

## Imaging the Word: Art and Theology



Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *"The Adoration of the Lamb"*, the centerpiece of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432. *St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent*.

The monumental Ghent Altarpiece by Northern Renaissance painters Hubert and Jan van Eyck is one of the world's finest art treasures—every student who's taken Art History 101 knows this piece, and it has been the subject of much scholarship.

In the nearly six centuries since it was painted, it has been damaged, restored and changed hands on numerous occasions. It was once stolen by Napoleon and looted by Hitler. Yet it remains a revolutionary artwork due to its painterly realism.



At the center of the altarpiece, the focal point of the entire fifteen-foot work, is the panel known as “the Adoration of the Lamb.” Here, a haloed lamb stands on an altar and bleeds into a chalice. He is, of course, a symbol of the self-sacrificial Christ. Angels surround him holding instruments of the passion (cross and crown of thorns) or swinging censers of incense before the altar. The Latin inscription on the antependium (altar hanging) translates to “Behold the Lamb of God (Agnus Dei), who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

The vision of an altar, a chalice containing the blood of Christ and angels swinging censers all vividly recalls the service of the Mass. Yet there is more that is referenced here. For what is portrayed here is the scene of heaven described in Revelation 4 & 5, where the angelic choir, the four living creatures, the elders and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” sing praises to the Lamb, that is Jesus.

Recently, the 15th century Altarpiece underwent major restoration work. Centuries of alterations have been peeled back to reveal a near original masterpiece, including a lamb with a strikingly humanoid face that surprised everyone. As H el ene Dubois, head of restoration, [says](#) this lamb has a more “intense interaction with the onlookers.”



On the left is the way the "Lamb of God," depicted on the Ghent Altarpiece, looked before its restoration.

Given that Hubert and Jan van Eyck could paint things like hands realistically (that's really complicated!), but painted the Lamb *unrealistically*, we have to assume that the decision to anthropomorphize (make human-like) the Lamb was intentional. Why do you suppose they would make the Lamb's face human-like?

In its context, above the altar of the church, the piece is intended to be a devotional aid. In medieval times, the laity took communion in one kind only, taking the bread (the body of Christ) but not the wine (the blood of Christ). The blood of Christ was consumed by the eyes alone--and in the Ghent Altarpiece, there is a splendid banquet for the eyes to feast on.

The Fountain of Life (Revelation 22:1, 'And he showed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb'), another symbol of the Eucharist, has been placed in the foreground. Water sprays from it from six spigots, symbolizing the other six sacraments of the Church. All these elements of the panel particularly emphasize the redemptive and healing powers of the Eucharist, able to absolve all sins and guarantee your entry to the Paradise we see in the altarpiece.

Several groups of figures converge on the sacred altar: Old Testament patriarchs, prophets and pagan philosophers; apostles, popes and bishops; holy martyrs and confessors, hermits and pilgrims, knights and just judges. Lots of these figures can be identified by their attributes: Virgil holding a laurel wreath, St Barbara with the tower she was locked up in by her father.



As you can see, lots of the heavenly ‘congregation’ are holding thick service books, as if they are also participating, like the angels, in the service of the Mass. When the Mass was celebrated each day in the chapel itself in Ghent, it would have been as if the clergy and any worshippers were ‘joining in’ with the eternal, heavenly Mass depicted in the lower register of the altarpiece.

This is aim of the piece, its devotional intention, to invites all Christians to join in the worship of the Lamb that was slain.

### **To Explore further...**

[The Ghent Altarpiece in 100 Billion Pixels](#) This application allows you to view high-resolution details of this world treasure. I recommend starting by clicking on the “Closed” and “Open” tabs on the left sidebar, then select “After restoration” and hover over any of the twenty panels to zoom way, way in. The most acclaimed panel is *The Adoration of the Lamb*, on the inside bottom center. Other panels include Adam and Eve, some Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, the Annunciation, and Christ enthroned.