

FACE TO FACE WITH HUGO VAN DER GOES

FACE TO FACE WITH

HUGO

VAN

DER

HANNIBAL

GOES

Old Master, New Interpretation







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## FOREWORD

*Anne van Oosterwijk,  
Director of Collection Musea Brugge*

In 2017, at the initiative of former director Till-Holger Borchert, Musea Brugge launched an ambitious restoration project. *The Death of the Virgin* by Hugo van der Goes had already been high on the restoration wish list for some time, but the fragile state of the work had acted as a brake on any efforts in that sense. After an extensive preliminary study, however, Griet Steyaert began the restoration process under the supervision of an international advisory committee. A generous subsidy from the Flemish Masterpieces Committee set the project in motion. A long, intensive and complex process, it was above all an enriching one. Hugo's work had always been among the favourites of both the museum staff and the public, but this restoration behind closed doors only heightened admiration for the work and the artist.

It was therefore only natural for Musea Brugge to organise an exhibition in which the work – after its long absence from the galleries – would take centre stage: *Face to Face with Death. Hugo van der Goes, Old Masters and New Interpretations* (28 October 2022–5 February 2023). The power of the painting, which is even more apparent now that the restoration is complete, convinced Elviera Velghe, Director of Public Affairs & Exhibitions, and Anne van Oosterwijk, Director of Collection, that an exhibition built entirely around this one work would be most interesting. After all, a masterpiece of this calibre deserves a great deal of attention. Perhaps contrary to expectations, however, this is not an exhibition focused on a single work. The exhibition features some seventy objects, and almost all these works of art and heritage objects date from Hugo's time. They support, explain and contextualise the various themes present in *The Death of the Virgin*. They are all gems by many well-known Old Masters: Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Hans Memling, Albrecht Bouts, Adriaen van Wesel and Cornelis Engebrechtsz.

In addition, the universal and timeless themes addressed in this painting form the basis for five contemporary new masters to give their vision of the work of art and the subject. Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, Ivo van Hove, Berlinde De Bruyckere and Sholeh Rezazadeh immediately responded positively to our request to act, somewhat unusually, as new masters in an exhibition of Old Masters. They are the bridge between Van der Goes's

work and visitors who may not have the religious baggage to understand the traditional interpretation of the painting, and viewers who may not be captivated spontaneously by the brush technique of a Flemish Primitive. The contemporary masters open up the panel in an entirely new way to a very diverse audience with different backgrounds. This will undoubtedly broaden Hugo's public and certainly increase the number of his fans.

This project demonstrates the ambition Musea Brugge has with its collection-based exhibition programme. The heritage we manage tells many special stories that are of interest to a wide audience and that deserve far more attention. This ambition will be fully realised in the new BRUSK exhibition hall (opening in 2025). *Face to Face with Hugo van der Goes – Old Master, New Interpretation* is an important step in this development.

#### *Acknowledgements*

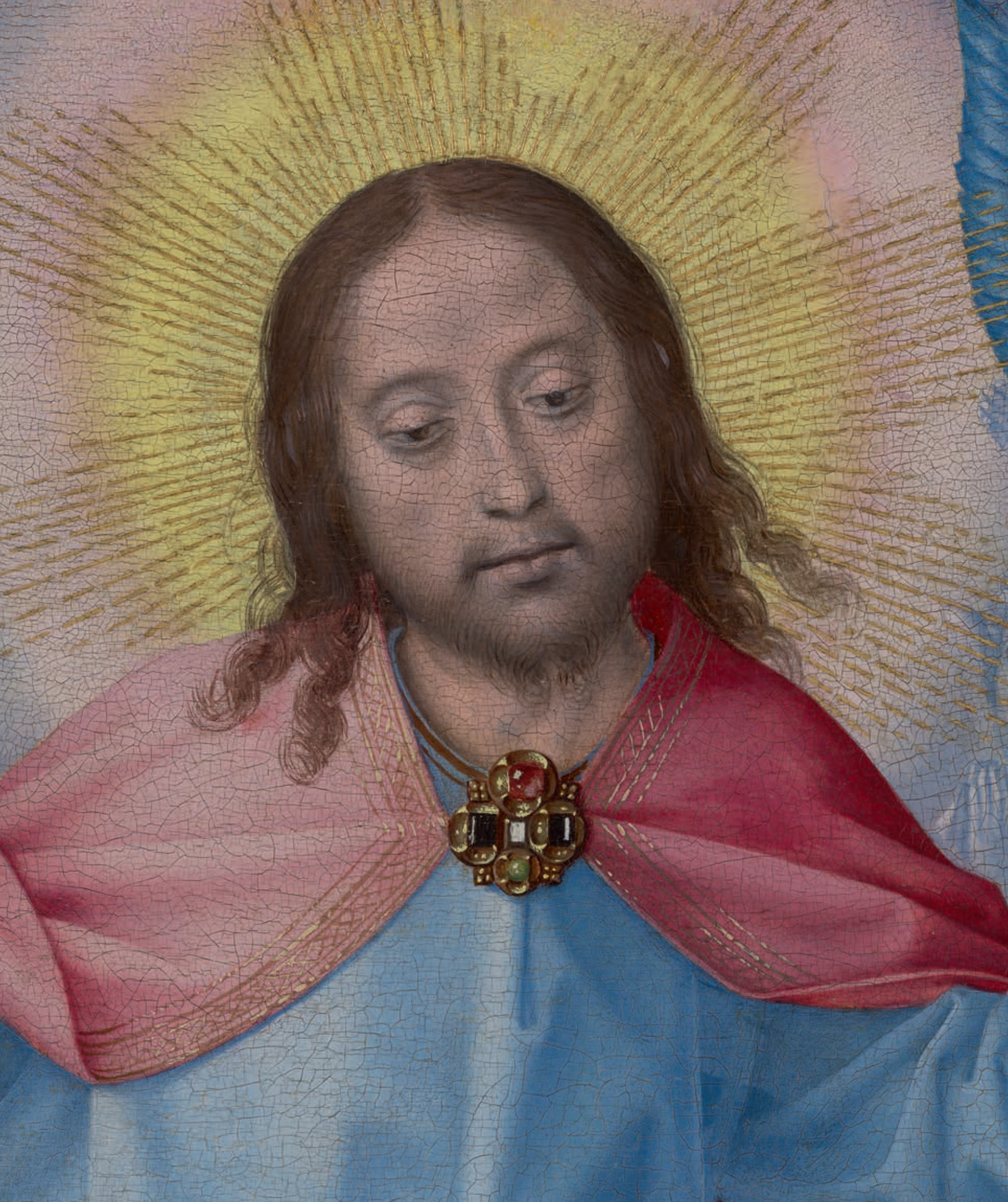
A project like this takes some doing and it would not have been possible without the advice and assistance of many people. First of all, we would like to thank Griet Steyaert, and Marie Postec who assisted Griet in the last phase of the restoration. They carried out and followed up this complex restoration project conscientiously and most carefully. They were accompanied by an international scientific advisory committee consisting of Maryan Ainsworth, Till-Holger Borchert, Lorne Campbell, Nicola Christie, Jill Dunkerton, Beatrix Graf, Babette Hartweg, Lizet Klaassen, Stephan Kemperdick, Catherine Reynolds, Kristel Van Audenaeren, Nadia Vangampelaere, Anne van Grevenstein and Hilde Weissenborn. We thank them all sincerely for their advice and guidance.

Noël Geirnaert, Samuel Mareel, Bart Ramakers and Bernhard Ridderbos were an important sounding board for the development of the exhibition concept. Our sincere thanks for always reflecting on our proposals, despite the digital hindrances in Covid times. Jimi Abidts and his colleagues at VC Studios made the atmospheric reports about the new masters. Studio OTW and Chloroform were in charge of the beautiful scenography.

The entire staff of Musea Brugge contributed to this important project. Unfortunately, not everyone can be mentioned here by name. We will make an

exception for the members of the project team: Sibylla Goegebuer, Marijn Everaarts and Lieven De Visch deserve a mention for their hard work and inexhaustible dedication to raise this exhibition to the highest level. The new frame of the painting was developed by Peter Van Pelt and Casper Vanhaelemesch of the technical workshop of Musea Brugge in close consultation with the restorers and Nadia Vangampelaere. This craftsmanship also deserves an honourable mention.













*[brother Hugo] ... was so renowned as a painter  
that on our side of the mountains there was no  
one his equal at that time, it was said.*

Gaspar Ofhuys, c. 1510







HUGO VAN  
DER GOES  
AND THE  
DEATH OF  
THE VIRGIN

The Story of  
a Masterpiece

*Matthias Depoorter*











FIG. 3

Hugo van der Goes,  
Portraits of Tommaso  
Portinari and Maria  
Baroncelli (details), from  
the *Portinari Triptych*,  
c. 1477–78, oil on panel,  
274 × 652 cm, Florence,  
Le Gallerie degli Uffizi,  
inv. 1890/3191-3193



de' Medici and his wife Clarice Orsini, still bear witness to those glorious days and to Bruges's connection with Florence. Portinari did everything in his power to associate with the Burgundians. Bladelin had been councillor to Philip the Good (1396–1467) and Portinari did business with this Burgundian duke. He also acted as one of his councillors. He gave diplomatic advice to his son Charles the Bold (1433–1477) and lent him large sums of money to finance his wars. The repayment of these loans eventually proved impossible after the duke's death in 1477 at the Battle of Nancy. These and other malpractices would herald the end of both the Bruges and London Medici Bank branches. Nevertheless, Portinari continued to be called on for diplomatic assignments by Emperor Maximilian of Austria (1459–1519) and his son Philip the Handsome (1478–1506). He also succeeded in settling the conflict with Lorenzo de' Medici.

Tommaso Portinari had an eye for pioneering art. He ordered at least two works from Hans Memling, among which a Passion scene (Galleria Sabauda, Turin) with the kneeling portraits of himself and his wife Maria Baroncelli, as well as a devotional triptych whose side panels with both their portraits have been preserved to this day (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). He and his wife and children are also depicted on Van der Goes's *Portinari Triptych* (fig. 3). After *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by the Van Eyck brothers (1432, St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent), the painting is one of the largest works of the Flemish Primitives to have been preserved. Hugo van der Goes put all his genius into it, but never lived to see the moment when the altarpiece was installed in Florence, the beating heart of the Italian Renaissance. He died before or during it was being shipped via Bruges to Pisa, from where the masterpiece was transported further via the Arno to Florence. Sixteen men then carried the panel to the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. There, in 1483, it was given a place on the main altar in the Chiesa di Sant'Egidio, the hospital church, in the Portinari family chapel.

It must have made an unforgettable and exotic impression on the painters in the city. Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–1494), who taught Michelangelo to paint (frescoes), fed upon the artistry of Van der Goes, as did his colleagues Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510) and Filippino Lippi (c. 1457–1504).

That the *Portinari Triptych* was by Hugo van der Goes we owe to Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) who mentioned it in 1550 in the first edition of *Le vite*, his book of artist biographies. Although he calls the painter Ugo d'Anversa – the connection between Van der Goes and Antwerp is unclear – his attribution became the building block of further art historical research into the painter. Van der Goes's oeuvre, which consists of only a few unsigned and undated works, was compiled on the basis of the *Portinari Triptych*. This also applies to *The Death of the Virgin*, the (with good reason) most idiosyncratic painting by Van der Goes that has survived.

For a long time, this master painter remained largely unknown to the general public. In the nineteenth century, several (art) historians did some pioneering work reconstructing his oeuvre. But it was not until the *Exposition des Primitifs flamands et d'Art ancien* in 1902 in Bruges that everything gained in momentum. Viewed more broadly, this exhibition was a reference point for exhibitions devoted to artists from the Burgundian Netherlands. Since then, interest in Hugo van der Goes and *The Death of the Virgin* has only increased.

## Art and context

Hugo van der Goes was active as a painter in the second half of the fifteenth century when the Burgundian Netherlands were the most urbanised region of Northern Europe. Trade and industry were flourishing, mainly due to the production of Flemish cloth which had been the driving force behind this economic prosperity since the eleventh century. The presence of capital fed the demand for art and luxury products, and metropolises such as Ghent and Bruges played an essential role in this. These very favourable socio-economic conditions formed the basis of a creative environment within an urban network in which highly skilled craftsmen and artists were enjoying their heyday. Hugo van der Goes was one of them.

Politically, this region was united by the dukes of Burgundy in the Burgundian Netherlands. In 1369, Margaret III, Countess of Flanders, married the Burgundian duke Philip II the Bold (1342–1404), son of the French king John the Good (1319–1364). In 1384 this marriage led to the union of French Burgundy and Flanders. Their grandson, Philip the Good, expanded











FIG. 4

Justus van Gent (possibly Joos van Wassenhove), *Calvary Triptych*, c. 1465, oil on panel, 326.5 × 214.9 cm, Ghent, St Bavo's Cathedral

the empire further and his son, Charles the Bold, turned it into an almost completely uninterrupted territory: from high in the north of today's Netherlands to Burgundy in the south, at the level of present-day Switzerland. After the death of Charles the Bold in 1477, power passed to his daughter Mary of Burgundy (1457–1482). Due to her sudden death in 1482, power over the Netherlands passed into the hands of her husband Maximilian of Austria from the Habsburg dynasty.

It was within this social and political context that Hugo van der Goes had a lightning career of about fifteen years, counting from 1467 (when he became a 'free master' in the Guild of Saint Luke in Ghent) until his death. Where exactly he was born and when is unclear. It is plausible that the painter was born in Ghent, but that has not been proven. In the Leuven city accounts from 1480, Ghent is mentioned as his place of birth, and the court poet Jean Lemaire de Belges (1473–c. 1525) called him 'Hugues de Gand' (Hugo of Ghent). This may be why Van der Goes became identified with the city where he worked. It is possible that he was born around 1440, but that too is guesswork.

Who he learned the painter's trade from is not known, but it seems logical that he was already an experienced artist when he became a free master in Ghent. That Van der Goes first worked with Rogier van der Weyden in Brussels before becoming an independent painter in Ghent is, as Lorne Campbell has suggested, a possible line of thinking. He would then have shared this with Hans Memling, whose knowledge of the inner workings of the Van der Weyden studio was so extensive that it is assumed that he worked there as an assistant. Moreover, Memling became a burgher of Bruges after Van der Weyden's death in 1464. A similar concurrence in the chronology also holds for Van der Goes, who became a free master in Ghent three years after Van der Weyden's death.

The painter Justus van Gent (possibly Joos van Wassenhove, active 1460–c. 1480) was one of the guarantors of Van der Goes's free mastery within the Ghent Guild of Saint Luke. Sometime later, he exchanged Ghent for Italy in order to make a career in Urbino at the court of Federico da Montefeltro (1422–1482). The *Calvary Triptych* attributed to him in St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent, then still called St John's Church, gives an excellent picture of contemporary art in Ghent (fig. 4). Nothing is known with certainty about a possible









HUGO VAN  
DER GOES,  
LIFE AND  
WORK

*Marijn Everaarts*



Hugo van der Goes (c. 1440–1482/1483) was one of the most famous painters of his time. Until he entered the *Roode Klooster* or Red Cloister near Brussels as a lay brother in 1476, he worked in the Flemish city of Ghent. Here, he could count the Burgundian court, religious institutions, and prominent citizens and merchants among his patrons. He also played an important role in the Guild of Saint Luke, which united the city's painters. Hugo's influence on his contemporaries and followers can hardly be underestimated.

In the fifteenth century, the county of Flanders was part of the Burgundian Netherlands, which at its peak reached from the north of the present-day Netherlands to Burgundy in the south, united under the rule of the Burgundian dukes. Flanders was an economically prosperous region, with cities such as Bruges and Ghent as centres of trade, politics and religion. This prosperity led to a great demand for luxury products. It is in this context that Flemish art production flourished. The Flemish painters refined the use of oil paint, and this enabled them to depict the

world around them in ever-greater detail. This realism was also applied to the still-predominantly religious works, bringing the world of religion closer to the everyday life and circumstances of viewers; for example, religious scenes were situated in a fifteenth-century interior, sometimes with a view onto a contemporary cityscape (fig. 1). Famous names of painters from the fifteenth century are Jan and Hubert van Eyck, Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden, Petrus Christus, Dieric Bouts, Hans Memling and Gerard David. Although less well-known today, Hugo van der Goes fits seamlessly in the line of these innovators in painting. Aware of the art of his contemporaries, he occupies a place of his own among these great masters.

Only a small number of works can be attributed to Van der Goes with any certainty. As with many artists from that period, the information we have on his life and work is fragmentary. None of the paintings that are now considered part of Hugo's oeuvre are dated or signed. Records in preserved documents help us form an image of the career and life of Van der

FIG. 1

Hans Memling,  
*Diptych of Maarten van  
Nieuwenhove*, 1487, oil on  
panel, 52 × 83 cm (opened),  
Bruges, Musea Brugge,  
inv. O.SJ0178.I



Goes, but they only tell part of the story. They mainly show us the craftsman that Van der Goes was, but they do not explain his tremendous success as an artist among the elite. His works of art can often be linked to individual patrons from religious circles or the wealthy bourgeoisie. Alongside information from archives, art-historical and stylistic research is an important way of reconstructing a possible body of work.

## Records in archival documents

Archival documents from the city of Ghent and the Burgundian court enable us to map out the career of Van der Goes fairly well after 1467. In that year, the painter became a 'free master' in the Guild of Saint Luke (the guild to which painters belonged) in Ghent, the city where he would continue to work in the following years. Two other Ghent painters that we know by name, Joos van Wassenhove and Daneel Ruthaert, vouched for him. We do not know much about Daneel Ruthaert. Joos van Wassenhove, also known as Justus van Gent, was at that time also a free master and one of the most successful painters in Ghent. Around 1470 he left for Italy to enter the service of Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino. After this, Van der Goes became the most important artist in Ghent.

Little is known with certainty about the years before 1467. In all likelihood, the painter was born in or around Ghent, as evidenced by a record in a document from the Leuven city accounts of 1480. He is not mentioned by name here, but since the painter in question is reported to be living in the Red Cloister, it is highly likely that this concerns Van der Goes. The same source states that this painter is from Ghent. Jean Lemaire de Belges, the court poet and historiographer of Archduchess Margaret, Governor of the Habsburg Netherlands, also describes him at the beginning of the sixteenth century as coming from this city – 'Hugues de Gand' (Hugh of Ghent) – and also as one of the most important artists of his time. Where and from whom he learned his trade as a painter is not known with certainty. Different fifteenth-, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historians give varying information; for example, they say he was a pupil of Jan van Eyck, but also that he came from Bruges, or even Leiden.

### *The city of Ghent and the court of Burgundy*

Van der Goes occupied an important and prominent place in the Ghent painters' guild. During the years he was working in the city, the artist vouched several times for new members of the guild, for instance Alexander Bening and Agnes van den Bossche in 1469, and Heinric Lievins in 1474. He was also elected dean of the guild several times, making him the highest person in authority.

Van der Goes moved in the (artistic) milieu of the elite around the Burgundian dukes and their pomp and circumstance. From documents, we know that the artist received several assignments from the city of Ghent and the Burgundian court. In 1468, 1472 and 1473, for instance, he painted coats of arms and blazons on the occasion of the papal indulgence in Ghent. During this celebration (which was held in a different city each time), indulgences could be obtained. In 1468, together with many other artists from Flemish cities, he worked on the lavish decorations of the ducal palace in Bruges on the occasion of the marriage of Charles the Bold and Margaret of York. He was also paid for providing decorations and heraldic painting on the occasion of the Joyous Entries of Charles the Bold and his wife Margaret of York into Ghent in 1469 and 1472. In 1474 he worked on several blazons that were hung in the Church of St Veerle in Ghent, when the mortal remains of the Burgundian duke Philip the Good (who died in 1467) were transferred from Bruges to Dijon.

### *The Red Cloister and Gaspar Ofhuys*

At the height of his career, around 1476, Van der Goes made the remarkable decision to leave Ghent and enter the Red Cloister near Brussels as a lay brother. Here, with the support of the prior, he continued to practise his profession as a painter. He enjoyed privileges, such as the right to travel and drink wine. He also received distinguished visitors, such as Archduke Maximilian. In 1480 he was asked by the city of Leuven to come and estimate some unfinished panels by the Leuven painter Dieric Bouts. He also undertook a journey together with his fellow brothers, probably to Cologne. On the return journey he suffered a nervous breakdown, but his fellow travellers were able to bring him back safely to the cloister.



FIG. 2

Hugo van der Goes,  
*Portinari Triptych*,  
c. 1477–78, oil on panel,  
274 × 652 cm, Florence,  
Le Gallerie degli Uffizi,  
inv. 1890/3191-3193

These events were made known thanks to the account of Hugo's fellow brother Gaspar Ofhuys, who wrote a chronicle around 1509–13 about the history of the Red Cloister. In it, Ofhuys also talks extensively about the unstable mental condition of Van der Goes during the last years of his life. Ofhuys's chronicle was rediscovered by Alphonse Wauters in 1863 and led to renewed interest in the painter. Although the account provides us with a lot of interesting information – after all, we rarely know anything about the everyday life of fifteenth-century artists, let alone their state of mind – and is therefore a uniquely valuable source of information, the narrative also led in the nineteenth century to an all-too-romantic interpretation of Van der Goes as a troubled but brilliant artist. Ofhuys's account also influenced the research into the painter's work, especially with regard to his later works (see the chapter 'Hugo van der Goes and *The Death of the Virgin*: The Story of a Masterpiece'). Van der Goes died in 1482/1483 and was buried at the Red Cloister, according to Ofhuys.

## The preserved oeuvre

### *Portinari Triptych*

The centrepiece of Hugo van der Goes's oeuvre is the so-called *Portinari Triptych* (fig. 2). This monumental triptych – open, it measures more than 2.5 by 6 metres – was probably commissioned around 1473 by Tommaso Portinari, a very rich Florentine banker who lived and worked in Bruges, where he managed a branch of the Medici Bank and acted as advisor to the Burgundian court. On the side panels, Tommaso Portinari and his wife Maria Baroncelli and their children are depicted with their patron saints. On the back of the triptych's side panels (fig. 3), we see an Annunciation, the announcement that Mary would give birth to Jesus, which heralds the depiction on the central panel, namely the birth of Christ and the adoration of the shepherds. Van der Goes positions all the figures around the Christ Child and depicts them in great detail, which can be seen in the expression of the fabric of the various robes



FIG. 3 (next page)

Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Triptych* (exterior), c. 1477–78, oil on panel, 253 × 141 cm (each), Florence, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. 1890/3191-3193

FIG. 4

Jan and Hubert van Eyck, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, 1432, oil on panel, 340 × 440 cm, Ghent, St Bavo's Cathedral

and the individualised faces of the shepherds. The shepherds looking in with their archetypal heads raise the work's realism and dynamism to an unprecedented level, an innovation in painting.

The *Portinari Triptych* was shipped to Florence in 1483, where the work was placed on the main altar of Sant'Egidio, the church of the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. Once in Florence, the work immediately influenced the production of art there. This can be seen, for example, in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, produced shortly after the arrival of the triptych. The realism with which Ghirlandaio painted the figures, especially the shepherds, was innovative in Florentine art at the time and was certainly indebted to Van der Goes's work. In his 1550 series of artist biographies, *Le vite*, Giorgio Vasari mentions an altarpiece in this church by the hand of Ugo d'Anversa. Although the connection between Hugo and Antwerp is not clear, from then on the *Portinari Triptych* was taken as a starting point for

the further reconstruction of Van der Goes's oeuvre. Possibly, Vasari associated Flanders with Antwerp particularly because in the sixteenth century this city had gained in importance compared to Ghent and Bruges.

In the *Portinari Triptych*, we see both the originality of Van der Goes and the tradition from which he stems. Although the format is exceptional, it is not unique. It seems to compete with that other magnificent altarpiece from Ghent, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by Hubert and Jan van Eyck (1432) (fig. 4). That Van der Goes knew the work of the Van Eyck brothers seems unavoidable, since it was located in Ghent at the time and was already well known in those days. Perhaps Van der Goes is the painter mentioned in 1495 in the travel diary of Hieronymus Münzer. Münzer recounts a visit to the *Mystic Lamb* and tells of a great painter – not mentioned by name – who wanted to imitate the work but fell into melancholy because he would never be able to match it.











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The translation of the quotes by Gaspar Ofhuys (pp. 11, 137) is based on: Elisabeth Dhanens, *Hugo van der Goes*, Antwerp 1998

Citation p. 99: Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem 1604

Details pp. 4, 8, 9, 12, 54, 84, 96, 97, 100, 134, 135, 138, 142: Hugo van der Goes, *The Death of the Virgin*, 1475–82/83, oil on panel, 147.8 × 122.5 cm, Bruges, Musea Brugge, inv. 0000.GRO0204.I

Detail pp. 20, 21: Hugo van der Goes, *Portinari Triptych*, c. 1477–78, oil on panel, 274 × 652 cm, Florence, Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. 1890/3191-3193

Detail pp. 51, 52: Hugo van der Goes, *Adoration of the Kings* (the Monforte Altarpiece), c. 1470, oil on panel, 147.2 × 241.4 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 1718

Detail pp. 70, 71: Hugo van der Goes, *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1480, oil on panel, 99.9 × 248.6 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, inv. 1622A