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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

THE FLIP SIDE

The secrets of conserving the wood behind an early masterpiece.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Several of the world's top experts in the conservation of very old wood covered with very old paint met recently in a windowless, cramped room of the St. Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, Belgium. For two days, they worried over planks that had been cut from Baltic oak trees six centuries ago, probably in Poland, because the Low Countries were already running out of timber. The room, named the Villa Chapel, houses the multi-panelled Ghent Altarpiece, a six-hinged polyptych, measuring twelve feet high by seventeen feet wide when it is fully opened, which is sometimes called "The Adoration of the Lamb," after its largest panel. The work is believed to have been begun by Hubert van Eyck in the early fourteen-twenties and was finished in 1432, six years after his death, by his brother Jan van Eyck, a revolutionary innovator who was at least as important to Northern European painting as Giotto, a century earlier, had been to Italian painting.

The altarpiece originally inhabited a more elegant but even smaller space in the cathedral, the private chapel of Joost Vijdt, a wealthy textile merchant who had commissioned it. It remained there through six centuries, except for a number of prudent removals—most urgently, to rescue it from Protestant iconoclasts, in 1566, and from a fire, in 1822—and two confiscations, by French soldiers, who filched the central panels in 1794, and by Hitler, who, in 1942, had most of the altarpiece taken from where it had been stored for safekeeping, in France, and hauled first to a castle in Bavaria and then, to avoid Allied bombing, to a salt mine in Austria, where it was discovered by American soldiers in 1945. In 1986, it was relocated to the Villa Chapel, for reasons of security, and enclosed in a huge, aquarium-like box of bulletproof, reflective, greenish safety glass that renders it scarcely seeable and which the restoration experts loathe. Nevertheless, the work is the premier tourist attraction in Ghent, which

cannot rival Bruges, Antwerp, or Brussels for their abundance of canonical Flemish art created in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries under the reigning dukes of Burgundy—notably, Philip the Good, Jan van Eyck's principal patron, who is otherwise famous for having captured Joan of Arc.

The experts had been charged with assessing the physical condition of the altarpiece, which last underwent a major restoration in 1950-51, and with recommending a site and a design for its future display. Overseen by Anne van Grevenstein-Kruse, from the University of Amsterdam, and the art historian Ron Spronk, from Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario, the group included José de la Fuente, from the Prado, in Madrid; Ray Marchant, who works in the Hamilton Kerr Institute's restoration studio in London; the leading local authority, Jean-Albert Glatigny, from Brussels; and Ingrid Hopfner, from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna. They were attended by four "mid-career" conservators from New York, London, Los Angeles, and Budapest, and by three "emerging-level" conservators from Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Brussels, for what amounted to a master class, funded by the Getty Foundation's Panel Paintings Initiative, in response to an incipient crisis: the majority of the people who are most entrusted with preserving paintings on wood are now in their sixties and seventies, and are soon to retire. The category of their expertise encompasses nearly all early-Renaissance paintings, by artists from Giotto to Fra Angelico—except for frescoes, and for works that were subjected to a once common process that involved gluing paper or fabric to the paint, and, the wood having been chipped away, transferring it to canvas—as well as many Renaissance works, among them the "Mona Lisa."

New recruits to the field are exhaustively versed in the ethics of conservation and the chemistry and the physics of the