A PAINTING BY JOOS VAN GENT

By HARRY B. WEHLE

Curator of Paintings

As a center of industry and wealth Ghent had no equals in the medieval Netherlands except Ypres and Bruges. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, however, Ypres had already suffered a serious decline, and Ghent, which had developed an enormous weaving industry, had only Bruges as a rival. That thriving and lovely city of canals had built up an extensive ocean trade with all parts of Europe, so that the wealth of its citizens and the splendor of its peaked and gilded architecture were renowned far and wide.

Bruges in the fifteenth century attained furthermore an unchallenged pre-eminence in northern Europe as a city of great painters. There worked Jan van Eyck (during the later part of his career), Petrus Christus, Memling, Gerard David, and a number of excellent painters whose names have been lost or are at any rate detached from their works. All these contributed toward the prolonged artistic supremacy of Bruges. Other Dutch towns had their transient greatness, owing to individual painters or to small groups, but their glory was comparatively short-lived. Thus Tournai during the second quarter of the fifteenth century, and for a few years beyond, had Robert Campin and his great pupils Jacques Daret and Rogier van der Weyden (until Rogier moved to Brussels), and Louvain during the third quarter had Dieric Bouts. Ghent also appears to have had its great moments as a city of painters, but they were few and of brief duration.

The greatest single fact in the history of Ghent’s art was, of course, the glorious existence in the collegiate church of Saint John (later known as the Cathedral of Saint Bavon) of the altarpiece representing the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, painted by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Inexhaustibly complex and wonderful, this work is universally conceded to be the unrivaled masterpiece of Flemish painting. It was installed in 1432, six years after the death of Hubert van Eyck, the elder of the brothers. The fact of his burial in Saint John’s church suggests that he may have spent a considerable part of his life in Ghent. His brother Jan, who survived him by fifteen years, worked elsewhere, however, and the installation of the famous altarpiece is the last important artistic event that we know of in Ghent for more than thirty years. Then on the sixth of October, 1464, a painter named Joos van Wassenhove, who had four years earlier been admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke in Antwerp, was accepted under highly respectable sponsorship into the guild in Ghent. In 1467 he in turn acted as guarantor for the gifted young painter Hugo van der Goes, who would thus appear to have been about seven years Joos’s junior. But Hugo had been active in Ghent only a few years when he took his departure for Bruges in order to paint his great altarpiece (1473-1475) for Tommaso Portinari, after which he soon retired, mentally distracted, into the monastery of Rouge Cloître, near Brussels. At this time a third painter of importance is mentioned in documents of Ghent, namely Gerard van der Meire, but no works by him have thus far been identified.

Documents of the 1460’s in Ghent mention
no specific paintings by Joos van Wassenhove except the forty papal coats of arms which Saint John's church ordered him to paint early in 1468 in celebration of a jubilee. A document of 1475 indicates that Joos van Wassenhove had gone to Rome but fails to tell us in what year he went.

The piecing together of the life and works of Joos van Gent, as he has come to be called (for some decades he was also known, erroneously, as Justus van Ghent), has indeed been an extraordinarily precarious and contentious undertaking. After his departure for Italy no further light whatever is thrown upon his progress from Flemish sources, though there are certain retroactive flashes from Italy which clearly reveal pictures painted by him before he left Ghent behind. A number of clues have also been discovered which concern his career after he reached Italy, but there remains a gap in the record from the spring of 1468 until early in the year 1473.

The first word which art historians received concerning Joos's activity beyond the Alps came, surprisingly enough, from Vasari, who mentions a “Giusto da Guanto, who made the altarpiece of the Communion and other pictures for the Duke of Urbino.” Archives in Urbino confirm Vasari's statement, informing us that payments were made to “Giusto da Guanto” from time to time during the years 1473 and 1474 for work on a picture of the Communion but that it was the Confraternity of Corpus Domini, not the Duke of Urbino, for whom Joos undertook to paint it. The predella for this altarpiece had been painted by Paolo Uccello between 1467 and 1468, and Piero della Francesca was employed in 1469 to give advice concerning the continuation of the work. Evidently Piero reported adversely on retaining Uccello for the painting of the altarpiece proper, at the same time declining to paint it himself. The Confraternity went ahead, however, and the wood for the panel and most of the pigments for painting it were purchased in 1470 and 1471.

Just when and under what circumstances Joos van Gent began his work we do not know. The picture which he painted, about nine feet high and ten feet wide, remained in Urbino until this present year and must be there still unless the Germans have removed it. Aside from its intrinsic merits, it is important as constituting the ultimate criterion for the style of the artist. The subject of the picture is a curious combination of the theme of the Last Supper with the sacrament of the Communion as administered by the western branch of the Catholic Church. Christ himself undertakes the function of the officiating priest, and it is his kneeling disciples who receive the holy wafer. At one side of the scene Joos introduces portraits of Federigo da Montefeltro accompanied by personages from his court, a visiting ambassador, and the duke's infant son Guidobaldo carried in his nurse’s arms.

The subject of the Communion of the Apostles had been treated in a similar fashion a generation earlier by Fra Angelico. Now it was undertaken by an artist from the north, the only early Flemish painter who is known to have settled permanently in Italy. In this picture of the Communion, however, Joos's pictorial idiom is still by no means pure Italian but rather a strange and compelling blend of northern and southern styles. The mystical drama takes place in a splendid apse-like room with dark columns and round-arched windows. The actors are arranged in semicircular groups to the right and left. In the center stands Christ himself, a figure of gentle bearing and characterized by a narrow brow and long, slightly curving nose. This type of the Saviour and indeed the entire conception of the picture, including even the richly dressed, white-bearded gentleman in Federigo's train, are so strikingly reminiscent of Aelbert van Ouwater's Raising of Lazarus, painted many years before, that we may well wonder whether Haarlem actually may not have been the city where Joos van Gent received his training.

In this Communion picture the glowing, naturalistic treatment of light still adheres to the northern tradition, and the soaring angels wear white garments which flutter in folds of amazing northern complexity and loveliness. Thus, although Joos's figures in this period reveal an almost Italian amplitude of style,
suggesting that he spent a good part of the
"lost" years from 1468 to 1472 in Italy (espe-
cially in Urbino, where he could have profited
by the example of Bramante and Piero della
Francesca), there still remains enough of his
Flemish quality to afford us quite explicit evi-
dence concerning his style before he left Ghent.

It was on the basis of this evidence that art
histors some twenty years ago reattributed
an important and glorious altarpiece in the
Cathedral of Saint Bavon, which shows the
Crucifixion in the central portion and inci-
dents from the story of Moses in the wings.
The three panels depict landscapes of excep-
tional spaciousness and beauty liberally popu-
lated with effective and interesting figures.
Baedeker's guidebook and other serious writ-
ings on art used to give hesitant credit for the
triptych to the almost mythical Gerard van
der Meire, but present-day scholars agree in
ascripting it to Joos van Gent. It seems more
than likely that it was the receipt of this im-
portant commission which prompted Joos's
removal from Antwerp to Ghent, and in that
case 1465 or 1466 might be accepted as the
year in which the altarpiece was completed.

A second painting unquestionably from the
same hand as the Crucifixion altarpiece in
Ghent is the Adoration of the Magi, which recently came to the Metropolitan Museum as the most highly prized painting in the bequest of George Blumenthal. Indeed the Adoration is so close in style to the Crucifixion that we cannot escape the conclusion that it was painted within a year or two of that altarpiece—but later rather than earlier, for the Adoration reveals a style which is further developed and perfected.

This rare and fascinating masterpiece has the distinction of being the one and only work by Joos van Wassenhove in America. It is said to have come from the collection of the dukes of Frias and to have been for long years closely guarded from public view in their Convento de Santa Clara at Medina de Pomar, near Burgos. The sixth duke of Frias, Juan Fernandez de Velasco, had been ambassador to England and had traveled in Flanders around the year 1600. Many items from the collection at Medina de Pomar were brought to Paris by Baron Pichon about the year 1922. In any case it was in Paris that the Adoration of the Magi was purchased by its recent owner. In size the picture is rather large, 43 by 63 inches, and it is painted in the medium of tempera on fine canvas, instead of in oil on gesso-coated wood as was the general rule in fifteenth-century Flanders. Thus the texture of the paint is mat, which gives to the work an effect of reticence and understatement that serves to enhance the picture’s expression of mediaeval remoteness.

That this picture is to be counted among the truly great ones we recognize or feel at once. Attempting to analyze the constituents of its greatness is just the sort of baffling and perhaps hopeless task which art historians impose upon themselves. Friedländer calls attention in our Adoration to the arrangement of the six chief figures, ascending in two parallel rows like notes on a musical manuscript. Their attitudes are strange and hushed, with each figure isolated from the others in the dim and spacious room. An overlapping of figures is seen only at the left, where the simple folk of the village crowd curiously about the steps outside the building. Within, seated on the foot of a bed covered with a spread of clear cinnabar red, is the Virgin holding on her knee her thin, friendly Child. Her blue dress is almost hidden beneath a white mantle which cascades to the ground in a tinkle of multitudinous broken folds—precisely the sort of folds which we have seen already on the angels in the Urbino altarpiece. Her slender throat and intelligent, aristocratic face are scarcely less white than her mantle. Over her shoulder leans long-nosed Joseph, tense with slow-witted solicitude. The monkish sobriety of his robe contrasts strikingly with the rich costumes of the adoring potentates. The first, his face that of an elderly gentleman of rank, wears a robe of the same bright red as the coverlet on the Virgin’s bed. The second wears a blue gown heavily furred and overlaid with a tunic of blue and gold brocade—left unfinished by the artist. He stands aloof and brooding, passionate yet immobile, a subtle and eloquent expression of an incomprehensible epoch. The third king, a mere youth and evidently a mulatto, wears a green doublet and stands delicately poised on slender, well-stockinged legs. The very same youth may be observed among the bystanders who watch Moses striking the rock in the left wing of the altarpiece of the Crucifixion at Saint Bavon’s in Ghent.

We have now sketched the career of Joos van Wassenhove of Ghent through his completion in 1474 of the Communion of the Apostles for the brotherhood of Corpus Domini in Urbino. On March 7, 1475, he was paid by the same brotherhood for painting a procession banner. As we might expect, the project of the brotherhood’s altarpiece had been encouraged by the good duke Federigo, and when that task was out of the way Joos was kept in Urbino for further enterprises. Upstairs in the palace Federigo had recently built a small studio similar to the studiolo in his palace at Gubbio—the studiolo now owned by the Metropolitan Museum. In Urbino (as in New York) the lower part of the studio walls was covered with intarsia perspectives. Above this woodwork the duke wished to have painted two tiers of half-length ideal portraits. Joos van Gent’s part in the project is indicated by
The Adoration of the Magi, by Joos van Gent. Bequest of George Blumenthal, 1941. A detail in color from a photograph by Charles Sheeler is on the cover.
this passage from a life of Federigo written by Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421-1498), his book-seller and constant literary adviser: “Not finding in Italy any master who knew how to paint in oil, he [Federigo] sent to Flanders to find an impressive master to come to Urbino where he had many pictures from his splendid brush, and above all in his studio where he arranged to have painted philosophers, poets, and all doctors of the Church, Greek as well as Latin, rendered with marvelous skill; he portrayed his Lordship in such a living manner that there was lacking nothing but life itself.”

The portrait of the duke, for centuries in the Barberini collection but in recent years returned to Urbino, is of narrow, upright form, the design being cramped within the frame in a curiously northern way. Federigo, though he is dressed in full regalia, sits cosily in his chair reading a book. His mighty scepter is used as a plaything by little Guidobaldo. The portrait must have been painted about 1477, for Guidobaldo, born in 1472, looks about five years old. Despite Vespasiano’s remarks, quoted above, Joos’s authorship of the work has been much contested.

It is especially the twenty-eight ideal portraits of illustrious scholars, however, which have aroused controversy. Fourteen now belong in the Louvre and fourteen more, once in the Barberini collection in Rome, were returned to Urbino.

The date 1476 is inscribed just below the ceiling in Federigo’s Urbino studio, and that presumably records the time of the completion of the portrait series. No documents are known, however, which incontestably establish the date or authorship of these paintings. If they are from the hand of Joos van Gent, as believed by Friedländer, Winkler, Lalvalleye, Wauters, A. Venturi, Hoogewerff, and some others (including the present writer), then they reveal a decided advance in Joos’s grasp of Italian ideals of beauty. The actual appearances of most of the personages portrayed in the series—Homer, Virgil, Euclid, Solon, Thomas Aquinas, Moses, Solomon, Saint Augustine, et alii—were of course unknown, and the subtlety, individuality, and credibility of the portraits can only be accounted for by supposing that the artist used as his models the scholars and church prelates who frequented the ducal court.

A good many years ago, when Schmarsow wrote a book about Melozzo da Forlì, he attempted to demonstrate that Melozzo had taken an important part in the painting of these portraits of illustrious men. In more recent years a passionate tribute to the splendor of the portrait series has been paid by scholars in the field of Spanish art and by some others, who have advanced urgent pleas in behalf of Pedro Berruguete of Castile as the author of many of the portraits and co-author of others. From a document of 1477 it appears that at that time a certain Piero Spagnoletto was indeed at work in Urbino. Writing a century later, Pablo de Cespedes mentions “another Spanish painter, who painted a small room in the ducal palace at Urbino with some portrait heads representing illustrious men, wonderfully well done.” Further evidence points toward Berruguete as probably the painter in question. Although his recorded presence in Urbino was a year later than the indicated completion of the decorations in the studio, he may possibly have assisted in the execution of this work. His altarpieces painted in later years at Avila show signs of his having remembered his experiences at Federigo’s court, even perhaps of his having brought home drawings. On the other hand, Berruguete’s style as seen by unprejudiced and even charitable eyes lacks altogether the breadth and urbanity which make the portraits of illustrious men at Urbino perhaps the most complete of all visual expressions of humanism in Italy.

Another series of paintings exists for which serious scholars claim Joos’s authorship, namely, a set of allegorical paintings of the Seven Liberal Arts which Federigo ordered for his library on a lower floor of the palace. Of these paintings only four are known to exist today, two in London and two, somewhat different in style, in Berlin. It seems likely that, at the very least, Joos made the designs for the Berlin pair, but here again there is violent disagreement among the doctors. Berenson’s opinion
is that all four were conceived by Melozzo and executed by Berruguete, and the Berruguetistas claim a still greater share of honor for their protagonist.

Our last indication of the existence of Joos van Gent in Urbino is the enchanting, rather large and spacious painting in his style at Windsor. It shows Federigo and Guidobaldo with attendant courtiers or humanists listening to a lecture. Guidobaldo has by this time grown to be a proud and self-reliant boy with the look, one would say, of an eight-year-old. The date of the painting would thus be about 1480. And this painting is absolutely the last indication of the existence on earth of Joos van Wassenhove of Ghent.

Moses with the tablets of the law, by Joos van Gent. In the Ducal Gallery at Urbino