, no work from his Hague period has been preserved. An echo of it can be found in the famous Turin-Milan Hours (Turin, Museo Civico), in which a few miniatures are presumably copies of the paintings made by Jan van Eyck in The Hague. Moreover, his compositions must have gained fame with illuminators in the Northern Netherlands via copies, because many miniatures, particularly those in manuscripts from Utrecht workshops, are clearly based on his creations.

In 1433, Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (d. 1467), managed to seize power from the Counts of Holland once and for all, and court life vanished from The Hague. In the years to come, the only art patrons left were the clergy, the urban bourgeoisie and members of the local aristocracy. Besides their castles in the country, the latter often also owned a residence within the city walls. In Utrecht, where the greater part of the ancient inner city still survives, we find these among the houses of the

bourgeoisie. Throughout the Middle Ages, this city was a centre of religious culture as well. It was the only episcopal city in the Northern Netherlands, and therefore a meeting place of high, often very wealthy, clergymen. Some of these were canons, and as such, members of one of the five Chapters, while others, as abbots or priors, were in charge of one of the many abbeys and monasteries. These eminent lords often displayed true Maecenas-behaviour, and they commissioned many works of art. The Chapter of the Dom was exceptionally rich, and, in the 15th century, it spent great amounts of money on the completion of the cathedral. This activity drew many artists, in particular stone-carvers and sculptors. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Dom city became a centre of sculpture. Whereas, for example, in other cities, memorial tablets would consist of engraved copper plates or painted panels, in Utrecht we find many epitaphs carved in stone. Chimney friezes, too, were sometimes decorated with reliefs representing, for instance, the Virgin or other saints. Moreover, the art of wood sculpturing flourished as well. There was a rich production of free-standing statues and altar groups. Practically all these sculptors have remained anonymous. Very rarely, we can link a name with surviving wooden sculpture. Thus, in 1475, Adriaen van Wesel, domiciled in Utrecht, received the honourable commission to make an altar for the Brotherhood of Our Lady in 's Hertogenbosch. Fortunately, part of this altar has been preserved. Most of the surviving pieces of this altar retable can be found at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, but the Catharijneconvent as well is lucky enough to possess a small group, representing the Holy Family (RMCC, ABM bh471, Fig. 17). Adriaen

van Wesel (ca. 1419-1490) combined a sense of intimacy with an eye for realistic detail. We encounter these qualities in more Utrecht sculptures, as can be seen in some such works presented at the exhibition (Cat. Nos. 69-71).

Outside Utrecht, it was mainly the urban bourgeoisie who acted as art patrons. As a result, the towns in Holland became important as centres of visual arts. In particular, these were Haarlem, Leyden, Delft, Gouda, and later Amsterdam. Not only their beautiful churches, built in the style known as Scheldt Gothic, bear witness to a grand artistic past, but also the very few surviving panels. In all these towns, the production of books played an important role. This concerned manuscript illumination as well as the art of printing. The Dutch, not devoid of chauvinism, even used to attribute the invention of printing to Laurens Janz. Coster from Haarlem. Although nobody believes this anymore today, Haarlem is still often considered one of the places where a number of the forerunners of the incunabula, the so-called block-books, were made. From other books, some magnificent woodcuts have been preserved (Cat. Nos. 15-17, Fig. 18), made by the anonymous "Master of Haarlem", who worked in that town for a time. Regrettably, no important examples of Haarlem sculpture have survived. However, this certainly does not imply that this art was not practised there. Notably around 1400, there must have been sculpture workshops, because Claus Sluter (d. 1405/6), the famous sculptor who, in Dijon, created the splendid Well of Moses and the Chartreuse portal for Philip of Burgundy, came from Haarlem. Haarlem was also the town where the most famous Dutch painter of the late 15th century worked: Geertgen tot Sint Jans (ca. 1460/65 - d. before 1495). He

derives his name from the fact that he lived and painted as a lay brother at the famous and rich Commandery of St. John in that town. He must have been a dedicated follower of the ideas of the *Devotio Moderna*, because nowhere do we find the spirit of intense piety manifested as clearly as in his work. A fine example of this is the small panel with the Man of Sorrows, one of the most treasured works at the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent (RMCC, ABM s63, Fig. 19). We see the bleeding, suffering Christ, weighed down under the load of his cross. He shows his wounds to the observer and turns to him with an imploring look full of compassion, which is so intense that it, as it were, outshines the bloodiness of the depiction. It is this kind of artist, with a highly personal style, that is typical of the towns in Holland. Much of this art is anonymous, sometimes it is possible to reconstruct an oeuvre and to give the master a so-called provisory name. This is the case with the Master of the Morrison Triptych, who owes his name to the triptych of the same name at the Toledo Museum of Art (Toledo, Ohio, USA). In his work, this master not only shows distinct influence from Geertgen tot St. Jans, but also some definitely Southern Netherlands' characteristics. The painter presumably came from Holland, and, as so many artists from the Northern Netherlands, emigrated to the Southern Netherlands, which were more prosperous, and had a greater demand for works of art. A small panel with the Adoration of the Shepherds, which is part of the exhibition (Cat. No. 20), probably dates back to his Holland period. In its sobriety, this piece is closely related to the work of Geertgen tot St. Jans. The clear composition and schematic build-up of the architectural

elements are also typical of Northern art. Not all Holland artists were equally serene and sober in their work; sometimes they were very expressive, such as, for example, the Master of the *Virgo inter Virgines*, who worked in Delft (ca. 1460s-1490s). However, his Late-Gothic mannerism goes hand in hand with highly introvert facial expressions. We can therefore state that the emphasis on piety and sobriety is one of the few characteristics that art works from the Northern Netherlands often have in common, in spite of all the differences in style and execution. These differences could be substantial, even with painters living in the same town. It often occurred that, within the walls of one town, various styles of painting flourished. Sometimes it even happened that artists with totally different qualities and equally different styles worked together on the decoration of a single manuscript, such as the large two-volume bible commissioned by the Utrecht canon Evert Zoudenbalch around 1465 (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 2771-2772). Most artists in the Northern Netherlands must have had modest workshops with relatively few assistants. Not until the early 16th century do we see painters such as Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen (ca. 1472-ca. 1533) and Jan van Scorel (1495-1562) heading workshops where large commissions were carried out under supervision of the master. Many painters did not restrict themselves only to painting. A number of them also designed woodcuts or patterns for embroideries. The most famous example of this is the above-mentioned Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen. He is also known for his woodcuts for book illustrations, for his vault paintings and as a supplier of designs for ecclesiastical

embroidery. A number of such embroideries are on view at this exhibition (Cat. Nos. 43-48). Another versatile artist from the early 16th century was Lucas van Leyden (1494-1533), who left behind an important graphics oeuvre rivalling that of his contemporary, the famous Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). Like Dürer, Lucas van Leyden and Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostanen were exponents of the transition between Late Gothic and Renaissance. This cannot be said of Jan van Scorel, who left for the Holy Land in 1520 and visited Rome on his return. There, Adrian VI (1459-1523), born in Utrecht, had just been made pope. He appointed his compatriot Van Scorel curator of the papal collections, as successor to Raphael, who had recently died (d. 1520). This gave Jan van Scorel the opportunity to study not only the remnants of classical antiquity, but also the most recent developments of Renaissance art in Rome, where Raphael's influence still prevailed. When he returned to Utrecht in 1523, after the death of Adrian VI, he introduced the new style, which made him the first real Renaissance painter in the Northern Netherlands (RMCC, ABM s331, Fig. 20). Before he went to Rome, he had been a pupil of Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostanen, and before that, of the Haarlem painter Cornelis Willemsz. (d. after ca. 1552). The two panels with St. Peter and St. Paul presented at the exhibition (Cat. No. 21) are attributed to the latter.

ART FROM THE SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS

Art from the Southern Netherlands enjoys greater fame than that from the Northern provinces. The so-called

Flemish Primitives are familiar to everyone interested in Western-European mediaeval art. This name denotes the painters who worked in the cities and towns of Brabant and Flanders in the 15th and early 16th century. Initially, Bruges and Ghent were the centres, but towards 1500, the port of Antwerp took over as a result of changing political and economic conditions and, in the course of the 16th century, became the most important metropolis of Northern Europe. The prosperity of the cities mentioned raised the vast, high-quality, art production to an exceptional level. Flemish art (Cat. No. 7) was even commissioned from abroad. The result was that not only artists from the surrounding countries moved to Flanders as the centre of trade and culture (Cat. no. 8 & 20), but artists from the Southern Netherlands also emigrated to even more southerly countries, particularly Spain and Portugal, where art from the North was in great demand. Moreover, there were a number of regal residences in the Southern Netherlands, with great cultural appeal. The most prominent was Brussels, the old capital of the Duchy of Brabant. In 1430, the Dukes of Burgundy, who had ruled over Flanders since 1384, inherited this province. Brussels became the residence of the House of Burgundy in the Southern Netherlands and remained the capital under the Hapsburgs as well, but with an interruption at the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, when Mechelen took over this function for a short period of time. A great many members of the aristocracy established themselves around the ducal residence. They commissioned many works of art for the embellishment of their palaces.

After he had left The Hague, the famous

Jan van Eyck joined the court of Philip the Good (1418-1467), Duke of Burgundy. He was not only employed as a painter, but also fulfilled diplomatic missions for his master, as for example in 1428, when he travelled to Portugal on behalf of Philip, to ask for the hand of the infanta Isabella. While Jan van Eyck (d. 1441) served at the court, Rogier van der Weyden (1399-1464) - together with Jan van Eyck one of the most well-known Flemish masters - was employed as city painter in Bruges. Besides the commissions he received from the local bourgeoisie, the city government and the clerical authorities, he also worked for the court of Burgundy and other noble patrons. He painted, for example, portraits of various sovereigns. This painter, who was already very famous during his own lifetime, also received commissions from Spain.

Van der Weyden's art is much more detached than that of his brothers-in-art from the North. However, his works are certainly not devoid of emotion. His figures show this in a more formal, sometimes theatrical way. Rogier's paintings are characterized by courtly distinction rather than homely intimacy. The linear aspect played a prominent role in his work. This made it easy to copy and imitate his paintings. His compositions and figures not only had a far-reaching influence on the art of his immediate environment, but also on that of the Northern Netherlands and even the western regions of Germany. Van der Weyden's forms and schemes decisively affected the art of painting in this part of Europe throughout the second half of the 15th century. His influence was felt most strongly in the Southern Netherlands, which is perhaps also why, before 1500, there were so many fewer masters with an individual style in these regions than in

the towns of Holland. Not only Flemish painters with less distinctive artistic personalities soon imitated the work of the great Brussels artist, but also prominent painters, such as Dieric Bouts (d. 1475), Hugo van der Goes (d. 1482) and Hans Memlinc (d. 1494), could not or would not avoid his influence. Even the work of Geertgen tot St. Jans, paragon of the Holland-type painting, was distinctly influenced by Rogier van der Weyden and his followers. Via Hugo van der Goes in particular, Rogier's style blossomed in Geertgen.

In the 15th century, the Southern Netherlands were clearly ahead of the North. Larger workshops, where a number of artists produced art using almost industrial methods, had already sprung up, especially in Antwerp. Large ateliers were involved in the production of altarpieces and memorial tablets. Sizeable, sculptured, altar retables with many statue groups were exported throughout Northwest Europe. Moreover, there were also large painters' workshops, such as those of Jan van Dornicke (1475-1511) and Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502-1550). Around the Onze Lieve Vrouwekerk (Church of Our Lady), there were special halls where the artists could sell their work. Renaissance, too, was introduced to the South much earlier than to the North. The regents, Margaret of Austria (d. 1530), aunt of Charles V (d. 1558) and his sister Mary of Hungary (d. 1558), were important in this respect as, in the first half of the 16th century, they promoted the introduction of the new style from their residences in, respectively, Mechelen and Brussels. One of the painters who worked for them was Bernart van Orley (d. 1542). His earliest work was still strongly influenced by Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden,

but the forms of Renaissance were already visible in the architectural details. This can be observed, for example, in one of the works exhibited: a Virgin and Child panel by an anonymous follower (Cat. No. 22).

It has already been mentioned that art from the Northern Netherlands is less well known internationally than that from the South. There are various reasons for this. In the first place, much more art from the Northern Netherlands has been lost than from the South. This is often blamed on the iconoclastic outbursts, which began in Flanders in 1566, as a result of social unrest and religious turmoil and spread from there over the Netherlands. In the South, however, this upheaval raged much more vehemently than in the North, where cities such as Haarlem, Dordrecht and Rotterdam remained practically untouched by this ravaging violence. Even in the cities which were stormed, some churches remained unharmed. Therefore, iconoclasm cannot be the explanation for the fact that more mediaeval art from the Southern than from the Northern Netherlands has been preserved. A much more decisive factor is that, at the end of the 16th century, the Northern provinces broke away from the Spanish Hapsburg empire and subsequently prohibited the overt practice of Roman Catholicism on their territory. Consequently, all churches came under the authority of the town magistrates, who usually put them at the disposal of the protestants. In the course of this process, the former Catholic churches were purged of "papist" imagery, an action conducted with much more deliberation and thoroughness than during the more spontaneous outbursts of iconoclasm. The guilds were given permission to remove their own

possessions from the churches. Precious gold and silver altar plates were melted down, paintings were sold and books were collected for the founding of the first public libraries. The works of art removed from the churches and cloisters were sometimes stored in city depots, but often destroyed. This latter was the fate of large statues and sculptured retables in particular, because these were often difficult to accommodate. In clandestine Catholic churches which came into being around 1600, those mediaeval religious artefacts which had been saved were still cherished, but these were always relatively small pieces. Free-standing altar groups sometimes also survived the ages. Moreover, there are private devotional pieces which have been spared. However, the surviving objects will almost never be found on their original location. This not only makes it difficult to establish where these pieces once belonged, but also to identify works of art or connect them with the name of an artist known from the archives or mentioned in Carel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck*, a compilation of artists' biographies from 1604.

Another reason for the greater fame of Flemish art lies in the fact that many of these objects were purchased at the time of their creation, or directly commissioned, by foreign patrons. Thus, art from the Southern Netherlands has also found its way into Portuguese churches and cloisters. Moreover, the Hapsburg sovereigns acquired many Flemish works of art, so that quite a number of Flemish paintings have been preserved in Spain.

All this explains why mediaeval art from the Northern Netherlands has remained relatively unknown and has therefore never enjoyed its due attention. This exhibition at the Museum Calouste Gulbenkian, mainly of Northern

Netherlands' works of art from the Utrecht Catharijneconvent, is for the Portuguese art lover an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with and enjoy this less well-known, but high quality, form of art.

Antwerp 1991

Utrecht/New York 1989

Utrecht 1986

Utrecht 1984

Amsterdam 1958

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