CRAZY *about* DYMPHNA

SVEN VAN DORST

The Story of a Girl who Drove a Medieval City Mad

HANNIBAL

THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

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FOREWORD

Goossen Van der Weyden's Dymphna altarpiece

A material witness to something intangible

KATHARINA VAN CAUTEREN
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FAMOUS GRANDFATHER

The art-historical literature has not been kind to Goossen Van der Weyden (ca 1465-after 1538), the grandson of the great Rogier. When your grandfather is viewed, and rightly so, as a titan of the so-called 'Flemish Primitives', the bar is high and the assessment criteria wrong. Why? Because Goossen simply isn't Rogier. Moreover, by the time the young Goossen had reached maturity, the world had changed thoroughly. But with the benefit of hindsight, this does not seem to have helped him either. After all, the art historians of the past enjoyed sticking labels onto things. While Rogier acquired every epithet that befitted a Primitive – and those labels were even based on his style – the machine malfunctioned when it came to his grandson. Goossen Van der Weyden was active as a painter during the somewhat nondescript period between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Memling and Co. were past their prime, the once innovative artistic recipes had acquired an air of déjà vu, and the fresh new influences of the Italian Renaissance had not yet fully permeated. Crumbs were all that remained. In his Dymphna altarpiece, or so it would seem, Goossen surfed on his grandfather's fame and harked back to previous fashions, even when 'old-fashioned' was synonymous with 'unfashionable'.

The final verdict: Goossen was a follower. Worse still, he was a product of so-called 'Antwerp Mannerism', with 'mannerism' being akin to blasphemy in the church of the hallowed fine arts. In 1915 Max J. Friedländer killed the *Maniëristen* (despite having been the one to devise this umbrella term) by calling them uninspired epigones who – the scandal! – were commercially minded. Friedländer can be praised for his contribution to the development of what was then a still young discipline of art history. But art-historical tyrannosaurs are also children of their time. In the wake of nineteenth-century ideas, Friedländer and his followers believed that an artwork should be genius, original, and the result of an insatiable urge to create. Goossen Van der Weyden missed the mark on all three counts. Fortunately for the painter, he was blissfully unaware of these posthumous parameters in the years around 1500.

MISUNDERSTOOD MICHELANGELO

In Goossen's time, an 'image-maker' – meaning someone who made visual depictions – was usually a kind of manager. The master stood at the helm of a well-oiled workshop that was populated with pupils and companions. Given the backdrop of an exponential increase in artistic production, which flooded Europe with works produced in the Brabantine and Flemish cities, artists were fiercely competitive. Goossen therefore needed to be flexible. Were you a conservative kind of customer? Then he would provide a slightly more traditional scene. A preference for the latest fashions? You ask, we paint.

Friedländer may have viewed 'commercial' as a dirty word, but even a painter can't live on his art alone. Van der Weyden Jr probably made a decent living. Just like the Impressionists discovered themselves in 1863, and became the height of good taste half a century later, or the Expressionism that remained 'modern' for amateur art lovers until the 1950s, the meticulous paintings in the Primitive tradition smoothly rounded the cape of the sixteenth century. The average customer did not lose any sleep over the avant-garde, not least because the avant-garde had not yet been invented. Above all, art needed to be functional and to support devotional practices. No one was waiting for the newfangled style that was emerging in Italy and was primarily based on the art of antiquity. When Michelangelo superciliously complains that the unadventurous paintings by the *fiamminghi* [Flemish painters] were more suited to women, monks, nuns and noblemen who lacked 'a sense of harmony', his frustration bristles from the pages. It would seem that the great Michelangelo, all the way over in Italy, felt misunderstood. Because here too, the conservative northerners enjoyed a level of success that irritated the Renaissance titan. No, in the early sixteenth century Goossen may not have been the Monet of his time, but whoever placed an order with him could count upon a solid and well-constructed tableau in the timeless style of his grandfather's tradition. No wonder Antonius Tsgrooten, the abbot of Tongerlo Abbey, came knocking on Van der Weyden's door in around 1505. On his wish list: a grand polyptych, starring Dymphna of Geel, the patron saint of lunatics.

AN EPISODE OF *GAME OF THRONES*

Legend has it that Dymphna was a sixth-century Irish princess. Assuming this is the case, Irish princesses too have both a father and a mother. But the latter died. The lonely king then decided to go in search of a new queen. She needed to be as sweet, beautiful, funny and intelligent as her late predecessor. Unfortunately, such women were so thin on the ground that he was forced to conclude that only his daughter met all the criteria. Dymphna thanked him for this honour before fleeing with her confessor to Geel, which in the sixth century was undoubtedly little more than a hamlet in the unruly Kempen, a region to the north of Antwerp. She delved into her savings and built a hospital for the poor locals and the (mentally) ill. But because her father noticed the balance of his bank account suddenly dip, he was able to track her down. He travelled to Geel, where he decapitated her, his own daughter.

This improbable and gruesome story alone is enough to turn Dymphna into a blisteringly topical figure, on several accounts. Firstly, the narrative touches on some of the social issues that the world still struggles with today: incest, self-determination, emancipation, corruption, the refugee problem … to name just a few. To medieval viewers, Goossen Van der Weyden was updating history. He focused on the tiniest details while 'modernising' the setting and the characters. Goossen took the sixth-century Dymphna and transplanted her into late-medieval soil – where she flourished. Her story is told in easily digestible episodes with a level of suspense that would be the envy of many a contemporary television producer. Each panel resembles an episode of *Game of Thrones*. The pilot with Dymphna's baptism is followed by the dramatic marriage proposal, and then, the flight. But beware, the princess is tracked down and betrayed by her father's messengers – resulting in her heartbreaking murder. Fortunately, the relics bring consolation and a happy ending, or at least for the late-medieval audience: their heroine ascends directly to heaven. This all goes to show that Dymphna and Goossen were far more attuned to their audience than Michelangelo with his Olympic heroes and indomitable Renaissance. Dymphna's a girl with whom you can empathise.

LARGER THAN LIFE

It is not clear why Dymphna was elevated to her position as patron saint of the mentally ill. Perhaps it was because she lost her head. Many saints are supposed to protect against the physical torments that killed them or the agonies they endured. Lucy's eyes were gouged out, and she became the patron saint of the blind; Agatha's breasts were cut off, making her the first port of call for anyone suffering problems in this area or with fertility in general. Decapitated martyrs (both male and female) are thus linked to everything related to the mind and all that can go wrong with it – or at least by medieval standards. It would seem that Saint Dymphna was not one to disappoint: pilgrims flocked to Geel from the fifteenth century onwards in the hope of curing their psychological afflictions. The local church, which was eventually inundated with visitors, was enlarged. Sick rooms were even added so that the patients could stay within the building. The abbot of nearby Tongerlo Abbey probably hoped to grab a slice of the pie with his monumental painting – because wherever there are pilgrims, the ching of the cash register can be heard.

Ultimately, the Dymphna cult in Geel evolved into the Unesco-recognised mental health-care system that exists to this day: a model in which patients are not patients, but live as the guests of the local population. They are treated with respect and nursed within family circles, without being thought of as sick. Geel is like a warm bath, a place where those who are searching for themselves can find themselves and where there is no stigma attached to being different. This might be the situation today, but it was no different in the late Middle Ages. From the sixteenth century onwards, the nuns in the city extended a loving welcome to pilgrims. This historical context ensures that the system not only bears witness to profound human values, but also to the social, economic and political shifts that characterised the region that we know today as 'Flanders'. In the cities that arose on that prosperous handkerchief of land between the Scheldt, Rhine and Meuse, an enterprising kind of citizen emerged. Irrespective of gender, these were people who consistently devised

creative solutions to the social problems that the established institutions of Church and State were still incapable of addressing. They created beguinages for single men and women – the latter being known as *begarden* – hospitals and guilds with social-security systems, thus providing a safety net for people who were mentally adrift.

And then Dymphna stepped onto the stage. By helping to structure these everyday care practices and strengthening them via her compelling story, she became a heroine. Yet she is responsible for so much more. Dymphna's existence – while probably fictitious – had very real consequences, which imbues her with a larger-than-life quality. She lends a face – albeit an imaginary one – to an undeniably real community project that is founded on the principles of charity and humanity. Dymphna is both a fiction and a social construct, and yet she has secured a permanent place in our collective imagination. This is why we relate to her and why she continues to thrive. She is what makes us human. Dymphna is not just a gateway to the past: she lives.

OVER THE PAINTER'S SHOULDER

As a result, the Dymphna altarpiece fulfils almost all the criteria that inspire contemporary researchers. The saint is eternal and yet acutely topical. The artist who depicted her has been vilified but deserves a second chance. Goossen and his Dymphna, together, have much more to recommend them. While most artworks are executed by artists whose names have long since vanished into the mists of time, together with those of their owners, Dymphna has a well-documented pedigree. We know for and by whom the polyptych was made, where it was displayed and all it has suffered. We know when the triptych was sawn apart and on which scoundrel's orders. We also know which panel is missing and why the abbot's portrait has slowly faded. In short, the object is exceptionally well-documented. And at the same time, it's not. Until recently – and notwithstanding the prejudices surrounding Goossen Van der Weyden – trying to understand what it meant to be a painter in the early sixteenth century was like staring into a crystal ball. How were the studios organised and by what means did they collaborate? How were the tasks divided and what was the precise role of the master? How exactly did the studio complete an ambitious project like the Dymphna altarpiece?

When The Phoebus Foundation acquired the work in 2010, it was in a problematic condition. Despite having been well cared for in recent years, the old layers of varnish had yellowed and the historic retouches were discoloured. Worse still: over the course of its history, the Dymphna altarpiece had been sawn into pieces in addition to losing a panel and being overpainted in various places. But necessity became a virtue. The restoration campaign marked the start of a large-scale art-historical study, based primarily on the material evidence provided by the altarpiece itself. In order to extract every scrap of information from the centuries-old oak panels and the venerable layers of paint, a no-holds-barred approach was taken to the use of cutting-edge scientific analysis. X-rays yielded insight into the construction of the altarpiece and its historical modifications, while infrared technology revealed all of the retouched losses. And then it became even more exciting. Infrared reflectography was used to look through the paint layers, all the way down to the underdrawing. Macro-XRF unlocked the secrets of the actual painting process. Cross-sections and paint samples provided data about the structure of the layers and SEM-EDX analyses identified the various compounds from which Goossen mixed his paint.

The end results enable us to look over the painter's shoulder, as it were, and helps us to understand the lively day-to-day activities in an early sixteenth-century studio. What decisions were taken, at which point, and why? How do we account for the Visverkoperstoren [Fishmonger's tower] in the Antwerp Vismarkt [fish market], which was initially painted and then overlooked? And why did Goossen 'only' choose azure blue instead of the more expensive ultramarine? Were his clients counting their pennies or did the painter dissuade them? Surely the people with real money frequented Quinten Metsys rather than Goossen? Or did a suspicious whiff of humanism and heresy surround the former, while Goossen's studio was associated with good Christian pieces? Why was one of the female portraits painted on tin leaf and then neatly integrated into the overall

composition? Well, we say 'neatly', but if you scrutinise the painter's handiwork it becomes apparent that a number of adjustments were made and it was finished too quickly. Her portrait was meant to be inserted later but in its absence, and unable to sit still, the team of painters finished the body and hands. Only now, in retrospect, do we see how disproportionate they are in relation to her tiny head. 'Gosh, you know, I doubt if anyone will notice', somebody must have thought around 1505. And they would not have been wrong, because up until the restoration project more than five centuries later, this was probably the case.

Yet the woman with the large hands also indicates our limitations. Looking through our twenty-first century glasses, we have certain aesthetic and formal expectations – which preclude big hands and a small face. But perhaps for the lady in question it was not so much the size of her hands that mattered, but the fact that she was actually in the painting. She was there! What's more, she was in the front row! And just imagine: next to the saint herself! All too often we lack historical empathy and understand little of the pragmatic idiosyncrasy of artists and their patrons, their profound faith, their priorities and assessment criteria. By dwelling on the materiality of the painting, these new horizons are opened up. It makes the restoration project almost as unique as the object itself.

A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

As a master, you were only as good as your colleagues. Just like the altarpiece itself, the restoration and research project was the result of teamwork. Like a latter-day Goossen, Sven Van Dorst, who is also head of the conservation studio of The Phoebus Foundation Chancellery, took the lead. He collaborated intensively with Hilde Weissenborn on the restoration, while the entire Chancellery worked on the practical and interpretive questions. Here, Niels Schalley deserves a special mention. Sven was also able to rely upon the expertise of a wealth of researchers with specialist knowledge of the period, the artist and his subject. You can read about their insights and findings in this book.

The result is a voyage of discovery that leads from sixth-century Ireland via late medieval Antwerp to modern-day Geel. It is a story of vulnerability and strength, of sanctity and recognisability, of ambition and commerce, mysticism and pragmatism. It is a testimony to a faith that is as deep as it is distant – but equally to an enviably well-run business, and of a selflessness that is both universal and timeless. Dymphna is all this, and yet so much more. But beyond everything else, Dymphna tells a story that touches the very essence of who we are – as people.

Goossen Van der Weyden
Dymphna and her Companions about to Embark (detail)
Top left: condition in 1913
Top right: condition in 1923
Bottom left: condition in 1920-40
Bottom right: condition 2001

Goossen Van der Weyden
Dymphna's Father Proposes to her
Top: laying the varnish between the impasto
Bottom: the impasto after the removal of the varnish

CLEANING

After consolidation, the cleaning of the panels could begin. Under the most recent synthetic varnish layer, the paint surface was still covered with older layers of yellowed varnish and varnish residues containing natural resins. Under ultraviolet (UV) light, these fluoresce a distinctive blue-green colour. Although the varnish layers saturated the colours and protected the porous paint layer, the resin had also reacted with environmental factors such as light and air, thereby causing it to discolour. The bright blue sections of sky that characterise the work looked somewhat green under the yellowed varnish. Furthermore, the texture of the brocade motifs in the king's cloak appeared totally flat due to an accumulation of varnish between the raised brushstrokes. Grey veils of dust and dirt between the layers of varnish disturbed the depth and colour contrast of the scenes. The removal of the varnish layers and dirt was done under magnification. With the aid of solvents, sometimes in the form of a gel, these were gradually separated from the underlying painting. This was done with the utmost care as it was vital not to effect the original paint layer.

The most recent retouches could easily be dissolved together with the top coat of varnish. These were mainly remedial treatments for older, underlying interventions. As a result, they tended to be widespread and cover much of the original material. The older, discoloured retouching that remained on the paint surface were also systematically removed. The variety of filling materials uncovered during the cleaning process testifies to the repeated restoration treatments to which the paintings had been submitted. When these were stable and did not obscure the original, the fillings were retained; others were adjusted or removed.

As a result of the cleaning process, the blotchy appearance of the paintings disappeared and the bright, majestic colours became visible once again. The cleaning also revealed the remains of painted banderoles at the bottom or top edge of the panels. These had been hidden beneath overpaint and retouching for years.

Goossen Van der Weyden
Discovery of the Sarcophagi Containing the Bodies of Dymphna and Gerebernus
Top left: condition before conservation
Bottom left: during the removal of the yellowed varnish
Top: after the removal of the old layers of varnish and the retouches

STRUCTURAL TREATMENT

After the paintings had been cleaned, the team's panel specialist checked the joints and old cracks in the wood. The preliminary investigation had shown that almost all joints had been opened and reglued at some point. The collagen glue used for this had held up well. Only in a few cases did we need to reinforce the cracks or joints. After removing the old glue residue, new glue was applied and the alignment of boards was adjusted using light pressure. When the panels no longer connected, a filler was added to the adhesive to provide the necessary strength.

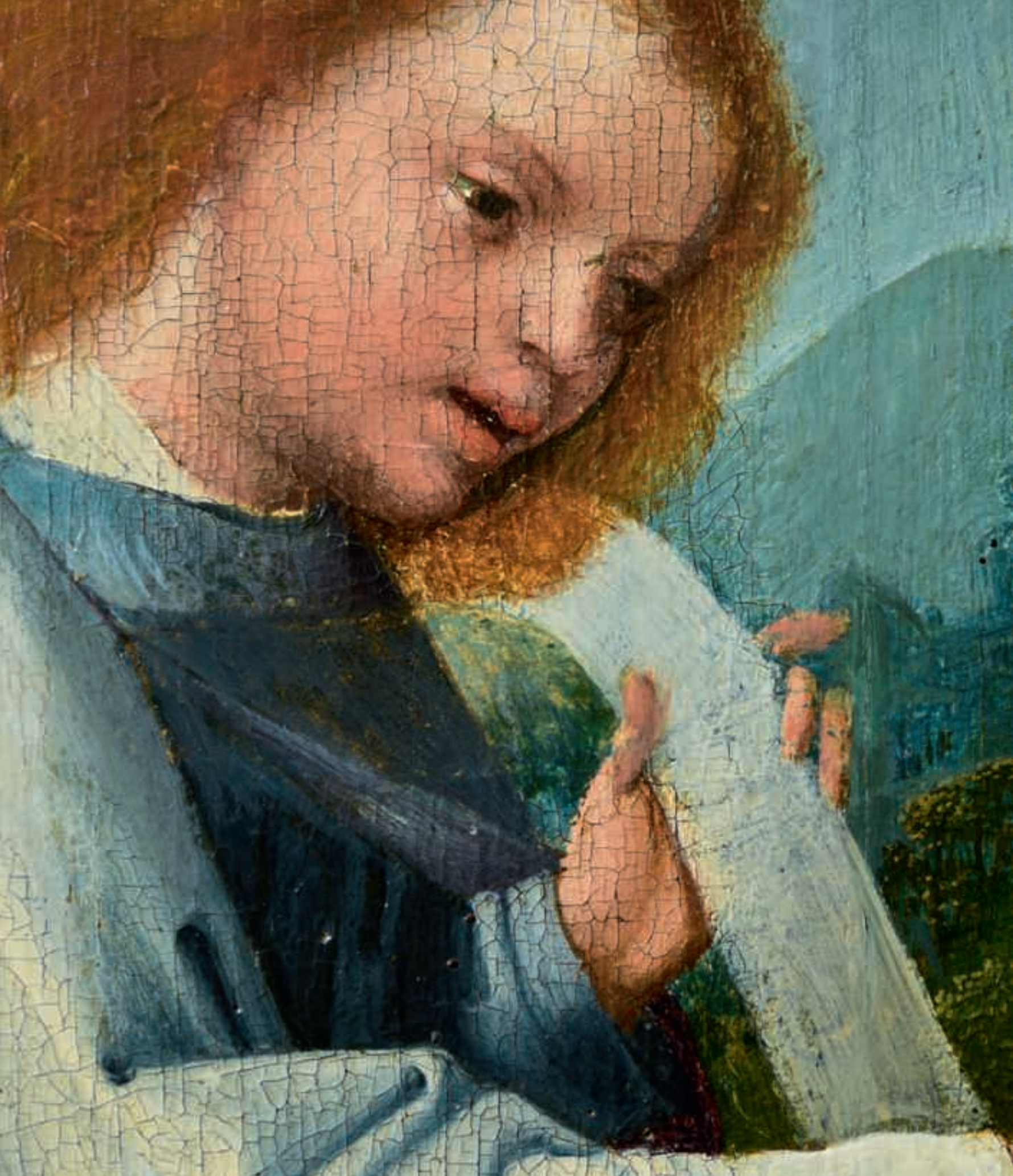
FILLING, RETOUCHING AND VARNISHING

The extent of the damage to the paint layer only really became visible on the 'stripped' panels. Most of the losses were quite small, but some panels contained reasonably large areas where the paint layer had become detached. Paint losses were also evident along the opened panel joints and at the edges where the panels had been sawn. Mechanical damage and old scratches were also visible in the paint layer, and the thinly applied brown, grey and black paints was abraded in several places.

Before adding new material, a thin layer of varnish was applied to the paintings. On the one hand, the aim was to saturate the colours so that they would be clearly visible when retouched. On the other hand, the layer forms a buffer between the original and the new fillings and retouches.

The differences in height between the losses and the paint layer were filled with a paste composed of chalk and a stable water-soluble binder. Old fillings that were less than perfect were also carefully updated. In order to match the surface structure of the fillings as closely as possible to the surrounding paint structure, both the relief of the paint and the craquelure patterns were meticulously imitated.

A base colour was applied in watercolour. With a fine brush, the pale fillings were given an initial even colour: a basic tone that matched the surroundings. Another varnish was applied to improve colour saturation. The fine details, brush strokes and glazing colours (semi-transparent) were applied during the final retouches. Composed of lightfast pigments bound with a synthetic resin, the paint was chosen for its stability, colour fastness and reversibility.

It was decided to fully integrate the losses into the adjacent areas, with the exception of the text on the painted banderoles. The fragments of words were so incomplete that it was impossible to reconstruct the letters. It was opted to retouch these zones in a pale colour matching the tone of the banderoles.

The filling and retouching took months to complete, but the results are eminently successful. By retouching the damage, the focus reverts to the beautifully painted scenes. The disruptive vertical lines, caused by the damage to the panel joints, are no longer visible. The treatment was completed by applying a final varnish that protects the retouches and ensures an even gloss.