

## Jan van Eyck and the Madonna of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin

MORE is known about the life of Jan van Eyck than of any other important Netherlandish painter of the fifteenth century, and yet the development of his art, especially before the completion of the Ghent Altarpiece in 1432, remains a disconcerting if not embarrassing issue for scholars of Dutch and Flemish painting\*. The problem of the evolution of his early style focuses on a few key monuments, and the controversies arising from two of these, the Hand G miniatures in the Turin-Milan Hours and the Ghent Altarpiece itself, are so familiar that they need no explanation here. But the problem grows, and the issues posed by a third major work, the so-called *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (Figs. 1–4) have only recently been raised. Some scholars see the panel as the work of Van Eyck's very earliest period, executed probably in Liège before he entered the service of the Burgundian court in Flanders in 1425, and thus as a clear demonstration that his style had fully matured before he left the Mosan valley—where he allegedly was born and first trained—to settle in Flanders<sup>1</sup>. This dating completely disrupts the more generally accepted chronology of Jan van Eyck's oeuvre. The Rolin Madonna is usually dated in the middle thirties and is taken to indicate that his style crystallized only after he had been in the service of Philip the Good for five or ten years<sup>2</sup>. The later dating is more convincing in terms of the style. The same neatly confined interior space that tightly encloses the large figures, the same rigid symmetry and hushed immobility of the figures themselves are found in the *Wedding Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini* and the *Madonna of Canon George van der Paele*, painted in 1434 and 1436 respectively, while the Madonna, mature and stately, is the type that appears in his other works of these years. It is not surprising then that the arguments put forth for the earlier date rest not so much on evidence of style as on aspects of the iconography. Who is the donor kneeling before Mary? What city is depicted in the panoramic landscape seen through the loggia?

The identification of the donor as Nicolas Rolin, chancellor of Flanders and Burgundy from 1421–1462, has been generally accepted<sup>3</sup>. Born about 1376 near Autun, Rolin came from a family well-established

\* I wish to thank Professor Charles Mitchell for his kind help in preparing this article.

1. For a useful summary of the evidence for Van Eyck's origins and early activity in the Mosan valley see J. Lejeune, *Les van Eyck-Peintres de Liège et de sa cathédrale*, Liège, 1956, pp. 18 ff. The theory that Van Eyck's earliest works were executed in Liège (including the Madonna of Autun) was first seriously proposed but not published by M. Henrotte in a paper, 'La Vierge du Chancelier Rolin de Jean van Eyck et la ville de Liège', delivered at a meeting of l'Institut archéologique liégeois in 1938—see J. Philippe, *Van Eyck et la genèse mosane de la peinture des*

*anciens Pays-Bas*, Liège, 1960, pp. 79 ff. In a recent study by Jan Goris, *Jan van Eyck geen Luikenaar*, Arendonk 1967 (privately published), arguments for his origin in the Kempen district have been put forth.

2. For these arguments see L. Baldass, *Jan van Eyck*, London, 1951, pp. 55 ff., p. 278; E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1953, pp. 192 ff.; E. Michel, *Musée National du Louvre—Catalogue raisonné des peintures du moyen-âge, de la renaissance et des temps modernes: Peintures flamandes du XVe et du XVIe siècle*, Paris, 1953, p. 115.

3. Cf. J. Desneux, 'Nicolas Rolin, authentique donateur de la Vierge d'Autun', *La Revue des Arts*, iv, 1954, pp. 195–200.

in that part of Burgundy, and his own name became immortalized in the annals of Autun and Beaune as one of their most illustrious citizens<sup>4</sup>. The wealthy chancellor made numerous donations to both towns. He had a family chapel in Autun where he was buried, and he founded a hospital in Beaune, bestowing upon it some of his richest vineyards that produced and still produce famous wines that carry his name. For this hospice Rolin commissioned Rogier van der Weyden to paint the famous polyptych of the *Last Judgment* still to be seen there, and it has been suggested that the panel in the Louvre was originally executed for Rolin's chapel in the church of Our Lady in Autun. It was recorded as being in that church as early as 1705<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the face of the kneeling donor is like that in other presumed portraits of Rolin, and judging from his appearance, a date in the middle thirties, when he would have been between fifty-five and sixty, seems justifiable<sup>6</sup>.

Those who argue that the panel is a much earlier work, executed before Jan would have come in contact with the Burgundian chancellor, identify the donor as John of Bavaria, who was Prince-Archbishop of Liège from 1390 to 1418 and later Count of Holland, Zeeland and Hainault, with his residence at The Hague until his death in 1425<sup>7</sup>. This identification must be considered seriously since John of Bavaria is the earliest of Van Eyck's documented patrons. Reliable records inform us that Jan worked for him at The Hague between 1422 and 1424<sup>8</sup>. To erase any connections between the painting and Rolin, it has been suggested that the famous work found its way to his home town and church as part of the loot taken from Liège by the Burgundians when they pillaged the city in 1468. Other portraits identified as John of Bavaria, however, do not resemble the donor in the Louvre painting at all<sup>9</sup>.

Turning now to the city in the background of the picture, the astonishing naturalism and the infinite detail of the landscape have led many scholars to believe that the panorama must have been based on a sketch of a particular site. The first to describe it at length, Courtépée, who saw it in the sacristy of the collegiate church in Autun in 1778, identified the city as Bruges, the place with which Jan van Eyck was traditionally associated<sup>10</sup>. Others have described the city as Autun, Rolin's home, while others again have described it as Maastricht, London, Prague, and, more recently, Geneva, for a variety of reasons that do not concern us here<sup>11</sup>. The only one of these cities that still preserves its fifteenth-century appearance, namely Bruges, in no way resembles Van Eyck's sprawling town. In a somewhat more convincing fashion, the cityscape has also been interpreted as a sort of fanciful pastiche of Netherlandish

4. For biographies of Rolin see especially A. Perier, *Un chancelier au XVe siècle—Nicolas Rolin*, Paris, 1904; and G. Valat, 'Nicolas Rolin, chancelier de Bourgogne', *Mémoires de la Ste. Eduenne, Autun*, XL, 1912, pp. 73-145; XLI, 1913, pp. 1-73; XLII, 1914, pp. 52-148.

5. A. de Charmasse, 'La Cathédrale d'Autun en 1705', *Mémoires de la Ste. Eduenne, Autun*, XXXIV, 1906, pp. 193 ff.

6. Desneux, *op. cit.*, p. 196 ff.

7. J. Lejeune, 'La période liégeoise des van Eyck', *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch*, xvii, 1955, pp. 62-78; Philippe, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff.

8. The documents on the early career of Jan van Eyck are conveniently gathered by W. H. James Weale in his classic study, *Hubert and*

*Jan van Eyck*, London and New York, 1908. See also E. Schiltz, *Van Eyck-Problemen*, Antwerpen n.d. (1965, privately published).

9. Cf. Lejeune, *Les van Eyck—Peintres de Liège et de sa cathédrale*, Liège, 1956, pp. 15-18; A. Châtelet, 'Les étapes de l'enluminure des manuscrits dits de Turin et de Milan-Turin', *La Revue des Arts*, iv, 1954, pp. 205 ff.; Philippe, *op. cit.*, pp. 138 ff.

10. C. Courtépée, *Description du Duché de Bourgogne*, Dijon, 1778, III, pp. 451-461. Courtépée noted that there were over 2000 figures in the landscape.

11. See J. Timmers, 'De Achtergrond van de Madonna van Rolin door Jan van Eyck', *Oud-Holland*, LXI, 1946, pp. 5-10; Philippe, *op. cit.*, pp. 59 ff.

villages in general with famous landmarks culled from various centers including Utrecht, Maastricht, and Liège, cities far from Flanders.

Resemblances to aspects of towns along the Meuse—the region where Jan van Eyck was probably born—are apparent in many details of the landscape, especially in the great bridge that bears a striking similarity both to the *Pont des Arches* in Liège and the bridge at Maastricht. That such features should be so prominent would, of course, enhance the arguments of those who see the work as an early piece executed for John of Bavaria, who was the Prince-Archbishop of Liège until 1418. Along this line, one scholar has devoted nearly an entire book to the city<sup>12</sup>. Having meticulously studied and compared details in the background with descriptions of mediaeval Liège—not much of which survives—he not only attempted to identify the various quarters of the town but even to name numerous ecclesiastical, civic, and domestic buildings as well. On this theory Van Eyck's vantage point was located down the Meuse near the hill of *Saint-Barthélemy*. To the right is depicted the *Cité* with the great cathedral of Saint Lambert, and to the left is the district known as the *Outremeuse* with a few farms, monasteries, and numerous vineyards owned by the Carthusians.

It must be admitted, however, that in the light of the mediaeval remains of the various cities proposed for Van Eyck's landscape, any precise identification of it seems hopeless, and, as we shall see later, it is a misdirected quest at that. If, on the other hand, we permit Jan van Eyck some freedom in laying out his city and analyse it along other iconographic lines, it becomes an important key to the meaning of the picture as a whole and, surprisingly enough, an unexpected bit of evidence for the identification of the donor.

What does the picture really represent? Over this general question—the first to be asked—most writers have passed too briefly, though several have remarked on the seemingly bold manner in which the donor confronts the Virgin. Dr. Panofsky, however, goes further, observing that 'a human being has gained admission to the elevated throne room of the Madonna without the benefit of a canonized sponsor, (so that) it was doubly imperative to designate this throne room as part of a palace not of this earth'<sup>13</sup>. But is it Rolin who visits the Virgin, or the reverse—the Virgin visiting Rolin?<sup>14</sup> And, however elevated, how can the scene be set in heaven in a house not of this earth when two such earthly figures look down on to such a terrestrial landscape from the terrace of the chamber itself? Clearly, the current explanations will not do.

What the panel in fact depicts becomes plain enough once we remember that Van Eyck habitually employed realistic settings and realistic figures for symbolic purposes. The setting is Rolin's own chamber, where he kneels in private devotion at his *prie-dieu* with his breviary open before him; and

12. J. Lejeune, *Les van Eyck . . .*, pp. 79-154. Cf. A. H. Cornette, 'Jan van Eyck en O. L. Vrouw met den kanselier Rolin', *Elsevier's Maandschrift* XLVIII, 1938, pp. 1-14.

13. Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

14. In his review of Panofsky's book on Netherlandish painting,

Professor Julius Held, while accepting his interpretation in general, quite rightly, to my mind, questioned the identification of the foreground chamber as the throne room of the Virgin, remarking that the *prie-dieu* of Rolin is a more permanent fixture of the room than the obliquely placed throne of Mary (*Art Bulletin*, xxxviii, 1955, p. 213).

the moment is when he lifts his eyes from the book and is visited in thought by a vision of the Virgin. That is why his gaze is abstracted and not focused on the Virgin but (like that of Canon van der Paele in Van Eyck's famous other devotional panel) looking into space. In Jan's world Mary and the Child appear as very real, very tangible figures. Furthermore, in his typical fashion, Van Eyck shows us exactly why this particular mental vision came to Rolin at this particular moment. Unfortunately, we cannot read what is written on the open page of his book, but we can read the text—or some part of it—on the border of the Virgin's mantle. Along the lower border appear the words *exaltata sum in Libano* (from the phrase 'quasi cedrus exaltata sum in Libano'—'I was exalted like a cedar in Lebanon'), and other portions of this same passage from *Ecclesiasticus* xxiv can be found in the upper part of her mantle. It was in fact this very passage (beginning with verse 14, 'ab initio et ante saecula creata sum') that served as the *lectio* of the *Officium parvum* of the Virgin in Netherlandish breviaries<sup>15</sup>. As he lifts his eyes after reading the text, Rolin is mystically visited by the Virgin herself.

And how fittingly Van Eyck elaborated the theme into every detail, so that the picture could stand in Rolin's own chapel in Our Lady's own church at Autun. In the reading from *Ecclesiasticus* xxiv, the personification of Holy Wisdom is praised and glorified in terms of its own creation: as Jerusalem, the cedar of Lebanon, the cypress of Mount Sion, the rose of Jericho, the fragrance of the vines and the beauty of the flowers—the glorious types of earthly creation. And Wisdom, the verses continue, pours forth the rivers that nourish the meadows and the fields of this lower world just as, on a different level, Wisdom also pours forth the true doctrine down to the faithful on earth. Accordingly, Van Eyck portrays the Virgin both as the Queen of Heaven and as the *sedes sapientiae*—the throne of *logos*, Holy Wisdom. The Christ Child, the *logos* and Creator, appropriately holds the orb and the cross and blesses his creation<sup>16</sup>. The resplendent world beyond his finger tips is the glorious and infinitely varied creation of the divine Word, honoring its maker. It is the same sort of sparkling Netherlandish landscape as the one Jan painted in the *Adoration of the Lamb* to represent the New Jerusalem.

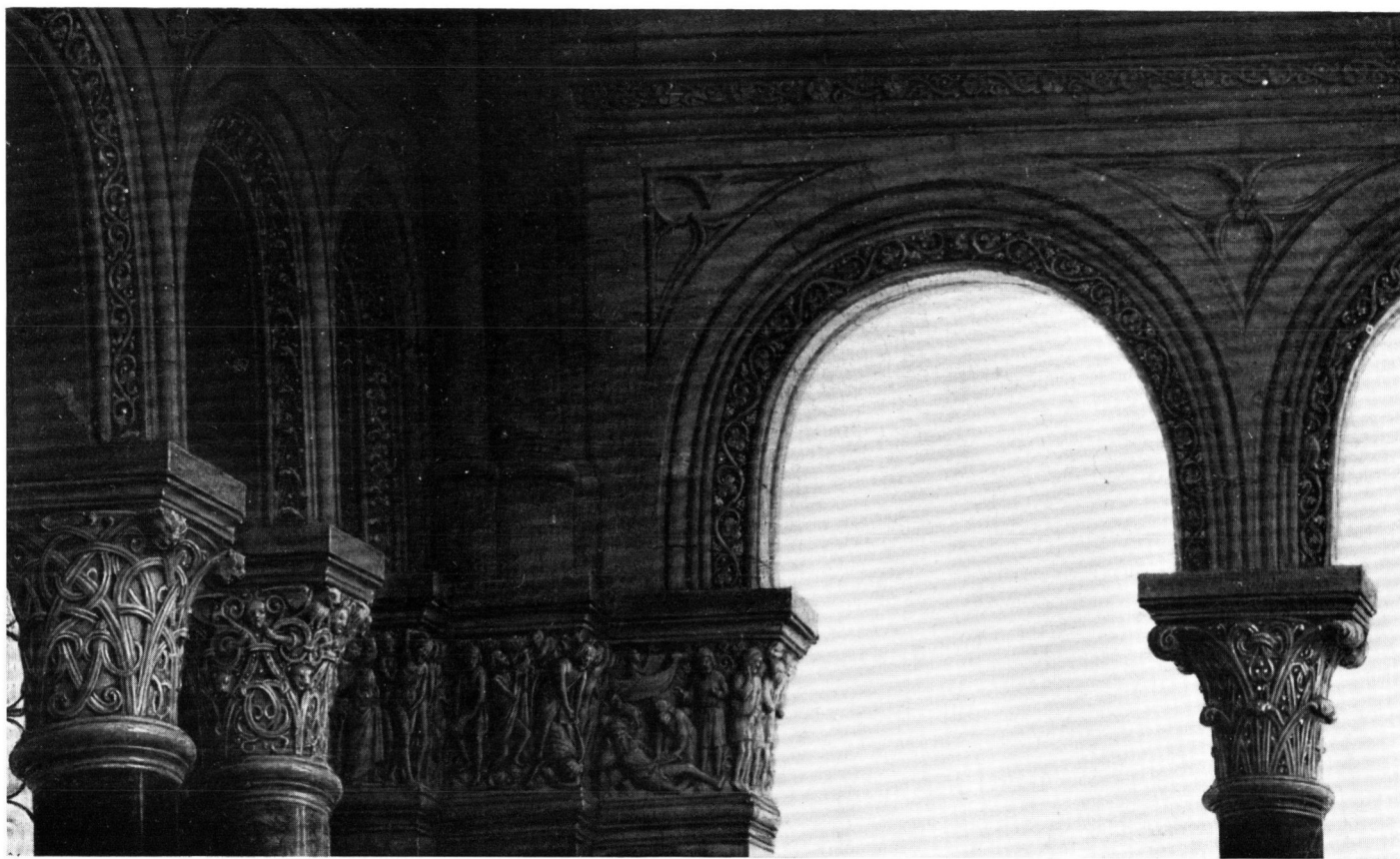
The wonderful panorama that fills the background of the painting is both real (or at any rate realistic) and symbolic. Between the loggia in the foreground and the distant landscape is a small enclosed garden, the familiar *hortus conclusus*, symbolic of Mary's purity and virginity, and many of the flowers that grow there can be recognized as symbols of Mary popular in Netherlandish art. On the wall of the garden and within the crenelation of the parapet beyond it perch exotic peacocks, signifying the role of the Madonna as the eternal queen of heaven.

Beyond the closed garden stand two men. One, with his back to us, peers over the ledge as if surveying the landscape, while the other stands erect and in profile. Their presence in the exact center of the composition cannot be explained as simply that of casual bystanders, and some curious interpretations have been put forth as to their identities. It has even been suggested that the man to the left is actually sketching the river valley, using the parapet as a desk, and that he could well be a portrait of none other

15. J. A. F. Kronenburg, *Maria's Heerlijkheid in Nederland*, Amsterdam, 1904, II, p. 43.

16. Cf. the summary of interpretations given by Michel, *op. cit.*, p. 116.





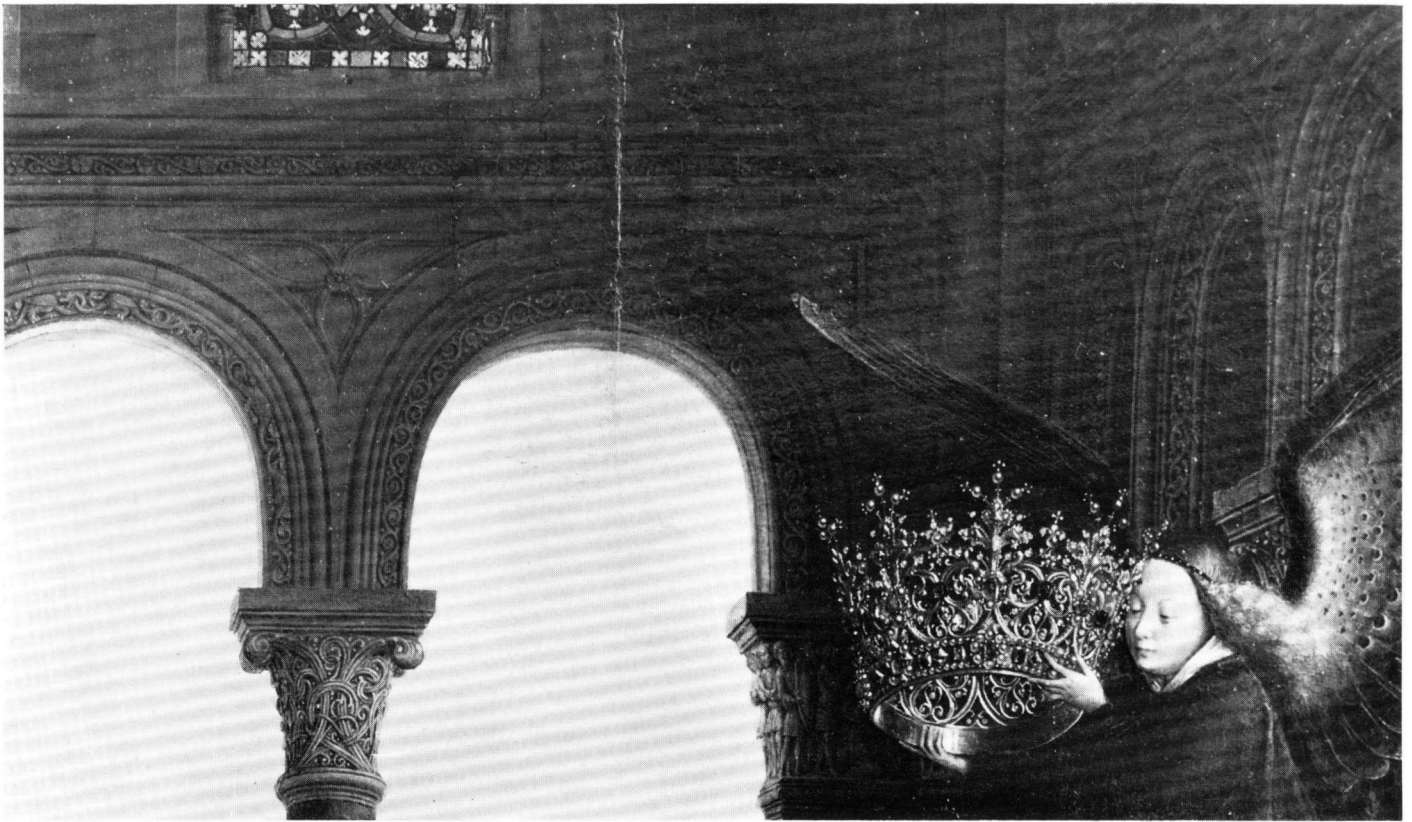
(3)



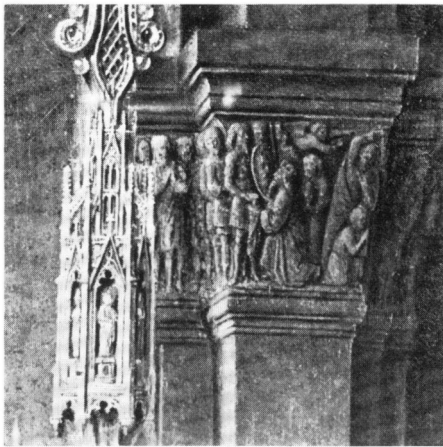
(1)

(1). Jan van Eyck. *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. Panel, 66 x 62 cm. *Paris, Louvre*.

(3). *Idem*, detail.—



(4)

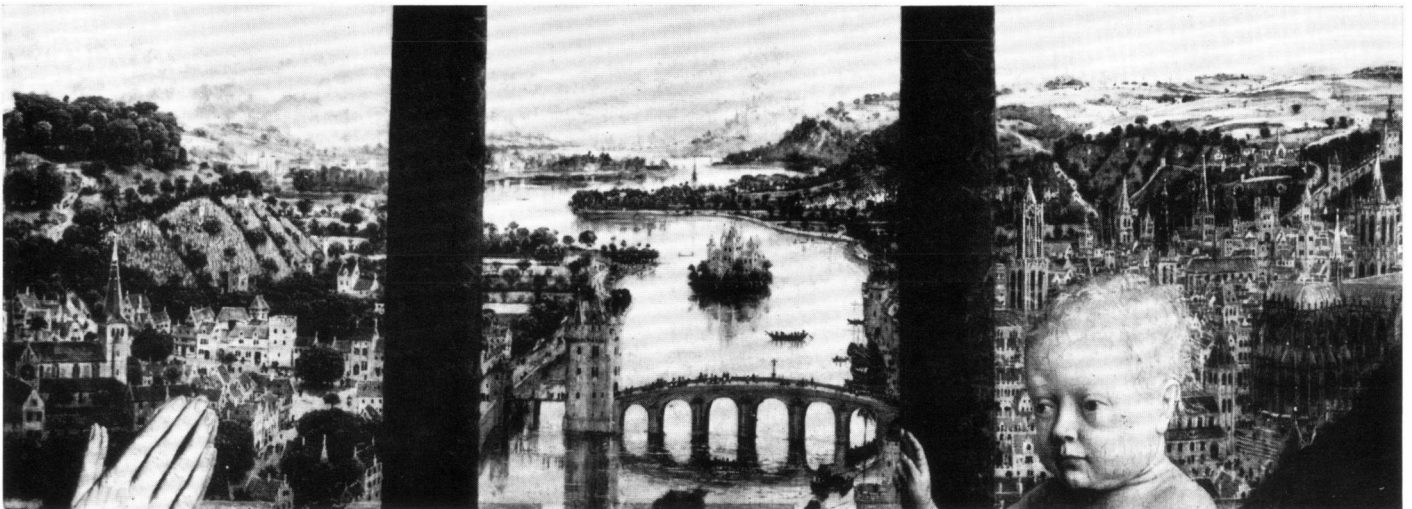


(5)

(2). Idem, detail.—

(4). Idem, detail.—

(5). Detail from Jan van Eyck. *Madonna of Canon van der Paele*. *Bruges, Municipal Museum*.



than Hubert van Eyck (he hides himself still!)<sup>17</sup>. The suggestion that the second figure, facing the donor, could be Jan van Eyck, is more convincing. We know that Jan included himself in at least two other paintings—in the reflections in the mirror of the *Wedding portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini* and in the armour of Saint George in the *Madonna of Canon van der Paele*<sup>18</sup>. The world Van Eyck painted, however symbolic, was so real that he could put himself into it.

Now we come to another question. Granted that Van Eyck's 'disguised symbolism' (as Dr. Panofsky calls it) involved extreme realism, how 'real' were his models?<sup>19</sup> Is the landscape in Rolin's painting an accurate topographical reproduction of a particular locality or combination of various actual sites, or is it imaginary and simply based on Van Eyck's general knowledge of the Netherlandish scene? The landscape is emphatically divided into two halves by the river. Professor Lejeune, it will be recalled, identified the two parts as topographical features of Liège<sup>20</sup>. Along quite another line, De Tolnay called the two halves two different worlds, the rustic countryside on the left contrasting with the elegant ecclesiastical setting on the right. All people, he noted, move from left to right across the great bridge from what he considered to be the more secular and earthly domain to the paradise of the church<sup>21</sup>. While recognizing the symbolic significance of the background, Panofsky rightly criticized this interpretation ('it should be noted that the big boat crosses the river, not from left to right, but from right to left') and added that the 'glittering Meuse suggests the „pure river of water, clear as crystal" that runs through the New Jerusalem'—the heavenly city in the *Apocalypse* of Saint John<sup>22</sup>.

For the most part, these theories tend to divorce the landscape from the figures and thus fail to account for the meaning of the picture as a whole. The entire scene is both unified and divided. In the foreground we see Chancellor Rolin on the left and the Madonna on the right, and behind them the panorama of creation, honoring its Maker. A clear gulf fixed between Rolin and his vision is expressed realistically by the open tract of pavement between the kneeling figure and the Virgin, and this vertical line of demarcation continues into the background in the form of the broad river—a river which clearly separates two symbolic complexes. It is perhaps significant that as the Christ Child, the Creator, raises his fingers in benediction they just touch the spring of the great bridge that joins the two sides of the landscape. On the right is the complex of the Virgin (*Notre Dame*) and the image of the great church (*Notre Dame*). This juxtaposition obviously equates the Virgin to the church—the notion made typically explicit in Van Eyck's painting of the Madonna in the church in Berlin. The countless churches in the cityscape to the right, moreover, may well again refer to the verses of *Ecclesiasticus* XXIV where the first lines tell how Wisdom, the Creator, 'opens its mouth through the churches'. The symbolism of the complex on the left is not so apparent. Here the figure of Rolin, the earthly patron, is set against a

17. Lejeune, *Les van Eyck* . . . , p. 203.

18. David Carter, 'Reflections in the Armour in the Canon van der Paele Madonna', *Art Bulletin*, xxxvi, 1954, pp. 60-62. Lejeune (p. 202) states that the profile bears a resemblance to the portrait of 'Arnolfini' in Berlin, which he implies might be a portrait of Jan van Eyck instead—raising an old issue once more. It should also be pointed out that the profile is similarly close in features to the *Man in the Red Turban* in

London, also considered by many to be a self-portrait of the artist.

19. Panofsky, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 134 ff., for an excellent analysis of realism and symbolism in Van Eyck's art.

20. Lejeune, *Les van Eyck* . . . , pp. 96-107.

21. Charles De Tolnay, *Le Maître de Flémalle et les Frères van Eyck*, Brussels, 1939, p. 29.

22. Panofsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 139, 414 (n. 139-2).

modest countryside showing prominent vineyards—a feature not common in Van Eyck’s landscapes, though a vine does grow amid the rich foliage in the Ghent altarpiece. What special meaning, we may ask, could these vineyards have for Rolin’s picture?

Their significance is first personal. Rolin was one of France’s most famous entrepreneurs of fine Burgundian wines<sup>23</sup>. He donated many of his best vineyards to the Hospice at Beaune we know, and his tapestries that once hung there show his family arms, his personal device and initials alternating with heraldic motifs of vine stocks in which quails—birds often associated with wine in France—are perched<sup>24</sup>. And it is likely enough that he also donated vineyards to the Church of Our Lady in Autun, for which our picture was painted, though no documentary proof of this is known to me. Secondly, their significance is sacramental. For when we turn to the decoration of the chamber in the foreground, we see specific allusions to the vine there too and these allusions clearly refer to the sacrament of the Eucharist. The capitals left, right, and in the center of the room display the familiar floral and animal motifs found in many of Van Eyck’s works and seem to have no special symbolic message. But directly over the heads of the kneeling patron and the enthroned Madonna, Van Eyck introduced capitals carved in Gothic style with recognizable histories displayed upon them. To the left, in keeping with the character of the donor’s half of the picture, the capitals (Fig. 3) represent the fall of Adam, the murder of Abel, and the drunkenness of Noah, each illustrating a basic failing in the descendants of Adam: yielding to temptation, envy, and overindulgence. The story of Noah is very prominent and appears directly over the head of the donor. Noah was the first to plant the vine and to make wine from its harvest—a sort of Old Testament Bacchus; he drank too much and was reduced to the shameful figure of a drunkard. Behind the figure of the inebriated Noah one can, in fact, see his first vine with its twining stem, and the same motif emphatically continues above the abacus of the pillar in the form of a stylized grapevine that meanders along the intrados of the three arches to join the historiated capital on Mary’s side.

In the capital above the Virgin (Fig. 4) only one narrative episode is discernible, and its subject matter, somewhat obscured by varnish, has been variously interpreted. De Tolnay identified it as the encounter of Esther and Ahasuerus<sup>25</sup>, Panofsky as the Justice of Trajan<sup>26</sup>, while Philippe noted that it bore a resemblance to the relief on the capital in the *Madonna of Canon George van der Paele* which clearly depicts the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek (Fig. 5)<sup>27</sup>. This last identification is surely the right one. After a victorious military campaign, Abraham was met and blessed by Melchizedek, a king-priest, as the one appointed by the most high God—‘the creator of heaven and earth’ (Genesis XIV: 19). But the more important fact for our picture is that this same episode was considered from the time of

23. The history of Burgundian wines and vineyards has been well studied. For the vineyards of Rolin’s time in Beaune, Autun, and Dijon, see especially H. David, ‘La vignoble bourguignon’, *Annales de Géographie*, xxvii, 1918, pp. 285 ff.; and C. Tournier, ‘Le vin a Dijon de 1430 a 1560’, *Annales de Bourgogne*, xxii, 1950, pp. 7-32, 161-184. On at least two occasions Philip the Good passed strict legislation declaring that certain vines in Beaune could not be transported or transplanted elsewhere in France in order to preserve their excellence and reputation.

24. William Wixom, *Treasures From Mediaeval France*, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, 1967, p. 298, reproduces one of the tapestries. For the associations of the quails and vineyards see *La grande encyclopédie*, Paris, viii (n.d.), pp. 776 ff.

25. De Tolnay, *op. cit.*, p. 50, n. 67.

26. Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

27. Philippe, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine to be the type *par excellence* of the institution of the Eucharist. Melchizedek, the first Old Testament priest to make a bloodless offering of wine and bread, was a type of Christ the king-priest, who offered the same elements at the Last Supper. According to Saint Augustine, in his discussion of the first offering of bread and wine by Melchizedek, Jesus himself was made a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek—quoting a passage from Saint Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews<sup>28</sup>. And in a lengthy discussion of the story of Noah’s vine and intoxication and nakedness, Saint Augustine stated that the act was ‘pregnant with prophetic meaning and veiled in mystery’. His act, in fact, presaged the Passion of Christ, and the robe his sons placed over him was a symbol of the sacrament itself<sup>29</sup>. Thus, to sum up, the symbolism of Eucharistic wine runs through Van Eyck’s painting. In the architecture we have the drunkenness of Noah on one side and the scene of Abraham and Melchizedek on the other, while vine tendrils clamber across the three arches that links the two sides. And in the vineyards so prominent on both sides of the landscape we have not the topographical record of a particular Mosan city, but a precise allusion, at once realistic and symbolic, both to the business of the donor and to the sacramental gift of the True Vine.

28. *De civitate dei*, xvi. 22.

29. *De civitate dei*, xvi. 1-2.