THE MERODE ALTARPIECE

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The acquisition for The Cloisters of the Merode altarpiece brings to the Metropolitan Museum’s collections one of the key works in the history of painting. This is a major event for the Museum and also for the growth and enrichment of American collections. For the picture stands as a milestone between two periods; it at once summarizes the medieval tradition and lays the foundation for the development of modern painting.

It has always been famous. In its own day it was frequently copied, and its influence can be traced in the work of Flemish artists for generations afterwards. Since it first came to the attention of scholars it has been of intense interest to all students of the Flemish school. The consensus of opinion is that it was created in the third decade of the fifteenth century and is contemporary with, probably earlier than, the great Ghent altarpiece by the brothers van Eyck, which was finished and installed in 1432. Its author is regarded as the initiator of the trend of realism which makes its appearance in panel painting at this time and of the widespread and influential style that came to be associated with the name of Rogier van der Weyden.

On this much most scholars are agreed; but there is still a strong division of opinion as to the identity of the artist. Originally called the Master of the Merode Triptych, his name was changed to the Master of Flémalle with the discovery of three panels, now in Frankfort, supposed to have come originally from an abbey at Flémalle. As the group of paintings grew larger with the addition of others in the same style it became clear that the author of these works was a painter of importance, and the suggestion was made that he might have been Robert Campin, who, documents tell us, kept the foremost shop in Tournai at the beginning of the century and was the master of Jacques Daret and of Rogier van der Weyden. Some scholars rejected this theory, and others substituted for the identification with Campin an identification of the Master of Flémalle with the young Rogier van der Weyden. The disagreement is based on the interpretation of the documents, which lack of space prevents us from repeating here. (The main arguments will be found in the books referred to on page 129.) Suffice it to say that the author of this article finds the arguments in favor of identifying the painter with Robert Campin the most convincing considering the present state of our knowledge.

The date and place of Robert Campin’s birth are unknown, but he is mentioned in Tournai as a master painter in 1406. In 1410 he officially acquired citizenship in his adopted city. During the following years his fame evidently spread through Flanders because apprentices came to his workshop from other cities well before 1419. Then, four years later, he became involved in politics as the result of a revolt of the guilds, which took over the city government. Campin seems to have played an important part in the movement since he became the dean of the Painters’ Guild in 1423 and a member of one of the councils which governed the city until the patricians returned again to power in 1428. He was prosecuted for his part in the revolt and was later in legal difficulties because of his extramarital relations with a young lady who was called Leurence Polette; but this does not appear to have had any effect on his professional standing since he is mentioned repeatedly in connection with commissions during these years and until his death in 1444.

The triptych makes an impression far out of proportion to its small size. It has the quality of a precious object, epitomizing all the affectionate and conscientious carefulness of the medieval craftsman. It inspires profound and unhurried contemplation; and the longer one studies it, the more rewarding it becomes. The following pages are devoted to an attempt to analyze Campin’s temperament as a painter and the technical means by which he expressed himself.
The mood of the picture is quiet and unassuming. Mary calmly reads her holy book undisturbed by the presence of the angel, apparently unaware that her candle has gone out and that a supernatural light fills the room. The angel gazes at her, lifting his hand in a gentle, almost timid gesture. There is no sense of drama or miracle. The donors kneel outside in a small garden enclosed by a high wall. The man looks through the half-open door into the Virgin’s room with a rapt and attentive expression. His wife behind him is reserved and detached. In the other wing Joseph sits in his narrow little carpenter’s shop, his back turned to the window, completely absorbed in his work.

Nothing in the attitudes or faces of these people suggests spirituality, and yet there is something deeply reverent about the picture—something so moving that it reduces one to silence and fills one with wonder. This feeling increases as one becomes more familiar with the triptych. It is the result of the extraordinary love and care with which every part of the picture, down to the smallest detail, has been painted. No matter what the object, how obscure or humble it may have been, the artist worked on it with intense concentration so that its essential character is apparent to us and its own particular beauty is brought out. The towel is fresh and white, the bronze candlestick polished to a glowing tone, the carpenters’ tools well kept and efficient, the donor’s purse with its silver clasps and buckle is round and bulging, even the tiles on the floor of the Virgin’s room have the warm glow that comes only with years of wear and scrubbing. Each of these things has been painted with devotion, almost with veneration, and the emotion of the artist is so well communicated to us that everything in the picture seems to partake of the spiritual nature of the main subject, the Annunciation.

This response to the beauty and the spirit of the smallest things around him—man-made things as well as nature—reveal the artist as a poet with an unusually pure and ingenuous, almost childlike sensitivity. But the picture tells us more about him. He was also by instinct and by temperament a painter in the truest sense of the word. He expressed himself in terms of color and light, and he rejoiced in the richest and most varied use of his medium. His picture depends primarily on color for its success in conveying its message to us. The central panel, where the miracle of the Annunciation takes place, is bathed in the celestial light radiated by the archangel Gabriel, and the colors in it are brighter, more intense, and lighter in value than those in the side panels, where the general tonality, except for a few bright accents, is in a more subdued key.

The over-all color harmony of the triptych is cool. This was brought out most strikingly by a recent cleaning, as very often happens with pictures of this period. However, the central scene depends for its effect on the lively contrast between two large areas of bright color: the warm red of the Virgin’s robe and the cool, pale blue of the angel’s vestment. This use of contrasting warm and cool tones plays a role in balancing and giving life to the composition throughout the triptych. In the upper half of the Annunciation the dominant color is the delicate cool gray of the plaster walls, whereas in the lower part the two figures stand out against a background of deep warm brownish green in the tiles. In the side panels the scheme is reversed: both have a cool note in the lower foreground, on the left the steps before which the donors kneel and on the right the gray stone paving of the workshop and the blue steel of the saw and axe. In the upper part, on the other hand, the blacks and grays of the donors’ clothes are set against the mottled brown surface of the garden wall, and Joseph’s eggplant coat and blue turban stand out before the dark, warm shadows of the window shutters and paneling seen against the light.

This play of warm and cool tones runs all through the picture: in the various surfaces of the fireplace, the steps to the Virgin’s door, the façades of the distant houses, and in the modeling of form. It becomes most subtle and entertaining to the eye in another aspect of its execution, the treatment of light and shade. This seems to have had a peculiar fascination for our artist. We can see this immediately in his treatment of the reflections on the polished bronze surfaces of the laver and the candlestick (both of which reflect a window not shown in the painting, probably
The Annunciation with Donors and Saint Joseph, the Merode altarpiece, by Robert Campin (active 1406-1444). Height, 25 3/4 inches. At The Cloisters
that of the studio in which the artist was working), in the lovely interplay of highlights, shadows, and reflected lights in the Virgin’s robe, and in the corbels supporting the beams of the ceiling. But it is in the cast shadows from several different sources of illumination that the painter seems to have been especially interested. Except in the donor’s wing, these occur all over the picture, not according to any natural logic but rather as effective and pleasing variations of the surface. The most charming are those cast by the laver in its niche and by the two wrought-iron candle brackets above the fireplace; the most effective in the composition are those emphasizing the outlines of the table and the Virgin’s bench. They vary in number and complexity, but all start from a transparent dark brown near the object and are repeated in bands of lighter shades of ochre. One of these, however, almost always stands out in contrast as a cool and pearly opaque gray.

Another personal means used by the artist to give animation to the surface is the infinite variety of highlights of every form and shape, painted in almost pure white. They are to be seen in the fine, sharp lines (hardly noticeable in a photograph) accenting the edges of Joseph’s tools, the outlines of the Virgin’s bench and of many of the architectural elements. They are also present as sparkling dots and dashes on a multitude of surfaces which catch the light: the keys, the nails studding the doors and shutters, the silver decorations on the donor’s purse and dagger, his consort’s coral beads, and the minute figurine attached to them. They are functional in the definition of the gables and church spires of the little crystal-clear views of the city, but at times they seem to be employed only for their decorative quality as in the puzzling snowlike dots on the little figures and the pavement outside of Joseph’s workshop or in the grain of the wood of the Virgin’s bench.

In modeling form to create the illusion of solidity the artist worked so as to keep his colors as pure as possible. A tone close to white is used for the highlights, the middle tone is given more color, and the full shadow is the most intense and usually the warmest. This is still the medieval method, but there are exceptions to it. In the faces, treated with a pale flesh tone for the highlights and a warmer color for the cheeks, half shadows, and reflected lights, the stronger shadows, under the chin, in the eyes and ears, are cool. Also in the red dress of the donor’s wife and the red tights of the figure standing in the gateway the shadows are painted in with black

Drapery of the Virgin’s robe. The modeling is defined by the play of light so that it looks like a bas-relief.
or dark brown. These figures, as we shall see, are probably later additions. Modeling also plays its part in the over-all structure of the triptych, being carried out much more forcefully in the central panel than in the others.

One of the most interesting and enjoyable things about the picture is the way the artist has used his brush. Because he worked on such a small scale, a very close examination of the surface is necessary; indeed, for some passages, a magnifying glass adds tremendously to one's enjoyment. Such close scrutiny is wonderfully rewarding because it reveals that the painter was evidently fascinated by his medium and delighted in manipulating it for its own sake. The picture is painted entirely in oil; and although this particular development of the oil technique was new at the time, Campin already shows himself a master craftsman in its use. He takes full advantage of the whole range of properties which have made oil the favorite medium of painters since it was first developed. He moves from the opacity of the whites and ochers in the towel, the earthenware jug, and the woodwork

Central panel of the triptych. This is one of the earliest representations of the Annunciation in an ordinary Flemish interior. The sky with clouds seen through the windows has been painted over an earlier gold ground.
the flowers, where he calls on all the malle-ability of the medium. The folds of drapery and the faces are modeled so smoothly from light to dark that the gradations are imperceptible, there being practically no trace of the brush stroke. At other times he uses the brush to define the hair of the Virgin or the angel as delicately and clearly as a silverpoint. There are other details, such as the little silver scrolls decorating the donor's purse, where, at a scale which can be appreciated only with a glass, he has put in highlights with the freedom and vigor of a Frans Hals. The same is true of the painting of the small figure standing in the gateway. Such power and control of the brush at this scale must surely be the result of many years spent painting miniatures, the art in which these qualities had been developing during five or six centuries. It would not be surprising if illuminations by the hand of this artist were to be found some day.

He was keenly aware of the substance, the material solidity, of paint and treated it in ways that must have been new and surprising in his day. In Joseph's heavy coat he used a stick or the wooden handle of his brush to work a heavy, woolly pattern into the wet paint, and then he glazed it over. The façades of some of the tiny houses were painted first in a dark tone, then covered with white, through which he scratched to reveal the underlayer of dark and thus create the half timbers. The divisions between the flagstones behind Joseph's bench are also cut into the paint with a sharp instrument. These, almost unnoticeable in the shadow, bear witness to his integrity as a craftsman and the infinite pains and patience he lavished on every last detail of his work.

Much has been written about the realism in our picture. It is true that, in order to bring out their essential character, the artist has tried to recreate the pattern of light and color on the surface of objects as they are seen in reality. But the way the forms are arranged, in surface or in giving the illusion of depth, is not realistic. Here the painter entirely changed and transformed reality to serve his own purpose of making the picture more effective. One of his methods was to make the outline of one form lead directly into another, for instance, the right hand of the
angel and the table, thus guiding the eye forcibly from one place to another. In the same way the back of the Virgin's bench carries our attention to the table—in this case, one might almost say, with increasing speed—and the outline of Joseph's left arm leads into the folds of his turban. These lines play a vital part in the picture's surface and give it what might be called a visual rhythm. That the artist was aware of their importance seems proved by slight but most effective alterations, such as those at the lower outline of the door, the edge of the floor behind the angel, and his hip, which were all clearly made to give a more flowing line leading from one panel towards the center of the other.

One becomes aware in looking at this painting of the frequency with which the outline of one object will either come very close to another without quite touching or in other cases will barely touch. A good example of this can be seen in the tools on the workshop table or in the relationship of the saw, the stick, and the tip of Joseph's wooden patten. These devices, and there are many others in the picture, create a feeling of tension which either concentrates our gaze on one place or leads it in a given direction. In this, as well as in his great interest in light, Campin recalls Vermeer, who had a similar predilection for the edges of objects but combined it, of course, with a much more sophisticated atmospheric effect.

The rendering of space is a most important element in the triptych. As in the color composition the artist uses it to emphasize the Annunciation panel, in which the perspective is steeper, bringing everything in the room forward, closer to us. The side panels are seen from a different point of view and give a greater illusion of depth. The exaggerated and illogical perspective of objects seen from different points of view in the same room has been variously explained as ignorance of so-called real perspective or as a deliberate effort to show more of the surface of each object, since that was what the artist most enjoyed painting. The second explanation has some merit, but there is still another, which may be more significant and which has to do with the relationship between painters and sculptors during the artist's lifetime. This is particularly in-
Sometimes, it was specified that he was to supervise the whole process, and there can be no doubt that his part was the more important. An example of this relationship can still be seen in the sculptured group of the Annunciation in the church of Sainte Marie Madeleine in Tournai, which a document tells us was carved by Jean De le Mer and painted by Campin in 1428. Its resemblance to our picture would indicate that Campin was also responsible for the design.

This “steep” perspective, in which every object is seen from above and even the figures are turned towards the onlooker so that he can see more of them, has the effect of making a picture suggest a bas-relief. Nothing seems to be completely three-dimensional. Only the parts facing us give this impression. The artist does nothing to suggest a satisfactory explanation for the parts we do not see but know are there. All of the figures might be flat on the side turned away from us. For instance, we do not know what the Virgin is seated on; we are uncertain about Joseph. The donor’s wife could hardly be fitted into the place where she is kneeling. It seems more than possible that the point of view prevailing in the painting may have been influenced by that of sculpture, where such distortions are

Campin, Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and other, lesser masters. Considered from our twentieth-century point of view, the implication is that the painter played a subordinate role to the sculptor. However, the documents which have come down to us prove that in Tournai this was not true. Those naming Campin are in connection with commissions for sculpture, bas-reliefs, retables, or funeral monuments, for which Tournai was famous, and on several occasions Campin is recorded as having been commissioned to “design” an altarpiece or retable, which was then to be carried out in stone by the sculptor, and finally to be painted by Campin. Thus the original concept was the painter’s, and it was the painter who completed the work.

Angel from a sculptured Annunciation in Sainte Marie Madeleine in Tournai, carved by Jean De le Mer and painted by Campin. The head is restored. Right: Bas-relief copy of Campin’s Annunciation in Magdeburg
to some extent dictated by the nature of the material and its connection with architecture. In this respect, our central panel shows a resemblance to a small bas-relief of a church interior produced in Tournai at about the same time. Further evidence of the close relationship between painting and sculpture at this period is afforded by the fact that our Annunciation itself was copied in bas-relief at least twice during the fifteenth century.

The coats of arms on the windows have been identified as that of the Ingelbrechts of Malines at the left and at the right, with less certainty, that of the Calcum family. A certain Ingelbrechts is recorded as having had investments in Tournai in 1427, and this may well be the man in our picture. The strange and uncomfortable place occupied by the lady and the noticeably different and much more subtle manner in which she is painted were explained by the discoveries made during the cleaning, so interestingly described by William Suhr in his article in this issue. The same applies to the flaking of the paint in the windows of the Virgin's room, which was so astonishing in an otherwise almost perfectly preserved picture. It now seems probable that the donor commissioned the triptych while still a bachelor (or a widower) and that at that time all the windows in the central panel were gold, and his was the only figure in the left wing. Later, at the time of his marriage (or perhaps

bethrothal, since no wedding ring is visible on the lady's hand), the changes were made which we see today.

Judging by the rather plain style of their clothes, the donors were members of the wealthy burgher class, not of the aristocracy. The lady's headdress is similar to that worn by the model in the portrait attributed to Campin in London

(it has exactly the same pins and fringe) and to that of the second attendant to the left of the Virgin in Jacques Daret's Presentation of Christ in the Temple, in the Petit Palais, Paris, which was completed in 1435. Her dress, cartridge-pleated and drawn in tightly at the waist, is essentially the same as that of the woman kneeling close to the Cross in the central panel of Rogier's altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments in Antwerp, and the same artist's Magdalen in London. But her sleeves are deeply looped at the wrists and show a decorative fur lining. The closest parallel to the silhouette and costume of our donor is presented by the small figure kneeling before Saint Bernard in a manuscript in Frankfort, painted around 1400. Our kneeling man is quietly and warmly dressed for outdoors in a black woollen tunic, with a protective collar-
it seems very gay and festive in contrast to their rather somber elegance. It has been suggested that he may be the painter, but there is little about his attitude or expression that looks like what we expect in a self-portrait. There is another possibility suggested by a small shield hanging from a chain on his breast. This shield, as far as one can judge from so small a representation, has three red pales on a field of gold. It resembles the arms of the city of Malines, with which the family of the donor was connected. A similar coat of arms, with these same charges and colors, was also borne by the lords of Berthout, who included the princes of Grimbergh, the chief branch of the family of Merode. Varlets and minor servants of great families sometimes wore the family shield on the shoulders of their tunics, as we see in miniatures ornamenting a fifteenth-century manuscript, the Livre des Tournois du roi René. It is tempting indeed to see in the fantastically dressed little figure on the left wing of our altarpiece a servant of the family of Merode, thereby suggesting some very early connection of the picture with this family.

Another possibility, however, presents itself. Such shields were also worn by guild members, and this particular one resembles the emblem of the guild of the courtiers or brokers. Could it be that this figure represents the marriage broker responsible for the contract between the two donors? The X-ray of the picture shows that he was painted in over the wall; and although small figures are often painted in over the background, it could mean that he may well have been added at the time the whole picture was changed to include the donor's wife and her coat of arms.

No documents have been found by which it is possible to date any of the pictures ascribed to Campin. Only one of these, the left wing of the altarpiece of Heinrich von Werl in the Prado, is inscribed with the date—1438. The same lack of precision prevails about comparable works created by other artists active in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. As a result, the chronological arrangement of Campin's pictures must depend on our judgment of his stylistic development. Most scholars have agreed that the Merode Annunciation belongs to the early part of
ABOVE: Heads of the donor and Robert de Masmines (Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin), both in Campin's forthright earlier manner. BELOW: Heads of the donor's wife, added later by Campin over the background of the painting, and Saint Barbara from Campin's Werl wing (Prado), dated 1438, showing similarity in handling.
his career, immediately after the Nativity in Dijon. Although the cool color scheme of grays, mauves, and whites shaded with blue is the same and the distant city views are very like the buildings in the charming landscape behind the Nativity and are handled in a very similar way with many little white highlights to give animation, we no longer find the rather artificially elegant gestures and the deliberately decorative elements like banderoles which characterize the Dijon picture. Furthermore, the head of the donor is carried out with a naturalism that exceeds anything in the earlier works. It is the strongest and most vigorous part of the initial state of the triptych. It is straightforward in technique and gives the impression that it was taken from life with nothing done to stylize it in any way. In this effect it bears a striking resemblance to the so-called portrait of Robert de Masmines in Berlin and to a portrait of a man wearing a turban in the National Gallery, London, both dated by scholars in the late four-teen twenties. In these there are the same sharp highlights defining the features and a similar breadth, almost a roughness, of handling. The head of the lady donor, in contrast, is quite different and belongs to a still more advanced period in the artist’s career. It shows the much more experienced and sensitive feeling for modeling and atmosphere found in the head of the Saint Barbara of the Werl panels. Thus it is surely safe to assume that Campin made this and the other additions to the Merode painting toward the end of his life.

If we accept the theory that Jan van Eyck’s Annunciation in the Ghent altarpiece was influenced by Campin’s treatment of the same subject in our picture, then ours must have been finished by 1432, when the Ghent altarpiece was completed, and possibly by 1427, when Jan van Eyck is known to have visited Tournai. This was on October 18, the day of Saint Luke, the patron of painters; he was officially entertained by the city, and it would have been natural for him to visit the most prominent artist there and admire his works.

It would seem more logical, however, in consideration of Campin’s career and his development as a painter, to give our picture a somewhat earlier date, closer to 1420. By this time he had been a recognized master for at least fourteen years; and since pupils were being sent to him from other parts of Flanders, he must have been well known outside of his own city. He had doubtless begun painting in the more graceful and stylized manner current at the turn of the century—and this seems to be borne out by the recently discovered fragments of an Annunciation in fresco that he painted in 1406 in the church of Saint Brice in Tournai. By 1420, however, he had certainly progressed beyond this and asserted his own personality. If we review what our picture shows of the make-up of his personality, we find him divided between traditional and progressive tendencies, just as we would logically expect him to be at this halfway point in his career. He is still fundamentally a man of the Middle Ages in his conscious transformation of the real structure of things for the sake of stressing the religious message of his picture. But his direct and literal way of repre-
senting the miraculous event in everyday surroundings, which must have reminded his contemporaries of their own homes, is new. Almost all the supernatural elements, such as haloes, have been excluded. Only the tiny infant with the cross, borne on seven golden rays, remains of the elaborate symbolic decoration so dear to the medieval artists. It is most interesting to imagine the vivid impression such a familiar presentation of the Annunciation must have made in Campin’s time.

Also new is the unassuming humanity of the figures and the extraordinarily clear and explicit painting of the appearance of objects. In this naturalism—or better, “materialism,” as Erwin Panofsky has so aptly described it—he shared in the newly awakened interest in the physical world which was spreading all over western Europe at the time and which evidently found an enthusiastic response in his own warm, sensuous, and very human temperament. But here again his progress was held back by his medieval disregard of internal structure. He gives us the most immediate visual effect of the surface. But at the surface he stops. We find the same situation in his technique, where, as a true artisan, he mastered the new method of using oil but still kept to the traditional way of modeling by increasing intensity and depth of color and to the time-honored method of simulating gold by warm glazes over a silver or white metal base.

This lovely and precious little picture helps us to complete the meager image of Robert Campin that we can reconstruct from documents. The tender intimacy, the respectful and loving approach to all objects he painted, animate or inanimate, combined with the robust and forthright character of his talent as a painter, seem perfectly fitting in the man who stood with his fellow craftsmen in their fight and disregarded the conventions of the time in his private life. Exhibited in The Cloisters, surrounded by objects created in the same spirit by the artists and craftsmen who were his contemporaries, it will be not only a key to the understanding of the wonderfully vital period that produced it and upon which it had such an influence but also a source of the deep enjoyment that rewards the contemplation of great beauty.

General information concerning the Merode altarpiece and the school of Tournai can be found in the following books: Max J. Friedländer, Die Altniederländische Malerei, II, 1924, pp. 55 ff., 109, no. 54, pls. XLVI, XLVII; Paul Rolland, Les Primitifs tourajiens, 1932; Charles de Tolnay, Le Maître de Flémalle et les Frères van Eyck, 1939, pp. 10-17, 56, no. 4, pls. 6, 7, 8; Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, 1953, I, pp. 149 ff., II, pl. 91. Further bibliography is given on page 139.