

**Attributed to Jan van Eyck**

***Virgin and Child***

***(Ince Hall Madonna)***

1433

Oil on oak, 26.3 - 4 x 19.4 cm

Inscribed: (on back wall on either side of the cloth of honour - possibly a later addition)

COPLETV ANO D      AAC

MCCCCXXXIII      IXH

P IOHEM DE EYC      XAN

BRVGIS

Provenance: unidentified 18th century (?) ecclesiastical (?) owner, Henry or Charles Blundell, probably between 1803 and 1837, by descent to Mr C. J. Weld-Blundell, 1922 bought by the Felton Bequest for the National Gallery of Victoria, accessioned 1923 (1275/3)

The appraisal of the materials and technique of this small panel painting is an intriguing and at times curious case in the study of early Netherlandish paintings. Nineteenth-century critics described the work's pronounced craquelure.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century overpainting was observed in the Virgin's face and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The appearance of the inscription attracted particular scrutiny. Some critics accepted the inscription as having been placed on the panel by Jan van Eyck.<sup>3</sup> Others regarded the writing as too coarse to be attributable to the artist himself. The hypothesis that the inscription had been transferred from the original frame, now lost, gained acceptance until 1956.<sup>4</sup>

Between 1957 and 1958 the work was examined, cleaned and restored at the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique under the direction of Paul Coremans, with some assistance from the National Gallery, London. A précis of the technical analysis was published in the *'Primitifs Flamands' Corpus* entry for the work in 1971.<sup>5</sup> It was claimed that this analysis provided technical evidence that the painting could not be attributed to Van Eyck, and a number of authors have agreed with this assessment.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it has been suggested that the examination showed that the painting is likely to be a forgery.<sup>7</sup> A close re-examination of the records of the analysis, as published in 1971 and as recorded in the original reports and correspondence,<sup>8</sup> shows that the evidence presented does not sustain many of the conclusions made regarding the work's materials and technique.

Two examples demonstrate the uncertain assessment of the work in the 1950's. First, the authors claimed that the folds of the Virgin's mantle were built up with lead-white, covered with a red lake glaze, contrary to the early Netherlandish practise of modelling depth in the glazes.<sup>9</sup> However, no lead-white was identified in the samples taken from the mantle. The initial paint layer is described as vermilion with a red lake admixture, followed by a red lake glaze.<sup>10</sup> Further, none of the reports mentioned that the red lake glaze contains small quantities of lapis-lazuli as was observed in the hand written pigment analysis notes.<sup>11</sup> The presence of black in the deepest shadows of the mantle was described as uncharacteristic,<sup>12</sup> but it is known that black is found in the final paint layers of the *Ghent altarpiece* which Coremans had examined only a few years before the *Virgin and Child*.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the absence of a *barbe* and unpainted fringe around the work was described as uncharacteristic. The authors went so far as to say that no fifteenth-century Netherlandish paintings were known without these features.<sup>14</sup> However, there is what can reasonably be thought the remnants of a *barbe* along the left edge of the panel, a fact at one stage acknowledged in Coremans' correspondence,<sup>15</sup> but not in his reports. A number of early Netherlandish panel paintings have been cut down, thus removing their unpainted fringes.<sup>16</sup> This also is likely to be the case with the *Virgin and Child* since the paint layers have been damaged along the top and right edges.

Such problems with the observation, reporting and interpretation of the *Virgin and Child's* materials and technique occurred in much of the analysis conducted in the 1950's and this has influenced the subsequent art historical commentary. A reassessment of the raw data gathered in the 1950s, conducted by this author at The University of Melbourne, in the School of Fine Arts, Classics and Archaeology, together with the interpretation of technical analysis conducted at the National Gallery of Victoria since 1998, suggests that the materials and technique of the work are in many ways typical of early Netherlandish panel paintings, and contain a number of features which appear closely aligned to Van Eyck's works of the early 1430s.

The following are some of the characteristics of the work that might be described as Eyckian. First, the dimensions of the painted surface correspond to those for Van Eyck's *Man in a Turban* (London, National Gallery) also bearing the date 1433, which are approximately 26 x 19 cm.<sup>17</sup> Second, the apparent absence of a priming layer in the *Virgin and Child*<sup>18</sup> corresponds to the apparent absence of a priming layer in the *Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his wife* (London, National Gallery).<sup>19</sup> Third, the recent infrared reflectography of the work has revealed that there appears to be fine and extensive underdrawing in the architecture, figures, drapery, shadows and elsewhere, possibly executed in a liquid medium.<sup>20</sup> The underdrawing is comparable in some

respects with the underdrawing of the *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (Turin, Galleria Sabauda) notably a series of short hatches at an angle to the contour in lower horizontal contours of the drapery in both works.<sup>21</sup> The underdrawing of the Infant's toes in his right foot with a thickish and dark scalloped line, while the foot was painted a little higher up, is comparable with the underdrawing of the Infant's left foot in the *Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin* (Paris, Louvre), where the toes are likewise heavily indicated, and the foot was actually painted a little higher up as well.<sup>22</sup> There is diagonal hatching to the Virgin's left, which at the bottom may have some cross hatching, for a shadow setting her figure in relief. This is reminiscent of, though not principally in the same direction as, the similarly placed hatching for the shadow beside the Saint in the *Saint Barbara* (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten). Fourth, the green layers of the cloth of honour are executed over an initial grey layer, as in passages of the *Ghent altarpiece*. This layer, in the latter work, has been described as an '*impimatura locale*', perhaps intended to enhance the relatively weak colour of the green pigment.<sup>23</sup> The red lake glazes contain small quantities of lapis lazuli, as they do in the *Man in a Turban*.<sup>24</sup> The blue of the Virgin's robe is executed with an initial layer of lapis-lazuli and lead-white in an oil medium, followed by a lapis lazuli glaze in an aqueous medium,<sup>25</sup> as are the jewels of the *Ghent altarpiece*.<sup>26</sup> Fifth, and potentially of greatest significance, is the elevation of the window beyond the top of the picture in the paint layers, since a similar pentimento is evident in the infrared reflectography of the *Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife*.<sup>27</sup> This poses the question of whether there is a developmental relationship between the two works. Was the pentimento in the window of the earlier work transferred to the later one? Did the two works develop simultaneously between the years 1433 and 1434? Or are the similarities in the compositional development of the two works a coincidence?

The paint layers of the *Virgin and Child* have been abraded, and have been overpainted on a number of occasions.<sup>28</sup> The paint of the Infant's right eye, the top right 'hinge' and the highlight of the lock on the front of the chest all pass over tiny losses, suggesting that they may be overpainting.<sup>29</sup> The sketchy execution of the keys with their raised white highlights appears different to the execution in the rest of the painting when viewed microscopically. Though it has been asserted that the inscription is contemporary with the paint layers,<sup>30</sup> insufficient evidence has been presented to support this claim.<sup>31</sup> Small passages of the original paint layers have been partially obscured by overpainting carried out in 1958, particularly on the floor-boards,<sup>32</sup> and other decisions made in this restoration raise questions about the original appearance of the work.<sup>33</sup>

Hugh Hudson

The University of Melbourne

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, J.A. Crowe and G.B. Cavalcaselle, *The Early Flemish Painters; Notices of Their Lives and Works*, London, 1857, pp. 339-341.

<sup>2</sup> E. Panofsky (*Early Netherlandish Painting, its Origin and Character*, vol. 1, Cambridge, 1953, p. 183) noted overpainting on the Virgin's face.

<sup>3</sup> G. F. Zink, letter to the editor, *The Daily Telegraph*, London, 7 October, 1922; [R. A. M. Stevenson], 'The Private Collections of England, no. LXXVI - the Ince-Blundell Hall, Liverpool', *The Athenaeum*, October 6, 1883, pp. 439-440.

<sup>4</sup> F. Grossman, 'Flemish Paintings at Bruges', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. XXIX, 1957, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> U. Hoff and M. Davies, *The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Les Primitifs Flamands*, 1: Corpus de la peinture des anciens Pays-Bas méridionaux au quinzième siècle, vol. 12, Brussels, 1971, pp. 29-31.

<sup>6</sup> C. Purtle, *The Marian Paintings of Jan van Eyck*, Princeton, 1982, p. 98, n. 1; J. Sander, *Niederländische Gemälde im Städel 1400-1550*, Mainz am Rhein, 1993, p. 260.

<sup>7</sup> L. Campbell, 'Further Reviews', *Apollo*, vol. XCVI, no. 129, November, 1972, p. 460; Campbell (*Early Netherlandish Paintings in the National Gallery*, London, 1998, p. 205, n. 47) more recently suggested that the work may be a copy.

<sup>8</sup> Original interim reports, final reports and correspondence regarding the technical and art historical analysis of the *Virgin and Child* were kindly made available by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the National Gallery, London, the Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels and Professor J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer, Amsterdam.

<sup>9</sup> U. Hoff and M. Davies, 1971, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> U. Hoff and M. Davies, 1971, p. 30; [microsample analysis] L. 3177E (rouge), unpublished, National Gallery of Victoria files.

<sup>11</sup> J. T. ([J. Thissen], *Van Eyck (?) Melbourne*, 30 December, 1957, p. 1, unpublished, Institut Royal de Patrimoine Artistique files.

<sup>12</sup> P. Coremans, A. Philippot & R. Sneyers, *Laboratory Examination of the Ince Hall Madonna* (translation by Mr David Lawrence), 14 November, 1958, p. 5, unpublished, National Gallery of Victoria files.

<sup>13</sup> Brinkman, P.W.F., Kockaert, L., Maes, L., Thielen, E.M.M. and Wouters, J., 'Het Lam Godsretable Van Van Eyck Een Heronderzoek Naar De Materialen En Schildermethoden, De hoofdkleuren. Blauw, groen, geel en rood', *Bulletin Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique*, vol. XXII, 1988/89, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> U. Hoff and M. Davies, 1971, p. 29 & p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Coremans stated in a letter to Martin Davies (23 January, 1958 unpublished, Institut Royal du Patrimoine Artistique files): '... *il n'y a nulle part de bord non peint, mais peut-être à certains endroits des restes de ce que on pourrait appeler une barbe.*'

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, Campbell (1998, p. 218) notes that Van Eyck's *Portrait of a Young Man* (London, National Gallery) has been cut down on all four sides.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 1998, p. 212.

<sup>18</sup> This observation derives from inspection of the microsample photography and microsample analysis appended to Coremans, P., Philippot, A. & Sneyers, R., *Laboratory Examination of the Ince Hall Madonna*, (translation by Mr David Lawrence), 14 November, 1958, unpublished, National Gallery of Victoria files. In addition, neither Coremans nor Rawlins specifically mentioned a priming layer in any of their reports. However, priming layers may be thin and difficult to identify.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> The infrared reflectography was kindly made available to the author by the National Gallery of Victoria Paintings Conservation Department, 1999-2000. Access to these facilities was made possible through Professor Jaynie Anderson's and Robyn Slogett's Research Infrastructure and Equipment Fund grant. I regret to disagree with John Payne and Carl Villis, as underdrawing appears to be present in many parts of the composition.

<sup>21</sup> This comparison was suggested to me by Professor J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer, in conversation, September, 1999.

<sup>22</sup> M. Fairies & J. R. J. van Asperen de Boer, "La Vierge au Chancelier Rolin de van Eyck: examen au moyen de la réflectographie infrarouge", *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1990, p. 35 and fig. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Brinkman, Kockaert, Maes, Thielen and Wouters, 1988/89, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, 1998, p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> The paint layer structure and media of the Virgin's blue robe are described in *Compte Rendu des Tests*, 24 December, 1957, p. 4, unpublished, National Gallery of Victoria files.

<sup>26</sup> P. Coremans, *L'Agneau Mystique à Laboratoire: Examen et Traitement*, Les Primitifs Flamands, Antwerp, 1953, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> R. Billinge and L. Campbell, 'The Infrared Reflectograms of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his wife Giovanna Cenami (?)*', *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol. 16, 1995, p. 50. While John Payne and Carl Villis have suggested that the significance of the major pentimenti in the work have yet to be understood, I suggest that the elevation of the window is comparable in intention with the change to the window in the *Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and his Wife*, and the underpainting of curtain sacks is comparable with a number of fifteenth-century Netherlandish panel paintings and miniatures showing these features.

<sup>28</sup> There is abrasion to the edges of the craquelure and losses in: the red lake glazes of the right side of the mantle, the left part of the inscription, the cloth of honour, the right side of the carpet, the floor-boards, the face of the Virgin and elsewhere.

---

<sup>29</sup> These observations were made and kindly brought to my attention by John Payne and Carl Villis at the National Gallery of Victoria Paintings Conservation Department, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> U. Hoff, *European Paintings before 1800 in the National Gallery of Victoria*, Melbourne, 1995, p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> The suggestion was initially proposed by Coremans (P. C. [P. Coremans], *Compte Rendu*, 14 May, 1958, pp. 1-2, unpublished, National Gallery of Victoria files). The assertion that the inscription was as 'authentic' as the rest of the paint layers was based on the inscription's equivalent solubility to the original paint layers. However, solvent tests may confirm the presence of overpaint, but may not demonstrate that paint layers are contemporary.

<sup>32</sup> The photograph of the work after cleaning in Hoff and Davies, 1971, Plate LI, shows a shadow covering the area of floor-boards on the right side, where there is now a mass of beige coloured strokes in the same area.

<sup>33</sup> For example, certain parts of the craquelure appear to have been emphasised by a dark coloured paint and certain small losses in the right side of the cloth of honour have been filled with yellow pigment which does not match the pattern on the left.