The Epitaph of Anna van Nieuwenhove

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I N H I S *Early Flemish Portraits 1425–1525* Guy Bauman made some interesting comments on a painting in the Robert Lehman Collection entitled *Virgin and Child, with St. Anne Presenting a Woman* (Figure 1).[1] In this essay I propose to present additional information about the work, more specifically about its inscription, original provenance, and function.

This panel is generally attributed to an anonymous Bruges painter known as the Master of the St. Ursula Legend. It represents a woman, turned to the viewer's left, who kneels in adoration of something outside the picture. Her prayer book lies next to her on a hedge. Behind the adoring figure her patron saint, St. Anne, introduces her with a gentle gesture of the right hand. St. Anne stands in front of an honorary brocade with woven pineapple motifs and with her left arm shelters her daughter, Mary. As Guy Bauman observed, the Virgin, who holds the Christ Child, appears more as a conventional attribute of St. Anne, who enfolds her, than as a full-fledged personage in the scene.[2] Not only her diminutive scale but especially the odd representation of the Christ Child blessing the donor, who turns her back to Him, proves this point.

In the background of the picture, there is a hilly landscape with two castles at the right. On the left in the background one sees a cityscape, easily identifiable as Bruges. It shows the Minnewater with two round towers; the tower on the left, the Poedertoren, still exists. The city is dominated by three towers, which are, from left to right: the belfry, the church of Our Lady, and a third tower, probably that of St. Savior, which is not truthfully represented. St. Savior's spire was not that pointed in the fifteenth century.[3] In order to see this specific configuration of the three Bruges towers, one has to look at the city from the north-northeast, some-

where between the Ghent Gate and the Catherina Gate. Seen from the side of the Minnewater, as in the painting—which is more toward the east—the tower of the belfry should be placed in the middle.

The sitter has been identified as Anna de Blasere, the wife of Jan van Nieuwenhove. The identification is made possible by her and her husband's coats of arms on the frame[4] and by the inscription (Figures 2–4) at the bottom of the picture, which may be translated as: "The companion and wife of Jan and [*sic*] Michiel van Nieuwenhove, born Anna, daughter of Johannes de Blasere, died in 1480, minus iota, the 5th of October; may she rest in peace. Amen."[5]

The numerals in this inscription—*.m.c. quater .x. octo.* and *qui*[n]*ta*—are written in red; the words are in white. The year is not 1488, as thought earlier.[6] *M.c. quater .x. octo.* should be read as "thousand, hundred times four, ten times eight," that is, 1480.[7] The hitherto unexplained addition *sed excipe iotam*, inserted between the year and the day, is certainly the most puzzling element. Literally it means "but subtract iota," in which the Greek letter iota stands for one.[8] In other words, the date in the inscription should be understood as 1480 minus 1: 1479. This date, October 5, 1479, is precisely eleven days after Anna gave birth to her daughter, Catherina.[9] Like many women during the late Middle Ages, Anna must have died from complications in childbirth.[10]

It has been suggested that the inscription was written before Anna's death and that some space was left open for the date, which would have been filled out in red after she died.[11] This hypothesis appears incorrect, because in that case the word *octobris* would have also been written in red. On the contrary, one may deduce from this that either the painting was made after October 5, 1479, or that the inscription was added to the painting after that date.

The unusual format of the date and the use of two colors in the inscription may indicate that it hides a chronogram, similar to the famous quatrain

Figure 1. Master of the St. Ursula Legend, *Virgin and Child, with St. Anne Presenting a Woman*. Tempera and oil on wood, 49.9 × 34.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975, 1975.1.114

on the Ghent Altarpiece.[12] Indeed, if one adds up the values of the significant letters in q_uater x octo . . . qu_inta, the result is twenty-one. To judge from the apparent age of the woman in the picture, Anna may have been that age when she died. However, no archival documents have yet surfaced that corroborate this.

The 1479 date in the inscription is a terminus post quem for the picture. On the other hand, the Bruges belfry in the background is represented the way it looked before it was rebuilt in 1483.[13] This means that the painting originated between 1479 and 1483. It was probably commissioned from the Master of the St. Ursula Legend by Jan van Nieuwenhove in commemoration of his beloved wife, shortly after her premature death.

The inscription may have been retraced at some later date, which would explain the mistake *Johannis et michaelis* instead of *Johannis f*[iliu]*s michaelis*. But there is no reason to doubt its authenticity. It includes typical Middle Netherlandish phrasing literally translated into Latin, as one often finds in documents of that period. *Coniunx domicella* is the literal translation of the Middle Netherlandish *gheselnede ende huuswyf* (companion and wife).[14]

The reference to the date of Anna's death and the words *pace quiescat* suggest that the picture was originally an epitaph and may have been part of a funerary monument.[15] Anna van Nieuwenhove was buried in the church of Our Lady in Bruges. The fourth chapel from the west in the south aisle of this church belonged to the van Nieuwenhove family.[16] At the entrance, a family sepulcher of bluish limestone from Tournai with brass inlay was set into the floor.[17] In this monument, now lost, six members of the family were buried: Michiel van Nieuwenhove;[18] Catherina van Belle, Michiel's wife;[19] Jan van Nieu-wenhove, son of Michiel;[20] his wife, Anna de Blasere;[21] Martinus van Nieuwenhove, Jan's brother;[22] and Margaretha Haultains, wife of Martinus.[23]

A memorial stone with the van Nieuwenhove coat of arms was set into the south wall of the chapel itself.[24] The inscription on it had faded by the late seventeenth century, when epitaph inscriptions were first systematically recorded in Bruges. Today, the stone has completely disappeared. The inscription doubtless alluded to the foundation of this chapel and, as usual, to the Masses that the van Nieuwenhoves had endowed there.[25]

Perhaps the painting in the Lehman Collection hung to the right of this foundation stone on the south wall of the chapel of the van Nieuwenhove family in the church of Our Lady. There are no traces of hinges on the picture's frame, which indicates that it was not the right shutter of a diptych or a triptych, as one would expect, judging from Anna's position turned toward the viewer's left and looking at something outside the picture frame.[26] The foundation stone may very well have had an engraved figurative decoration, such as a Crucifixion, for instance, under which the actual text was inscribed. This way, the painting would have matched compositionally the memorial stone, and Anna's gaze out of the picture would be more comprehensible.

If this is so, the installation much resembled that of the lost epitaph of Wouter Metteneye in the same church. The sepulcher of the Metteneye family was situated at the southeastern side of the ambulatory.[27] Above this funerary monument a stone with an epitaph inscription and the family's coat of arms was set into the wall. On either side of it hung a painting: the one on the left represented Wouter Metteneye, the one on the right his wife, Margriete

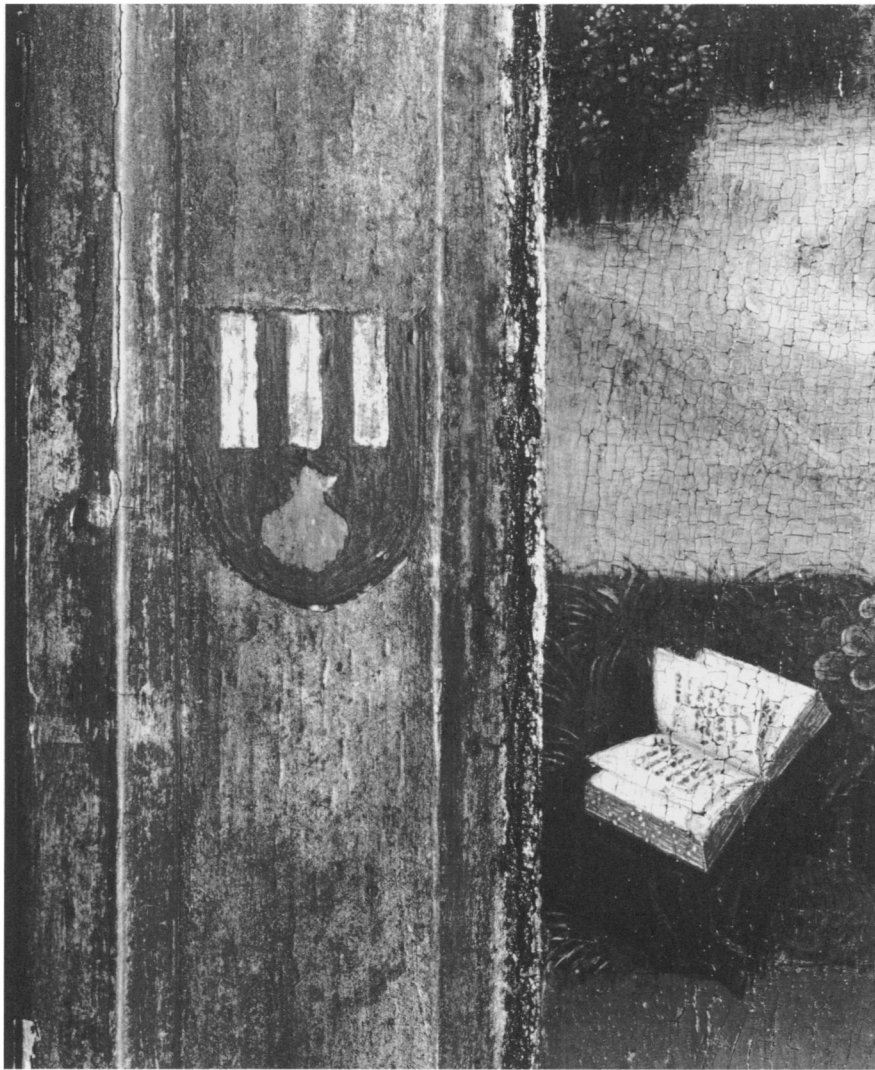Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1 showing inscription

Figure 3. Detail of Figure 1 showing coat of arms on frame at left

Canneel. Both figures were accompanied by their children, no doubt the man with his sons and the woman with her daughters. These paintings were probably installed shortly after July 1, 1448, when Wouter Metteneye died.

Thus far, only G. Marlier has doubted the attribution of the painting to the Master of the St. Ursula Legend.[28] I believe there is no reason for such doubts. The naïveté of the doll-like figures in this composition, especially of the portrait of Anna de Blasere, is very typical of this master's manner.[29] She could be a sister of the Antwerp *Lady with a Carnation*, who wears the same headgear and veil.[30] The chalky color of the flesh, the black eyes without highlights, the large, closed mouth, and above all the blank facial expression are unmistakably the work of the same hand.

The Virgin in the Lehman picture—her long hair cascading over her shoulders and accentuated by golden highlights—resembles the figure of St. Ursula in the Bruges panels of the *Legend of St. Ursula*, from which this master takes his name.[31] The upper half of the figure of St. Anne may be based on the same preparatory sketch that was used in reverse for this saint in the Brussels *Virgin and Child with St. Anne and Saints*.[32]

The rocks and shrubbery in front of the cityscape and the view of Bruges itself in the background of the epitaph are almost identical to the disposition of the background in the *Portrait of Ludovico Portinari* in Philadelphia, except that on the latter painting the St. Savior tower is missing.[33]

The epitaph of Anna van Nieuwenhove fits stylistically very well in the corpus of paintings attributed

Figure 4. Detail of Figure 1 showing coat of arms on frame at right

to the Master of the St. Ursula Legend. Indeed, since the painting can be dated with relative precision between 1479 and 1483, it is a firm reference in the chronology of this Bruges master's oeuvre.

NOTES

1. G. Bauman, *Early Flemish Portraits 1425–1525* (New York, 1986) pp. 22–25. Other literature on this painting includes F. J. Mather, "Three Early Flemish Tomb Pictures," *Art in America* 3, 6 (Oct. 1915) pp. 261–272; Robert Lehman, *Catalogue of the Philip Lehman Collection* (Paris, 1925); M. J. Friedländer, *Die Altniederländische Malerei* VI: *Memling und Gerard David* (Berlin, 1928) no. 119, pl. LIV; P. Bautier, "Le Maître Brugeois de la Légende de Sainte Ursule," *Bulletin Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België* V (1956) p. 4; G. Marlier, "Le Maître de la Légende Sainte Ursule," *Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen*

(1964) pp. 5–42; M. J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting* VIa: *Hans Memlinc and Gerard David*, with comments and notes by N. Veronée-Verhaegen (Brussels/Leiden, 1971) pp. 39, 60, no. 119, pl. 142.

2. Bauman, *Early Flemish Portraits*, p. 25.

3. Compare this tower to the one in the right background of Gerard David's *Portrait of an Ecclesiastic Praying* (National Gallery, London); see H. J. Van Miegroet, *Gerard David* (Antwerp, 1989) pp. 254, 301, no. 34, pl. 245, who questions the identification of this tower as being that of St. Savior.

4. On the left, *azure, on an escallop argent an armlet, and issuant from the chief three pallets or,* van Nieuwenhove; at the right, *per pale,* I, van Nieuwenhove; II, *gules, a chevron or, between three horns, sable and or,* de Blasere.

5. *De nieuwenhoue co[n]iunx Domicella Johannis et michaelis / Obit de blasere nata Johanne Anna sub .m.c. quater / .x. octo. sed excipe Jotam octobris qui[n]ta pace quiescat Amen.*

6. Friedländer, *Malerei,* VI, no. 119; idem, *Early Netherlandish Painting,* VIa, no. 119; Bautier, *Le Maître Brugeois,* p. 4. This mistake was first reluctantly rectified by Marlier, *Le Maître de la Légende,* p. 13.

7. A similar format for numerals is still used in French, for instance, in *quatre-vingts* for eighty (literally four twenties). In Old French sources, more combinations of that sort are found, such as VII^{xx} for 140 or IX^{xx} for 180; see L. de Laborde, *Les Ducs de Bourgogne. Études sur les lettres, les arts et l'industrie pendant le XVe siècle* I (Paris, 1851) pp. 256, 265, nos. 882, 932.

8. I am grateful to Kristoffel Demoen (Ph.D. candidate, Department of Classical Philology, University of Ghent) for clarifying this puzzle for me.

9. Catherina was born on Sept. 24, 1479, and died in 1521; see J. Gailliard, *Bruges et le Franc* IV (Bruges, 1857–64) p. 93.

10. Before the 17th century, about 20 to 25 percent of female mortality in Flanders was caused by complications in childbirth; see C. Vandenbroeke, "Zuigelingensterfte, bevallingsstoornissen en kraambedsterfte, 17de–19de eeuw," *Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis* 50 (1978) pp. 133–163; A. Delva, *Vrouwengeneeskunde in Vlaanderen tijdens de late Middeleeuwen* (Bruges, 1983) p. 85.

11. Nicole Verhaegen communicated this observation to Marlier, *Le Maître de la Légende,* p. 13.

12. On the quatrain of the Ghent Altarpiece, see, among others, J. Duverger, *Het Grafschrift van Hubert van Eyck en het Quatrain van het Gentsche Lam Gods Retabel (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten, Klasse der Schone Kunsten,* VII/4) (Antwerp/Utrecht, 1945); E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting. Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953) I, p. 206 n. 1; P. Ampe, "De metamorfozen van het authentieke Jan van Eyck kwatrijn op het Lam Gods," *Jaarboek van het Museum voor Schone Kunsten van Antwerpen* 32 (1969) pp. 7–60.

13. Marlier, *Le Maître de la Légende,* p. 13. Dating based on the different building phases of the belfry's tower was first introduced by Georges Hulin de Loo in a seminar series on the followers of Memling (ibid.). It was used by Marlier to construct a chronology of the oeuvre of the Master of the St. Ursula Legend. Later Nicole Verhaegen applied it to the works attributed to the Master of the St. Lucy Legend (N. Verhaegen, "Le Maître de la Légende de Sainte Lucie. Précisions sur son Oeuvre," *Bulletin van*

het Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium 2 [1959] pp. 73–82). One could argue that the building phase of the belfry's tower is not necessarily a reliable source for the date of this and other pictures on which this tower appears; theoretically, these cityscapes may have been copied from older sketches. Nevertheless, it would have made little sense for a Bruges painter to represent a Bruges building the way it looked some years earlier. Besides, why would the Master of the St. Ursula Legend and the Master of the St. Lucy Legend have represented the belfry also in its later building phases?

14. J. W. Fuchs, O. Weijers, M. Gumbert-Hepp, *Lexikon Latinitatis Nederlandicae Medii Aevi. Woordenboek van het Middeleeuws Latijn van de Noorderlijke Nederlanden* II (Leiden, 1981) p. 1007, *i.v. coniunx*; III (Leiden, 1986) pp. 1574–1575, *i.v. domicella.*

15. It is doubtful that such a painting would have been called an epitaph in the 15th century. Only later, from the 16th century on, did the word *epitaph* come to mean a memorial sculpture or painting, besides its original and more restricted meaning of funeral inscription; see P. Schoenen, "Epitaph," *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte* V (Stuttgart, 1967) cols. 872–873.

16. In the 19th century, this chapel was still commonly known as the van Nieuwenhove chapel; see J. Gailliard, *Éphémérides brugeoises ou relation chronologique des événements qui se sont passés dans la ville de Bruges, depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours* (Bruges, 1847) pp. 203–204. Nevertheless, no archives related to the original foundation of the chapel or to the acquisition of the sepulchral concession have been preserved; see M. Vandermaesen, *Inventaris van het oud archief der kerkfabriek van Onze-Lieve-Vrouw te Brugge* (Brussels, 1984).

17. It is not known whether these inlaid brass elements were only inscriptions or whether they also represented the coats of arms or the effigies of the deceased. On this floor slab, see I. de Hooghe, *Versaemelinghe van alle de sepulturen, epitaphien, besetten, waepens ende blasoenen, die gevonden worden in alle de kercken, kloosters, abdyen, capellen ende godshuysen binnen de stad van Brugge (. . .)* II, 1698–1707 (Bruges, Stadsbibliotheek, ms. 449, II, fol. 207); P. Beaucourt de Noortvelde, *Description historique de l'église collégiale et paroissiale de Notre-Dame à Bruges* (Bruges, 1773) p. 284 (literally translated from de Hooghe); Gailliard, *Éphémérides*, p. 204; idem, *Bruges et le Franc*, p. 94; idem, *Inscriptions funéraires et monumentales de la Flandre Occidentale. I. Arrondissement de Bruges, 2. Bruges, Eglise de Notre Dame* (Bruges, 1866) p. 389; V. Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten te Brugge voor 1578* (Bruges, 1976) II, pp. 344–345, no. 341.

18. Michiel had been city councillor in 1449, 1456, and 1461; treasurer of the city in 1455; district head in 1469 and 1471; and alderman in 1470 and 1472. In 1460 he was also chosen as provost of the Noble Confraternity of the Holy Blood. He died on Sept. 11, 1474. For biographical data on the van Nieuwenhove family and their relatives, see Gailliard, *Bruges et le Franc*, p. 93.

19. Catherina van Belle was the daughter of Barbara de Boodt from her first marriage to Laurent van Belle. Later, Barbara married Jan Jansz. van Nieuwenhove, Michiel's brother.

20. Jan Michielszoon was a counselor to the archduke Maximilian. He was tortured and sentenced to death during the revolt against this sovereign on Nov. 29, 1488. He also held the office of *watergrave* of Flanders (i.e., the official responsible for all rivers, canals, dikes, and sluices in the country), and he was city councillor in 1473, 1476, and 1482; mayor of the community in 1466; and provost of the Noble Confraternity of the Holy Blood in 1485.

21. She was the daughter of Jan de Blasere and Catherina Joncheere. While he gave exact dates for most other members of the family, de Hooghe, *Versaemelinghe*, fol. 207, recorded the date of Anna's death only as "5. *dag* . . ." (the fifth day . . .). He may perhaps have been puzzled by the inscription on the painting.

22. Martinus (Nov. 11, 1463–Aug. 16, 1500), best known from his famous portrait by Hans Memling of 1487 (St. John's Hospital, Bruges), was city councillor in 1492 and 1494, district head in 1495 and 1498, and mayor in 1497.

23. Margaretha died on Aug. 22, 1522. She was related to Martinus's family and was the great-granddaughter of Nicolas Jansz. van Nieuwenhove, who was her husband's uncle. Vermeersch pointed out that this tomb monument has been confused in 17th- and 18th-century collections of funeral inscriptions, with the sepulcher of Jan's son, Jan van Nieuwenhove, Jr., who married Barbara de Boodt. Like his father, Jan Jr. also served as mayor of Bruges. He died after 1506. He was buried in a niche monument in the van Nieuwenhove chapel; see Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, II, p. 345, and III, p. 443.

24. See de Hooghe, *Versaemelinghe*, fol. 207; Beaucourt de Noortvelde, *Description historique*, p. 284; Gailliard, *Éphémérides*, p. 204.

25. This foundation stone may be compared to, for instance, that of Margaretha Bladelin of 1449 in the same church; see Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, II, pp. 177–178, no. 192, pl. 75.

26. Observed by Bauman, *Early Flemish Portraits*, p. 25, who speculated that "it may have been intended for display beside an altarpiece, the object of Anna's devotion, near her grave."

27. Gailliard, *Inscriptions funéraires*, p. 73; Vermeersch, *Grafmonumenten*, II, p. 175, no. 189.

28. Marlier, *Le Maître de la Légende*, p. 14.

29. For an accurate analysis of this master's style, see Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VIa, p. 39.

30. Museum Mayer Van den Bergh, Antwerp, no. 355; see Marlier, *Maître de la Légende*, pp. 22–23, pl. 16; Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VIa, p. 61, no. 136, pl. 147; J. de Coo, *Museum Mayer Van den Bergh, Catalogus 1: Schilderijen, Verluchte Handschriften, Tekeningen*, 3rd ed. (Antwerp, 1978) p. 102.

31. Groeningemuseum, Bruges, no. 0.1542–45; see D. de Vos, *Catalogus Schilderijen 15de en 16de eeuw*. Stedelijke Musea Brugge (Bruges, 1979) pp. 151–155 (with complete bibl.).

32. Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels, no. 1158; see Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VIa, p. 60, no. 118, pl. 141.

33. John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia, no. 327; see Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, VIa, p. 61, no. 134, pl. 143; B. Sweeney, *John G. Johnson Collection. Catalogue of Flemish and Dutch Paintings* (Philadelphia, 1972) p. 59, no. 327.