

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Hugo van der Goes. Between Pain and Bliss (Gemäldegalerie—Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, March 31–July 16, 2023). Catalogue by Stephan Kemperdick and Erik Eising with the collaboration of Till-Holger Borchert (ed.), Hugo van der Goes. *Between Pain and Bliss*, exh. cat., trans. Bram Opstelten and Joshua Waterman. Munich: Hirmer Verlag for Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2023. 304 pp. col. ill. ISBN 9783777438481.

The early Netherlandish painter Hugo van der Goes (c.1440-1482/83) is not as well-known as he should be. He has a renown—although largely for his biographical peculiarities. In c.1475-7, at the height of a successful career in Ghent (about which we know little excepting decorative commissions, notably for Charles the Bold), Hugo became a lay brother at an Augustinian foundation known as the Roodde Kloster. Shortly before his death, as related by the monastery's carer, Gaspar Ofhuys, Hugo suffered 'frenesis magne' (a serious mental illness) (cat. 44 for Ofhuys' c.1509/13 text and a translation). Ever since Hugo has been made to embody—*avant la lettre*—the mad artist-genius sacred to Romanticism. For Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower, Hugo's life was one of the earliest 'reliable records of a mentally ill artist'.¹

Beside these biographical dramas, Hugo's artworks risk fading into the background. But visitors to The Uffizi will recall the sudden apparition of his gigantic *Portinari Altarpiece*, commissioned by the Italian banker Tommaso Portinari. The Scottish National Gallery boasts another marvel: Hugo's tall and enigmatic *Trinity Panels* (a Royal Collection loan), needing conservation treatment.² His few other surviving works are spread throughout Europe and North America. Before the Gemäldegalerie's display, they had never been gathered together.

The exhibition's original motivation was a desire for completion: the latest of a decades-long succession of museum projects on canonical early Netherlandish painters. As divulged by Stephan Kemperdick and Till-Holger Borchert in a 2018 preview talk, Hugo was the only significant early Netherlander without an extensive monographic show. One might speculate as to why. Two of Hugo's most celebrated works, the *Portinari Altarpiece* and *Trinity Panels* mentioned already, are unlikely ever to travel (represented in Berlin by to-scale reproductions—useful but ghostly—and in the catalogue by Emma Capron's and Lorne Campbell's essays). Perhaps, however, other factors made Hugo less attractive: his name's unfamiliarity to non-art

¹ Rudolf and Margaret Wittkower, *Born under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists; A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963), 108–13.

² Nicola Christie, 'Case Study: The Trinity Panels by Hugo van der Goes', *Royal Collection Trust* [online], <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/conservation/the-trinity-panels-by-hugo-van-der-goes>> (accessed October 31, 2023).

historians, the issues surrounding his oeuvre, and the sheer visual strangeness of his work.

The organisers had a difficult task. The exhibition subtitle was *Schmerz und Seligkeit*, for which the English catalogue (the version reviewed here) uses ‘pain and bliss’. ‘Bliss’, however, falls short of *Seligkeit*’s theological and beatific connotations. These same spiritual reverberations distinguishing Hugo’s aesthetic are foreign to modern viewers. Many of us lack the deep religious sentiment—the *Schmerz und Seligkeit*—the works demand.

Furthermore, sources linking Hugo’s name to surviving paintings are almost non-existent; the *Portinari Altarpiece* is the closest thing to a documented work. Kemperdick remarked before the exhibition opening, parodying the art world’s attributional terminology, that ‘every Hugo van der Goes work displayed here could be labelled “attributed to”’. No exhibited artwork by Hugo claimed incontrovertible autograph status.

The exhibition and its ‘International Colloquium’ (14–15 July 2023) revived an old debate around the sequencing of Hugo’s works (e.g. 222). Some scholars, for example, wonder whether the *Portinari Altarpiece* preceded the *Monforte Altarpiece*, usually supposed to be his earliest surviving painting. Since Hugo’s output has been established indirectly, by connoisseurly opinion, deduction and consensus, the evidence’s reliability sometimes totters, threatening the fragile historical logic.³ Why, for instance, are almost all surviving works, among which number at least five sizeable altarpieces (six counting cat. 24, a copy), squeezed within such a limited period during his later years (c.1470/75–c.1482/83)?⁴

The exhibition was therefore a confident attempt at coherence, presenting a variety of visual material relating to Hugo and his known oeuvre. Versions and copies, drawn and painted, argued persuasively that works such as the *Monforte Altarpiece* and “large” *Descent from the Cross* were influential, even revolutionary, in and beyond Hugo’s time (see cat. 2, 3.1, 3.2, 4, 18, 19.1, 19.2, 20). The provenance of derivations and copies also provided hints concerning the original locations of several works. The organisers prioritised traditional art historical concerns to good effect: biography, attribution, dating and chronology, as well as technical findings. This same academic thrust caused some restraint in gallery interpretation. Sometimes, one wished for more explanation or contextualisation.

The environment was conceived thoughtfully: a darkness perforated by powerful spotlights upon the artworks. A familiar strategy for pre-modern displays, the melodramatic illumination did much to enhance the religious passions on show. The *Monforte Altarpiece* (Fig. 1) conjured—more powerfully than usual—a theatre stage (cat. 2). Here, on entering, the viewer confronted the curators’ strongest argument for Hugo’s artistic genius.

The *Monforte Altarpiece*’s colouring is still sensational, as if it had just left Hugo’s studio. A c.1490/1500 drawn copy (cat. 3.1) labels verbally the subtle tints in Hugo’s painted masonry. Gone, here, are the wooden stables of earlier Nativities; instead,

³ Cf. Shira Brisman, ‘The Madness of Hugo van der Goes; The Troubled Search for Origins in Early Netherlandish Painting’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 51 (2021), 321–65.

⁴ Confusingly, Othuys’ chronicle mentions Hugo ‘could scarcely execute them [his paintings] in nine years’.



Fig. 1 Hugo van der Goes, *Monforte Altarpiece*, c. 1470/75, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie—Staatliche Museen zu Berlin © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie/Dietmar Gunne

we see a lofty, quasi-Romanesque ruin of stone. And Hugo does not, as in countless other examples, contain the structure within the picture; rather he truncates, prompting a far more expansive building. Doubtless, this device (also evident in his *Portinari Altarpiece*) left its mark on the history of art.

The loftiness was enhanced by the exhibition's reconstruction of the *Monforte Altarpiece's* lost top portion (the original was severed to fit a location in Monforte, northern Spain).⁵ Whether the Gemäldegalerie continues to show the extension is an open question; but this was a creative supplement to the exhibition experience, restoring the altarpiece's upper sections with a sense of airiness and releasing pressure on the figures. Perhaps, however, even more than visual appropriateness, the reconstruction's future display should consider the historical accuracy of one of its key sources: the Stockholm drawing (cited already). Although arguing this was made 'in front of the original' (126)—its lower portions are faithful to the altarpiece's main features—Kemperdick concedes that the drawing is also not a straightforward copy. It was partially transformed to fit a curved-top ogival format. The upper region should therefore be considered cautiously; for the draughtsman adds embellishments clearly outside Hugo's original ensemble—such as the stepped finishing of the right side's ruined stone wall.

⁵ For a short curatorial essay on the reconstruction, see Stephan Kemperdick, 'Curator's Project: Hugo van der Goes's Monforte Altarpiece and the Challenge of a Modern Reconstruction', *CODART* [online], 2023: <<https://www.codart.nl/feature/curators-project/hugo-van-der-goess-monforte-altarpiece-and-the-challenge-of-a-modern-reconstruction/>> (accessed 31 October 2023).

Further conundrums beset our understanding of this exceptional painting. Unusually, Hugo places the eldest king directly in the altarpiece's centre. When compared with the principal religious subjects (the Virgin and Child), this figure is daringly prominent. His accented conspicuousness has enticed scholars to see him as a disguised portrait of a contemporary donor. Museum professionals traditionally avoid delving into such questions, preferring clear, verifiable kinds of patron identification, but Kemperdick is atypical. Resuscitating the debate in both the catalogue and colloquium, Kemperdick maintains that no mere courtier would have assumed a kingly guise.⁶ It must have been someone of princely rank—he suggests (31), speculatively, Engelbert II of Nassau-Breda (1451–1504). In a c.1510/15 version by the Master of Frankfurt (fig., 121), it is telling that Emperor Frederick III (1415–93) assumes this same role.

The altarpiece's other lost sections should be considered in relation to this question. As proven by the surviving hinges, the *Monforte Altarpiece* once had wings, but there is no way of knowing exactly what they depicted. Strictly, the closest versions' wings may not resemble Hugo's originals—especially if Hugo's erstwhile wings, as in the *Portinari Altarpiece* (also a Nativity), showed a donor with their family.

Where and with whom Hugo trained no one knows. Close to the *Monforte Altarpiece* were several works introducing the three main candidates: Rogier (van der Weyden), Justus van Ghent (or Joos van Wassenhove) and Dirk Bouts. The latter two have relatively direct evidence linking them to Hugo (see Erik Eising's essay), including Hugo's puzzling collaboration on Bouts' *Triptych of the Martyrdom of Saint Hippolytus* (c.1475 and 1479) (cat. 17). The working hypothesis, by no means concrete, is that Bouts and his workshop finished the centre and right-hand panels, but Bouts died (1475) before painting the left wing, leaving its composition in drawn form. Hugo, by now in the Roode Klooster, was delivered the underdrawn panel and tasked with completing the donor figures (painted with immense virtuosity) and setting, for both of which he substantially—possibly also self-consciously—diverged from Bouts' original design.

As argued in Kemperdick's and Eising's essays, there are many more persuasive, more direct visual parallels between Hugo's and Rogier's (and Rogier's close associates') productions than between Hugo and Bouts or Hugo and Justus. Particularly notable among the exhibited works was the Mauritshuis' recently restored *Lamentation of Christ* by Rogier or a follower (c.1460/70; cat. 1), whose head of Mary Magdalene provided a 'veritable quotation' (25) for the same saint in Hugo's *Portinari Altarpiece*. Also, tucked in a corner of the exhibition was Hugo's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* from Lisbon (cat. 8), a painting overlooked by scholars. Full of thoughtful details (Luke's rolled sleeve; the codex as a draughtsman's support), it shows Hugo adapting Rogier's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* (c.1435-40; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) to a more intimate interior setting. If Hugo and Rogier had known each other personally, it is intriguing that the face of Hugo's Luke is so like Rogier's earlier protagonist, who is often judged a Rogierian self-portrait of sorts.

⁶ Although later counter-examples may be identified. Martin Weiß, the wealthy weaver of Augsburg, features as the standing magus clad in green in Ulrich Apt's *Adoration of the Magi*, c.1500/25, oil on panel, 125 x 71 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Kemperdick draws attention to a head revealed by technical imagery, appearing at Hugo's *Saint Luke's* window but subsequently painted over (144–45). Might this have been a portrait of Hugo himself, observing the saintly artist (and thus in some way also honouring Rogier?).

Perhaps Hugo assisted more than one of these three painters, in Brussels (Rogier), Leuven (Bouts) or Ghent (Justus). The mobility a fifteenth-century Netherlandish painter enjoyed before achieving master status is uncertain.⁷ Apprenticeship typically lasted two to four years, followed by an interval of as much as eight years before becoming a master. The average time painters spent as journeymen is likewise undetermined. Courts, aristocratic households, and cities like Tournai and Brussels (where Rogier resided), permitted journeymen to work for periods without guild restrictions. In practice and geography, the influence on early Netherlandish painters was probably more compound than traditionally supposed—perhaps also in Hugo's case. The notion of a singular late medieval master influencing a singular apprentice seems a nineteenth-century art historical anachronism.

Next, the exhibition displayed what looked like portraits (cat. 13, 14.1, 14.2, 14.3). On closer inspection, however, the majority were revealed to be excerpts. Doctoring early Netherlandish religious painting was a relatively common practice in subsequent periods.⁸ Collectors severed faces from their pictorial contexts, thereby producing new secular artworks of sorts. No portraits *per se* survive in Hugo's oeuvre (see Maryan Ainsworth's essay), yet his donors and religious figures alike display a remarkable talent for physiognomic observation—one surely also utilised to create standalone portraits. These, like so much of the artist's oeuvre, must no longer survive.

Hugo's years in the monastery have unjustly coloured art historical perceptions of his breadth. Most likely, he produced diverse other subject matters. Particular lacunae are Hugo's landscape, genre and historical event painting (*Ereignisbilder*), erstwhile indications of which the exhibition also highlighted (e.g. cat. 5, 33, 34).

Hugo's works on *Tüchlein* (cloth) are another marginalised facet of his oeuvre: a surviving example is the "large" *Descent from the Cross* in Oxford (cat. 18). Hugo and his studio must have executed numerous such works, vanishing subsequently due to the *Tüchlein* medium's tendency to deteriorate. The Italian provenance of surviving examples, however, implies that trade in these works was originally widespread and transnational. In their time, cloth pictures provided affordable, transportable instances of Hugo's manner.

Hugo's dedication to studying "after nature" is divined restrictively from religious motifs like the *Portinari Altarpiece's* floral still lifes. The lush horticulture in Hugo's *Vienna Diptych* (cat. 15) (Fig. 2) is surely not an anomalous venture, rather likewise

⁷ But see the still useful Lorne Campbell, 'The Early Netherlandish Painters and their Workshops', in Dominique Hollanders-Favart and Roger Van Schoute (ed.), *Le dessin sous-jacent dans la peinture* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Collège Erasme, 1981), 43–61.

⁸ See, for example, Dirk Bouts, *Portrait of a Man* (?), c.1470, oil on panel, 29.5 × 20.6 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Petrus Christus, *Portrait of a Young Man* (?), 1450–60, oil on panel, 35.4 × 26 cm, London, National Gallery.



Fig. 2 Hugo van der Goes, *Fall of Man*, left wing of the *Vienna Diptych*, c. 1477/79, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum © KHM-Museumsverband

representative of a once significant and innovative component of Hugo's talent. Installed near the *Tüchlein*, this exquisite *Diptych* has posed frequent issues for scholars due to the stylistic dissonance between the left and right wings. Were they executed at different times and joined together?

Important arguments for the panels' intimate association can, however, be found within their compositions. The diptych demonstrates a sophisticated renovation of medieval typology, where Old and New Testament images were displayed side-by-side.⁹ Eve's gesture stimulates the concordance ingeniously. Her arm curves, reaching to pluck the apple; and, in the bow-shaped body of the dead Christ, the first sin echoes its

⁹ See, for example, the diptych of *Moses Receiving the Tables of the Law—Doubting Thomas*, Trier, late 10th century, ivory, 24 × 10 cm, Berlin, Bode-Museum.

absolution. Hugo also plays on nudity: his Eve and Adam (the latter resembling Christ) are unclothed, whereas Christ's body is being wrapped in a shroud. Numerous related oppositions materialise: the verdancy of the left, the barrenness of the right; the bounty of the tree, the baldness of the cross; the pudenda-covering iris, the blue of the Virgin's cloak; Eve's improbably long hair, the several covered heads of the female mourners. In view of the manifold correspondences, one panel must have been made in response to the other—whether simultaneously or not. Question marks, however, linger over the (for the time) unusual centrality of all female protagonists. This could be explained by a female patron: Eve assumes the left wing's centre, and Mary occupies the right's, while Saint Genevieve (an uncommon saint, potentially punning on "Eve") inhabits the reverse grisaille.

Two works formed the exhibition's denouement: the Berlin *Nativity* and the newly conserved *Death of the Virgin* (Fig. 3) (cat. 27 and 28, respectively). Across both, Hugo presents extremities of spiritual passion in birth and death, as if reanimating a medieval mystery play. But, as always with Hugo, some of the most striking passages are less restrictively theological. In the *Nativity*'s shepherds, for instance, Hugo presents countryside labourers with a degree of interest rarely met in fifteenth-century panel paintings. Though a logical pairing stylistically (and supposedly chronologically), it was a bold decision to show these sizeable works side-by-side. The *Nativity* suffered from the proximity.

Recent conservation has renewed the *Death of the Virgin*'s colour scheme—its clash of blue, green and red now more glaring and even more haunting. Technical investigations also suggest that the curtained canopy formed a more logical enclosure continuing on the left-hand side (subsequently cut down), with the space of the painting corresponding to the large bed. Related hangings in Hugo's *Trinity Panels* and Berlin *Nativity* seem intended to prompt revelation—as if the illusionary curtains had only just been pulled back. This makes one wonder—especially considering the recurrent usage of bedroom canopies in Netherlandish painting—about the symbolic richness of the curtain motif. In any case, if Hugo was on the verge of psychosis while producing this painting (as some have speculated), the mental predicament did nothing to dampen his artistic capabilities.

Indecision regarding the *Death of the Virgin*'s function resurfaced during the colloquium, despite the new research prompted by its conservation. But would contemporaries have always perceived such a categorical distinction—between public, official altarpiece, and private, intimate devotional work? Or might function be subject to an owner's discretion, possessing the capacity to fluctuate? At the very least, this debate underlined the potentially misleading aspects of such classifications.

Although Hugo's chronology remains unresolved, the *Nativity* and *Death of the Virgin* are supposedly his later works. Hugo's panel constructions might provide clues for future researchers. Visible in the painted surface, peculiar wooden dowel assemblies with sets of four round pegs in a square formation (seen more normally in timber-framed houses, says Kemperdick) are found in Hugo's *Portinari Altarpiece*, *Death of the Virgin* and Berlin *Nativity* (14; 222; 229–32)—but not, confusingly, his *Trinity Panels*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Usually dated c.1475/80 (i.e. coinciding roughly with Hugo's Roode Kloster stay). On the dowels, see also Colin Thompson and Lorne Campbell, *Hugo van der Goes and the Trinity Panels in Edinburgh* (London: Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, 1974), 95 and 100–01; and Christie, 'The Trinity Panels'.



Fig. 3 Hugo van der Goes, *Death of the Virgin*, c. 1480, Bruges, Groeningemuseum © Musca Brugge, artinflanders.be, photo: Dominique Provost

Many such enigmas concerning Hugo await resolution, not least some fundamental ones. Regarding the artist's place of birth, discussions erupted almost immediately during the colloquium (see the essay by Jan Dumolyn and Erik Verroken, with Borchert). But whether a fifteenth-century artist's "nationality" should influence our understanding of the artworks is questionable.¹¹ In any case, nation was hardly an important concept at that time—especially compared with its significance today. The matter seems a rather blunt tool with which to prise open a marvel of art like the

¹¹ Cf. Meyer Shapiro, 'Race, Nationality and Art', *Art Front* 2 (March 1936), 10–12.

Portinari Altarpiece. Beside such coolly historical debates, Hugo's paintings seem more intractable than ever.

Did Hugo's unravelling sanity influence his art? This, too, appears a central question. Perhaps it always was. After seeing Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* in 1495, the humanist-physician Hieronymus Münzer remarked, '... another great painter confronted [the *Ghent Altarpiece*], wanting in his work to emulate this picture, and he was driven melancholic and witless'.¹² The unhappy rival has often been interpreted as Hugo—and with good reason, in view of the *Portinari Altarpiece*. For Münzer, though, Hugo's work revealed a syndrome far more common than insanity sparked by fear of damnation—more common in artists at least—the green-eyed madness that is ambition.

Ultimately, Hugo devoted much of his career to painting large Nativity or Adoration scenes. This focus on childbirth, unmistakable in the exhibition, was far more pronounced in Hugo than in any of his early Netherlandish peers: chosen for his *Monforte Altarpiece*, *Portinari Altarpiece*, *Berlin Nativity*, and a lost altarpiece seemingly also substantial (see cat. 24). In each, Hugo affirms that deep union between procreation and artistic creation. It is his genius that elevates this connection through the viewing experience to a state relational and mystical: people adore his pictures just as the painted audiences worship their Christchild. As to which is the more miraculous however—child or artwork—Hugo gives us pause.

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¹² Mentioned briefly in Bernhard Ridderbos' and Gregor Wedekind's essays. E. Ph. Goldschmidt, 'Le voyage de Hieronimus Monetarius à travers la France: III', *Humanisme et Renaissance*, 6 (1939), 348: '... quidam alius magnus pictor supervenit volens imitari in suo opere hanc picturam et factus est melancolicus et insipiens'. Münzer's *supervenit* surely puns upon several meanings, lingering during the rest of his sentence (i.e. to *come upon* the work, to *confront* it or rise to its challenge, to attempt to *surpass* it, and to eventually be *overcome* by it). Münzer's *insipiens* literally means the opposite of *sapiens*, i.e. not wise. With its popular source in Psalm 52's 'the fool says in their heart there is no God', *insipiens* had associations with folly. By striving to rival Van Eyck, Hugo played the fool.