

Hugo Van Der Goes

“A Progression Towards Insanity And God”



Ted Nappi

ARTH 286B

Prof Jean Wilson

05.01.01

Hugo Van Der Goes' passionate art has inspired and fascinated viewers and scholars for centuries. His imaginative career has held him as the most important painter out of Ghent in his time period. Although his actual origins and rearing have been debated he is mostly known as a man of Ghent. Although some believe that Hugo may have been from Antwerp. It has been suggested that he may have been a student of Jan Van Eycke's, but being that his birth can only be traced back to 1430, this seems highly unlikely. Others say he may have been a pupil of Roger Van De Weyden, or even Robert Campin, but his actual teacher is still unknown. He was known to have been a great admirer of the Ghent altarpiece, of which he had unlimited access to, so this could possibly explain his influences of Van Eycke. Hugo's work has also been disputed because scholars not only cannot decide the exact dates of his work but also disagree on their chronological order.

Hugo's vivid imagination has made him the only Flemish artist who painted on such a large scale. Out of this large body of work: *Virgin And Child*, *Crucifixion*, *Fall Of Man*, *Lamentation*, *Adam And Eve*, *Monforte Altar*, and the *Adoration Of The Magi*; are some of his better-known works. But none of these has had the impact, and insight into the beliefs and noticeable doubts and fears relating to his own salvation and fate than the personal emotional content of the *Dormition Of The Virgin*. There have been hypothesis on why Hugo had entered the monastery at Roodendaal in 1476. Following his entry he would lead himself into a realm of melancholy and madness, which eventually would lead to his own death. Amidst his fits of madness and drunken stupor he would engage in creating one of his most mystifying works depicting the death of

Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. Even though much of his works dates are not known for sure; because of the personal account of fellow Brother Gaspar Offhuys of Turnai, who was a novice at the same time as Hugo, we can place the painting of the *Dormition Of The Virgin* around the year 1500 when his chronicle was written from the Rouge Clostre. Brother Offhuys tells the story of his induction through the progression of his affliction. "I was a novice when Van der Goes was a novice," says Offhuys. "He was so celebrated as a painter that it was said that his like could not be found even beyond the Alps; he had been good rather than great in his earlier years, yet the prior, at his reception and during his probation, allowed him to indulge in pleasures which more surely recalled worldliness than penitence and humility; and the prior's tolerance was not seen without jealousy by some of our brethren. Numbers of people of rank, the Archduke Maximilian amongst the rest, constantly came to see him and admire his pictures; and through their intercession he obtained permission to frequent the guest room and join the strangers' dinners. No doubt he was subject to fits of melancholy, often thinking how he should complete the mass of works, which he had to do; but what did him most harm was his copious indulgence in wine at the strangers' dinner table. Five or six years after he professed he went with his brother Nicholas and others to Cologne, and on his return he was seized with such a hot fit that but for his friends he would have laid violent hands on himself. He was brought back with difficulty to Brussels, and there the prior, who had been sent for, endeavored to soothe his passion with the sound of music; but for a time nothing would quiet him, and he labored long under the belief that he "was a son of perdition." At last he improved; and then, of his own accord, he gave up the habit of attending in the refectory, and took his meals with the lay brothers."(Crowe, 158) Other

accounts tell of how Hugo received payment for paintings done in the monastery in the form of amounts of wine, which may have helped him escape his anxiety about his work and calm his mood swings from excitement to melancholy.

The initial entry into the monastery has sparked debate on why he may have decided to live a life of seclusion. One theory believes that as a young painter he studied Van Eycke's *Adoration of the Lamb*, and decided that he would never be able to become Jan's equal. But Ofhuys' account and others show that this could not be true. "He was far too competent of a craftsman to fret himself about the successes of his predecessors or his contemporaries. He enjoyed high repute during his life in the world, was elected to the highest position in his guild, and, as we know from Brother Ofhuys, was sought out by "noble lords," who appreciated his genius. The man who Tommaso Portinari selected to paint the altarpiece for his family chapel had no reason to feel himself a failure or to suffer qualms of inferiority."(Van Der Elst, 83) He supposedly had an infatuation with the daughter of Jacob Weytens, who commissioned a painting of David and Abigail. The character of David was of the likeness of Hugo and Abigail that of Weytens' daughter. But Hugo was never married. Could he have entered because of his lack of finding a wife? In 1473, Philip the Good died and Hugo was involved in the funeral procession. Could this strong relation to this death celebration have started his contemplation on his impending fate? His life long strife whatever it may be is embodied within the *Dormition Of The Virgin*. Every aspect of his emotions is represented in the faces of the apostles surrounding Mary in the painting. The attention to each individual's expression carries a unique and heavy emotional weight. "Hugo's last picture is perhaps the *Death of the Virgin*. In this large panel, packed with figures, the artist abandons all attempts at clarity

of space. The dying Virgin lies diagonally on her bed, the vision of Christ floating above her, and the Apostles disposed around her. But the room has no depth, and the group has no common emotion. The Apostles do not see the vision, few of them look at the Virgin, or communicate with one another. Instead, they stare out of the picture, or across the bed with nothing to meet their gaze. The colors are bright but harsh. Individual features, the new curling drapery of Christ moving above, the firm drawing of the Virgin's head, the modeling of the hands, are masterly – but the whole is immensely disquieting. That it is a great picture no one, especially if they have seen it in a mixed exhibition where it kills most other works of its century, can doubt. The artist had beyond question the most powerful personality of the second half of the fifteenth century in Flanders. This picture makes his death from melancholia in 1482 at once understandable and all the more sad.”(Whinney, 82)

But not all have felt that this picture depicts a freely expressed painful emotion of the doubt of Hugo. Some are that the vision of Jesus and the angels was one of the last influenced religious ideas expressed through his work. “[The] heavenly vision adds nothing to the power of the imagined event. Hugo had to bring it in; he did not introduce it by choice. It is evident that only the human beings in the room below were generated by a true creative force within him; the others were constructed, not born. Every face and figure of an Apostle had lived in the artist's imagination before it appeared on his panel. Hence the vividness of their vitality. The figures fit together like old friends accustomed to one another's company. The affection that unites them is obvious. The spectator's sympathy goes out to them willingly. Just so we can believe such a group might have behaved and looked. If only the figure of Christ had been omitted we should be better

pleased. Below all is fact and Hugo's realm; above is fancy, and of that he had no gift."(Conway, 180) Careful consideration of this opinion brings to mind that the psychological idea that Hugo may have inadvertently had behind this is that; the people he had known to be real through historical biblical accounts could be closely related to the people surrounding him in his present situation, therefore they were portrayed as real. While the imagery of the risen Christ and angels may have been only accepted by him as mythological fantasies, and therefore had no real persona or emotion. Some believe that the faces of the Apostles may have been that of the monks that accompanied him to his own death in the monastery.

It is amazing and interesting nonetheless to see how much of an influence of a life spent revering and commemorating religious figures in painting could end in such contradiction and confusion. Hugo sought out the monastery as a place for peace and solace for his troubled spirit. But instead amongst his loneliness and despair he found the time not to contemplate the greatness of his own existence, but to live in fear of the torment of the unknown.

"Of his last years we know no more than Brother Ofhuys has told us, but he was the most famed painter of his generation whose influence on the Florentine painters ... was profound. The epitaph on his tomb reads:

'...[The painter, Hugo van der Goes, buried here,
rests in peace,

Art mourns, for she knows not his equal].'"

(Van Der Elst, 84)

Works Cited

Crowe, Cavalcaselle. The Early Flemish Painters. New York: Garland, 1978

This book gives an opening account from Olivier De La Marche's Memoirs, which gives an account of the wedding of Margaret of York and Charles of Burgundy at Bruges in 1468. His description tells how all the festivities of the wedding distracted the guests from the beautifully painted canvases created by Hugo Van Der Goes. He goes on to speak about Thomas Portinari and how he was the wealthiest merchant and patron to Hugo. He gives a general background of Hugo and his connection to the Guild of St. Luke in Ghent. He tells of how Hugo's canvases came into great demand and how he also produced cartoons for glaziers. Interestingly he notices how Hugo tends to paint women in a beautiful graceful form and tends to make males appear disappointing and sometimes vulgar. But throughout gives Hugo the credit of being "true and full of life". It also mentions an account of Van Mander which comments on the painting of *David And Abigail* for Jacob Weytens, which suggests that Hugo may have had romantic feelings for Jacob's daughter being that he represented himself as David and her as Abigail in the painting. Although this is unfounded there is no historical proof that Hugo was ever married.

The section continues with more information about scenic canvases, small altarpieces, and the cartoons done for the glaziers, which were compared to the greatness and detail of Jan Van Eycke. The 1468 marriage is again mentioned in reference to his work done in the *entremetz* and his relations and work with De Rycke. It describes how at the end of his life Hugo enters the convent of Rooden Clooster near Brussels. The cause of his entrance and consequent mental breakdown is said to be a secret. An

account mentioned in several publications is mentioned of Brother Gaspar Offhuys of Turnai's chronicle written at the cloister in 1500, which describes the "treating" of Van Der Goes.

The section ends with several paintings that have been in question but have been attributed to Hugo. Some of these include: *Virgin And Child* in the Uffizi at Florence, *Virgin And Child* in the late Puccini collection at Pistoia, and an altarpiece work in the church of Santa Maria del Gesu at Polizzi in Sicily, Italy.

Whinney, Margaret. Early Flemish Painting. New York: Praeger, 1968

This book, like many, started its conversation about Hugo attributing his and all Flemish painters success on that of "The Van Eycks, Campin, and Roger." But credited Hugo in taking this style to "new heights of expressiveness."

It tells a brief biography outlining his supposed birth in Antwerp, induction into, and becoming a Master in the guild in Ghent, where Joos Van Wassenhoven had originally stood surety for him. It is explained how he worked for Philip the Bold for not so high of pay. His reputation grew until he became Dean of the Guild. They also explain how his "restless spirit" drove him to enter into the Augustinian monastery of the Rhode Kloster near Brussels. They described how he remained in contact with Ghent until 1478 and continued to paint although he was now a Brother.

There is further mention of his works of: *Crucifixion*, *Fall Of Man*, *Lamentation*, *Adam And Eve*, *Monforte Altar*, and the *Adoration Of The Magi*. There is an interesting

analysis of the composition as well as a discussion of Hugo's influences from his predecessors. There is also a lengthy discussion included about the *Portinari Altar*, where there is mention made towards a switch to a more dramatic, less rational, and cooler color scheme in Hugo's style. This begins a further introduction into the discussion on how the change from the style of the *Monforte Altar* to the *Portinari Altar* may have been due to the increasing melancholy of the artist. It discusses several possible reasons for his fascination in eminent death, which may have influenced his paintings and eventual insanity. It ends with a statement that attributes Hugo's *Dormition Of The Virgin* with strangeness, disturbance, and greatness, and says that this makes his death "understandable and all the more sad."

Conway, Martin. The Van Eycks And Their Followers. London: Murray, 1921

Although I found this article somewhat informal in ways and consequently opinionated, it also contained some interesting points. One was that there is a huge amount of disagreement regarding Hugo's schooling and development among scholars. Some have supposed him to be a student of Jan Van Eycke, but his birth date can only be traced to 1430, so this is debunked. He discusses Hugo's admiration for the *Ghent Altarpiece*, by Van Eycke. He also suggests that there could even have been the possibility that he was a student of Roger.

He then laughably refers to the *Dormition Of The Virgin* as "an admirable little Death of the Virgin, which appears between Campin and Hugo." But then goes on

to mention two other versions of the same painting, but how he felt that this was more influenced by the style of Campin. The section then returns to the question of his origins because of a record of his presence in Antwerp and Ghent around the same period. Also he like many other authors suggests a connection between him and Justus of Ghent. He then mentions how Hugo was one of the few artists from Flanders who had to paint on such a large scale. Although he again mentions that many of these paintings cannot be properly placed in chronological order because each expert disagrees with its chronological placement.

He speaks in detail about *Adam And Eve*, *the Nativity*, and *The Adoration Of The Magi*. Also there is an extensive discussion about the different Linen work that may have been Hugo. He also mentions the meeting of *David And Abigail*, and how it may have reflected his admiration for the daughter of the paintings commissioner. The author boldly comments that he believes that the *Death Of The Virgin* was actually made in 1472 and not in 1479 where other writer had supposed it had been made. He mentions some interesting observations, which states that Hugo only put the vision of Christ by the reasoning that he had to by the conventions of the period and that the real meaning of the strife and melancholy of the painting lays within the expressions of the apostles in the painting. He goes as far as saying that the viewer would be much more pleased if the image of Christ were omitted from the painting. The author says that this vision was just a forced fantasy of Hugo.

He continues on speaking about the *Portinari Triptych* and several other works of Hugo. The article like many others offers the personal account of Brother Offhuys of Turnay and how he related the eventual insanity of Hugo. *The Nativity and The*

Adoration of The Magi are credited as being the most important pictures to be painted during this time period, and that Hugo was the most important artist in the city of Ghent in his day. He ends the section by discussing at length the influences that Hugo had in the future generation of artists including Maitre de Moulins.

Van Der Elst, Joseph. *The Last Flowering Of The Middle Ages*. New York: Doubleday, 1944

This section describes a biographical account of the life of Hugo and also describes several of his works. It begins with a basic background starting with a question of what Elisabeth Bouts must have thought about Hugo. It gives information on his responsibilities in Ghent and His eventual entrance into the Red Cloister near Brussels. It then talk about some of the reasons for his later insanity and assumes that it was dementia praecox. Some of the diary entries of fellow Brother Offhuys are also included as to give a personal account of why Hugo may have entered this melancholy like state. His description includes accounts of Hugo's dismay in having to complete several works in a short amount of time and his uneasy philosophical and psychological disagreement with death, which eventually culminated in the painting of the *Dormition Of The Virgin*.

Within the body of this section an analysis and description is made of the following paintings: *Madonna And Child With St. Anne*, *The Adoration Of The Magi*, *The Portinari Altar*, *Adam And Eve*, *The Lamentation*, and *The Dormition Of The Virgin*.

It attempts to give some understanding for the imagery in all of the paintings and also offers some comparison and influence by Jan Van Eycke

Kendall, Alan. Flemish Painting From The Van Eycks To Metsys. New York:
McGraw-Hill, 1970

This book tended to give only peripheral information on Hugo Van Der Goes. It tended to emphasize that Hugo was basically living in the shadow of the painter Joos Van Wassenhoven. It contained a section that was labeled and indexed as being about Joos and Hugo, but really only mentioned Hugo as being a student or influenced by Joos and having repeated his technique. I felt that this book may have been political in nature and was very unfair in it's description of Hugo and his work. It also was very unscientific and served to be an annoyance to read being that it offered no insight into the life of Hugo.