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*Flemish versus Netherlandish: A Discourse of Nationalism**

by LISA DEAM

This essay shows how scholarship on fifteenth-century Flemish panel painting became intertwined with efforts at national identity-building in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe. Paintings such as Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece were not only dispersed across regional and national boundaries, but were intellectually appropriated for competing national programs. The paintings consequently became a site of conflict between the Latin and Germanic traditions. These conflicts are clearly visible through the shifting terminology of this art, variously claimed as "Flemish" and "Netherlandish." Such nationalist discourses shaped future scholarship on Flemish painting and contributed to its perceived inferiority vis-à-vis the Southern artistic tradition.

“At the beginning of Netherlandish painting stands, looming and mysterious, the Ghent Altarpiece” [fig.1].¹ The “mystery” of which Max J. Friedländer speaks in his 1921 book on the altarpiece is usually taken to be its enigmatic authorship and its seemingly divergent parts, issues that have baffled generations of scholars attempting to determine the role of Jan and/or Hubert van Eyck in the history of Flemish painting. But the serene surface of the altarpiece also hides a modern mystery having to do with national rather than artistic identity. When Friedländer penned these words on the Ghent Altarpiece, its twelve panels had just been reunited after more than a century of continuous dispersals across regional and national boundaries. The perceived crisis in the work’s artistic identity may have thus resulted from a very real crisis in its modern identity and ownership.

These events in the post-history of the Ghent Altarpiece form an important chapter in the historiography of fifteenth-century Flemish art, various aspects of which have been investigated in some detail by such scholars as Suzanne Sulzberger and Francis Haskell.² The inter-

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the College Art Association of America, January 1995. I would like to thank Katherine Crawford Lubber and Joel Snyder for their suggestions on drafts of the paper, and I am especially indebted to Linda Seidel for her generosity and insight.

¹Friedländer, 1921, prologue: “Am Eingange zur niederländischen Malerei steht ragend und rätselvoll der Genter Altar.”

²Sulzberger; Haskell, chap. 15, “Huizinga and the ‘Flemish Renaissance.’”

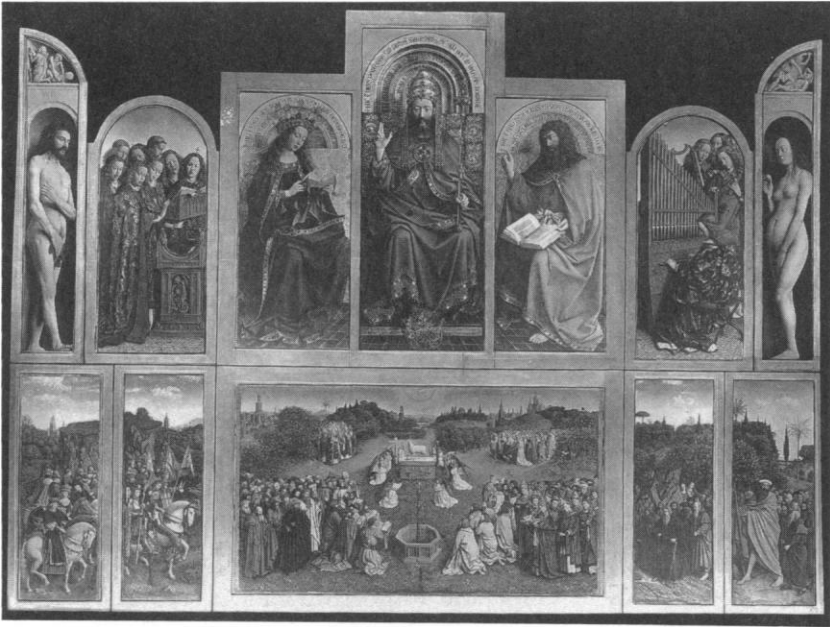


FIGURE 1. Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. View of interior of altarpiece with wings open. Photo: copyright IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

relationship of scholarship and nationalism is a key piece in this historiographical puzzle but has yet to be fully explored. By following the physical movements of the Ghent Altarpiece, I will demonstrate in this essay how scholarship on Flemish painting became intertwined with efforts at national identity-building in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe. These developments are quite visibly played out on the level of terminology. Although most art historians today speak of Eyckian art under the general heading “Northern Renaissance,” scholars of previous generations debated whether van Eyck and his contemporaries should be more properly known as “Flemish” or “Netherlandish.”³ For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen to employ the term “Flemish painting” to refer to panel painting produced in and around the fifteenth-century region of Flanders, in present-day Belgium. Although this choice may seem to place me on one side of the terminological debate that I describe, I use this term knowing that, like others, it is an arbitrary definition, one that comes with pre-ascribed meanings and values. My difficulty in set-

³ The history of the term “Northern Renaissance” is an important issue that I cannot explore here (but see Haskell, 431-95).

ting on a term speaks to the heart of the issues discussed in this essay. Indeed, the terminological confusion facing today's student of fifteenth-century Northern painting testifies to the far-reaching implications of nationalism for the study of Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries.

The scholarly and terminological debates surrounding Eyckian art are bound up with the biographies of the works of art themselves. Perhaps the most dramatic "life history" is that of the Ghent Altarpiece.⁴ In addition to falling prey to fires, thefts, and multiple restorations, the altarpiece was caught in a web of nationalistic intrigue beginning in the late eighteenth century.⁵ During the Napoleonic wars, its four central panels were confiscated by the French Republic and exhibited in the Revolutionary Louvre.⁶ They were returned in triumph to Ghent after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, but the celebrations over the repatriation of the altarpiece were cut short the following year. Acting on an apparently long-standing desire of the fabric fund of St. Bavo's Cathedral where the altarpiece was housed, the churchwardens sold the wings (minus the panels of Adam and Eve) to Brussels art dealer L.J. van Nieuwenhuys in 1816. It seems that, for the churchwardens at least, the wings were "irrelevant" to the four central panels depicting God the Father, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, and the Adoration of the Lamb; it was only after the sale that the legality of the churchwardens' actions were questioned by the city of Ghent and that the plight of the Ghent Altarpiece came to the attention of the Belgian public. By this point, van Nieuwenhuys had sold the wings to English timber merchant Edward Solly, who in turn sold them as part of a larger collection to the Prussian government. Once in Berlin, they were exhibited in the "Old Museum" (sometimes called the Berlin Museum), whose collections were transferred to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum upon its foundation in 1904. The Treaty of Versailles dictated the wings' return to Belgium, along

⁴In tracing the events in the post-history of the Ghent Altarpiece, I am guided by Arjun Appadurai's argument, 3-63, that objects of value, including works of art, have social lives and biographies, and that it is only by following an object's trajectory that we can more fully grasp its meaning to those who value it.

⁵For the following events surrounding the Ghent Altarpiece, see *Les primitifs flamands*, 2:40-45, on the confiscation and return of the panels by the French Republic and the sale of 1816; and 57-58, on the acquisition of the Adam and Eve panels by the Brussels Museum. See also van den Gheyn, 28-35.

⁶On the plunder of works of art in Belgium by the Revolutionary campaigns, see Gould, 30-40; McClellan, 114-16.

with various other goods such as livestock, coal, and ships, in 1919.⁷

The two wings depicting Adam and Eve followed an equally dramatic but more obscure trajectory. Indeed, it is difficult to trace many events surrounding these panels, perhaps because of scholarly efforts to erase a particularly embarrassing episode in the history of the altarpiece. Sometime around the French Revolution, the panels of Adam and Eve were removed from public view and stored in the cathedral's archive room, where interested scholars were able to obtain limited access to them.⁸ Whether this move can be attributed to the 1781 visit of Emperor Joseph II, who reportedly found the panels offensive, is uncertain,⁹ although it seems that Adam and Eve were deemed in some sense inappropriate to the four central panels. There appears to have been a drastic change of heart during the nineteenth century, however. In 1861, the Belgian government persuaded St. Bavo's Cathedral to sell these panels to the Brussels Museum, partly in exchange for copies of the wings of the Ghent Altarpiece painted by Michael Coxcie in 1559. But because Coxcie had not painted copies of the Adam and Eve panels, Belgian painter Victor Lagye provided copies of them in 1864, which are still displayed, although unlabeled, in St. Bavo's Cathedral [fig. 2]. The new Adam and Eve appeared decorously clothed in hair tunics, the "modifications désignées par le conseil de fabrique,"¹⁰ which gives some credence to the story that the original panels were considered indecent.

In 1865, the Ghent Altarpiece was "reconstituted" at St. Bavo's Cathedral with the four original central panels, Coxcie's copies of six wings, and Lagye's "improved" copies of Adam and Eve. This reconstitution, however, was as illusory as the paintings themselves, for the altarpiece had become a mere pastiche of original and copied panels. Somewhat ironically, the Berlin Museum, which possessed six of the original wings of the Ghent Altarpiece, acquired Coxcie's panels of

⁷ *The Treaties of Peace, 1919-1923*, 1:149.

⁸ The French archivist Léon de Laborde, 1:cxii-cxiii, n. 1, discussed the difficulty he had gaining admittance to see the Adam and Eve panels in 1847.

⁹ While most accounts of the Ghent Altarpiece reproduce this story, there is no definitive documentary proof that these panels were removed from public view before the French Revolution. See *Les primitifs flamands*, 2:40-41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:57.



FIGURE 2. Victor Lagye, copies of the Adam and Eve panels from the Ghent Altarpiece, 1865, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Photo: author.

the Adoration of the Lamb and God the Father in 1823, giving the museum its own near-complete pastiche of the altarpiece (Coxcie's panels depicting the Virgin and John the Baptist went to the Pinakothek in Bavaria). The completeness of Ghent's version aside, who is to say which museum possessed the "real" Ghent Altarpiece? The traditional art historical values of unity and authenticity played little role in these museums' competing attempts to reconstitute Jan van Eyck's early masterpiece.

As these events show, nineteenth-century reactions to the Ghent Altarpiece among the scholarly and public communities of Belgium were at best ambivalent, rather than uniformly or even primarily enthusiastic. This surprising fact challenges the universal reverence accorded Jan van Eyck and Flemish painting today. What, then, lies behind the dispersion of the altarpiece and the seemingly precarious status of Flemish painting during this time? One issue might be, as Haskell addressed, the fluctuating status of Flemish painting between "medieval" and "Renaissance," the end of one tradition or the beginning of another.¹¹ I believe, however, that the national status of Eyckian art was also at stake, particularly in Belgium. Indeed, the

¹¹ Haskell, 431-95.

events surrounding the Ghent Altarpiece raise a number of perplexing questions regarding Belgium's attitude toward its artistic ancestors. Why, for example, was Ghent so easily satisfied with a pastiche of the altarpiece in 1865? From whence sprang Brussels's sudden interest in the Adam and Eve panels, which had remained hidden for so long? And, perhaps even more troubling, what lies behind Belgium's role in the altarpiece's gradual dismemberment in the nineteenth century? A behind-the-scenes look at these events indicates that they were driven not by disregard for Jan's work, but by confusion and conflict regarding its role in defining the nation of Belgium.

The modern state of Belgium was formed in 1830, when it seceded from the Netherlands, and the new nation's efforts to develop a strong national identity were not always successful. From the start, Belgium was accused, by some of its own citizens as well as outsiders, of being an artificial creation, more the product of international diplomacy than natural development. Belgium's lack of a common language and history of independence, two important signifiers of nationalism, were further factors that prevented acceptance of the new nation.¹² According to one Belgian historian of the Revolution, "in Belgium, there are parties and provinces, but no nation. Like a tent erected for one night, the new monarchy, after sheltering us from the tempest, will disappear without a trace."¹³ Although the monarchy did not disappear into the night, the tempest continued as definitions of Belgian nationalism underwent several metamorphoses over the course of a century.¹⁴ The most popular definition was that of historian Henri Pirenne, who around the turn of the century defined a Belgian identity located not in racial origins, languages, or national borders, but in the *civilisation commune* of the Belgian people.¹⁵ Despite Pirenne's confident declaration, it remained unclear how or whether Belgian identity was manifested in the Flemish panel paintings that the nation inherited. This is evidenced by the selling of the wings of the Ghent Altarpiece, which took place before the Belgian Revolution, demonstrating the lack of consensus over the status of Belgium's cultural heritage.

¹² Stengers, 46-47.

¹³ Quoted in Hasquin, 22: "En Belgique, il y a des partis et des provinces, et point de nation. Comme une tente dressée pour une nuit, la monarchie nouvelle, après nous avoir abrités contre la tempête, disparaîtra sans laisser de traces." All English translations of French quotations are my own.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-88.

¹⁵ Pirenne, 1:viii-x.

The Belgian population was further divided by linguistic duality. French was the only official language of Belgium until 1898, but the province of Flanders was and remains predominantly Dutch-speaking. The government's long-time refusal to acknowledge Dutch through language reform led to hostilities between Flanders and the French-speaking region of Wallonia. These hostilities gave rise to the "Flemish movement," which began as a literary/cultural organization and later became a political movement that fought primarily for legal rights of the Dutch language.¹⁶ The Flemish movement attained a victory with the 1898 "Equality Law" that made Dutch an official language of Belgium, but Dutch did not become the only official administrative language of Flanders until 1921, the year after the wings of the Ghent Altarpiece returned to Belgium. (Further language reforms followed in the 1930s and again in the 1960s.)

The Flemish movement affected nearly all levels of political and cultural life in Belgium in the mid-nineteenth century, including the fortunes of the Ghent Altarpiece. After receiving a new-found admiration following the 1816 sale of the wings, the altarpiece became an object of contention between Belgium's competing political, civic, and linguistic identities. The same fate befell Jan van Eyck's *Van der Paele Madonna*, Hans Memling's *St. Christopher Altarpiece* ("Moreel triptych"), and Gerard David's *Judgment of Cambyses*, three works that had also been confiscated from Belgian collections by the French Republic and later returned. One particularly volatile issue surrounding these works was that of local versus national ownership of Belgium's artistic heritage. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed continuous struggles for control between the Belgian government and the Commission Royale des Monuments in Brussels on one side, and the local administrations of Ghent and Bruges on the other, over the conservation of these panels.¹⁷ Leveraging for control of the returned paintings by van Eyck, Memling, and David, the Minister of the Interior claimed in 1874 that "the Bruges authorities are merely tempo-

¹⁶ On the Flemish Movement and language rifts in Belgium, see Kossmann, 171-73, 203-04, 254-58, 462-73, 536-37, 630-49; De Schryver, 25-29; Hermans, Vos and Wils, 1-39.

¹⁷ See the archival documents, official publications and literary sources printed in *Les primitifs flamands*, 4:57-202 (and 19-23 for summary of restoration conflicts). For restorations of the Ghent Altarpiece, see *ibid.*, 2:48-57.

rary trustees of these works, which are national property.”¹⁸ The following year, the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Bruges countered: “as to our rights of ownership of the three panels that were taken to Paris under the French government, we believe that it would be superfluous to defend them. [These panels] were painted in Bruges for specific locations, commissioned by known persons, with a special destination.”¹⁹ The status of these paintings as repatriated objects undoubtedly heightened questions of ownership; their return to Belgium was a political triumph on which both local and, after 1830, national factions wished to capitalize. The acquisition of Ghent’s Adam and Eve panels by Brussels in 1861 was a major coup in this struggle between the national and local governments. (The victory, however, was only temporary, for Brussels returned the panels to Ghent upon the arrival of the remaining wings from Germany in 1920.)

Owning the Adam and Eve panels also added to the cultural prestige of Brussels, which competed with other cities for the status of artistic capital of Belgium. While some of these rivalries centered around the promotion of contemporary art,²⁰ the old Flemish masters were equally important in establishing a city’s cultural value. Most of the major Belgian cities could boast a connection to at least one of these fifteenth-century artists, but Bruges remained secure in its status as the recognized “home” of the Flemish masters, probably in large part because it retained its fifteenth-century flavor (a fact that still draws throngs of visitors to Bruges today). Indeed, although Belgium itself was sometimes satirized as a place to pass through in nineteenth-century travel literature,²¹ William Wordsworth immortalized Bruges as a “haven of medievalism” in his 1820 sonnet “The Spirit of Antiq-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:106: “Cet état de choses [obstacles to restoration] ne peut se prolonger sans engager gravement la responsabilité du gouvernement, d’autant plus qu’on peut soutenir avec fondement que les autorités brugeoises ne sont que les dépositaires, à titre provisoire, de ces oeuvres qui sont une propriété nationale.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:111: “Quant à nos droits de propriété sur trois tableaux qui ont été transportés à Paris sous le gouvernement français, nous croyons qu’il serait superflu de les défendre. Ces tableaux proviennent de nos monuments communaux, églises, hôtel de ville et salle du Franc. Ils ont été peints à Bruges pour des emplacements déterminés, commandés par des noms connus, avec une destination spéciale.”

²⁰ For example, Brussels’s Les XX versus Antwerp’s art circle *Als Ik Kan*. See *Belgian Art*, 17-40, 71-80.

²¹ Buzard, 37 and n. 29.

uity.”²² These sentiments were echoed some thirty years later when the French historian and archivist Léon de Laborde remarked, “when you leave your inn in Tournai, Ghent, Haarlem, in all these old Flemish and Dutch cities, but above all in Bruges, you are struck by a sort of vertigo, so much does nature deceive you into believing you are in front of a van Eyck painting.”²³ These kinds of sentiments may have been at least partly responsible for the success of the 1902 Bruges exhibition of Flemish painting entitled “Les Primitifs flamands et l’art ancien.”²⁴ This exhibition, the impetus of much scholarly and public enthusiasm about Flemish art, included the three paintings by Memling, David, and van Eyck that had been confiscated and returned by the French Republic, as well as the Adam and Eve panels from the Ghent Altarpiece. Holding the exhibition in Bruges, and in one of the city’s most prominent neo-Gothic buildings, allowed visitors to view these emotionally-charged paintings in their “original” context in a very tangible way.²⁵

Not surprisingly, the popular medieval charm of Bruges prompted the envy of neighboring Belgian cities. The author of one late-nineteenth-century guidebook to Antwerp, for example, lamented the loss of his city’s more “primitive” side: “Bruges has honorably restored the style that characterized this city in the epoch of her splendor; why should we not further imitate this fine example in Antwerp?”²⁶ These cultural competitions provide another context in which to view Brussels’s acquisition of the Adam and Eve panels from the Ghent Altarpiece. Although Bruges’s claim to the Flemish

²² Ibid., 178. The poem reads: “The Spirit of Antiquity—enshrined / In sumptuous buildings, vocal in sweet song, / In picture, speaking with heroic tongue, / And with devout solemnities entwined- / Mounts to the seat of grace within the mind: / Hence Forms that glide with swan-like ease along, / Hence motions, even amid the vulgar throng, / To an harmonious decency confined: / As if the streets were consecrated ground, / The city one vast temple, dedicate / To mutual respect in thought and deed; / To leisure, to forbearances sedate; / To social cares from jarring passions freed; / A deeper peace than that in deserts found!”

²³ Laborde, 1:xcvi-vii: “Quand vous sortez de votre auberge à Tournay, à Gand, à Haarlem, dans toute ces vieilles villes flamandes et hollandaises, mais par-dessus tout à Bruges, il vous prend une sorte de vertige, vous êtes en face de la nature et vous croyez voir un tableau des van Eyck.”

²⁴ On this exhibition, see Haskell, 445-61.

²⁵ Ibid., 446, 460.

²⁶ Beetemé, viii: “Bruges a remis en honneur le style qui prédominait chez elle à l’époque de sa splendeur, pourquoi n’imiterait-on pas davantage à Anvers ce bel exemple?”

masters was implicit in the very fabric of the city, Brussels countered by engendering a discourse on origins in acquiring Ghent's "first parents," the literal and figurative progenitors of the entire Flemish school.

The dispersal of the Ghent Altarpiece did not stop with Brussels's acquisition of Adam and Eve. Belgium's artistic rivalries also created the occasion for an *intellectual* dismemberment of the altarpiece among scholars who were divided over the role of Hubert van Eyck in its creation. In 1933, art historian Emile Renders put forth the theory, in *Hubert van Eyck, personnage de légende*, that Hubert was an invention of sixteenth-century humanists and rhetoricians which was maintained by contemporary Ghent scholars in order to glorify their city at the expense of Bruges.²⁷ One of his main targets was Ghent historian Georges Hulin de Loo, whom Renders made the subject of one of his chapters; one of Renders' reviewers even remarked that his book could be easily read as an attempt to discredit Hulin.²⁸ Renders set Hulin de Loo's arguments against those of German historian Max J. Friedländer (an anti-Hubertian), which seems an ironic strategy given the struggles between Germany and Belgium to retain physical and intellectual control over the Ghent Altarpiece (explored in greater depth below). It seems that for Renders, who himself hailed from Bruges, an alliance with the German scholarly tradition was preferable to one with the city of Ghent. These kinds of civic debates may help to explain why Belgian scholars preferred the title *L'agneau mystique* to the more popular title, "the Ghent Altarpiece." While German scholars were apt to use the latter title, the adoption of the iconographical term *L'agneau mystique* by Belgian scholars appears to have reflected a tacit agreement to avoid ascribing local ownership to the altarpiece.²⁹

Belgium's cultural and linguistic rivalries thus played a significant role in the dispersal and attempted reconstitution of the Ghent Altarpiece.

²⁷ Renders, especially chap. 4, "Les légendes constituant la tradition gantoise."

²⁸ Faider, 1275-76.

²⁹ As other scholars have noted, Jan van Eyck is far from the only Flemish painter whose work has been subject to civic and regional debates. For example, as Professor Ann Roberts (Lake Forest College) kindly pointed out to me, the painter Jan Provoost, who was from Mons but moved to and worked in Bruges, has created some conflict among Belgian scholars because of his crossing of Belgium's linguistic border. Fry, 114, discusses another instance of Belgian local feelings regarding the identity of the Master of Flémalle. Thanks to my colleague Jennifer Spreitzer for urging me to consider the meaning behind the different titles for the Ghent Altarpiece.

piece. Although a visitor to Ghent after 1865 could see a reconstructed “pastiche,” the “real” Ghent Altarpiece was divided for sixty years among three institutions: the central panels remained in Flemish territory in St. Bavo’s Cathedral in Ghent, Adam and Eve resided in the Franco-Flemish Brussels Museum, and the remaining wings were in the Berlin Museum in Germany. A victim of nationalist conflict, the altarpiece, usually regarded as the “supreme symbol of Flemish art,”³⁰ emerges instead as a symbol of the fragmentation of Belgian identity. The physical and intellectual dispersion of the Ghent Altarpiece seems ironic in hindsight, given the revered role it was to play in scholarship on early European panel painting, and this irony is heightened by Belgium’s role in its dismemberment. The irony was acutely felt by many Belgians themselves, especially the organizers of the 1902 Bruges exhibition, who were unable to reunite all the panels of the altarpiece for the occasion (the altarpiece being represented only by the panels of Adam and Eve).³¹ One exhibition catalogue bemoaned, “must we abandon all hope of seeing the twenty panels of the van Eycks’s altarpiece reunited in Bruges?”³²

The Bruges exhibition formed part of the concerted efforts of Belgian intellectual leaders to repair the rifts in their nation’s identity by underscoring the unity of the Belgian tradition, both past and present. The Flemish masters were called in to aid this enterprise and to support popular theories of a centuries-old Belgian civilization. One such theory was proposed by Pirenne, the father of Belgian nationalism, who wrote that the longstanding unity of the Belgian people resulted from a unique fusion of the Latin and Germanic races.³³ References to Pirenne’s “formula” for Belgian identity occasionally resurfaced in art historical writings. In his study of Flemish painting, for example, Hippolyte Fierens-Gevaert stressed the unity of Belgian art across the centuries; his statement that Hubert and Jan van Eyck were “des Belges d’avant la lettre, des Belges suivant la formule moderne”³⁴ brings to mind Pirenne’s theory of Latin-Germanic fusion, even though Fierens-Gevaert placed greater emphasis on the Latin side of this formula. Art historians also employed more tradi-

³⁰ Haskell, 449.

³¹ See *ibid.*, 449.

³² *Exposition des primitifs flamands à Bruges*, 10-11: “Faut-il abandonner tout espoir de voir réunis à Bruges les vingt tableaux du retable des frères Van Eyck?”

³³ Pirenne, 1:viii-xi.

³⁴ Fierens-Gevaert, 1:78.

tional criteria to determine the significance of the Flemish masters to Belgium. Georges Hulin de Loo, for example, attempted to fill the documentary and biographical gaps in the history of fifteenth-century Flemish painting, knowledge of which, he lamented, lagged far behind that of the contemporary Italian schools.³⁵ The issue of style was also important. Although the stark realism of the Adam and Eve figures from the Ghent Altarpiece had once been cause for some concern, such naturalism came to be highly regarded and was even perceived to be a national characteristic. Fierens-Gevaert, for example, wrote of the “‘national’ aspirations of our masters, their technical merits, their special knowledge of forms, space, and light.”³⁶ While these scholarly claims were doubtlessly intended to foster a needed pride in past, they may have also represented attempts to intellectually rectify or mask present losses — in particular, the loss of Belgium’s cultural heritage that had been scattered to other nations (in addition to the dispersion of the Ghent Altarpiece, Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* was bought by the London National Gallery following the Napoleonic wars).

The changing dynamics of Belgian nationalism are perhaps best seen in the problematics of scholarly terminology. Given Belgium’s tumultuous history and new, precarious status in the nineteenth century, what were scholars to call those fifteenth-century artists to which the nation was heir? In the nineteenth century, terminology fluctuated between such designations as “*école de Bruges*” and “*ancienne école néerlandaise*.” After the turn of the century, however, the nearly unanimous choice among Belgian scholars was the expression, “*Primitifs flamands*,” which was canonized by the title of the 1902 Bruges exhibition.³⁷ While use of the term “primitive” for van Eyck and his contemporaries is itself a problematic issue,³⁸ my concern here is with the implications of their designation as “Flem-

³⁵ Hulin, 1902, xiii-xviii; idem, 1909, 202-05. Also see Hulin’s other articles published in *Burlington Magazine* in the early twentieth century.

³⁶ Fierens-Gevaert, 1:viii: “Nous soulignerons cette unité — et l’on n’a pas encore tenté l’entreprise pour l’ensemble de notre peinture — dans les aspirations ‘nationales’ de nos maîtres, leurs mérites techniques, leur intelligence spéciale des formes, de l’espace, de la lumière.”

³⁷ This title represents a decisive change from the 1867 Bruges exhibition of Flemish painting, which had been entitled the “*ancienne école néerlandaise*” by W. H. James Weale. See Sulzberger, 20.

³⁸ For some discussion of the problematics of this expression, see Haskell, 447-48. For the evolution of the term, see Sulzberger, 14-20.

ish” rather than “Netherlandish.” “Flemish,” on the one hand, may have had some historical validity, given the importance of regional identity in the early modern period. Writing in 1550, for example, Vasari discussed the contributions of van Eyck and his contemporaries under the heading, “Di diversi Artefici Fiamminghi.”³⁹ But the term had further, nationalistic connotations: the fact that many Belgians referred to their second language as “Flemish” rather than “Dutch” throughout the nineteenth century indicates that this term stood to some degree for Belgium’s newfound autonomy from the Netherlands.⁴⁰ “Flemish” was, therefore, a patriotic and synecdochic term, standing for the nation of Belgium itself. It is ironic, however, that Belgian historians celebrated the “Flemishness” of Eyckian art not in the Flemish language, but primarily in its rival language, French. Clearly, Belgium’s linguistic duality was still an issue, despite patriotic sentiments. This linguistic duality may also help to explain why the term “Belgian art” never became a viable expression for fifteenth-century painting, despite some attempts to promote its usage.⁴¹ Classifications for early and pre-modern artistic productions are often based on philology.⁴² Thus, even though *Belgium* was a humanistic term in use during the fifteenth century,⁴³ the absence of a Belgian language may have rendered such terminology problematic for the art of this period. Too, the reluctance to adopt this term may be partly indicative of the continuing uncertainties of what it meant to be “Belgian,” particularly in the years following the Revolution of 1830.

Belgium’s linguistic and national dynamics had far-reaching implications for future scholarship on Flemish painting. This impact can be ascertained by shifting the focus from within Belgium to outside its borders, where scholars in the neighboring countries of France and Germany exhibited a keen interest in the Flemish artistic tradi-

³⁹ Vasari, 3:659.

⁴⁰ Gubin, 334-39. The “Flemish” language in Belgium was not officially termed “Dutch” until 1973. See documents 60 and 64 in Hermans, Vos and Wils.

⁴¹ For example, in tracing the commonalities between the fifteenth-century Flemish painters and modern Belgian artists, Poirier, 16, stated: “ce qu’on appelle par tradition ‘la peinture flamande,’ c’est ‘la peinture belge.’”

⁴² As early as 1904, French historian Henri Bouchot recognized that the early “Écoles d’Italie” were so called because the Italian territories possessed a unified Italian language, and he argued, 1904,¹ 1-2, for the existence of a medieval “Écoles de France,” which would include the Burgundian provinces, due to what he saw as the linguistic unity of the medieval French territories.

⁴³ Bonenfant, 48-51.

tion. To these “foreign” scholars, Belgium’s internal conflicts — its regional and linguistic clashes, lack of a clearly formulated identity, and seeming equivocations toward its artistic heritage — signaled the weakness of Belgian nationalism and raised doubts as to the legitimacy of Belgian claims to the Flemish masters. The door was thereby left open for the appropriation of Flemish art for other national traditions. Political factors, such as Belgium’s policy of neutrality before the first World War, undoubtedly contributed to this development. The co-optation of Belgium’s artistic tradition by France and Germany, for example, might be seen as an intellectual extension of these countries’ plans for Belgian annexation preceding and during the war.⁴⁴ These cultural and political clashes wrenched the “Primitives” from the uncertain hands of Belgian nationalism and placed them at the center of a continuing cultural debate, North versus South, or the Germanic tradition versus the Latin. It was not immediately clear to which tradition Flemish painting belonged, given Belgium’s bilingualism and history of subjection to both French and Germanic rulers. Scholars on both sides of the debate thus displayed a dazzling array of conflicting “evidence” to sway the jury, while Belgium’s voice was often lost amid the louder cries of its neighbors.

German and French art historians redrew Belgium’s national boundaries according to linguistics, geography, and race in their attempts to assimilate Flemish painting into their own past and present cultural traditions. Given the language controversies surrounding the Flemish movement, it is not surprising that many French art historians were apt to rely on socio-linguistic evidence to support their claims. For example, French historian Henri Bouchot, author of a commentary to the 1904 exhibition, “Les Primitifs français,” capitalized on Belgium’s franco-flemish culture by emphasizing that French social mores prevailed in the fifteenth-century French territories, including the Burgundian ducal provinces. In fact, he argued for the French identity of the Burgundian court, in opposition to Pirenne’s assertion of a distinctively Belgian identity in fifteenth-century Burgundy.⁴⁵ In his attempts to demonstrate the dependency of Flemish painting on that of France, Bouchot went so far as to question the very existence of Flemish hero Jan van Eyck, citing the *L’agneau* as one example of how no panel by either Hubert or Jan could be se-

⁴⁴ See, for example, Kossmann, 525-27.

⁴⁵ Bouchot, 1904,¹ 20, 79-82. On Bouchot, also see Haskell, 466.

curely attested by documentation.⁴⁶ Reactions to these assertive claims reveal further rifts in Belgian identity. Hulin de Loo, who would later face the attacks of Bruges scholar Emile Renders over the existence of Jan's brother, Hubert, defended the existence of Jan van Eyck himself as he reclaimed the primacy of Flemish over French art.⁴⁷ Other Belgian scholars, however, adopted Bouchot's point of view, partly in an attempt to downplay the burgeoning theory of the Germanic origins of Eyckian art.⁴⁸

Ultimately, however, it was this Germanic theory of Eyckian art, and the German art historical tradition in general, that left the most lasting mark on future scholarship. Indeed, Sulzberger and Haskell have already traced the "rediscovery" of the Flemish painters to German soil, where the renewed celebration of medieval Germanic culture characterized the Romantic movement.⁴⁹ Friedrich Schlegel is often credited with jump-starting this "rediscovery," recording many of his influential observations on Flemish painting in the epistolary accounts of his travels to Belgium and France. In 1802, he visited Paris and admired the Ghent Altarpiece when it was exhibited in Napoleon's Louvre. "The rigidity, the Egyptian grandeur of these holy figures [the panels of God the Father, the Virgin and John the Baptist], straight and severe, that seem to appear out of far distant times," he wrote, "call forth an intimate reverence and draw us strongly towards them like incomprehensible monuments of a distant past, larger and sterner."⁵⁰ Despite what he took to be their orientalizing character, Schlegel explicitly defined the distant past of these figures as German throughout the rest of his description. He placed van Eyck under the heading "altdeutschen Gemälden" and connected him to the early Cologne school of painting, while maintaining that this school flourished almost two centuries before van Eyck.⁵¹ As Sulzberger and Haskell have pointed out, Schlegel's Netherlandish-Cologne connection became a widely accepted theory in certain circles,

⁴⁶ Bouchot, 1904,¹ 16-18, 24-29, and chap. 8, "La question des Van Eyck."

⁴⁷ See *idem*, 1904,² 169-78 for a summary of these arguments and an example of the conflicts between Bouchot and Hulin.

⁴⁸ For example, Maeterlinck, 198-200; Poirier, 11-13.

⁴⁹ See Haskell, 431-37; Sulzberger, 44-79.

⁵⁰ Schlegel, 4:43-44: "Die ägyptische Erhabenheit und Steifheit dieser geraden, strengen Göttergestalten, wie aus grauem Altertume, muß innige Ehrfurcht gebieten, und zieht uns bei allem abschreckenden Ernste eben so an, wie die unbegreiflichen Denkmale einer größern und strengen Vorwelt." English translation by Faggin, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4:135-52.

in part because it buttressed his claims for a Germanic tradition that was distinct from and superior to the Latin, or Italian tradition.⁵² To be sure, recent and contemporary scholars still recognize the connections between the art of Flanders and Cologne;⁵³ this relationship, however, seems to have had special currency within the context of the German “rediscovery” of Northern art. Schlegel thus placed the Ghent Altarpiece and Flemish painting in general squarely within the Germanic-Latin debates for perhaps the first time. It is typical of the irony that characterizes the altarpiece’s history that its “Germanness” was “discovered” while it was in French territory.

Despite the immediate success of Schlegel’s German-Netherlandish theory of Eyckian art, the most important proponent of his ideas came about a century later in the figure of Max J. Friedländer, who served as curator and director of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin and is best known for his fourteen-volume corpus, *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Although he has not received as much critical reevaluation as his successor Erwin Panofsky, Friedländer was instrumental in shaping many modern conceptions of Northern art. His skills in connoisseurship are well known,⁵⁴ but his writings also form a significant part of the nationalistic heritage of scholarship on Flemish art. Friedländer’s nationalistic theories are in a sense a revival of Schlegel’s, although there are some important differences between the two scholars. While the Cologne school was important to Schlegel, it does not figure as prominently in Friedländer’s work, perhaps because other scholars had since made a closer and more nuanced study of the relationship between Flemish and German art.⁵⁵ However, Friedländer maintained what is arguably the core of Schlegel’s commentary — the use of Jan in service of the Germanic versus Latin debate.

⁵² Haskell, 435; Sulzberger, 46-47, 54-56, 74-75.

⁵³ In his essay for the 1974 exhibition *Vor Stefan Lochner*, for example, Wolfgang Stechow pointed out the “Netherlandish” qualities of one of Lochner’s youthful works. Dirk De Vos, 17-20, also noted that Hans Memling borrowed several compositional types from Cologne artists such as Lochner.

⁵⁴ For evaluation of Friedländer as a connoisseur, see Held, as well as Panofsky’s preface to the English translation of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 1:9-13. My own discussion of Friedländer is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of his critical thought, but an examination of one aspect of his treatment of Jan van Eyck and Flemish panel painting.

⁵⁵ Haskell, 436-37. See Waagen, 169-72 and 174-81 for an example of early scholarship citing the differences between the German and Flemish schools.

Friedländer's most overtly national and racial analyses are found in his 1916 book, *From van Eyck to Bruegel*, the precursor to his larger corpus of the following decades. The book consists of chapters devoted to the major Flemish artists, much like his later volumes, but opens with a chapter entitled "The Geography of Netherlandish Art" in which Friedländer expounded his theories on the racial derivation of the Flemish painters. Although he reassured the reader that the individual genius of artists such as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden transcended purely racial qualities, he also made the sweeping statement that "in the fifteenth century the Netherlands were more of an entity with a uniform culture and the Germanic essence, blended it is true with Latin elements from France and Burgundy, flowed through the entire land."⁵⁶ Indeed, the very mark of superiority of Flemish painting — its impulse to observe nature — was to be regarded as its Germanic heritage according to Friedländer.⁵⁷ Friedländer's correlation of race and artistic expression in the art of the Flemish masters might be placed in the larger context of German art historical and anthropological debates about cultural differences and evolution that have recently been examined by Claire Farago and Mitchell Schwarzer.⁵⁸ However, we should also recall that a little over a decade later, as examined above, Fierens-Gevaert wrote about the specifically Belgian quality of the Flemish painters' "special knowledge of forms, space and light." Flemish realism thus became a particularly contested quality across the board, as it were, since it was claimed as a national characteristic by both Belgian and German scholars.

Despite Friedländer's emphasis on a uniform Germanic culture in the fifteenth-century Netherlands, racial tension marks his comparison of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden, the primary players in the first chapter of *From van Eyck to Bruegel*. Jan van Eyck, whose birthplace had been identified as Maaseyck (on the border between present-day Belgium and Germany) was the uncontested hero of Friedländer's Germanic Netherlands. Rogier van der Weyden, however, was more problematic because he hailed from Tournai, a

⁵⁶ Friedländer, 1965, 4: "Im 15. Jahrhundert sind die Niederlande eher ein Ganzes mit einheitlicher Kultur, und die germanische Art, freilich von Nordfrankreich und Burgund her vermischt mit lateinischen Elementen, durchströmt das ganze Land." English translation by Kay, 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁸ See Farago, 77-81, and Schwarzer.

French-speaking city. On the one hand, Friedländer was quick to point out that, during Rogier's Italian voyage in ca. 1450, his personal and essentially Netherlandish style remained "untouched by the breath of foreign air."⁵⁹ Although Friedländer emphasized that Rogier was immune to Southern influence partly because he was simply set in his ways by the time of the voyage, this statement also serves to perpetuate the oft-repeated topos that artistic influence flowed only from North to South during the fifteenth century.⁶⁰ Despite Rogier's supposed faithfulness to Northern styles, Friedländer identified him as a primary player in the stylistic collision of the Germanic and Latin temperaments: "it would be tempting to regard the contrast between Jan van Eyck, who came from the East, and Rogier, who came from the South, as a conflict between the German and the Latin temperament with the towns of Flanders providing the battleground. Round about 1450 the battle seems to be going in Rogier's favor."⁶¹ Friedländer's use of martial imagery suggests the uneasiness he felt in dealing with the racially diverse makeup of Belgium,⁶² and in this sentiment he stands in distinct opposition to Belgian historians such as Pirenne who had sought to underscore the unity of the Latin and Germanic traditions.

Other German art historians also asserted, with varying degrees of emphasis, the Germanic origins and character of Eyckian art;⁶³ their Teutonic adoption of van Eyck represents a tendency among some German scholars to appropriate Netherlandish models for na-

⁵⁹ Friedländer, 1965, 25: "Gerade die Bemühung, Motive südlicher Altarkunst zu verarbeiten, während die Typik und Gewohnheit der Formensprache von der fremden Luft nicht im geringsten bewegt wird, läßt die entschiedene Selbstsicherheit seines Wesens hervortreten." English translation by Kay, 22.

⁶⁰ This topos was reiterated, among other scholars, by Panofsky, 8-9, in the first chapter of his 1953 study.

⁶¹ Friedländer, 1965, 7: "Ich fürchte, es gibt kein wissenschaftlich befriedigendes Mittel, mit dem die Stammesart Rogiers festgestellt werden könnte, verlockend aber ist der Versuch, den Gegensatz zwischen Jan van Eyck, der vom Osten kam, und Rogier, der vom Süden kam, als einen Gegensatz germanischer und lateinischer Art aufzufassen. Die flandrischen Städte bieten den Kampfplatz. Um 1450 scheint sich der Sieg auf die Seite Rogiers zu neigen." English translation by Kay, 3-4.

⁶² As Luber pointed out, Panofsky also used metaphors of nationalist conflict in his *Early Netherlandish Painting* of 1953. Indeed, martial imagery seems to be especially common in studies on Flemish painting, including French as well as German scholarship. In describing the supposedly French identity of the Burgundian court, for example, French historian Bouchot, 1904,¹ 20, wrote, "Les habitudes françaises s'infiltrèrent, prirent force de loi."

⁶³ Burger, 11; Voll, 13.

tionalistic ends. Historian Harold James notes that this kind of appropriation was common in the construction of German national identity: "In the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth century, Germany was a political territory in which institutions failed to give any true stability and continuity. Germans looked to foreign models for inspiration, and attempted to assimilate these in a theory of Germanness."⁶⁴ James cites Friedrich Schiller's 1788 history of the Dutch revolt as one example of a Netherlandish model coopted for Germany.⁶⁵ Perhaps an even more infamous example comes from the art historical field, however. In the late nineteenth century, Julius Langbehn, in his book, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, posited Rembrandt as the quintessential German artist who was to lead Germany back to its cultural roots (although Langbehn was arguing primarily from the perspective of northwestern Germany, the geographical area sometimes called Niederdeutschland).⁶⁶ While Friedländer never went quite so far, Netherlandish art and culture represented Germanic superiority to him as well. In introducing seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting in his 1947 book on genre painting, for example, he wrote: "the Dutch soul has roused itself and wards off everything foreign with quiet self-confidence. Protestantism holds its own against the "universal" Church, the Germanic element against the southern."⁶⁷ Regarding individual artists, Friedländer, like others, noted the Dutch origins of such painters as Dieric Bouts and Geertgen tot Sint Jans,⁶⁸ although Jan van Eyck clearly embodied to him the pinnacle of the Netherlands' kinship with Germany. The presence of six wings of the Ghent Altarpiece in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, where Friedländer worked, must have served him as a constant visual reminder of these ties. Friedländer, incidentally, was not the only German for whom these ties were strong, for the bust of

⁶⁴ James, 240.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁶ For example, Langbehn, 9, stated, "Wenn die Deutschen das vorzugsweise individuelle Volk sind, so kann auf künstlerischem Gebiet ihnen auch nur der individuellste ihrer Künstler als geistiger Wegführer dienen; denn ein solcher wird sie am ehesten auf sich selbst zurückweisen. Unter allen deutschen Künstlern aber ist der individuellste: Rembrandt." On Langbehn, see Stern, 97-180. I wish to thank Professor Reinhold Heller (University of Chicago) for discussing Langbehn's theories with me.

⁶⁷ Friedländer, 1947, 108: "Die holländische Seele ist wach geworden und stösst alles Fremde mit ruhigem Selbstbewusstsein ab. Das Protestantische setzt sich durch gegen die 'allgemeine' Kirche, das Germanische gegen das Südliche." English translation by Hull, 88-89.

⁶⁸ Friedländer, 1965, 29, 58.

Jan van Eyck forms part of the portrait series of Germanic heroes erected at the Walhalla monument near Regensburg for Ludwig I in 1830–42. In his description of the portrait series, King Ludwig praised Jan's stylistic innovations and called him "der grösste niederdeutsche, in Manchem aller deutschen, Maler."⁶⁹

Germany's defeat in World War I introduced new complexities to Friedländer's writings on art and nationalism. One change wrought by the war was a tangible one: the wings of the Ghent Altarpiece were removed from the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in 1920 and returned to Belgium by order of the Treaty of Versailles. One year after their removal, Friedländer published a book on the altarpiece, *Der genter Altar der Brüder van Eyck*. The prologue functions as a memorial to the altarpiece-turned-*Kriegsziel*, which suggests that the book itself may have been written at least partly in response to the wings' departure from Germany. In the prologue, Friedländer bemoaned the loss of the wings primarily on technical and scholarly grounds. The Berlin Museum, he claimed, presented far better viewing conditions than St. Bavo's Cathedral — the altarpiece's original location to which the wings returned — and consequently had inspired a century of scholarship (including his own, one must think) on these panels. But the prologue speaks an emotional and visual language as well: its distinctive outline is reminiscent of an altarpiece, its tapering toward the bottom recalling a predella such as the one the Ghent Altarpiece may have originally possessed [fig. 3].⁷⁰ Although the prologue visually attempts to reconstitute the altarpiece, the last lines of text express the reality that it was a "für Deutschland verlorenen Werkes."⁷¹

It was probably the outcome of the war that also led Friedländer to temper some of his previous claims regarding nationalistic conflict. These subtle changes in rhetoric become evident in comparing portions of Friedländer's 1916 book with his fourteen-volume corpus,

⁶⁹Ludwig den Ersten von Bayern, 109. I am grateful to Professor Jeffrey Chipps Smith (University of Texas at Austin) for pointing out to me this surviving legacy of Jan's Germanic heritage.

⁷⁰For a description and proposed reconstruction of the predella, see Philip, 23, 25, 28, on structure and materials; 66–67, on iconography; and figs. 41–42.

⁷¹Friedländer, 1921, prologue.

AM EINGANGE zur niederländischen Malerei steht ragend und rätselvoll der Genter Altar. Seit Jahrhunderten ein Gegenstand staunender Verehrung, ein Monument, an dem die Kunstgelehrsamkeit ihre Kräfte erprobt hat und sich ihres Unvermögens bewußt geworden ist, wurde er schließlich — ein »Kriegsziel«. Der Vertrag von Versailles hat diejenigen seiner Teile, die seit 100 Jahren in Berlin bewahrt werden, dem belgischen Staate zugesprochen. Auch wer sich nicht als Deutscher durch den Verlust unmittelbar getroffen fühlt, wird schwerlich Befriedigung und Genugtuung über die Restituierung aufbringen. Allerdings werden zersprengte Teile zu dem Ganzen vereinigt, und das Ganze soll wieder an der Stelle sichtbar sein, für die es geschaffen worden ist, so daß ein theoretisch erwünschtes Ziel erreicht zu sein scheint, schwerlich wird aber dadurch die Hoffnung belebt, das Werk werde in seinem Zusammenhange dringliche Fragen deutlicher beantworten als bisher in zersplittertem Zustande. Im Gegenteil: die schwach beleuchtete Kapelle in der St.-Bavo-Kirche zu Gent vermag so günstige und bequeme Studengelegenheit wie der Berliner Museumsraum nicht zu bieten, und einige Tafeln, die in Augenhöhe genossen werden konnten, werden in beträchtlichen Blickabstand entrückt mit Mühe sichtbar sein. Da die zukünftige Möglichkeit des Studiums zweifelhaft erscheint, wird es als Pflicht empfunden, für möglichst scharfe photographische Aufnahmen der Berliner Teile zu sorgen und das Ergebnis der wissenschaftlichen Bemühung zusammenzufassen. Während eines Jahrhunderts haben Gelehrte die Flügel geprüft und davor gegrübelt.

Und wenn wir auch keinen Schlußstrich unter die Ermittlung setzen,
in dem Bewußtsein, alles sei nun aufgeheilt, so mag immerhin
ein Abschnitt der gelehrten Arbeit markiert werden,
und ein Rechenschaftsbericht an der Zeit sein,
zugleich mit einer durch den Abschieds-
schmerz-gesteigerten Besinnung über
den Wert des für Deutschland
verlorenen Werkes.

FIGURE 3. Max J. Friedländer, prologue to *Der Genter Altar der Brüder Van Eyck*. Munich, 1921. Photo: author.

Early Netherlandish Painting, which was published from 1924 to 1937. For example, in volume two of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Friedländer observed that to describe Jan and Rogier as proponents of two different races, which was precisely what he had done (albeit cautiously) in 1916, was *zu naïv*,⁷² and he transferred their antithesis to the stylistic realm, citing Jan's warmth, aroma, and joy versus Rogier's dramatic tension and moral grandeur.⁷³ This stylistic analysis may not be as neutral as it appears, however. Many of the phrases Friedländer used to describe Jan's work (such as "warmth" and "sense of closeness to nature") evoke his realistic style, which, as we have seen, was viewed as a national characteristic by both Belgian and

⁷²Friedländer, 1924-37, 2:54: "Ehemals betrachtete man Jan van Eyck als den Vertreter Flanderns, Rogier als den Vertreter Brabants. Das war gar zu naïv." English translation by Norden, 2:32.

⁷³See *ibid.*, 2: 45-47, 54, for Friedländer's stylistic comparisons of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden.

German scholars (recall Friedländer's statement that Flemish naturalism was a Germanic heritage). Friedländer further noted that stylistically Rogier and Jan were "rooted in altogether different soil," a metaphor that recalls his earlier statements about their differing racial origins.⁷⁴ This new rhetoric, clothed in the poetic and "impressionistic" imagery admired by Friedländer's successors Julius Held and Erwin Panofsky,⁷⁵ would thus seem to mask old sentiments about nationalistic conflict between Jan and Rogier.

Other of Friedländer's statements confirm that, although he may have omitted metaphors of conflict and conquest in his later volumes, he did not renounce his views on national identity. He retained his earlier claim that the artistic genius of Flemish artists was a heritage of Lower Germany,⁷⁶ and he even strengthened his definition of Jan van Eyck's identity by referring to him as *Deutschen* rather than *germanische*.⁷⁷ Unlike some German scholars who later sought to distance themselves from their homeland,⁷⁸ Friedländer himself seems to have retained his national identity during his period of exile and emigration. Although forced to flee the Third Reich in 1936, he remained in "Germanic" territory by immigrating to Holland⁷⁹ rather than joining many of his colleagues in the "intellectual migration" to America.⁸⁰ Friedländer spent the remainder of his life in Amsterdam, where he kept in close contact with the Kaiser Friedrich Museum and other Berlin art institutions and completed the final three volumes of *Early Netherlandish Painting*.⁸¹

Perhaps Friedländer's most lasting legacy to future scholarship was the term, "Early Netherlandish Painting," the English translation of the titles of his two major studies on Flemish painting. Given Friedländer's belief in the Netherlands' kinship with Germany, it is not surprising that this title was hardly neutral, but carried nationalis-

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:45: "Dennoch steht Rogier im Gegensatze zu Jan van Eyck dem Geist und der Form nach, wurzelt in anderer Erde." English translation by Norden, 2:28.

⁷⁵ Held, 38 and Panofsky's preface to the English translation of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 1:12-13.

⁷⁶ Friedländer, 1924-37, 1:15.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:137: "Dem Gotiker, dem Deutschen und dem Maler war der Reichtum des quellenden Lebens unermüdlicher Nachbildung würdig." Norden, 1:78, translates "Deutschen" as "Germanic" rather than the noun "German" and thereby glosses over what seems to be an important alteration in Friedländer's use of these terms.

⁷⁸ See Landauer, 255-56.

⁷⁹ For Friedländer's biography, see Winkler, 161-67.

⁸⁰ Eisler, 544-629.

⁸¹ Winkler, 167.

tic associations. What is perhaps more surprising is that with few exceptions German scholars came to use this title exclusively, as a glance at the bibliography of Panofsky's *Early Netherlandish Painting* of 1953 confirms. Panofsky himself was the most influential heir to Friedländer's terminology,⁸² and it is especially interesting to note that he retained his precursor's title despite the fact that in the text of his book he usually referred to Jan van Eyck and his contemporaries as "Flemish" or "the great Flemings."⁸³ I believe that this seeming contradiction in terms is significant, for as I have tried to show throughout this essay, titles provide layers of meaning, often political or national in character, that signify beyond their accompanying texts.⁸⁴ Thus, despite Panofsky's fluctuating terminology, his use of the title "Netherlandish" provides his book with a distinctly nationalistic frame of reference.⁸⁵ I believe that this also holds true for those German scholars who do not necessarily endorse all of Friedländer's nationalistic views in their narratives, but who retain the title "Netherlandish" for their works.

Friedländer's definition of Eyckian art as "Netherlandish" must be seen as a vehement rejection of the term used by Belgian and French historians, "Flemish Primitives." Haskell may be correct in noting that Friedländer was uninterested in whether the Flemish painters should be known as "primitives,"⁸⁶ but he reacted strongly against their designation as "Flemish." His objection was based in part on geographical reasoning. Friedländer correctly recognized, for example, that this term "setzt einen Teil für das Ganze" (earlier we noted its synechdochic nature),⁸⁷ and he pointed out that many of

⁸² Seidel, 4, notes that Panofsky's title was an "implicit acknowledgment of Friedlaender's prior work," and she discusses other of Panofsky's borrowings from his predecessor (219, 221).

⁸³ Although Panofsky, 313, remarked in passing that "South Netherlandish" is a more precise term than "Flemish" to describe these artists, he continued to use the term "Flemish" throughout his book.

⁸⁴ For the interpretive structures that titles impose on works of art and literature, see Bann. I believe that the ability of titles to direct our interpretive focus, sometimes in directions that seem to diverge from the work itself, is also operative in the classification and naming of art historical periods.

⁸⁵ See Luber and Moxey, 1994 (65-78, "Panofsky's Melancholia") on Panofsky's nationalism, which is more complex than the title of his book would have us believe.

⁸⁶ Haskell, 463.

⁸⁷ Friedländer, 1965, 4: "Der Begriff 'flämisch' für die habsburgischen Südstaaten ist nicht korrekt und setzt einen Teil für das Ganze." He went on to state, "Genau genommen, umfaßt dieser geographische Begriff nur die beiden Grafschaften Flandern,

these supposedly “Flemish” artists actually came from southern counties other than Flanders. He further discussed several artists who were born or who worked in regions in the Northern Netherlands, such as Geertgen tot Sint Jans, Albert van Ouwater, and Gerard David. Because some of these Northern artists never worked substantially if at all in Flanders, one can understand Friedländer’s hesitation to employ the term “Flemish” to describe them; in fact, he often attempted to single out the particularly “Dutch” qualities of their work.⁸⁸

Aside from its claims to greater historical accuracy, the term “Netherlandish” allowed Friedländer to manipulate modern geography. The definition of Jan van Eyck as a “Netherlandish” painter places him stylistically and nationally in the same category as Dutch artists such as Geertgen and Rembrandt and thus reinforces the perceived link that existed between Germanic and Netherlandish culture. The last sentence of Friedländer’s *From van Eyck to Bruegel* explicitly makes this link: “to place [Bruegel] alongside Jan van Eyck and Rembrandt is to emphasize what is essential in the course of Netherlandish painting.”⁸⁹ This statement, and the term “Netherlandish” in general, secures the Germanic heritage of Eyckian art and at the same time denies van Eyck a place in Belgian history, thereby erasing the political and cultural autonomy that Belgian scholars had sought to establish through their own choice of title, “Flemish Primitives.”

The crux of Friedländer’s argument on classification revolves around a discourse of origins rather than geography. Although Friedländer recognized the international character and fluid boundaries of fifteenth-century Flanders, he did so primarily in order to deny this region a significant role in the artistic production that took place

nicht aber den Hennegau, Lüttich, Brabant und andere Teile, die an dem Kunstleben der nicht holländischen Niederlande größeren Anteil haben als Flandern.” English translation by Kay, 1. This kind of statement became a topos for historians wishing to challenge the Flemish preeminence of Eyckian art. English historian Weale, 5-6, for example, used the same argument twenty years before Friedländer. The Belgian art historian Fierens-Gevaert, 1:viii-ix, also recognized the arbitrariness of the term “Flemish,” even as he employed it for the title of his book.

⁸⁸ In vol. 5 of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, for example, Friedländer, 41-49, devoted a chapter to “Geertgen als ein Vertreter holländischen Wesens,” and in vol. 6, 102-13, he attempted to determine which aspects of Gerard David’s work can be considered to be native “Dutch.”

⁸⁹ Friedländer, 1965, 151: “Und ihn [Bruegel] neben Jan van Eyck und Rembrandt stellen, heißt: das Wesentliche im Gange der niederländischen Malkunst hervorheben.” English translation by Kay, 141.

there. "If then what we might call the consumers [of art produced in Flanders] were by no means pure Flemish," he wrote, "the producers were still less so. Of the masters who set the course for Bruges art hardly one was of Flemish origin."⁹⁰ Friedländer thus defined identity as principally a function of racial origins. Belgian scholars, as we saw, rejected this equation in their own definition of nationalism, and indeed, it seems to contradict Friedländer's previous statement about *internationalism*. Can racial origins serve as the primary criterion for identity in a region that was, by Friedländer's own admission, marked by continual movement across its borders? The mobility of fifteenth-century artists is one factor that challenges Friedländer's theory of origins; many of those artists whom Friedländer identified as "national Dutch" moved to and remained in Flanders, while van Eyck, although not born in Flanders, became firmly attached to the ducal retinue, even purchasing land in Bruges and paying annual taxes to the city from 1432.⁹¹ In an era of such great itineracy, in which artists were often called to different locations by courtly or economic considerations, identity may not have been categorically equated with birthplace. Perhaps Friedländer's own feelings of nationalism led him to believe that an artist such as van Eyck could not possibly take on a new identity upon settling in his adopted city.

These terminological conundrums are exacerbated by the dearth of documents that mention "nationality" with regard to fifteenth-century Northern artists. Although national identity in terms of modern nation-states is not of course at issue, it proves equally difficult to determine the construction of fifteenth-century identity with regard to other criteria, such as region or birthplace. Of the many contemporary references to Jan van Eyck, for example, none are very helpful in reconstructing what his regional, civic or group identity might have been. Italian commentators such as Cyriacus of Ancona often identified Jan according to the region of Flanders or his adopted city, Bruges.⁹² In 1456, however, Bartolomeo Fazio referred to Jan as "Iohannes Gallicus," probably alluding to Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* and thereby transforming the French territories into a humanist

⁹⁰Ibid., 5: "Waren also sozusagen die Konsumenten durchaus nicht rein flämisch, so waren es die Produzenten noch weniger. Von den Meistern, die das Schicksal der Brügger Kunst bestimmten, ist kaum einer flämischer Herkunft." English translation by Kay, 2.

⁹¹Seidel, 93.

⁹²In 1450, Cyriacus of Ancona referred to Jan as "the famous John of Bruges." See Faggin, 9.

site.⁹³ Against these Italian references, the archival documents of the dukes of Burgundy avoid any mention of Jan's adopted city or region, usually referring to him as "Johannes de Heick, varlet de chambre et peintre de mon dit Seigneur."⁹⁴ From the sixteenth century, we have at least one mention of both "Flemish" and (in a manner of speaking) "Netherlandish" to describe Jan: in his *Lives of the Artists* Vasari consistently referred to Jan and his successors as "Flemings," while in 1517 Antonio de Beatis called him a master from "Magna Alta" (i.e., Germania Inferior, or the Low Countries).⁹⁵ This sketchy array of references, some of them much later than Jan's own time, confirms the accuracy of neither "Flemish" nor "Netherlandish" as the proper description of Jan's national or regional identity. Friedländer was aware of these contemporary references to van Eyck, for he cited most of them (along with some others) in volume one of *Early Netherlandish Painting*.⁹⁶ He did not, however, cite any in defense of his own choice of terminology.

We must conclude, then, that these conflicts in modern terminology point not to historical accuracy, but to nineteenth and twentieth-century definitions of nationalism. Friedländer could not define van Eyck as a Flemish artist because, in his view, Flanders was tainted with Latin culture while the Netherlands remained wholly Germanic. Because France was viewed as one of the primary repositories of Latin culture, Friedländer's terminology should be seen more as an attempt to diminish French claims to Belgian art than as a direct conflict with Belgium itself. The competing terminology demonstrates the complexity of European national identities and relationships around the turn of the century. Behind each term lies the desire to forge some associations while erasing others — "Flemish" came to stand for Belgian autonomy from the Netherlands, while "Netherlandish" expressed a perceived link with Germany.⁹⁷ Just as the 1919

⁹³ Baxandall, 165-66. Although Baxandall, 8-20, discussed humanist terms for art historical and other concepts, he did not comment on Fazio's use of "Gaul."

⁹⁴ See Laborde for the ducal expense accounts at Lille that mention Jan van Eyck.

⁹⁵ Vasari, 3:659-66; Faggin, 9, 89.

⁹⁶ These citations occur in Friedländer, 1924-37, 1:40-49, the chapter on the "biographical data" of Hubert and Jan van Eyck.

⁹⁷ It might be questioned why, if the term "Netherlandish" was so nationalistically charged for German scholars, these same scholars employ "Flemish" for other periods of Northern painting. Friedländer, for example, was quite willing to call Rubens a Flemish rather than a Netherlandish painter in his 1923 book on seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. The reason, I suggest, is twofold. The seventeenth century already had a great cultural hero in Rembrandt, and thus the Flemish school was no

Treaty of Versailles demanded the physical reparation of works of art, here we see that art historical classifications were equally subject to political and cultural manipulation.

Early twentieth-century scholarship thus viewed panel painting in Flanders largely in terms of conflict: that of “Flemish versus Netherlandish,” or the Latin tradition versus the Germanic. This conflict contributed to one of the most pervasive divisions in the historiography of art, the polarization between North and South that has been reinscribed in art historical discourses since the early twentieth century. In his influential 1915 study, *Principles of Art History*, for example, Heinrich Wölfflin set out to investigate stylistic change in “Renaissance” and “Baroque” art, but against his own thesis claimed that “there is a definite type of Italian or Germanic imagination which asserts itself, always the same in all centuries.”⁹⁸ The same kinds of assertions mark later scholarship on Northern European art. Panofsky framed his *Early Netherlandish Painting* of 1953 in terms of “The Polarization of European Fifteenth-Century Painting in Italy and the Lowlands” and often engaged in the same kind of nationalistic rhetoric as did Friedländer.⁹⁹ More recently, Svetlana Alpers, in *The Art of Describing*, expressed the need to distinguish between a Southern and an essentially Northern way of “picturing.”¹⁰⁰ Alpers’s defense of Northern art is evidence of its perceived inferiority to Italian art. Although she points out that this view dates to Michelangelo’s infamous condemnation of Flemish art in the sixteenth century, the continuing emphasis on the national differences between Northern and Southern pictorial traditions merely reinscribes the schisms that inevitably give rise to such judgments.

longer needed to provide Germany with a cultural model for this period. And in classifying Rubens, there was simply not as much at stake as there was in defining van Eyck and his school. Although Rubens was highly regarded, Jan was the real “father” of modern painting, and his identity as a Netherlander was thus far more important in the construction of German national identity. The classification of Rubens as “Flemish” might therefore be seen as somewhat pejorative vis-à-vis both Rembrandt and van Eyck and may represent another instance of cultural competition.

⁹⁸ Wölfflin, 273: “Es gibt eine bestimmte Art von italienischer oder von deutscher Vorstellungsweise, die sich gleichbleibend in allen Jahrhunderten behauptet.” English translation by Hottinger, 235. On Wölfflin’s racial categories, see Fargo, 77-78.

⁹⁹ See n.62 above. Landauer, especially 255-56, 260-61, 270-72, 279-80, reminds us, however, that national identity was a somewhat more ambivalent issue for Panofsky because of his immigration to America.

¹⁰⁰ Alpers, especially xvii-xxvii.

Although the North–South polarization fed off the Germanic–Latin debates, it simplified them as well. The term “Northern Renaissance Art,” for example, engulfs Flemish, Netherlandish, and French art under one large umbrella, thus taking for granted the existence of a well-defined “Northern tradition” that can be contrasted to that of the South.¹⁰¹ In so doing, the larger North–South controversy bypasses conflicts among the Northern countries themselves, not to mention regional divisions within these countries. According to most of the scholars discussed in this essay, however, there was no single “Northern tradition” at all. As we saw, France was classified as part of the Latin tradition, while the art of Belgium was the site of a tug-of-war between the Latin and Germanic cultures. Rather than participating in a preexisting unified tradition, scholarship on Flemish painting developed in the context of the rise of individual Northern nationalities, and the North’s struggle for self-definition may have partly contributed to the perceived inferiority of Northern as compared to Italian art. One manifestation of this ultimately damaging struggle is the fluctuating terminology for Flemish painting. The lack of a consistent classification of Flemish art projected a message of its unimportance,¹⁰² leaving modern scholarship in a persistent quandary as to the most appropriate term for the art of fifteenth-century Flanders and the organizations formed to study it.¹⁰³

* * * * *

Contemporary scholars have inherited these terminological problems and accompanying nationalistic baggage, although their approaches to these issues reflect the changing outlooks of their time and place. For example, to many late twentieth-century American scholars, Flanders seems a genuinely international site, where Flemish, German and Netherlandish artists mingled with French dukes and Italian mer-

¹⁰¹ I am thinking primarily of James Snyder’s *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, which discusses the art of France, the Netherlands and Germany over the course of two centuries. It is true that “Northern Renaissance Art” is not as hallowed a term as some in the field of art history. It is not included in the *Art Bulletin*’s traditional listing of categories for dissertation titles (recently examined by Nelson, 29–30), and the art of this period is increasingly subsumed within more sweeping and seemingly neutral categories such as “Early Modern Period.”

¹⁰² Sulzberger, 14.

¹⁰³ See Silver. At another 1995 College Art Association session organized and chaired by Ann M. Roberts, the Historians of Netherlandish Art debated the most appropriate name for their society given these kinds of questions.

chants. Penny Howell Jolly, for example, suggests that Jan van Eyck took an Italian pilgrimage for duke Philip the Good, during which he saw the miraculous *Annunciation* in Santa Annunziata in Florence.¹⁰⁴ Jolly claims that this fresco was a source for Jan in his own Ghent *Annunciation* — as well as for Italian artists such as Fra Angelico — and thus she does away with the common scholarly topos that artistic “influence” went only one way in the fifteenth century, from North to South. Jolly presents the Ghent Altarpiece as an object of the exchange of ideas across the “great divide” of North and South, and her voice harks back to Belgian scholars like Pirenne who celebrated the fusion of the Latin and Germanic traditions. In a similar vein, Linda Seidel, in her recent study on Jan's *Arnolfini Portrait*, explores the theme of women and marriage as a dialogue between this work and contemporary Italian productions such as *cassone* panels.¹⁰⁵ As these examples show, contemporary scholarship has begun to reshape the field of Flemish art by defining works of art as the products of interactions across geographical boundaries. Such a perspective, which I embrace in my own engagement with Flemish art, is, of course, not without its own assumptions regarding the formulation of nationalism and identity.

Whatever one's views regarding the physical boundaries of Flemish art, it is clear that art is formed across temporal boundaries as well. Indeed, the modern re-creations of fifteenth-century art examined above show that scholars are constantly engaged in creative leaps through time. The impacts of these re-creations are long-lasting. For example, although we can now view the Ghent Altarpiece in its more or less “original” state and location in St. Bavo's Cathedral, it retains the memory of its earlier dispersals and nationalistic redefinitions. By referring to the altarpiece by its popular title, by classifying it as “Flemish,” “Netherlandish,” or simply “Northern,” and by accepting or rejecting the persistent view that it is not quite “unified,” we continue to engage the nationalistic heritage bestowed by our scholarly ancestors. In taking up where they left off, we leave our own legacy by either reinforcing earlier classifications or placing the altarpiece within a broader, perhaps “international” context. Whichever path we choose, national sentiments are always with us, and, as Keith

¹⁰⁴ Jolly.

¹⁰⁵ Seidel, 106-25, 206-18. Exploring the art of the Renaissance period in terms of cultural interaction rather than nationalist isolation is also the appeal that Claire Farago makes in her recent editorial project, *Reframing the Renaissance*.

Moxey recently emphasized, they have a place within our scholarly writing.¹⁰⁶ Understanding the nationalism of our scholarly precursors is thus more than an historiographic exercise: such knowledge not only informs us about the origins of our field, but deepens our engagement with works of art and allows us to see from whence emerge our own perspectives.

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¹⁰⁶ Moxey, 1995, especially 399-401.

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