

## The Ghent Altarpiece: a Bibliography

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The immense body of literature that has grown up around the *Ghent Altarpiece* poses a particular challenge to anyone researching this masterpiece by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Over the years, hundreds of articles have been published in different languages, together with numerous monographs and exhibition catalogues. In addition to these scholarly contributions, there is a whole range of publications aimed at a more general readership. The themes studied are, moreover, highly varied, a diversity that does not make it any easier to compile a survey of the literature that aims to be both complete and relevant.

Is there actually any point in compiling a bibliographic guide to the world-famous artwork when so much information is available online in open access form? Certain references appear to be shared abundantly but others much less so, due more to their online accessibility in some cases than the relevance of their content. Hence our initiative to publish a coherent survey of the existing literature on the *Ghent Altarpiece*.

The drive for compiling this specific bibliographic survey was the polyptych's ongoing restoration by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA). A considerable amount of detective work and study has resulted in an e-publication with the title *The Ghent Altarpiece: a Bibliography*, which contains the fullest possible bibliography of the painting from the earliest literature through to the publication of this book, with the focus on relevance rather than exhaustiveness.

Fig. 10e.1. Meeting of the national and international advisory board during the treatment of the *Ghent Altarpiece* in Brussels: Paul Coremans introducing the first meeting (on 10 November 1950)

Fig. 10e.2. The scientific staff of the National Research Centre "Flemish Primitives" in 1964; clockwise: Micheline Comblen-Sonkes, Nicole Verhaegen, Denise Rossels, Christiane Van den Bergen-Pantens, Françoise Lambiotte, Christiane Deroubaix, Pierre Apraxine and Marguerite Baes-Dondeyne

### FROM INDEX CARD TO DIGITAL REFERENCE

Bibliographic references on the *Ghent Altarpiece* began to be collected systematically in 1949 by the National Research Centre "Flemish Primitives" (now Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives), founded by Paul Coremans.<sup>1</sup> The Centre was set up under the auspices of the then ACL (Archives centrales iconographiques d'Art national et le Laboratoire central des Musées de Belgique), the predecessor of the KIK-IRPA, which was established in turn in 1957. Following the return of the *Ghent Altarpiece* after the Second World War, Coremans initiated an unprecedented project in which all the panels of the polyptych were thoroughly documented, analysed using the latest research techniques and restored (fig. 10e.1).<sup>2</sup> The Centre also embarked on the systematic inventorying and cataloguing of all Flemish Primitives' paintings throughout the world. Coremans drew on the advice of an inter-university committee for this large-scale project and three major scholarly series were first published by the

Centre in the period in question: the *Corpus of 15th-Century Painting in the Southern Netherlands*, the *Repertory of Flemish Paintings of the 15th and 16th Century* and the *Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives*.

Erwin Panofsky once dubbed the researchers of the Centre Nicole Verhaegen, Jacqueline Folie and Anne Carton de Wiard ‘the three recording angels’,<sup>3</sup> expressing his admiration for the zeal with which they went about their daily task of inventorying paintings and registering all manner of bibliographic references (fig. 10e.2). Together with a substantial team of assistants, they painstakingly noted every reference in the literature to all the Flemish Primitives known at the time. The result is an exceptionally detailed system of index cards, which was supplemented further in the years that followed, laying the foundations for the bibliography on the *Ghent Altarpiece* that is presented here. Micheline Comblen-Sonkes took the initiative in 1984 to publish the collated references to all known Flemish Primitives in the form of a book,<sup>4</sup> for which Hélène Mund and Cyriel Stroo produced a supplement in 1998.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later, Dominique Deneffe, Bart Fransen, Valentine Henderiks and Hélène Mund published a further bibliographic survey online.<sup>6</sup> Other institutions, meanwhile, have also compiled overviews, annotated or otherwise, of the most important references regarding the Flemish Primitives or on the Van Eyck brothers in particular.<sup>7</sup>

#### APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

*The Ghent Altarpiece: a Bibliography* differs from the previously published bibliographies in that it focuses solely on the Van Eycks’ polyptych. The number of references is also larger, as more in-depth research has been done. To compile this bibliographic guide, no fewer than 1,700 of the Centre’s index cards were systematically studied and screened. Selection was based primarily on the relevance of the content, reflecting the aim of only retaining references that might be useful to research into the Van Eyck brothers’ *Ghent Altarpiece*. A conscious decision was taken, for instance, not to include the extensive literature relating to the theft of the ‘Just Judges’ panel in 1934. At the same time, the compilers have sought to achieve as complete as possible a survey, regardless of the form of publication, which includes articles in magazines, books, exhibition catalogues, reviews, historical publications, unpublished doctoral theses and several important early newspaper reports.

The bibliography is ordered chronologically and is a reflection to some extent of trends in the research devoted to the *Ghent Altarpiece* over the years. The publications deal with themes such as the work’s eventful history, the role of Hubert van Eyck, the return of the panels from the Altaussee salt mines in 1945, the polyptych’s original configuration, the stylistic formal idiom, the iconographic programme, the technical characteristics, the commission of the altarpiece, the historical context, the creation process and the role and organization of the Van Eyck’s workshop.

## SHARING IS CARING

By publishing this bibliography online, in open access form, the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives aims to provide a readily accessible tool for anyone studying the *Ghent Altarpiece*. We hope that the specialist researcher and the interested art lover alike will find something here to their taste.

*The Ghent Altarpiece: a Bibliography* is the fifteenth issue in the series *Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives* published by the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA). It may be consulted via the following websites: [www.kikirpa.be](http://www.kikirpa.be), [xv.kikirpa.be](http://xv.kikirpa.be) and [closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be](http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be).

## NOTES

- 1 Folie 2000; Masschelein-Kleiner 2000, pp. 22-23; Fransen, Mund 2005; Dubois, Deneffe 2018, p. 132.
- 2 Coremans 1953.
- 3 Folie 2000, p. 225.
- 4 Comblen-Sonkes 1984.
- 5 Mund, Stroo 1998.
- 6 Deneffe et al. 2011.
- 7 Examples include the online series of *Oxford Bibliographies* by A. Acres (last modified: 27 June 2018) and by Linda Seidel (last modified: 30 January 2014). See <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0078.xml> and <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0022.xml> respectively.