

# Realer than Life

## MEMLING'S PORTRAITS

by Gail Leggio

The portraits of Hans Memling (1435/40–94) follow a deceptively straightforward formula: a half-length figure presented in close-up, pushed right against the picture plane, the hands silhouetted against dark, rich fabric. There are *trompe l'oeil* effects—a shoulder in front of a fictive frame, fingers that seem to slip over a ledge into the viewer's space. Memling's most striking contribution to the genre, something that would have a tremendous influence on his Italian contemporaries, lies in his backgrounds. Gentle, blue-tinged landscapes stretch seductively into the distance, achieving through a virtuoso display of aerial perspective and miniature details a sense of an infinite natural world. The discrepancy between the monumentality of the foreground figure and the infinitesimal delicacy of the world beyond is never jarring. It's as if the landscape were expressing, with great subtlety and reserve, the innermost thoughts of Memling's prosperous, taciturn sitters.

Approximately two dozen of these portraits are on view through December 31, 2005, at the Frick Collection in New York City, in a rare and beautiful exhibition organized by the Frick, the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid and the Groeningemuseum in Bruges. Memling was born in Seligenstadt, near Mainz in Germany, but became—first, as a pupil of Rogier van der Weyden (1399/1400–64) and then as a master in his own right—one of the stars of Bruges, the exquisite medieval cultural center at the heart of the Flemish painting miracle. As anyone who has ever visited the Sint-Janshospitaal, Memlingmuseum, will testify, his works have an extraordinary physical presence, and in the religious compositions, especially, he seems to transfigure mere paint into jewels and velvet, dewy skin and limpid air. The Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti caught the effect perfectly in an 1850 sonnet describing the *Triptych of the Two Saint Johns* (1479): “The light is starred in gems, and the gold burns.”<sup>1</sup> Rossetti and his contemporaries were particularly drawn to religious works by the artists then known as the Flemish Primitives, both for the sumptuousness of the saints' jewel-encrusted robes and, on a deeper level, for their supernatural naturalism. Memling made the things of heaven as well as the things of earth palpably real, incarnate in an almost theological sense, through the skill of his painting and the clarity of his perception. The Pre-Raphaelites were realists as well as mythographers, and they responded instinctively to Memling's uncanny verisimilitude infused with otherworldly significance. The current exhibition includes none of the big altarpieces but demonstrates that the artist brings the same technical skills and

Hans Memling  
*Diptych of Maarten  
van Nieuwenhove,*  
1487, left panel

BRUGES,  
STEDELIJKE MUSEA,  
MEMLINGMUSEUM—  
SINT-JANSHOSPITAAL



lucid vision to less ambitious projects. He is a master of portraiture and equally resourceful using a more somber palette.

It is not always easy to separate secular from sacred in Netherlandish painting, and many of the portraits fall along a continuum between the two. Donor portraits could be introduced into religious scenes, establishing the piety and the social status of an individual simultaneously. *The Virgin and Child with St. Anthony Abbot* (1472) depicts a matter-of-fact miracle, a fictional yet completely convincing encounter in a rich but down-to-earth room. The illusionistically convincing interior space is established by perspective lines—a sharply angled window to the left, the orthogonals of the tiled floor—and by the natural light bathing the Madonna and Child standing in front of a brocaded baldachin throne. An open door offers a glimpse of a radiant landscape. The detail of the room is realized with such skill that the viewer is enticed into a willing suspension of disbelief. The heavenly mother and





Hans Memling  
*Diptych of Maarten  
van Nieuwenbove,*  
1487, right panel  
BRUGES,  
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MEMLINGMUSEUM—  
SINT-JANSHOSPITAAL

child—who with the erect posture of a miniaturized adult raises his tiny hand in benediction—have materialized in this prosperous Flemish home in a perfectly natural way. The kneeling fifteenth-century donor displays reverence but no surprise, perhaps reassured by the protecting hand of his patron saint—a fourth-century Egyptian hermit—standing behind him. Temporal implausibility vanishes in this becalmed, gracious audience chamber.

Another compositional strategy for the devotional encounter appears in one of the standouts of this exhibition, the *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenbove* (1487), which retains its original configuration and frame. Over the centuries many multipanel works have been broken up. Exhibitions provide opportunities to reunite works such as the *Portrait of an Elderly Couple* (1470–75). The husband's panel belongs to the Staatliche Museen, Berlin; the wife's, to the Louvre. Reunited, they show an expansive landscape, a continuous panorama that enhances the composition. The *Diptych of Maarten Van Nieuwenbove* is a

more complex work, and we can only rejoice it has survived intact. The spatial relationship between the two wings is dynamic. On the right, the young donor (he would have been about 23 at the time) steeple-folds his hands in prayer above a devotional book; the artist's execution of the gilt edges and lines of text shows great finesse. Behind him, an image of his patron saint, on horseback and dividing his cloak with a beggar, appears in a stained-glass window. The clear pane below reveals a landscape with a tower and a man crossing a bridge, elements so tiny they seem very far away and yet are fully realized. The interior space is sharply angled, and the exaggerated perspective—like Maarten's gaze—draws our attention to the left-hand panel. The Virgin, perfectly frontal and inviting the devotion of the viewer, occupies the main, pyramidal-shaped segment of the composition, boldly blocked out by her vivid red cloak. With one hand she supports the Christ child; with the other, she presents a small apple as if it were a religious artifact. As an emblem of the Fall and hence humanity, it is a richly symbolic detail. On another level, it reads as a treat for the infant who reaches for it in a gesture simultaneously naturalistic and theologically charged. The baby sits on a brocaded cushion atop a carpet-covered parapet that seems to extend into the viewer's space. Behind the Virgin is a stained-glass window with medallions bearing the donor's coat of arms, a virtuoso convex mirror and a tranquil landscape, with a very small figure on a winding road.

The Memling madonna—with her demure expression, wide forehead and small mouth—established a type of beauty, enhanced by subtle yet sumptuously painted details such as the jewels trimming her dress and encircling her brow or the delicate gold spray of a halo. For the Victorians, she was a mysterious mix of tenderness and otherworldly wisdom, who foresees her child's earthly agony and heavenly victory. Rossetti described her prescience and equanimity:

There abideth on her brow  
The ended pang of knowledge, the which now  
Is calm assured. Since first her task began  
She hath known all.<sup>2</sup>

She exists simultaneously in this upper-class fifteenth-century room, convincingly real in its own time and place, and on the plane of eternity. The early Netherlandish painters seemed immediately relevant to nineteenth-century critics. One even placed van Eyck in the context of contemporary realism with the surprising declaration that the *Van der Poule Madonna* was “a wonderful piece of Zola-like painting.”<sup>3</sup> And Memling ranked very high. In the standard text by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Memling was praised for having “a truer sentiment of color and aerial perspective” than his master, van der Weyden. They continued: “The great characteristic feature of Memling was his



Hans Memling  
*The Virgin and Child with  
St. Anthony Abbot*, 1472  
NATIONAL GALLERY OF  
CANADA, OTTAWA

grace and poetry of delineation. His pictures were lyrics, not epics, like van Eyck's."<sup>4</sup> In the twentieth century tastes changed, elevating to the pantheon van Eyck's majestic tableaux and van der Weyden's existential dramas, set in stony stage spaces, with emotions articulated through sheet-metal folds of angular drapery. Perhaps we can more readily accept Memling's charm now and rediscover the elegant stillness of his images. The portraits are an excellent place to start, showing us that clear-seeing is not incompatible with formal



genius. Erwin Panofsky, in his classic *Early Netherlandish Painting*, treats Memling as something of an afterthought but relishes the portraits as a "genuine synthesis of stylization and verisimilitude, a happy medium between Rogerian character and Eyckian individuality."<sup>5</sup>

What makes Memling's portraits remarkable? They are neither psychologically penetrating, in the manner of Velázquez or Rembrandt, nor splendidly superficial in the style of Sargent or Boldini. His sitters are all socially prominent people, elegant but not gaudy in their dress (Bruges was famous for its clothmaking). These prosperous Netherlandish and Italian sitters are depicted with quiet dignity. No extreme emotions ruffle their demeanor, yet they are never bland. Our sense of encountering intelligent, introspective individuals reaches across the centuries. Memling's technique still looks like prestidigitation. The physical presence is startling, and our awareness of facture nearly evaporates, so rigorous is his control. The catalogue entry on the relatively

straightforward *Portrait of a Man with an Arrow* (c. 1475–80) notes that brushwork is “all but imperceptible in the face” while the delicate strands of hair are more “calligraphic.”<sup>6</sup> Recent restoration has revealed a trompe l’oeil detail with a provenance dating back to classical antiquity, a fly perched on the lower edge of the picture. To enhance the immediacy further, the artist extends the man’s thumb across the picture plane. Above all, the translucent layers of color achieved by the Netherlandish painters were a wonder, especially to their Italian contemporaries. Tempura was the common medium in Italy; oil painting was a Flemish specialty.

Despite their evident status, Memling’s sitters have sometimes been difficult to identify. Recently, the handsome, curly-haired subject of *Portrait of a Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero* (1473–74) has been recognized as Bernardo Bembo (1433–1519), the humanist who resided as Venetian envoy at the Burgundian court of Charles the Bold in Flanders. A background palm tree and a sprig of laurel have been associated with Bembo’s *impresa* or family emblem. Bembo was a collector of antique coins as well as paintings; his collection included a Memling diptych. Bembo became ambassador to Florence in 1475, a fact that accounts for the picture’s influence on Italian artists. (In fact, *Portrait of a Man with a Coin* was previously attributed to the mid-fifteenth-century Sicilian Antonello da Messina, whose work has the tight modeling and cool sumptuousness reminiscent of the Flemish.) The influence of *Man with a Coin* is most obvious in Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Young Man with a Medal of Cosimo de’ Medici*, which replicates the central conceit and picks up on Memling’s pure landscape background. Less obvious but more intriguing are the echoes of Memling in Leonardo’s exquisite *Ginevra de’ Benci*, now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. The image was actually painted for Bembo, who was having a platonic love affair with the lady. This fascinating story is outlined by the catalogue authors using an impressive array of recent scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Memling’s original work justifies the admiration of other great artists, who responded to the dramatic silhouette of the black-clad sitter’s head and shoulders, the detailed folds of the narrow white collar, the sheen of the skin and the translucency of the nails on the fingers carefully presenting the rare coin. Behind the figure, a cerulean sky with vaporous clouds pales as it descends to the horizon, reflected in the blue haze of the distant mountains. The nearer landscape is filled with gilt, sunlit rounded trees, a lake with a pair of swans—still common on the picturesque canals of modern Bruges—and a rider on the distant shore. Panofsky characterized the Netherlandish juxtaposition of near and far, “of the minutiae of an interior with a vast, almost cosmic panorama” as “the simultaneous realization, and, in a sense, reconciliation of the ‘two infinities,’ the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large.”<sup>8</sup>

Another portrait of an Italian sitter, unidentified, may have influenced Verrocchio and Perugia, according to the catalogue editors. *Portrait of a Young Man* (1475–80) presents a handsome subject in a dark purple tunic, brocade



and fur. The fine hairs of the narrow fur trim—like the feathery edges of the subject's hair—are delicately etched against his skin, the pale stone wall and the sky. Here, the backdrop is not pure landscape. The subject is placed in a transitional space, a fictive loggia with a porphyry column and an elevated point of view. Like the aristocratic sitter, we perch above fields and trees; a tower is enveloped in the blue haze of the distant mountains. In contrast to the Italianate associations of this image, Memling's *Portrait of a Young Woman* ("Sibyl"), dated 1480, is quintessentially Flemish. The painter's lucid vision encompasses the sitter's aura of clairvoyance, suggested by the response to the work over the centuries. There is no landscape, although the simple blackish background has darkened from the original blue-green. The subject has a refined beauty, the severity of the hair pulled back tight under the conical cap softened by the folds of diaphanous veiling and the richness of white fur, crimson velvet, jeweled rings and pendent. This is the only independent portrait of a woman by Memling to survive, and it was a particular favorite of nineteenth-century viewers, who knew it as the *Sibylla Sambetha* or *Zambeth*. In the late sixteenth century inscriptions with that identification, a reference to the Persian Sibyl, were added in a cartouche and a banderole on the marbled brown frame, itself part of Memling's original conception. It is easy to see her as a serene young prophetess, with her shimmering headdress like a transparent halo of light. The hands, one placed on top of the other, rest on the edge of the frame, reaching out into the viewer's space, a compositional flourish picked up by Victorian artists such as Rossetti, who used it in portraits of Fanny Cornforth (*Fair Rosamund*, 1861) and Jane Morris (*Aurea Catena*, 1868). Did Memling's arresting portrait have a further purpose? Scholars are skeptical about it being half of a marriage diptych; a memorial is another possibility.

*Portrait of a Young Man at Prayer* (1485–94) was probably part of a multi-panel composition, perhaps the left wing of a triptych with a central image of the Virgin and Child, flanked on the right by a portrait of the man's wife. The sliver of landscape in the existing panel would have extended across the whole composition. But the single panel we have is a masterpiece in its own right. The handsome, long-haired subject may have been a Spaniard involved in the textile industry. His dress is unusually dramatic, his white shirt embroidered with gold bands and tied with gold ribbon, a black fur cloak around his shoulders. He is turned toward that missing center panel, the angle reinforced by the diagonal wall behind him, in a loggia with a red marble column and a balustrade draped with an oriental carpet. Rich carpet reappears on the reverse of the panel, supporting a blue-and-white vase marked with Christ's monogram, IHS, and holding a bouquet of lilies and irises, symbolic of the Virgin's joy and sorrows. The still life—both religiously charged and autonomously, secularly beautiful—is set in a shallow, shadowy trompe l'oeil niche. The multipanel compositions of early Netherlandish painters have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension, as anyone who has ever visited the Belgian

museums will know. Altarpieces are often kept closed, shuttered by the wings, with their reverse designs of trompe l'oeil still lifes or sculptures in grisaille. When the wings are opened, a flood of color and deep perspective scenes are revealed. Memling's mastery extends beyond his extraordinary mimetic virtuosity; he reminds us that the artist's realism is a fiction in the service of deeper truths. This painted world encompasses fifteenth-century Flanders, recorded with loving fidelity, and seamlessly integrated with the planes of the supernatural and the ideal. We seem to share this world—a perpetually timeless present moment—with the sitters in his portraits.

The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color, 191-page catalogue, published by the Groeningemuseum and Ludion and distributed in English, French, Dutch, Spanish and German. Thames and Hudson is publishing the hardcover English edition. In addition to detailed entries on each work in the exhibition, the catalogue features essays by Till-Holger Borchert, Lorne Campbell, Paula Nuttal and Maryan W. Ainsworth.

#### NOTES

1. From the second of two sonnets published in *The Germ*, "A Virgin and Child, by Hans Memmeling; in the Academy of Bruges" and "A Marriage of St. Katharine, by the same; in the hospital of St. John at Bruges." The triptych is sometimes identified by its central subject, the mystic marriage of St. Catherine. Reprinted in Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited, Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 344–45.
2. "A Virgin and Child, by Hans Memmeling," *ibid.*
3. Harry Quilter, "Life, Art and Nature in Bruges," *The Contemporary Review* (January 1886), pp. 43–55.
4. J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, *The Early Flemish Painters* (London: John Murray, 1857), p. 251.
5. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 348.
6. Till-Holger Borchert, *Memling's Portraits* (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2005), p. 163.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 160.
8. Panofsky, p. 3.