

**The Art of Revelation in the Apocalypse Panel of Hans Memling's  
*Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist,*  
Sint-Janshospitaal (Memlingmuseum), Bruges**

by

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### ABSTRACT

This thesis adopts a comparative approach to Hans Memling's Apocalypse panel, critically analysing the methodologies the panel has been subjected to, while simultaneously demonstrating the polyvalent meaning and reception of the Apocalypse and the *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist* within the visual history of Bruges. Chapter One provides a description of the altarpiece, while Chapter Two establishes that Memling's panel signals a regional movement toward the condensation and abbreviation of the depiction of Apocalypse episodes. Chapter Three explores this narrative shift in the context of representations of the Apocalypse in Bruges, which further develop this narrative strategy toward a contemplative, devotional focus on St John. Chapter Four considers the socio-political context of the hospital as well as liturgical and eschatological connotations. Chapter Five considers the impact of an intermingling of meanings across the panels of the altarpiece in the context of private contemplative experience.

Examiners:

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my family, in particular, my father and mother, Laing and Kathleen Brown, my grandmother, Mary Curling, and my husband, Mischa Greenwood. And to Sri Sathya Sai Baba: *twameva vidya*. Thank you for challenging me to live my life the way it's supposed to be lived.

## INTRODUCTION

From horribly chaotic yet beautiful to dreamy and vibrant, even peaceful, the seemingly unending medieval pictorial variations on the wondrous and calamitous episodes of St John's Revelation continue to this day to captivate viewers, artists and academics alike. In particular, the right panel of Hans Memling's *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*, installed in 1479 in the high altar of the Church of the Sint-Janshospitaal of Bruges, has been considered notable as a particularly vivid and apparently unprecedented illustration of St John the Evangelist witnessing and recording his vision of the Apocalypse on the island of Patmos.<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, Memling's Apocalypse panel is the first single monumental painting that endeavours to display a nearly comprehensive vision of the episodes of the Apocalypse (as they were revealed to St John and recorded in the text of Revelation) within a single, undivided narrative field.<sup>2</sup> Memling has applied a compressed pictorial narrative structure to the Apocalypse episodes such that they occur simultaneously within this composition.

Although the *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist* (hereafter referred to as the *St John Altarpiece*) has been the subject of a number of analyses that proclaim the distinctiveness of the Apocalypse panel, these studies do not address how the panel, given its unique composition, contributes to the inclusive meaning of the altarpiece. When the Apocalypse panel has been examined it has been studied as a singular entity, separate from the altarpiece as a whole, and only within the context of the

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<sup>1</sup> The altarpiece is also occasionally referred to as the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* because of the prominent portrayal of the saint's *mystic marriage* with Christ in the central panel.

<sup>2</sup> Dirk De Vos, *Hans Memling: the Complete Works* (Ghent, 1994), 154. This claim has been confirmed by W. H. Weale, *Hans Memling* (London, 1901); De Vos, *Hans Memling*; Hans Gerhard Evers, *Dürer bei Memling* (München, 1972); Frederick van der Meer, *Apocalypse: Visions from the Book of Revelation in Western Art* (London, 1978), 266; Vida Joyce Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings for the Hospital of Saint John in Bruges* (New York, 1981), 73-74.

Apocalypse tradition. Scholarly explorations of the entire *St John Altarpiece* also tend to be restrictively one-dimensional as they concentrate upon a single layer of the altarpiece's context and meaning, effectively eschewing a broader, more encompassing approach to the altarpiece. For example, many existing analyses of the *St John Altarpiece* look to the social or political context of the Sint-Janshospitaal, while others concentrate on contemporary spiritual considerations or the relevant artistic context. Although these various investigations are essential to our understanding of the altarpiece's composite of meaning, by themselves they do not begin to address the full implications of the impact of the complex contemporary artistic environment upon the *St John Altarpiece*. Indeed, northern religious art of the fifteenth century has been understood to utilize multiple meanings (arising from varying contexts) within a single work. On this topic in the context of fifteenth-century northern art, Craig Harbison argues,

All art may eventually submit to multiple interpretations, or be shown to result from multiple sources of inspiration. Fifteenth-century northern religious art is more specifically and intentionally multiple in its message, however, than that generalisation implies.<sup>3</sup>

The *St John Altarpiece* reflects and communicates an interactive set of multiple meanings that arise from the influence of this environment.<sup>4</sup>

It is the purpose of this thesis to adopt a comparative approach to the study of Memling's Apocalypse panel as part of a reading of the entire *St John Altarpiece*. I will critically examine the diverse methodologies that have been applied to the study of the right panel in particular and to the work as a whole. This analysis simultaneously

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Harbison, "The Northern Altarpiece as a Cultural Document," *Altarpiece in the Renaissance*, ed. Peter Humfrey and Martin Kemp (Cambridge, 1990), 74. See chapter four, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of this topic see chapter four, pp. 65-66, 70-71 and chapter five, pp. 87-88, 96, 108-13.

demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between the Apocalypse panel and the meaning and reception of both the *St John Altarpiece* and the Apocalypse within the visual history of Bruges. This thesis does not attempt to offer a new, comprehensive reading of the *St John Altarpiece*, as there is neither time nor space to examine the left, central, and exterior panels in the depth that would be required for such an approach the Apocalypse panel receives. Rather, I seek to point out the advantages and disadvantages of the variety of methodological tools employed by scholars thus far in the literature, while reconsidering the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece* from this more inclusive perspective. When considered within this context, the *St John Altarpiece* can be seen to function as an interactive site of meaning which concentrates on the promise of salvation, uniting the diverse discourses of death, the afterlife, the Apocalypse, private devotion and the visual cultures of Bruges.

#### *Hans Memling's Apocalypse Panel*

Extant examples of the medieval visualization of the Apocalypse seem to have been studied thus far as a contained and isolated tradition, without significant reference to the influence of the general regional visual and eschatological cultures particular to a specific work in question. To fully appreciate such works of art we cannot look only to the context of apocalyptic art, for many of these images are not only part of larger altarpieces or manuscripts, but are derived from varying visual and regional cultures that encompass diverse narrative traditions. Such is the case with Memling's Apocalypse panel, which must be seen in the context of both the *St John Altarpiece* and the visual narrative traditions of Bruges.

Memling's vertical stacking of the apocalyptic episodes in the right panel of the *St John Altarpiece* works effectively to distil the elaborate revelatory narrative of the panel. The origins of this experimental spatial conception of the Apocalypse have been discussed only cursorily in the literature and never in relation to the fundamental meaning of the altarpiece. This is perhaps due to the widespread perception that Memling's panel is an unparalleled "one-off" and dependent upon earlier, often foreign, Apocalypse traditions.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the panel is retardataire and seeks only to recall the resplendence of past Apocalypse traditions, thereby making it an immature predecessor of Albrecht Dürer's famed 1498 woodcut Apocalypse cycle of sixteen images.<sup>6</sup> This view is also often coupled with the criticism that the serenity of expression with which Memling's panel is executed is contradictory to its narrative subject. However, those elements of Memling's Apocalypse panel that have been previously discounted as either retardataire or anomalous are, in fact, central to understanding the strategic narrative structure and overall meaning of the entire altarpiece. Memling's panel is not a mere regurgitation of earlier medieval iconography made fresh by a masterly hand, but more importantly represents a seminal link to the visual and eschatological culture of Bruges.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> De Vos, Hans Memling, 156. See also Yves Christe, "L'Apocalypse de Memling," Arte medievale 10, no. 1 (1996), 141-47.

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne Lewis, Reading Images: Narrative Discourse and Reception in the Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Apocalypse (Cambridge, 1995), 339; Michael Camille, "Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages," The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca and London, 1992), 288. See chapter three, pp. 51-55, for further comparison of Dürer and Memling.

<sup>7</sup> The term "visual culture" can be attributed to Michael Baxandall, Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style (Oxford, 1972) and The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany (New Haven, 1980). The term is used in specific reference to Bruges by Jean C. Wilson, Painting in Bruges at the Close of the Middle Ages (Pennsylvania, 1998), 4.

### *Methodology*

This thesis reconsiders the right panel of Memling's triptych, and ultimately the entire altarpiece, through an analysis of the visual expression of the Apocalypse, attendant regional and urban visual narrative traditions, the socio-political context of Bruges, the eschatological context of the Sint-Janshospitaal and contemporary notions of private devotional experience and practice. I argue that the Apocalypse panel is integral to the meaning of the *St John Altarpiece* in that the above analyses ultimately allow for a rethinking of the altarpiece from the perspective of private devotional experience and practice, among other approaches.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the complex iconography of the *St John Altarpiece* by way of a comprehensive description of the Apocalypse panel and a short description of the remaining panels of the altarpiece. This description allows for a better understanding of the altarpiece's intricate sacred narrative, which is crucial to the detailed analysis of the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece* presented in this thesis.

Through an examination of extant examples of the medieval monumental and miniature tradition of the Apocalypse, the second chapter establishes that Memling's panel both signals and corroborates a contemporary regional movement toward the purposeful concentration of the episodes of the Apocalypse and away from the copious number of Apocalypse episodes generally depicted within the medieval "manuscript matrix of Revelation," which had been the model upon which preceding monumental Apocalypse art seemed to rely.<sup>8</sup> Memling's panel consciously resists this manuscript

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 339. Suzanne Lewis has referred to a "manuscript matrix" of Revelation, which includes lexical signs and the complex Gothic structure found in Apocalypse, specifically Anglo-French, manuscripts. I use the term here to refer to the impact Gothic manuscripts had upon Apocalypse art in

model and thus participates in a seminal shift in the way pictorial space and the revelatory visions of St John were represented and received by their audiences, particularly in the Netherlands. As we shall see, this has important implications in terms of our understanding of the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece*.

As will be discussed in chapter three, this hitherto underestimated narrative strategy of distillation appears to have been intended to emphasize St John himself and the entirety of his revelation and its unified meaning, rather than to be concerned with the individual significance of the Apocalypse episodes. A comparative analysis of later Apocalypse illustration from Bruges confirms that Memling's panel signals this transition from the focus on apocalyptic episodes (and the overall episodic meaning of the Apocalypse) toward a devotional focus on St John that effectively intensifies the serene and meditative tone of Revelation. This visual expression of the Apocalypse is indicative of a change in the reception of the Apocalypse and its meaning as well as a developing interest in the meditative, devotional contemplation of the Apocalypse in late-medieval and early-Renaissance Bruges.

Chapter four explores the socio-political context of the Sint-Janshospitaal as well as the liturgical and eschatological connotations associated with the *St John Altarpiece*. As we shall see, in addition to being a reflection and articulation of the Sint-Janshospitaal's newly acquired social, political and religious status, the altarpiece, when considered from a liturgical and eschatological perspective, provides a framework of religious instruction for death particular to its unique hospital context. This framework is delivered to the viewer with a serenity of expression that marks a distinct departure from

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general. See chapter two for further discussion of the impact of the "manuscript matrix of Revelation" upon late-medieval Apocalypse art.

contemporary hospital altarpieces; in fact this tranquility has been regarded as contradictory to the usually intense depiction of the Apocalypse narrative. This chapter argues that Memling's calm and placid depiction of the Apocalypse was a conscious choice and serves to alert us to a more complex environment lying behind the unique composition of the Apocalypse panel.

Chapter five considers Memling's serenity of expression in the context of a concurrent "utopian" Apocalypse tradition that suggests that the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* depicted in the central panel was symbolic of the *Marriage of the Lamb*, the auspicious culmination of the Apocalypse. The central panel thus becomes the optimistic and hopeful climax of the unfinished Apocalypse in the right panel, which does not depict the final events of St John's vision. In this chapter I expand this "cross-panel" reading to include the remaining panels of the *St John Altarpiece* in the context of contemporary notions of private devotional experience and practice.

Different from the Italian and Spanish visual expression of visions, such as the "ecstatic experience" depicted in representations of St Teresa of Avila, the late-medieval Flemish expression is based on a comparatively methodical and rational visionary process.<sup>9</sup> As we will see, Memling's panel not only signals a link to characteristic fifteenth-century regional notions of contemplation and meditation, but also indicates a connection with a general regional impetus toward representing St John as percipient and visionary model. When viewed within this context, the altarpiece thus becomes an indivisible, "multi-panel" landscape upon which the diverse discourses of death, the afterlife, the Apocalypse and the hospital context collectively communicate and celebrate

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<sup>9</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in early Flemish Painting," *Simiolus* 15, 2 (1985), 88. See chapter five, pp. 102-4.

a path toward salvation. The following discussion and review of relevant literature will confirm that no study has adequately addressed the above concerns.

*Review of the Literature*

Of those scholars that specifically address the *St John Altarpiece* in detail, Shirley Neilsen Blum provides one of the earliest, most comprehensive and widely referenced studies to date on this topic in her 1969 book Early Netherlandish Triptychs: A Study in Patronage. In particular, her landmark analysis of the meaning and significance of the altarpiece in the context of the simultaneously active and contemplative existence of the brothers and sisters of the Sint-Janshospitaal has been particularly influential in subsequent studies. Blum offers a reading of the altarpiece based upon the social context of the hospital, but does not venture beyond the scope of that frame of reference. However, she does note Memling's condensation of the Apocalypse episodes into a single panel and references in comparison the "long narrative fashion" of Apocalypse representation in twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscript and tapestry traditions.<sup>10</sup> Although Blum's observations concerning the condensation of apocalyptic episodes are salient and significant, she does not attempt to explain the origins of the unique composition of the panel.<sup>11</sup>

Vida Joyce Hull's 1981 dissertation, entitled Hans Memlinc's Paintings for the Hospital of Saint John in Bruges, is an excellent resource that discusses the hospital's patronage of Memling. Hull examines each of Memling's four pieces commissioned by the hospital, and delves into Memling's background as well as the history, operation and structure of the hospital. Like Blum, Hull focuses on the *St John Altarpiece* as illustrative

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<sup>10</sup> Shirley N. Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," Early Netherlandish Triptychs, a Study in Patronage (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 91.

<sup>11</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 87-96.

of the active and contemplative life relevant to the everyday reality of the brothers and sisters of the hospital and their dutiful engagement in activities related to both spheres. She interprets the Apocalypse panel and the scenes of St John the Evangelist in the central panel as a representation of contemplative life, and the scenes concerning St John the Baptist in the left and central panels as a representation of active life. She also offers intriguing liturgical connections between the altarpiece and its viewing community.

Hull also duly notes the compositional ingenuity exhibited by Memling in the Apocalypse panel, suggesting that “Memling was the initiator of this new type of Apocalypse,”<sup>12</sup> combining the tradition of single representations of the St John with that of sequential Apocalypse series.<sup>13</sup> While she briefly suggests a tentative predecessor, the Paris Apocalypse manuscript of ca. 1400 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, néerl. 3), Hull does not expound further on this connection.<sup>14</sup> Nor does she address the various other levels of contextual meaning at play in the *St John Altarpiece*.

Dirk De Vos’ Hans Memling: the Complete Works, was prepared and published for the 1993 Hans Memling exhibition in Bruges.<sup>15</sup> De Vos presents comprehensive information about the production and provenance of the *St John Altarpiece*, as well as current technical information, and he includes an invaluable listing of primary documents and sources that form the foundation of Memling’s biography and attributions. De Vos discusses a liturgical interpretation of the *St John Altarpiece* and reads the triptych as both symbolic of the active and contemplative life of the hospital brothers and sisters and as an intercessory monument. However, he does not address the eschatological context of

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<sup>12</sup> Hull, Hans Memling’s Paintings, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Hull, Hans Memling’s Paintings, 73-74.

<sup>14</sup> Hull, Hans Memling’s Paintings, 78-79. This connection is also mentioned by Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling,” 146.

<sup>15</sup> De Vos, Hans Memling.

the hospital. De Vos observes that the narrative composition of the altarpiece (particularly that of the Apocalypse panel) is ingenious, but does not offer any explanation for, or discussion of, the origin or nature of its ingenuity. He asserts his belief that the panel is a “one-off creation,” “unique in the history of painting.”<sup>16</sup>

Maximiliaan P. J. Martens examines the economic and political context of Memling’s altarpiece, suggesting that it is an articulation of both a “loyalty to contemporary Burgundian politics” and the religious and social status acquired by the hospital during the tumultuous restructuring of hospital administration between 1459 and 1463.<sup>17</sup> Although this analysis is crucial to the understanding of the *St John Altarpiece*, Martens bases his reading of the *St John Altarpiece* solely upon the economic and political context of the hospital and does not address other avenues of investigation.

The literature that examines the possible origins of the unique composition of Memling’s Apocalypse panel in relative detail generally does not consider the regional visual context, but looks instead to the Apocalypse traditions of Italy or those northern visual traditions outside of Flanders. For example, Yves Christe’s article “L’Apocalypse de Memling” argues that Memling made key choices with regard to the exegetical content of the panel and that these provide important clues to its meaning and the tradition from which it stems.<sup>18</sup> Christe tackles the question of the origins of Memling’s unusual panel and links it to eleventh- and twelfth-century monumental painting traditions connected with an Italian tradition that, in and of itself, while undoubtedly important to our understanding of the Apocalypse panel, fails to consider a broader range

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<sup>16</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 156, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Maximiliaan P. J. Martens, “Patronage and Politics: Hans Memling’s *St John Altarpiece* and ‘the Process of Burgundization,’” *Le Dessin Sous-jacent dans la Peinture* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1995), 176.

<sup>18</sup> Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling,” 141-47.

of (more contemporary) influences. The exclusive focus on early precedents does not address the possibility of the legacy of the northern traditions of the Apocalypse and the impact of the visual cultures of Bruges. However, Christe does mention the Flemish Paris Apocalypse (mentioned above in relation to Hull) as a possible precedent. According to Christe, “Je ne connais pas de vrais antécédents à cette initiative de Memling, sinon dans une Apocalypse néerlandaise des années 1400... où les annotations paysagères sont certes nombreuses, mais encore inorganisées.”<sup>19</sup> While Christe explores and evaluates possible iconographic influences, he does not address the important issue of spatial composition.

To my knowledge, Derk Visser is the sole scholar who addresses how the unique composition of the Apocalypse panel might contribute to a specific meaning of the *St John Altarpiece*. Visser connects Memling’s Apocalypse panel with what he sees as an optimistic, “utopian” Apocalypse discourse connected to *Marriage of the Lamb* iconography. He further proposes that the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* symbolizes the *Marriage of the Lamb*, the culmination of the unfinished Apocalypse in the right panel of the altarpiece.<sup>20</sup> However, Visser fails to extend his reading to include the remaining panels of the altarpiece and does not broaden his analysis to consider the physical context of the altarpiece.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling,” 146.

<sup>20</sup> Derk Visser, “Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism,” *Apocalypse as Utopian Expectation (800-1500)* (Leiden, 1996), 152-80.

<sup>21</sup> Sally W. Coleman’s dissertation “Empathetic Constructions in Early Netherlandish Painting: Narrative and Reception in the Art of Hans Memling” only came to my attention in the final stages of this project. It appears that Coleman discusses the *St John Altarpiece* as a “highly structured” narrative consciously orchestrated by the artist to evoke “an empathic devotional response.” Coleman, “Empathetic Constructions in Early Netherlandish Painting: Narrative and Reception in the Art of Hans Memling,” Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2003, 2. According to Coleman, the *St John Altarpiece* is organized to create an empathetic construction of narrative evocative of both the political and religious concerns of the hospital community, while simultaneously promoting “mystical union with God” by means of its references to the

One must seek literature that is broader in scope (i.e., not devoted entirely to either Hans Memling or the *St John Altarpiece*) in order to find studies that consider or shed light on possible influences for the spatial structure of Memling's panel. Peter K. Klein's chapter "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," from Richard K. Emmerson's and Bernard McGinn's anthology The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages, provides a valuable overview of Apocalypse art throughout the medieval period.<sup>22</sup> Of particular interest is Klein's analysis of late-Gothic block-books and printed Bibles.<sup>23</sup> According to Klein, "More important for the later innovative development of late-Gothic graphic prints are those Flemish Apocalypse manuscripts that condense the usual eighty to one hundred illustrations of the English cycles to only a few compositions."<sup>24</sup> Although Klein connects the "simplification and condensation" of traditional cycles in Flemish Apocalypse manuscripts (specifically, the Paris Apocalypse) to late-Gothic block-books and printed Bibles, he makes no attempt to map this trend of condensation or to explain why it occurred.<sup>25</sup> He also does not relate this phenomenon to Memling's panel nor does he make mention of the monumental Apocalypse painting tradition in relation to it. The "simplification and condensation" characteristic of Flemish Apocalypse manuscripts and German woodcut Bibles must be examined in connection with the similar conflation found in Memling's panel.

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Eucharist. Coleman, 17, 142. Although Coleman discusses the portrayal of St John in relation to contemporary vision discourse, she does not relate it to the overall meaning and function of the *St John Altarpiece*, which she prefers to read within a sacramental frame. Coleman, 140-41. Her treatment of the composition of the Apocalypse panel is cursory.

<sup>22</sup> Peter K. Klein, "Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages, 159-99.

<sup>23</sup> Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 196-99.

<sup>24</sup> Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 197.

<sup>25</sup> Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 197.

Michael Camille's article, "Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages," in Emerson's and McGinn's 1992 anthology discusses Memling's panel in the context of spatial innovations (though he makes no reference to a trend of compression), directly relating these innovations to northern Apocalypse illustration (particularly manuscript illustration). He suggests that the reasons behind Memling's composition lie with shifting notions of the visionary in the late-medieval world. According to Camille, St John became "a model for seeing and interpreting vision," a shift he associates with the northern late-medieval visual culture in general.<sup>26</sup> Although Camille's findings undoubtedly clarify our understanding of Memling's panel, he does not expand his discussion to allow for differences within the northern visual culture he discusses, thereby disregarding the specific regional and urban visual cultures that affected the *St John Altarpiece*.

Camille's enquiry builds upon and reflects recent scholarly interest in the dialogue between late-medieval notions of vision or contemplation and art. For example, Craig Harbison's ground-breaking 1985 article "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting" suggests that fifteenth-century Flemish painting was closely associated with, and used as an aid for, contemplation and meditation: "Officially, art was recognized as an incentive, an aid to meditation; very quickly, in the popular consciousness at least, it became identical with the contemplative process itself. Contemplating something came to mean its visualization."<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger's 1989 article, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," supports this view: "Visionary experience...became a commonplace

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<sup>26</sup> Camille, "Visionary Perception," 288.

<sup>27</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 114.

aspiration...[M]any fifteenth-century paintings...actualize such visionary expectations.”<sup>28</sup> As already exhibited by Camille’s findings, the impact of contemporary notions of visionary experience has interesting implications for the study of both Memling’s *St John Altarpiece* and late-fifteenth-century Flemish art in general. The application of this context of private devotional experience and practice, as well as the characteristic “diversity of motive” found within the fifteenth-century Flemish altarpiece, allows for a new reading of both the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece* that considers the interaction of the panels both thematically and in relation to the structuring of contemplative experience.<sup>29</sup>

Hans Memling’s work has been characterized as a nostalgic testament to late-Gothic glory, teetering at the edge of the Renaissance, but retaining a late-medieval mentality and style, very much rooted in antecedent stylistic traditions. Seen within the context of the rich artistic landscape of fifteenth-century Bruges, Memling’s Apocalypse panel yields insight not only into the meaning and reception of the *St John Altarpiece*, but also into the “tension between tradition and innovation” in the transition between late-medieval and early-Renaissance Bruges.<sup>30</sup> In the following chapter, we will focus on a detailed description of the work to understand better its complex iconographic structure.

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, “The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions,” *Viator* 20 (1989), 181-82.

<sup>29</sup> Harbison, “Visions and Meditations,” 74-75.

<sup>30</sup> Martens, “The Dialogue between Artistic Tradition and Renewal,” *Bruges and the Renaissance: Memling to Pourbus*, exh. cat., ed. Maximiliaan P. J. Martens (New York, 1998), 43. Martens uses the above phrase in relation to the work of Pieter Pourbus, which is discussed in further detail in chapter three, pp. 59-61. I think this idea can also be applied to Memling’s work which was also poised at the brink of the Renaissance.

### **Chapter One: A Description of the Apocalypse Panel and the *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist***

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Bruges established itself as an important business centre and a key international market within Western Europe. However, as the fifteenth century came to a close the city was confronted with political upheaval as well as waves of devastating plague. Bruges was historically a powerful city within Flanders, the strongest principality of the Low Countries during the late Middle Ages. Hans Memling created his altarpiece for the hospital church of Sint-Janshospitaal in Bruges (fig. 1). This city, with its vibrant urban commercial society, provides the backdrop for the successful career of Memling, who was a highly esteemed painter and member of society. The artist completed the commission of the *St John Altarpiece* during the most productive years of his career, from 1475 to 1480. He enjoyed the extensive patronage of the nobility, clergy, foreign merchants and dignitaries, and, in particular, of the Sint-Janshospitaal community.

The installation of Memling's triptych in 1479 coincided with the construction (ca.1473-74) of a new apse on the east end of the twelfth-century hospital chapel. The piece, one of four of Memling's works requested by the hospital, was commissioned by donors who are represented on the exterior wings of the altarpiece: these are the master and prioress of the hospital, as well as other important men and women in the hierarchy of the hospital. The triptych remained in the high altar of the hospital at Sint-Janshospitaal until 1637, when the church underwent further renovations. To this day it remains in its original frame and is situated in the recently restored hospital building, now part of the Memling Museum in Bruges. To better understand the nature of the

iconographic subtleties fundamental to our reading of this object in subsequent chapters of this thesis, a full description follows.

### *The Exterior Panels*

Each of the two external panels presents two kneeling donors with their respective patron saints, all standing within sculpted stone niches (fig. 2). In the left panel kneel the two hospital brothers, Jacob de Ceuninc and Antheunis Seghers, master of the hospital, with their patrons saints, St James the Great and St Anthony the Great, respectively. The right panel depicts two hospital sisters, Agnes Casembrood, prioress of the hospital, and Clara van Hulsen, and their patron saints, St Agnes and St Clare.<sup>31</sup> The two groups of figures face the central division of the altarpiece.

### *The Central and Left Interior Panels*

The central panel of Memling's triptych measures 173.6 by 173.7 cm and portrays the Virgin and Child surrounded by saints and angels, following the manner of a *Sacra Conversazione* (fig. 3).<sup>32</sup> The enthroned Virgin serenely reaches her left hand to turn the page of the manuscript she is contemplating, which is held by an attendant angel dressed in pale blue.<sup>33</sup> Above the Virgin's head two angels hold her heavenly crown, in preparation for her celestial coronation. To the left of the Virgin kneels an elaborately garbed angel who plays upon a small portable organ as she looks smilingly in the direction of the Christ Child. The Child slips a ring onto the finger of St Catherine, seen

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<sup>31</sup> See chapter four for further description of these panels as related to hospital iconography and context. See chapter five, esp. pp. 106-09, for an analysis of how the exterior panels are linked to the interior of the *St John Altarpiece* in terms of both meaning and contemporary notions of vision.

<sup>32</sup> For information on the possible precedents for the central panel see, for example: De Vos, Hans Memling, 154, fn. 9; Hull, Hans Memling's Paintings, 59-62; and Friedrich Winkler, Das Werk des Hugo Van der Goes, (Berlin, 1964), 176. Memling repeats the composition of the central panel in the *Triptych of John Donne* (ca. 1480), now in the National Gallery, London; and the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Catherine and Barbara and Two Musical Angels* (ca. 1479), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See De Vos, Hans Memling, 154, 166-67, 180-83.

kneeling atop the broken wheel and sword, both symbolic of her martyrdom.

Interestingly, this musical angel has the most animated face of all the figures in this central panel, if not the entire altarpiece. St John the Baptist and the Lamb stand behind and slightly to the left of St Catherine. With his right hand St John indicates in the direction of the Christ Child and the *Mystic Marriage*. St Barbara, who is reading and contemplating a breviary, kneels to the right of the Virgin. Behind the shoulders of St Barbara, and at the right of the panel, is depicted her attribute, a miniature tower in the form of a monstrance. Within a window of this tower the viewer can glimpse the Eucharistic Host under a glass dome atop a crescent moon. St John the Evangelist stands behind St Barbara and the angel who holds the book for the Virgin. As he holds the poisoned chalice, in which a serpent can be seen, St John makes a blessing with his right hand over the cup.

Scenes from the lives of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist appear in the background beyond the sacred gathering and on the historiated capitals of the four columns that enclose this central scene. Depicted on the two capitals above St John the Baptist are (from left) Zacharias and the Vision of the Angel, in which the Baptist's birth is announced (Luke 1: 11-20), and the saint's birth itself (Luke 1: 57). On the two capitals above St John the Evangelist we see represented the resurrection of Drusiana (Acts of John 80) and the episode of the poisoned wine. Behind the Baptist, in the background to his immediate left, is the scene of his arrest (Matthew 14: 3-4 and Mark 6: 17-20). Above this scene is a depiction of the *Sermon* (Luke 3: 1-17), and above this again, the saint is shown praying in the wilderness (Luke 1: 80). In the top narrative level of the

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<sup>33</sup> Blum suggests the Virgin is reading the Book of Wisdom; see "The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns," 89.

background, to the immediate right of St John the Baptist, is the burning of his body; below this, the decomposing head of St John rests within a wall niche.<sup>34</sup>

The left panel of the triptych measures 176 by 78.9 cm and includes further scenes from the life of St John the Baptist (fig. 4). The saint's gruesome death is depicted in the immediate foreground. After cleaving off the saint's head, the executioner, with his back to the viewer, turns and presents it to Salome who receives it on a plate, her eyes cast aside from the grisly sight. St John's lifeless body falls at an angle toward the viewer revealing hands clasped in a prayerful gesture, while the saint's life-blood spurts in gleaming rivulets from his severed neck. In the tower immediately above and left of this scene, Herod watches Salome, daughter of Herodias, dance (to a trumpet and fife) during a banquet (Matthew 14:6-9, Mark 6:21-28). Outside and to the right are two of St John's disciples, St John the Apostle and Andrew. On a forested knoll in the background above, seen in miniature scale, we note the scene of *St John the Baptist answering the questions of the priests and Levites* (John 1:19-23). Down and to the right, the baptism of Christ occurs against a background of crystal blue water (Matthew 3:13-16). Across the water to the right, the portrayal of the *Ecce Agnus Dei* is witnessed by the saint's first two followers (John 1:29). God the Father is depicted at the very top of the panel in a burst of cloud and sunlight, mirroring the right panel's image of the Woman Clothed with the Sun. The left panel is believed to be inspired by Rogier van der Weyden's retable of St John the Baptist (Staatliche Museen, Berlin).

In the central panel, to the left of St John the Evangelist's head, is a contemporary scene which portrays the town crane, the *Kraanplaats*, and hospital brothers on the

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<sup>34</sup> There is no biblical source for these episodes. They are discussed in the Golden Legend. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2 (Princeton, 1993), 135-38.

Kraanplein, or Crane Square (then situated opposite the Church of St John, but no longer in existence). This contemporary scene is ingeniously separated from scenes of biblical times by a colonnade.<sup>35</sup> At the top level of the background narrative, to the right of the colonnade and the Evangelist, is a grey church in which the saint baptizes a devotee.<sup>36</sup> Below this St John is led to the boat that will give him passage to Patmos, the site of his revelatory vision. Underneath this scene is the portrayal of the miraculous incident of the Evangelist's submersion in boiling oil and subsequent survival. Further below these narrative scenes is the portrait of a single figure in Augustinian habit, which appears to observe and witness the central scene. The identity of this figure has never been conclusively confirmed.<sup>37</sup>

#### *The Apocalypse Panel*<sup>38</sup>

The right panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, measuring 175.9 by 78.9 cm, features a youthful, yet bearded St John serenely seated on the island of Patmos, as he witnesses and records his vision (or revelation) of the events of the Apocalypse as they are revealed

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<sup>35</sup> Hull recognized the change of scene from contemporary Bruges "to first century Rome" and noted that the building in the far distance resembles the Coliseum. Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 58, fn. 26.

<sup>36</sup> De Vos believes it is the philosopher Crato that is being baptized in this scene. However, Coleman argues that this is not part of the saint's legend and that it represents St John's general "role in the founding of churches in Asia as well as his conversions and baptisms before he was exiled to Patmos." Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 113, fn. 31.

<sup>37</sup> There are a number of theories about who this figure is. Those who have suggested that the mysterious figure is the artist himself include L. Kämmer, *Memling* (Bielefeld, Leipzig, 1899); and K. B. McFarlane, *Hans Memling* (Oxford, 1971). Others have suggested that this figure is Joos Willems, who was in charge of measuring wine from 1467 to 1488 and was Antheunis Seghers' successor in 1475: H. Fierens-Gevaert, *Histoire de la Peinture Flamande des Origines à la fin du Xve Siècle*, II (Paris, Bruxelles, 1927). Interestingly, Weale identifies this figure as Joos Willems in one source (*Hans Memling*, 37) and as Jan Floreins in another (*Bruges et ses Environs*, 176). Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 58, fn. 27; Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 154, fn. 17. The most recent suggestion is that the figure is Jacob de Ceuninc: Van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 263; and De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 156, fn. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Biblical excerpts are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1962, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.), ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger.

to him (fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> While St John gazes in the direction of the vision of the Throne of God and, perhaps, the central panel, a small stream of water spurts out from the earth beneath St John's left foot.<sup>40</sup> A span of mirror-like water reflects pieces of that same vision as well as the train of horsemen who can be seen traversing the island-like terrain, which stretches between St John and the aureole containing the vision of God.

With penknife, ink bottle and quill at the ready, St John records what he witnesses in his book. Reinforcing the fact that the episodes illustrated in the panel begin with the fourth chapter of Revelation, many pages of St John's book seem to already contain some record of his vision. Presumably, St John had previously written down the contents of chapters one through three. It is significant that Memling begins with the fourth chapter, because it is in this chapter that St John is transported to the state of being "in the spirit."<sup>41</sup> Given that the episodes Memling depicts in the panel begin with those of the fourth chapter and that the saint has already recorded a substantial amount in his book, I believe that the figure standing just within the rainbow aureole represents the voice of the fourth chapter that says to St John, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this" (Rev. 4:1). Memling has depicted an elegantly dressed figure in a green dalmatic and red deacon's stole who motions with open palm to St John, as well as to the enthroned figure within the inner rainbow aureole (fig. 6). This gesture seems to beckon to St John to "come up hither"; while the stately figure connects St John to the aureole and skilfully directs the viewer's eye into the vision of the aureole and the events that

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<sup>39</sup> It is relatively rare for St John to be depicted as a bearded youth. He is typically portrayed as either a beardless youth (by Memling's contemporaries and by Memling himself in other pieces) or as an old man with a white beard (in the Byzantine tradition). On this topic see, Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> St John's line of sight does not seem to meet directly with the vision of the Throne; it is softened by the interiority of his revelation and, as I argue in chapter five, also seeks the central image of the Virgin and Child. For further discussion see chapter five, p. 105.

take place after (“and I will show you what must take place after this”). Here begins St John’s (and the viewer’s) journey through Memling’s remarkable vision of the Apocalypse.

“At once I was in the spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated in the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald” (Rev. 4:2-3).<sup>42</sup> According to Carlos Van Hooreweder,

the rainbow ... is indeed a sign of God’s merciful will for salvation, and the confirmation of the eternal alliance between him and all living beings. (Gen: 9, 12-17) The iridescent colours of the rainbow are a token of the divine splendour. (Ap: 4, 3) The blue recalls Christ’s heavenly origin, the red announces the apocalypse while the green proclaims the advent of a new world.<sup>43</sup>

Beside the man/God is the Lamb who opens the seals that unleash the events of the Apocalypse upon the earth.<sup>44</sup> Surrounding the throne are thirteen of the twenty-four elders mentioned in the text of the Revelation, many of whom are depicted playing instruments such as the harp, flute, psaltery, portable organ, hurdy-gurdy, and the lute

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<sup>41</sup> The significance of Memling’s choice to begin the panel’s visual narrative with the fourth chapter of Revelation is further discussed in chapter five, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> The use of the aureole to separate “reality” from the “envisioned” is not uncommon in medieval art, particularly in manuscript illumination. Sixten Ringbom describes the use of this pictorial convention for the *differentiation of levels* in scenes recording dreams, visions, or thoughts. Ringbom, “Some Pictorial Conventions for the Recounting of Thoughts and Experiences in Late Medieval Art,” Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium, (Odense, 1980), 39, 52, 54-69. Predecessors of Memling’s panel that employ an aureole for the vision of the Throne include a panel painting by the Master of the Vision of St John, ca. 1450, and a lower Rhineland painting by the Master of the Coronation of the Virgin, ca. 1460. Both are now in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne. See Van der Meer, Apocalypse, 68, 73; De Vos, Hans Memling, 154, fn. 10; Hull, Hans Memling’s Paintings, 78, 80, fig. 23. The Apocalypse Altarpiece of the Victoria and Albert Museum (ca. 1400) also utilizes this device. For further discussion of this altarpiece see chapter two, pp. 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Carlos Van Hooreweder, Hans Memling in the Hospital of St. John, Bruges (Brugge, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 1993), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Please note that six of the seals have been broken, but the seventh remains intact. The reason for this will be explained below.

(Rev. 4:4).<sup>45</sup> We can imagine their eternal song, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). The “four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind” stand majestically around the enthroned one (Rev. 4:6). Before the throne “there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal” on which one sees a reflection of the tapestry of God’s throne and of the four living creatures (Rev. 4:6).

With the breaking of the seals by the Lamb the four horsemen are released. After the vision of God and St John himself, the horsemen are the most prominent figures in Memling’s panel. Seen to the left of the middle register, the first of the horsemen is seated on a white mount; he holds a bow and is depicted wearing a crown as the text specifies (Rev. 6:2) (fig. 5). He sets out “conquering and to conquer;” with his bow drawn back in readiness to fire an arrow (Rev. 6: 2). It is interesting to note that this arrow is pointed in the direction of St John; however, the reasons for this are unknown and one can only guess at its significance. With the breaking of the second seal comes a “horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword” (Rev. 6: 4). Memling’s second horseman wields a great sword with ease as his horse ominously rears up. The third rider appears on a black horse and carries a scale, which we can interpret with the aid of the voice that declares “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm the wine!” (Rev. 6:6). The breaking of the fourth seal releases the fourth and last horseman. A rider by the name of Death bestrides a pale horse and is followed by Hades. And so begins the terror of the Apocalypse on earth.

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<sup>45</sup> Carlos Van Hooreweder has connected this scene with the industry of musical instrument making in Bruges at this time. Van Hooreweder, Hans Memling in the Hospital of St. John, Bruges, 10.

Other cosmic and terrestrial disasters follow the coming of the four horsemen and are detailed by Memling trailing up into the hazy distance through to the top right-hand register of the panel (fig. 7). The earth and sky are filled with the disasters that foretell the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. Every space reveals an event; there is no escape from the fateful and impending reality of St John's divine vision.

The opening of the fifth seal, where those souls that "had been slain for the word of God" are typically seen under an altar (Rev. 6:9), is absent from Memling's panel. Coinciding with the opening of the sixth seal there is an earthquake, as well as various other celestial events. Memling depicts one of these phenomena in the top right corner of the panel. The text states that the *full* moon became like blood, but in Memling's panel we see a *crescent* moon the colour of blood. It seems that Memling has fused this passage (Rev. 6:12) with Rev. 8:12 which states that one third of the light of the moon (and the sun and stars) was darkened. This darkening of light finds visual expression in Memling's panel in the form of the crescent moon. The red colour and the crescent shape of the moon act to conflate these two passages of the text.

To the immediate right of the fourth horseman Memling has included a small rocky outcrop with two caverns in which are huddled three men. As evidenced by their attire (or lack thereof), Memling has depicted men of varying wealth and prestige, who can be taken to represent the different types of people in the caves as mentioned in Rev. 6:15: "Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains" to seek shelter from the face of God and the wrath of the Lamb.

After the breaking of the seventh seal "... another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne..." (Rev. 8:3-4). Memling has placed this angel kneeling at the altar immediately below the aureole containing the vision of God. According to the text, the angel throws fire from the censer upon the earth and the seven angels with seven trumpets sound their instruments one after the other (all seven are shown emerging from the top right of the aureole enclosing the vision of God). Although we do not actually see the angel throw the fire, this act is illustrated on the triangular cope he is wearing.<sup>46</sup> Upon the dark green interior of this angel's cloak is the miniature scene wherein the angel turns and pours the fire from his censer. The deep red of flaming chaos descends to the lower portion of the mantle. Although we can see the effects of this act upon the earth, Memling has contained this scenario to the mantle of the kneeling angel. The delimitation Memling has placed on his account of unfolding events and the foreshadowing of what is to come are further confirmed and clarified by the fact that the seventh and final seal (the breaking of which portends the episode described above) remains unbroken upon the lap of the One enthroned and the page on which St John records his visions appears just at the half-way mark of the book, effectively marking the progress of the saint's vision for the viewer.

The first two trumpet soundings bring hail and fire, the throwing of a great mountain burning with fire into the sea, and the destruction of a third of the living creatures in the sea, and a third of the ships (Rev.8:7-8). The small island immediately above the mouth of Hades at the heels of the fourth horseman is the location for the portrayal of these events. Memling has illustrated burning lands/grasses onto which fall

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<sup>46</sup> Van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 1978, 268. De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 154.

fiery streaks of hail; we can also see two troubled ships, one sinking into the depths of the sea, while a great flaming mountain tumbles into the waters beside it. With the sounding of the third trumpet the star Wormwood falls from heaven “like a blazing torch” (Rev. 8:10) tainting a third of the waters. To the right of the sinking ship we can see this streaking star falling to earth and on the brink of dropping into what appears to be a well. Dark, murky waters flow down the stream from this area of impact. A diminutive man lies beside the stream, presumably having perished after ingesting the poisoned waters, thus confirming the deathly mission of the star Wormwood.

With the trumpet of the fourth angel, Rev. 8:12 proclaims that one third of the sun and the moon, one third of the stars and one third of the day were kept from shining. Again, this is associated with the red crescent moon and is perhaps the reason for the slightly darkened, ethereal light of the panel. Just down to the left of the blood-red moon is the soaring eagle that cries “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on earth” (Rev. 8:13). The next event can be seen to occur immediately above the falling star, Wormwood. The trumpet of the fifth angel sounds and a star falls to earth. The angel is then given a key to the bottomless pit, which can be seen below the fallen star (Rev. 9:1). Memling shows the angel to the right of the fiery pit. The pit is opened and smoke “like a great furnace” is seen pouring out, darkening the sky (Rev. 9:2). One’s eye can follow the smoke trailing up through to the top right register and then arching back across the very top of the panel. From this smoke the locusts are released onto the earth on a mission to torture mankind (9:4-5). Memling has here taken extraordinary care in rendering the locusts in accordance with their description in Rev. 9:7. We can see they are “like horses arrayed for battle” with crowns of gold on their heads and human faces.

The sixth angel blows his trumpet, and then the four angels who are bound at the river Euphrates are released to kill one third of mankind (Rev. 9:14-15). They are not, however, seen in Memling's panel. The troops of the cavalry are released as well (Rev. 9:16); they are seen beyond and above the locusts on a separate and distinct stretch of land. Memling has stayed true to the description of the text in his representation of the cavalry's hideous mounts. The heads of the horses are like lions' heads and fire, smoke and sulphur spew from their mouths (Rev. 9:17). These emissions carry the three plagues that will eventually kill one third of mankind (Rev. 9:18). Also, the tails of the horses "are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound" (Rev. 9:19). This is evidenced by the half-naked fallen figures that lie beneath the feet of the cavalry.

St John sees another angel wrapped in translucent puffs of cloud (Rev. 10:1). Memling depicts this angel as if his torso is comprised entirely of clouds. The angel has a rainbow over his head, a face like the sun, and legs like twin pillars of fire. Memling's angel has a shining golden-coloured face and legs the reddish-orange colour of fire. As in the text, the angel's right foot is on the sea and his left on the land; he holds a little book open in his hand (Rev. 10:2). Above the angel's head is an enormous storm cloud with seven points of light emanating from its depths. This can be interpreted as Memling's visualization of the seven thunders, the rumblings of which St John prepares to record (Rev. 10:3-4).<sup>47</sup> The saint is stopped and told to seal up this message. A tiny figure of St John can be seen kneeling on the land, about to receive the book from the angel, after which he will be directed to eat the book, with the warning that it will be bitter to his stomach although sweet as honey in his mouth (Rev. 10:9).

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<sup>47</sup> This was pointed out by Christe, "L'Apocalypse de Memling," 1.

The eleventh chapter of Revelation, including the sounding of the seventh trumpet, is not illustrated by Memling in this panel. Rev. 12 announces the Woman Clothed with the Sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars upon her head. Rev. 12:3 introduces the “great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads”. Memling has placed these figures at the very top and centre of the panel. The viewer can see the dragon’s tail sweeping down one third of the stars from heaven (Rev. 12:4). He is purposefully positioned before the Woman Clothed with the Sun so that he might devour her male child. The child is illustrated by Memling to be in the arms of the Woman, just as an angel comes for him. This presumably is the artist’s visual expression of the text’s statement that the “child was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev. 12:5).

The top right corner of the panel reveals the war between Michael, his angels and the dragon (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is then thrown down with his own angels and can be seen tumbling to the earth along the right side of the panel (Rev. 12:8). On earth the dragon pursues the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:13). Memling has painted a rounded mountainous island to the right of the massive angel, and a rainbow above his head. The dragon and the Woman are seen hurtling toward this island just at the moment that the Woman is given two wings of the eagle to aid her escape to the wilderness (Rev. 12:14). This pursuit can be observed just above the right of the island and immediately right of the large angel. Just behind the rainbow of the angel with the legs of fire is the dragon that stands on the sand of the sea (Rev. 12:17), and before him the other beast rises out of the sea (Rev. 13:1). Memling has illustrated a sand bar on which the dragon stands facing the beast. The newly-risen beast has ten horns, seven heads and ten diadems

upon his horns. The beast “was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth” (Rev. 13:2). Men worshipped the dragon and the beast. Further, authority over every tribe, people and nation was to given to the beast (Rev. 13:4-7). Memling does not depict the third beast, nor does he illustrate episodes of Revelation after the thirteenth chapter.<sup>48</sup>

Memling’s meticulous rendering of the Apocalypse in the *St John Altarpiece* undoubtedly indicates an intense interest in and consciousness of the individual episodes of St John’s prophetic revelation. However, as we shall see, the diminutive scale in which the majority of the episodes are rendered in comparison to the sizeable figure of St John, as well as their borderless and seemingly haphazard placement upon the landscape of the saint’s vision, indicate a striking departure from the celebrated medieval tradition of the Apocalypse. Memling’s truncated and miniaturistic depiction of the Apocalypse has long been considered to be an enigmatic “one-off,” but when examined in the context of the complex visual cultures of the Apocalypse and those of its region it becomes apparent that it heralded a key transition in the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse in Bruges.

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<sup>48</sup> See chapter five, esp. pp. 89-91, for a discussion of how Memling’s omission of specific Apocalypse episodes impacts how the altarpiece communicates meaning and what that meaning might be. See also Christie, “L’Apocalypse de Memling.”

**Chapter One: A Description of the Apocalypse Panel and  
the *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist***

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Bruges established itself as an important business centre and a key international market within Western Europe. However, as the fifteenth century came to a close the city was confronted with political upheaval as well as waves of devastating plague. Bruges was historically a powerful city within Flanders, the strongest principality of the Low Countries during the late Middle Ages. Hans Memling created his altarpiece for the hospital church of Sint-Janshospitaal in Bruges (fig. 1). This city, with its vibrant urban commercial society, provides the backdrop for the successful career of Memling, who was a highly esteemed painter and member of society. The artist completed the commission of the *St John Altarpiece* during the most productive years of his career, from 1475 to 1480. He enjoyed the extensive patronage of the nobility, clergy, foreign merchants and dignitaries, and, in particular, of the Sint-Janshospitaal community.

The installation of Memling's triptych in 1479 coincided with the construction (ca.1473-74) of a new apse on the east end of the twelfth-century hospital chapel. The piece, one of four of Memling's works requested by the hospital, was commissioned by donors who are represented on the exterior wings of the altarpiece: these are the master and prioress of the hospital, as well as other important men and women in the hierarchy of the hospital. The triptych remained in the high altar of the hospital at Sint-Janshospitaal until 1637, when the church underwent further renovations. To this day it remains in its original frame and is situated in the recently restored hospital building, now part of the Memling Museum in Bruges. To better understand the nature of the

iconographic subtleties fundamental to our reading of this object in subsequent chapters of this thesis, a full description follows.

### *The Exterior Panels*

Each of the two external panels presents two kneeling donors with their respective patron saints, all standing within sculpted stone niches (fig. 2). In the left panel kneel the two hospital brothers, Jacob de Ceuninc and Antheunis Seghers, master of the hospital, with their patrons saints, St James the Great and St Anthony the Great, respectively. The right panel depicts two hospital sisters, Agnes Casembrood, prioress of the hospital, and Clara van Hulsen, and their patron saints, St Agnes and St Clare.<sup>31</sup> The two groups of figures face the central division of the altarpiece.

### *The Central and Left Interior Panels*

The central panel of Memling's triptych measures 173.6 by 173.7 cm and portrays the Virgin and Child surrounded by saints and angels, following the manner of a *Sacra Conversazione* (fig. 3).<sup>32</sup> The enthroned Virgin serenely reaches her left hand to turn the page of the manuscript she is contemplating, which is held by an attendant angel dressed in pale blue.<sup>33</sup> Above the Virgin's head two angels hold her heavenly crown, in preparation for her celestial coronation. To the left of the Virgin kneels an elaborately garbed angel who plays upon a small portable organ as she looks smilingly in the direction of the Christ Child. The Child slips a ring onto the finger of St Catherine, seen

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<sup>31</sup> See chapter four for further description of these panels as related to hospital iconography and context. See chapter five, esp. pp. 106-09, for an analysis of how the exterior panels are linked to the interior of the *St John Altarpiece* in terms of both meaning and contemporary notions of vision.

<sup>32</sup> For information on the possible precedents for the central panel see, for example: De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 154, fn. 9; Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 59-62; and Friedrich Winkler, *Das Werk des Hugo Van der Goes*, (Berlin, 1964), 176. Memling repeats the composition of the central panel in the *Triptych of John Donne* (ca. 1480), now in the National Gallery, London; and the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Catherine and Barbara and Two Musical Angels* (ca. 1479), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 154, 166-67, 180-83.

kneeling atop the broken wheel and sword, both symbolic of her martyrdom.

Interestingly, this musical angel has the most animated face of all the figures in this central panel, if not the entire altarpiece. St John the Baptist and the Lamb stand behind and slightly to the left of St Catherine. With his right hand St John indicates in the direction of the Christ Child and the *Mystic Marriage*. St Barbara, who is reading and contemplating a breviary, kneels to the right of the Virgin. Behind the shoulders of St Barbara, and at the right of the panel, is depicted her attribute, a miniature tower in the form of a monstrance. Within a window of this tower the viewer can glimpse the Eucharistic Host under a glass dome atop a crescent moon. St John the Evangelist stands behind St Barbara and the angel who holds the book for the Virgin. As he holds the poisoned chalice, in which a serpent can be seen, St John makes a blessing with his right hand over the cup.

Scenes from the lives of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist appear in the background beyond the sacred gathering and on the historiated capitals of the four columns that enclose this central scene. Depicted on the two capitals above St John the Baptist are (from left) Zacharias and the Vision of the Angel, in which the Baptist's birth is announced (Luke 1: 11-20), and the saint's birth itself (Luke 1: 57). On the two capitals above St John the Evangelist we see represented the resurrection of Drusiana (Acts of John 80) and the episode of the poisoned wine. Behind the Baptist, in the background to his immediate left, is the scene of his arrest (Matthew 14: 3-4 and Mark 6: 17-20). Above this scene is a depiction of the *Sermon* (Luke 3: 1-17), and above this again, the saint is shown praying in the wilderness (Luke 1: 80). In the top narrative level of the

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<sup>33</sup> Blum suggests the Virgin is reading the Book of Wisdom; see "The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns," 89.

background, to the immediate right of St John the Baptist, is the burning of his body; below this, the decomposing head of St John rests within a wall niche.<sup>34</sup>

The left panel of the triptych measures 176 by 78.9 cm and includes further scenes from the life of St John the Baptist (fig. 4). The saint's gruesome death is depicted in the immediate foreground. After cleaving off the saint's head, the executioner, with his back to the viewer, turns and presents it to Salome who receives it on a plate, her eyes cast aside from the grisly sight. St John's lifeless body falls at an angle toward the viewer revealing hands clasped in a prayerful gesture, while the saint's life-blood spurts in gleaming rivulets from his severed neck. In the tower immediately above and left of this scene, Herod watches Salome, daughter of Herodias, dance (to a trumpet and fife) during a banquet (Matthew 14:6-9, Mark 6:21-28). Outside and to the right are two of St John's disciples, St John the Apostle and Andrew. On a forested knoll in the background above, seen in miniature scale, we note the scene of *St John the Baptist answering the questions of the priests and Levites* (John 1:19-23). Down and to the right, the baptism of Christ occurs against a background of crystal blue water (Matthew 3:13-16). Across the water to the right, the portrayal of the *Ecce Agnus Dei* is witnessed by the saint's first two followers (John 1:29). God the Father is depicted at the very top of the panel in a burst of cloud and sunlight, mirroring the right panel's image of the Woman Clothed with the Sun. The left panel is believed to be inspired by Rogier van der Weyden's retable of St John the Baptist (Staatliche Museen, Berlin).

In the central panel, to the left of St John the Evangelist's head, is a contemporary scene which portrays the town crane, the *Kraanplaats*, and hospital brothers on the

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<sup>34</sup> There is no biblical source for these episodes. They are discussed in the Golden Legend. See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, vol. 2 (Princeton, 1993), 135-38.

Kraanplein, or Crane Square (then situated opposite the Church of St John, but no longer in existence). This contemporary scene is ingeniously separated from scenes of biblical times by a colonnade.<sup>35</sup> At the top level of the background narrative, to the right of the colonnade and the Evangelist, is a grey church in which the saint baptizes a devotee.<sup>36</sup> Below this St John is led to the boat that will give him passage to Patmos, the site of his revelatory vision. Underneath this scene is the portrayal of the miraculous incident of the Evangelist's submersion in boiling oil and subsequent survival. Further below these narrative scenes is the portrait of a single figure in Augustinian habit, which appears to observe and witness the central scene. The identity of this figure has never been conclusively confirmed.<sup>37</sup>

#### *The Apocalypse Panel*<sup>38</sup>

The right panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, measuring 175.9 by 78.9 cm, features a youthful, yet bearded St John serenely seated on the island of Patmos, as he witnesses and records his vision (or revelation) of the events of the Apocalypse as they are revealed

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<sup>35</sup> Hull recognized the change of scene from contemporary Bruges "to first century Rome" and noted that the building in the far distance resembles the Coliseum. Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 58, fn. 26.

<sup>36</sup> De Vos believes it is the philosopher Crato that is being baptized in this scene. However, Coleman argues that this is not part of the saint's legend and that it represents St John's general "role in the founding of churches in Asia as well as his conversions and baptisms before he was exiled to Patmos." Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 113, fn. 31.

<sup>37</sup> There are a number of theories about who this figure is. Those who have suggested that the mysterious figure is the artist himself include L. Kämmer, *Memling* (Bielefeld, Leipzig, 1899); and K. B. McFarlane, *Hans Memling* (Oxford, 1971). Others have suggested that this figure is Joos Willems, who was in charge of measuring wine from 1467 to 1488 and was Antheunis Seghers' successor in 1475: H. Fierens-Gevaert, *Histoire de la Peinture Flamande des Origines à la fin du Xve Siècle*, II (Paris, Bruxelles, 1927). Interestingly, Weale identifies this figure as Joos Willems in one source (*Hans Memling*, 37) and as Jan Floreins in another (*Bruges et ses Environs*, 176). Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 58, fn. 27; Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 154, fn. 17. The most recent suggestion is that the figure is Jacob de Ceuninc: Van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 263; and De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 156, fn. 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Biblical excerpts are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1962, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.), ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger.

to him (fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> While St John gazes in the direction of the vision of the Throne of God and, perhaps, the central panel, a small stream of water spurts out from the earth beneath St John's left foot.<sup>40</sup> A span of mirror-like water reflects pieces of that same vision as well as the train of horsemen who can be seen traversing the island-like terrain, which stretches between St John and the aureole containing the vision of God.

With penknife, ink bottle and quill at the ready, St John records what he witnesses in his book. Reinforcing the fact that the episodes illustrated in the panel begin with the fourth chapter of Revelation, many pages of St John's book seem to already contain some record of his vision. Presumably, St John had previously written down the contents of chapters one through three. It is significant that Memling begins with the fourth chapter, because it is in this chapter that St John is transported to the state of being "in the spirit."<sup>41</sup> Given that the episodes Memling depicts in the panel begin with those of the fourth chapter and that the saint has already recorded a substantial amount in his book, I believe that the figure standing just within the rainbow aureole represents the voice of the fourth chapter that says to St John, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this" (Rev. 4:1). Memling has depicted an elegantly dressed figure in a green dalmatic and red deacon's stole who motions with open palm to St John, as well as to the enthroned figure within the inner rainbow aureole (fig. 6). This gesture seems to beckon to St John to "come up hither"; while the stately figure connects St John to the aureole and skilfully directs the viewer's eye into the vision of the aureole and the events that

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<sup>39</sup> It is relatively rare for St John to be depicted as a bearded youth. He is typically portrayed as either a beardless youth (by Memling's contemporaries and by Memling himself in other pieces) or as an old man with a white beard (in the Byzantine tradition). On this topic see, Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> St John's line of sight does not seem to meet directly with the vision of the Throne; it is softened by the interiority of his revelation and, as I argue in chapter five, also seeks the central image of the Virgin and Child. For further discussion see chapter five, p. 105.

take place after (“and I will show you what must take place after this”). Here begins St John’s (and the viewer’s) journey through Memling’s remarkable vision of the Apocalypse.

“At once I was in the spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated in the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald” (Rev. 4:2-3).<sup>42</sup> According to Carlos Van Hooreweder,

the rainbow ... is indeed a sign of God’s merciful will for salvation, and the confirmation of the eternal alliance between him and all living beings. (Gen: 9, 12-17) The iridescent colours of the rainbow are a token of the divine splendour. (Ap: 4, 3) The blue recalls Christ’s heavenly origin, the red announces the apocalypse while the green proclaims the advent of a new world.<sup>43</sup>

Beside the man/God is the Lamb who opens the seals that unleash the events of the Apocalypse upon the earth.<sup>44</sup> Surrounding the throne are thirteen of the twenty-four elders mentioned in the text of the Revelation, many of whom are depicted playing instruments such as the harp, flute, psaltery, portable organ, hurdy-gurdy, and the lute

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<sup>41</sup> The significance of Memling’s choice to begin the panel’s visual narrative with the fourth chapter of Revelation is further discussed in chapter five, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> The use of the aureole to separate “reality” from the “envisioned” is not uncommon in medieval art, particularly in manuscript illumination. Sixten Ringbom describes the use of this pictorial convention for the *differentiation of levels* in scenes recording dreams, visions, or thoughts. Ringbom, “Some Pictorial Conventions for the Recounting of Thoughts and Experiences in Late Medieval Art,” Medieval Iconography and Narrative: A Symposium, (Odense, 1980), 39, 52, 54-69. Predecessors of Memling’s panel that employ an aureole for the vision of the Throne include a panel painting by the Master of the Vision of St John, ca. 1450, and a lower Rhineland painting by the Master of the Coronation of the Virgin, ca. 1460. Both are now in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne. See Van der Meer, Apocalypse, 68, 73; De Vos, Hans Memling, 154, fn. 10; Hull, Hans Memling’s Paintings, 78, 80, fig. 23. The Apocalypse Altarpiece of the Victoria and Albert Museum (ca. 1400) also utilizes this device. For further discussion of this altarpiece see chapter two, pp. 34-35.

<sup>43</sup> Carlos Van Hooreweder, Hans Memling in the Hospital of St. John, Bruges (Brugge, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 1993), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Please note that six of the seals have been broken, but the seventh remains intact. The reason for this will be explained below.

(Rev. 4:4).<sup>45</sup> We can imagine their eternal song, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). The “four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind” stand majestically around the enthroned one (Rev. 4:6). Before the throne “there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal” on which one sees a reflection of the tapestry of God’s throne and of the four living creatures (Rev. 4:6).

With the breaking of the seals by the Lamb the four horsemen are released. After the vision of God and St John himself, the horsemen are the most prominent figures in Memling’s panel. Seen to the left of the middle register, the first of the horsemen is seated on a white mount; he holds a bow and is depicted wearing a crown as the text specifies (Rev. 6:2) (fig. 5). He sets out “conquering and to conquer;” with his bow drawn back in readiness to fire an arrow (Rev. 6: 2). It is interesting to note that this arrow is pointed in the direction of St John; however, the reasons for this are unknown and one can only guess at its significance. With the breaking of the second seal comes a “horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword” (Rev. 6: 4). Memling’s second horseman wields a great sword with ease as his horse ominously rears up. The third rider appears on a black horse and carries a scale, which we can interpret with the aid of the voice that declares “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm the wine!” (Rev. 6:6). The breaking of the fourth seal releases the fourth and last horseman. A rider by the name of Death bestrides a pale horse and is followed by Hades. And so begins the terror of the Apocalypse on earth.

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<sup>45</sup> Carlos Van Hooreweder has connected this scene with the industry of musical instrument making in Bruges at this time. Van Hooreweder, Hans Memling in the Hospital of St. John, Bruges, 10.

Other cosmic and terrestrial disasters follow the coming of the four horsemen and are detailed by Memling trailing up into the hazy distance through to the top right-hand register of the panel (fig. 7). The earth and sky are filled with the disasters that foretell the end of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. Every space reveals an event; there is no escape from the fateful and impending reality of St John's divine vision.

The opening of the fifth seal, where those souls that "had been slain for the word of God" are typically seen under an altar (Rev. 6:9), is absent from Memling's panel. Coinciding with the opening of the sixth seal there is an earthquake, as well as various other celestial events. Memling depicts one of these phenomena in the top right corner of the panel. The text states that the *full* moon became like blood, but in Memling's panel we see a *crescent* moon the colour of blood. It seems that Memling has fused this passage (Rev. 6:12) with Rev. 8:12 which states that one third of the light of the moon (and the sun and stars) was darkened. This darkening of light finds visual expression in Memling's panel in the form of the crescent moon. The red colour and the crescent shape of the moon act to conflate these two passages of the text.

To the immediate right of the fourth horseman Memling has included a small rocky outcrop with two caverns in which are huddled three men. As evidenced by their attire (or lack thereof), Memling has depicted men of varying wealth and prestige, who can be taken to represent the different types of people in the caves as mentioned in Rev. 6:15: "Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains" to seek shelter from the face of God and the wrath of the Lamb.

After the breaking of the seventh seal "... another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne..." (Rev. 8:3-4). Memling has placed this angel kneeling at the altar immediately below the aureole containing the vision of God. According to the text, the angel throws fire from the censer upon the earth and the seven angels with seven trumpets sound their instruments one after the other (all seven are shown emerging from the top right of the aureole enclosing the vision of God). Although we do not actually see the angel throw the fire, this act is illustrated on the triangular cope he is wearing.<sup>46</sup> Upon the dark green interior of this angel's cloak is the miniature scene wherein the angel turns and pours the fire from his censer. The deep red of flaming chaos descends to the lower portion of the mantle. Although we can see the effects of this act upon the earth, Memling has contained this scenario to the mantle of the kneeling angel. The delimitation Memling has placed on his account of unfolding events and the foreshadowing of what is to come are further confirmed and clarified by the fact that the seventh and final seal (the breaking of which portends the episode described above) remains unbroken upon the lap of the One enthroned and the page on which St John records his visions appears just at the half-way mark of the book, effectively marking the progress of the saint's vision for the viewer.

The first two trumpet soundings bring hail and fire, the throwing of a great mountain burning with fire into the sea, and the destruction of a third of the living creatures in the sea, and a third of the ships (Rev.8:7-8). The small island immediately above the mouth of Hades at the heels of the fourth horseman is the location for the portrayal of these events. Memling has illustrated burning lands/grasses onto which fall

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<sup>46</sup> Van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 1978, 268. De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 154.

fiery streaks of hail; we can also see two troubled ships, one sinking into the depths of the sea, while a great flaming mountain tumbles into the waters beside it. With the sounding of the third trumpet the star Wormwood falls from heaven “like a blazing torch” (Rev.8:10) tainting a third of the waters. To the right of the sinking ship we can see this streaking star falling to earth and on the brink of dropping into what appears to be a well. Dark, murky waters flow down the stream from this area of impact. A diminutive man lies beside the stream, presumably having perished after ingesting the poisoned waters, thus confirming the deathly mission of the star Wormwood.

With the trumpet of the fourth angel, Rev. 8:12 proclaims that one third of the sun and the moon, one third of the stars and one third of the day were kept from shining. Again, this is associated with the red crescent moon and is perhaps the reason for the slightly darkened, ethereal light of the panel. Just down to the left of the blood-red moon is the soaring eagle that cries “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on earth” (Rev. 8:13). The next event can be seen to occur immediately above the falling star, Wormwood. The trumpet of the fifth angel sounds and a star falls to earth. The angel is then given a key to the bottomless pit, which can be seen below the fallen star (Rev. 9:1). Memling shows the angel to the right of the fiery pit. The pit is opened and smoke “like a great furnace” is seen pouring out, darkening the sky (Rev. 9:2). One’s eye can follow the smoke trailing up through to the top right register and then arching back across the very top of the panel. From this smoke the locusts are released onto the earth on a mission to torture mankind (9:4-5). Memling has here taken extraordinary care in rendering the locusts in accordance with their description in Rev. 9:7. We can see they are “like horses arrayed for battle” with crowns of gold on their heads and human faces.

The sixth angel blows his trumpet, and then the four angels who are bound at the river Euphrates are released to kill one third of mankind (Rev. 9:14-15). They are not, however, seen in Memling's panel. The troops of the cavalry are released as well (Rev. 9:16); they are seen beyond and above the locusts on a separate and distinct stretch of land. Memling has stayed true to the description of the text in his representation of the cavalry's hideous mounts. The heads of the horses are like lions' heads and fire, smoke and sulphur spew from their mouths (Rev. 9:17). These emissions carry the three plagues that will eventually kill one third of mankind (Rev. 9:18). Also, the tails of the horses "are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound" (Rev. 9:19). This is evidenced by the half-naked fallen figures that lie beneath the feet of the cavalry.

St John sees another angel wrapped in translucent puffs of cloud (Rev. 10:1). Memling depicts this angel as if his torso is comprised entirely of clouds. The angel has a rainbow over his head, a face like the sun, and legs like twin pillars of fire. Memling's angel has a shining golden-coloured face and legs the reddish-orange colour of fire. As in the text, the angel's right foot is on the sea and his left on the land; he holds a little book open in his hand (Rev. 10:2). Above the angel's head is an enormous storm cloud with seven points of light emanating from its depths. This can be interpreted as Memling's visualization of the seven thunders, the rumblings of which St John prepares to record (Rev. 10:3-4).<sup>47</sup> The saint is stopped and told to seal up this message. A tiny figure of St John can be seen kneeling on the land, about to receive the book from the angel, after which he will be directed to eat the book, with the warning that it will be bitter to his stomach although sweet as honey in his mouth (Rev. 10:9).

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<sup>47</sup> This was pointed out by Christe, "L'Apocalypse de Memling," 1.

The eleventh chapter of Revelation, including the sounding of the seventh trumpet, is not illustrated by Memling in this panel. Rev. 12 announces the Woman Clothed with the Sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars upon her head. Rev. 12:3 introduces the “great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads”. Memling has placed these figures at the very top and centre of the panel. The viewer can see the dragon’s tail sweeping down one third of the stars from heaven (Rev. 12:4). He is purposefully positioned before the Woman Clothed with the Sun so that he might devour her male child. The child is illustrated by Memling to be in the arms of the Woman, just as an angel comes for him. This presumably is the artist’s visual expression of the text’s statement that the “child was caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev. 12:5).

The top right corner of the panel reveals the war between Michael, his angels and the dragon (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is then thrown down with his own angels and can be seen tumbling to the earth along the right side of the panel (Rev. 12:8). On earth the dragon pursues the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev. 12:13). Memling has painted a rounded mountainous island to the right of the massive angel, and a rainbow above his head. The dragon and the Woman are seen hurtling toward this island just at the moment that the Woman is given two wings of the eagle to aid her escape to the wilderness (Rev. 12:14). This pursuit can be observed just above the right of the island and immediately right of the large angel. Just behind the rainbow of the angel with the legs of fire is the dragon that stands on the sand of the sea (Rev. 12:17), and before him the other beast rises out of the sea (Rev. 13:1). Memling has illustrated a sand bar on which the dragon stands facing the beast. The newly-risen beast has ten horns, seven heads and ten diadems

upon his horns. The beast “was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth” (Rev. 13:2). Men worshipped the dragon and the beast. Further, authority over every tribe, people and nation was to given to the beast (Rev. 13:4-7). Memling does not depict the third beast, nor does he illustrate episodes of Revelation after the thirteenth chapter.<sup>48</sup>

Memling’s meticulous rendering of the Apocalypse in the *St John Altarpiece* undoubtedly indicates an intense interest in and consciousness of the individual episodes of St John’s prophetic revelation. However, as we shall see, the diminutive scale in which the majority of the episodes are rendered in comparison to the sizeable figure of St John, as well as their borderless and seemingly haphazard placement upon the landscape of the saint’s vision, indicate a striking departure from the celebrated medieval tradition of the Apocalypse. Memling’s truncated and miniaturistic depiction of the Apocalypse has long been considered to be an enigmatic “one-off,” but when examined in the context of the complex visual cultures of the Apocalypse and those of its region it becomes apparent that it heralded a key transition in the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse in Bruges.

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<sup>48</sup> See chapter five, esp. pp. 89-91, for a discussion of how Memling’s omission of specific Apocalypse episodes impacts how the altarpiece communicates meaning and what that meaning might be. See also Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling.”

## Chapter Two:

### The Condensation and Abbreviation of the Late-Medieval Northern Apocalypse

Hans Memling's Apocalypse panel is noted for its serene and contemplative portrayal of the episodes of Revelation within a single, undivided narrative space, an approach unparalleled in panel painting. One reason for this tranquil mood is that the terrifying episodes are quietly rendered in miniature scale in comparison to the dominating presence of St John and the Vision of the Throne. The gruesome influence of the earthly manifestations of the Apocalypse is relegated to a unified background, effectively unfolding as a single episode with neither frame nor border separating the action. Although there are few, if any, substantiated precedents for Memling's panel, the incredibly rich and complex medieval Apocalypse tradition introduced in this chapter affords much insight into both Memling's panel and the *St John Altarpiece*. As we will see, the unique narrative composition of the Apocalypse panel points to a shift in the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse in late-medieval Bruges. Later chapters will demonstrate that this shift accentuated a contemplative and meditative tone characteristic of contemporary northern notions of private devotional experience and practice. Within the specific socio-political, eschatological and liturgical context of the Sint-Janshospitaal, the *St John Altarpiece* can be seen to function as a framework of religious instruction for death. The calm and placid manner in which Memling has depicted the Apocalypse further indicates how this didactic framework functioned within the context of fifteenth-century regional notions of contemplation and meditation. Seen within this context, the Apocalypse panel provides insight into the meaning and reception of the *St John Altarpiece* and the Apocalypse in late-medieval Bruges. The *St John Altarpiece* establishes a revelatory, "multi-panel" landscape in which the path toward salvation is

distinguished through the communication of Bruges' contemporary notions of death, the afterlife, the Apocalypse, and private devotional experience and practice.

In order to expose the reasons and motivations behind the meaning of function of the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece*, it is first necessary to look at the medieval visual Apocalypse tradition, as further investigation reveals that there are narrative and compositional elements of Memling's panel that suggest a departure from the usual treatment of the late-medieval Apocalypse and a link with regional visual cultures. These visual and narrative elements of Memling's panel include the condensation of the text of Revelation into a distinctive digest of the Apocalypse that is not subject to a strict sequential structure. The predominant tendency toward the detailed documentation and compartmentalization of Apocalypse episodes in the medieval Apocalypse monumental and manuscript painting tradition stands in marked contrast to Memling's panel. The artist eschews this dominant tradition and places the Apocalypse episodes (comparatively) freely upon the landscape of Patmos without utilizing the customary borders or frames.

This chapter will first examine extant examples of the medieval monumental Apocalypse tradition, including northern wall and panel painting. This critical survey serves as an aid in understanding the novelty of Memling's panel within the context of monumental expressions of the Apocalypse. We will also consider the medieval Apocalypse manuscript tradition including the renowned Anglo-French Apocalypse tradition and, perhaps more importantly, the Flemish and Netherlandish manuscript and block-book tradition. In contrast to the Anglo-French tradition, extant Flemish and Netherlandish examples display a characteristic interest in the abridgement of visual

Apocalypse cycles that continues into the sixteenth century. Memling's acclaimed pictorial précis of Revelation indicates a key transition in the conception of the pictorial space of the Apocalypse and the meaning and function of the Apocalypse in late-medieval and early-Renaissance Bruges.

*The Apocalypse in Late-Medieval Monumental Painting*

The late-medieval visualization of the Apocalypse in Northern Europe occurs primarily in illuminated manuscripts.<sup>49</sup> Because of the limited number of extant examples, monumental painting, specifically panel painting, has played a comparatively minor role in the scholarly discussion devoted to the development of Apocalypse imagery. Although monumental painting has not figured largely in art historical discourse concerning late-medieval apocalypse visual traditions, it is more than apparent that the genre is intimately connected with that of manuscript illustration. In fact, the Apocalypse monumental painting tradition is almost entirely reliant upon the models set forth by the Anglo-French Apocalypse tradition, creating a veritable “manuscript matrix” of Revelation.<sup>50</sup> The compartmentalized and sequential nature of Apocalypse illustration is bound by the text in both miniature and monumental painting, and is consequently distinctly discernible in late-medieval wall painting and panel painting.<sup>51</sup> According to Michael Camille, “Wall paintings and altarpieces tend to retain the compartmentalized

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<sup>49</sup> Early medieval manifestations of the Apocalypse occur chiefly in frescoes, mosaic, gothic portals and in early illuminated manuscripts. See Christe, *L'Apocalypse de Jean : Sens et Développements de ses Visions Synthétiques* (Paris, 1996) and “The Apocalypse in Monumental Art of the Eleventh through Thirteenth Centuries,” *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 234-58; Dale Kinney, “The Apocalypse in Early Christian Monumental Decoration,” *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 200-16.

<sup>50</sup> See the introduction to this thesis, fn. 8.

<sup>51</sup> We also see this trend in Gothic stained glass depicting scenes from the Apocalypse. For example, the stained glass windows at Bourges cathedral (1210-15), Lyon cathedral (ca. 1200), Chartres cathedral (ca. 1250), Sainte-Chapelle in Paris (late-fifteenth-century renovation), and Auxerre cathedral (1222-35). The east window of York cathedral (1405-06) is the largest extant Apocalypse stained glass cycle, totaling eighty-one scenes. Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 169-70.

and abstract forms of the thirteenth century because they have to carry the pictorial message to viewers a long distance away.”<sup>52</sup> This preservation of the tendency to partition can be attributed to the dominance of the conventions of Apocalypse miniature painting in the late-medieval monumental visual tradition of the Apocalypse. In order to better understand Memling’s place within the tradition of monumental painting of the Apocalypse, it is necessary to examine the key northern examples that have survived.

*Northern Wall Painting: Westminster Abbey Chapter House Apocalypse*

The chapter house of Westminster Abbey contains the only wall paintings of the Apocalypse in England, but they have been the focus of only a few studies (fig. 8).<sup>53</sup> These wall paintings, originally numbering ninety-six in total, date to approximately 1400 and were gifted in part by John of Northampton, a monk who resided and served at the abbey from 1372 to 1404.<sup>54</sup> The paintings exhibit the characteristic compartmentalized and framed episodes of the Apocalypse, accompanied by rubrics, and include a paraphrased gloss (Berengaudus of Ferrières’ Apocalypse commentary, the

<sup>52</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 285.

<sup>53</sup> See Paul Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power, 1200-1400* (New Haven, 1995), 187-89, 192-93, figs. 250-51; and Brian Turner, “The Patronage of John of Northampton,” *British Archaeological Association Journal*, 138 (1985), 89-100. For a discussion of the possible models for these paintings and associated manuscripts see J. G. Noppen, “The Westminster Apocalypse and its Source,” *Burlington Magazine* 61 (1932), 146-59. See the following cited in Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 191, fn. 176: *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments: An Inventory of the Historical Monuments of London, vol. I* (London, 1924), 9, 79-81, pls. 13-15; Christel Hansen, *Die Wandmalereien des Kapitelhauses der Westminsterabtei London* (Würzburg, 1939), 14-27; David Park, “Wall Painting,” *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200-1400*, ed. Jonathan Alexander and Paul Binski (London, 1987), 125-30. Wall paintings of the Apocalypse outside of England include: the Cimabue frescoes in the upper church of San Francesco in Assisi, ca. 1277-80 (see Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 194, fn. 191-93; van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, fig. 117); the frescoes at the Padua Baptistery by Giusto de Menabuoi, 1378 (see Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 198; van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 193-96, figs. 127-29); Apocalypse frescoes by Giotto in S. Chiara commissioned by Robert of Anjou, no longer extant (see Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 194-95, fn. 194); and the frescoes at the imperial palace of Karlstejn, Bohemia in the St Mary Chapel (ca. 1357-61) (see Turner, “The Patronage of John of Northampton,” 96; Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 193, fn. 187; van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, fig. 118). For a complete listing of trecento Italian cycles see Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 194-96.

<sup>54</sup> Noppen, “The Westminster Apocalypse and its Source,” 146.

*Expositio super septem visiones libri Apocalypsis*, ca. 860), which guide the viewer in his/her interpretation of the visual programme.<sup>55</sup> Each narrative compartment measures approximately twenty-five inches square, including the text that is presented upon a fictive *trompe l'oeil* scroll. The wall paintings employ the same device of alternating background colour as can be observed in the renowned Angers Apocalypse tapestry.<sup>56</sup> The background of the Westminster paintings alternates between shades of red and white.<sup>57</sup>

### *Panel Painting*

Unlike other examples from the monumental arts such as wall painting and tapestry, the visual expression of the Apocalypse episodes themselves is extremely rare in panel painting. More typical of panel painting is the depiction of the Last Judgement, as we see in the following northern examples: Jan van Eyck's *Crucifixion and Last Judgement* diptych, ca. 1438-40 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), Rogier van

<sup>55</sup> The *Expositio super septem visiones libri Apocalypsis* will hereafter be referred to as the *Expositio*. For a transcription of the Berengaudus gloss see Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, vol. 17, *Patrologiae Cursus Completes* (Paris), 763-970.

<sup>56</sup> Turner, "The Patronage of John of Northampton," 98.

<sup>57</sup> The Angers Apocalypse tapestry in the Angers Musée des Tapisseries was commissioned by Duke Louis I of Anjou on the occasion of his marriage. This significant and substantial tapestry dates to ca. 1377-79 and consists of eighty-four separate Apocalypse scenes. It is worth noting here as it is similarly inspired by manuscript models of visual Apocalypse cycles. The impressive size of the tapestry permits a marvellous clarity and "readability," which is further enhanced by the contrast between a dark indigo-blue, sometimes deep red background serving to outline the figures and architecture (fig. 9). While "reading" the great tapestry the viewer becomes aware of the constant presence of St John, who is commonly depicted on the outskirts of each scene, witnessing the episodes unfold simultaneously with the viewer. Cartoons by the Bruges painter Jean Bondol inspired the design and iconography of the tapestry, and Nicholas Bataille of Paris financed the weaving. It was formerly thought that Bataille's workshop had woven the tapestry. Current literature now indicates that he financed the project, as he was both a banker and a merchant. See Peter K. Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 191, fn. 179; Fabienne Joubert, "L'Apocalypse d'Angers et les débuts de la tapisseries histories," *Bulletin Monumental* 139 (1981), 125-40; Pierre-Marie Auzas et al., *L'Apocalypse d'Angers: Chef-d'Oeuvre de la Tapisserie Médiévale* (Fribourg, 1985). Bondol's cartoons, and thus the tapestry, are based upon two Anglo-French Apocalypse manuscripts: a thirteenth-century English Apocalypse (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr.403) and an early-fourteenth-century French Apocalypse (Paris, B.N. MS lat. 14410). George Henderson, "The Manuscript Model of the Angers 'Apocalypse' Tapestries," *Burlington Magazine*, 127 (1985), 209-18. The stylistic and compositional similarities discussed by Henderson elucidate the important connection between the Anglo-French miniature painting tradition and the Angers tapestry.

der Weyden's *Last Judgement Altarpiece*, ca. 1445-48 (Beaune, Musée d'Hôtel Dieu), and Memling's *Last Judgement Altarpiece*, ca. 1467-73 (Gdansk, Muzeum Narodowe). Often, the Apocalypse is only referred to in an extremely abbreviated fashion in panel painting, offering St John as a single standing figure in the wing of an altarpiece, with little evidence of his revelatory vision. Such is the case with the right wing of Memling's *Triptych of John Donne*, ca. 1480 (National Gallery, London), which shows St John standing alone in a corridor, holding the poisoned chalice.<sup>58</sup> Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432 (Ghent, Cathedral of St Bavo), exemplifies the prominent use of a single episode from Revelation (the *Adoration of the Lamb*) in an altarpiece. As in wall painting, when the Apocalypse is fully visualized in panel painting it is frequently with the use of a highly structured and chronological (according to the order in which the saint's visions were revealed to him) composition.

*The Apocalypse Altarpiece of the Victoria and Albert Museum*

The early-fifteenth-century German Apocalypse altarpiece of the Victoria and Albert Museum is a rare and exceptional example of Apocalypse illustration in the north in the later Middle Ages (fig. 10). The altarpiece, executed in tempera on panel, was produced by the workshop of Master Bertram for the Franciscan Friary of St Mary Magdalen in Hamburg, Germany and dates to approximately 1400-10.<sup>59</sup> Although the altarpiece is not in its original condition, forty-five scenes remain, arranged in a grid-like composition on both the inner wings and central panel of the triptych. These episodes detail sixteen of the twenty-two chapters of Revelation; each is placed within a framed

<sup>58</sup> The left wing contains St John the Baptist and the central panel, St Catherine and St Barbara with patrons. See De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 180-83, cat.39.

<sup>59</sup> C. M. Kauffmann, *An Altar-piece of the Apocalypse from Master Bertram's Workshop in Hamburg* (London, 1968), 1, 31. See also Max Hasse, "Der Apokalypse-Altar (Johannes-Altar) im Victoria und Albert Museum zu London," *Niederdeutsche Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte*, 19 (1980), 125-36.

compartment with inscriptions.<sup>60</sup> The inscriptions on the altarpiece include text from the Bible and abridged text from the mid-thirteenth-century Apocalypse commentary by Alexander Minorita of Bremen.<sup>61</sup> The overwhelming sight of closely situated episodes arranged in a sequential order functions similarly to a manuscript programme, but without its full text; the inscriptions of the altarpiece function in a comparatively cursory manner.

It is evident that Memling's panel departs from this tradition of panel painting of the Apocalypse, for it is in his panel that we see a compositional experimentation with the Apocalypse unaddressed thus far in the above examples. The episodes of Memling's panel are neither compartmentalized nor strictly sequential. The vision of the One enthroned is bound within an aureole and, significantly, is the only image that is contained in any way. One interesting device that Memling uses to organize space, however, is the separation of land into islands. He uses this particularly in the representation of the four horsemen who each stand upon individual patches of land. The use of such a device has been connected by some scholars to a tradition of trecento Neapolitan cycles.

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<sup>60</sup> Kauffmann suggests that the altarpiece was, in all probability, originally larger and included the remaining chapters of Revelation in its visual programme. For a detailed account of suspected past alterations, see Kauffmann, *An Altar-piece of the Apocalypse*, 1-2.

<sup>61</sup> The commentary of Alexander interprets St John's Revelation as an historical account of the Christian Church. According to Kauffmann, this altarpiece is entirely fashioned around Alexander's commentary on the Apocalypse, and its illustrations are based upon an Alexander Apocalypse manuscript. For a comprehensive discussion of the German Apocalypse altarpiece and its Alexander manuscript models see Kauffmann, *An Altar-piece of the Apocalypse*, 14, 17-25. For bibliography on the manuscripts associated with Alexander's commentary see Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 192-93, fn. 183, 186.

*The Neapolitan Panels of the Stuttgart Staatsgalerie*

The Stuttgart Staatsgalerie collection contains two small Neapolitan Apocalypse panels commonly attributed to Giotto, which date to ca. 1330-40 (fig. 11).<sup>62</sup> The panels illustrate forty-four Apocalypse episodes in grisaille arranged over a deep blue background on floating “island-like” devices with the occasional charming palm tree.<sup>63</sup> The episodes are not separated by borders, but are ordered into four disjointed horizontal registers, creating an unusually compressed and somewhat tangled composition. The deep blue of the background is the only aid, other than the islands, that serves to separate the episodes from one another. The compartmentalization present in the northern monumental examples reviewed thus far is softened and relaxed in the Neapolitan panels. There is still a sense of the individual integrity and separateness of the episodes, but they are more visually connected by the absence of any formal internal borders or frames. The sequential nature of the Apocalypse is preserved, but dramatically less so than in the Angers Tapestry or in the orderly composition of the Victoria and Albert Apocalypse altarpiece.

According to Peter Klein, the Stuttgart panels are at the forefront of a tradition of late-trecento Italian cycles that included Giotto’s Apocalypse fresco in the Peruzzi Chapel of S. Croce in Florence and the wall paintings at S. Maria Donna Regina in Naples. This Italian tradition is primarily characterized by the “island-like” arrangement of the Apocalypse episodes. In addition to these examples, the tradition also influences

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<sup>62</sup> For a detailed account of each scene see Angelo Tartuferi, *Giotto: Bilancio Critico di Sessant’anni di Studi e Ricerche*, exh. cat., Galleria dell’Accademia (Firenze, 2000), 192-97. For a clear reproduction of the panels see Van der Meer, *Apocalypse: Visions from the Book of Revelation in Western art* (London, 1978), 189-201, figs. 130-35. I would like to thank Janis Elliot, who brought these panels to my attention in the early stages of this project.

<sup>63</sup> Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 195.

fourteenth-century Neapolitan manuscripts and later-fourteenth-century north Italian wall and panel paintings.<sup>64</sup> In particular, the Apocalypse illuminations contained in two mid-fourteenth-century Italian bibles have been related to the Stuttgart panels: the Hamilton Bible (Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett MS 78.E.3), dating to ca. 1350 (fig. 12), and a bible from Vienna (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek MS 1191), dating to ca. 1375 (fig. 13).<sup>65</sup> However, although the “island-like” arrangement of space is maintained in the Hamilton Bible and the Vienna manuscript, the effect, so splendidly put to work in the Stuttgart panels, is minimized in these manuscripts. This is due to the confinement of the illustrations to separated sections of the page, the lack of naturalistic detail (evident in the Stuttgart panels and in Memling’s panel), and, most importantly, the sometimes sharp division of miniatures into a number of narrative compartments using the ground line to demarcate space. This dissection of narrative space in the miniatures of both manuscripts indicates that the use of islands as devices for manipulating narrative space to accommodate multiple Apocalypse episodes is minimal in the manuscript context, particularly in comparison to their use in the Stuttgart panels.

Peter Klein, Max Friedländer, and Yves Christe have suggested that there is a connection between this particular trecento Italian tradition and Memling’s panel, mainly

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<sup>64</sup> Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 195-96. Klein cites the following examples as being included in this tradition: the extant Apocalypse frescoes by Giotto in S. Chiara and commissioned by King Robert of Anjou, the Hamilton Bible (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett MS. 78.E.3), ca. 1350, and the Padua baptistry frescoes by Giusto de’ Menabuoi (see this chapter, fn. 53), and the Torcello polyptych in the Venice Gallerie dell’Accademia by Jacobello Albergno, 1378. He also states that the tradition influenced the following programmes outside of Italy: the frescoes at the imperial palace of Karlstejn, Bohemia in the St Mary Chapel (ca. 1357-61) (see fn. 53 above), the Escorial Apocalypse by Jean Colombe for the House of Savoy (ca. 1482) and a Russian icon in the Kremlin’s Uspensky Sobor Cathedral by Dionisii (ca. 1500).

<sup>65</sup> Richard K Emmerson and Suzanne Lewis, “Census and Bibliography of Medieval Manuscripts Containing Apocalypse Illustrations, ca. 800-1500, III,” *Traditio* 42 (1986), 452-53, 456; Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 195, fn. 198.

due to the use of islands in Memling's composition and similarities in iconography.<sup>66</sup>

Yves Christe has suggested the Stuttgart panels and both the Vienna manuscript and the Hamilton Bible as possible iconographic and pictorial sources for Memling's panel.<sup>67</sup> The examples of this Italian tradition provide interesting insight into Memling's lack of compartmentalization and his use of islands to achieve this compressed composition. But, it must be recognized that this tradition does not reduce the Apocalypse visual cycle as Memling's panel does. Memling's characteristic Flemish passion for miniaturization and naturalism finds perfect expression in this compositional device. However, the use of islands is common to medieval Apocalypse art, most likely originating in the fact that St John's vision took place on an island. For example, a similar "island-like" arrangement of space can be seen in a late fifteenth-century Flemish lectionary and Apocalypse (Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 68) belonging to one of the most renowned Apocalypse manuscript traditions in northern Europe, the Anglo-French tradition (fig. 14). The manuscript has not been connected to the aforementioned Italian trecento tradition. The style and composition are strikingly different, but the compositional use of islands is somewhat similar.

The following examination of late-medieval Apocalypse manuscripts and block-books from Flanders and the Netherlands, including the Flemish lectionary, suggests a trend toward compression and, more importantly, contraction that is apparently not evidenced in the trecento Italian tradition. Although these Italian connections make an important contribution to understanding the composition of Memling's panel, there are

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<sup>66</sup> Klein, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 195-96; Max Friedländer, *Hans Memlinc and Gérard David*, vol. 6, pt. I, *Early Netherlandische Painting* (Leyden, 1971), 77, no. II, fig. 43; and Christe, "L'Apocalypse de Memling," *Arte Medievale*, 10, 1 (1996), 143.

<sup>67</sup> Yves Christe, "L'Apocalypse de Memling," 143, figs. 2-3.

still questions left unanswered with respect to the unprecedented degree of condensation and abbreviation of the Apocalypse episodes within Memling's Apocalypse panel. The inclination to condense the Apocalypse episodes was present in this Italian trecento tradition but, unlike in Memling's panel, there was no demonstrated inclination to abridge.<sup>68</sup> Thus, it would be misleading to overemphasize this connection, as it suggests profound differences in the visual cultures of different European regions. As will be demonstrated below, the northern tradition of Apocalypse manuscripts and block-books indicates that Memling's panel represents a regional shift in the representation of the Apocalypse.

#### *The Anglo-French Apocalypse Tradition*

A considerable amount of ink has been committed to the topic of the celebrated Anglo-French Apocalypse tradition, which forms the largest extant group of medieval illustrated Apocalypses, numbering eighty in total.<sup>69</sup> This tradition is usually afforded the honour of being recognised as the pinnacle of medieval European Apocalypse illumination. These English, French and Flemish manuscripts were produced between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries and typically detail the individual episodes of the Apocalypse in anywhere from fifty to over one hundred half-page illustrations.<sup>70</sup> Accompanying these illustrations are the text of Revelation and a commentary (either that

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<sup>68</sup> The Berlin manuscript contains twenty-eight Apocalypse illustrations and the Vienna manuscript contains eleven. However, it was common for Apocalypse cycles within Bibles to be somewhat condensed. See chapter three, pp. 57, 62, fn. 102 for further discussion of how Memling's panel deviates from this Italian trecento tradition discussed above (specifically the Stuttgart panels).

<sup>69</sup> Emmerson and Lewis, "Census and Bibliography of Medieval Manuscripts Containing Apocalypse Illustrations, ca. 800-1500, II" *Traditio* 41 (1985), 370-409.

<sup>70</sup> Although the half-page format is characteristic of this group of manuscripts, some Anglo-French manuscripts have full-page illustrations. See Emmerson and Lewis, "Census and Bibliography, II," 370-409.

of the well-known Berengaudus or one less common) in verse or in prose.<sup>71</sup> These texts are in Latin, Anglo-Norman or French.

A Flemish example of the Anglo-French tradition is the lectionary and Apocalypse mentioned above.<sup>72</sup> Dating to ca. 1470, this manuscript was produced in Bruges in the shop of David Aubert for Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, whose arms appear on folio 1. Following lections from the Old and New Testaments are sixty-eight Apocalypse illustrations that accompany a paraphrase of the Apocalypse in French. The style of the illustrations is of the ostensible “Ghent-Bruges school,” specifically related to Loyset Liédet.<sup>73</sup> The paintings are framed by slender borders that arch elegantly across the top of the page. Each page contains a similar scene with numerous landscape and architectural settings framed by the same border.<sup>74</sup> Folio 157 represents *Saint John on the Island of Patmos* witnessing a vision of the enthroned Christ (fig. 14). At the side of the kneeling saint is an angel who indicates the miraculous vision with upraised hand. The angel’s wings are stretched wide and overlap the rainbow arc that floats behind the enthroned figure hovering above a wooded and rocky knoll. The background scene of an inlet populated by many islands is reminiscent of the aforementioned trecento Italian tradition. The natural landscape is evocative of Memling’s panel in that the ground is broken into a fragmented, “island-like” arrangement of land. However, the islands are employed somewhat differently in the case of this Flemish manuscript, as they display

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<sup>71</sup> Emmerson and Lewis, “Census and Bibliography of Medieval Manuscripts Containing Apocalypse Illustrations, ca. 800-1500, I” *Traditio* 40 (1984), 338.

<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, this manuscript is almost entirely unpublished. See De Ricci and Wilson, *Census II* (1937), 1378; *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century: Art and Civilization*, exh. cat. (Detroit, 1960), 391-92; J. Plummer, *Liturgical Manuscripts for the Mass and Divine Office*, exh. cat. (New York, 1964), 20, no. 17; and Emmerson and Lewis, “Census and Bibliography, II,” 395.

<sup>73</sup> *Flanders in the Fifteenth Century*, 391; and Emmerson and Lewis, “Census and Bibliography, II,” 395.

<sup>74</sup> Emmerson and Lewis, “Census and Bibliography, II,” 395. For reproductions of two additional miniatures from this manuscript (*Opening of the First Seal*, fol. 174 and *Opening of the Third Seal*, fol. 175), see Nancy Grubb, *Revelations: Art of the Apocalypse* (New York, 1997), 75, 80-81.

only trees, bushes, and rocks. Just the island in the foreground showcases an Apocalypse episode, condensing and restricting the narrative to a single island. In this miniature, islands are employed as a simple decorative device rather than a means of displaying numerous episodes in a single composition.

*The Condensation of the Apocalypse in Flanders and the Netherlands*

Although Durer's 1498 Apocalypse cycle has received considerable and warranted attention, the Flemish and Netherlandish Apocalypse traditions are still emerging and as yet understudied areas of medieval Apocalypse investigation. The Flemish and Netherlandish manuscript and block-book Apocalypse traditions provide clues to Memling's apparently "unprecedented" distillation of apocalyptic episodes. As discussed above, Apocalypse cycles (particularly those of the Anglo-French tradition) typically contain anywhere from fifty to over one hundred separate images. It cannot be denied that in the visual tradition of Flemish and Netherlandish manuscripts and block-books there is a demonstrated development toward the condensing of Apocalypse cycles. Yet, this shift is rarely discussed, being referred to only in a cursory manner in relation to Memling's panel. The reason for this oversight lies in the prevailing account of the history of apocalypse illustration, specifically late-medieval northern apocalypse illustration. The pervasive reluctance to address these issues seems related to a negative evaluation of late-medieval northern Apocalypse illustration. Some consider this body of work "lacking in ambition and freshness" until ultimately revived by Durer's 1498 wood cut cycle.<sup>75</sup> According to Suzanne Lewis, "Lingering traces of the medieval Apocalypse can be seen in isolated faint echoes in the work of such retardataire northern painters as

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Lewis, *Reading Images*, 339.

Memling, but the intensity and vigor of the medieval enterprise have now dissolved into nostalgic congeniality.”<sup>76</sup> Yves Christe takes a similar stance,

Tel que nous l’avons décrit et analyse, le programme adopté par Memling est donc tout à fait anachronique: il est en retard de trois siècles. Dans le choix des motifs retenus, dans leur agencement et leurs combinaisons, il ne correspond à rien de connu à la fin du 15th siècle.<sup>77</sup>

Michael Camille explains this context, exemplified above by both Lewis’ and Christe’s remarks:

Late medieval representations of the Apocalypse either transform earlier models or evolve novel means of representing revelation in ... [a] climate of heightened popular enthusiasm. Yet studies of this material tend to discount much of it as a degeneration of iconography from the great thirteenth-century Anglo-French tradition, either into mediocre manuscript repetitions or into ‘popular’ block-books, and only finally to be redeemed by the new beginning of Dürer’s 1498 woodcut series.<sup>78</sup>

The Northern late-medieval Apocalypse is often viewed as possessing a lack of ambition giving way to repetition and a general “degeneration of iconography.” It is in the area of spatial exploration that we see the Northern Apocalypse excel and make perhaps its greatest contribution to medieval Apocalypse illustration. Camille’s “Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages” addresses this very subject, suggesting that “it is in manuscripts and later printed books ... that we see the most spectacular pictorial experiments with the space of the apocalyptic vision.”<sup>79</sup> However, Camille does not expand his examination to include monumental painting in relation to spatial innovation, which, in effect, creates a partition between the mediums, discouraging further analysis of their relationship as related to

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<sup>76</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 339.

<sup>77</sup> Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling,” 145.

<sup>78</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 277.

<sup>79</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 285.

spatial innovation. It is my view that the late-medieval Northern Apocalypse tradition (including both monumental and miniature painting, as well as printed books) is not a protracted nostalgia after a “High” Medieval Apocalypse tradition, but rather represents an Apocalypse discourse rich, complicated, and valid in its own right. The conventional dependence on a linear narrative of the medieval visualization of the Apocalypse has resulted in a failure to sufficiently recognize the complex interplay of regional influences at work. Studies of the Paris Apocalypse, a Flemish Apocalypse now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (MS Néerlandais 3), have suffered from this very situation.

*The Paris Apocalypse*

The Paris Apocalypse, written and illuminated in the Low Countries in approximately 1400, modified earlier manuscript models of the Apocalypse by limiting the number of miniatures devoted to the visual explication of the Apocalypse. Whereas the usual number of illustrations springing from the Anglo-French tradition is anywhere from fifty to over one hundred, the Paris Apocalypse contains a comparatively and decidedly sparse twenty-three full-page miniatures. These miniatures are accompanied by the text of the Apocalypse in Flemish and the Berengaudus gloss, with each miniature facing its corresponding chapter and gloss.<sup>80</sup>

The Paris Apocalypse is comparable in style to the Angers Apocalypse tapestry, ca.1377-79. In addition to the figure style, the alternating dark blue and red background is similar to the Paris manuscript. The use of this device, in addition to the correlative figure style, connects the tapestry with this manuscript. But similarities between the tapestry and

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<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the details of this manuscript see Mariette Hontoy, “Les Miniatures de l’Apocalypse Flamande de Paris,” *Scriptorium*, 1 (1946-47), 289-309, pls. 27-43a. A detailed bibliography for this manuscript until the date of 1986 can be found in Emmerson and Lewis, “Census and Bibliography, III,” 452. Large reproductions of all twenty-three of the miniatures can be found in Van der Meer, *Apocalypse* (London 1978), 202-35, pls. 137-159.

this manuscript cycle are limited to these general stylistic considerations. Like Memling's panel, the Paris Apocalypse is consistently considered to be an oddity. Often in passing and with little substantiating evidence, the manuscript has also been connected to such specimens as the Angers Apocalypse tapestry, Dürer's 1498 woodcut cycle, Memling's panel, and the block-book Apocalypse tradition.

The first miniature of the Paris Apocalypse illustrates the life of St John and the remaining twenty-two miniatures are devoted to each of the twenty-two chapters of Revelation. Thus, this Apocalypse functions as a condensed cycle, which dramatically and effectively juxtaposes many of the myriad visions of each chapter of Revelation into each of its twenty-two single miniatures. No other Apocalypse is known to pre-date this manuscript wherein each chapter of Revelation is illustrated with one large miniature containing many of its multiple visions/events.<sup>81</sup> The figures vary in size and thus consequence in this manuscript, and this variation works to change the focus of the viewer's eye as it moves to the different episodes in each large and comprehensive miniature. Not all of the events of each chapter are chronicled in its respective miniature; thus is achieved an unprecedented and powerful abbreviation of the standard Apocalypse visual cycle.

The miniature of St. John's first vision, the Son of Man and the seven churches, is the first miniature in the apocalypse cycle proper (fig. 15). This miniature (folio 2r)

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<sup>81</sup> Hontoy, "Les Miniatures de l'Apocalypse Flamande de Paris," 296. Earlier evidence of condensation was discussed in my above examination of two Italian bibles. These, however, are not representative of the same stylistic and iconographic family as those of the Paris Apocalypse, and they also did not conflate the episodes of a single chapter into one miniature. Among the handful of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian bibles that did contain an Apocalypse cycle it was not uncommon for a shortened Apocalypse cycle to appear amongst the one hundred or so illustrations that comprise each respective manuscript. In comparison, Flemish illustrations are particularly notable for their condensed state because of the context supplied by the Apocalypse manuscripts (manuscripts devoted to the Apocalypse cycle) in which they typically occurred.

details the multiple visions of the first chapter of Revelation, while simultaneously and industriously providing the viewer with a narrative link to the life of St John, the subject of the preceding miniature. In the left corner of the bottom register is a hooded figure in a small boat that uses a long staff to “push off” from the shore of the island St John has been exiled to. The newly abandoned St John reclines on the grass and covers his mouth in surprise as the angel enters, presumably telling the saint what he must write down on the empty scroll. The top register reveals the evangelist witnessing the vision of the Son of Man, the seven golden candlesticks, and the seven churches. The two registers are stacked one atop the other.

The Vision of the Throne, folio 5r, is the fourth vision of St John (fig. 16). Arms raised, an angel with scarlet-speckled wings, sets and supports the glorious Throne in heaven. Inside the mandorla is the Son of Man who holds the opened Book, while the four beasts encircle Him. The elders, holding violins and harps, concurrently inhabit and merge into the deep blue of the sky. To the left of this sight an angel emerges through an archway and grasps St John’s hands to pull him into heaven.

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the Spirit and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! (Rev. IV: 1-2.)

The purposeful placement of St John in the periphery of the main vision of this miniature acts not only to restrain his role as an active visionary, but to highlight the eminence and distinction ascribed to the vision of the throne.

The fifth revelation is represented by a miniature on folio 6r that contains what appears to be a single scene, but in fact it depicts two: the Lamb both receiving and

opening the Book. The Lamb appears twice in the miniature (fig. 17). From the book held by the Lamb dangle the seven seals. The four symbols representing the Evangelists occur at the four corners of this mandorla; they also hold books, which they seem to be studying intently.

The miniature for Revelation six, folio 7r, is divided into three main registers, which effectively act as separate fields of action. St John sits to the left of the middle register (fig. 18). He points to and introduces the first of the four horsemen, while the second, with sword upraised, sits astride his mount. The bottom register dramatically recounts the coming and terrors of the last two of the four horsemen. The last horseman rides out from the gaping maw of the head of a great beast, Hades. The caves underneath the third horseman shelter those who hide from the enthroned One and from the wrath of the Lamb. The deep blue sky of the top register gives prominence to the four living creatures that beckon the arrival of the four horsemen on the opening of the first four seals. The white-robed souls of those who were slain for the word of God huddle under a floating grey and white altar upon the opening of the fifth seal. In the top left and right corners of the miniature, the opening of the sixth seal is illustrated with a darkening sun and a moon that has turned the colour of blood. The face of Christ calmly bears witness to all these events.

Revelation ten, folio 11r, is distinguished by the two-fold appearance of St John and, like the miniature with two images of the Lamb which illustrates the fifth chapter, this duplication artfully allows the miniature to simply and clearly chronicle more than one scene (fig. 19). On the left St John receives the instruction not to write down what the seven thunders had expressed. The angel raises his hand skyward and swears the

fulfillment of the mystery of God. To the right of the angel the second figure of St John receives the Book. Notably absent from this miniature is the typical scene wherein the saint consumes the Book.

The full-page miniatures of the Paris Apocalypse are conspicuously more detached from the text than the pairings of half-page miniatures and text, so typical of the Anglo-French tradition. The Paris miniatures can thereby work in a comparatively autonomous fashion, such that each miniature “can function as a meditative structure” almost independent of the text.<sup>82</sup> The calculated and physical disconnection of image from text also operates to allow the manuscript to become almost solely devoted to, while simultaneously manipulated by, the visionary experience of the viewer. This marked departure from Apocalypse manuscript convention is deceptively facile, but marks a progressive and significant step down a course toward condensation and the Apocalypse block-book and print tradition.

### *Block-Book Apocalypses*

Because printed books were less expensive to produce, they were able to access a much wider audience than that reached by illuminated manuscripts. The Apocalypse was a particularly popular subject in its manuscript format and thus was among the first subjects to appear in printed books in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>83</sup> Just a few short years after the production of the Paris Apocalypse, illustrated Apocalypses printed from wooden blocks began to be produced in the Netherlands and Germany.<sup>84</sup> Such block-book apocalypses and apocalypse cycles in printed bibles further developed the spatial

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<sup>82</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 282.

<sup>83</sup> Gertrude Bing, “The Apocalypse Block-Books and Their Manuscript Models,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 4 (1942), 143.

<sup>84</sup> For an excellent overview of the debates surrounding the origins of the block-book Apocalypse see Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 196, fn. 205.

innovation and shortened visual cycle evocative of the Paris Apocalypse cycle.<sup>85</sup>

According to Peter Klein, many printed Apocalypses were influenced by illuminated “Flemish Apocalypse manuscripts that condense the usual eighty to one hundred illustrations of the English cycles [of the Anglo-French tradition] to only a few compositions.”<sup>86</sup> In particular, Klein cites the Paris Apocalypse as being an important predecessor to condensed block-book apocalypse cycles.<sup>87</sup> Later-fifteenth-century printed Bibles include shortened Apocalypse cycles numbering from eight to nine woodcuts. The unique visual narrative structure of the Paris Apocalypse and the trend toward condensation in block-books evidences a widespread northern interest in the constriction of the visual representation of the Apocalypse, particularly in the Netherlands and Flanders. The evident popularity of short, compendious apocalypse cycles in block-book apocalypses in the Netherlands and Flanders indicates that the phenomenon of the Paris Apocalypse was not a singular or isolated occurrence.

The Paris Apocalypse thus confirms a trend of condensation and is a pivotal precedent, not just for the cycles of the northern Apocalypse block-books of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also for Memling’s Apocalypse panel.<sup>88</sup> According to

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<sup>85</sup> For example, the Cologne Bible (printed by Heinrich Quentell in 1478-79, it compresses the apocalypse cycle into nine images), the Nürnberg Bible, (printed by Anton Koberger in 1483 using the same blocks as the Cologne Bible), and the Strasbourg Grüninger Bible (1485). See Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 197-98, fn. 213, fig. 17.

<sup>86</sup> Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 197.

<sup>87</sup> Klein, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 197. For a discussion of manuscript models of early block-book Apocalypses see Bing, “The Apocalypse Block-Books and Their Manuscript Models,” 143-58.

<sup>88</sup> Because of the unique visual narrative structure of the Paris Apocalypse, Erwin Panofsky has labeled this manuscript as “the only genuine anticipation of Dürer’s Apocalypse.” Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2 vols (Cambridge, 1966), I, 110; and Panofsky, The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Princeton, 1955), 52. The miniatures of the Paris Apocalypse face each corresponding chapter of the text, while the illustrations of Dürer’s cycle are independent and sequenced without interruption from the text. Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, 110. Indeed, Dürer’s cycle thus marks a progression toward an Apocalypse cycle freed from the “manuscript matrix of Revelation.” Lewis suggests that Dürer’s 1498 woodcut series is free from the lexical signs of the text of Revelation (e.g. a strict sequential sequence) that are characteristic of what she terms the “manuscript matrix of Revelation.”

Christe, “Je ne connais pas de vrais antécédents à cette initiative de Memling, sinon dans une Apocalypse néerlandaise des années 1400 (aujourd’hui Paris, Bibl. Nat., ms néerl. 3)...”<sup>89</sup> But, like most scholars who connect the Paris Apocalypse with Memling’s panel, Christe does not explain this connection.<sup>90</sup>

Memling’s panel both signals and corroborates this movement toward the distillation of the episodes of the Apocalypse and away from the copious number of Apocalypse episodes depicted within the examples discussed above. The occurrence of this narrative structure in Hans Memling’s panel confirms that there was a significant shift at this time in the way pictorial space and the visions of St John were conceived, particularly in the Netherlands and Flanders. This regional connection has been underestimated and under-studied.<sup>91</sup> The next chapter of this thesis addresses the impact of the visual cultures of Bruges, not only upon Memling’s panel, but also upon those Apocalypse images from Bruges that appear after the installation of the *St John Altarpiece*. This brief analysis reveals a continued and developing interest in the devotional focus on St John in the late-medieval and early-Renaissance Apocalypse illustration of Bruges. We see evidence of a key narrative shift, from the concentration on the individual episodes of the Apocalypse to the figure of St John the Evangelist, which produces a tangibly meditative mood that signals a distinct transition in the reception and

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Lewis, *Reading Images*, 339. See the introduction to this thesis, fn. 8 for a discussion of the phrase “manuscript matrix of Revelation.” For a discussion of the freeing of European art from “the literary model,” see Sixten Ringbom, “Some Pictorial Conventions for the Recounting of Thoughts and Experiences in Late Medieval Art,” *Medieval Iconography and Narrative*, A Symposium (Odense, 1980), 38-69, esp. 69.

<sup>89</sup> Christe, “L’Apocalypse de Memling,” 146.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Hontoy, “Les Miniatures de l’Apocalypse Flamande de Paris,” 289-309; and Hull, *Hans Memling’s Paintings*, 78-79.

<sup>91</sup> In fact, Memling (along with Gerard David) has been credited with weaving together a “Bruges canon” with a distinctive artistic identity from the previous generations’ achievements and the diverse influences that existed in the regional visual culture of Bruges. Hilde Lobelle-Caluwé, “Hans Memling,” *Bruges and the Renaissance*, 66-67; Martens, “The Dialogue Between Artistic Tradition and Renewal,” *Bruges and the Renaissance*, 45.

meaning of the Apocalypse in Bruges and yields fresh insight into the function and narrative strategy of the *St John Altarpiece*.

### Chapter Three: The Visual Expression of the Apocalypse in Late-Medieval and Early-Renaissance Bruges

Albrecht Dürer's 1498 Apocalypse woodcut cycle is frequently cited as the culmination and pinnacle of the northern Apocalypse tradition, while Hans Memling's Apocalypse panel is often explained, even discounted as being either *retardataire* or an enigmatic, singular "one-off creation."<sup>92</sup> A careful examination of the Flemish art context (of both the general visual narrative traditions as well as the Apocalypse) contemporary with, and subsequent to, the installation of Memling's *St John Altarpiece* in 1479 serves both to challenge this recurrent comparison of Memling with Dürer, and to emphasize the import and related implications concerning the distillation of Apocalypse episodes in Memling's panel. As discussed below, a number of extant examples from Bruges parallel and further develop the tendency toward condensation and abbreviation, the trend towards devotional focus, as demonstrated in Memling's Apocalypse. This comparative analysis indicates that the narrative strategy of both Memling and the later Apocalypse illustration of Bruges concentrates less upon the individual episodes of the Apocalypse and more upon St John as a devotional focus, effectively intensifying the meditative tone. This crucial narrative shift indicates an interest in a serene devotional contemplation and a modification in the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse in late-medieval and early-Renaissance Bruges.

#### *The Influence of Bruges' Visual Cultures Upon Apocalypse Discourse*

According to Michael Camille in a comparison of Memling's Apocalypse panel and Dürer's woodcut cycle:

The problem with this image is its effacement of the sequential and temporal nature of the Apocalypse, which is difficult to

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<sup>92</sup> De Vos, Hans Memling, 156.

convey in one field without recourse to miniaturization. It is a difficulty Dürer did not face when, not long afterward, he started work on his series of woodcuts dramatizing the same subject.<sup>93</sup>

Camille's evaluation seems to contradict a perspective he espoused earlier in the same 1992 article, "Visionary Perception and Images of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages," wherein he said the following:

Late medieval representations of the Apocalypse either transform earlier models or evolve novel means of representing revelation in ... [a] climate of heightened popular enthusiasm. Yet studies of this material tend to discount much of it as a degeneration of iconography from the great thirteenth-century Anglo-French tradition, either into mediocre manuscript repetitions or into 'popular' block-books, and only finally to be redeemed by the new beginning of Dürer's 1498 woodcut series.<sup>94</sup>

Camille's disaffection with the viewpoint that the late-medieval apocalypse tradition was a degeneration of iconography, together with his signalling of the spatial ingenuity of this tradition, seems to effectively contradict his critique of Memling's panel, particularly when it is recognized that by his "recourse to miniaturization" Memling was able to achieve the spatial innovations late-medieval illustrations of the Apocalypse are acclaimed for. Further, Dürer's ascribed success in this area can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that the block-book format did not necessitate the portrayal of the Apocalypse episodes in a single narrative field/composition (fig. 20). A series of images is precisely suited to a sequential visual narrative, while a single panel format (as used by Memling) naturally faces more challenges if the prototypical compartmentalization of previous models is either discarded or disregarded. Camille's apparently contradictory comments highlight an issue that is crucial to the understanding of Memling's panel and

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<sup>93</sup> Camille, "Visionary Perception," 288. Blum also criticizes the lack of "biblical order" in Memling's depiction of the Apocalypse. Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 94-95.

the late-medieval northern Apocalypse tradition. It is my opinion that Memling did not use the “effacement of the sequential and temporal nature of the Apocalypse” as a means of accommodating the “problem” of a single narrative field, but rather he consciously and deliberately strove for this effect. As will be evidenced below, it is likely that Memling’s decision to miniaturize was based upon Bruges’ urban visual culture, rather than upon a negative, default decision to merely “squeeze in” the majority of the visionary episodes of Revelation. Memling’s deliberate deviation from the sequential depiction of apocalyptic events has important implications within late-medieval Apocalypse discourse.

In the scholarship concerning Apocalypse art there is an apparent and restrictive tendency to isolate the study of Apocalypse images only to the Apocalypse tradition, while neglecting to consider how the medium and attendant visual cultures influenced the image in question. In addition to being dependent on visual Apocalypse traditions, both monumental painting and manuscript illustration of the Apocalypse are also naturally related to their attendant general regional visual traditions. Unfortunately, these visual traditions are often treated as being detached from, or incidental to, the Apocalypse visual tradition. Thus, valuable and insightful information occurring in a context outside the visual representation of the Apocalypse, though in the same regional visual tradition, is often either overlooked or ignored.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 277. This excerpt is also discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, pp. 42-43.

<sup>95</sup> I refer specifically to those anthologies on the topic of the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages that discuss, chronicle and examine the visual representation of the Apocalypse as an isolated group of images, without significant reference to attendant general visual traditions outside of Apocalypse discourse. Although independent studies are also guilty of this tendency, it is often the anthology, by its very nature, that gives the distinct impression of an impregnable, independent corpus of work. While these anthologies are undoubtedly invaluable to the study of medieval visual Apocalypse discourse, they are misleading in that they create an insular and limited consciousness of these discourses. See, for example, Richard K.

When one considers the contemporary visual context, it becomes evident that Memling did not merely resort to miniaturization, and that in fact he did not experience difficulty with the sequential and temporal nature of the Apocalypse. An examination of his painterly oeuvre demonstrates that Flemish interest in miniaturization and episodic imagination was commonly employed by Memling, as well as several other monumental painters from this region. Memling's *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ* of ca.1480 (fig. 21) and *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* (fig. 22) of ca.1470-71 are examples of such northern episodic imagination at work. In the Apocalypse panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, Memling did not efface the sequential and temporal nature of the Apocalypse, he organically manipulated it, trailing the episodes of chapters one through thirteen of Revelation through the middle and top registers in a meandering narrative line. Those elements of the episodes that needed to be placed outside of the narrative sequence were positioned quite naturally in the composition (for example, the sun and moon of the sixth chapter of Revelation are pictured in the sky at the top of the panel, removed from the other events described in that chapter). This can be understood as conforming to trends in late-medieval Flemish naturalism.<sup>96</sup> There are also notable omissions; the visual interpretation of Revelation in the panel is by no means complete, nor was it intended to be.<sup>97</sup> Memling has moved away from depicting the Apocalypse episodes sequentially in a

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Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, ed, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*; van der Meer, *Apocalypse*; Christe, *L'Apocalypse de Jean*; and M. R. James, *The Apocalypse in Art* (London, 1931). See also the comments of Suzanne Lewis and Yves Christe in chapter two of this thesis, pp. 41-43, as an example of comments made within studies that overlook general visual traditions outside of Apocalypse discourse. The discussion below will, I hope, prove the futility of these comments in light of an examination of those visual traditions attendant to the *St John Altarpiece*.

<sup>96</sup> Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 78-79. Camille discusses the effect of "'naturalistic' modes of representation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" on the portrayal of the Apocalypse, but does not link this effect to Memling's Apocalypse panel. Camille, "Visionary Perception," 277, 284-88.

<sup>97</sup> The significance of the number of episodes Memling chose to depict in his panel is discussed in chapter five of this thesis.

strictly linear, literal, and lexical fashion. Camille interprets this as Memling's response to a difficulty he was faced with. However, when viewed within the context discussed above it becomes clear that this shift represents a focused and cognizant detachment from the "manuscript matrix" of Revelation, expressed most clearly in Memling's departure from a strict sequential and linear narrative.<sup>98</sup> These lexical signs, characteristic of what Lewis terms as a "manuscript matrix of Revelation," are usually attributed to manuscript Apocalypse cycles. This format is maintained in the visual narratives of the monumental examples of Apocalypse art discussed in the second chapter of this thesis. Unlike the Victoria and Albert Apocalypse altarpiece and the Stuttgart panels, Memling's panel is not strictly bound by the text, eschewing compartmentalization and any strict sequential and temporal framework. Nor does it reflect the "manuscript matrix" of Revelation, embracing instead the singular spatial narrative of panel painting.<sup>99</sup>

We see a similar marked departure from the "manuscript matrix" of Revelation in fifteenth-century Flanders, where St John is liberated from a compartmentalized and sequential framework and, in later examples, from most (and sometimes all) of the visionary episodes of Revelation. The condensed account of Revelation found in both the Flemish Paris Apocalypse and Memling's panel thus reflects a continuing decrease of interest in the details of the visionary episodes in the examples discussed below.

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<sup>98</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 339. See also, Ringbom, "Some Pictorial Conventions," 69.

<sup>99</sup> Although the Stuttgart panels eschew a compartmentalized composition, they maintain the sequential and temporal nature of the Apocalypse with a comprehensive representation of the episodes portrayed in a sequential fashion.

*Late-Medieval Manuscript Illumination in Bruges*

There are a number of extant examples from the period following the installation of Memling's *St John Altarpiece* in 1479 that attest to artists in Bruges continuing to be interested in the abridgement and distillation of the illustration of the Apocalypse. The conspicuous and prominent representation of the figure of St John occurs together with a concurrent eradication of all or most of the visionary episodes from the landscape of the saint's vision. Within the visual culture of Bruges, this narrative focus in the Apocalypse results in a dramatic narrative focus on the body of the saint himself, rather than on the episodes of his visionary experience. The following examples evidence and confirm that the narrative shift demonstrated by Memling's Apocalypse panel was not an isolated instance; indeed, it may have contributed to a developing shift in narrative focus in the visual culture of Bruges.

It is in a fifteenth-century miniature and a group of sixteenth-century miniatures of the Apocalypse from Bruges that we first see a continuation of this narrative and spatial inclination.<sup>100</sup> These single miniatures reveal an interest in the abbreviation of the Apocalypse episodes, as they depict St John in contemplation without revealing a comprehensive spectacle of the events of the saint's vision. Of particular interest is a miniature contained in the Breviary of Queen Isabella the Catholic of Castile (British Library, Additional MS 18851, ca.1488-96).

The foreground of the Isabella Breviary's *St John's Vision on the Island of Patmos* (fol. 309r) portrays St John seated on the island of Patmos witnessing and recording the events of his vision onto a scroll (fig. 23). On a grassy knoll to the left of St

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<sup>100</sup> For an examination of the history and development of single apocalypse scenes in manuscript illumination see Klein, "Single Apocalypse Scenes," in "The Apocalypse in Medieval Art," 171-75.

John is the saint's symbol, the eagle. Above, on rugged cliffs overlooking the water, tiny wild creatures scramble. Amidst a collection of deer, one raises its antlers and turns its head, presumably to witness the battle above. High in the darkening sky, the Woman hands the divine child into the secure arms of a waiting angel, while warrior angels hold off the great seven-headed beast. The battle is reflected in the water below, underneath a more substantial reflection of the four horsemen. To the left of the terrestrial scene, their reflections glimmering on the surface of a rippling waterway, the four horsemen emerge and traverse a series of islands. The layout of these, and the procession of the four horsemen, are strikingly similar to comparable elements in Memling's Apocalypse panel.<sup>101</sup> The evident focus on St John and the absence of all but two of the revelatory episodes in the Isabella Breviary miniature indicate an interest in compression similar to the Paris Apocalypse and to Memling's panel. This connection is further confirmed by the remarkable resemblance between the compositional structure that forms the landscape for the four horsemen in both Memling's panel and in the Isabella Breviary. The influence of Memling's panel upon this later work seems undeniable.<sup>102</sup>

A later group of miniatures from the workshop of Simon Bening reveals a continued interest in this particular, more reductive, model. For example, the *St John on Patmos* miniature of the Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours (Stockholm, Swe Kungliga

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<sup>101</sup> It is interesting to note that one of Memling's pupils, Michael Sittow, became a court painter to Isabella the Catholic. Lobelle-Caluwé, "Hans Memling," *Bruges and the Renaissance*, 67. The central panel of the *St John Altarpiece* has been subject to various "reprisals" as well, including two by Memling himself: the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Catherine and Barbara and Two Musical Angels* (ca. 1479, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the John Donne triptych (ca. 1480, London, National Gallery). The Master of the Verbeek triptych (see De Vos, cat. 91).

<sup>102</sup> As discussed in chapter two (pp. 35-38, 40-41), the use of islands was not unfamiliar to the late medieval representation of the Apocalypse. However, the characteristic combination of the four horsemen and their island path is unique to Memling's panel and the Isabella Breviary miniature. In the Stuttgart panels two of the horsemen float above the dark blue background, while the remaining two also float, but over two separate island devices.

Biblioteket A.227, fol. 59R, sixteenth century) exhibits a similar concern with focusing on St John (fig. 24).<sup>103</sup> St John sits in the centre of the panel; his head remains level as he tilts his eyes skyward to witness the visions he records in the book that balances on his right knee. The eagle stands to the left, wings extended, and observes the saint. Behind the saint is a view of a waterway, parted in the centre by a mountain island. The distant background receding behind the central island reveals a townscape, with boats drifting into a harbour; towering over it is a magnificent building. The seven-headed beast emerges from the clouds in the top left corner of the miniature. The margins of the miniature consist of an intricate Gothic architectural structure, while the bottom margin depicts two children playing with tops in a courtyard.

Although the Stockholm-Kassel miniature is not as strikingly similar to Memling's panel as the Isabella Breviary miniature is, it is evident that the Stockholm-Kassel miniature, and those of the Simon Bening group, point toward a tradition of the portrayal of the Apocalypse using a singular narrative space with a focus on St John, rather than an enumeration of separate but related episodes of the Apocalypse. This trend can also be observed in panel painting from Bruges, as we shall see.

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Anne Testa suggests that the *St John on Patmos* miniature was executed, not by Simon Bening, but by an "associate." Testa, *The Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours: A Reintegrated Manuscript from the Shop of Simon Bening* (Stockholm, 1992), 67-70. Otto Pächt attributes this miniature to Simon Bening. Otto Pächt, "Die Evangelistenbilder in Simon Benings Stockholmer Stundenbuch," *Nationalmuseum Bulletin* 7 (1983), 73-92. For bibliography on the Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours see Testa, *The Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours*, 75-78. There are two extant miniatures of St John on Patmos with a similar composition attributed to Simon Bening. These are a detached leaf of 1521, now in the Brooklyn Museum (inventory number 11.505) and a miniature from Bibliothèque municipale, Rouen, MS 3028, f. 59R. For the Brooklyn miniature, see James H. Marrow, "Simon Bening in 1521: A Group of Dated Miniatures," *Liber amicorum Herman Liebaers* (Brussels, 1984), 537-59. For the Rouen miniature, see the illustration in Pächt, "Die Evangelistenbilder," fig. 9.

*Pieter Pourbus*

After Memling's death in 1494, the artist Pieter Pourbus rose to a stature that nearly equalled that of Memling in Bruges. Pourbus' *Triptych with the Baptism of Christ* of 1549 is considered to be indebted to the work of both Memling and Gerard David (fig. 25).<sup>104</sup> Pourbus pays tribute to two important Bruges masters in this triptych; however, he modernizes the themes and abbreviates the content. The central panel of Pourbus' triptych illustrates his interpretation of David's *Baptism of Christ*, painted for Jan de Trompes, at the chapel of St Lawrence in Saint Basil's Church. The wings of Pourbus' triptych are directly derivative of those of Memling's *St John Altarpiece*.

The left panel of the beheading of St John the Baptist presents Pourbus' variant of Memling's left panel of the *St John Altarpiece*. As in Memling's panel, the executioner stands in the foreground, but unlike the backward-facing figure of Memling's panel, Pourbus' figure faces the viewer at a slight angle. He proffers St John's severed head to Salome who shrinks away in disgust. This display of emotion is markedly different from Memling's composed and seemingly serene Salome. Pourbus' panel turns the lifeless body of St John to face away from the viewer, who is then confronted with the soles of the saint's feet, instead of the severed neck depicted in Memling's scene. The triad of observers remains in Pourbus' panel, but they stand more removed from the action of the foreground. In the background, Salome dances for King Herod at the banquet.

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<sup>104</sup> Unfortunately, this triptych is almost entirely unpublished as it is now in the hands of an unknown private collector in Barcelona. De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 397, fig. 187; Martens, "The Dialogue Between Artistic Tradition and Renewal," 43-45, fig. 12. Brussels 1985; J. M. Duvosquel and I. Vandevivere, eds, *Luister van Spanje en de Belgische Steden, 1500-1700*, exh. cat., 2 vols, Paleis voor Schone Kunsten (Brussels, 1985), II, 482-85, c. 16. According to Carel Van Mander's 1604 commentary on the connection between Pourbus and Memling, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, (Harlem, 1604), Pourbus specifically admired Memling's Ursula Shrine in the Sint-Janshospitaal and "... always went to see the excellent piece on feast-days when it was displayed, and who could neither see nor praise it enough ...". Pourbus' admiration for

Of particular interest is the altarpiece's right panel, which contains Pourbus' re-working of some of the creative precepts of Memling's Apocalypse panel. Pourbus' panel features St John in the lower right corner, wholly preoccupied with his vision, writing the contents of it in a book while gazing up into the distance. His pose and position are virtually identical to Memling's rendering of the saint. Wings outstretched, a large eagle is perched beside and to the left of the saint. A turbulent-looking waterway splits the panel in half and courses down and through the middle of the panel, amongst inlets. Just above the water hovers the Woman Clothed with the Sun who is threatened by the great seven-headed beast who seeks to steal the child. The Woman is enclosed in a sphere of clouds, which echoes the great rainbow aureole of Memling's panel. At the very top of the panel is the vision of God the Father in a glorious burst of colour and cloud.

As in Memling's panel, there is a clear focus on the figure of St John and his role as visionary, but this focus is further cultured in Pourbus' interpretation. The tight visual focus on St John as a contemplative figure and the almost complete absence of apocalypse episodes limits the field of vision and consciously concentrates the viewer's focus onto the saint. This focus produces a deeply contemplative feeling, uncluttered by numerous visionary episodes. Pourbus maintains and amplifies the contemplative sensibility of Memling's panel; he alters the composition to produce a panel that is mindful of its break from this predecessor, while also striving to acknowledge and, more importantly, to refine further the narrative strategies devised by Memling for his panel painting of the Apocalypse. The intensification of St John's contemplative mien resulting

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Memling' work obviously extended to the *St John Altarpiece* as evidenced by the *Baptism of Christ* triptych. Carel Van Mander, cited and translated in De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 62-63.

from this narrative shift is vital to our understanding of both Memling's panel and the visual expression of the Apocalypse in Bruges.

Maximiliaan Martens stresses that Pourbus' triptych denotes a continuing movement toward the devotional concentration on individual saintly figures in the artistic production of Bruges, stating that Pourbus' work offers an "insight into the tension between tradition and innovation that existed in sixteenth century Bruges."<sup>105</sup> This tension can also be detected in the *Triptych with the Baptism of Christ* in details that reveal the increasing interest in the representation of emotion. In particular, the expressive face of Salome in the left panel of Pourbus' stands out as markedly different from Memling's more tranquil representation of the same figure in his St John the Baptist panel of the *St John Altarpiece*. Further, Pourbus' comparatively emotive rendering of Salome (she is clearly dismayed by the presentation of the Baptist's severed head) is different from the meditative focus on the Evangelist in the right panel of the *Triptych with the Baptism of Christ*, signifying the particularity of this tone of representation to the Evangelist and the Apocalypse.

As evidenced above, the gradual compendious restructuring of the late-medieval visual cycles of the Apocalypse in Bruges coincided with a transition in the devotional focus of these cycles. A greater emphasis on the saintly figure of St John, rather than on the events of his vision, becomes increasingly apparent in the Apocalypse in Bruges near

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<sup>105</sup> Martens, "The Dialogue Between Artistic Tradition and Renewal," 43. Another example in Bruges' panel painting is *The Glorification of the Virgin* triptych by the Master of the Holy Blood, which dates to the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The right panel depicts a close view of St John on Patmos, recording his visions while gazing at the vision of the Woman Clothed with the Sun (also reflected in the water) and the rescue of the child from the seven-headed beast. This panel is different in that there are two monks who kneel beside the saint, but the focus on St John and the representation of a single visionary scene confirms a similar interest to that seen in Pourbus' triptych. *Bruges and the Renaissance*, 109-11, fig. 31.

the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>106</sup> As demonstrated in chapter two, there had been a preoccupation with chronicling the many episodes of St John's vision. This particular concern can be observed, for example, in the Westminster Abbey wall paintings, the Victoria and Albert Apocalypse altarpiece, and the characteristic large cycles of the Anglo-French tradition, wherein St John's (often peripheral) placement as well as the sheer number, temporal organization, and prominence of episodes all attest to their primary devotional significance. Such is also the case for the Stuttgart panels of the previously discussed Italian trecento tradition, in that the devotional focus appears to be on the episodes of the Apocalypse rather than on St John himself. The emphasis on the episodes of Revelation apparent in these examples does not contradict that St John was of critical importance, but rather suggests that the saint's importance and his stature and authority as a visionary were critically attached to the visual display of the revelatory episodes of his vision. Although the depiction of the Vision of the Throne in Memling's panel can be seen to aid in a similar manner with regard to establishing St John's status as a visionary, the demonstrated narrative shift renders the episodes of the saint's vision less prominent than ever before in the history of the visual manifestation of the Apocalypse.

Memling's narrative strategy appears to have been intended to emphasize the entirety of St John's revelation and its unified meaning, rather than the individual significance of the numerous episodes.<sup>107</sup> These events and their connotations are invoked in Memling's panel, but the focus has shifted. St John and his visionary status

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<sup>106</sup> Camille, "Visionary Perception," 288.

<sup>107</sup> Standing in front of Memling's altarpiece, one is immediately struck by the size and weight of the figure of St John in a way that cannot be fully felt when viewing photographic representations of the altarpiece. According to Emerson, "In both literature and art, John occasionally seems to receive greater attention than many features of his vision, being most prominently portrayed, for example, in the right panel of Hans Memling's Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine triptych [the *St John Altarpiece*]." Emerson, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Culture," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 328.

rival the prominent vision of the elders and the One enthroned as the focus of the panel. The episodes are then further abbreviated in the Pourbus triptych and the St John miniatures. In Memling's panel, the revelatory episodes of St John's vision are thus less important in establishing his authority and status as visionary. The further contraction of Apocalypse episodes in late-medieval Flemish examples that follow Memling's panel indicates that it represents a transition between the focus on apocalyptic episodes (as well as the overall episodic meaning of the Apocalypse) and a devotional focus on St John. This concentration on St John signifies a change in the reception of the Apocalypse and its meaning and the relationship between the saint and his visions, consistent with the visual cultures of Bruges. Memling's panel thus sits at the forefront of a key modification in the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse in late-medieval Bruges. The above comparative analysis of Memling's panel with contemporary and subsequent art from Bruges serves to highlight this narrative shift, as well to elucidate an emergent amplification of a contemplative and meditative focus in the representation of St John and his revelatory vision.

To begin to understand the significance of this transition in terms of its impact on the meaning and reception of the Apocalypse panel and the *St John Altarpiece*, it is also important to examine the events surrounding its commission, the environment of the Sint-Janshospitaal and, in particular, the eschatological associations of this environment. Art historians have traditionally sought to explain the meaning of Memling's altarpiece in relation to its socio-historic context. The issues raised by this approach form the focus of the next chapter.

#### Chapter Four: The Sint-Janshospitaal and Eschatological Considerations

The shift in the devotional emphasis of Apocalypse illustration in the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Apocalypse illustration of Bruges has significant ramifications with respect to the reception and meaning of the Apocalypse. The narrative consequences of this transition toward a discernible devotional focus on St John are necessarily related to the overall meaning of Memling's *St John Altarpiece*, which some relate to its role as an altarpiece in the hospital chapel. The *St John Altarpiece*, like the *Isenheim Altarpiece* by Matthias Nithart (known as Grünewald), now in the Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, ca. 1505 (from the hospital of the Monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim, near Colmar), needs to be considered in light of its hospital context, which, according to Andrée Hayum in the case of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, "had become a powerful motivating force in the commission, ... provided a principal component of the iconographic fabric of the work, and ... shaped a crucial aspect of the altarpiece's overall function."<sup>108</sup> The *St John Altarpiece* similarly realizes and reflects motivation and meaning arising from its own hospital context and this is precisely where an investigation into the altarpiece's meaning and the implications of the evidenced alteration in the devotional focus of the Apocalypse in Bruges must begin.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 17.

<sup>109</sup> The interaction of religious art and the hospital context has previously been explored in the study of both Matthias Nithart's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, now in the Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, and Rogier van der Weyden's *Last Judgment* altarpiece from the Hôtel-Dieu at Beaune. See, for example, Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton, 1989); Barbara Lane "Requiem aeternam dona eis': the Beaune *Last Judgment* and the Mass of the Dead," *Simiolus*, 19, 3 (1989), 166-80; and Blum, "The Last Judgment Altarpiece by Rogier van der Weyden," *Early Netherlandish Triptychs*, 37-48. Hayum sees the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a "model for the study of art as a culturally integrated system of communication, requiring ... interdependent investigations of such issues as architectural setting, patronage, role with prescribed ritual practice, and reception by a specific audience." Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 7.

Although Hans Memling's *St John Altarpiece* has been the subject of a number of analyses that relate the overall meaning and function of the altarpiece to the realities of daily life in the community of Sint-Janshospitaal, most of these analyses ignore other possible co-existent courses of meaning related to and informed by narrative structure, as this thesis has tried to suggest. According to Craig Harbison on the topic of fifteenth-century northern art,

It is not just a matter of there being a variety of impulses behind successive images; but that within any one image there is both subtlety and openness to a variety of meanings, simultaneous and intentional diversity of motive .... But perhaps the object was *not* to separate out the various strands of meaning found in a fifteenth-/or early sixteenth-century altarpiece – but to observe their fertile interaction.<sup>110</sup>

Shirley Neilsen Blum makes a similar comment in direct relation to Memling's *St John Altarpiece*, "Memling's triptych seems to have several plausible associations [in relation to its role in the hospital setting], none of which seems to take precedence."<sup>111</sup> Although her comment was made in a context unflattering to Memling's narrative talents, Blum nevertheless acknowledges the multilayered narrative potential of his altarpiece.

This chapter explores and evaluates the different ways in which the hospital context may have helped to shape the *St John Altarpiece* and points to two main ideas: 1) the *St John Altarpiece* is a reflection and articulation of the Sint-Janshospitaal's newly acquired social, political and religious status, and 2) the altarpiece, when considered from a liturgical and eschatological perspective, provides a framework of religious instruction for death particular to its unique hospital context. While shedding light on the context of the Sint-Janshospitaal and contemporary notions of death and the afterlife, the following

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<sup>110</sup> Harbison, "The Northern Altarpiece as a Cultural Document," 74-75.

<sup>111</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 91.

analysis also seeks to introduce the *St John Altarpiece* as a calculated arrangement of a multiplicity of interrelated and interactive levels of meaning.

### *The Sint-Janshospitaal*

Construction of the Sint-Janshospitaal of Bruges commenced in the twelfth century, and although not completed until the fifteenth century, the hospital has the distinction of being one of the earliest establishments related to healthcare in Flanders. Much of the early structure was removed during a major reconstruction carried out in the nineteenth century, but the original pillars and arches of the hospital ward are still visible today.<sup>112</sup> St John the Evangelist was the patron saint of the hospital from its inception, and in the fifteenth century St John the Baptist shared the honour, such that the hospital had co-patron saints.<sup>113</sup> By this time the hospital was essentially a religious institution under the jurisdiction of the bishop, with the objective of providing care for the sick and destitute, as well as offering a single night of shelter to pilgrims and other travellers.<sup>114</sup> The hospital operated under municipal jurisdiction and according to an original Rule that dated to January 1188.<sup>115</sup> In 1215, when the ruling of the Fourth Lateran Council mandated that lay hospital communities must implement an approved rule, the Sint-Janshospitaal, like many such communities, chose to abide by the Rule of St Augustine.<sup>116</sup> However, the Rule of St Augustine extended only to the structure and

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<sup>112</sup> On the history and building of the Sint-Janshospitaal, see Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 27-50; Weale, *Bruges et ses Environs* (4<sup>th</sup> edn, Bruges, 1884), 172-84; H. Rommel, "L'Hôpital St. Jean à Bruges," *Annales de la Société d'Emulation*, 64 (1914), 140-200; Jozef Pennick, *Het Memling Museum en het Sint-Janshospitaal Brugge* (Brugge, 1973); L. Gilliodts-van Severen, "Le Premier Reglement de l'Hôpital Saint-Jean à Bruges," *La Flandre* 6 (1874-75), 55-90.

<sup>113</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 37-38; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976* I, 69; II, 362.

<sup>114</sup> Gilliodts-van Severen, "Le Premier Reglement," 72, 90; Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 28.

<sup>115</sup> Gilliodts-van Severen, "Le Premier Reglement," 55-90; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976* I, 42, 53-54; II, 342; and Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 31-32.

<sup>116</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 32-35; Pennick, *Het Memling Museum*, 7; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976* I, 55.

management of the Sint-Janshospitaal communal life; the lay brothers and sisters took no vows and the hospital maintained an identity distinct from other Augustinian monasteries in Bruges.<sup>117</sup> The religious (although not civic) autonomy of the hospital persisted until 1459 when it was placed under the protection of the Bishop of Tournai, Jean Chevrot, and a new charter was implemented making the hospital accountable to both the bishop and the city.<sup>118</sup> Now part of a religious community, all brothers and sisters took vows and wore traditional Augustinian religious habits. The resultant restriction on the authority of the city generated tremendous tension between the city, hospital community, and bishop. Another charter was devised in 1463 to clarify the nature of the authority of both the city and the bishop over the hospital and its community. The structure of authority specified therein assigned control of administrative issues to the city (magistrature), while responsibility for the personnel of the hospital community was assigned to the bishop.<sup>119</sup>

The impetus for the commission of the *St John Altarpiece* is typically attributed to the rebuilding of the church apse in 1473-74;<sup>120</sup> however, Maximiliaan Martens presents a compelling argument in favour of reading the *St John Altarpiece* as a commemoration

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<sup>117</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 33-34. Both the Augustinian Hermits and the Canons Regular of St. Augustine had established influential monasteries in Bruges. See the following for further information and a detailed bibliography on this subject: Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 34-35, fn. 22.

<sup>118</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 35-36, fn. 24. For more details on the charter of 1459 and a reproduction of the document see, *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976 I*, ex. cat., (Bruges, 1976), 50, 55-57, 170-71, 173; II, 357.

<sup>119</sup> Martens, "Patronage and Politics," 171-72; Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 36, fn. 26; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976 I*, 50, 173.

<sup>120</sup> See, for example, De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 37, 155, 157; Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 53; Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 87-88; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976 I*, 275; Rommel, "L'Hôpital St. Jean à Bruges," 161; and Adolphe J. Duclos, *Bruges: Histoire et souvenirs*, (Bruges, 1910, 1913), 341-42, 499.

of the outcome of the events of 1459-63, a pivotal period for the hospital in terms of its administrative and religious history.<sup>121</sup>

### *Socio-Political Considerations*

According to Martens, the altarpiece, in addition to being an integral part of the rebuilding of the church apse, was an expression and articulation of “loyalty to contemporary Burgundian politics” and the newfound religious and social status acquired by the hospital during this tense period of reform.<sup>122</sup> The date of Memling’s altarpiece coincides with this course of reform. Martens also points out the prominent and significant presence of Agnes Casembrood and Antheunis Seghers on the exterior wings of the triptych; both of these known personages maintained their positions during this time of reform. Further, and because their leadership coincides with the time of reform, Martens concludes they were probably instrumental in the reform process, particularly during the consultations leading up to the charter of 1463.<sup>123</sup>

The decrease in city authority over the hospital and the related newfound authority of the Bishop of Tournai, a close ally of Philip the Good, are indicative of the dominion of Burgundian politics, which aimed to effect centralization of ducal power, while diminishing city authority. According to Martens,

The process of burgundization was clearly not only a matter of annexation of domains, shrewd marriage alliances and the consolidation of central political institutions. The burgundian ambition manifested itself also in numerous attempts to gain influence in every possible aspect of social, economic and cultural life.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 169-76. Hilde Lobelle-Caluwé has also suggested this as a possible reason for the commission of this altarpiece: *Memlingmuseum Brugge*, *Musea Nostra* 6, (Brussels, 1987), 44-45.

<sup>122</sup> Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 176.

<sup>123</sup> Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 172.

<sup>124</sup> Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 171.

As evidenced by his comment on the hospital reforms that took place in 1459, Dirk De Vos concurs, “The change had everything to do with court policy to limit the influence of the towns and to give more power to the prelates, most of whom belonged to the ducal family or the Burgundian clan.”<sup>125</sup> The authority granted to the Bishop of Tournai is suggestive of his incidental association with the Burgundian rulers and their political agenda.<sup>126</sup> Although the circumstances surrounding the commission of the altarpiece indicate an allegiance with contemporary Burgundian politics, this alliance by no means signified a further restriction of the hospital community but rather, quite the opposite. The hospital enjoyed augmented autonomy with minimal municipal interference.<sup>127</sup>

There are a number of other salient details in the *St John Altarpiece* that similarly demonstrate a desire to articulate the position and authority of the hospital and its community. One important and lucrative privilege the hospital gained in the thirteenth century was the duty and prerogative of wine measuring. The *Kraanplaats*, the town crane located on the Rue Flamande, is depicted above and to the left of the head of St John the Evangelist in the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece*; in front of this a hospital brother oversees the action and inspects a wine barrel. Martens mentions this but briefly, perhaps because it is not directly involved with the events of the fifteenth

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<sup>125</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 37. See also Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 169-76.

<sup>126</sup> Martens takes the connection with Burgundian politics one step further by mentioning and supporting the theory that St Catherine and St Barbara were portraits of Mary of Burgundy and Margaret of York, respectively. However, as Martens admits, there is little evidence to substantiate this theory, which was initially suggested by O. Rubbrecht, “Trois Portraits de la Maison de Bourgogne par Memling,” *Annales de la Société d’Emulation de Bruges*, LX (1910), 15-64; and corroborated by Weale, “Notes on Some Portraits of the Early Netherlandish School,” *The Burlington Magazine* 17 (1910), 174-77. On the singular topic of St Catherine as Mary of Burgundy see, P. Wescher, “Das höfische Bildnis von Phillip dem Guten bis zu Karl V, II,” *Pantheon* 18 (1941), 272. This theory has been widely rejected, particularly by H. Pauwels et al., *De Euw der Vlaamse Primitieven*, ex. cat., (Bruges, 1960), 107; and De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 157, fn. 13. Martens thus reopens the debate. Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 172-73.

<sup>127</sup> Martens, “Patronage and Politics,” 172.

century; however, this depiction seems further evidence of the patrons' desire to communicate their general status and privileged position in the details of the *St John Altarpiece*. Another detail evidencing contemporary references is the prominent portrayal in the central panel of St John the Baptist's skull, placed in an opening in the wall to the right of the saint's left arm. It is known that in the fifteenth century the hospital did possess a relic of St John and although it is not known what the relic was, it has been suggested that it was part of the saint's skull.<sup>128</sup> This feature has fresh implications with respect to the beheading episode in the left panel; the choice to depict this particular episode from the Baptist's life may be more directly related to the context of the Sint-Janshospitaal than typically thought. Interestingly, the hospital also had a relic of St Barbara, which further links the altarpiece's iconography to the Sint-Janshospitaal and is, perhaps, another indication of the patrons' desire to articulate the identity and status of their community.<sup>129</sup>

Although I concur with Martens in that the examination of the relationship between the hospital reform and the commission of the *St John Altarpiece* is crucial to our understanding of the altarpiece, this is a narrow and limiting approach. I do not think that this approach alone provides a complete view of the significance of the hospital context, or that Marten's findings can exist as a singular course of meaning; rather, they contribute one facet to the altarpiece's composite of meaning. These layers, or levels, of meaning would allow the altarpiece to express a *mélange* of intermeshed and interactive

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<sup>128</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 62, fn. 36; Weale, *Hans Memlinc: Biographie, Tableaux Conservés à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 49; *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976 I*, 204. Such relics were also in Amiens and the Sint Janskerk in Ghent. See, Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 62, fn. 38; Raoul Plus, *Saint-Jean-Baptiste dans l'art* (Paris, 1937), 47.

<sup>129</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 64, fn. 43; Weale, *Hans Memlinc*, 49.

meanings.<sup>130</sup> The specific context of fifteenth-century northern religious art, examined by Harbison and discussed above, necessitates the examination of Memling's altarpiece as a distinct, complex and interactive set of meanings, informed by rich and varied influences. For example, the daily life of the hospital community played an equally important role in the fashioning of the *St John Altarpiece* and its function as both a private and public monument.

*The St John Altarpiece and the Spiritual Life of the Hospital Community*

Shirley Neilsen Blum suggests that in addition to commemorating the Virgin and the two patron saints of the hospital, the altarpiece is a representation of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, denoting the duality of the lives of the brothers and sisters of the hospital community.<sup>131</sup> Within the central panel St Catherine, as visionary and a patroness of nuns, can be seen to embody the *vita contemplativa*, while St Barbara, patroness of soldiers, and traditionally invoked against sudden death, embodied the *vita activa*. Similarly, as demonstrated by their narratives in both the central and the side panels, St John the Baptist represents the *vita activa* and the Evangelist, the *vita contemplativa*. The placement of the patrons on the exterior therefore locates them as the earthly personifications of the correlative interior gathering, thus signifying the duality of life in the daily routines of the brothers and sisters of the hospital. However, Hull makes an observation that challenges this interpretation: St Barbara is portrayed serenely contemplating a book and is in close association with the host, iconography that specifically identifies her with her role as intercessor, rather than as the active patroness

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<sup>130</sup> How the *St John Altarpiece* expresses these interactive meanings and what they signify is discussed in further detail in chapter five.

<sup>131</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 92.

of soldiers.<sup>132</sup> This links her to, rather than distinguishes her from, St Catherine, as she too was called upon in instances of sudden death. Although the distinction between the representation of the *vita activa* and *contemplativa* is perhaps less clear than Blum suggests, this connection to the hospital community is still evident. The symmetry of representation of the two male and two female saints seems to refer again to the hospital community of monks and nuns, particularly those represented on the exterior wings of the *St John Altarpiece*.<sup>133</sup> This highlights the role of the altarpiece as an intercessory monument for the patrons, a role generally agreed upon in the literature and which I agree is a stratum of the altarpiece's multi-layered meaning. In addition to performing this function of "personal propitiation," the piece also functioned as a public altarpiece.<sup>134</sup> As the altarpiece for the church of the Sint-Janshospitaal, the *St John Altarpiece* was viewed by the hospital inmates and additionally by the brothers and sisters of the hospital. The role of the altarpiece as a public monument can be clarified by examining what little is known of the mundane and spiritual realities of its lay audience, the patients of the Sint-Janshospitaal.

*Death and the Afterlife: Eschatological Connotations with Respect to Hospital Commissions*

The everyday reality of the Sint-Janshospitaal was intimately connected with co-existent notions of death and the rituals and religious discourse surrounding it. Within the context of a hospital, such eschatological themes as the Apocalypse, Last Judgement, and the role of intercessors were of paramount and persistent importance. Contemporary notions of eschatology go hand in hand with the context of hospital iconography and,

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<sup>132</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 66.

<sup>133</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 155-56.

<sup>134</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 92.

naturally, with the role visual narrative played within that context. The purpose and function of Memling's altarpiece in the hospital environment is necessarily connected with the discourse on death, judgement and eschatology.

The spiritual welfare of the hospital's patients was considered to be just as or more important than their bodily welfare, particularly because the soul, unlike the body, was thought to be eternal. This concern for the spiritual aspect of the hospital patients' wellbeing is due also to the grim reality of the limitations of medieval medical care, and to the generally accepted belief that sinning could result in illness.<sup>135</sup> All patients and travellers admitted to the hospital were encouraged to participate in the religious observances of the hospital community and were subject to its rules.<sup>136</sup> In addition to requiring the patients' participation in the rites of confession upon admission to the hospital,<sup>137</sup> the hospital also conducted mass and anointed the sick, which ultimately involved extreme unction (the last rites).<sup>138</sup> The hospital church was conjoined with the open ward of the hospital; with no division between the two spaces, one could see into the church from the ward.<sup>139</sup> This spatial arrangement served to allow those in the ward to

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<sup>135</sup> See Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 30, fn. 9; and Yves Ferroul, "The Doctor and Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick, *Studies in the Humanities: Literature, Politics, Society XLV*, ed. Guy Mermier (New York, 1999), 31-50.

<sup>136</sup> Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 29.

<sup>137</sup> *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976 I*, 59; Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 29.

<sup>138</sup> *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 29; Dankwart Leistikow, *Ten Centuries of European Hospital Architecture*, trans. Oliver Hill and Amy Hogg (Ingelheim am Rhein, 1967).

<sup>139</sup> It was not until the eighteenth or nineteenth century that the church was separated from the ward with the construction of a wall. Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 40-41. The massive size of the *Last Judgement Altarpiece* at the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune, along with the pierced screen for ease of viewing, no doubt allowed many hospital patients to clearly see the altarpiece from their beds. The comparatively diminutive size of the *St John Altarpiece* seems to indicate that there was not a similar imperative for the patients of the Sint-Janshospitaal to clearly view the altarpiece from their beds. However, it was evidently important that the church not be separated from the ward in order that the patients could at least hear, and perhaps glimpse, the liturgical and sacred activities of the hospital church. On the *Last Judgement Altarpiece* at the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune and its strategic positioning and size see Lane, "Requiem aeternam dona eis," 170, fn. 25. Medieval hospitals typically utilize a chapel and ward combination. On this topic see Leistikow, *Ten Centuries of European Hospital Architecture*, trans. Oliver Hill and Amy Hogg (Ingelheim am Rhein,

see and experience the activities of the church, as their ability to participate in spiritual activities was considered an essential part of the healing process.<sup>140</sup>

Thus, as we have seen, in the study of the Sint-Janshospitaal and the *St John Altarpiece*, the social and historical context of the hospital must be considered together with the eschatological discourse inevitably attendant in any medieval hospital context. This particular context is generally associated with any hospital commission, and thus accounts for the unmistakable differences in altarpieces commissioned for different hospitals. There does not appear to be a specific formula of eschatological iconography bound to the hospital context in late-medieval northern Europe; however, apparent similarities may be attributed to the shared eschatologically-based concerns communicated by these commissions. Among the indications of mutual interest and concerns are the presence of intercessors (often associated with healing or invoked against sudden death) and a preoccupation with the process of death and the afterlife (manifested in diverse, but often comparable, ways). A comparison of Rogier van der Weyden's *Last Judgement Altarpiece* (from the Hotel-Dieu, Beaune of ca. 1445-48) and Nithart's *Isenheim Altarpiece* with the *St John Altarpiece* clarifies that these pieces evidence both mutual and divergent interests. Differences that did appear amongst hospital commissions can also be attributed to separate and distinct regional visual traditions.

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1967); John D. Thompson and Grace Goldin, *The Hospital: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London, 1975), 6-35; Alexis Chevalier, *L'Hôtel-Dieu de Paris et les Soeurs Augustine (650 à 1850)* (Paris, 1901), 3-39.

<sup>140</sup> There are varying opinions as to how many hospital beds were in the ward before the mid-sixteenth century. The following have suggested that the ward was comprised of approximately 240 beds in the fifteenth century: Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 87; Weale, *Bruges et ses Environs*, 172 ff. It has also been suggested that the number of beds in the fifteenth century was 100 (which would serve 150 patients). *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976* I, 63. Hull cautiously refers to the same number based on the aforementioned source. Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 37.

Like the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the *Beaune Last Judgement*, the *St John Altarpiece* depicts saints specifically associated with illness and/or who were customarily invoked during the process of dying. Christ is distinctly represented as the ultimate judge in the *Beaune Last Judgement*, suffering for the sins of mankind during the Crucifixion and Lamentation of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and as child and mystical marriage partner to St Catherine in the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece*. His death is an essential and prerequisite element in the Christian visualization and understanding of death.

The Virgin is also portrayed significantly in each of the three hospital altarpieces: on the exterior in grisaille and as a component of the Deësis in the *Beaune Last Judgement*; holding the Christ Child, weeping for His death at the Crucifixion on the exterior, and attending Him at the Lamentation in the exterior predella in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*; and finally, as the central enthroned figure holding the Christ Child in the *St John Altarpiece*.<sup>141</sup> The Virgin was not only considered the ultimate of intercessors, but her death was viewed as a model for every Christian to emulate.<sup>142</sup> As Jesus' mother and one who has a unique role at the time of the Last Judgement, she was consistently called upon as a powerful intercessor during the process of death.

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<sup>141</sup> A number of factors suggest a close association of the Virgin with the Sint-Janshospitaal. In addition to Mary being the patroness of Bruges, the hospital is located across from the Church of Our Lady. The ties between the church and the hospital were close. See Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 63; De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 155; and *Sint-Janshospitaal 1188/1976*, 41-75. Although little evidence exists, Blum has suggested that the hospital church was dedicated to Jesus' mother. Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 91.

<sup>142</sup> Roger S. Wieck connects Marian devotion and the belief of the Virgin's role as the ultimate intercessor to the striving for the medieval ideal of death, the "death desired." Wieck, "The Death Desired: Books of Hours and the Medieval Funeral," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, 431-76. Also, see the following on the role of the Virgin as intercessor and associations with death: Donald F. Duclow, "Dying Well: The *Ars Moriendi* and the Dormition of the Virgin," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, 379-429; Ilse E. Friesen, "Saints as Helpers in Dying: The Hairy Holy Women Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, and Wilgefortis in the Iconography of the Late Middle Ages," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, 246; Harvey Stahl, "Heaven in View: The Place of the Elect in an Illuminated Book of Hours," *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia, 2000), 215-20; and Marina Warner, "The Hour of Our Death," *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976), 315-31.

The Baptist also prominently figures as part of the Deësis in the Beaune *Last Judgement*, attendant at the Crucifixion on the exterior of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and in both the central and left panels of the *St John Altarpiece*.<sup>143</sup> The importance of baptism to the well-being of the eternal soul is well established in Scripture and seems alluded to in all three altarpieces. In Matthew 3:11 St John the Baptist declares, “I indeed baptize you with water into repentance; but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with Fire.”<sup>144</sup> According to Hayum, “This baptism with ‘the Holy Ghost and with Fire’ is the cosmic trial conducted by Jesus at the Last Judgment.”<sup>145</sup> In the Gospel of St Mark, chapter sixteen, verse sixteen, Christ reveals, “He who believes and is Baptised will be saved, he who does not believe will be condemned.” The saint’s role in the Deësis in the Beaune *Last Judgement*, his presence at the *Crucifixion* in the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and his evident connection with Christ in the central panel and the depiction of the baptism of Christ in the left panel of the *St John Altarpiece* all communicate the importance of baptism and the intercession of the Baptist in the life and death of a patient.

St Anthony, invoked against the dreaded disease, St Anthony’s Fire, and called on for his powers of healing, is also present in all three altarpieces: on the exterior right wing of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in grisaille on the exterior of the Beaune *Last Judgement*, and on the right of the exterior left wing of the *St John Altarpiece*, where he appears with a crutch (associated with St Anthony’s Fire) and his book.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> On St John the Baptist in a hospital context see Hayum, “*Fides ex Auditu*: John the Baptist, Baptism, and Judgment,” *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 89-117.

<sup>144</sup> Also, see Luke 3:16-7.

<sup>145</sup> Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 93.

<sup>146</sup> St Anthony’s Fire is now known as ergotism and is contracted by eating grain with the ergot fungus. Sufferers endure spasms, gangrenous limbs and hallucinations. On St Anthony in late medieval visual

St John the Evangelist is also represented: as one of the Apostles at the Last Judgement in Beaune, in the exterior Crucifixion scene and in the exterior and interior sculpted predella of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, and, of course, in the central and right panels of the *St John Altarpiece*. As one who was attendant at the Crucifixion and Lamentation, in addition to being the visionary of Revelation, St John would naturally have been considered an influential intercessor. In the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, the saint's role as a patron of the hospital is clearly a focal point (as it is for St John the Baptist). The Evangelist holds and blesses the poisoned chalice, from which thereafter flees the poison in the form of a serpent. Indeed, the two historiated capitals above the saint depict two episodes from his life that emphasize additional references to his "power over death:" the poisoned chalice and Drusiana's resurrection.<sup>147</sup> Surprisingly, the vision of the Apocalypse in Memling's altarpiece is less clearly commented on in the literature, nor is it linked directly to the hospital context, other than by general comments which suggest that the Apocalypse is appropriate in a hospital as it held a similar meaning to the Last Judgement, a theme often involved in the hospital context.<sup>148</sup>

The *St John Altarpiece* portrays five saints who are unrepresented in either the *Isenheim Altarpiece* or the Beaune *Last Judgement*. Kneeling at the feet of the Virgin in the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece* are St Catherine of Alexandria and St Barbara, both influential intercessors invoked by those facing death, particularly sudden death without the assistance of the last rites. The two martyrs were among the fourteen *Nodhelferen*, or Holy Helpers, a group of saints who enjoyed great popularity toward the

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programmes in the hospital context see Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, 20-21, 30-37; and C. D. Cuttler, "The Temptation of St. Anthony in Art," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1952.

<sup>147</sup> Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 62.

<sup>148</sup> This is examined in more detail below. De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 155-56.

middle of the fifteenth century due to their status as powerful intercessors.<sup>149</sup> St Catherine is, of course, also portrayed as the bride of Christ.

St Agnes and St Clare appear as patron saints to the female donors on the exterior right wing of Memling's altarpiece. St Agnes is portrayed holding a string to which her attribute, the lamb, is attached. Interestingly, St Agnes, like St Catherine, was also associated with mystic marriage to Christ in the later Middle Ages, particularly in the Utrecht Diocese.<sup>150</sup> St Clare holds a monstrance in which the Eucharistic Host is clearly visible. St James the Great is depicted on the exterior left wing of the altarpiece, to the left of St Anthony. St James appears with his staff and pilgrim's hat as patron saint of pilgrims and crusaders, and of the hospital brother kneeling in front of him.

*Dying the "Good Death": the Liturgy, Death Discourse and the Apocalypse*

The *St John Altarpiece* has been the subject of a number of analyses that focus on the impact of the liturgy upon its meaning.<sup>151</sup> Both De Vos and Hull have suggested that the central panel, in particular, alludes to the Holy Mass.<sup>152</sup> The Virgin is seen to represent and function as a sacred altar,<sup>153</sup> while the Eucharistic Host, observed both

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<sup>149</sup> On St. Barbara's particular popularity as one invoked against sudden death in the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages (including stories of miracles associated with the saint) see Mathilde Van Dijk, "Travelling-Companion in the Journey of Life: Saint Barbara of Nicomedia in a *Devotio Moderna* Context," *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, 221-37.

<sup>150</sup> Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," *Apocalypse as Utopian Expectation (800-1500)* (Leiden, 1996), 161-62; Visser, "Neither Humanist Nor Protestant: Ring, Betrothal, and Marriage in Literary and Artistic Discourse as Metaphors of Salvation by Grace," *Archive for Reformation History* (1993), 133-34.

<sup>151</sup> For general information on the Apocalypse in medieval liturgy see C. Clifford Flanigan, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Liturgy," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 333-51. While Coleman prefers a liturgical interpretation of the *St John Altarpiece*, focusing on connections with the Eucharistic rite, she also acknowledges that the altarpiece integrated the political interests of the hospital. However, her reading of the altarpiece focuses on her liturgical inquiry, arguing that the central theme of the altarpiece was "mystical union with God." Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 120-24, 142.

<sup>152</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 151; Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 63-64.

<sup>153</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 154. Blum, however, believes that this is not the case as the architecture surrounding the Virgin in Memling's altarpiece does not suggest a church interior. Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St. Johns," 94.

through the window of St Barbara's tower and in St Clare's monstrance, is an unmistakable reference to the sacrament of communion.<sup>154</sup> Further allusions to the Eucharist are embodied by the two St Johns: St John the Evangelist blesses the chalice of wine as a priest might during mass; the Baptist, with the lamb, indicates the Christ Child, the "true sacrificial lamb" referenced in the sacrament of Holy Communion.<sup>155</sup> De Vos has made the suggestion, albeit speculative, that the musical angel and the Virgin's studious concentration communicate further conventions of the Holy Mass.<sup>156</sup> The liturgical references seem both demonstrated and deliberate, and, whether or not they were appreciated and understood by all viewers (i.e. the laity), they were undoubtedly intended to provide inspiration and direction for the benefit of the life, and thus the inevitable death, of the viewer.<sup>157</sup> Liturgical connotations carry particular import within a

<sup>154</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 151; Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 63-64.

<sup>155</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 151. On the Eucharist and lay people see: Harbison, "The Northern Altarpiece", 68.

<sup>156</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 151.

<sup>157</sup> Craig Harbison argues resolutely for the primacy of private and lay devotion as an informant of art historical interpretation and as a "motivating force" in the production of fifteenth-century Flemish painting. He leaves little room for explorations into "complex theological meaning" and liturgically based art historical interpretation and argues their irrelevance (based on contemporary lay attitudes toward religion). Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 87-91, 118. See also Harbison, review of "The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting," by Barbara Lane, *Simiolus*, 15, 3-4 (1985), 221-24; and Jacques Toussaert, *Le Sentiment Religieux en Flandre à la Fin du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1965). While it is true that much art historical scholarship focuses on such liturgically based analyses to the exclusion of other perhaps more comprehensive approaches (that consider private and lay devotion, for example), these liturgically based analyses nevertheless warrant consideration alongside those that maintain the value of private and lay piety. Although it is possible that the lay viewer was not concerned with (or did not have access to) these liturgically based meanings, it does not mean that these meanings were not referred to in religious art. An altarpiece could be relevant for and communicate with different audiences in multiple ways. In rejecting such liturgically based analyses Harbison sacrifices countless avenues of further investigation and, in a way, negates a fundamental tenet/theory of a later article (discussed above, p.6-7) in which he says that fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Flemish triptychs were sites of multiple meaning, "fertile" ground upon which it is possible to observe the "interaction[s]" of these multiplicities of meaning. Harbison, "The Northern Altarpiece," 49-75, esp. 74-75. See pp. 65-66 of this chapter for further discussion of the late medieval Flemish altarpiece as a site of multiple, interactive meanings.

While keeping the impact of lay devotion in mind (see chapter five for a discussion of how the *St John Altarpiece* functioned as a site of lay vision and meditation), I believe that the Sint-Janshospitaal context proves the validity of such a liturgical interpretation, for the *St John Altarpiece* as the promotion of the ideal Christian death (discussed below) was inseparable from the sacraments. Thus, promoting the practice of the sacraments was an instrumental goal of the spiritual care given by the hospital community in

hospital context like that of Sint-Janshospitaal. They reference concern with the entire experience and process of dying, inclusive of the practice of religion in daily life and of the notion of accountability for how one lives until the point of death. In addition, these liturgical associations play a role in enabling the achievement of an exemplary Christian death, the “death desired,” a concept that was much contemplated in the late-medieval Christian world.<sup>158</sup> As in Memling’s piece, the juxtaposition of liturgical imagery with the depiction of powerful intercessors (called upon against, or in times of sudden death when the last rites are not, or cannot be performed) creates an entire framework of religious instruction for death particular to a hospital context.

Contemplation on and preoccupation with the “death desired” is further evidenced in the late fifteenth century with the introduction of the *Ars moriendi*, or *Art of Dying Well*.<sup>159</sup> The *Ars moriendi* was a manual for the ideal Christian death and was the most widely available treatise on death in Europe, particularly northern Europe.<sup>160</sup> Used mainly by the clergy to assist the laity in preparation for dying, the *Ars moriendi* manifests a heightened interest in working toward an ideal death, an interest that was of more immediate concern in the hospital environment. It was never too early to work to

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that context, which, as discussed above (pp. 72-74), had as its primary goal the spiritual care of the hospital inmates.

<sup>158</sup> Duclow, “Dying Well,” 379-429; Wieck, “The Death Desired,” 431-76; Paul Binski, “The Good Death,” “Chapter One: Ways of Dying and Rituals of Death,” *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London, 1996), 33-47, fn 133.

<sup>159</sup> On the history and use of the *Ars moriendi* see, Duclow, “Dying Well,” 379-429; and Mary Catherine O’Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars moriendi* (New York, 1941). In the fifteenth century, the parallel development of the visual representation of the Dance of Death, or the *Danse Macabre*, further indicates the interest in death and its contemplation.

<sup>160</sup> Among the information disseminated in the *Ars moriendi* are the five temptations at the time of death and those five inspirations suggested to counteract those temptations. Thus, the temptation against faith is conquered with the confirmation of faith; the despair over sins is surmounted by the hope for mercy through contrition; impatience, by charity and patience; complacency, with humility (recollection of sins); and, finally, avarice is subjugated with the practice of detachment. Duclow, “Dying Well,” 381.

ensure a “good death.” It is both noteworthy and significant that these sentiments toward death proliferated within the climate of late Middle Ages.

According to John Aberth,

What made the late medieval era unusual was a confluence of crises that threatened to make these visions of the Apocalypse become real. At no other time in history did so much variegated misery – famine, war, plague, and death – descend all at once as upon England and Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>161</sup>

Records from Bruges indicate it suffered a five percent loss of its total population within a period of six months in 1316, losses probably caused by the Great Famine that affected northern Europe from 1315-22.<sup>162</sup> In Flanders, between 1365 and 1424, the loss of life during the scourge of the Black Death was dramatic: over one-third of the population perished.<sup>163</sup> Suffering was widespread; all of Europe endured. Recent eschatological studies concerning the Middle Ages associate this threatening climate with the proliferation of complex notions of death, the end of time and the afterlife, which in turn had become inextricably linked in the minds of medieval religious personnel, intellectuals and lay people alike.<sup>164</sup> Thus, events of apparent apocalyptic proportions were accompanied by the attendant appreciation and realization of the inevitability of death.

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<sup>161</sup> John Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages (New York and London, 2001), 6.

<sup>162</sup> Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse, 18. See Aberth’s discussion on famine in the context of medieval Apocalypse discourse and his bibliography on famine in the late Middle Ages: 9-55, 278-80.

<sup>163</sup> Monnéage or hearth tax records indicate this population decline in Flanders. See Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse, 131. Aberth’s bibliography on the plague in the Middle Ages is excellent: 283-89. See also Laura A. Smoller, “Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography: Plague and Investigation of the Apocalypse in the Later Middle Ages,” Last Things, 156-87, fn. 5; Binski, “The Macabre, the Black Death and ‘Cultural Causation’,” “The Macabre,” Medieval Death, 126-34.

<sup>164</sup> Bynum and Freedman, “Introduction,” Last Things, 1. Also see Smoller, “Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography”; ed. DuBruck and Gusick, Death and Dying in the Middle Ages; Binski, Medieval Death; Herman Braet and Werner Verbeke, ed. Death in the Middle Ages (Leuven, 1983); Aberth, From the Brink of the Apocalypse. On the five main components of the medieval funeral see Wieck, “The Death Desired,” 434-42. Frederick S. Paxton, Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe (Ithaca and London, 1990).

The end of the world was never far removed from the medieval psyche. Concepts concerning the Apocalypse were, unsurprisingly, connected with notions of dying and the afterlife, themes of crucial concern in a medieval hospital. Death was/is inevitable, as was the Apocalypse and impending Last Judgement. Preparation was therefore essential. The Apocalypse was a clearly a pertinent subject for a hospital context because of its inescapable association with contemporary notions of the process of dying, death, the afterlife and the preordination of the end of the world.

The means whereby this sense of the imminent nature of death is realized and expressed is another issue of vital importance to the understanding of Memling's Apocalypse panel, the entire *St John Altarpiece* and northern hospital commissions such as the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the *Beaune Last Judgement*. The relative serenity of the *St John Altarpiece* has been remarked upon -- it marks a departure from the customary dark warnings of the impending judgement and the horrible effects of illness.<sup>165</sup> Further, many scholars perceive an incongruity between Memling's calm, placid style and the horrors of the Apocalypse.<sup>166</sup>

The *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the *Beaune Last Judgement* share a purposeful sense of urgency. In its own hospital context, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* is ultimately concerned with suffering, illness and healing, as exemplified and demonstrated in its depictions of Christ and the saints.<sup>167</sup> The altarpiece communicates these messages with an immediacy wrought by visceral depictions of the raw suffering, pain and sorrow of, among others, Christ, the Virgin and St Anthony (figs. 26, 28). Contrasting these scenes of misery are

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<sup>165</sup> Hull, *Hans Memling's Paintings*, 74-75.

<sup>166</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns," 95; De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 38; van der Meer, *Apocalypse*, 259, 270-71.

<sup>167</sup> See Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*.

poignant scenes depicting moments of sweet, transcendent joy as seen, for example, in the panels of the Virgin and Child and the Resurrection (fig. 27). On an emotional, intuitive, yet painstakingly symbolic level this altarpiece communicates messages associated with illness, healing and death and is representative of the consequential nature of contemporary death discourse discussed in the previous chapter. The Beaune *Last Judgement* confronted the medieval hospital viewer with a massive unbroken field upon which were played out for each soul the final moments determinative of either salvation or damnation (fig. 29). The immediacy and intent of this altarpiece is comparable to that of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*; both carry a timely message to the hospital viewer: As you suffer, so did Christ, so did the Virgin in her sorrow, so did the saints; as you experience your final and ultimate journey, know and take comfort in those who have walked before you, those who, if appealed to, can assist you in reaching your final destination.

In contrast to both the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the Beaune *Last Judgement*, Memling's *St John Altarpiece* proffers a vision of tranquility and peace, which is particularly observable in the treatment of the Apocalypse in the right panel. Scholarly literature tends to identify the serenity of the *St John Altarpiece* as characteristic of Memling's calm and placid style. However, when one compares Memling's *St John Altarpiece* with his vigorous and intense *Last Judgement Triptych*, it becomes apparent that the serenity of representation in the former altarpiece is entirely conscious and calculated, and not merely a manifestation of the artist's stylistic choices (fig. 30). The *St John Altarpiece* seems less willing to impress upon its viewer the harshness of one's last moments in this world or anxiety about journeying to the next.

Although commonly dismissed as a general, stylistic quality of the artist, the altarpiece's serene tone and expression instead alerts us to the more complex environment that lies behind the unique composition of the Apocalypse panel. As we shall see, the role of the contemplative participation of the viewer, in relation to new approaches to the idea of Apocalypse and the Last Things, the emergence of new forms of devotional painting, together with an emphasis on "virtual" visual pilgrimage, combine to help us uncover a new way of reading the *St John Altarpiece* within the context of late-medieval private devotional experience and practice.

## Chapter Five: The Indivisible Landscape of Vision

In previous chapters, I outlined the gradual distillation of late-medieval visual cycles of the Apocalypse and the simultaneous emergence of the devotional focus on St John within the artistic production of Bruges. The apparently paradoxical calm of Memling's Apocalypse panel can be better appreciated and understood when it is contextualized by this condensed narrative strategy and the resulting focus on St John. As we identified in chapter four, Memling's tonal "deviation" from the conventional dark depiction of the Apocalypse is typically – one might say – superficially, ascribed to the style of the artist himself. According to Derk Visser, Memling's panel participated in a contemporary Apocalypse discourse that stressed an optimistic, "utopian" view of the end of the world. Visser contends that the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* of the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece* is representative of the *Marriage of the Lamb*, a propitious culmination of the unfinished Apocalypse narrative of the right panel. In this chapter I will build further on this interactive, "cross-panel" reading to include the remaining panels of the *St John Altarpiece* in the context of contemporary notions of private devotional experience and practice. Indeed, as stated by Harbison, "... by the fifteenth century paintings were taken as essential instruments for stimulating popular religious devotion. The reciprocal relationship between image and meditation was recognized and exploited....[In fact,] it [i.e., art] became identical with the contemplative process itself."<sup>168</sup> The serene and

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<sup>168</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 114. "At least a nominal part of even clerical meditations, images can be seen to have played an increasing role in the process of making a somewhat difficult body of monastic devotional practice accessible to the lay person in the fifteenth century" (Harbison, 114). See the Introduction of this thesis, pp. 13-14. See also Bret Rothstein, "Vision and Devotion in Jan van Eyck's *Virgin and Child with Canon Joris van der Paele*," *Word and Image*, 15, no. 3 (1999), 262-76; and Rothstein, "Vision, Cognition, and Self-Reflection in Rogier van der Weyden's *Bladeline Triptych*," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 64, no. 1 (2001), 37-55. Of particular interest is Rothstein's forthcoming publication: *Sight and Spirituality in Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge, forthcoming). According to the Cambridge University Press summary of Rothstein's book, the author examines how vision is important

restrained quality of Memling's panel, when viewed from this context, not only indicates a connection with a general regional impetus toward representing St John as percipient and visionary model, but also signals a link to characteristic fifteenth-century Flemish notions of contemplation and meditation. As we will see, these notions privilege a "restrained" and "rational approach" and include both "empathic meditation" and "mental pilgrimage."<sup>169</sup> When viewed within this context, the Apocalypse panel can be read according to a more inclusive method for reading the entire *St John Altarpiece* that considers the impact of an intermingling of meaning across the various panels of the altarpiece (in both its open and closed position). In order to better understand Memling's peaceful representation of the Apocalypse, it is necessary to further consider contemporary Apocalypse discourse in greater detail.

*"Utopian" Apocalypse Discourse and the Marriage of the Lamb*

Although the darker view of medieval Apocalypse culture espoused earlier by scholars such as Johann Huizinga has been contested, this view still continues to influence some scholarly approaches to Apocalypse iconography.<sup>170</sup> This view has also had an impact on the study of the *St John Altarpiece*:

The use of the Apocalypse [in the *St John Altarpiece*], the vision of the end of the world ... was no doubt also intentional. It has the same admonitory and cautionary function with regard to death as the Last Judgement, another common hospital theme.<sup>171</sup>

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in the context of both narrative and meaning in early-Netherlandish painting and connects the experience of the viewer with the process of visionary practice and understanding.

<sup>169</sup> Hull, "Devotional Aspects of Hans Memling's Paintings," 208.

<sup>170</sup> Johann Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: a Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, trans. F. Hopman (1<sup>st</sup> edn 1924; Garden City, 1954). One example of those authors that refute Huizinga's view of medieval culture (in addition to those discussed on pp. 86-87 of this chapter) is Svetlana Alpers, who discusses Huizinga's view specifically in relation to Memling's oeuvre. Alpers, "I Wouldn't Mind Trying to Teach Him Again," review of *Hans Memling: The Complete Works*, by Dirk De Vos, *London Review of Books* 17, 7 (April 1995), 19.

<sup>171</sup> De Vos, *Hans Memling*, 155-56.

I will suggest that this “admonitory and cautionary function” may not have been as prevalent or pervasive as previously believed.

Derk Visser has suggested the existence of a dichotomy in medieval Apocalypse discourse and notes these differing perspectives:

The first focused on the fearful reign of the Antichrist and the horrors of hell. The other, instead, looked forward to the second coming of Christ as the fulfillment of the promise of salvation at the end of time when the paradise of the first creation will be restored.<sup>172</sup>

Although not specifically talking about our altarpiece, Vida Hull notes that, “The serene, harmonious paintings of Hans Memlinc scarcely seem indicative of the historical period characterized by Huizinga as a time of emotional extremism, declining religious sensibilities, superstition and preoccupation with the macabre.”<sup>173</sup> Instead, inherent in these Apocalypse traditions was a reassuring message of hope and recovery.<sup>174</sup> Again, this motif of encouragement can be linked with what Visser terms a late-medieval “utopian,” optimistic interpretation of the Apocalypse.

To better understand this shift, an extended discussion of the role of the Berengaudus gloss is now in order, since its influence is considered by some scholars to have prompted the change. Visser posits that Berengaudus’ Apocalypse commentary, the *Expositio*, particularly impacted the Low Countries in the late Middle Ages.<sup>175</sup> He connects this with a transmission of a “‘utopian’ mentality,” an “Augustinian exegesis” that viewed the Apocalypse, not as the dark and horrific end of either one’s life or the

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<sup>172</sup> Visser, “Introduction,” *Apocalypse as Utopian Expectation*, 2. See also for a discussion of authors and anthologies that propagate the so-called negative, “apocalyptic” approach.

<sup>173</sup> Hull, “Devotional Aspects of Hans Memlinc’s Paintings,” *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 11, 3 (1988), 207.

<sup>174</sup> Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, 255.

<sup>175</sup> See chapter two, pp. 32-33, fn. 55.

world, but as a beginning, the harbinger of the Second Coming of Christ.<sup>176</sup> “For Berengaudus, death is but an interlude in the life of the believer’s body ... at the second coming [of Christ] it will resume its body.”<sup>177</sup>

According to Visser, the transmission of this utopian mentality into the Low Countries in the later Middle Ages is attributable to the increased availability of the *Expositio* and to the existence of numerous Apocalypse manuscripts with the Berengaudus gloss in the Paris royal library and in the collection of the Dukes of Burgundy.<sup>178</sup> He suggests that the iconographic influence of these manuscripts (and thus the influence of Berengaudus’ *Expositio*) can be easily detected in Bruges, for instance, in the central panels of Jan van Eyck’s altarpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb* (ca. 1432) and Memling’s *St John Altarpiece* (fig. 31).<sup>179</sup> Indeed, van Eyck’s *The Adoration of the Lamb* offers a particularly bright account of salvation history:

His [Van Eyck’s] vision of salvation history is entirely optimistic; it focuses on the promises of the Redeemer and the result of redemption: only those that are saved, bought by the blood of Christ, gather around the Lamb on its altar.<sup>180</sup>

Visser locates the origins of the Ghent altarpiece’s utopian-centred theology within the *Expositio* and suggests that the *Expositio* is not only useful in the interpretation of the

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<sup>176</sup> Visser, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>177</sup> Visser, “Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism,” 181.

<sup>178</sup> Visser, “Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism,” 152-53. For further discussion of the availability of the *Expositio* in the Low Countries see Visser, 153.

<sup>179</sup> The Paris Apocalypse (B.N. ms. Neérl. 3), discussed in detail in chapter two, pp. 43-49, is also mentioned as being connected to this group of influential manuscripts, although Visser does not elaborate on how this manuscript may be specifically connected with either the Ghent altarpiece or Memling’s *St John Altarpiece*. Visser, “Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism,” 152-53.

<sup>180</sup> Visser, “Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism,” 152.

theological background to the *Adoration of the Lamb*, but also to the understanding of the *St John Altarpiece*.<sup>181</sup>

Referenced by Visser, and of further interest and particular relevance to Memling's *St John Altarpiece*, is the relationship between the utopian mentality and *Marriage of the Lamb* iconography, an episode featured prominently in the nineteenth chapter of Revelation and a recurring theme in Apocalypse illumination.<sup>182</sup> Berengaudus' *Expositio* explicitly correlates the *Marriage of the Lamb* with the assurance of salvation. This covenantal relationship of salvation between God and His devotee is expressed by *Marriage of the Lamb* iconography. Depictions of the ring ceremony itself, such as that between Christ and St Catherine and as seen in the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, were similarly held to be symbolic of the promise of eternal salvation and became a recognized metaphor for the *Marriage of the Lamb*.<sup>183</sup> Visser notes that Memling's Apocalypse panel does not reference chapters fourteen through twenty-two of Revelation, passages that form the climax of John's vision (namely the marriage of the lamb and the establishment of the New Jerusalem), and postulates that instead they are referenced in and symbolized by the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* in the central panel.<sup>184</sup> Rather than assuming that the absence of the optimistic, concluding episodes of the Apocalypse is indicative of a focus on the "dark" aspects of Apocalypse narrative, he

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<sup>181</sup> Visser points particularly to a similar focus on characteristic iconographic elements within the *Expositio* and the *Adoration of the Lamb*, such as the separation of saints into recognizable categories such as virgins and martyrs as we see in the lower central panel of *The Adoration of the Lamb*. Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," 153.

<sup>182</sup> Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," 158-59.

<sup>183</sup> According to Visser, this concept is further reinforced by mystical writers such as Jan van Ruusbroec (Vanden Vingherlinc, "On the [finger]-ring"). Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," 158.

<sup>184</sup> Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," 161. In an earlier article, Visser mentions that both St Barbara (seated across from St Catherine in the *St John Altarpiece*) and St Agnes (in green on the right exterior wing) are recognized as brides of Christ. As testimony to this connection in the *St John Altarpiece*, St Agnes holds a ring attached by a string to a lamb at her feet. Visser, "Neither Humanist nor Protestant," 134.

interprets it to be a prelude which then finds its culmination in the revelatory vision of the ring ceremony in the central panel. Visser suggests that this theme is evidenced in the central panel by St John the Baptist who gestures toward the marriage ceremony itself, and not solely toward the Christ Child, thus directing the viewer's attention to this event. The author also indicates that this may allude to John 3:29, in which the saint reveals the following: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom." St John the Evangelist is, of course, the author who records the Baptist's words in his Gospel and their fulfillment (the marriage of Christ and the Church) in Revelation.<sup>185</sup> Thus, Visser references elements of a "utopian" Apocalypse tradition and connects these with features of Memling's *St John Altarpiece*.<sup>186</sup>

I would like to point to additional evidence beyond that addressed by Visser which further strengthens the claim that the central panel of the *St John Altarpiece* functions as the completion of the "unfinished" Apocalypse panel. St Catherine is distinguished from the other saints gathered in the central sacred vision by the similarity between the rich patterned fabric of her gown and the cloth of honour hung behind the Virgin and Child. This attests to the artist's apparent intent to highlight St Catherine and the *mystic marriage*. St John the Baptist's role in the altarpiece also further evidences iconographic connections between the *mystic marriage of St Catherine* and the *Marriage of the Lamb*. Accompanying St John in the central panel is, as expected, the Lamb, which was commonly known to signal the saint's words about Jesus: "Ecce Agnus Dei" ("Behold the Lamb of God"). St John's martyrdom depicted in the left panel may also be symbolic of the sacrifice of the Lamb. As the saint's blood spills from his gaping wound,

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<sup>185</sup> Visser, "Berengaudus, Jan van Eyck and Fifteenth Century Mysticism," 156-57.

<sup>186</sup> Visser also suggests that Van Eyck's *Adoration of the Lamb* references *mystic marriage* iconography. See Visser, "Neither Humanist nor Protestant," 129-31.

the viewer is reminded of the blood shed by the Lamb/Christ for the salvation of mankind. The Baptist's sacrifice recollects that of the Lamb/Christ.

Visser's hypothesis seems supported by the serenity of expression observable in Memling's Apocalypse panel. This feature can, at least in part, be attributed to the "utopian" discourse that Visser has identified as a significant component of medieval piety. The communication of sacred messages based upon a "utopian" mentality can be promoted by an overall tone of serenity. Additionally, it is significant that Memling begins the panel's narrative with the fourth chapter of Revelation. In this chapter St John is transported to the state of being "in the spirit," from which he is able to envision the details of the events of the Apocalypse. Those events displayed in the panel are primarily physical manifestations of the Apocalypse on earth, events that, as discussed in chapter four, were considered to be occurring contemporarily. The panel does not reference the majority of the mystical aspects of the Apocalypse (occurrences not manifest on earth such as those found in Revelation chapters fourteen through twenty-two) and focuses more on "this-worldly" concerns as to the effect of the Apocalypse on earth, leaving the central panel to symbolize its mystical culmination. To reiterate a crucial point, "medievalists are now more inclined to find it [apocalyptic sentiment] mingled with this-worldly concerns, a lens through which experience and change were viewed ...."<sup>187</sup> This would suggest that Memling's Apocalypse was representative of an emergent tradition that was moving away from a strictly dark interpretation.

Hypotheses that privilege either a wholly "utopian" or a wholly "dark" view of the Apocalypse are by nature reductionist, as they act to curtail further inquiry into the rich and heterogeneous nature of medieval piety. Defining Apocalypse discourse as a

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<sup>187</sup> Bynum and Freedman, "Introduction," *Last Things*, 4.

dichotomy, as Visser has done, can create an oversimplified view of what was an organic and complex composite of perspectives on the Apocalypse. Both perspectives, as well as their productive interaction, must be considered in any analysis of the Apocalypse tradition in order to avoid generalizing the nature of either the tradition or the example in question.

Visser also does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that the Berengaudus gloss had long been utilized in the Anglo-French Apocalypse tradition, which had, as discussed in chapters two and three, been influential in Flanders for quite some time. The gloss was used (in one form or another) in twenty-four out of the eighty extant Anglo-French Apocalypse manuscripts.<sup>188</sup> Suzanne Lewis further traces the influence of the Berengaudus gloss: “Indeed it can be shown that all Anglo-French Apocalypses, whether furnished with commentaries or not, descend from one of the distinctive cycles of illustration created for the Berengaudus and French prose glosses.”<sup>189</sup> As previously discussed, the Anglo-French tradition had a significantly different approach to the representation of St John and the Apocalypse narrative from that chosen by Memling. The Anglo-French tradition showcases the Apocalypse episodes as a sequential narrative that does not give precedence to selected themes of the Apocalypse, such as the *Marriage of the Lamb*. Consequently, in comparison to Memling’s altarpiece and the Ghent altarpiece, the utopian influence does not seem to be clearly demonstrated and focused on as a theme in the Anglo-French tradition. Although the true extent of the *Expositio*’s impact (and thus also the impact of a utopian discourse connected with marriage iconography) on Bruges’ Apocalypse tradition cannot be fully explored in this thesis, it

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<sup>188</sup> See Emmerson and Lewis. “Census and Bibliography, II,” 370-409

<sup>189</sup> Lewis, “Exegesis and Illustration in Thirteenth Century English Apocalypses,” *Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 260.

becomes apparent that, because of the commentary's relationship with the Anglo-French tradition, and the seeming lack of a utopian influence in that tradition, utopian inclinations must be traceable to influences beyond the Berengaudus gloss in the case of the *St John Altarpiece*.

As previous chapters have argued, the Apocalypse tradition of late-medieval Bruges must be considered against a background that is inclusive of contributions made by the visual traditions of Bruges and the actual physical environment of individual art works. With respect to the *St John Altarpiece*, it would be short-sighted and restrictive to attribute its stylistic, compositional and narrative elements (such as the narrative focus on St John and the condensation of the Apocalypse narrative) to the utopian theory alone, in isolation from connections with its artistic and hospital context. As discussed in previous chapters of this thesis, these stylistic, compositional and narrative elements signal a momentous shift in the reception of the Apocalypse in fifteenth-century Bruges. Further insight into this shift in reception lies with an examination of contemporary private devotional experience and practice.

Although Visser does not thoroughly investigate the influence of Berengaudus' *Expositio* and the utopian discourse on Memling's *St John Altarpiece*, he does distinguish an intriguing narrative connection between the Apocalypse panel and the central panel of the altarpiece, suggesting that the central panel is Memling's calculated resolution of the "unfinished" Apocalypse panel. This interactive relationship between the two panels not only introduces and facilitates a method for the inclusive reading of the altarpiece, but also reveals an inaugural step taken by Visser toward recognizing the necessity to consider the altarpiece as an indivisible whole. His analysis also serves to look beyond

Apocalypse discourse and iconography to inform an examination and discussion of Memling's Apocalypse panel. If, as Visser contends, the right and central panels reference each other with respect to theological and devotional messages, then surely the remaining panels must also be involved in this process.<sup>190</sup> It is my opinion that Memling has configured his panels such that they are interdependent; this signals how the *St John Altarpiece* should be read and that the panels are inter-related, not only with respect to form (physically, by their very hinges), but also with respect to content. This theory of interactive configuration is supported by the insufficiently acknowledged realm of private devotional experience and practice.

*Private Devotional Experience and Practice in Late-Medieval Flemish Art*

Speaking in general about Flemish fifteenth-century painting, Craig Harbison establishes that religious art played a primary role in the rise of lay devotion in fifteenth-century Flanders. Consequently, in this context there is a discernible shift in the reception of religious art.

In fifteenth-century Flanders we find a religious art in which individual piety is the prime motivating force; not scholastic disputation, transcendent ecstasy or liturgical ritual, but a calculated, personal religious experience, the vision or meditation is found at the center of things.<sup>191</sup>

Acknowledging that the affirmation and proliferation of lay devotion was burgeoning in late-medieval Flanders, Harbison proposes that complex theological or liturgically based art historical interpretations can often obscure the "chief religious ideal of the time, lay

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<sup>190</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 106.

<sup>191</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 87. See also Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary," 181-82; Ringbom, "Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions: Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, series 6, 73 (1969), 159-70, esp. 164-66; and Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 11-22, 30-39. See the following for a general discussion of art and meditation: David Freedberg, "Invisibilia per visibilia: Meditation and the Uses of Theory," *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago and London, 1989), 161-91.

visions and meditations.”<sup>192</sup> In addition to frequently fostering a connection with its viewer on more complex theological and liturgical levels of meaning,<sup>193</sup> late-medieval Flemish religious art also promoted the stimulation of vision or meditation, to connect with the viewer at a fundamental level of lay piety. The recognition of the coexistence of levels of meaning in late-medieval Flemish art is of vital importance to its study, particularly as related to content of a visionary character because, as we shall see, these levels of meaning could be understood in unity through a visionary perspective.<sup>194</sup>

*The Representation of St John as Visionary in Flemish Religious Art*

Both Peter Klein and Suzanne Lewis note an increase in the emphasis on vision and the visionary in thirteenth-century English cycles of the Apocalypse.<sup>195</sup> Furthermore, in the Anglo-French tradition, St John is frequently depicted as an emotionally responsive “visionary agent” and “active observer” peeking into the main frame/illustration, often through a portal of varied form or a window, through which the main action of the

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<sup>192</sup> Harbison, “Visions and Meditations,” 91. We are here reminded of Harbison’s argument against the value of liturgically based analyses in the study of fifteenth-century Flemish altarpieces. While Harbison highlights a crucial avenue for further reflection (lay visions and meditation), as discussed in chapter four I believe that liturgical analyses yield essential information about the meaning of the *St John Altarpiece*, but should be executed in tandem with other methods of investigation. See chapter four of this thesis, fn. 157, for a detailed treatment of this topic.

<sup>193</sup> See Flannigan, “The Apocalypse in Medieval Liturgy,” 333-51. As discussed in chapter four, pp. 78-81, there have been a number of art historical observations and interpretations of Hans Memling’s *St John Altarpiece* that employ a liturgically based inquiry.

<sup>194</sup> The term visionary here refers to the illustration of subjects concerning (mystical) visions, meaning depictions of visionaries, a well-known visionary’s vision, or a representation that is meant to be a vision in and of itself.

<sup>195</sup> Klein, “From the Heavenly to the Trivial: Vision and Visual Perception in Early and High Medieval Apocalypse Illustration,” *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation: Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf, (Bologna, 1996), 275; Lewis, *Reading Images*. For a discussion on shifting approaches to vision and visual perception as communicated by Apocalypse illustrations throughout the early Middle Ages to the twelfth century see Klein, 247-78. According to Klein “the visionary character of the Apocalypse” was not a principal concern “for the Early Christian and early medieval commentators.” However, in the twelfth century this way of thinking changed when, “... in both commentaries and illustrations of the Apocalypse, we notice a specific emphasis being given to the visionary element. Hence, in this regard, the twelfth century definitely marks a change.” Klein, 247, 274-75. This interest continued to develop in the thirteenth century.

episodes of the Apocalypse is taking place.<sup>196</sup> St John is also frequently placed within the illustrations as an active participant and as a preceptor whose emotional responses act to model as well as expound the visionary experience and the visual expression of the Apocalypse.<sup>197</sup> According to Lewis, "... the author of the Apocalypse became the hero of an interior spiritual experience that could be viewed as exemplary by layperson and cleric alike."<sup>198</sup> Lewis confidently examines thirteenth-century Apocalypse traditions and discusses the contemporary reader in relation to these traditions:

The reader is ... situated within a literal lexical experience defined by the vellum page and the difficult-to-decipher discourse of the text .... The illustrations are then perceived to exist within their frames, not only as representations of the text, but also as pictorial signifiers of an inner world that lies beyond the mundane and material, enabling the reader to experience the text as John perceived his visions, that is, 'in the spirit.' For John on Patmos, as well as for medieval readers and exegetes, spiritual understanding was an act of seeing.<sup>199</sup>

Fifteenth-century Flemish painting exhibits an increasing interest in the representation of the visionary. Harbison addresses fifteenth-century notions of the visionary in Flanders:

There was thus in the fifteenth century a strong desire to emulate visionaries and relive visions from the past. This notion of identifying with, and ultimately taking inspiration from, another more famous individual's personal religious experience suggests an important way of understanding a painting....<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Emerson, "The Apocalypse in Medieval Culture," *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 328. St John can be observed utilizing such a portal in, for example, London, British Library MS Roy. 19.B.XV, fol. 5v, where the saint is taken up into his vision by way of a ladder that reaches up to a portal/window with shutters.

<sup>197</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 20.

<sup>198</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 39.

<sup>199</sup> Lewis, *Reading Images*, 12.

<sup>200</sup> Harbison, "Visions and Meditations," 94.

This context is directly related to the portrayal of St John and the depiction of the Apocalypse where, in fact, he had long been a model for vision.<sup>201</sup> The generalized and enhanced interest in visionaries in the fifteenth century was thus a catalyst for the further concentration on St John. As discussed in chapter three, the intensification of the contraction of the illustration of the Apocalypse in late-medieval Flanders reflected a trend wherein the revelatory episodes of St John's vision were increasingly less important in establishing his authority and status as visionary, with the result that the saint himself is projected into sharp focus. Indeed, in this context, St John becomes "a model for seeing and interpreting vision," creating a framework for the understanding of exemplary visionary experience.<sup>202</sup> The landscape of his vision thus becomes not only an aid for contemplative experience, but also an exemplary visionary experience in and of itself. In instances where there remains only a single episode, St John himself is the embodiment of a model visionary, requiring only this single episode to confirm his authority.

Camille considers the focus on St John in Memling's panel to be a direct result of changing notions of vision, signifying the need for "a model for seeing and interpreting vision," with St John in the role of percipient, not author.<sup>203</sup> He also ascribes this same theory to the Paris Apocalypse and Apocalypse block-books where St John was incorporated into many episodes of his vision as percipient and witness, not author.<sup>204</sup> According to Camille, "His authority is vested not so much in his having written down

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<sup>201</sup> Emerson, 'John as Visionary Model,' "Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Culture," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 328-32; Lewis, "*Auctor et Auctoritas*: St. John as Seer, Author, Preceptor, and Pilgrim," *Reading Images*, 19-39.

<sup>202</sup> Camille, "Visionary Perception," 288.

<sup>203</sup> Camille, "Visionary Perception," 287.

<sup>204</sup> Whereas in Anglo-French manuscripts, St John is often on the fringes of the action outside the main frame or peeking through windows.

what he saw as in having seen it.”<sup>205</sup> Unfortunately, Camille’s theory does not address differences between the Paris Apocalypse and block-books and Memling’s panel, such as the further condensation and abbreviation within Memling’s panel, the resultant intensified focus on St John, or the crucial influence of Bruges’ visual cultures upon it. These differences are certainly indicative of a modification in the function and/or perception of St John as visionary that Camille has not sufficiently acknowledged. In Memling’s panel, St John both witnesses and chronicles the Apocalypse; he is simultaneously witness and author. Although it cannot be denied that the function of St John was connected to his role as percipient and visionary model, to ascribe the panel’s composition simply to the general Apocalypse movement toward St John as percipient and the need for a visionary model suggests a rather one-dimensional picture of the broad artistic context, as it ignores the influential imprint of Bruges’ artistic identity and visual traditions. The impetus toward a focus on St John and the condensed and abbreviated cycle in Memling’s panel cannot be completely explained by the need for a visionary model because, as mentioned above, this need had already been expressed in the thirteenth-century Anglo-French tradition.<sup>206</sup> Further examination of the late-medieval and early-Renaissance visual and contemplative traditions of Bruges indicate a closer connection between the trend toward the focus on St John and this urban visual culture than has been previously acknowledged.

#### *The Devotional Half-Length Narrative*

It should be noted that a comparable concentration on individual saintly figures occurred not only in the depiction of the Apocalypse, but also in early-Renaissance

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<sup>205</sup> Camille, “Visionary Perception,” 287.

<sup>206</sup> See pp. 95-96 of this chapter. See also, Emerson, “John as Visionary Model,” 328-32; Lewis, “*Auctor et Auctoritas*,” 19-39.

painting of Bruges in general. Interestingly, Memling's panel, Pourbus' triptych, and the St John miniatures are contemporary with a period in northern Europe which produced a proliferation of images that concentrate on "dramatic close-up" half-lengths (depicting either a single figure or a number of figures in a narrative context), while minimizing the miniaturized narrative details that Flemish artists once so enthusiastically delighted in.<sup>207</sup> Although not strictly comparable in terms of composition (particularly because of the use of half-length figures), the apparently common interest in the intimate focus on holy figures, while simultaneously stripping away copious, sometimes miniaturized, narrative details, reveals a similarity that, on further investigation, cannot be dismissed as either random or arbitrary.

In his book, Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting, Sixten Ringbom discusses the "close-up" half-length model apparent in devotional panels, and more specifically in diptychs.<sup>208</sup> This format was most popular in the Netherlands, its place of origin.<sup>209</sup> According to Ringbom, the dramatic "close-up" half-length narrative was a "compositional formula which originated in the domain of devotional art, where icons with half-length figures formed a starting point and

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<sup>207</sup> These images are typically referred to as *Andachtsbilder*.

<sup>208</sup> Sixten Ringbom, Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting (1965; repr. Doornspijk, 1984). See the following for discussion of devotional portrait diptychs and their use: Laura D. Gelfand, "Fifteenth-century Netherlandish Devotional Portrait Diptychs: Origins and Function," Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1994; Gelfand, "Devotion, Imitation, and Social Aspirations: Fifteenth-century Bruges and a Memling School Madonna and Child," Cleveland Studies in the History of Art 5 (2000), 6-19; Wolfgang Kermer, Studien zum Diptychon in der sakralen Malerei: Von den Anfängen bis zur des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts (Dusseldorf, 1967); S. Bäuml, "Studien zum Adorationsdiptychon Entstehung, Frühgeschichte und Entwicklung eines privaten Andachtsbildes mit Adorantendarstellung," Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians Universität, 1983; and J. B. Friedman, "An Iconological Examination of the Half-Length Devotional Portrait Diptychs in the Netherlands, 1460-1530," Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1977.

<sup>209</sup> Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, 47.

a source of inspiration for the creation of extensive dramatic composition designed according to some compositional principle.”<sup>210</sup> As suggested by Ringbom,

... there can be little doubt that it was the demands of private devotion that, during the latter part of the fifteenth century, resulted in a form which combined the vividness of the narrative ... with the portrait character and direct appeal of the traditional icon.<sup>211</sup>

The tight, almost “close-up” focus on St John (in comparison to the epic narrative panoramas of earlier Apocalypse illustration) in Pourbus’ triptych, evident in the St John miniatures from Bruges, and seen emerging in Memling’s panel, is not unlike the intimate, devotional focus of the half-length images discussed by Ringbom. These works attest to and demonstrate a comparable type of focused meditation upon their various subjects. The general humanistic interest in the individual as well as in emotions is expressed in the half-length narrative, which created “the possibility of rendering in a close-up the subtlest emotional relationships *expressed within a minimum of dramatic scenery* [emphasis added].”<sup>212</sup> This same goal to reduce narrative elements (namely Apocalypse episodes) and focus on St John, while just emergent in Memling’s panel, is more fully manifest in Pourbus’ triptych and the St John miniatures of Bruges. Pourbus’ triptych also reveals an increasing interest in the depiction of emotions. However, the devotional design and focus of Memling’s panel differs from that observed in the “close-up” half-length narratives that Ringbom discusses. Memling’s panel focuses on St John. This focus first draws the eye into the panel and then leads it through the trailing episodes of his vision. The panel seeks a meditative, devotional involvement, but, as evident in the previous discussion on Memling’s serenity of expression, it does not attempt to connect

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<sup>210</sup> Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 5.

<sup>211</sup> Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 39.

<sup>212</sup> Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 71.

on an overtly emotional level and creates instead a markedly different effect than that of images of Ringbom's study. Alongside the St John miniature, within the Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours are numerous "close-up" half-length and full-length images of saints, which would seem to indicate that there is a relationship between the function and intended devotional effect of the "close-up" format and the abbreviated narrative of the St John miniature.<sup>213</sup> It is not so much that the compositional formulas are related, as that they are similar in terms of seeking a focused devotional involvement and meditative response from the viewer. The physical proximity to the viewer can be seen to translate to a more immediate devotional involvement. However, whereas the images Ringbom discusses seek a devotional and emotional connection as an aid to "empathic meditation" in a context of private piety,<sup>214</sup> Memling's panel, the Pourbus triptych and the St John miniatures seek an involvement that, in comparison, is not specifically concerned with dramatic emotionality.<sup>215</sup> But, there can be no doubt these works intend to involve the viewer with a devotional, meditative response in a similar manner to the images Ringbom discusses. The serenity of expression evident in Memling's panel and the entire *St John Altarpiece* signals a distinctive, yet inclusive approach to visionary and meditative practice.

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<sup>213</sup> Half-length "close-up" views in Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours (Kassel MS 50) include *St. James Major*, leaf 6 and *St. Jude Thaddeus*, leaf 8. Full-length close-ups include *St. Bartholomew*, leaf 3 and *St. Matthew the Apostle*, leaf 5.

<sup>214</sup> For a discussion of "the empathic approach" and "empathic meditation" see Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 12-13. Ringbom asserts that a "certain psychological state of mind" was considered a principal objective for the viewer of an image. See also Lloyd Benjamin, "The Empathic Relation of Observer to Image in Fifteenth Century Northern Art," Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1973; James H. Marrow, "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance," *Simiolus XVI* (1986), 153-57; and Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions." On the topic of private piety see, for example, Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 30-39.

<sup>215</sup> The left panel of the *St John Altarpiece* also involves the viewer in a similar manner; both the lifeless body of St John the Baptist that reaches forward to the left at a diagonal slant and his executioner are pressed close to the edge of the frame and thus the viewer.

In fifteenth-century Flanders, the response to changing religious aspirations and the process of vision and meditation as related to religious art assumed numerous, but distinguishable forms. Harbison differentiates the character and method of vision or meditation in fifteenth-century Flemish art from Italian and Spanish representations of “ecstatic experience,” citing exuberant representations of St Teresa of Avila as an example. Vision and meditation in Flanders was “a more methodical meditative process” intended to promote visionary experience.<sup>216</sup> This characteristic Flemish process is evidenced in the generally serene, almost detached, visual expression of St John’s Revelation when compared to the “ecstatic experience” of Italian and Spanish models.

As stated previously, many perceive an incongruity between Memling’s calm, placid style and the horrors of the Apocalypse. Hull suggests that the serene and restrained quality of Memling’s work must be considered in the context of late-medieval personal piety, which, in its turn toward the individual and private devotional experience, favoured religious art of a highly contemplative and “participatory” nature.<sup>217</sup> She indicates that “... the restrained mood of his work suggests a rational approach to contemplation ...” in which his work serves as a meditative focus.<sup>218</sup> A discussion of the practice of “mental pilgrimage,” involving a rational, contemplative participation of the viewer, serves to elucidate the Flemish model of contemplation and its influence on Memling’s altarpiece.

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<sup>216</sup> Harbison, “Visions and Meditations,” 88.

<sup>217</sup> Hull, “Devotional Aspects of Hans Memlinc’s Paintings,” 207-8.

<sup>218</sup> Hull, “Devotional Aspects of Hans Memlinc’s Paintings,” 208.

### *Mental Pilgrimage*

The concept of “mental pilgrimage” as an aid to meditation and visionary experience is often discussed in relation to the religious art of late medieval northern Europe.<sup>219</sup> According to Craig Harbison,

... many fifteenth-century paintings, whether including special clues or not, were meant to be seen as visions themselves. Paintings are thus not limited to recording someone else’s vision, that person standing by, in or near the image itself, certifying its correctness .... A painting then quite literally stands as a vision, the spectator’s vision, not a material object limited and recorded as such.... The image is not just a physical object, an object of worship. It is the embodiment of the process of meditation itself.<sup>220</sup>

Maurits Smeyers references the “panoramic views” of Memling’s *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ* and *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* altarpieces as consciously conducive to the mental, meditative visitation of the viewer (figs. 22 and 23).<sup>221</sup> Hull also discusses the particular suitability of Memling’s “multi-episodic panels” to what she terms as “participatory devotions,” or spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>222</sup> Both authors refer to a very particular narrative strategy that employs numerous narrative groupings or tableaux different from the less clearly defined narrative groupings and sequence of the Apocalypse panel of the *St John Altarpiece*, although all utilize the characteristic Flemish episodic imagination.<sup>223</sup> The comparable use of narrative groupings and the roughly

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<sup>219</sup> Matthew Botvinick, “The Painting as Pilgrimage: Traces of a Subtext in the Work of Campin and His Contemporaries,” *Art History* 15, 1 (March 1992), 1-18; Harbison, “The Northern Altarpiece,” 70, fn. 66 for bibliography on the topic of mental pilgrimage.

<sup>220</sup> Harbison, “Visions & Meditations,” 117.

<sup>221</sup> Maurits Smeyers, “Analecta Memlingiana: From Hemling to Memling – From Panoramic View to Compartmented Representation,” *Memling Studies: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Bruges, 10-12 November 1994* (Leuven, 1997), 176, 182, 184. See also Coleman, ‘Pilgrimages: Actual and Imagined,’ “Empathetic Constructions,” 41-47.

<sup>222</sup> Hull, “Devotional Aspects of Hans Memling’s Paintings,” 208-9.

<sup>223</sup> Michael O’Connell addresses Memling’s *Passion* altarpiece as reflective of the reenactment of the Passion of Christ in civic theatre. O’Connell, “The Civic Theater of Suffering: Hans Memling’s *Passion* and

sequential nature of the narrative scenes in Memling's panel and in the entire altarpiece signify an undeniable connection between these works. According to Craig Harbison, "Already a popular form of religious activity, pilgrimages could be and were, increasingly in the fifteenth century, carried out in the mind."<sup>224</sup> These images, particularly those of the Passion, were sources of "empathic meditation," a form of meditation discussed above in relation to the "close-up" half-length.<sup>225</sup> "Mental pilgrimage" was thus another mode of contemplative experience that the viewer had access to in late medieval, particularly Flemish, religious art. Also discussed above, Memling's panel, as well as Pourbus' triptych and the St John miniatures, exhibit or seek a comparatively placid and (visually) restrained involvement with the viewer. The mental, visionary pilgrimage accessed through Memling's panel is different from the pilgrimage or "empathic meditation" associated with the *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ* and the *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* due to the specific and unique physical and social context of the *St John Altarpiece*. However, and although its expression is different, the influence of this form of visionary experience is apparent in Memling's panel and altarpiece.<sup>226</sup>

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Late Medieval Drama," European Iconography East and West: Selected Papers of the Szeged International Conference (Leiden, June 9-12 1993), 22-34. The relationship with vision is clear in that the altarpiece would thus be both a portal into a meditation/vision of the suffering of Christ and the theatrical process of civic theatre. See also Coleman, "Narrative Structures from the Theater: the Scenario of the Bruges Resident," "Empathetic Constructions," 48-58.

<sup>224</sup> Harbison, "The Northern Altarpiece," 70, fn. 66 for bibliography on this topic.

<sup>225</sup> Ringbom, Icon to Narrative, 12. Coleman argues that Memling's *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ* and *Scenes from the Passion of Christ*, in addition to the *St John Altarpiece* and *Shrine of St Ursula*, consciously promote a devotional response that is "empathetic" in nature. Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 2.

<sup>226</sup> According to De Vos, "One has to enter ... [Memling's panel], reducing oneself continually, in order to appreciate the truly colossal scale of the terrible and unforgettable cataclysms that succeed one another within an area no larger than a piece of writing paper." I believe De Vos' comment demonstrates a similar appreciation of those qualities found in the panel that are conducive to meditative pilgrimage. De Vos, Hans Memling, 39. See also Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," esp. 104-42.

*The Indivisible Landscape of Vision*

Keeping in mind the above discussion, it is now time to provide a reading of the *St John Altarpiece* in its entirety. The dominant presence of St John and the vision of the Throne along with the extreme physical compression of the Apocalypse cycle within one small section of the panel do not allow the viewer/pilgrim to freely explore the landscape of Memling's vision, as is possible for example, in the *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ* and the *Passion of Christ*. Memling's viewer/pilgrim is kept at a comparative and controlled distance and is, perhaps, forced to "enter" the vision under the guidance of the authoritative figure of St John who in turn directs his gaze (and the viewer's attention) back to the central panel. In the left panel the back of the executioner and the Baptist's diagonally-positioned body perform a similar function by barring the viewer from complete absorption into, or pilgrimage of, the panel. Both side panels redirect the viewer to the central panel by their refusal to allow complete visual and emotional investment. The central panel also discourages the viewer from becoming preoccupied with the background narrative scenes. The weight of the composition rests with the central grouping of figures and the surrounding architectural structure isolates both the central figures and the viewer from the background narrative.

The specific sacred narrative of all three panels represents the end of each respective narrative journey; each story is at its terminus. The condensation of the Apocalypse narrative in the right panel diligently presents the details of St John's vision and effectively culminates and concludes in the central panel. The martyrdom of St John the Baptist represents the completion of the saint's earthly journey. In the central panel, the miniaturistic narrative details of the lives of the two St Johns and the contemporary

references to the hospital find their ultimate resolution and goal in the *Sacra Conversazione* with the Virgin and Child. This temporal positioning of narrative effectively holds the viewer in the immediate moment of the vision created by the altarpiece. The three panels thus act in combination to impress upon the viewer a sense of a concentration on a united, eternal moment in time. This singular visionary experience unites the three main narrative moments of the panels and effects a simultaneous bestowal of grace which culminates in the central panel and which, in covenant, has no physical or temporal restrictions.

The exterior wings of the altarpiece have not been integrated into a comprehensive reading of the overall vision of the altarpiece, nor have they been considered in conjunction with the Apocalypse panel due to the fact that they are generally considered to be a separate and somewhat ineffective component of the altarpiece. However, while the exterior panels of the *St John Altarpiece* are seemingly separate from the central expanse, we shall see that, in fact, they enrich our understanding of the altarpiece and are an integral part of how the altarpiece functions with respect to the visionary experience of the altarpiece. In light of the above analysis of the *St John Altarpiece*, we can now integrate the exterior wings into this reading.

According to Blum, “The most overt iconographical ‘mistake’ is found on the exterior .... [The wings] demand to be separated by a devotional object.”<sup>227</sup> Instead, the focal point of the exterior is the “crack” where the wings close, which is viewed by Blum as an:

... arrangement [that] creates a highly unsatisfactory visual emphasis, which directs one’s attention toward nothing of pictorial importance. It appears as if the two groups are praying

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<sup>227</sup> Blum, “The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns,” 93.

to each other or to some unknown spirit lurking in the crack; both ideas are absurd.<sup>228</sup>

Blum goes on to speculate about the reason for Memling's choice, although, for Blum, it is not a satisfactory explanation:

The scheme of the wings makes sense only when they are opened and the enthroned Virgin is visible. Christ and His mother must be the object of the Augustinians' devotion. But Memlinc makes no attempt to explain this fact to the viewer by uniting the exterior and the interior .... The only connection between the two seems to be the desire to justify incongruity at any cost.<sup>229</sup>

Hull contributes to this discussion by explaining that the difference between the muted tones of the exterior and the bright colours of the interior

... suggests a distinction between the mundane, earthly realm inhabited by the brethren and the spiritual realm of the Madonna and saints to which the religious patients of the hospital aspired. However, this implied contrast of earthly and spiritual realms is not consistently maintained.<sup>230</sup>

An example of this "inconsistency" can be found in the central panel where the "earthly" contemporary wine-gauging scene is juxtaposed with scenes from the life of St John the Evangelist. Hull rationalizes that Memling's seeming inconsistency is probably the fault of the donors who most likely specified this iconographic composition.<sup>231</sup> However, this discrepancy between the viewing of the "earthly" and the divine within the central panel can be resolved; a comprehensive viewing of both realms simultaneously can be realized through visionary means.

Did Memling inadvertently disconnect the interior from the exterior of his altarpiece by means of iconographic mistakes (made either by him or the donors) and this

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<sup>228</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns," 93.

<sup>229</sup> Blum, "The Altarpiece of the Two St Johns," 94.

<sup>230</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 56.

<sup>231</sup> Hull, *Hans Memlinc's Paintings*, 57.

differentiation in tone, or has he succeeded in forcing the viewer to be constantly aware of the interior vision (even when it was not physically exposed) by posturing elements of the exterior in continual and permanent reference to the interior? Understanding this feature holds one of the principal keys to reading the altarpiece in its entirety. Harbison also refers to this distinction between the earthly and spiritual realms:

Memling has brought us closer to seeing the different ‘levels of reality’ which the exterior and interior of a triptych may represent; he has implied more strongly than earlier artists that it is the donors’ prayers which bridge the gap or crack leading to the visionary heart of the triptych.<sup>232</sup>

I would take Harbison’s theory one step further and suggest that Memling intended that the viewer’s vision, or potential for visionary experience, should also bridge this gap.<sup>233</sup> The “crack” could thus function as a narrative device, which is in essence a condensation of the customary inclusion of an exterior devotional focus. Memling’s viewer is forced to attend to the interior, the exterior and the interior visionary space are thereby connected, and a single, indivisible landscape of vision is created which is the field upon which the vision is presented to and experienced by the viewer. This perpetual adoration of the interior, when viewed from the context of late-medieval Flemish art, seems to confirm the idea that the triptych, including the exterior wings, functioned as an indivisible landscape of visionary experience and as an entity unified in both form and content (the overall, inclusive meaning).

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<sup>232</sup> Harbison, “Visions and Meditations,” 106. See also Paul Philoppot, “Les Grisailles et les Degrés de Réalité de l’Image dans la Peinture Flamande des X<sup>e</sup> et X<sup>VI</sup>e Siècles,” *Bulletin des Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 15 (1966), 225-42.

<sup>233</sup> The enigmatic figure in the guise of a hospital brother in the central panel may work in a similar manner. As a possible model for vision, the figure could both confirm and convey the visionary experience of the viewer thus signifying the act of the viewer’s vision. See chapter one, fn. 37 for a discussion of the possible identity of this figure.

Four moments of focus are communicated in the altarpiece: that of the exterior presentation of the donors and their respective patron saints, that of the central *Sacra Conversazione*, that of St John witnessing his vision, and that of the execution of St John the Baptist. These four seemingly disparate moments, three from sacred history, are woven together such that they can be viewed as a unity in eternal time. The exterior panels create a link to and consciousness of the internal devotional focus. When the triptych is opened a transcendental moment, in three different simultaneous manifestations, is presented across the expanse of the altarpiece. Existing concurrently with and informed by the many layers of meaning discussed in the previous chapters (such as the socio-political, liturgical and eschatological associations) is a vision above and removed from these details. It is a celebration of the ultimate culmination of the Apocalypse and salvation history, of the marriage of Christ with the Church, the glory of the Virgin and the ultimate Second Coming of her Child, the end result of the sacrifice of the Lamb/Christ (symbolized and prophesied by the martyrdom of St John the Baptist) and representative and exemplary of the path to final salvation. The altarpiece thus becomes a celebration and promise of salvation.<sup>234</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The late-medieval Flemish practice and process of visual signification and contemplative experience allows for an organic interaction of meaning between the panels, between the viewer and the triptych, and between the triptych or viewer and its or his/her physical and social context. Meaning is created and communicated in several ways and on multiple levels, continuously implicating, even manipulating the viewer in a unified, indivisible landscape of vision.

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<sup>234</sup> See Coleman, "Empathetic Constructions," 141-42.

As mentioned previously, the literature on Memling's Apocalypse panel is generally delimiting, as it tends to consider it a singular work and to assign meaning and significance to the piece only according to its attachment to visual Apocalypse traditions.<sup>235</sup> Additionally, other than that produced by Visser, literature on the *St John Altarpiece* does not employ or investigate the Apocalypse panel itself as a potential clue to further insight into the altarpiece's programme of meaning. In order to fully appreciate the multilayered composite of meanings achieved by Memling's Apocalypse panel, one must consider the panel within the context of the altarpiece as a complete, indivisible contemplative landscape.

The Apocalypse panel, in particular can inform us about the altarpiece as a whole. The panel offers five important indicators to assist in reading the altarpiece: the condensation and devotional focus of the panel as related to contemporary regional visual traditions, the meaning associated with the panel in relation to the specific hospital and eschatological context, implications arising from the serenity of expression with which the panel is rendered, and the panel's relationship with contemporary Apocalypse discourse and notions of private devotional experience and practice.

It has been the purpose of this thesis to model an inclusive, comparative approach to Memling's Apocalypse panel that critically analyses the various individual methodologies it has been subjected to, while simultaneously demonstrating the panel's inherent connection with and value to both the visual history of Bruges and the meaning and reception of both the Apocalypse and the *St John Altarpiece*. A more encompassing and expansive methodology of reading the Apocalypse panel and Memling's entire altarpiece emerges as a result of this re-evaluation of the panel and the scholarship that

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<sup>235</sup> See chapter three, pp. 53-54, fn. 95.

deals with it. It is my position that the Apocalypse panel provides the insight and justification for this inclusive reading by nature of its relationship to the *St John Altarpiece*. Further, the altarpiece in its entirety operates as an undivided, dynamic site of meaning, where the diverse discourses of death, the afterlife, the Apocalypse, private devotion, the visual cultures of Bruges, and the hospital context meet and merge to illuminate the path toward and promise of salvation.

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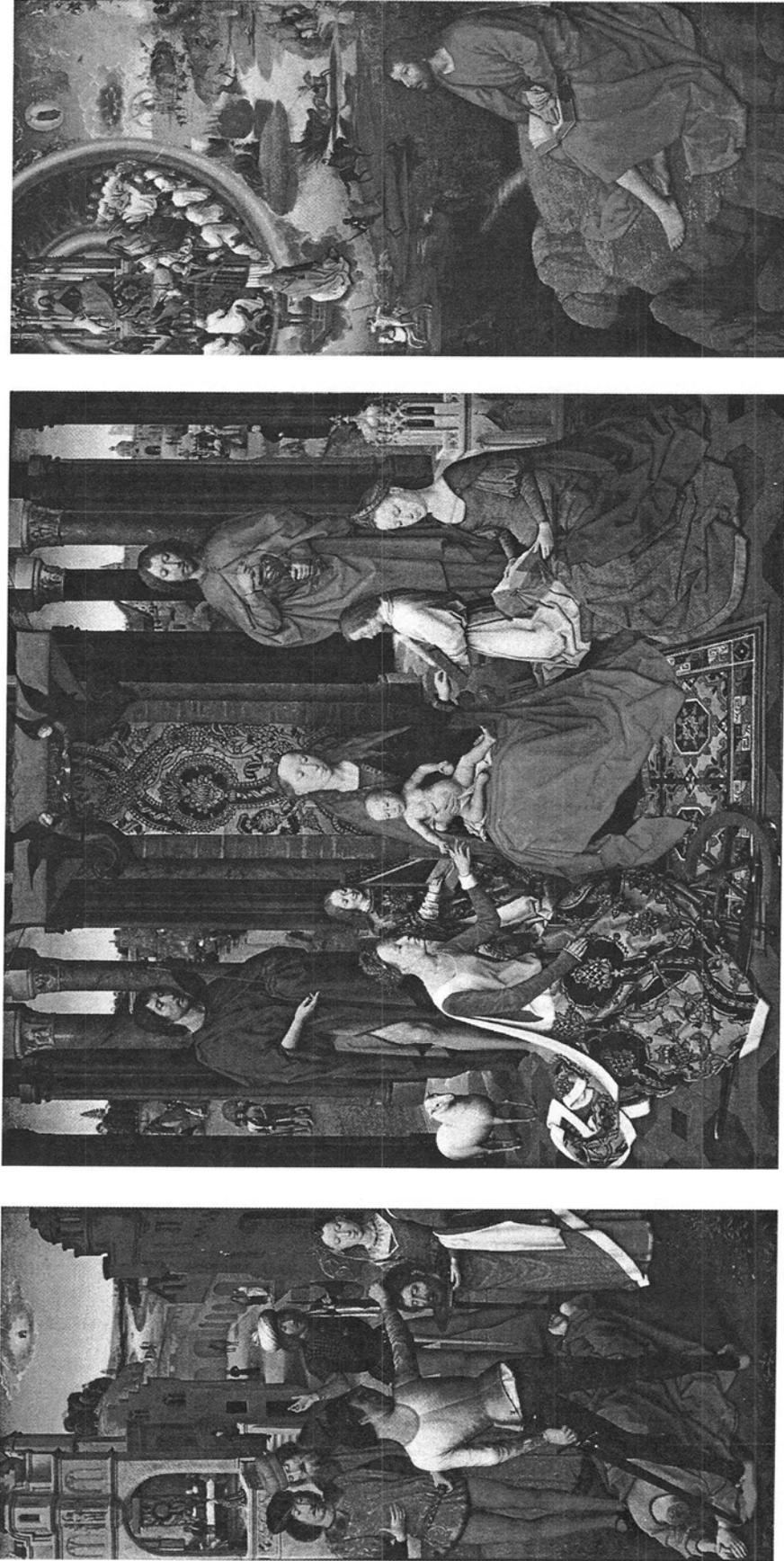


Fig.1. Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*, 1479. Oil on panel, Sint-Janshospitaal, Memlingmuseum, Bruges.



Fig.2. Exterior wings, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*, 1479. Oil on panel, Sint-Janshospitaal, Memlingmuseum, Bruges.



Fig.3. Central panel, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*, 1479. Oil on panel, Sint-Janshospitaal, Memlingmuseum, Bruges.

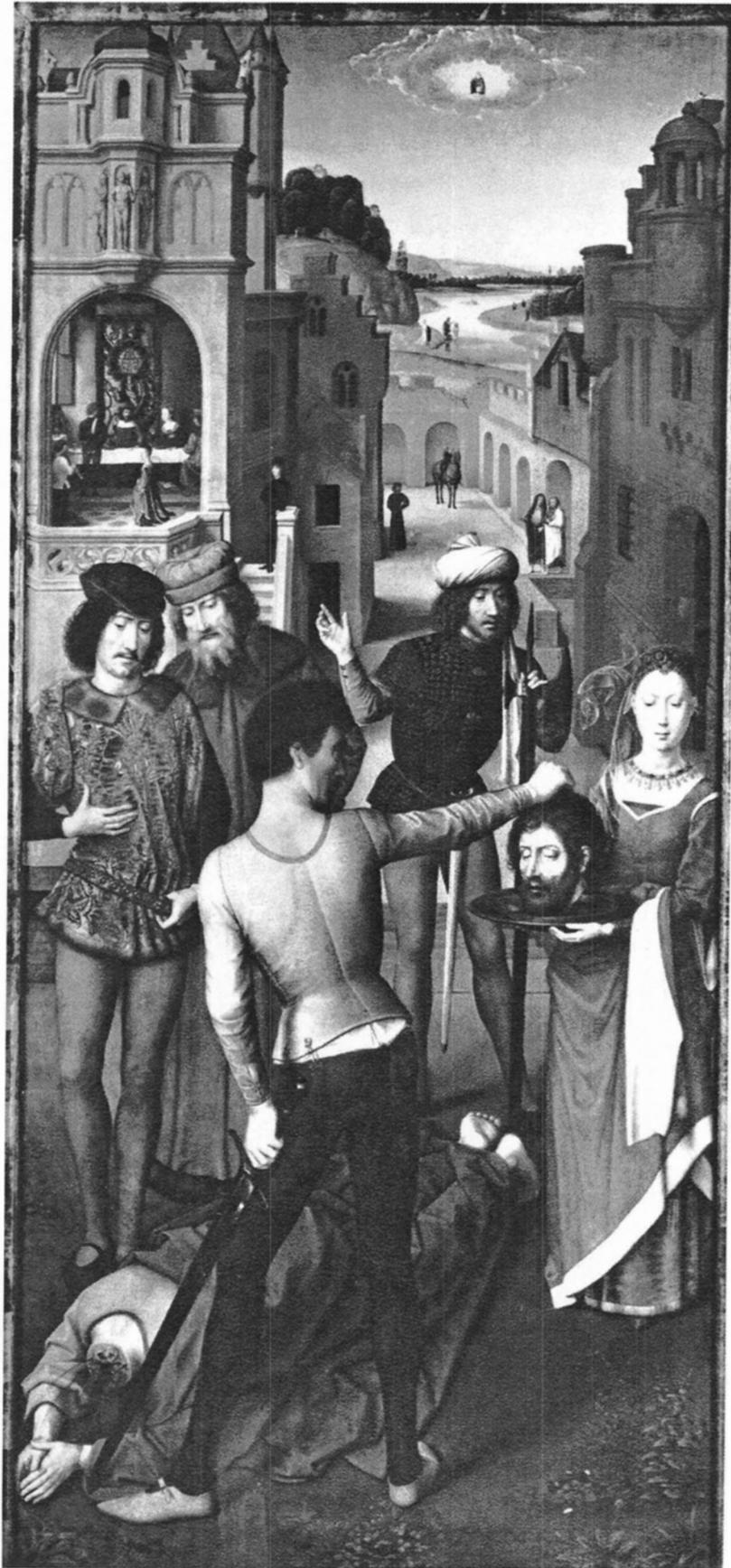


Fig.4. Left panel, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*. 1479. Oil on panel. Sint-Janshospitaal. Memlingmuseum.

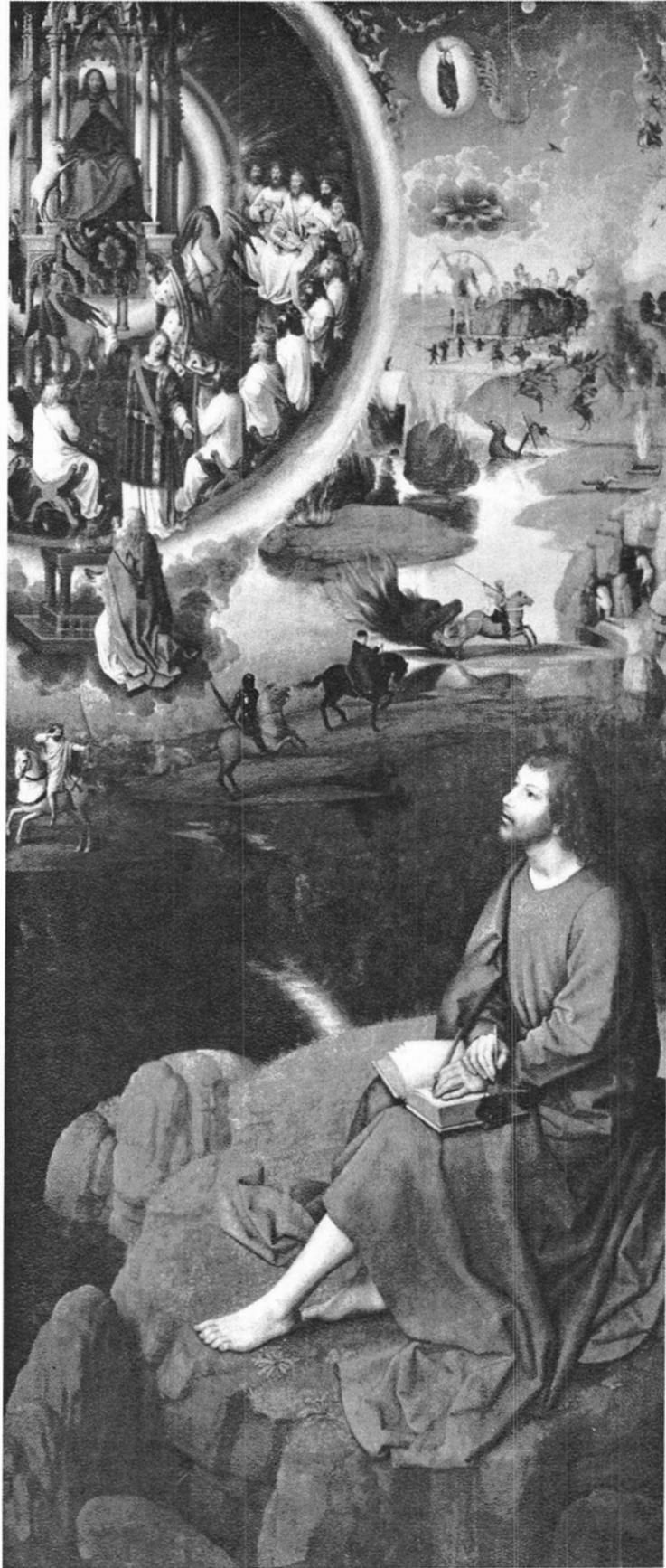


Fig.5. Right panel, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*, 1479. Oil on panel, Sint-Janshospitaal, Memlingmuseum, Bruges.

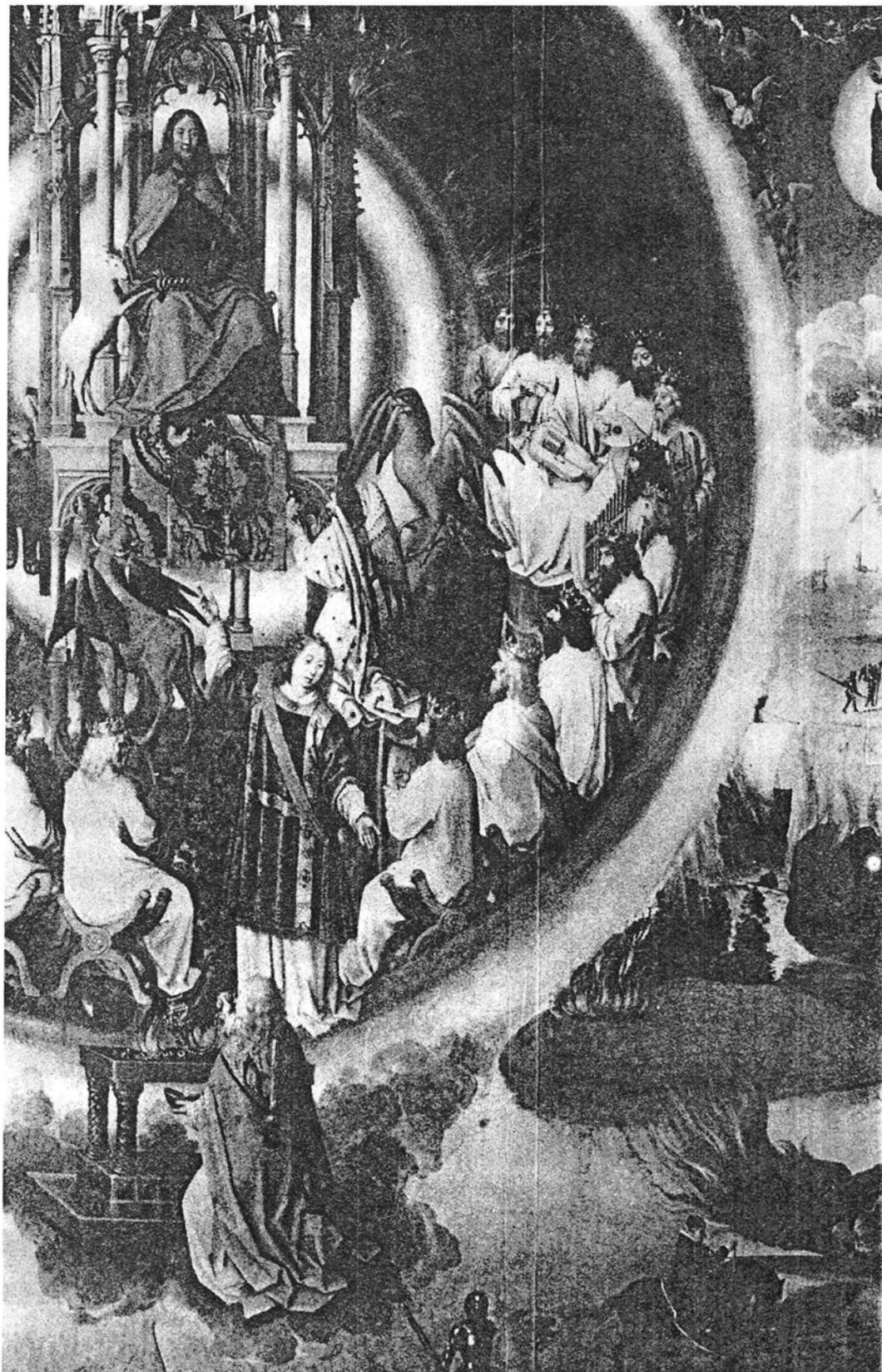


Fig.6. Detail, right panel, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*. 1479. Sint-Janshospitaal. Memlingmuseum. Bruges.

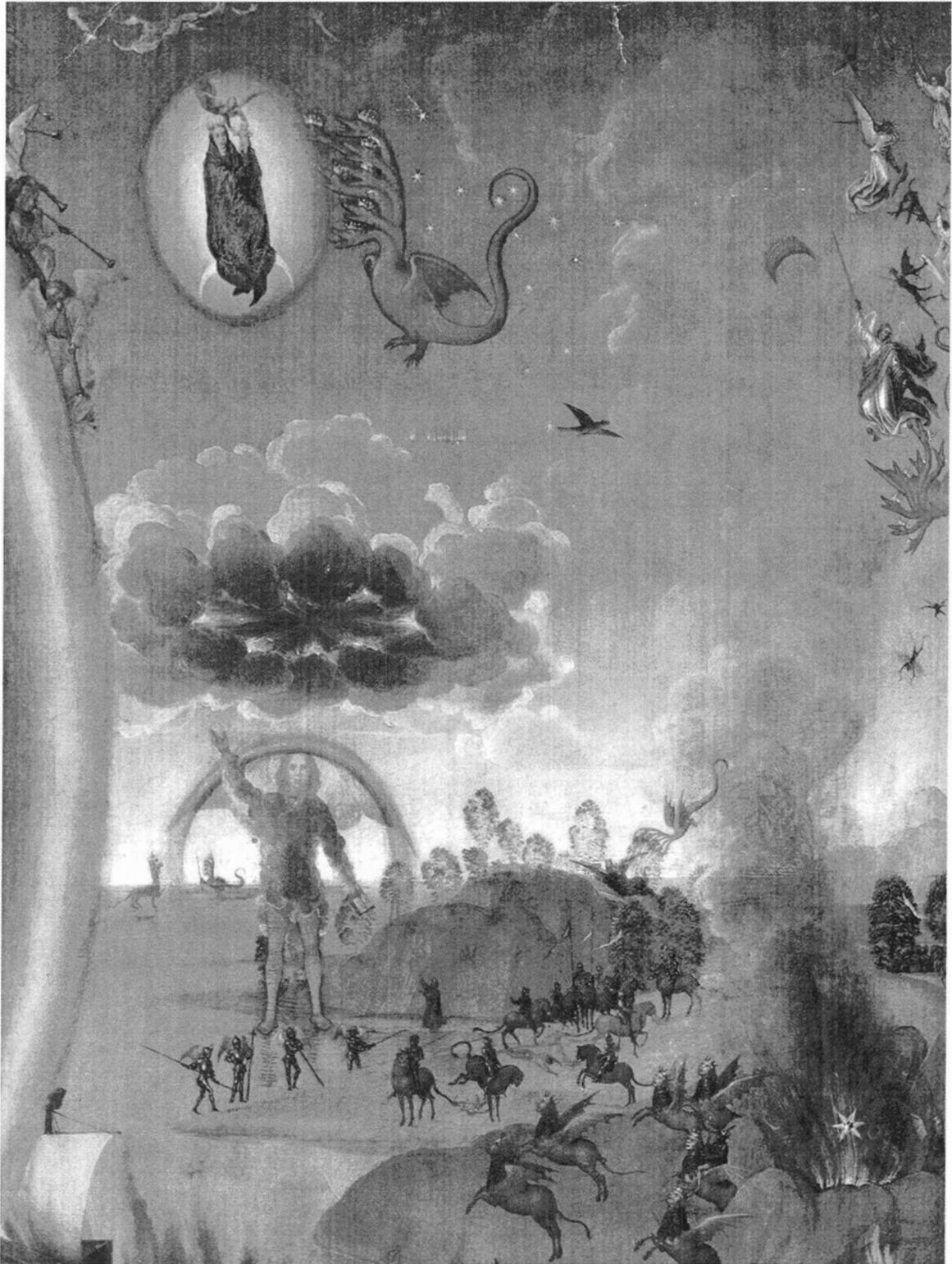


Fig.7. Detail, right panel, Hans Memling, *Altarpiece of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist*. 1479. Oil on panel. Sint-Janshospitaal. Memlingmuseum. Bruges.

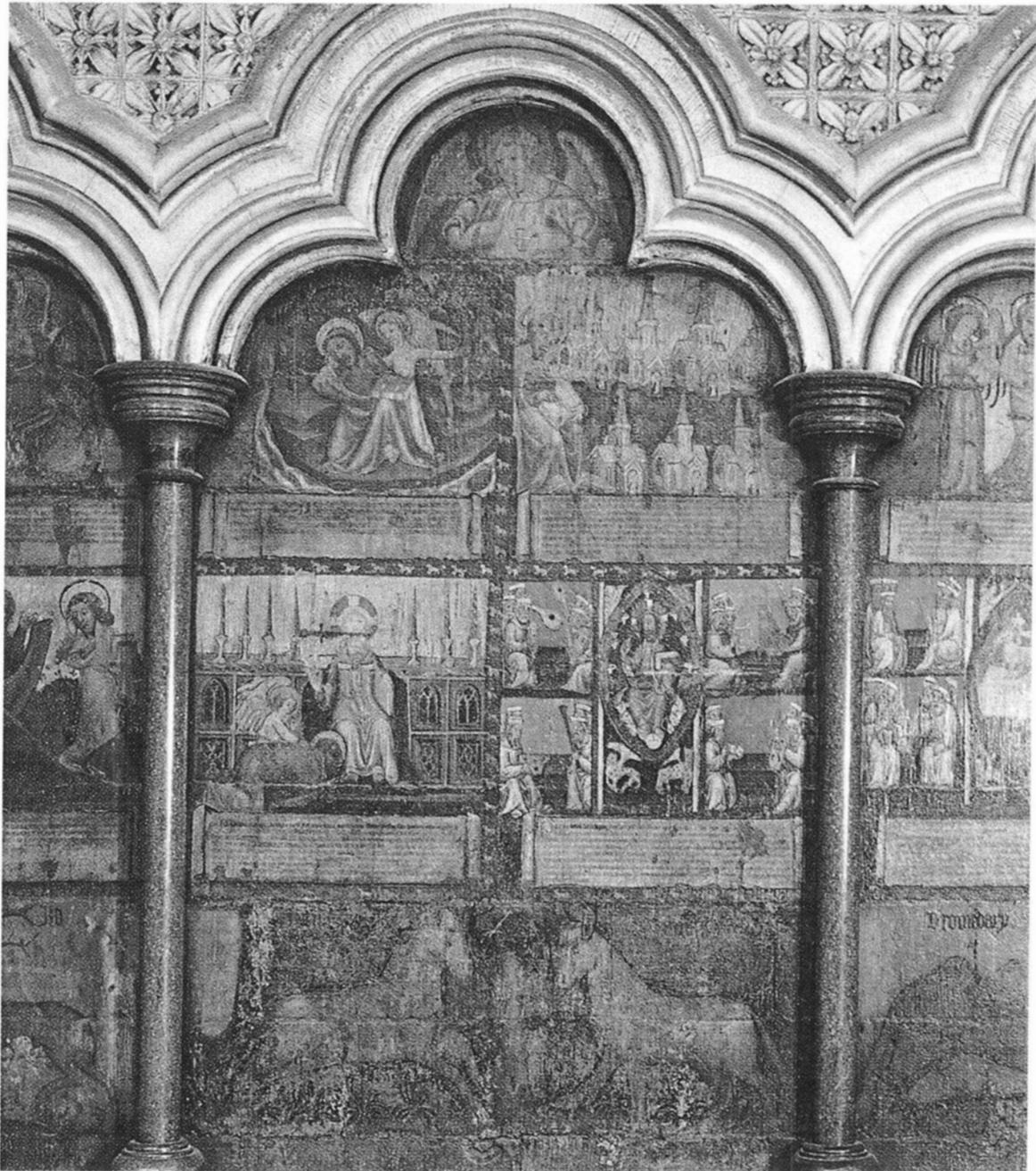


Fig.8. *John and the Angel, the Seven Churches, the Vision of the Candlesticks, and the Majesty of the Elders*, detail of Apocalypse frescos, ca. 1400. Fresco, Westminster Abbey Chapter House, London.

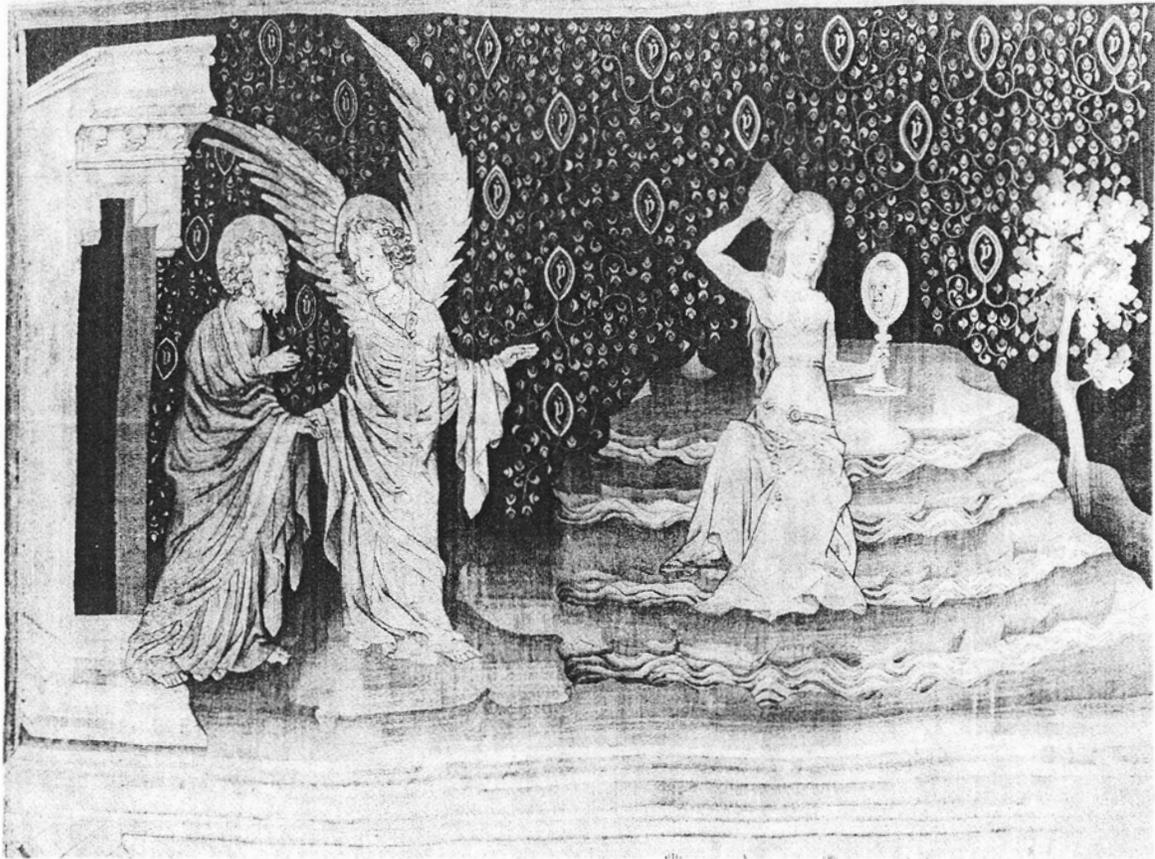


Fig.9. *The Whore of Babylon*, detail of the Apocalypse Tapestry, ca. 1377-79. Tapestry, Musée des Tapisseries, Angers.

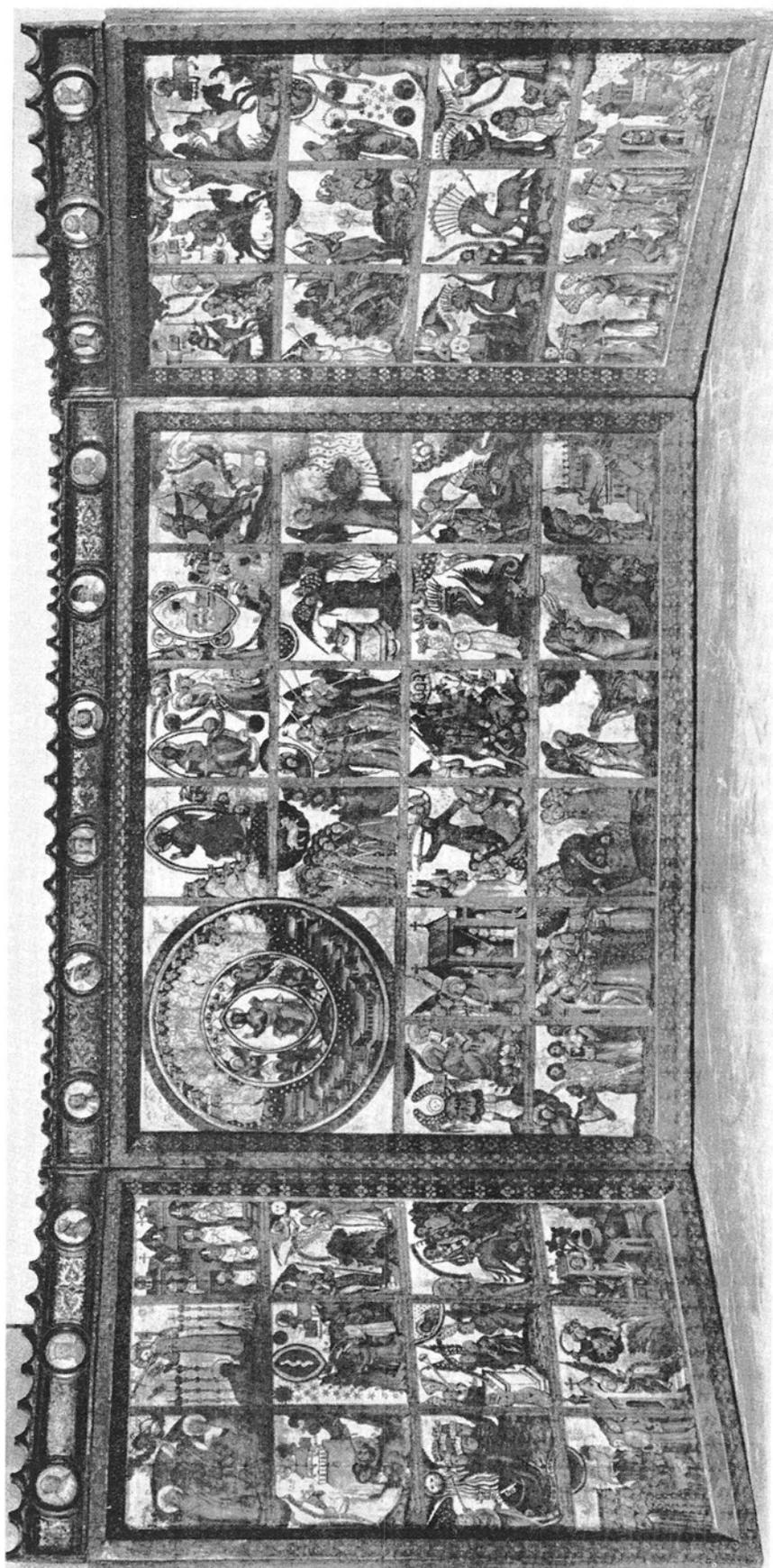


Fig. 10. Workshop of Master Bertram, *Apocalypse Altarpiece*, ca. 1400-10. Tempera and gilt on panel, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

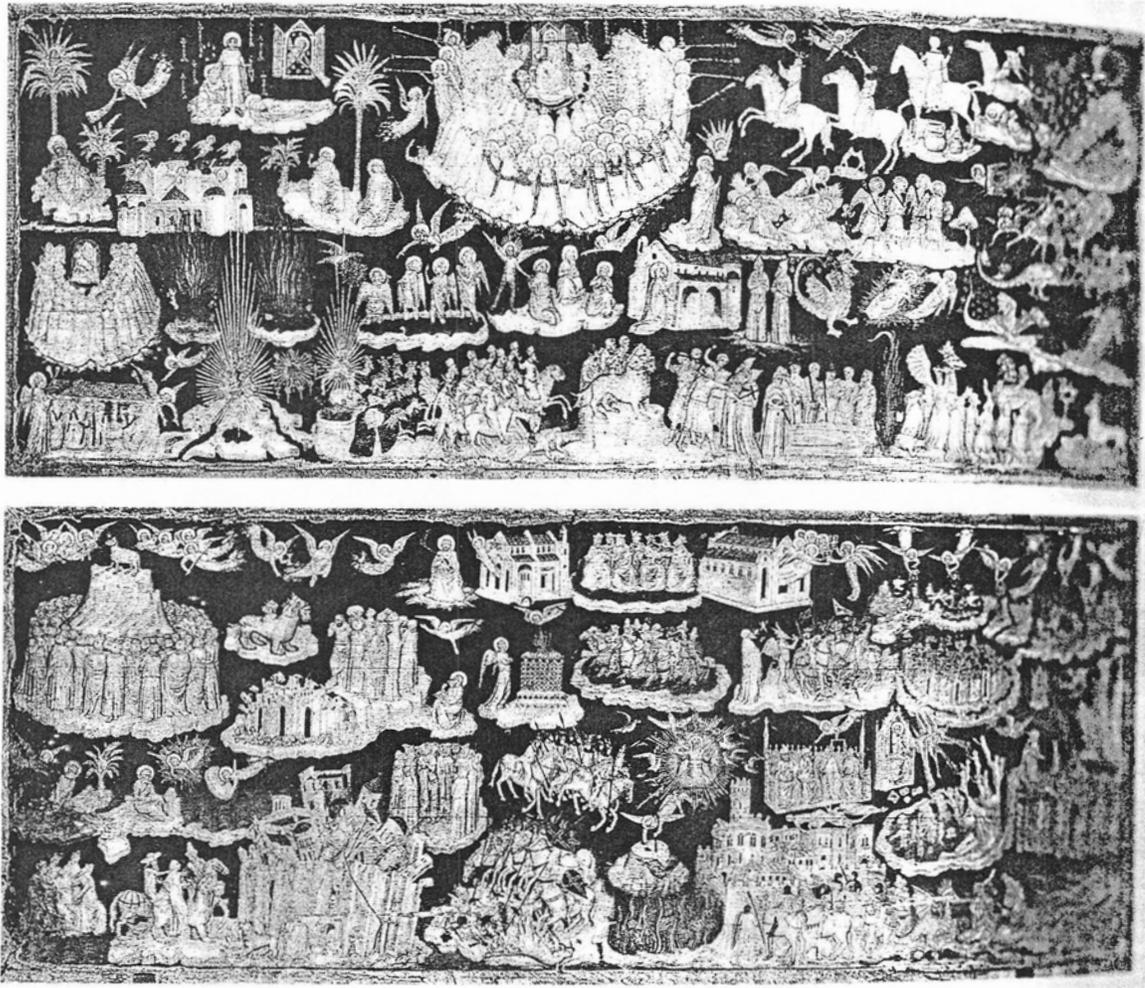


Fig.11. Giotto, *Apocalypse Panels*, ca. 1330-40. Tempera on panel, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.



Fig.12. *Scenes of Revelation V-X*, ca. 1350. Pigments on parchment, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett MS 78.E.3, fol. 456r.



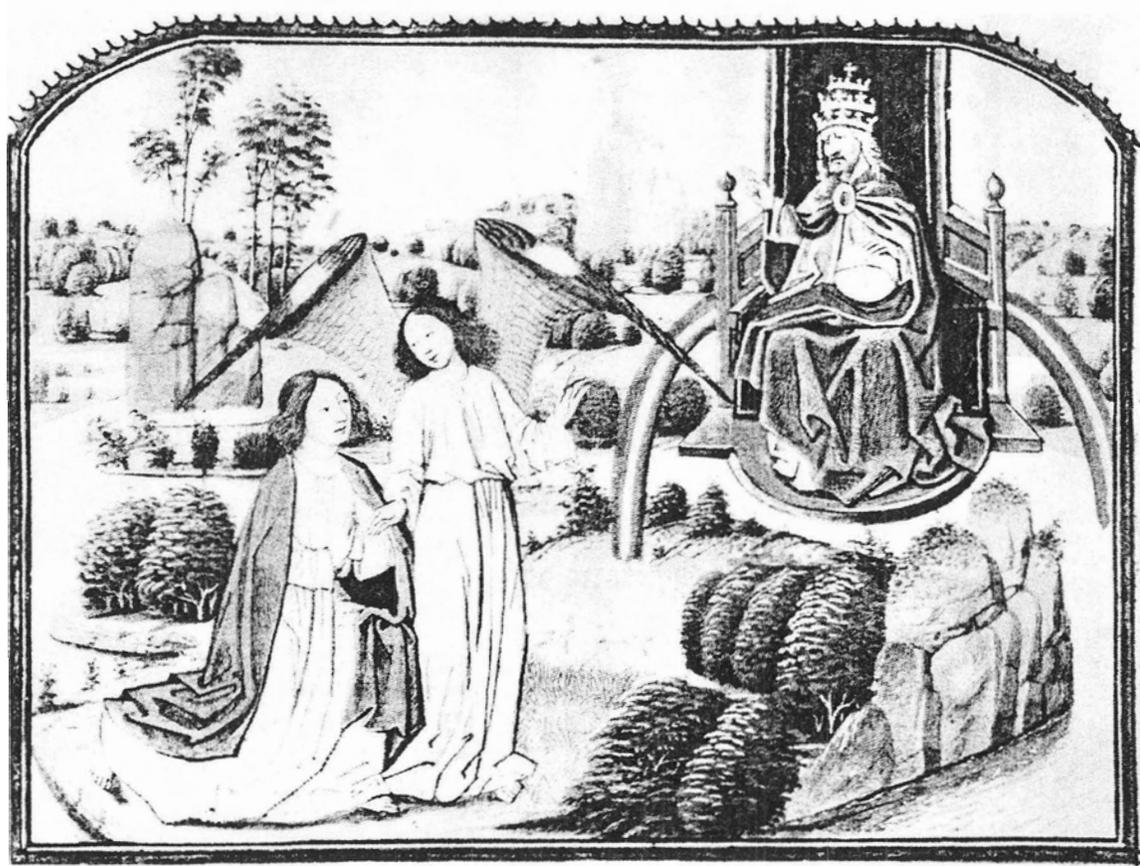


Fig.14. *St John on the Island of Patmos*, ca. 1475. Pigments on parchment, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 68, fol. 157.

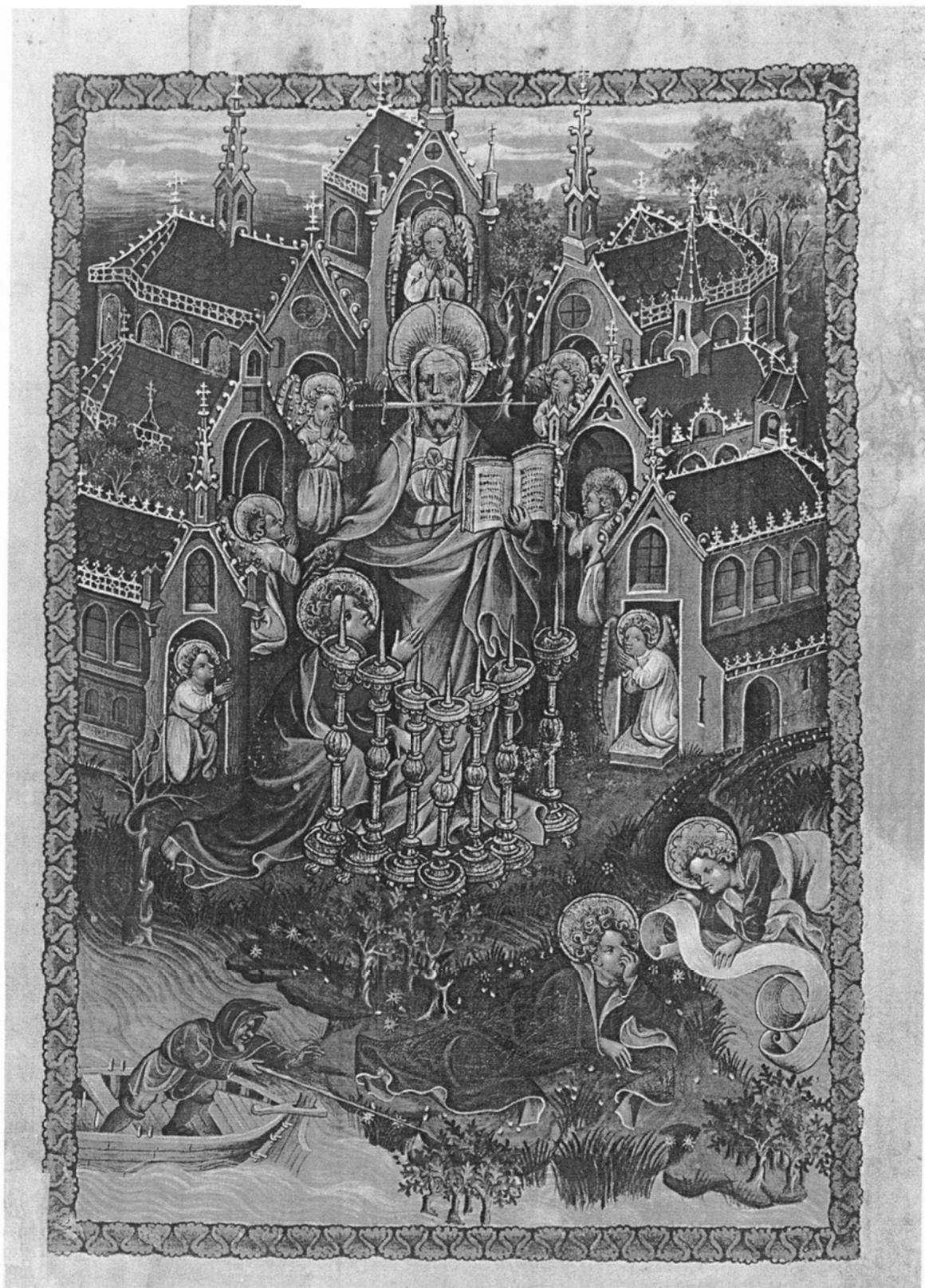


Fig.15. *The Son of Man among the candlesticks and churches, Rev. I*, ca. 1400. Pigments on parchment, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, néerlandais 3, fol. 2r.



Fig.16. *The Vision of the Throne, Rev. IV*, ca. 1400. Pigments on parchment, Paris. Bibliothèque Nationale. néerlandais 3. folio 5r.

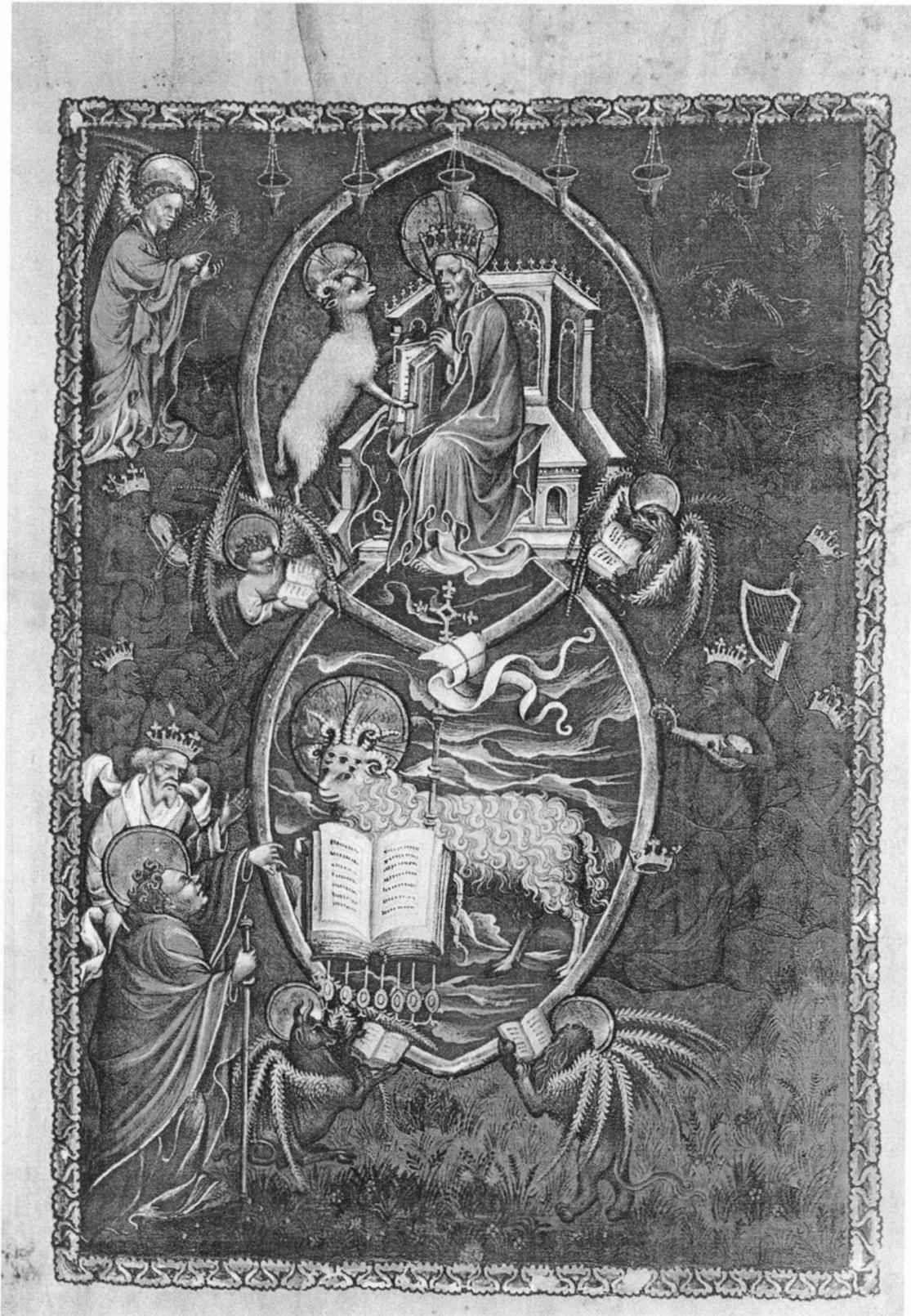


Fig.17. *The Lamb receiving and opening the Book, Rev. V*, ca. 1400. Pigments on parchment, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, néerlandais 3, folio 6r.



Fig.18. *Opening of the first six seals, Rev. VI*, ca. 1400. Pigments on parchment, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, néerlandais 3, folio 7r.

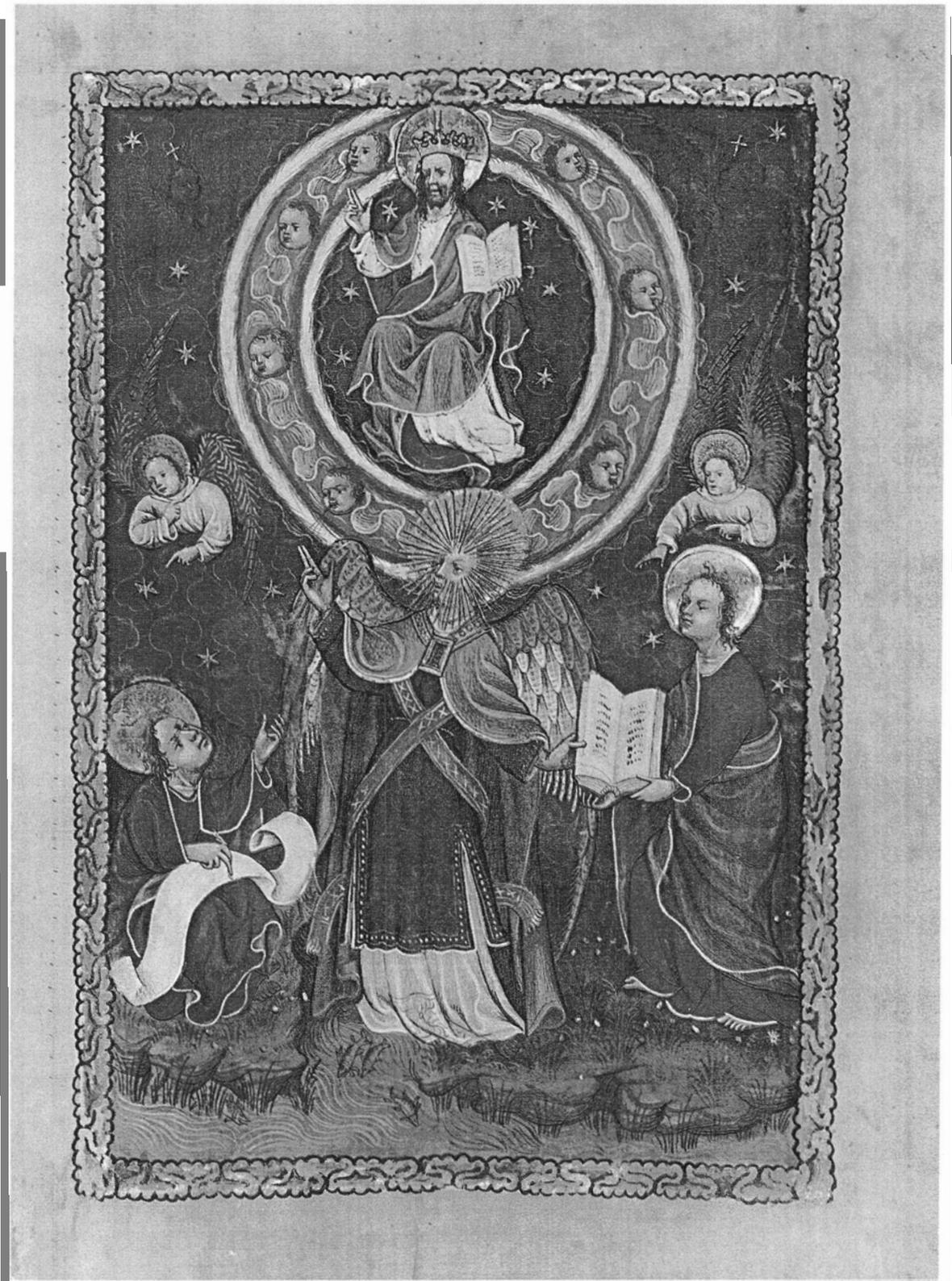


Fig.19. *The Great Angel giving the little book to John, Rev. X*, ca. 1400. Pigments on parchment, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, néerlandais 3, folio 11r.



Fig.20. Albrecht Dürer, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Apocalypse series, 1498. Woodcut, London, British Museum.

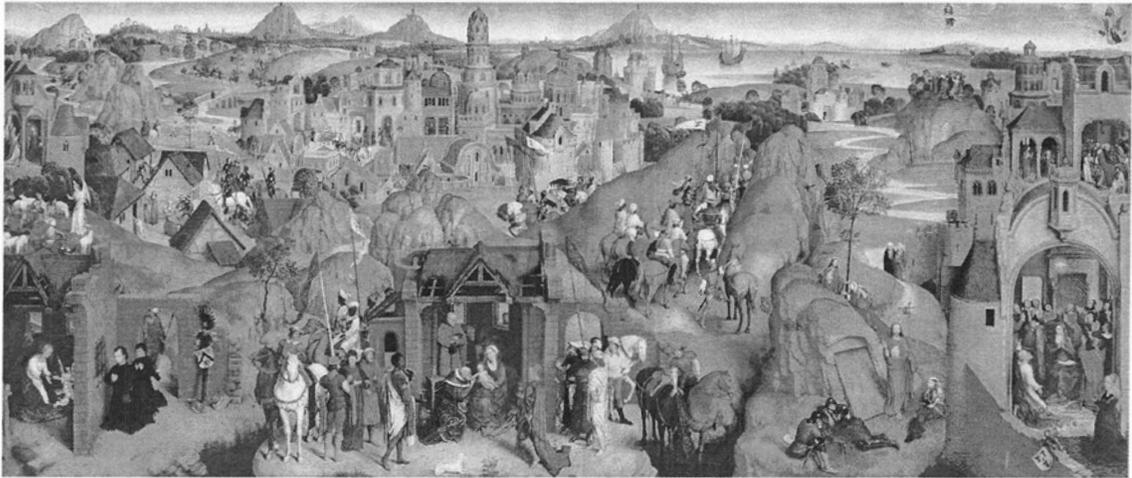


Fig.21. Hans Memling, *Scenes from the Advent and Triumph of Christ*, 1480. Oil on panel. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



Fig.22. Hans Memling, *Scenes from the Passion of Christ*, 1470-71. Oil on panel. Galleria Sabauda, Turin.



Fig.23. *St John's Vision on the Island of Patmos*, Breviary of Queen Isabella the Catholic of Castile, ca. 1488-96. Pigments on parchment, British Library, Additional MS 18851, fol. 309r.



Fig.24. *St John on Patmos*, Stockholm-Kassel Book of Hours, ca. 1550.  
Pigments on parchment. Stockholm. Swe Kungliga Biblioteket A.227, fol. 59r.

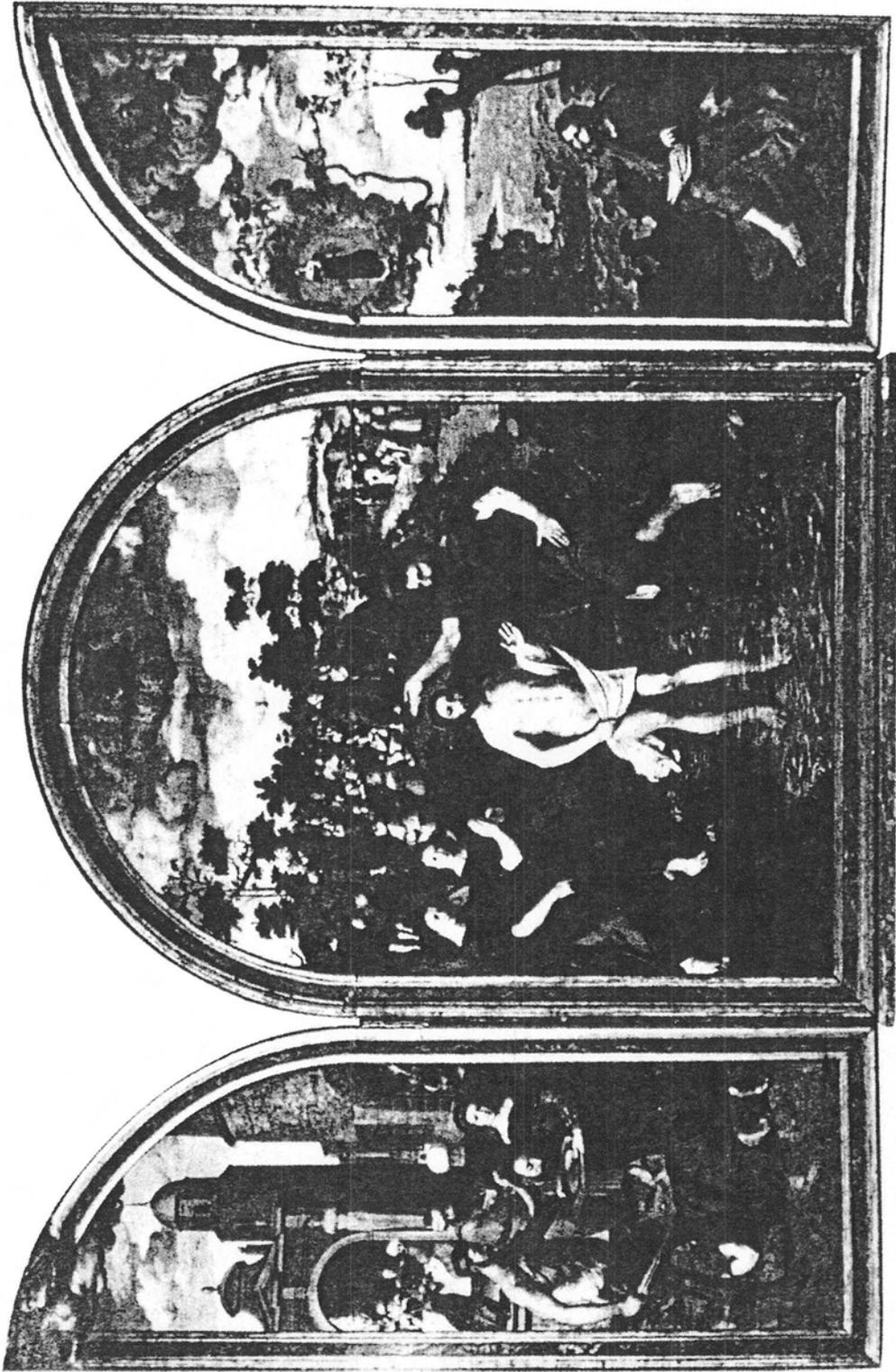


Fig.25. Pieter Pourbus, *Triptych with the Baptism of Christ*, 1549. Oil on panel, private collection, Barcelona.

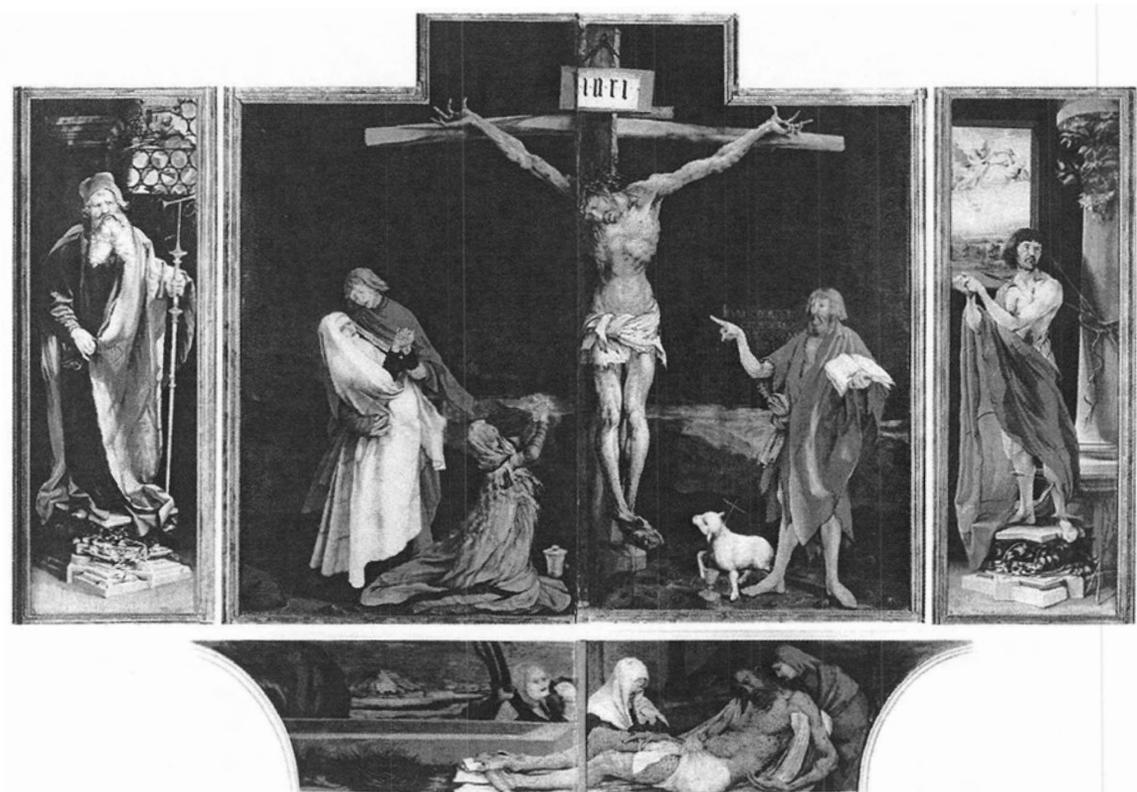


Fig.26. Exterior, Matthias Nithart, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, ca. 1505. Oil on panel, Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.

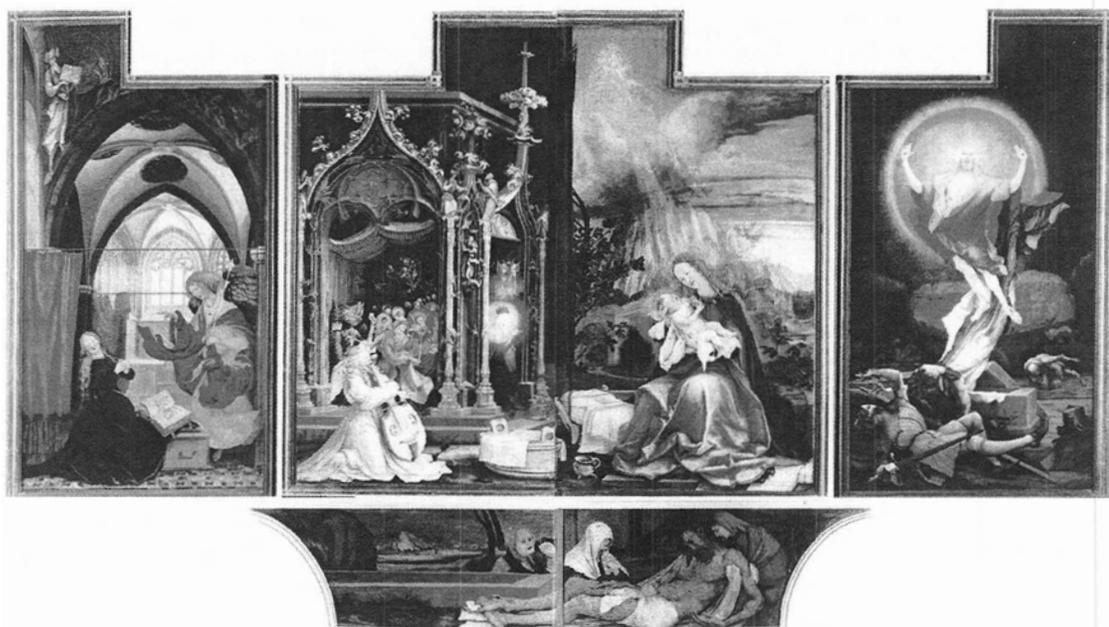


Fig.27. Center panels and wings, Matthias Nithart, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, ca. 1505. Oil on panel, Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.

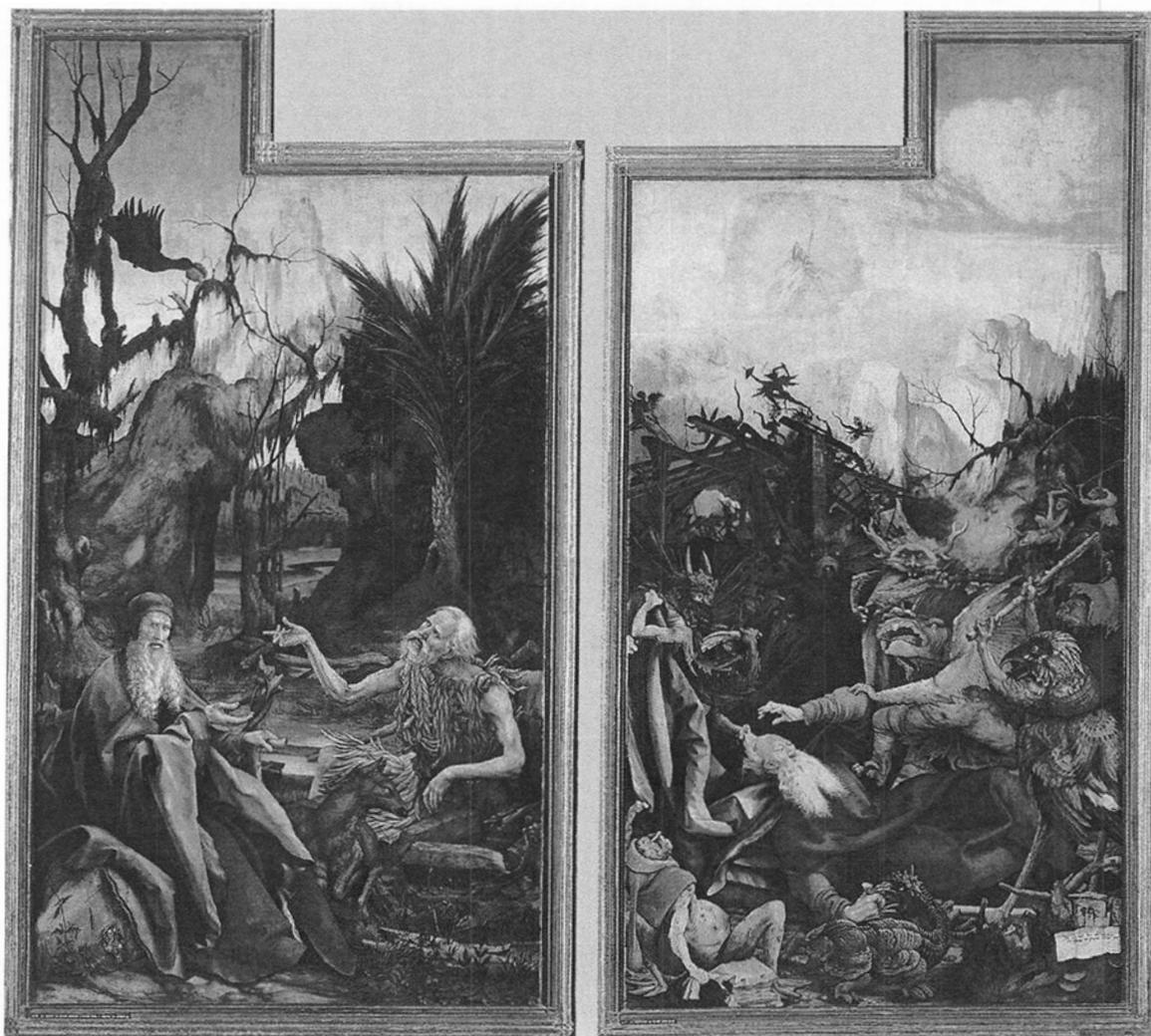


Fig.28. Interior wings, Matthias Nithart, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, ca. 1505. Oil on panel, Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.

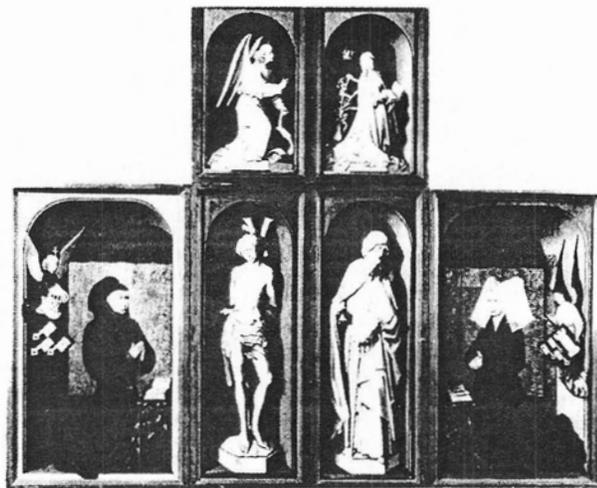


Fig.29. Rogier van der Weyden, *Last Judgement Altarpiece*, ca. 1445-48. Oil on panel, Musée d'Hôtel Dieu, Beaune.

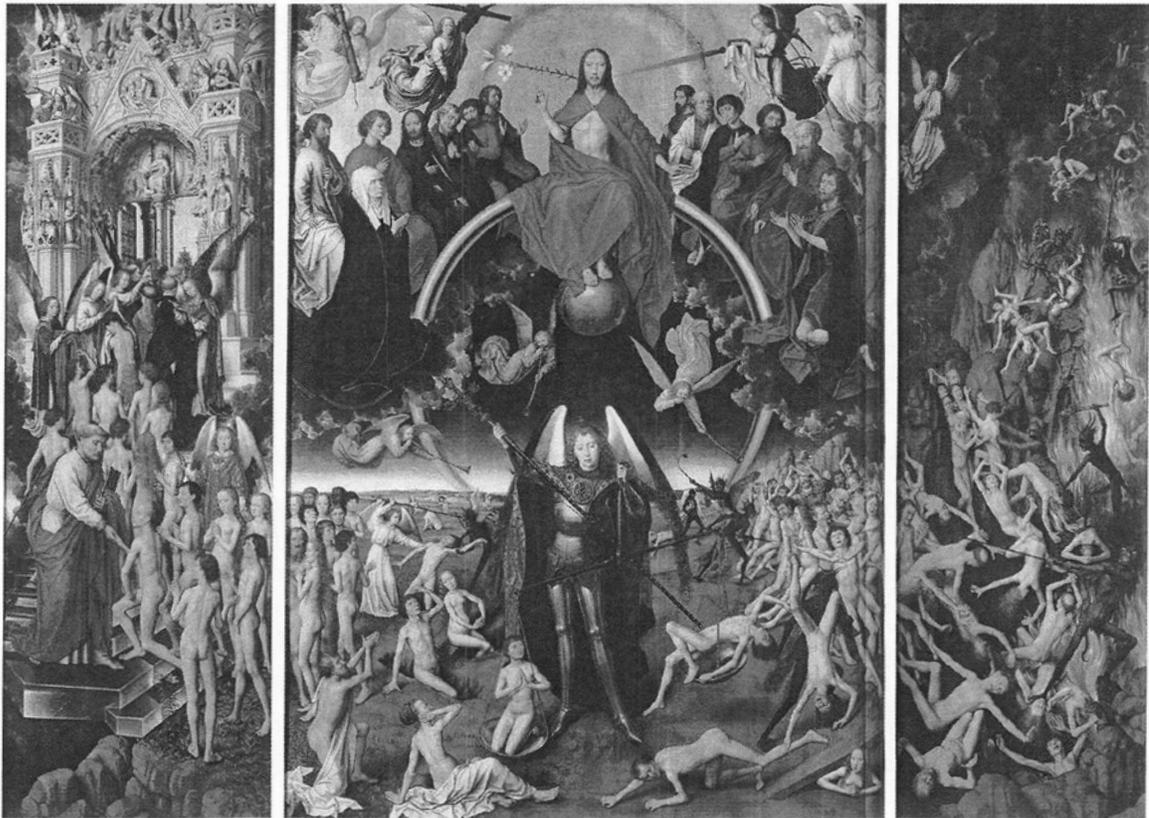


Fig.30. Hans Memling, *Last Judgement Triptych*, 1467-73. Oil on panel, Muzeum Narodowe, Gdansk.

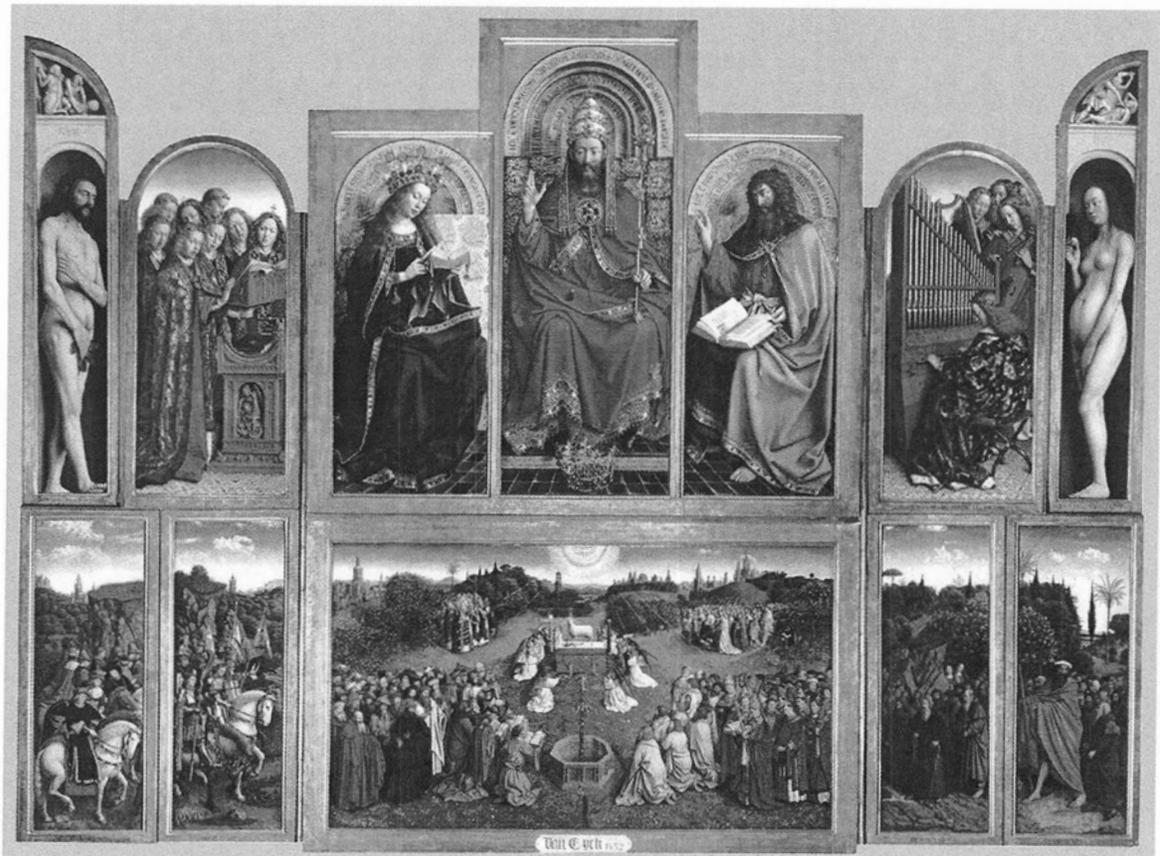


Fig.31. Jan van Eyck, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, 1432. Oil on panel, Cathedral of St Bavo, Ghent.