

A detail from Rogier van der Weyden's painting 'The Virgin Mary Reading'. The Virgin Mary is depicted seated, wearing a vibrant green robe with a dark blue belt and a white head covering. She is focused on reading an open book held in her hands. The background shows a wooden door and a blue garment hanging from above. The overall style is characteristic of the Northern Renaissance, with fine detail and a rich color palette.

# ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN IN CONTEXT

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**III. 15.1** After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross (Edelheere triptych)*, open, after conservation treatment, c. 1441-1443, oil on panel, 97 x 106 cm and 99 x 47 cm (wings). Leuven, Saint Peter's Church, Leuven, M - Museum, inv. s/85/w.

# 'The Edelheere Triptych': the Earliest Copy of Rogier van der Weyden's 'Descent from the Cross'

## History, Examination and Conservation Treatment

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**ABSTRACT:** The earliest known copy (1443) of Van der Weyden's masterpiece has been extensively studied in preparation for the exhibition of the M - Museum Leuven. It has undergone conservation treatment at the Royal Institute of Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) in Brussels, leaving Saint Peter's at Leuven for the first time since 1960. The recent study involved an art-historical assessment and a full technical examination of the triptych, whose authorship is still elusive. This paper discusses several art-historical and technical issues concerning the triptych, such as its unity of style and technique and its relationship to the prototype, using recent data from the technical examination.

### Introduction

The inaugural exhibition of M - Museum Leuven in 2009, *Rogier van der Weyden, 1400-1464. Master of Passions*, was preceded by a new campaign of restoration and examination of the most renowned copy of Rogier's *Descent from the Cross*: the Edelheere Triptych (ill. 15.1-15.2). The conservation treatment, carried out at the Royal Institute of Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) in 2008-2009, provided an opportunity to reassess previously published accounts regarding the structure of the support, the underdrawing and the painting techniques and style.<sup>1</sup> This was facilitated by new technical documentation including full infrared reflectograms, photographic details, X-radiographs and paint samples.<sup>2</sup> Issues reconsidered included dating, the triptych's relationship to its illustrious model and its stylistic and typological unity.

### A contemporary shadow of Van der Weyden's masterpiece

The triptych is named after one of the foremost Leuven families in the early fifteenth century. In the 1430s Willem Edelheere, son of a priest of the same name, inherited his father's fortune and became one of Leuven's wealthiest worthies, the owner of many houses, plots of land and other properties inside and outside the town.<sup>3</sup> He died before 17 October 1439 and his will provided for the founding of a chapel in the choir of Saint Peter's Minster, then under construction. The chapel is dedicated to the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin Mary and St James. It was consecrated in 1442 and Edelheere's son, also called Willem and a priest like his grandfather, became the foundation's first chaplain. It is probably this third Willem who commissioned the earliest copy of Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* by an artist whose name remains unknown. The triptych was erected on the family altar in Saint Peter's as a memorial to Willem's late father and to his mother, who died a few years later in 1449 or 1450. On the exterior of the right wing of the copy this text reads: *dese tafel heeft vereert he(ren) Wille(m) Edelhee(re) / en(de) Alyt syn werdinne* ('this painting has brought honour to Willem Edelheere and his wife Alyt') and the date *xli[ii?]* (1443?).<sup>4</sup> This epigraph therefore provides a *terminus ante quem* for Rogier van der Weyden's original *Descent from the Cross*.<sup>5</sup>



III. 15.2 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (Edelheere triptych) (ill. 15.1), closed, after conservation.

The triptych was moved in the course of the eighteenth century to the canons' vestry, and transferred to the church attic in 1801. Around 1825 it was offered for sale together with some planks. Joseph-Pierre Geedts, then director of Leuven's Academy of Fine Arts, discovered the panels and notified the dean, who had the paintings returned to the church.<sup>6</sup> After restoration the triptych was set up in the Blessed Sacrament chapel. The triptych was moved to the seventh chapel, the Saint Agatha chapel, and the ducal chapel in 1842, 1854 and 1861 respectively. During the Second World War it was stored in the vaults of the National Bank in Brussels. Currently the painting is installed in the fourth ambulatory chapel from the north transept, the Holy Cross chapel.

Up until the early twentieth century many authors accepted the Edelheere Triptych as the work of Rogier van der Weyden on the authority

of Johannes Molanus,<sup>7</sup> but this attribution is now long discredited. Today it is generally accepted that the triptych was painted by an unknown master, most likely from Leuven. Dating from after 1441 and probably from 1443 (see above), it is the earliest datable copy of Rogier's masterpiece. The painting does not reflect Van der Weyden's pictorial and formal language. The copyist gives his own interpretation of the central scene through subtle modifications to the composition. He reverts to a more traditional conception of the picture plane by enlarging the setting to what he feels is a more realistic space, thus taking away the strong and intense tension of the original. Nonetheless, on the wing-panels, which are not copies, he proves himself a competent portraitist.

In contrast to Van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, this copy does indeed have wing panels. Depicted kneeling in the left wing, in the same space

as the centre panel, are Willem Edelheere and his sons Willem, a priest like his grandfather, and Jacob. They are accompanied by Saint James. On the opposite side are Edelheere's wife, Aleydis Cappuyns, their daughters Aleydis and Catharina, and Saint Aleydis. The coats of arms of the spouses are displayed at the upper centre of their respective panels.

The grisailles on the exterior sides of the wing-panels are not original creations by the somewhat mediocre imitator, but hark back to existing compositions. They function as a condensed representation of the central theme. The left wing shows the Holy Trinity, now badly damaged, derived from various other representations of the Trinity in the same church.<sup>8</sup> God the Father stands upright holding the dead body of his son; Christ's left arm hangs away from his torso, while his right hand points to the wound in his side. Between Christ and God the Father there are still traces of the dove representing the Holy Spirit. Left of this group stands an angel with a lily and the word *MISERICORDIA*; on the right is a second angel with a sword and the word *IVSTICIA*. The better-preserved right wing shows John the Evangelist supporting a swooning Mary. Below that is the text giving the donors and the date, already cited. Both groups stand on a dais in a rectangular niche.

The combination of the Trinity, the two angels with lily and sword respectively (references to the Last Judgement), and the swooning Mary was described by Steppe in 1975 as a 'trinitarian Pieta'.<sup>9</sup> The composition can be traced back to a prototype by Robert Campin, applied via Rogier van der Weyden and his workshop.

The choice and combination of subjects make the *Edelheere Triptych* an unusually homogeneous whole, with the themes of the exterior and interior panels perfectly integrated and inextricably inter-linked. The triptych is a work of funerary art, in which the bodies of Christ and Mary on the outside of the wing panels become separate subjects of devotion and contemplation. The swooning Mary, Holy Spirit and St James refer to the dedication of the altar in the Edelheere chapel.

### Support and original frames

The supports originally consisted of approximately 1 cm thick quarter sawn Baltic oak planks assembled with dowels.<sup>10</sup> The central panel is constructed of five planks and the wings of three planks each, deriving from three different trees. The dendro-chronological examination of the panels, conducted by Pascale Fraiture in 2007, concluded that the most recent plank was obtained from a tree felled in 1414 at the latest.<sup>11</sup>

The original frames, now missing, were applied to the front edges of the panels and maintained with round pegs drilled through the unusually wide unpainted borders (ill. 15.3). This frame type seems to have been rather exceptional used for fifteenth century Flemish triptychs. The few recorded surviving examples originate from different areas of the Low Countries and are not particularly linked to Leuven ateliers.<sup>12</sup>

The reverse of the wings were not framed and the white ground and paint layers continued all the way to the edges. When the triptych was closed, it therefore would have shown an uninterrupted illusionistic representation of two niches with the sculpted figures of the Swooning Virgin, supported by Saint John on the left side and the Holy Trinity on the right side.<sup>13</sup>

The original locking system for the closed triptych closed is missing. However, metal fragments close to the left edge of the swooning Virgin with Saint John and at the bottom right corner of the Trinity are likely to correspond to remains of a closing device.

### Underdrawing

New infrared reflectograms<sup>14</sup> of the triptych reveal the underdrawing with greater clarity than ever before (ill. 15.4).<sup>15</sup> There are two distinct underdrawing mediums: the first, only detected in the female donor panel, consists of a dry material such as charcoal or black chalk; the second, widely used throughout all three panels, comprises a liquid medium applied with a brush.



III. 15.3 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (*Edelheere triptych*) (ill. 15.1), front side of the right wing without frame, after treatment.



III. 15.4 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (Edelheere triptych) (ill. 15.1), IRR, annotated to highlight changes during painting.

The central panel's underdrawing displays a range of expressive brushwork which varies in boldness and thickness according to its function: closely-spaced diagonal hatching to model the musculature of Christ's body (ill. 15.5); thicker, vigorous strokes to outline faces and wimples, as for example in the face of the Virgin, where there are also thinner diagonal hatching strokes for tone around the eyes; closely-spaced directional hatching for the articulation of the peculiarly sculptural pose of Mary Magdalen; and fan-like hatching for the shadowed inner drapery folds in the lower right. Faint, loose drawing lines are also detectable in a holy woman's face and her draperies; these are not necessarily related to the final forms and may represent early lines of a searching nature. They appear to have been applied in a liquid medium without much pigment using a fine brush, although the lines are so fine it is hard to be sure. Modifications are few and include the Virgin's face, shifted upwards during painting. Indeed, major changes would not be expected, given that the composition is a copy after Van der Weyden's original. Nonetheless, the artist modified the composition slightly during painting to suit the squarer format of the copy, including extensions of the cross to left and right and minor straightening-up of the figures.

There is considerable trial and error in the execution of the inner wings, which is perhaps understandable as these are not direct copies after

existing models, but new compositions integrating donors. The female donor panel has a unique feature: a bold and rapidly applied initial sketch for the two rightmost women in a dry medium such as charcoal or black chalk;<sup>16</sup> these figures were shifted right during painting (ill. 15.6-15.7). The outline of the female saint's face and wimple has been indicated in a liquid medium with broad brushstrokes; particularly visible in the infrared reflectogram is a thick stroke for her proper right profile. Other fainter, brush outlines unrelated to painted forms can also be seen to the left of the crown in the saint's robe. Furthermore, there are also some fine, faintly absorbing lines, possibly liquid, for the folds of her wimple and for hatching strokes on her cheekbone.

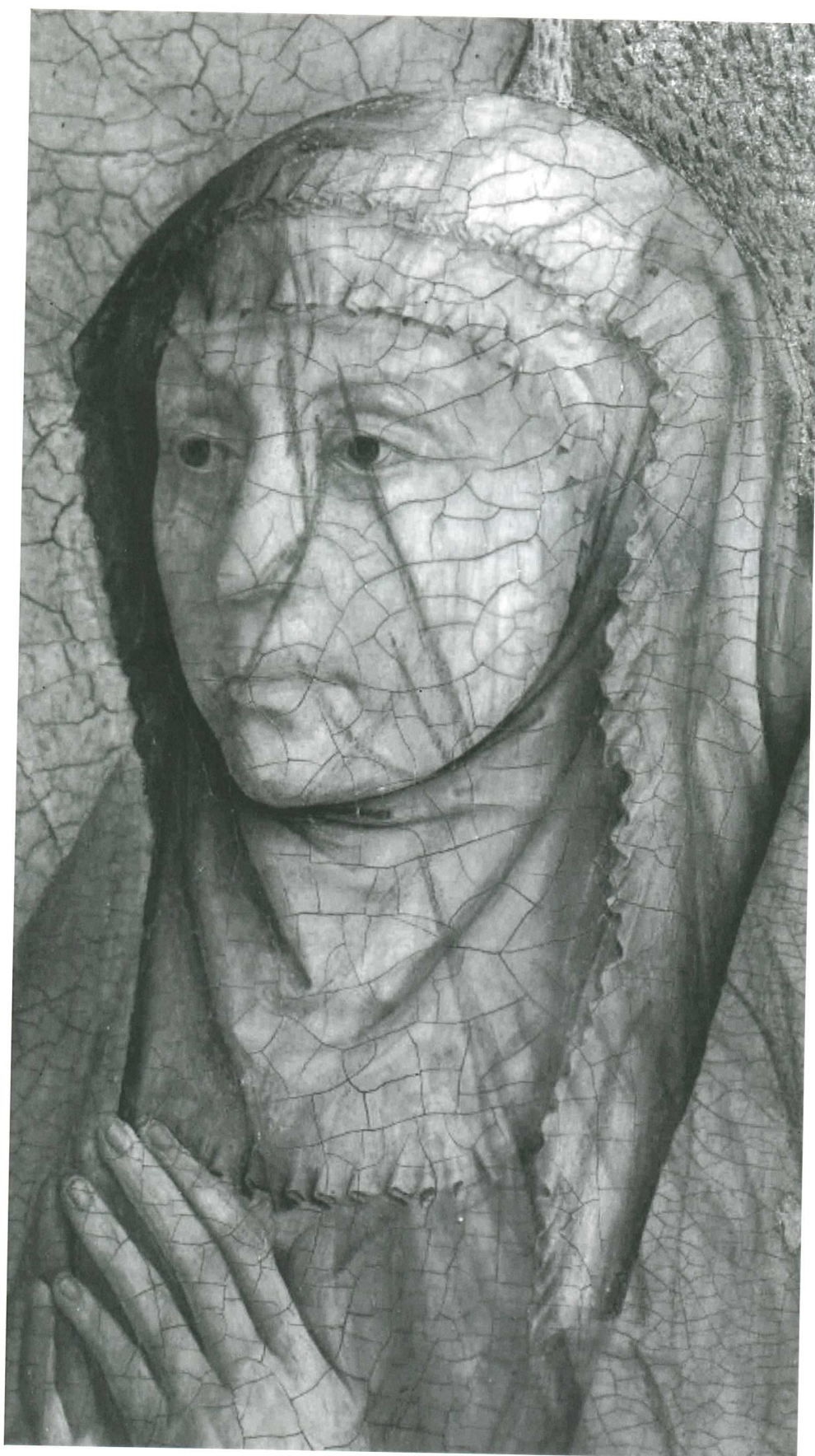


III. 15.5 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (Edelheere triptych) (ill. 15.1), detail: Christ, IRR.



III. 15.6 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (*Edelheere triptych*) (ill. 15.1), detail: female donor, right wing.





III. 15.7 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (Edelheere triptych) (ill. 15.1), detail: female donor, right wing, IRR.

The male donor wing only reveals what appears to be a liquid underdrawing. This indicates the whole composition in bold, often broad, freely applied brushstrokes. Several aspects of the design were, however, significantly altered at the painting stage. Modifications include the neckline of the male saint, moved right, and the sleeve opening of the priest, which was elongated and given additional folds at the cuff. The latter alteration breaks up the monotony of the donor's sleeves, which are all rounded at the underdrawing stage. Other adjustments include the first donor's foot, marked at least twice before settling on its final position, and drapery folds in all three donors. At the underdrawing stage, details of tone are indicated in the first donor's robe, which appears to have been accorded particular care; here, folds are modelled with delicate hatching and cross-hatching strokes in a liquid medium.

In the painted grisailles on the outer sides of the wings, the strongly infrared absorbing paint prevents a detailed examination of the underdrawing. Certain glimpses are possible though; particularly notable is that the niches were originally drawn with arched tops. The perspective of the pedestals was also less angled and more naturalistic. In the St John and Mary grisaille, the artist started painting the original design for the pedestal prior to changing his mind. In the left grisaille, the figure of Christ reveals faint drawing lines for the loincloth and fingers above their painted positions, showing that his body was more modestly covered in the underdrawing. Unexplained diagonal lines traverse Christ's naked torso. The inscriptions on both outer wings are no clearer in infrared.

Although an attribution to Van der Weyden himself was set aside a long time ago, it is worth considering whether or not the central panel and the wings were underdrawn and painted by the same hand. This is a tricky question to tackle as there are evident differences in style between the central panel and the wings owing to their different status – the first being a copy of a masterpiece, the second designed independently. Comblen-Sonkes,

while taking this into account, maintained that the triptych shows genuine unity at the level of the paint layer; she also noted underdrawn hatching in both the male donor panel and the central panel.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, close-up images show that the very style of these hatching strokes is extremely similar. There are delicate, partially joined and steeply angled diagonal hatching in a liquid medium for the shadows of drapery folds in both panels. This could favour common authorship for the inner wings and the central panel, at least at the level of the underdrawing.

Also worth noting are the straight incisions in the ground used to determine the horizontal and vertical edges of the cross and of the architecture.

#### **Artistic Genesis and relationship with Rogier Van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross***

The typical chalk and glue ground is sealed with a light grey priming containing lead white and carbon black. It is unclear whether the priming was applied before or after the underdrawing.

The gold background was executed before the figures were painted and in a different technique and style to the original version by Van der Weyden. Simple black lines and hatching suggest the architecture of a gilded and carved altarpiece rather than the more illusionistic approach to depicting stone structures adopted by Van der Weyden. The Edelheere triptych's more graphic technique is, however, similar to the rendition of a carved and gilded frame in Van der Weyden's altarpiece of the *Seven Sacraments* (Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts).<sup>18</sup>

The artist struggled somewhat with the design of the background of the central panel, which had to be adapted to accommodate the square format of the triptych. On a mordent containing minium, gold leaf was carefully applied around the figures and around a narrower version of the cross. The pale radiographic image of the corner spandrels suggests that these elements were added afterwards on top of the already gilded background and with a new layer of mordent. The horizontal mouldings in the background of the central panel were first

painted for a smaller version of the cross. The horizontal beams of the latter were later extended on top of the background.<sup>19</sup>

The background of the left wing also seems to have been modified extensively in the course of execution: the X-radiograph reveals a dense halo of strongly radio-absorbent paint around the heads of the donors and saints. Clearly defined geometric shapes to the left of the two heads – also visible in infrared and with the naked eye as darker zones in the gilded background – probably correspond to corrections in the position of the figures. Shifts in height in the underdrawing of the ecclesiastical vestment of the middle figure would tend to confirm this hypothesis.

Comparisons with its masterly model have already pointed out the awkward proportions and anatomy of the figures as well as rough, superficial modelling. Differences in execution also include simplifications in the rendering of the fabrics and a less refined colour palette. However, as regards important differences in the colours of the draperies, such as the Virgin's and the Magdalen's robes, colour changes are more related to the degradation of the pigments and binding media. For example, the dark tone of the Virgin's blue dress in the *Edelheere Triptych* is caused by darkening of the binding medium, the latter reacting with the azurite pigment contained in the layer.

#### Conservation treatment<sup>20</sup>

The condition of the support was problematic: joints were open in the central panel, the cradle was partly blocked and one of the four dovetails in the reverse of the left wing, roughly inserted in the nineteenth century in order to consolidate the joints, had caused the right joint to re-open.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, mould had grown on the panels, mainly on the wide unpainted edges covered by the frame rebate and on the reverse of the central panel, but also on local areas of the paint surface.

The presence of a pronounced craquelure pattern and raised areas of ground and paint were an immediate cause of concern, particularly in the

gold background of the central panel. Large blisters had been consolidated several times in the past; photographs taken in the early twentieth century clearly record severely raised paint in many areas. Several large losses had also been filled and restored previously, indicating that the background suffers from chronic structural instability, perhaps initially caused by neglect. The triptych has indeed had a traumatic material history. Like many early Netherlandish paintings, it was uncared for in the eighteenth century: relegated to the canon's vestiary, it served as a coat hanger after irons were inserted in the central panel.<sup>22</sup> Salvaged from destruction in the nineteenth century, it was restored several times and suffered considerable damage during the bombardments of the city in the First World War.<sup>23</sup> The edges of the panels have been cut down considerably, probably when the frames were partly replaced in the nineteenth century.

The most recent restoration campaign on the triptych was conducted by Albert Philippot in 1959–1961 at the KIK-IRPA. At the time the triptych was in a deplorable condition. His treatment included consolidation and impregnation of the paint layers with beeswax melted with infrared lamps, a technique often carried out at the time since wax was seen as perfectly stable material that would effectively protect the objects from humidity.<sup>24</sup> The pictures were cleaned and the old and deteriorated reconstruction of the inscriptions at the bottom of the grisailles on the outer sides of the wings were removed to reveal the ghostly remains of the original prayer and dedication.

At the time, the wood in the losses on the reverse was cleared of any remains of fillings and left bare whereas on the faces of the paintings the lacunae were fully retouched in an illusionistic manner. Losses in the gold background were integrated with new gold leaf, using pigmented glazes to adjust the colour. This treatment combined therefore a traditional restoration approach for the central panel and inner wings – with full reconstruction of the missing parts – and a more 'archaeological approach' for the outer wings, where losses

to the wood were not filled. Retouching of these areas was limited to the application of unifying glazes on the wood and on the visible ground layer along the edges of losses to facilitate perception of the remaining painted forms and confer a more harmonious appearance to the whole, free of excessive 'visual noise'. Abrasions and losses in the paint layers were also fully integrated.

Unfortunately, some retouching on the front and the glazes on the wood and around the losses on the reverse had darkened considerably. As a result, the outer wings had a patchy and chaotic appearance. Visually disturbing too were wide black bands applied in the past to the *barbes* and unpainted margins of the wing panels, presumably to hide gaps between the painted surface and the frames caused by shrinkage of the wood.

The present treatment first addressed the most essential conservation problems: the removal of mould and surface grime and the securing of blisters in the paint and ground layers. Wax-resin was used since the whole structure of the painting was already impregnated with this material. The structural conservation treatment involved unblocking the cradle of the central panel, gluing the joins and splits and replacing the dovetail inserts. Varnish removal was not considered necessary, but the appearance of the paintings was considerably improved by locally correcting discoloured retouching on top of the existing varnish layers. The black overpaint on the edges of the wings and the discoloured glazes covering the wood visible in the losses on the reverse were removed. The new dovetail inserts and the cleaned wood were retouched to ensure the harmonious integration of all parts and to make the wood visually recede behind the picture plane, limiting the interference of the losses with the fragmented remains of the *grisailles*.<sup>25</sup>

#### Support and frame

An important part of the treatment was the design and construction of a new frame. The partly original frame, documented during the former treatment and by Hélène Verougstraete,<sup>26</sup> had been lost



III. 15.8 After Rogier van der Weyden, *The Descent from the Cross* (*Edelheere triptych*) (ill. 15.1), detail: new framing system.

when the painting was hung in a secured installation in the church. The presentation of the triptych during the exhibition *Rogier van der Weyden, 1400-1464. Master of Passions* required a frame that could display all the painted surfaces. The restitution of the original format and structure were addressed while taking into account the material history of the object and conservation issues.

The triptych had to be exhibited in the museum in a closed glass case conditioned to a relative humidity of around 70% to correspond to the environmental conditions of the permanent location of the work in the Sint-Pieterskerk, Leuven. Exposure of the work to the lower levels of humidity in the museum environment would likely cause further damage to the triptych's fragile, chronically blistering paint layers.

Both the frame mouldings and its polychromy were closely modelled on the design of the original frame, now lost, relying on old photographic docu-

mentation and drawings. The size of the frames was deduced from a careful estimate of the reduction in format of the panels.

Small blocks of wood were glued to the edges of the panels and in the rebates of the frames to compensate for the sawn off edges. The wing panels were fitted in their frames by using sunken flexible nylon screws and springs connected to the rebates (ill. 15.8). This modern system of attachment was then hidden on the outer sides with thin oak laths stained to the colour of the original wood still visible in the losses, therefore visually restoring the original format of the wings.

## NOTES

1 Verougstraete-Marcq 1981: 119-129; Van Schoute & Trobec-Henrard 1991: 123-125; Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 118-156.

2 Eight paint samples had been collected during past conservation campaigns and mounted as cross-sections. Three new samples were taken during the present treatment to identify colorants in red glazes and to assess the technique and the condition of the gilding in the central panel.

3 Van Even 1870: 43-45; Van Buyten 2009: 14-21.

4 Van der Stock 2009.

5 Campbell 2009d.

6 Van Even 1895: 326.

7 For example Burckhardt 1842; Van Even 1870: 43-55; Van der Heyden 1900; *Inventaire* 1906: 19.

8 See the contribution on the Leuven *Trinity* in this volume.

9 Steppe 1975: 447-465.

10 In 1859, E. Le Roy thinned down the support of the central panel prior to cradling. Initially, Le Roy had suggested transferring the blistered paint layers of the central panel onto another cradled panel: Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 139.

11 Fraiture, 2007. This date differs slightly from J. Vinckier's 1987 estimated date of 1420 (see Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 153-155),

as Fraiture's calculation of the earliest execution date is based on the addition of nine sapwood rings to the last dated ring, 9 being the absolute minimum number of missing rings removed during the preparation of the boards.

12 Verougstraete-Marcq & Van Schoute 1989: 50. However, as previously noted by Verougstraete Marcq 1981, p. 126, the Frankfurt grisaille *Trinity*, attributed to the Master of Flemalle and tentatively identified by some authors as the reverse of wings of an altarpiece originally comprising Van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross* (originally in Leuven), bear similar round dowel holes and wide unpainted borders.

13 The original framing system is already described by Verougstraete-Marcq 1981: 121-123 and Verougstraete-Marcq & Van Schoute 1989: 294-295.

14 Inframetrics Infracam™ short wave video camera, used with a narrow bandwidth filter: 1.5-1.73  $\mu$ .

15 The underdrawing of the Edelheere triptych was previously examined by Helene Verougstraete (Verougstraete-marcq 1981: 124), Roger Van Schoute and Anna Trobeck (Van Schoute & Trobeck-Henrard 1991: 123-125) and Micheline Comblen-Sonkes (Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 119-120, 145).

16 Note that this sketch is partially concealed in the infrared image by the strongly infrared absorbing sleeve of the saint's blue robe (probably azurite).

17 Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 145.

18 See the contribution by Griet Steyaert on this altarpiece in this volume.

19 Modifications of the background of the recto of the left wing were already noted in Verougstraete 1981: 124-125, where it is suggested that a first, figurative version of the background might have been covered over.

20 The structural conservation of the panels was conducted by Jean-Albert Glatigny, assisted by Aline Genbrugge. The conservation of the paint layers and corrective retouching was carried out by Hélène Dubois, assisted by Géraldine Van Overstraeten.

21 The cradle and the dovetail inserts were probably applied between 1859 et and 1861, when Etienne Le Roy treated the triptych (see above, note 12). Critics reported that the grisaille paintings on the reverse of the wings had to be damaged in order to repair the joins.

22 Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 138-139.

23 Blisters in the background were consolidated twice by J. Buéso, in 1920-1921 and 1927-1928: Comblen-Sonkes 1996: 138-139.

24 Coremans 1953: 89-90.

25 The corrections and the retouching of the wood were carried out with Paraloid B72 and powdered pigments.

26 Verougstraete-Marcq 1981: 121-124.