HANS MEMLING

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Editor's Note
Out of respect to the author's original work, this text has not been corrected or updated, particularly regarding attribution, dates, and the current locations of works. These were uncertain at the time of the text's first publication, and sometimes remain so to this day. The information in the captions, however, has been updated.

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Contents

Foreword 7

I. Memling's Origins and Beginnings 11

II. Memling between History and Legend 35

III. Memling's Old Age and Genius 65

IV. Memling's Major Works 97

V. Master Memling, between Influences and Authentications 195

Notes 252

Index 253

Foreword

On approaching Bruges, one notes a tall tower with a warlike aspect that dominates the roofs of the city, and seems more like the dungeon in a fortress than a church's bell tower. But it is the bell tower of Notre Dame. No statues, mouldings, or engravings embellish this imposing mass. It proudly thrusts out its heavy walls, grave as the thought of death, bare and sad like the outside of a prison. Flocks of jackdaws fly around, calling their short loud cries, and they settle on the roof along with a row of mystical birds. The Northern sun whitens the edifice with its pale light, the Netherlands' misty horizon covering it with its bright lines. From the top of the tower, one can perceive from afar the ocean's tides. And, in a natural way, this scene inspires poetic sentiments and plunges its spectator into deep meditations. For any Dutch art lover, the picturesque town of Bruges is full of marvelous surprises. Even if its attractions cannot rival those of grander and more magnificent European towns, Bruges, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was the central and most important market of the cities of Hanse, home of merchant princes. Unfortunately, all this has changed; Bruges is no longer classified as an area of wealth and commercial importance. At one time houses were full of paintings by Memling and other great artists, which today are dispersed throughout the entire world. Bruges was only able to preserve a few pieces from its great masters.

Near this pious retreat, under the bell tower's shadow, looms another sanctuary that governs and protects the word of God. It carries the name of St John's Hospital. We do not know during what period it was founded, but was already in existence in the twelfth century. Around the year 1397 the monks there adopted the Rule of Saint Augustine. Dedicated to their vows of easing human suffering, their first priority dictated that they only see people from Bruges and Maldeghem. Nuns also took their place at the bedsides of the suffering and murmured words of consolation. Although the building has since become a museum, it has changed little. It is Gothic in style, full of gables and tarasques – mythical beasts half dragon and half-fish – and admits light through ogee windows. The sick awaited the end of their hardships there, under the pointed-arch vaulting. A calm, covered courtyard, fresh lime blossoms, and a single pond where ducks dabbled, occupied the space between the sickrooms. A small number of convalescents rested in the fresh air on fine days, full of gentle and profound melancholy with past anguish left behind them, hope of full recovery enlivening them with its magic visions.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man, c. 1470.
Oil on oak panel, 33.3 x 23.2 cm.
The Frick Collection, New York.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man, c. 1472.
Oil on oak panel, 35.3 x 25.7 cm.
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man from the Lespinette Family, c. 1485-1490.
Oil on wood, 30.1 x 22.3 cm.
Mauritshuis, The Hague.

It is at the heart of the hospital church (the buildings were separated during the nineteenth century) that the famous *Shrine of Saint Ursula* (page 135 to 140), created in 1489, can be found, and where other masterpieces produced by Hans Memling shine. Carefully kept for more than five centuries, gleaming in all their primitive radiance, their grace suddenly enchants the traveler and transports him into an era that is no more. He finds himself on the current of the eternal river, floating far from our time into older generations and onto other monuments, onto a shore that humanity has always avoided. Morals, costumes, passions, and beliefs, forever frozen under the artist's paintbrush, have found themselves transported into our modern age. A gentle and tender light illuminates the paintings, a profound silence reigns around the spectator; murmurs coming from outside serve to increase its poetic emotion: the wind sighs as it brushes against the crosses, swallows twitter as they skim over the rooftops, while the city rumbles from afar like a river through the mountains. In one's mind, these noises mix together and, dominated by the genius of memory, we can maybe imagine that we hear again the voices of days gone by.

— Why did these paintings belong to a hospice?

This is an inescapable question that plagues art historians, who can not respond to it in a satisfactory manner. A fog which seems to have enveloped so many Flemish masters, has wrapped itself around Memling and has hidden almost all knowledge of his existence. An impenetrable mystery surrounds him: we understand and admire his talent, but we know almost nothing of his life; several vague traditions and a few dry notes make up his story. Even his name was the subject of dispute for a long time, and the correct spelling of his name was not established until the beginning of 1861.[1]

I. Memling's Origins and Beginnings

Far from linking itself to a unique movement, the art of northern Europe, on the periphery of the Italian *quattrocento*, progressed rapidly and constantly. If the work of certain artists seems to offer similarities, fundamental differences are nonetheless notable in the works of great masters of this period such as Jan Van Eyck (c. 1390-1441), Rogier Van der Weyden (c. 1399-1464), Hugo Van der Goes (c. 1440-1482) and Hans Memling (c. 1433-1494), each distinguishing himself in his own manner from the "Old School" or the "New School." And if the Flemish fifteenth century can at times be perceived as a simple sketch for the full flowering of the seventeenth-century art of Rembrandt (1606-1669) or Vermeer (1632-1675), it is a no less unique and rich era. The last decades of this tumultuous period were particularly marked by artist migrations beyond the borders of the Netherlands, which, carrying the glory of Dutch art, also marked, in a sense, the end of the "Old School." Hans Memling was one of these men. And among the great names mentioned, it is that of Hans Memling of which Bruges can be the most proud.

However, a century after his death, the country that had been so rich in his works had been completely forgotten, so much and so well that in preparing his *Book of Painters* (*Het Schilder-Boeck*), a precious collection of Dutch and German biographies from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, published in 1604, Carel Van Mander (1548-1606) stated only that Hans Memling was a major master during his time, before the period of Pieter Pourbus (c. 1523-1584), that is, before 1540. According to Mander, Memling was born in the town of Bruges[2], while Jean-Baptiste Descamps (1714-1791) thought him to be from Damme. However, one could never doubt that he was not of German origin. The consensus with which all authors and documents call him "master Hans", suffices to prove this: *Hans* is the Teutonic form of the word Jean: in the Netherlands one says *Jan,* a monosyllable pronounced *Yann,* the English sound "j" being unknown in Germanic languages. There is a diminutive form *Hanneken.*[3] Marc Van Vaernewyck categorically affirms this elsewhere: "In Bruges," he says, "not only the churches but specific buildings are decorated with paintings from master Hugues, from master Rogier and from Hans the German."[4] If Bruges does not seem then to have been the hometown of renowned painters, its location, the quality of life it offered and the opportunity of the art market, nonetheless attracted a large number of artists over the course of the first half of the fifteenth century.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man Holding a Letter,
c. 1475.
Oil on wood, 35 x 26 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

The most famous, and those whose works have been preserved, were without a doubt the brothers Hubert and Jan Van Eyck. Hubert, the elder, lived there at the beginning of the century, and then moved to Ghent, while Jan lived in the town in 1425, from May to August. Then, in 1431, he moved there permanently and stayed there until he died in 1441. Peter Christus, a native of Baarle and student of the Van Eycks, also lived in Bruges, where he died in 1473 or 1474. It is also highly probable that the Memling family also came to live there. In addition, the artist's mother could have quite possibly been Flemish and the character inscribed on his paintings supports this theory. It is the discovery of an inscription in the Bruges citizens' register dating from 20 January 1465, under the name of Jean Van Mimnelinghe, son of Hamman, born in Seligenstadt, in Germany, which finally confirmed his Germanic origins. It is probable that Memling was already a major painter when he moved to Bruges: the fact that he was not recorded in the register preserved by the Bruges Painters Guild, demonstrates that he could have certainly practiced his art without constraint.

Memling's birth must have been, at the latest, in 1435. An anonymous traveler, whose notes were published by Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), had seen in 1521, at Cardinal Grimarni's, a self-portrait of Memling in which he appeared to be seventy years old.

If death had taken him in 1494, one must report his birth at least in the period around 1424. But when one traces his image in the mirror, he is fat and has a rosy face, indications of good health: therefore it would be very risky to think that he painted this image in the same year as his death. Thus, it appears more likely that he had not yet reached the end of his life, so we can then fix 1430-1435 as the approximate year in which he was born. So we shall adopt the middle year 1433 in order to not have him marry too late in life the woman who would accept him, and with whom he would have three children.

If Memling was raised within Dutch traditions, his apprenticeship as a painter and the identity of his master raise more questions. As he was only eight years old when Jan Van Eyck died in the month of July 1441, one can hardly suppose that he had learned the art of painting under that master's direction; their works present, in addition, fundamental differences. Nonetheless, he must have met Van Eyck sometimes in the streets of the city, in churches, in public meetings and during holidays, and examined his superior talents with precocious instinct. He helped, with all probability, at Van Eyck's funeral under the vault of Saint Donat; an emotional crowd gathered around the artist's humble coffin as the organ played, sending into the nave its sublime grief. The priests, celebrating the requiem mass, sang these beautiful lyrics: "Let whoever comes from the earth return to the earth, let whoever comes from God return to God!"

However, very early, Francesco Guichardin (1483-1540), Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and Filippo Baldinucci (1624-1696) ranked Memling among the students of Rogier Van der Weyden.[5] Vasari mentions a "Ausse, disciple of Rogier;"[6] Guichardin calls him "Hausse", and Baldinucci "Ans di Brugia." If the information acquired throughout the centuries and the "kinship" of certain works from the two masters seem to confirm this link, the notable stylistic differences between Memling's

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Young Man, c. 1480-1485.
Oil on wood, 26.7 x 19.8 cm.
Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich.

Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio),
Portrait of the Young Pietro Bembo,
1504-1505.
Oil on canvas, 54 x 39 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man, c. 1465-1470.
Oil on wood, 41.8 x 30.6 cm.
Städel Museum, Frankfurt.

early works and Van der Weyden's late paintings at times render this hypothesis improbable. And even if his style shows more resemblance to Van der Goes', the fact that the two men belong to the same generation can argue against a master-pupil relationship.

In the hotel of Margaret of Austria, one could see during the sixteenth century a triptych whose centre panel had been painted by Van der Weyden and whose side panels had been done by a pupil. The piece in the middle represents the Virgin holding the dead Christ in her arms; on the interior side of the panels two angels are moved to pity; on the outside, following a pattern already established, the Annunciation is traced in grey.[7] Memling's paintings prove that he was influenced by Rogier Van der Weyden at a time when the older artist was practicing his "second style." Thus we can believe that Memling left Bruges in order to come to Brussels to work under Rogier's direction.

Not only did Van der Weyden teach him how to use pencil and paintbrush, but he also taught him the art of oil painting. Descamps claims, however, that Memling did not want to employ this new method, and he always continued to thin his colours with egg white and plant gum. Tempera was then the most commonly employed technique, with these materials carefully mixed in more or less large quantities. The addition of honey, vinegar, or beer then allowed one to change the thickness of the body already obtained; the paint ended up like a coloured varnish, having the double advantage of giving the subject its tone and vigour and preserving the tempera from the harmful effects of the air. For a long time this error found resonance, yet never was this opinion more false nor did it delude the reader more. How would a man so skilled, a man so passionate about beauty, who appreciated so much, have looked down on an admirable means of standing by an ancient procedure? This hypothesis only offers little substance and is refuted elsewhere by facts. It is true, however, that certain of Memling's canvases, no doubt influenced by his Rhineland apprenticeship, were first started with tempera and then completed in oil. Thus, the master accentuated the principal lines of his composition, painted the rest in infinite delicacy, while his colours, following an unchangeable rule, proved to be so fine that the original drawing seemed to show through it.

However, this flimsy information hardly gives us a sense of the graceful colourist, and so we escape from the new and find Memling again in the notes from the anonymous traveler mentioned earlier. This time, the anonymous tourist admired, at the residence of Cardinal Grimani, a work by Memling's brush depicting Isabelle of Portugal, wife of Philip the Good, on which one can read the date of 1450. This painting proves that the Duke of Burgundy, connoisseur to the end, held the artist in the highest opinion; otherwise he would not have entrusted such an important task to him and would not have let him reproduce his wife's face, which had been painted for the first time by Jan Van Eyck himself. In the new image, the princess was seen a little smaller than she was in nature.[8] She had lost the brightness of her early days: twenty two years had passed since the head of the Bruges school had reproduced her features in all their splendour. What is twenty two years, when one thinks about it? It was one drop in the limitless abyss of eternity. This short space of time nonetheless sufficed to exhaust

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Young Man before a Landscape, c. 1475-1480.
Oil on wood, 26 x 20 cm.
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.

the soul and shrivel up the body; it embraces all the fertile years of life, almost all our moral existence; and however much time still wanting to abridge it, we do not repeat with bitterness: "Lord, Lord, take this chalice away from me!" Isabelle deserved to pose in front of a superior artist: she was a rare woman. She certainly was for the Duke of Burgundy, as she helped in many circumstances to make judgements, speeches, and activities, as a valiant companion and a skilled auxiliary. A prime minister could not have done better, or have been more useful to his monarch. In 1434, while they resided together in Dijon, the duke, forced to go to Flanders to take care of serious business, made Isabelle the Governor of Burgundy in his absence. It was a turbulent era in which men hardly had time to rest. As soon as Philip the Good left, the sound of a trumpet, the noise of arms, and the neighing of horses rang out in the dukedom: the discontented men and adversaries of the prince believed they would have better luck with a woman. Isabelle immediately convened every last one of her subjects, who rode into the countryside and forced the rebels to surrender. Such a brilliant debut inspired the duke with full confidence in the talents of the princess, whom he employed thereafter as an elite agent, especially in negotiations, in which she demonstrated great dexterity.

She had a sober beauty that conveyed her spirit: the noble, intelligent, and serious character of her figure left an impression on her listeners, increasing the eloquence and the subtlety of her discourse. In 1436 the women of Bruges implored her for help in resolving disputes with their husbands. During the year 1435 she contributed to the Arras Congress specifications which saved the monarchy from a perilous situation. Around 1437 she ruled on the marriage of the heir of Penthièvre, which ended the long quarrel between the older and younger branches of the house of Brittany. The Duke of Orleans, prisoner of the English since the battle of Azincourt in 1415, was freed after twenty-five years of exile, and had a happy union with Marie of Clèves, princess of Burgundy. A special biography of Isabelle by De Barante, too often overlooked and almost forgotten, inspires the deepest interest in its readers. Practical medicine, following the usage of the era, was one of her family occupations. Very charitable, she took care of the poor and the sick herself through her many pious works. When age lessened her strength, she moved to the chateau of Nieppe, near Hazebrouck, which she had decorated in advance, and where she stayed until her death in December 1471, at nearly seventy-five years of age. She had been born in Evora, in Portugal, on 21 February 1397. In the absence of information about her character, we could be led to believe that she communicated her ardour and her elation to her only son, but this seems not to be true. But by what odd whim of nature did such a wise and practical couple give birth to Charles the Bold?

Hans Memling,
The Canon Gilles Joye, 1472.
Oil on wood, 37.3 x 29.2 cm.
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.

Jan Van Eyck,
Portrait of Jan de Leeuw, 1436.
Oil on panel, 25 x 19 cm.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Hans Memling,
Portrait of a Man, c. 1480.
The Royal Collection, London.

Perhaps Philip the Good and Isabelle asked Memling for the triptych that Margaret of Austria owned, which, in the central panel, depicts the Virgin and her Son, Adam and Eve on the sides, and Saint John and Saint Barbara on the other flap.[9]

The portrait of a young man, which first adorned M. Aders' collection, and then that of the poet Rogers, and which is now found in the National Gallery in London, for many centuries passes as Memling's effigy. A critic from the Outer Rhine having hazarded this guess, everyone else


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repeated it by faith alone. It is an admirable work. We see a half-dressed figure in a relatively poor unfurnished room; his head is lost in the shadow that enters the room at an angle through the window pane, which is outlined behind him. He is still young and has badly-combed blond hair. He does not squint, unlike the engraving published by Passavant, but looks straight in front of him, with the expression of a man who is dreaming; his hands are humbly posed one on top of the other. The features of the stranger also have a plebian form, which designates him as a son of the people, as one born in the gloomy streets where the lower classes congregate. His large, regular brow, his pensive air, suit a man of talent, but his nose is a vulgar design, his cheekbones are prominent, and his large mouth with dull lips, a bony jaw and an unrefined chin compose an ensemble that classes his figure amongst inferior stock. His outfit corresponds to these indications also. This alleged Memling wears simple dress of fairly common material and the colour of wine sediment; a hat of the same fabric covers his head, while his straight and poorly-fixed hair seems without oil or fragrance.

There is, however, a charm that surrounds him. What is he thinking about in these evening shadows? Is he looking at the pale, sad landscape with the nuances of autumn, that the viewer discovers through the window? He seems to see nothing, not even the empty room where he is seated; one could say that his imagination is travelling further away, lost in his own thoughts. The man who gave him this dreamy expression so perfectly was, without the slightest doubt, a poet from the same era as the artist. And it deserves an equal account of the delicacy of its inspiration. The brush is fine, clean, and yet rich: the colour only has sweet and soft tones. A natural light envelops the objects. The great masters from Holland did not draw anything more exquisite, even two centuries later.

Does this painting truly show us Memling's portrait? The extract given by historian Johann David Passavant (1787-1861) about the figure depicted is interesting: "This young man," he says, "seems a little sickly and wears an outfit from St John's Hospital in Bruges. His hair is chestnut brown, the hat and outfit a dull purple; the sleeve on the right arm is split. On the right, in the upper corner, one sees the number 1462. This must be the portrait of Memling himself, and he must have been at St John's hospital." The work is certainly painted in Memling's style and is worthy of him. If one admits "that it represents himself, his injured arm and the vintage will indicate the era when he was staying at the hospice. One knows that two paintings by his hand, owned by the former establishment, date from 1479, that is to say, that they were executed seventeen years later."[10]

What free assumptions, what errors and contradictions in so few lines!

Firstly, the mysterious young man is not wearing hospital garb, but the outfit and the cone-shaped hat truncated in the style of Philip the Good; his robe is even of a beautiful material and an elegant colour.

Jan Van Eyck,
Portrait of a Man (Self-Portrait?), 1433.
Oil on wood panel, 26 x 19 cm.
The National Gallery, London.

Hans Memling,
Tommaso di Folco Portinari (1428-1501),
estimated date 1470.
Oil on wood, 44.1 x 33.7 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York.

Rogier Van der Weyden,
Philippe de Croy, Seigneur de Sempy.
Oil on panel, 49 x 30 cm.
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone
Kunsten, Antwerp.