

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

## ROME'S FIRST TRIBUTE TO HANS MEMLING

"THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED AND EXCELLENT PAINTER OF THE WHOLE CHRISTIAN WORLD"  
(DIARY OF ROMBOUT THE DOPPERE, 1494)

**H**ans Memling, the leading painter of portraits, diptychs for personal devotion, and several large religious works in Bruges, Belgium, during the last quarter of the 15th century, was born c. 1435-40 in Seligenstadt near Frankfurt, Germany. Although there is no documentary evidence to confirm this claim, he probably served apprenticeships at Mainz and Cologne before working as a journeyman in the Netherlands and then in Brussels under his mentor Rogier van der Weyden from c. 1455-1460. After van der Weyden's death in 1464, Memling moved to Bruges in Flanders, where he

lived and worked prolifically (as witnessed by the extraordinary number of his surviving works) until his death in 1494.

Memling built on the works and reputations of his Flemish predecessors, van Eyck and van der Weyden. Although he seems not to have traveled much, his fame did. His portraits were par-

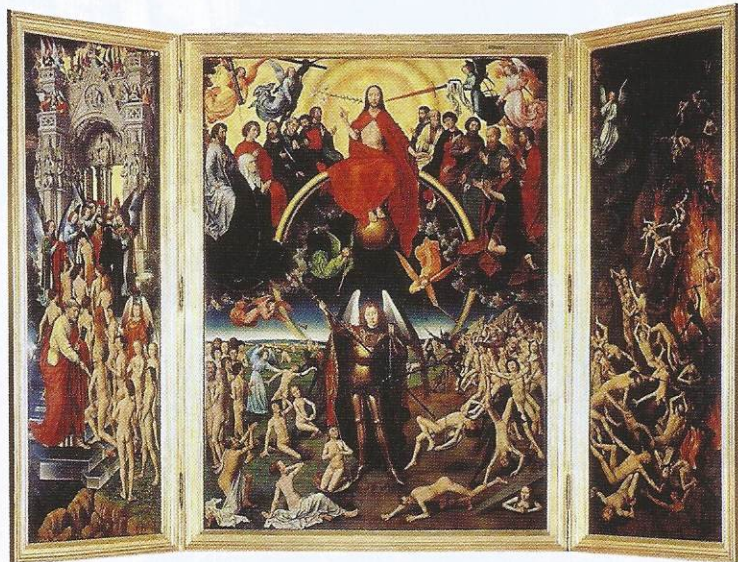


ticularly popular in Italy, where his work was much in demand by aristocrats, such as humanist scholar-poet Bernardo Bembo in Venice, who could be depicted in *Portrait of a Man Holding a Roman Coin*, and the heads of the house of the Medici in Florence.

He was also very much admired by Bruges' local court officials and gentry, and the expatriate mercantile community, particularly the Italians, who commissioned many works (25% of his total *oeuvre*) from him to be sent home.

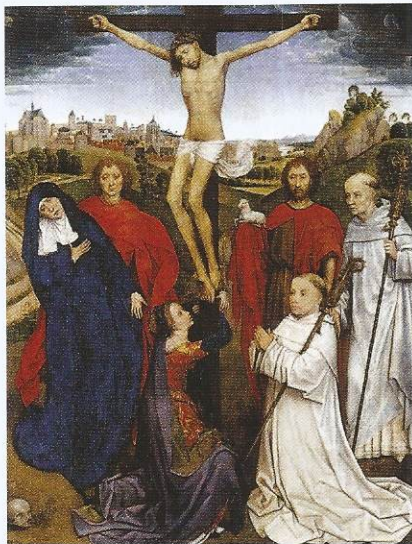
"In fact it is for this reason," explains an exhibition wall panel, "that more of his paintings are present in Italian collections than those of any other Flemish painter of the period."

His popularity also spread to Britain, where his patrons included British metaphysical poet, Sir John Donne.



Here, *The Last Judgment*, Memling's masterpiece still waiting to go to Italy. Left, portrait of the Venetian humanist Bernardo Bembo holding an ancient Roman coin.

Bottom, *Triptych for Jan Crabbe*, one of Memling's early works



On in the Quirinal's *Scuderie* until January 18 is the first one-man show in Italy devoted to this Flemish genius: "Memling: Flemish Renaissance" — although a number of his masterpieces have always been here.

The show's curator is the German art historian Till-Holger Borchert, chief curator of the Groeningemuseum and Artehuis Museums in Bruges. Its some 50 paintings are divided into 11 sections: His Life, His Early Years, An Ambitious Commission, The Master Portraitist, Moreel Triptych, Memling as Narrator, Reinventing the Devotional Image, The Established Artist, Rivals and Competitors,

Memling and Italy, and A Flemish Renaissance.

"Memling: Flemish Renaissance" explores every aspect of this extraordinarily talented artist's career and work, but "focuses," says the press release, "on the aspect of patronage in the artist's career,

highlighting in particular the importance of the Italian clients, who tended to be businessmen, court dignitaries and agents from Florence, Venice, or Genoa, who had settled in Bruges." The only other recent Memling monographic exhibition took place in Bruges in 1994

to celebrate the 500th anniversary of his death. Another "recent" exhibition, but only of his portraits, took place at Bruges, Madrid, and New York's Frick Museum in 2005.

In "His Early Years," early works by Memling are displayed alongside works by his mentor Rogier Van der Weyden for comparison. Of particular interest is Memling's *Triptych for Jan Crabbe*, the abbot (1457-88) of the powerful Cistercian abbey at Dunes and depicted here praying at the base of the cross; reconstructed for the first time, its central panel is on loan from Vicenza's Civic Museum, the inner sides of its "shutters" from New York's Morgan Library, and their external sides from the Groeningemuseum in Bruges.

"The Master Portraitist" compares Memling's portraits, accounting for 1/3 of his surviving works, with those by his Flemish contemporaries.





Memling's *Christ Blessing* of which Ghirlandaio made an exact copy. The two paintings are exhibited here in "Memling: Flemish Renaissance" side by side for the first time. Right, Memling's *Passion of Christ*, one of his narrative paintings. Below, Memling's *Salvator Mundi*

Memling's portraits are of two kinds: the painting's patron in prayer, usually on a "shutter" of a diptych or triptych, or as a single bust with a dark figureless or landscape background.

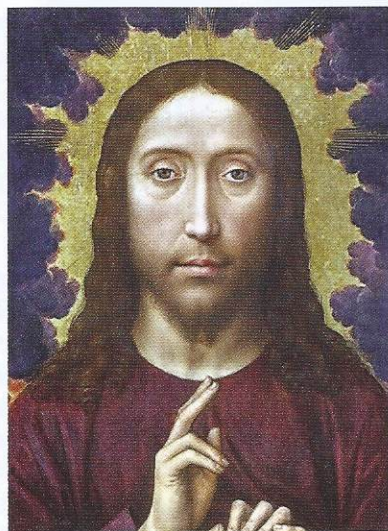
"Memling as Narrator" concerns Memling's narrative works and how they changed the style of his Italian contemporaries for this genre. Often of pilgrimages to the Holy Land, "they combine multiple events simultaneously in one single panoramic representation," explains an exhibition wall panel. "The highly original pictorial concept was based on German Passion cycles, Flemish tapestry designs, manuscript illumination, and possibly, on prints."

On display here are two scenes from the *Passion of Christ* commissioned by Tommaso Portinari for the Medici, the earliest of Memling's "narratives" and, by way of comparison, a panel from the *predella* of the Perugia Altarpiece of scenes of the life of St. Nicholas of Bari, on loan from the Vatican Museums.

A large number of privately-commissioned altarpieces, many of which have never been exhibited before, are displayed in "Reinventing the Devotional Image." This section is divided into three parts: the first contains works by Memling; the second, works commissioned by Italian clients from other painters in Bruges; the third, devotional works by Memling which show the first signs of Flemish/Northern European influence on contemporary Italian religious painting.

On display in "Memling and Italy" is part of a diptych by Memling of *Christ Blessing*, on loan from the *Musei di Strada Nuova* in Genoa, alongside Ghirlandaio's exact copy on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which attests the presence of this work by Memling in 15th-century Florence as well as the demand for replicas of Memling's work even in thriving art centers such as Florence.

On display in the last section, "A Flemish Renaissance," are commissions by Memling and his contemporaries from important families, which include the exceptional loan from Bruges of the *Adriaan Reins*



*Triptych*, the *Resurrection Triptych* with its sculpted figures and ornaments *all'antica* (presumably inspired by Donatello) from the Louvre, and the Uffizi's *Pagagnotti Triptych*.

The absolute masterpiece of "Memling. Flemish Renaissance" was to have been his monumental Bosch-influenced *Triptych of the Last Judgment* (1466-73) on loan from the Museum Narodowe in Gdansk, but at the last minute a commission considered it too fragile to travel. Memling had painted the triptych for the chapel dedicated to St. Michael in the Badia Fiesolana, near Florence. The Florentine Angelo Tani, manager of the Bruges branch of the Medici Bank, and his wife Caterina di Francesco Tanagli had commissioned it on the occasion of their wedding in 1466. They're both shown kneeling in the back of the triptych, while

Tommaso Portinari, Tani's former assistant at the bank, is also pictured. (It is said Tani and his wife chose to depict the Last Judgment to show Portinari, who had betrayed Tani, what could or should eventually happen to him.) From Bruges the painting was shipped on a galle that was attacked off the Dutch coast by a privateer, Paul Beneke, in the pay of the Hanseatic League, who sold the stolen painting to the city of Gdansk, so it never made it to Italy. According to legend, the citizens of Danzig, as Gdansk was called then, so loved the painting that it was placed in the city's cathedral, but the masterpiece's adventures did not end there.

According to an article published by the Italian news agency ANSA on August 4, "Tani fought in vain for the return of the three-part painting, with St. Michael weighing souls on a set of scales in the middle section while the virtuous ascend to heaven on the left and the damned spiral downward into hell on the right." Centuries later the triptych was again stolen, this time by Napoleon's troops, who took it to the Louvre from where it was evacuated by the Germans who, after the Second World War, handed it over as part of compensation for war damages to the Soviets, who placed it in the Hermitage. Eventually it



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Here, Moreel family triptych, dedicated to the three saints of the middle panel: Christopher, Maurus and Gillis, from Bruges' Groeningemuseum. Below, Memling's *Madonna and Child with Angels* on loan from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Bottom, the central panel of the *Pagagnotti Triptych*

was returned to Gdansk. Sadly, even now, more than 500 years later, in spite of good intention, Hans Memling's most famous work did not reach Italy, though it's possible for visitors to admire this monumental altarpiece, inspired by Van der Weyden's *Last Judgment*, thanks to a hands-on lightbox in "An Ambitious Commission."

Thus the two other triptychs, the Pagagnotti and Moreel family triptychs, can be considered the exhibition's stars. The first, but the last work displayed in the exhibition, was painted for Benedetto Pagagnotti, a Florentine cleric, about 1480. Its central panel depicting the Virgin and Child with Angels is now in the Uffizi in Florence. Instead, its "shutters" are in London's National Gallery. The left one shows St. John the Baptist carrying a lamb symbolizing Christ. The right one depicts the early Christian martyr St. Lawrence carrying his gridiron. The reverse sides of the "shutters" show cranes, the coat of arms of the Pagagnotti family. It garlands and *putti* could be said to show the influence of the more decorative contemporary Italian religious painting on its more austere Flemish counterpart.

Memling painted the second, now in Bruges' Groeningemuseum, in 1484 for Willem Moreel, an important Bruges politician, and his wife Barbara van Vlaenderbergh, alias van Hertsvelde, and their several children. Dedicated to the three saints of the middle panel: Christopher carrying the Christ Child on his shoulders, Maurus (a monk holding a crook staff and an open book) and Gillis with a doe and an arrow in his hand, the work was intended for the Bruges St. James Church, where the couple was interred. "It could be said to be one of the first and finest group portraits in Flemish art," explains an exhibit wall panel. "It is also a landmark in the nascent genre of landscape painting."

Other highlights include several portraits, a genre Memling perfected, portraying his sitter against a landscape background, a style which had a major influence on numerous early 16th-century



Italian artists including Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci (one example: the background landscape in the *Mona Lisa*): *Portrait of a Young Man* on loan from the *Galleria dell'Accademia* in Venice; *Portrait of a Man* from the Royal Collection in London; *Portrait of a Woman* from a private collection in the United States; *Portrait of a Man* from New York's Frick Collection; and the splendid *Man with a Roman Coin* from Antwerp's Royal Museum of the Arts (KMSKA).

A strong influence on Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Lotto, and Ghirlandaio, and thus already greatly admired during his lifetime and then later by the Romantics of the 19th century, who ranked him even above van Eyck as the greatest of the Flemish primitives, by the middle of the 20th century Memling's exalted reputation had declined sharply. "In 1953," *www.brepols.net* reports, "Panofsky labeled Memling a 'major minor master,' leading subsequent writers to consider him unworthy of serious study. It was only in 1994, the 500th anniversary of his death, that the major exhibition in Bruges launched a veritable flood of publications on his life and work, finally granting him the recognition he deserves." One of these is Barbara Lane's definitive *Hans Memling, Master Painter in Fifteenth-Century Bruges* (2009).

Epilogue: In spite of the numerous surviving works by Memling, in 2009, the same year as the publication of Lane's biography, the wings of a dismantled altarpiece by Memling were discovered in the Spanish city of Almazon (Soria). On display in "The Established Artist," "Memling's representations of St. Peter and St. Elizabeth of Hungary," an exhibit wall panel tells us, "are reminiscent of works by Van Eyck, whereas the depictions of St. Francis of Assisi and Bernardine of Siena on the wings' reverses are a clever variation of the conventional *grisailles*. Memling's patrons seem to have been nobleman of Almazon whose portraits presumably were painted on the lost middle panel." ○