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The chronograms in the inscription of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw**

Although numerous authors have believed that Jan van Eyck included chronograms in the *Ghent altarpiece* quatrain (Ghent, Saint Bavo's Cathedral) and the inscription of his *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* (Fig. 1) (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), doubts have been expressed about whether the former was actually composed by Van Eyck and whether the latter even contains chronograms. Thus, there has been some uncertainty regarding whether Van Eyck used chronograms at all. It seems to have escaped notice that there is unequivocal evidence in the disposition of the highlights on the letters of the *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* that Van Eyck did include two chronograms therein.

Chronograms are inscriptions in which a year is encoded in the text through the selection of words containing letters with Roman numeral values adding up to the year to be signified. The text alludes to an event in that year. In a nineteenth century collection of over five thousand chronograms James Hilton wrote that the use of chronograms in Western languages dated to the fourteenth century. Hilton also noted that in Flemish chronograms certain variations in the use of Roman numerals occurred, with the letter "W" capable of being read as two "V"s side by side and given a value of ten (Van Eyck painted the "W"s in the *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* as pairs of overlapping "V"s), the letter "Y" capable of being given a value of two (in Hubert and Jan van Eyck's *Ghent altarpiece* the letter "Y" was painted on the banderole behind Zachariah as a long vertical stroke on the left joined to a short vertical stroke on the right by a diagonal stroke rising to the right) and the letter "D" was sometimes not given any value at all.[1] While this last usage may seem arbitrary, its currency is borne out by the argument below.

One of the chronograms Hilton recorded was in the *Ghent altarpiece* quatrain. However, a number of authors have suggested that the *Ghent altarpiece* quatrain is not contemporary with the painting of the altarpiece. This scepticism was particularly prominent in the 1930s when even the existence of Hubert van Eyck, named in the quatrain as having started the altarpiece, was doubted.[2] Since then others have pointed out that there is no technical or stylistic evidence that the quatrain is a later addition and much that suggests that it is original.[3] While the authorship of the quatrain has been contested, it has not been doubted that the last line of the quatrain contains a chronogram, with the letters painted in red (V, V, X, M, I, V, C, L, L, C, C, V, I) providing the year of the *Ghent altarpiece*'s installation as 1432.

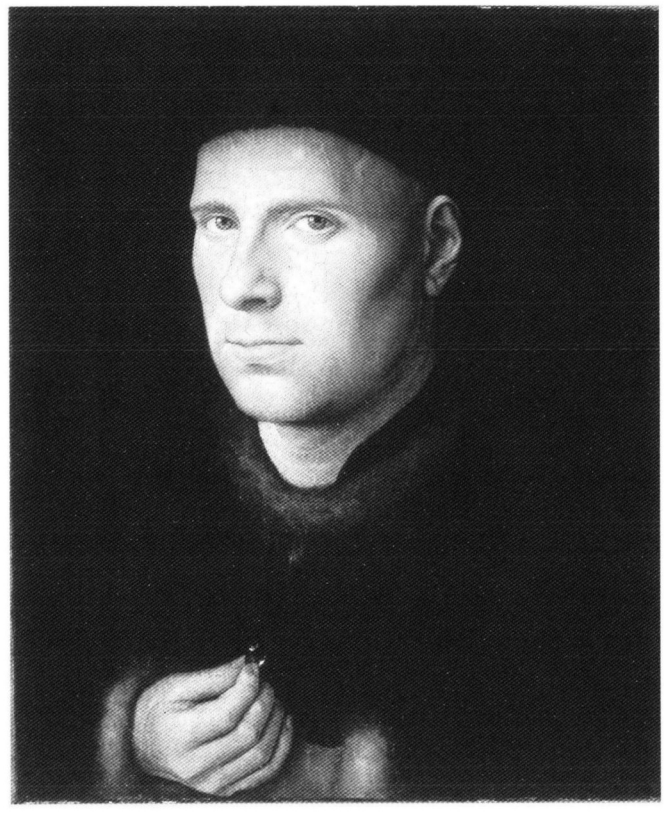


Fig. 1
Jan van Eyck, 1436, *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw*, oil on panel, 33 by 27 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, copyright, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

The inscription of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw*, reads:

+ ♦ IAN DE [PICTURE OF A LION IN PLACE OF "LEEUW"] OP SANT ORSELEN DACH/
♦ ♦ ♦ DAT CLAER EERST MET OGHEN SACH ♦ 1401 ♦/
+ GHECONTERFEIT NV HEEFT MI IAN ♦ ♦/
VAN EYCK WEL BLIICT WANNEERT BEGA(N) ♦ 1436 ♦

Elisabeth Dhanens translated this as: "Jan de [Leeuw = lion] who, on St. Ursula's day, opened his eyes for the first time, 1401, I am now painted by Jan van Eyck. It can be seen when he began, 1436."[4] A number of authors have read two chronograms in this signature including W.H. James Weale[5], Max Friedländer[6] and Erwin Panofsky[7]. More recently Guy Bauman wrote that there might be three chronograms.[8] In the first line of the inscription, disposed across the top and right sides of the frame, the first chronogram has been said to give the sitter's year of birth as 1401, which is actually painted in Arabic numerals at the end of the line. In the second line running across the bottom and left sides of the frame, the second chronogram has been said to give the year in which the portrait was commenced as 1436, which is also given in Arabic numerals at the end of the line. It was believed that Van Eyck replaced the sitter's surname "Leeuw", which means lion in Dutch, with an image of a lion in order to avoid upsetting the first chronogram by the addition of letters with a sum Roman numeral value of 65. In addition, Bauman proposed that the sum of the "V"s and "I"s of the second line might also provide the probable age of the sitter as 35.

However, uncertainty has been expressed as to whether these chronograms are intended, since the first chronogram is successful only if the three "D"s are not counted, and the second chronogram is only successful if the "Y" is given a value of one and the "W" is given a value of ten. It has also been noted that these chronograms

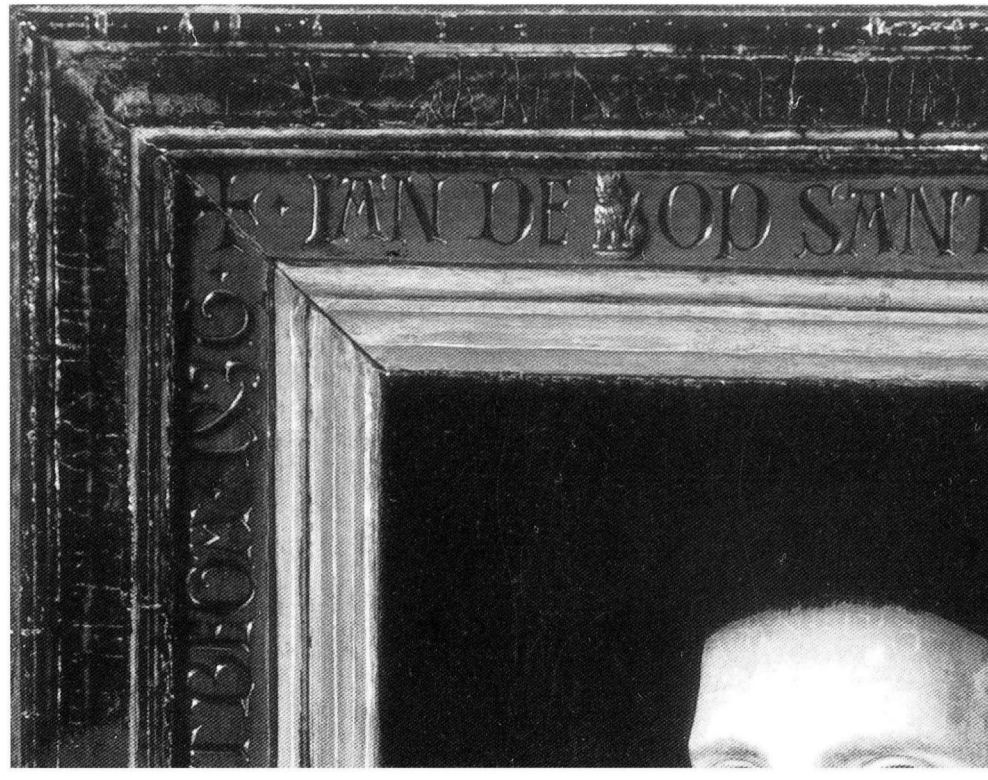


Fig. 2
Detail: The left top corner of the frame showing the "I", the lion and the date "1436" painted as though raised above the frame.

would be redundant since both dates are provided explicitly.[9] Bauman's proposed third chronogram is even further removed from the standard definition of a chronogram in ignoring the "M" and the "C"s, and indicating a figure other than a year.

Nevertheless, the signature is painted in such a way that the presence of two chronograms is irrefutable. Those letters whose values as Roman numerals are to be counted, including the "Y" and the "W", have their highlights painted on the edges closest to the top left corner of the frame, which is the area of light source for the work as a whole (I, L, C, C, L, M, C and C, I, V, M, I, I, V, Y, C, W, L, L, I, I, C, W) (Figs. 2 and 3). The image of the lion and the dates in Arabic numerals are also painted this way. Some of these features also have distinct shadows painted to the right, such as the first "I", the lion and the first "L". All the other letters, including the "D"s, the crosses and the *puncti* have their highlights painted on the edges closest to the bottom right corner and do not throw shadows. This can only mean that the first group of letters, the lion and the Arabic numeral dates are intended to be seen as though raised above the surface of the frame, while the other letters, the crosses and the *puncti* are intended to be seen as though sunken into the frame.

The Roman numeral values of the raised letters in the first line (I, L, C, C, L, M, C), when added give 1401. The Roman numeral values of the raised letters of the second line (C, I, V, M, I, I, V, Y, C, W, L, L, I, I, C, W), when added, give 1436 if the "Y" is given a value of one. This reading is supported by the way the letter is painted with a single vertical stroke corresponding to a Roman numeral "I". Thus the raised letters in the inscription of the *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* signify that two chronograms are present just as the red letters in the *Ghent altarpiece* quatrain signify that a chronogram is present there. There is no apparent evidence to support the hypothesis of a third chronogram, as the "M" and the "C"s in the second line are not distinguished in any obvious way from the other letters with Roman numeral values.

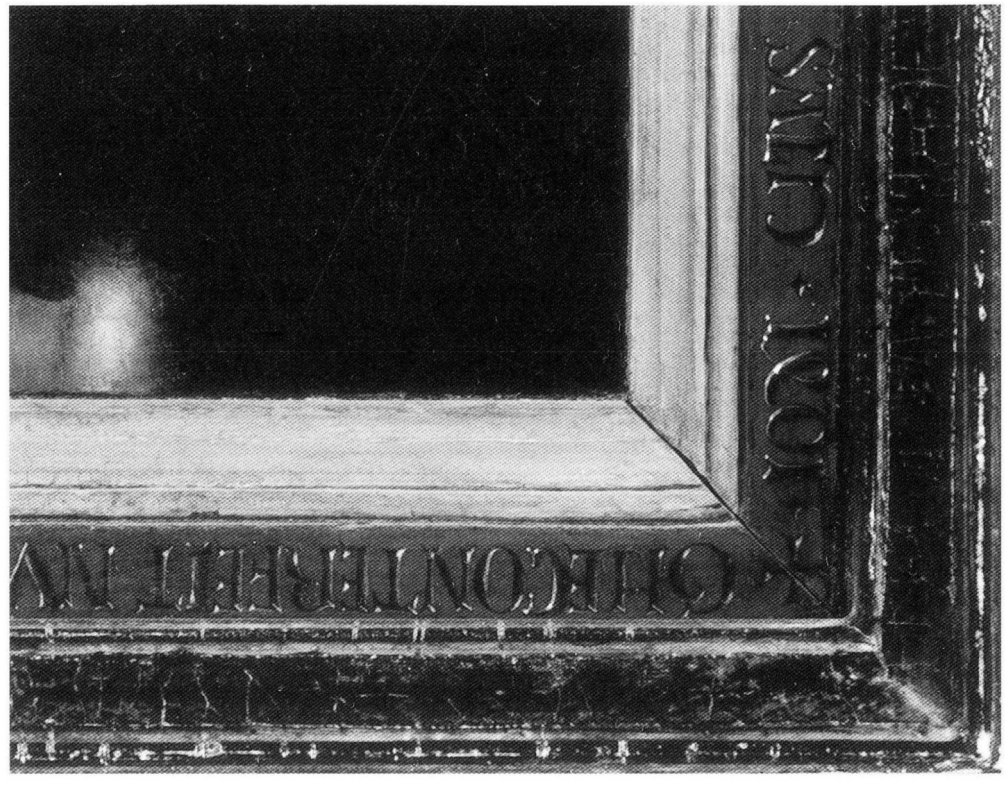


Fig. 3
Detail: The bottom right corner of the frame showing the "C", the date "1401" and the "I" painted as though raised above the frame.

The frame inscription of the *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw*, painted in black letters, numbers, crosses, *puncti* and a lion with gold coloured highlights against a golden brown background, takes the form of a sophisticated representation of three dimensional metalwork which the sitter, as a goldsmith, might well have appreciated. There is evidence that Van Eyck used chronograms in the inscription and "it can be seen".

NOTES

* This paper is derived from the lecture *Shedding Light on an Eyckian Virgin and Child: the critical reception and scientific analysis of the* Ince Hall Virgin and Child *(Melbourne. National Gallery of Victoria) and its signature* given at The University of Melbourne, School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology on 4 September 2001, for the Histories and Theories of Conservation subject, taught by Professor Jaynie Anderson, Herald Chair of Fine Arts. Thanks are due to Dr. Alexander Wied, Curator, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna for kindly assisting in the preparation of this article.

[1] J. Hilton F.S.A., *Chronograms 5000 and more in number excerpted out of various authors and collected at many places*, London, 1882, pp. v-xiv and pp. 54-55.

[2] For example, M. Brockwell (*The Van Eyck Problem*, London, 1954) provided an overview of this controversy in favour of the quatrain's non-originality.

[3] For example E. Dhanens (*Van Eyck: The Ghent Altarpiece*, London, 1973, pp. 26-31 and *Hubert and Jan Van Eyck*, Antwerp, 1980, pp. 81-82) suggested that the quatrain is contemporary with the installation of the *Ghent altarpiece*, but was composed by someone from the circle of the donor Joos Vijd; D. Goodgal (*The Iconography of the Ghent Altarpiece*, Ann Arbor, 1981, pp. 63-65) argued for the authenticity of the quatrain, but did not specify whether this meant it was composed by Jan van Eyck; G. Hulin de Loo ('La Fameuse Inscription Du Retable De l'Agneau', *Revue Archéologique*, 6th Series, III, January-June, 1934, p. 86) argued that the quatrain is likely to have been composed by Jan van Eyck.

[4] E. Dhanens, op. cit. (note 2), p. 238.

[5] W.H. James Weale, *Hubert and Jan van Eyck: Their Life and Work*, London/New York, 1908, p. 87-88.

[6] M. Friedländer, *Die Altniederländische Malerie. I. Die Van Eyck. Petrus Christus*, Berlin , 1924, p. 58.

[7] E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting Its Origins and Character*, Cambridge, 1953, I, p. 198.

[8] G. Bauman ('Early Flemish Portraits: 1425-1525', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Spring [1986], pp. 35-6) stated that the *Portrait of Jan de Leeuw* may contain a number of chronograms: for the year of completion of the work, the year of the sitter's birth and the age of the sitter. Concerning the third chronogram Bauman wrote: "... if the Y is not counted as I, and if the M's, C's and I.'s are discounted, the second sentence contains a different chronogram VVVVVIIIII (35), the sitter's probable age." Bauman noted that "D" is not counted because it had not been in use for dates for almost half a century before Van Eyck's time.

9 E. Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal: Medieval Marriage and the Enigma of Van Eyck's Double Portrait*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1994, p. 166, n. 56.