Memling in Rome

by Gail Leggio

That "Memling: Rinascimento Fiammingo" (October 11, 2014–January 18, 2015) was the Flemish master's first solo exhibition in Italy comes as a surprise. More of his paintings appear in Italian collections than any other Flemish painter of the period, a quarter of his oeuvre consists of Italian commissions, and he was the favorite artist of the cosmopolitan Italian community in Bruges. The commercial and cultural trade routes between Bruges and Florence were particularly busy during the period. The Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome has done Hans Memling (1435/40–94) proud with a superbly installed show. The Scuderie, originally papal stables built in 1722 and restored as an exhibition space in 2000,[1] gave the artworks—which ranged in size from small portraits to monumental altarpieces—breathing room. Beautifully lit, the colorful paintings glowed against dark grey walls with a matte pewter sheen. Unobtrusively placed wall texts (in English as well as Italian) were succinct and informative.[2] The exhibition also included work by Memling's Flemish and Italian contemporaries, notably *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (1460–65) by Rogier van der Weyden, believed to be Memling's master. The figures in the *Lamentation*—with their crisp, expressive drapery and their choreographed hands and feet—are striking; the landscape is also evocative, with the three crosses in the distance blending into a medieval-style town.

Erwin Panofsky, in his groundbreaking *Early Netherlandish Painting*, ranked Memling below van der Weyden and van Eyck.[3] But, in recent years, interest in Memling has

Portrait of a Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero, 1473–74
KONINKLIJK MUSEUM VOOR SCHONE KUNSTEN, ANTWERP, BELGIUM

Portrait of Benedetto Portinari, 1487
GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI,
FLORENCE, ITALY

surged. Most of that interest has focused on his portraits, notably in a 2005 exhibition at the Frick Collection and in "Face to Face: Flanders, Florence and Renaissance Painting," at the Huntington Library (2014).[4] In Memling's innovative compositional template, the sitter is shown half-length, dominating the foreground, and the face and hands are observed with meticulous realism. Often, a fictive bit of architecture—a stone ledge, a columned parapet—brings the sitter uncannily near to the viewer's space. The exquisite background landscapes proved particularly seductive, inspiring Italian artists for generations. Frequently, Memling's subjects are Italians.

Bernardo Bembo, the subject of *Portrait of a Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero* (1473–74), was Venetian envoy at the court of Charles the Bold in Flanders. Sandro Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Man with a Medal of Cosimo de' Medici* (c. 1475) clearly follows Memling's example—in the use of the antique (or Medici) coin as an attribute of Renaissance humanism and in the bold silhouette of the sitter against the blue-tinged landscape. Still, Memling's near-invisible facture (in the skin, curly hair and translucent fingernails) remains unrivaled, and the miniaturization of the background, with swans and a horseman, seems magical.

The Portinari family played a substantial role in the cultural exchange between Italy and Flanders. When Hugo van der Goes's *Portinari Altarpiece*, commissioned by Tommaso Portinari, arrived in Florence in 1485, it caused a sensation. Memling painted Benedetto Portinari in 1487, and the portrait combines technical virtuosity with a kind of quiet poetry. Benedetto folds his hands in prayer over a meticulously depicted prayer book. The texture of his brown fur collar is distinct from the velvety black of his robe. His frizzy hair catches

the light which slants in from the exterior space. We see the landscape—with its buildings, bushy trees and tiny figures on a winding road—framed by columns. Benedetto's shoulder is angled almost into our space, and the grey stone ledge he rests his arm on bears the date of the painting. Memling's portraits are perhaps his most accessible works for a modern audience. They require no command of arcane iconography. They inspire admiration for their painterly technique, their clarity of vision, the sympathetic yet emotionally restrained exchange between artist and subject. It is well to remember, however, that some of Memling's portraits were originally parts of multipanel compositions. This portrait was the right-hand panel of the *Triptych of Benedetto Portinari*. Benedetto (now in the Uffizi) once gazed at a Madonna and Child (now in Berlin).

One of the joys of this kind of exhibition is the opportunity to see multipanel works, long dismembered, in their original configuration. The installation of the *Jan Crabbe Triptych* (c. 1465–70) was revelatory. In the central panel, Memling depicts the Crucifixion with stately power and in striking color. Flanking Christ on the cross are two figures in red: the disciple John, supporting the half-swooning Virgin, and John the Baptist, holding a small lamb. Mary Magdalene—with a dark veil half-covering her sumptuous red and gold brocade dress—wraps her arms around the cross, gazing at the wounded feet she once anointed. Memling's timeframe is elastic: the scene includes a Cistercian abbot and St. Bernard, their white habits balancing the black robe of the Virgin. Christ provides the axis for this worldview, extending his arms over the landscape and the prosperous medieval city in the background. The central panel, which comes from the Museo Civico in Vicenza, is formally impressive in its own right.

But the composition extends beyond what visitors can see in Vicenza. Smoky-dark clouds hover at the edges of the central scene. They continue into the narrow-format side panels. The landscape spreads out as well: we see more of the distant city, on the left, and an expanse of verdant countryside, on the right. Those familiar with the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City will recognize the side panels. Pierpont Morgan purchased them in 1907, and they hang in his study. They are notable for their subdued palette. Two fifteenth-century figures kneel in prayer, while their saintly sponsors stand behind them. The older woman, in black, slate blue and white, is presented by St. Anne; the man and his sponsor, St. William of Maleval, are in black. (St. William's black armor is particularly striking.) The work was commissioned by Jan Crabbe, an abbot, and the side panels depict his mother and brother. When the ensemble is complete, we immediately grasp the formal coherence of the design and the devotional aspect of the triptych, as Memling's contemporaries become witnesses to a central event of the Christian faith.

The multipanel altarpiece format encourages formal, thematic and temporal experimentation. In Memling's *Resurrection Triptych* (1480–85), the three

panels depict distinct events. The Resurrection stands at the center; the slender Christ steps elegantly from the tomb (an angel has helpfully slid the top slab aside), and four soldiers sleep, their guard duty forgotten. The figures are all convincingly three-dimensional-looking, but they crowd together, pushed up against the picture plane, in an impossible space. Like his master, Rogier van der Weyden, Memling understands how to create drama on a tight, tilted-up shallow stage. Two of the soldiers rest their feet on a trompe l'oeil stone threshold that separates the viewer's space from the sacred scene. Elaborate columns complete the frame-within-a-frame. The architectural elements include white putti *all'antica*—Italian motifs—and swags of greenery.

The *Resurrection* side panels depict other events from the Christian narrative, rather than—as in the *Jan Crabbe Triptych*—prayerful patrons and their sponsoring saints. On the right is the Ascension, which occurred forty days after the Resurrection. The close-packed group of disciples and the Virgin Mary gaze upward as Christ rises above the limpid earthly sky and into a golden-yellow heavenly portal. Only his feet and the dark hem of his garment are visible. The left panel shows the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, whose near-naked body emphasizes the verticality of the composition. Tall and slender, he seems to lean against the margin of the frame and gaze toward Christ. Balancing the verticals of the figures, a continuous landscape flows across the triptych, and the luminosity of the sky spreads like a benediction over the actors in these sacred dramas.
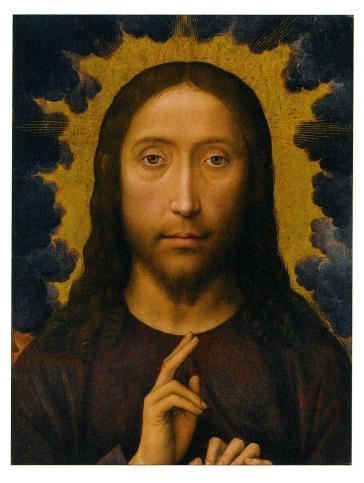
The *Moreel Triptych* (1484) combines two genres, group portrait and sacred conversation. The side panels depict the Moreel family in prayer. On the left, Willem Moreel and his five sons kneel; on the right, his wife, Barbara van Vlaedenerbergh, and their thirteen daughters. Willem's sponsor, St. William of Maleval—a twelfth-century hermit and former soldier—lays a gauntleted hand on his shoulder. His wife's sponsor, the legendary virgin martyr St. Barbara, carries her attribute, a miniature tower, and wears a rich red and gold brocade dress. Every face is carefully observed, and the details—the script on their prayer books, Barbara van Vlaenderbergh's diaphanous veil—are exquisite. The cosmopolitan Moreels (the original family name was Morelli) were wealthy and influential citizens of Bruges.

The central panel is an unusual variation on the sacred conversation, which places a stately group of holy figures in an atemporal space. Often, a throne room provides the setting for the gathering, as in Memling's *St. John Altarpiece* (1479), discussed in the catalogue but not in this exhibition. In the *Moreel Triptych*, the gathering of saints which occurs in the central panel takes place in a landscape. The central figure is St. Christopher, a character described in hagiographic texts as a third-century martyr but owing a good deal to legends of antiquity. He carries the Christ Child, a precocious toddler encircled with a nimbus of golden light and raising a hand in blessing.

Christopher dominates the composition, with his red cloak, his staff

bisecting the space diagonally and his purposeful stride as he ferries the child across a stream. The artist achieves a wonderful effect in the way the dark yet translucent water veils Christopher's legs. Memling's painterly legerdemain seemed near-miraculous not only to his contemporaries but also to later artists. According to Ernst Gombrich, his friend the Viennese modernist Oskar Kokoschka wept at the beauty of Christopher's feet in the *Moreel Triptych*.[5] Two other saints flank Christopher and the Christ Child. On the left bank of the stream stands St. Maurus, a sixth-century monk; on the right, the seventh-century hermit St. Giles and his only desert companion, a deer. Individuals from roughly the third to the fifteenth centuries convincingly share the same town-and-country space. Memling's realism seamlessly encompasses the spiritual idea of the communion of the saints. The Catholic writer G.K. Chesterton put the paradox succinctly: "Anachronism is the pedantic word for eternity." ("The Old Christmas Carols," 1925)

To illustrate the powerful influence of Flemish art on Italian painters,

*Christ Blessing
(Salvator Mundi)*
1480–85
COLLECTION
OF LYNDA AND
STEWART RESNICK

consider two versions of the same composition, *The Man of Sorrows Blessing*, in oil by Memling (c. 1485) and in tempera by Domenico Ghirlandaio (c. 1490). Ghirlandaio's faithful copy demonstrates how in-demand the Flemish painter's work was in Florence. The half-length Christ turns towards the right. He lifts one hand to display the wound in his palm, while, with the other, he seems to gesture towards the viewer. The hands and face—the warm pallor of his flesh is finely rendered—stand out against his dark robe, which blends into the shadowy backdrop. Rivulets of blood from the crown of thorns appear on his forehead, while barely visible tears glide down his cheeks. The image is restrained, free from the excesses of rhetorical piety, yet deeply affecting. Ghirlandaio departs from the prototype only by adding a few golden rays as a halo. Memling merges devotional fervor with an almost uncanny naturalism.

Unlike the grand works installed in churches, paintings such as *Man of Sorrows Blessing* were designed for private contemplation. In the late Middle Ages, Northern Europe gave birth to the *devotio moderna* movement, which encouraged prayerful encounters between individuals and Christ or the Virgin Mary. These encounters were fueled by meditation on the physical reality of suffering and the personal power of redemption. In *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings*, James Elkins traces the history of devotional weeping as an "officially recognized form of worship" and a legitimate response to religious artwork, acknowledging that the phenomenon lies "beyond the dry methods of scholarship, beyond the scope of most viewers in the twentieth century."[6] Yet looking at Flemish paintings of this era, the fusion of piety and artistry becomes understandable.

Even images that do not dwell on Jesus' wounds create the feeling of a one-on-one experience. In Memling's *Christ Blessing (Salvator Mundi)*, from 1480–85, Jesus' face is hieratically symmetrical, no wound is apparent on the hand raised in blessing, and he stands before a gold backdrop with rays dispersing an aureole of dark clouds. Yet he seems approachable. He comes close to the viewer's space, rather than looking down from the vast theological apparatus of salvation history. One hand rests on the trompe l'oeil ledge that separates our space from his, and he gazes with tender hazel-brown eyes into our souls. In visualizing the face, Memling brings a new level of reality to salvation history. The medievalist Caroline Walker Bynum writes: "shape or body is crucial, not incidental to story. It carries story; it makes story visible; in a sense, it is story. Shape (or visible body) is in space what story is in time." [7]

The Christian story unfolds in time, but what kind of time? The events of Jesus' life have a historical setting in late antique Palestine, but the Church conflated those events with the seasonal cycle of the liturgical year. One way Memling organized the narrative visually was in the *simultanbild*, a composition that presented temporally discrete events in a continuous landscape space. By following the recurring figure of Christ through a series of vignettes, the viewer could meditate on the Passion.

Memling's *Passion of Christ* (1470) occurs in a far-more-urban environment than he customarily depicts, a dollhouse city of medieval towers and high walls. We seem to be looking down on the panoramic labyrinth from above, noticing a wealth of incidents. In the lower left corner, a male donor kneels, an eyewitness observer of Jesus' arrest; one of the soldiers falls backward, clutching his wounded head, as Peter stands over him with a sword. In the lower right, a female donor observes Christ falling under the weight of the cross as he leaves through the city gate on the way to Golgotha. In his *Crucifixion Triptych* (c. 1480–85), Memling isolates three incidents. On the left, Christ, surrounded by a crowd, leaves the city gate. The center Crucifixion scene is crammed with figures: the two thieves, soldiers on horseback or playing dice, the mourning women. On the right, Christ flies from the tomb in a burst of light.

Memling's oeuvre encompasses complex genres and stylistic variations. Consider the *Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation* (c. 1485), a portable double-sided triptych with six small panels. On one side, a skull and a surprisingly elegant skeleton—straightforward exhortations of memento mori—flank a figure representing Vanity, a nude woman regarding herself in a mirror, accompanied by a pair of greyhounds and a fluffy white dog. She may represent a vice, but there is nothing vicious about her. She is proud in her nakedness, calm and beautiful, and the landscape she finds herself in seems idyllic. On the flip side of the triptych, a coat of arms and an energetic, technicolor devil (pushing the damned into the mouth of hell) flank an image of Christ in glory, sumptuously robed, crowned and surrounded by music-playing angels. He raises his hand in blessing, and his face is gentle. The meaning of this configuration remains elusive: an artist's vision cannot be reduced to an iconographic manual, but Memling seems to find beauty and grace in both the celestial and natural worlds.

NOTES

1. The Scuderie has an excellent book shop, a pleasant café and, just outside the exhibition rooms, good views of the Dioscuri, colossal Roman statues of Castor and Pollux flanking an obelisk, and a panorama across Rome to the Vatican.
2. The exhibition catalogue (Milan: Skira, 2014), with superb color plates, is in Italian only, but several of the authors (Barbara G. Lane, Paula Nuttall and Till-Holger Borchert) have written about Memling in English.
3. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).
4. See Till-Holger Borchert, *Memling's Portraits* (Ghent-Amsterdam: Ludion, 2005), and Paula Nuttall, *From Flanders to Florence: The Impact of Netherlandish Painting 1400–1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) and *Face to Face: Flanders, Florence and Renaissance Painting* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2014).
5. James Elkins, *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), Appendix.
6. Ibid., 157.
7. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 180.