

HANS MEMLINC'S ST. CHRISTOPHER TRIPTYCH

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With the death of Charles the Bold at the Battle of Nancy on January 5th, 1477, the influence the Burgundian court had for so long exerted on The Netherlands entered a period of decline. The Burgundian territories reverted to Maximilian of Austria through his marriage in 1477 to the young Princess Mary, daughter and heiress of Charles the Bold. With her death in 1482, the Burgundian lands were inherited by her children Margaret and Philip and passed into new political alignments. The effect of these important shifts in political allegiances on the Netherlands is particularly visible in the art of the time. The marvelous harmony between the physical and mystical world achieved by such artists as Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in the early part of the century, can in part be seen as a reflection of the exciting air of discovery and innovation that surrounded the activities of the Burgundian court. During the last third of the 15th century, however, the direction of Netherlandish art seems to have been increasingly dictated by the tastes of the prosperous and conservative men of commerce who came to dominate the city life of the Low Countries.

The artistic personality of Hans Memlinc (circa 1440-1494) appears to dominate the artistic community of Bruges during this late period. We have more preserved pieces by him, often signed and dated, than by any other contemporary Netherlandish artist. His panel paintings include many devotional subjects in addition to some 25 portraits. That he could list among his patrons some of Europe's most prominent figures is testimony to his fundamental alignment with the artistic spirit and popular tastes of his age. While the art of Jan van Eyck had special meaning for the clergy and the nobility who were best able to appreciate his complex iconographic programs, the art of Hans Memlinc eschewed the intellectual in favour of visual appeal. Memlinc's art is best known for its ability to please the eye.

The lack of dated early works by Memlinc makes it difficult to trace either stylistic or technical developments in his art. We are presented with a body of apparently mature works, most of the same high quality. Commissioned by Willem Moreel of Bruges circa 1484, *The St. Christopher Triptych* (fig.1) remains one of Memlinc's most popular paintings. Now hanging in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, this beautiful triptych typifies the essentially pleasing nature of Memlinc's oeuvre and therewith the confident grasp he had of contemporary demands made on art.

Our earliest knowledge of Memlinc comes from documents registering him as a citizen of the city of Bruges on January 30th, 1465. At this time, citizenship in Bruges carried a minimum age requirement of 25, and we may thus set his year of birth as no later than 1440. Max Friedlaender originally placed Memlinc's year of birth at 1433, but during

the Memlinc Exhibition held in Bruges in 1939, he revised his opinion to agree with the year 1440. Documents that record Memlinc's death in Bruges on August 11th, 1494, have enabled scholars to identify his birthplace as the town of Seligenstadt, near Mainz in Germany.

Of Memlinc's life before his appearance on the citizen roll of Bruges in 1465 we know little. His description of Cologne's architecture on the *Shrine of St. Ursula*, painted in 1489 and now in the Hospital of St. John at Bruges, reveals so intimate a knowledge of Cologne that we may assume the artist spent some time there before settling in the Netherlands. Memlinc's art, however, shows little influence of the school of Cologne, so that we can draw only summary conclusions about his early training. We do know that he was already a master in the painter's guild of Bruges in 1466. According to 15th century convention, Memlinc would only have been allowed such status following a lengthy apprenticeship under another master. This has led certain art historians to point out the similarities between Memlinc's work and that of Rogier van der Weyden. Rogier's angular forms do in fact appear in the geometric folds of St. Sebastian's discarded cloak in the *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (fig. 2), circa 1470. In his *Danzig Last Judgement* of 1473, Memlinc goes so far as to use almost without change Rogier's composition for the *Beaune Last Judgement* painted between 1444 and 1448. Memlinc's art refers again and again to the wealth of formal techniques developed by the older Brussels master.

The stylistic proximity of Memlinc's art to that of van der Weyden has led some scholars to conclude that Memlinc in fact received his early training in Rogier's studio. According to this theory, Memlinc left Brussels after his master's death on June 16th, 1464, and went to Bruges, where he appears on that city's roll of citizens the following January. In the absence of any real evidence, however, we can only say that Memlinc arrived in Bruges by 1465, his training essentially complete and with the formal stamp of Rogier van der Weyden on his artistic style.

Despite the incorporation of certain formal aspects of Rogier's art into his own, the religious and dramatic intensity of the older master's work seems to have remained alien to Memlinc's artistic oeuvre. In *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, for instance, the saint appears indifferent, even unaware of the arrows piercing his skin. His assailants seem equally removed from the drama of the narrative and, like the saint, are apparently lost in their own thoughts. Completely absent here is the emotional involvement between figures and pictorial content that is so typical of Rogier's art. Instead, the contemplative expression of Memlinc's figures recall the type used by Dieric Bouts, another older master born sometime in the 1420s, who died in Louvain on May 6th, 1475. Bouts' *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus Triptych* (fig. 3) is particularly illustrative of this similarity in that none of the figures, not even the victim himself, appear either moved or more than superficially involved in the grisly spectacle of the martyrdom. The somewhat flattened effect of Memlinc's figures is also reflective of the influence of Bouts' work.

In fact, Hans Memlinc seems to have borrowed at will from the wealth of established artistic and stylistic motifs of the art of the Low Countries. In this he was typical of many Netherlandish artists of the late 15th century who sought to capitalize on the success and persistent popularity of the work of earlier masters. Because Memlinc was working in a style that was his by adoption rather than birthright, he might easily have had a deeper understanding and appreciation of this artistic past.

It is Memlinc's own artistic sensibilities, however, especially his sense for balance and the visually pleasing, that are the determining factors of his art. His numerous paintings of the Virgin are revealing of this preference. While Memlinc's representation of the Virgin clearly owes a great deal to the formal precedents established by such earlier masters as Jan van Eyck, to Memlinc she is no longer an iconographic pivot so much as the embodiment of feminine grace and beauty. Eschewing the religious zeal and intensity of earlier masters, Memlinc's essentially peaceful oeuvre aligned him with the more contemplative approach of religious subjectivism which became increasingly typical of the late 15th century. This must have accorded with the tastes and beliefs of the haute bourgeoisie who gradually replaced the Burgundian court as the major patrons of art. The considerable personal wealth Memlinc amassed during his career in Bruges - at one point he owned three houses - reminds us that Memlinc was a member of this same bourgeois class and most probably he understood their values.

The figure of Willem Moreel, and his commission of the *St. Christopher Triptych*, are typical of art patronage in the Netherlands during the later part of the century. His family was of Italian descent, the name Moreel being derived from Moreli, and its members had been among Bruges' most prominent citizens since the 13th century. Though modern historians maintain that the economic decline of Bruges was already underway at this time, with the shrinking of its sea trade and increased competition from English cloth manufactures, during the late 15th century Bruges was still among Europe's leading cities and an international centre of banking and trade. Willem Moreel was an important member of this prosperous mercantile community and one of its richest citizens. From his father he had inherited both a landed estate and the title of Seigneur of Oost Cleyman. Moreel was also deeply involved in the political affairs of Bruges; between serving two terms as burgomaster of the city, he spent several months in prison for his involvement in the civil resistance launched against Archduke Maximilian of Austria.

The triptych commissioned by Willem Moreel and his wife Barbara van Vlaenderberghe was designed to hang above the altar in the newly constructed family funerary chapel, which was part of a series of enlargements made to the Church of St. James in Bruges between 1457 and 1518. By reputation alone, Hans Memlinc must have been the logical choice to fulfill such a commission. In addition, Memlinc had already completed portraits of Moreel and his wife at some time between 1478 and 1483, and he and Moreel were both members of the Confraternity of

Notre Dame des Neiges and were therefore most likely personally acquainted.

True to form, and clearly following the wishes of his patrons, Memlinc's masterpiece tends to recall the artistic wealth of the past. The triptych format itself had a well established tradition in Netherlandish art. Because the central panel remained hidden from view when the wings were closed, the triptych format tended to heighten the sense of mystery and majesty surrounding its sacred content. In keeping with this scheme, the exterior panels of the wings of the triptych feature grisailles. On one, St. John the Baptist points to the Lamb that symbolizes Christ. The opposite wing features a grisaille of St. George slaying the dragon. W. H. James Weale contends that these grisailles were painted by another artist sometime after the deaths of the artist and both donors. The importance of these grisailles here is therefore minimal.

The interior panels of the *St. Christopher Altarpiece* also follow a traditional format. Accordingly, the donors appear on the wings. Willem and his five sons appear on the left wing which also includes his patron saint, St. William of Aquitaine. Barbara van Vlaenderberghe appears on the right wing with her twelve daughters and her patron saint, St. Barbara.

The inclusion of the children in the donor panels is a common feature of late 15th century altarpieces. Barbara van Vlaenderberghe died in 1499 and Willem followed her in 1501, at which point records indicate they had nineteen children in total, two of whom must have been born after these panels were completed. While the result has a somewhat crowded effect, these panels nevertheless highlight the artist's great skill as a portraitist. Here, Memlinc's natural sense for visually pleasing effects, an instinct which pervades all his compositions, enabled him to show his subject in his or her best light. This was not so much the result of embellishment as it was of de-emphasizing the sitter's less attractive features. While Memlinc did not provide the spectator with the level of psychological analysis typical of Jan van Eyck's portraits, he was able to render the individuality of even the youngest of the Moreel children. Moreel and his wife even appear slightly older than in Memlinc's earlier portraits of them. Again, the religious zeal often shown on the faces of donors during the first half of the century is absent here. The Moreel couple appear devout but not especially humbled by their sacred context.

The centre panel of the triptych is dominated by St. Christopher who is flanked by St. Maurus on the left and St. Giles on the right. Only St. Christopher and the Christ child seated on his shoulders appear aware of or concerned about the other figures in the panel. This peculiar isolation of the figures in the central panel, and the absence of any overt and consistent iconographic program, distinguish this altarpiece from its predecessors of the early 15th century. In these earlier altarpieces, the central panel was almost always devoted exclusively to the representation of the figure of Christ and the Virgin, with additional figures serving to focus the viewer's attention on the central ones. That Memlinc would

raise three relatively minor religious figures to a cult status in the central panel is indicative of the different views and values held by the Moreel couple as newly emerging art patrons.

In the absence of any known historical or iconographic connections between the three saints in the main panel, why they should appear together as the compositional centre of the *St. Christopher Triptych* remains unclear. Our knowledge of Maurus, Christopher and Giles as individuals, however, is more complete. Maurus is believed to have been a pupil and protege of St. Benedict in Subiaco during the 6th century. Later, as an Abbot, he travelled to France, where he established the great Abbey of Glanfeuil, which became known as Saint-Maur-sur-Loire. Memlinc represents St. Maurus in the black cloak of the Benedictine order with a staff carved with an architectural miniature that refers to the abbey established by him.

St. Giles was also an Abbot and one of the most popular saints of the middle ages. Hans Memlinc himself was eventually buried in the Church of St. Giles in Bruges. Legend has it that he left his Greek homeland to avoid the applause and rewards lavished on him after performing a series of miracles. Travelling to Marseilles, he became a hermit in the area surrounding the city, taking only occasional nourishment from a hind. Eventually this same hind took refuge with St. Giles during a hunt led by King Flavius of the Goths in which Giles was accidentally hit by an arrow. To beg his forgiveness, King Flavius established a monastery with Giles as its first abbot. St. Giles appears in the Triptych wearing Benedictine robes, an arrow piercing his arm, and the hind standing beside him.

Of the three standing figures in the central panel, St. Christopher is best suited iconographically to the landscape setting. Highly honored from early times, a series of legends developed around this saint in both the east and west. The "Golden Legend" describes him as a giant of sorts, originally named Reprobus. His search for the mightiest of masters led him to the desert to seek out Jesus Christ. There a hermit instructed him in the teachings of Christianity, telling Reprobus that he should serve Christ by ferrying people across a certain river on his shoulders. The time came when the saint was carrying a small child whose increasing weight forced the giant under water. Once on the other side of the river, the child revealed himself as Christ, telling Reprobus that the burden he carried was the heavy weight of his concern for mankind. Having been symbolically baptised by this journey, Reprobus' name was changed to Christopher, meaning in Greek "one who carries Christ".

Another aspect of the legend tells of St. Christopher living on to convert thousands, until his eventual martyrdom under the Emperor Decius. A drop of the saint's blood was said to have cured a wound sustained by the Emperor, who was then converted to Christianity himself. This forms the basis of the belief that to gaze upon an image of the saint would protect the onlooker from sudden death. Memlinc chose the most typical way of representing Christopher, who appears in the

process of wading across the river carrying the Christ child. Christopher's attention is on his staff, which according to legend bore flowers and fruit as Christ revealed his identity. Christopher's hermit-teacher appears in the distance, poised at the mouth of a cave, holding a lantern.

To reiterate: this particular combination of figures is without precedent and seems to elude a final explanation. We must assume that Memlinc was catering here to the very specific request of his patrons, but the meaning these figures had for the Moreel family remains unclear. The altar in the family chapel was in fact dedicated to Ss. Maurus and Giles. One possible connection with St. Christopher is the feast day, July 25th, which he shared with St. James, in whose church most of the Moreel family was buried. It is more likely, however, that St. Christopher's appearance in the Triptych was due to his position as patron saint of seafarers. To Willem Moreel, a merchant grocer dependent on sea trade, this saint's protection must have had special importance.

Part of the legend of St. Giles tells of his intercession on behalf of Charles Martel, whom he offered absolution for a sin Martel did not dare utter. The intercessory powers of Maurus and Christopher make their inclusion in a funerary triptych more consistent. St. Maurus might have had special meaning as an old patron saint of the Moreel family, or because of his close ties to St. Benedict who was his teacher. Appearing with Willem Moreel on the left donor panel is his own patron saint, St. William of Aquitaine, founder of the Order of Hermits of William, who also wears the black robes of the Benedictines over his suit of armour. The prominence of the Benedictine order seems significant. At the very least, saints that lived in pious isolation, especially as hermits, seem to have held a strong attraction for the wealthy and worldly Moreel family, and the saints included in the *St. Christopher Triptych* fall easily into this category. Just visible at the feet of St. William of Aquitaine is the dragon that symbolizes his victory over earthly temptations. Barbara van Vlaenderberghe's patron saint, St. Barbara, appears with the tower, wherein legend says she lived her life in solitude rather than betray her beliefs. It is also revealing that, unlike patrons in the early part of the century who are represented in their finest attire and jewelry, the Moreel family chose to be painted in simple dress as if they too were eschewing worldly riches.

The inclusion of so many figures and themes, only tenuously related to one another, was typical of late 15th century altarpieces and eventually proved fatal to the singular focus on which the success of such works depended. As an artistic vehicle, the triptych format entered a period of decline after this time. Memlinc's assured skill, however, enabled him to bring visual harmony to the divergent elements of the *St. Christopher Triptych*. He draws the horizon line through all three panels and symmetrically positions the figures around St. Christopher. Both Giles and Maurus hold books, the latter reading his, and stand in a slight 3/4 view. The artist brings further unity to the composition through the

subtle repetition of strong colors; for instance the use of black and deep reds in the dress of the figures, as well as the greens of the landscape.

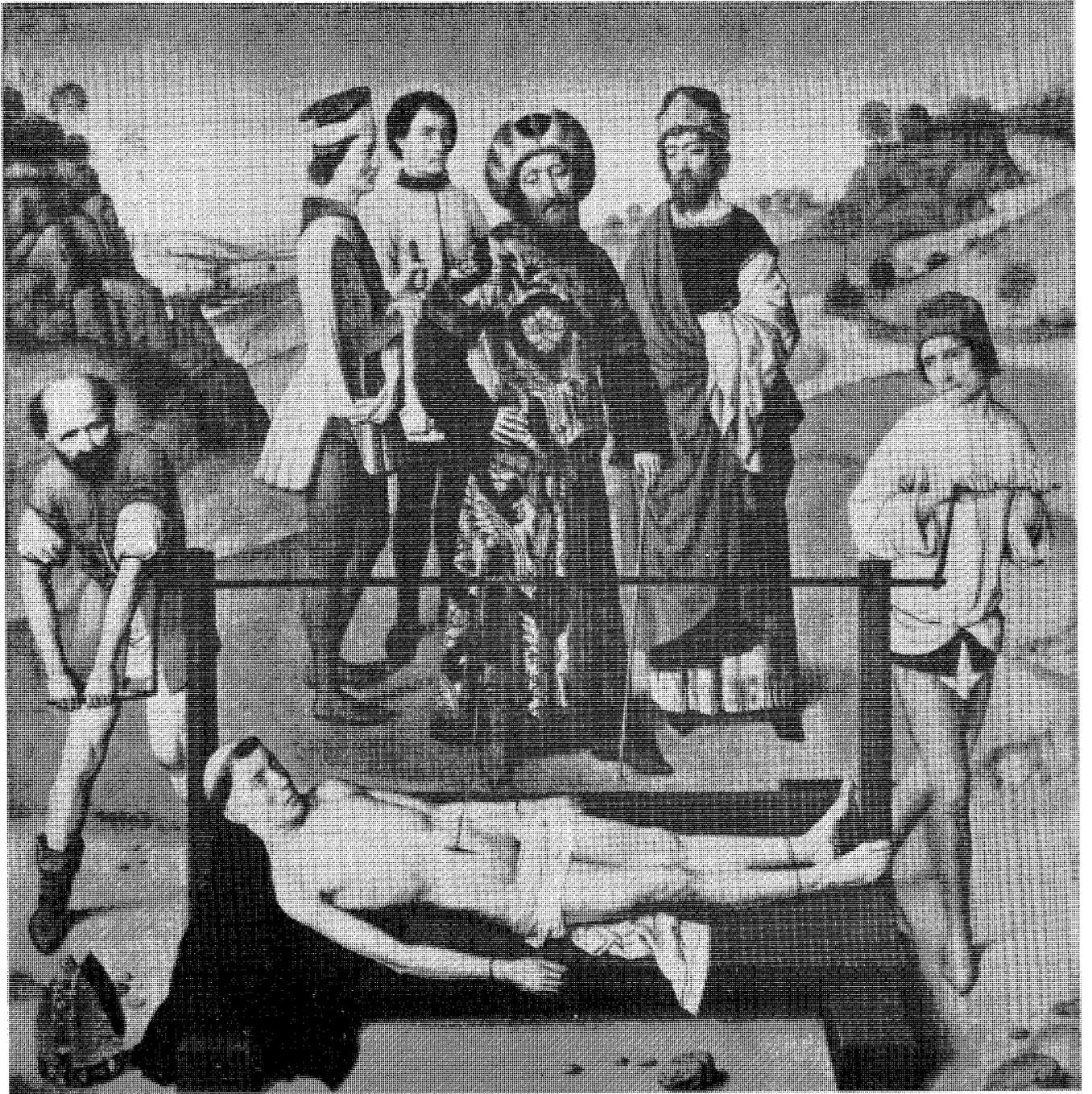
In this carefully balanced composition, Memlinc was also able to make use of the giant stature of St. Christopher. If the Moreel couple were willing to forgo the representation of the Virgin in favor of important intercessory saints, they were not willing to exclude the Christ child who sits precariously on the shoulders of St. Christopher. In wading through the deep river, the giant is put on the same horizontal line with Giles and Maurus, thereby placing the smiling Christ child above all other figures in the composition. His silhouette is the compositional climax of the triptych, and is echoed in the rising landscape on either side of him and in the distant cloud formations.

The magnificent landscape setting of the three panels allows Memlinc an opportunity to display his considerable powers of observation. The castles, cottages and church visible on the horizon of the donor panels are so carefully rendered that they might well represent actual buildings. The moated castle behind Willem Moreel may indeed be Oost Cleymaen, his family estate. The minutely rendered plant life at the feet of the figures, and the detail of St. Barbara's brocaded dress, are two more examples of Memlinc's considerable skill in rendering the visible world which is among the salient features of the art of the Low Countries.

While the work of Hans Memlinc is best understood in the context of late 15th century patronage, it should not be dismissed as the merely perfunctory dispatch of a commission. Certainly many features of the *St. Christopher Triptych*, for instance its customized sacred content and the high profile it affords the donor's family, can be seen to pander to the specific wishes of its patrons. Throughout these panels, however, and indeed in the rest of his work, it is Memlinc's own artistic personality that remains the painting's guiding force. The peaceful, park-like landscape in which the figures are set can be seen as typical of Memlinc's work and is revealing of the essentially gentle character of his artistic oeuvre. This love for beautiful, even pretty effects explains the considerable popularity Memlinc's work enjoyed during the 19th century as well as its subsequent rejection in our more critical age. In recent years, however, scholars have begun to re-evaluate Memlinc's work, so that he is now recognized as an artist of great importance. His technique, for instance, is superb. While Memlinc's artistic efforts were fundamentally aligned with the tastes of his wealthy merchant patrons, the high quality of his work, especially visible in the *St. Christopher Triptych*, sets it apart from contemporary workshops. The professional success Hans Memlinc enjoyed as an artist, and in particular the success of his *St. Christopher Triptych*, is largely explained by his ability to cater to the tastes of his patrons while still asserting his own artistic personality.



(fig.1) Hans Memlinc: St. Christopher Triptych. 1484. Panel, c. 47 3/4" x 60 3/8" (center), 47 3/4" x 27 1/3" (each wing). Groeningemuseum, Bruges.



(fig.2) Hans Memling: Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (detail). Circa 1470.
Brussels, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts.



(fig. 3) Dirk Bouts: The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus, Wood, 82 x 80 cm.
Louvain, St. Peter's Church.