

EXHIBITS

'Good for the Eye, Good for the Mind': Jewels of the Bruges Renaissance

Jan Van Eyck "invented" oil painting; Petrus Christus was his pupil; and Hans Memling was, in the words of one highly influential art historian, the epitome of the "major minor master." So go the standard clichés on these three masters of the fifteenth-century Netherlandish Renaissance in art-history survey books.

The three men's work spans the grand epoch of the "Northern Renaissance" from the revolutionary era of the 1420's, when Jan Van Eyck's first altarpieces appeared, to the end of the century (Memling died in 1494). All three worked in Bruges, the economic hub of The Netherlands, with its many ties to Florence, both in commerce and banking, and in art and ideas—until the port silted up and Bruges declined in the sixteenth century.

This spring, Americans will be treated to three exhibits of these artists, between the nation's two foremost art museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery in Washington. As National Gallery curator John Hand put it, the shows will be "good for the eye, and good for the mind."

Good for the Eye

Netherlandish painting in this era gives rich reward to patient contemplation. Some pictures were painted under a microscope with a single-hair brush. The loving depiction of particular textures and details goes hand in hand with an attitude about the material world which saw the hand of the Creator everywhere at work, and hidden layers of meaning in the most ephemeral phenomena.

The sheer joy expressed in imitating divine creation is typical of the decades which followed the Council of Florence, the event which drew together the whole Christian world to form a new unity on a higher level, just as nation-states were emerging with their unique contributions and conflicts. Bruges artists remind us especially of the personality of Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa, the German-born prelate and scientist (1401-1464) whose life's work wove together the threads of Italian, German, and Classical Greek civilization. (The Netherlands must be considered as "German" culture in the broad sense.)

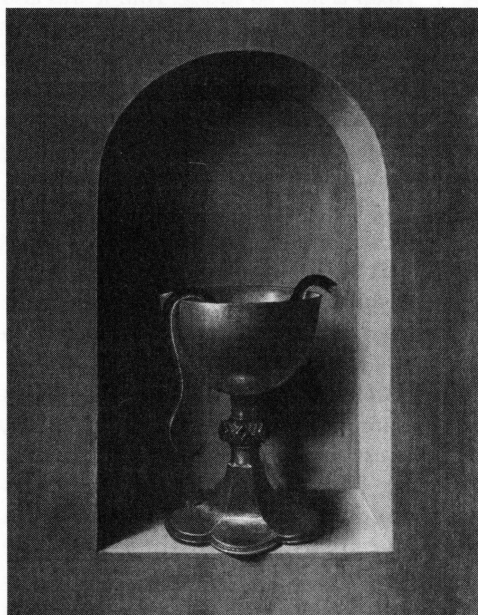
Van Eyck's fabulous "Annunciation" in a Gothic cathedral, to be exhibited to

the public in May again after a long absence in the conservation laboratory, will show that whatever his role was in developing the oil medium, he was a consummate master of his craft. This panel was once in the Czar's collections and came to the United States in 1931 when the famine-stricken Soviets sold many art treasures to American millionaires.

This "Annunciation" shows the moment of the Incarnation. The Virgin Mary, a queenly figure praying in the church interior, is approached by an equally regal Angel Gabriel. The words "Ave Maria" in gold letters issue from the divine messenger's lips, while Mary's reply—intended to be read in Heaven, and thus lettered upside down—is "Ecce Ancilla Dei."

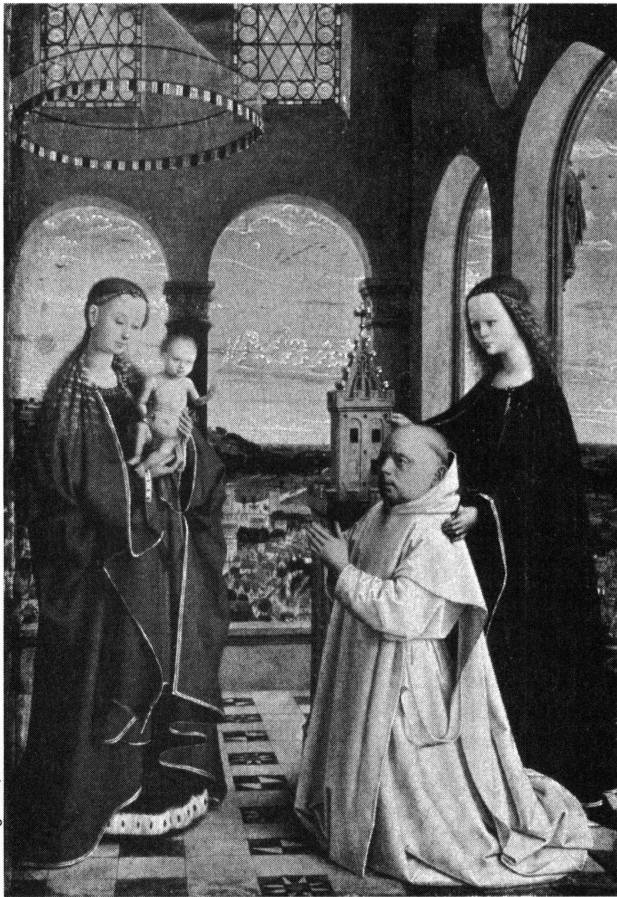
The painting is celebrated for its inclusion of the whole story of the Fall of Man and Old Testament events. These stories and symbols are depicted by Van Eyck as incised floor tiles, fictive statues, and stained-glass windows in the architectural setting.

The National Gallery's John Hand told *Fidelio* that he intends to display the newly restored picture with two manuscripts which are being borrowed for the occasion from the Getty Museum in Malibu and the Walters Gallery in Baltimore, respectively. These manuscripts will show that, while the choice of a cathedral interior for the Annunciation was unprecedented in the Netherlands around 1430, it had already been used in France a generation earlier, and that in turn, Van Eyck's inventive



Hans Memling, "The Chalice of St. John," reverse of "St. Veronica." Memling was a master of illusionistic effects.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Petrus Christus, "Virgin and Child with St. Barbara and Jan Vos (Exeter Madona)," c.1450. Vos was a leading figure in the monastic life of The Netherlands.

composition influenced manuscripts of the 1450's.

The "jewel-like" glow one expects from manuscript painting is replicated in Van Eyck's large panel, an indication of his exceptional skill in manipulating oil paints. New conservation techniques, including infrared reflectography, have allowed conservators and curators to see much more of Van Eyck's preparatory underdrawing.

Masters of Geometry

One reason that Petrus Christus has often been considered a Van Eyck disciple was his own prowess in producing that same richness. The "St. Eligius" on display in the Lehmann Wing of the Metropolitan Museum is a spectacular example [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. This saint, patron of goldsmiths, is shown at work in his shop as a young

couple comes to buy a ring. A concave mirror captures two other clients on the other side of the window—where the viewer stands.

Anyone who has read the dialogue in Nicolaus of Cusa's *Idiota de Mente*, written in the decade (1440's) when the "St. Eligius" was painted, will quickly connect the Cusan metaphor for the unique powers of the human intellect to this scene. Nicolaus demonstrates the human capacity for measurement, the discovery of order in the universe, by having one of his characters, the "Layman," point to marketplace operations of weighing gold and other commodities.

As early as 1441, Jan Van Eyck was mentioned in Italy

by a well-informed writer as the foremost master of geometry. Yet it was Petrus Christus, who was probably born in a village on today's Holland-Belgium border and became a citizen of Bruges in 1444 shortly after Van Eyck's death, who was the first Dutch or Flemish artist to have understood and applied the principles of one-point perspective. This discovery had been pioneered in Florence in the early fifteenth century.

The concave mirror, which had been famously used by Jan Van Eyck in his portrait of the Italian banker Giovanni Arnolfini and his bride, reveals a fascination with positive and negative curvature common to the most advanced artists in northern and southern Europe.

These great Bruges artists worked frequently for Italian patrons. Among the pictures the National Gallery will lend to the Metropolitan for the

Christus exhibit April 12-July 31, are two portraits by Christus of a donor and donatrix identified recently by scholar Joel Upton as members of two Genoese families, the Lomellini and Vivaldi. The Metropolitan already has on exhibit another such set of donor portraits, those of Tommaso Portinari and his wife, painted by another Netherlandish artist, Hans Memling. Portinari was the bank manager for the Medici, the leading Florentine family which had done much to encourage the early Renaissance in art.

Hans Memling

Hans Memling, like Jan Van Eyck and Petrus Christus before him, was an immigrant rather than a native of Bruges. Van Eyck had originated in the Rhine Valley. Memling was born near Cologne in Germany and became a citizen of Bruges in 1465.

The National Gallery will reunite two panel pictures of sacred subjects by Memling which have not been seen side-by-side since the 1930's. The Gallery's own "Veronica" is thought to have formed a diptych with the "St. John the Baptist" now in the Munich Alte Pinakotek. Such paintings would have been intended for private devotion among well-to-do families.

"Veronica" is the holy woman who tradition says wiped the face of Christ on his way to Calvary, producing the "true image" (*vera icon*) which is venerated as the likeness of the Savior. In Memling's little painting, she holds up the Sudarium with the image beautifully imprinted on it.

On the reverse, Memling depicted a chalice with a snake in it. This refers to the miracle of the chalice of St. John the Apostle, who according to an old tradition was handed a poisoned cup, and blessed it. The deadly poison turned into a snake and crawled away, thus saving the saint from death.

On the reverse of the "St. John the Baptist" panel is a complementary message: the skull which warns of the physical death which awaits us all. A Latin inscription warns viewers: "You too will die."

—Nora Hamerman