

MOST PEOPLE enjoy art. Few understand it. Still fewer are capable of totally altering the way we look at an accepted masterpiece, of clearing away its mysteries and thereby helping us to appreciate fully a once puzzling work of art.

One of these gifted few is Lotte Brand Philip, an energetic, attractive senior member of the art history department at the Queens College of the City University of New York. Philip's ability to solve art history mysteries has gained her a reputation as a kind of contemplative Lieutenant Columbo or an imaginative Miss Marple in the field of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century religious art. Like Columbo, Philip has a knack of asking seemingly innocent yet disconcerting questions, such as: What did this medieval masterpiece look like in its own day? And like Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, Philip brings to the field of detection the special knowledge of one who has submerged herself in the life and times of those whose masterful works she seeks to understand.

In Philip's case, the culprit is not the artist but time and time's ravages. Given the violent religious uprisings of the late Middle Ages, which resulted in the vandalization of countless works of art, and the fact that kings "collected" choice bits and pieces of many-paneled paintings, the odds that a medieval masterpiece has come down to us intact are extremely slim. When looking at a painting from the Middle Ages, most of us don't bother to ask ourselves if something might be missing. Philip does ask—and she is not satisfied until she has found an answer.

To retrace the steps Philip took that led to the solution of a long-unsolved art mystery is an enlightening and a humbling enterprise. Once she has amassed her evidence and solved a case, one's reaction is likely to be, "Why, of course! Why didn't I—or *somebody*, at least—think of that before?"

One of her most dramatic "cases" involved the Ghent Altarpiece, which was completed in 1432 and is one of the largest surviving religious paintings of the fifteenth century. It is also perhaps the most celebrated work of the early Flemish school of art. Long attributed to "the brothers Van Eyck"—Jan, the great master of early Flemish painting, and Hubert, a shadowy figure—it can be seen today in exactly the same place for which it was commissioned: a chapel in St. Bavo's Cathedral, in the once grand city of Ghent. (Ghent, which

lies about midway between sprawling Brussels and lovely, dead, medieval Bruges, was the largest and richest city of western Europe in the fifteenth century.) The fact that it has remained there is in itself unusual. Most religious masterpieces have been moved into museums, where they are seen out of context; viewers forget that these works served a specific purpose in their churches. Precisely what purpose the Ghent Altarpiece served was one of the questions Philip asked herself as she set about trying to solve its mysteries.

What was mysterious about it? I must confess that when I first viewed the many-paneled altarpiece a few years ago, I was not struck by its mystery but by the sheer brilliance, the luminosity, of the work. The altarpiece, whose wings are movable but whose center is stationary, was opened to show its main, feast day view. And when the altarpiece is opened, it glows. Fifteenth-century worshipers had, I knew, been struck by another aspect of the work. They had never seen such lifelike figures or such a realistic landscape. Realism then was just beginning to emerge in the art of northern Europe; its best-known practitioners were miniaturists like the Limbourg brothers, who in the early fifteenth century were illuminating the precious book of hours for the Duc de Berry in Paris. In the Ghent Altarpiece, the common people could, perhaps for the first time north of the Alps, behold the story of man's salvation in a vast representation in which many figures were nearly lifesize and all, whether caught in mid-song or about to speak, seemed alive.

It was only with a second look at the altarpiece that it dawned on me that something strange was going on. It had to do with scale. All the saints and martyrs in the lower level of the interior view, I noticed, were tiny when compared with the figures in the upper half. Moreover, the scale of the figures in the upper level kept changing. Adam and Eve were larger than the music-making angels but smaller than the three divine figures in the fixed central panel: the Lord, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John the Baptist. Once perceived, this constant shifting of scale was unsettling.

Back in America, I couldn't get the altarpiece out of my mind, largely because it spoke, with such confidence and eloquence, that great dead language in which our forefathers used to converse with God and partly because the altarpiece puzzled

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me. How did all its variables fit together? Reading about the work, I soon found myself caught up in the mystery surrounding the Ghent Altarpiece.

A crucial date in this tale of detection, I learned, was 1832. It was then, four centuries after the completion of the altarpiece, that a four-line Latin poem was discovered under a coat of greenish paint on the frame beneath the panels that show the donors and the two Saint Johns—the Evangelist and the Baptist. The lettering was Gothic, and it was in bad shape. Still, after supplying the letters and whole words that time or accident had rendered illegible, the text could be made out to say: “The painter Hubert van Eyck, greater than whom no one was found, began [this work], and Jan, his brother, second in art,” completed it “at the expense of Jodocus Vijd” in 1432. The Latin poem was full of news. It seemed to say that Hubert had been a painter of even greater renown than the famous Jan; two masters, not one, had worked on the altarpiece. Art historians concluded that Hubert must have been the elder brother, that he had conceived the whole, that he had died before its comple-



“The Lord enthroned in a miniature by a contemporary of Van Eyck.”

tion, and that Jan had taken over the commission. Excited at having found a work bearing Hubert’s name—for until then, none had ever been found—scholars promptly began to try to determine which

parts of the altarpiece the great Hubert had painted. This they did by sorting out those parts that seemed to have the style Jan used in his signed works, then ascribing to Hubert those parts that looked less “real,” less “advanced,” less three dimensional. Unanimity proved hard to come by, however. Over the course of more than a century, every portion of the altarpiece attributed to Hubert by one scholar was attributed to Jan by another.

IN THE MID-1940S Erwin Panofsky, a founding father of art history in America, set out to explain once and for all just what each brother Van Eyck had done and what it all meant. He did this in one densely argued chapter of his two-volume *Early Netherlandish Painting*, originally given as the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1947 and 1948. (Published in 1953, Panofsky’s book is still acknowledged to be a classic work on the general subject of early Netherlandish painting and its use of symbolism.) As Panofsky saw it, the troublesome interior view of the Ghent Altarpiece was an “ingenious combination” of

Of Heaven and Earth

WITHOUT the sculptural framework around the Ghent Altarpiece, “the meaning of the painted panels simply cannot be understood,” said Lotte Philip. Among the theological riddles of the panels that Philip solved are: Why are there two heavens—one stacked on top of the other—in the interior view of the altarpiece? And what are Adam and Eve, those famous sinners, doing on the same level as the Lord, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John the Baptist?

Philip pointed out that the altarpiece depicts the heavenly vision of Revelation: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven.... And [the angel] showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the

throne of God and the Lamb....” The upper portion of the altarpiece, then, shows the new heaven as a Gothic cathedral; the lower portion shows the new earth as a paradisiacal landscape.

There is good reason, too, for the presence of Adam and Eve in the new heaven. As Philip was the first to observe, the overriding theme of the Ghent Altarpiece is the union of God and man as expressed in Saint John’s apocalyptic vision: “Behold the tabernacle of God is with men ... and God himself will be with them.” In the Ghent Altarpiece, the new heaven is the setting for the final reunion of the Lord and his redeemed mankind. Adam and Eve stand there as the representatives of all humanity.

A third question had to do with exactly what is taking place in the new heaven and on the new earth. Philip explained that the panels illustrate the celebration of the heavenly mass, in which, according to Saint Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, Christ is both the celebrant and the sacrifice. In the new heaven, Christ is the priest who celebrates the mass, while the Virgin and Saint John recite the sacred texts and angels sing and play their instruments. On the new earth, He is the sacrificial Lamb.

Out of these insights Philip conceived

another that, like her reconstruction of the framework, enables the modern viewer to grasp the prodigious impact that the altarpiece must have had on the fifteenth-century worshiper. Philip surmises that from the soaring top of the sculpture work to the bottom and on down to the altar tables below, a vertical progression of religious symbols once moved from heaven to earth, as it were, and then led the devout viewer back up to heaven again.

High up in the stone canopy, God the Father was shown; below him, the Lord enthroned; below him, the Dove; below the Dove, the Lamb; below the Lamb, the Fountain of Living Waters; and below the fountain, the little stream that flows through the green grass of the new earth. Did the stream originally stop where it does now, cut off by the modern frame? Philip is convinced that it did not, that it gave the illusion of flowing directly into a vessel standing on the altar—a vessel that held the Eucharist, the body of Christ taken at Communion. As Philip wrote, the worshiper “saw the sacred water, the result of the celestial sacrifice, flowing ... into the vessel from which the priest would hand him the Host. The believer thus virtually became a participant in the celestial rite.” —J. S.

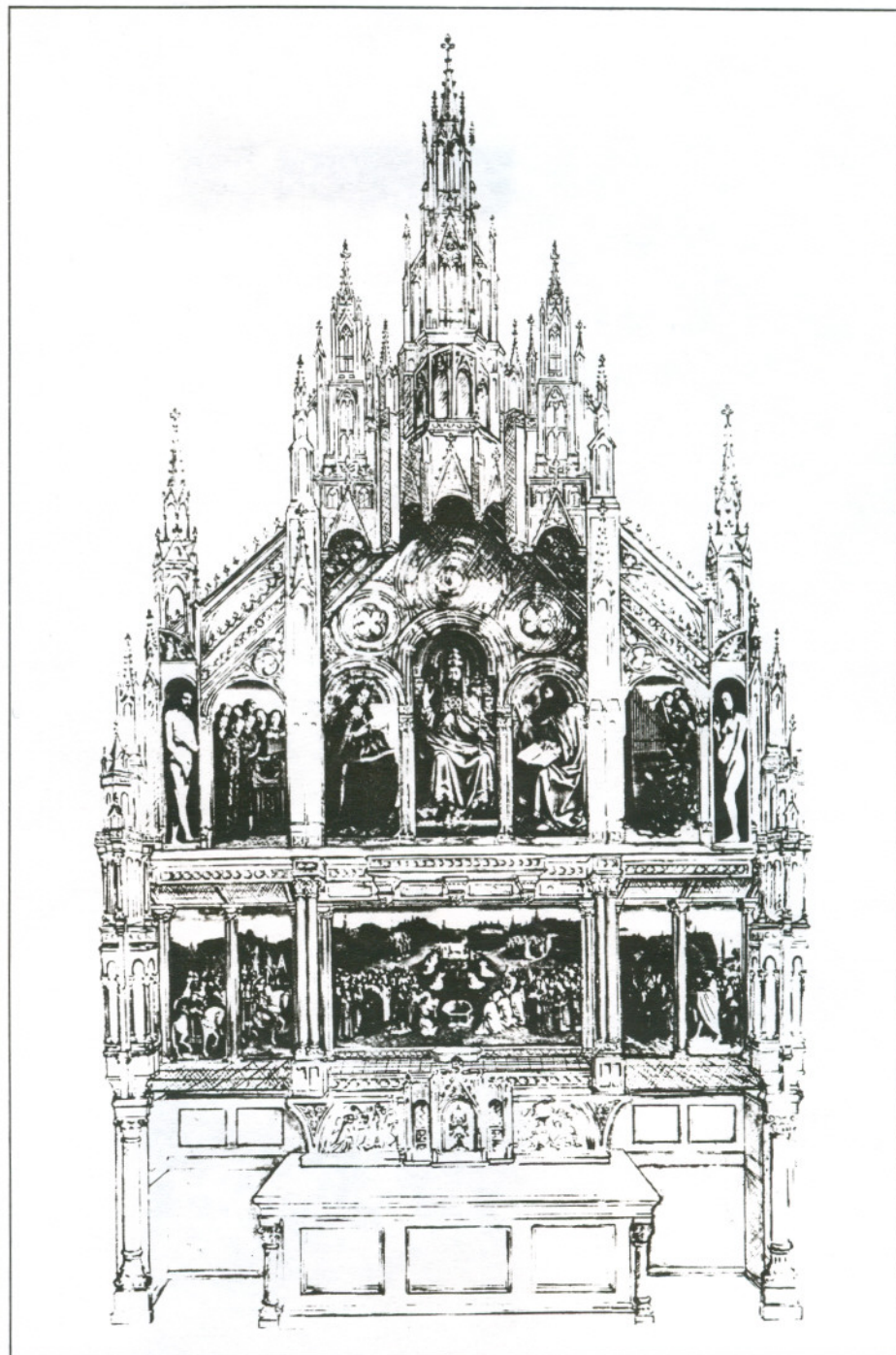
three works begun by Hubert and finished by Jan. The panels showing crowds of the blessed adoring the Lamb of God, Panofsky believed, had originally been intended as an All Saints' altarpiece, "probably destined for display in the city hall rather than the church." Those showing the Lord, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John the Baptist, he believed, had been designed for yet another altarpiece, while the two groups of musical angels had been designed to decorate a pair of organ shutters. Jan, busy with his own work but compelled by his brother's untimely death to finish the huge altarpiece, had artfully combined three works that were not meant to be seen together, Panofsky wrote. In addition, Jan had painted all the exterior panels—those showing the Annunciation, the donors and saints, and the prophets and sibyls who had foretold the birth of Jesus—as well as those two exceedingly realistic panels showing Adam and Eve. In short, the Ghent Altarpiece was a makeshift masterpiece with no unified meaning.

Given Panofsky's vast learning and authority, the case appeared to be closed. The culprit had been time in the sense that Jan, hurrying to finish the piece, had resorted to this "ingenious combination" of three thematically unrelated works of art.

But while Panofsky's solution answered some questions, it raised others. For example, would Jan van Eyck—who became a master painter in 1422 and court painter to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, in 1425, seven years before the completion of the altarpiece—have collaborated in the production of a makeshift work of art? And would an immensely wealthy donor like Jodocus Vijd, who was soon to become burgomaster of Ghent, have accepted it? Finally, would the ecclesiastical authorities have allowed a set of paintings that had no single religious message to be set up as an object of contemplation for the devout? They were sticklers on such matters.

Enter Lotte Brand Philip. Philip, who like Panofsky was born in Germany, had heard Panofsky lecture on the Ghent Altarpiece in Hamburg, in 1932, shortly before he emigrated to America. She recalls that her admiration for Panofsky's brilliant discourse was, even then, "mixed with a feeling of violent contradiction." Nearly 40 years would pass before Philip would pay homage to her mentor by respectfully contradicting him and to the Ghent Altarpiece by revealing it anew as the unified masterpiece it had once been.

It was in 1964 that she came upon the first clue concerning the mystery of the altarpiece. Philip had by then settled in New



Philip's reconstruction—"Triumph of imagination, scholarship, and sheer good luck."

York City and was lecturing on art history at Queens College. One afternoon, she recalls, she stopped at the Wittenborn Art Books store on Madison Avenue "simply to browse." A book jacket caught her eye. Its color jacket illustration was of a portion of the golden house-shaped reliquary of the Virgin housed in Aachen, the site of Charlemagne's main palace residence in northwestern Germany. "This is it!" Philip recalls saying to herself. "This is the Lord enthroned from the Ghent Altarpiece!"

In that moment one insight after another

came to her. "In my mind's eye," Philip recalls, "there appeared the tall, two-level reliquary structures built to display these golden shrines, which I had seen years before in the abbey church of Saint-Denis, outside Paris. I immediately recalled how much fifteenth-century painters enjoyed imitating all kinds of ancient church furnishings. Van Eyck, I concluded, had wanted to pass off his Ghent Altarpiece as an ancient reliquary structure, with the Lord and his two sacred companions enthroned in front of a golden shrine."

Had a soaring stone framework resolved the differences in scale among the painted figures? Had it unified the work in a way that was presently unimaginable? Philip began to entertain this idea as a working hypothesis. There was, however, one hitch: The chapel of St. Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent has no such structure.

What might have happened to it? Philip was aware that religious riots had broken out in Flanders in the 1560s, at which time many ecclesiastical works of art had been destroyed. Contemporary accounts of those riots written in Ghent revealed that two days before the iconoclasts stormed the churches of Ghent in 1566, city officials had ordered the painted panels of the Ghent Altarpiece removed from the chapel and taken to the church tower for safekeeping. As a result, according to one chronicler, only "the idols"—the statues—had been destroyed. Philip interpreted this as a reference to the statuettes and reliefs that must have adorned the two-story-high sculptural framework. And she thought it likely that the badly damaged framework had subsequently been dismantled.

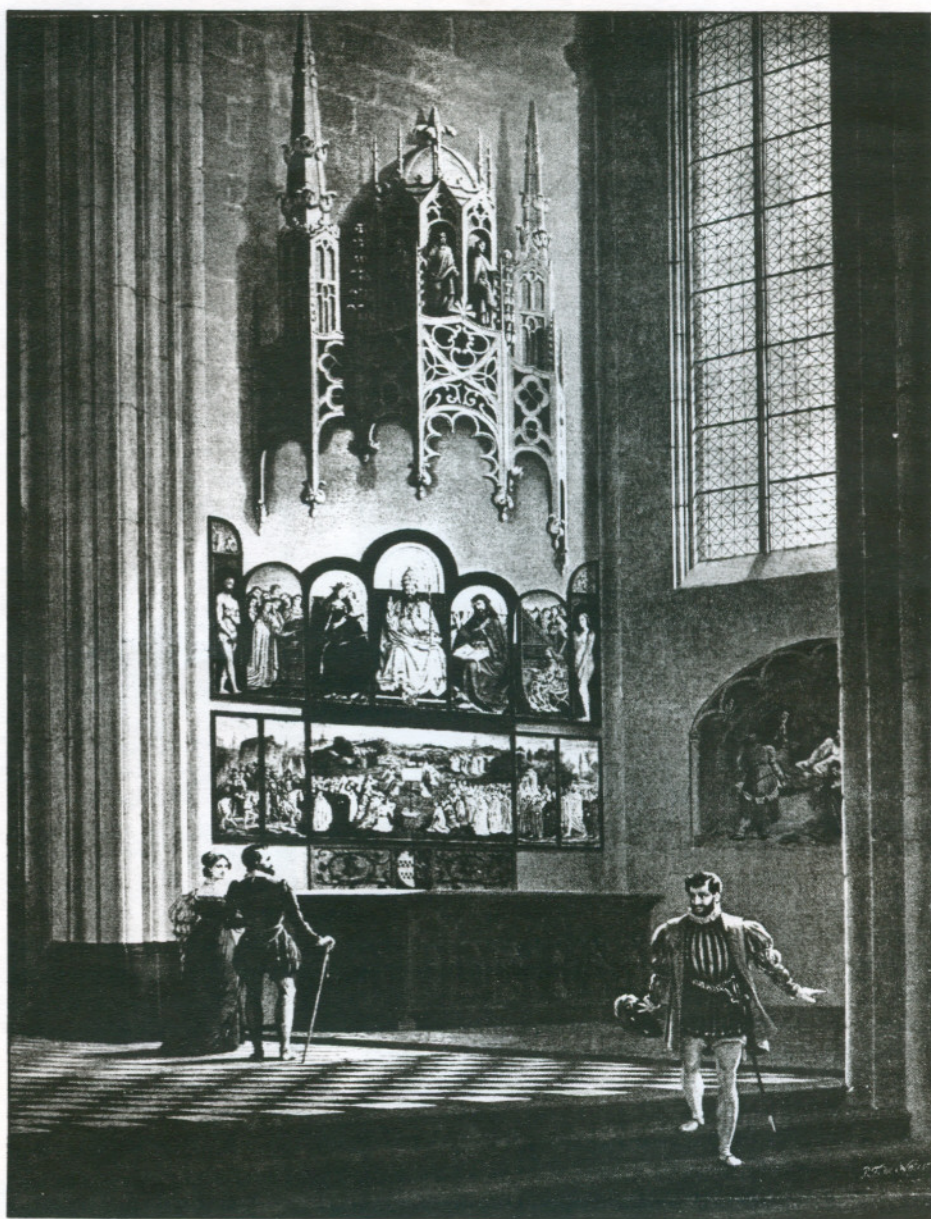
Still, it is one thing to explain why something is not in place now and quite another to come up with convincing evidence that it had once been there. Could she prove her theory?

Philip scouted around for evidence, and thanks to the powerful effect the art of Jan van Eyck had had on his contemporaries and followers, she was able to find three particularly impressive pieces influenced by his work. We shall call them exhibits A, B, and C.

Exhibit A: The sixteenth-century Netherlandish artist Jan Gossart depicted a painted architectural framework in his free copy of the three central figures of the "golden shrine" portion of the Ghent Altarpiece.

Exhibit B: Two columns on either side of the interior view of the Adoration of the Lamb are shown in a late-sixteenth-century copy of the Ghent Altarpiece.

Exhibit C: A small Gothic cathedral encloses the Lord enthroned in a miniature by a contemporary of Jan van Eyck. As Philip pointed out: "The core of the building which contains the throne ... is connected by flying buttresses with two buttressing piers.... If the framing stone architecture of the Ghent Altarpiece was constructed on the same principle, the strange appearance of the seven upper panels can be explained. The core of the building ... enclosed the golden reliquary with the [three divine figures]. The angels were placed directly under a system of flying



The critical de Noter canopy—"Dispelled the final shadow of doubt."

buttresses in an open space. The panels of Adam and Eve were the buttressing piers."

Such a structure would explain why the three divine figures are seen against a golden background while the musical angels are silhouetted against a blue sky and Adam and Eve are seen within stone niches. The lost framework clearly defined three different environments and three realms of reality, from the Holy of Holies to the earthiness of Adam and Eve, who are represented as colored statues miraculously come to life. It would also explain why the crowds of the elect adoring the Lamb are much smaller than the figures above them: The saints and martyrs were seen as set back in space—behind the large porch or portico whose columns supported the room above.

What had the original framework looked like? Philip's reconstruction is given as exhibits D—the altarpiece with the wings closed—and E—with the wings opened to show the feast day view.

Philip first presented her case in January 1965 at the College Art Association's annual meeting, held in Los Angeles that year. Her reconstruction, which solved so many riddles and allowed the full beauty of the work to be grasped for the first time in many centuries, was enthusiastically received, and she went on to deliver her lecture at 37 colleges and museums. Her reconstruction, moreover, allowed her to look at the original red herring clue—the Latin poem found in 1832—in quite a different light than other art historians had. Not suspecting the existence of a vast

sculptural framework and faced with a text saying that two artists had worked on the altarpiece, they had divided up the painted panels between Hubert and Jan. Philip, who had revealed the work's original unity, assigned all the painting to Jan and the framework to Hubert. Other scholars had readily supplied the letter *p* to fill out the damaged word *ictor* and had come up with *pictor*, or "painter." Philip supplied the letter *f* and came up with *fictor*, which is very good Latin for "sculptor." And while others had read "*arte secundus*" to mean that Jan van Eyck had been a less accomplished painter than Hubert, at least in 1432, Philip knew from her study of commissions for other altarpieces of the time that Jan would not have begun to paint until the frame had been completed. Jan, then, was second in art in a purely chronological sense—he was the second to work on the great altarpiece.

SO FAR, PHILIP'S CASE, while strong, had been built on what was, strictly speaking, circumstantial evidence. Everything pointed to the existence of a sculptural framework, but Philip still had not proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that a framework had, in fact, once been on the chapel wall.

That final shadow of a doubt was dispelled in the summer of 1966. Philip flew off to spend a summer in Belgium. After visiting Ghent she went to Brussels, where the Centre National de Recherche Primitif Flamand maintains an enormous collection of photographs, X-ray pictures, and infrared pictures touching on all aspects of early Flemish painting. There Philip and Mme. Jacqueline Folie, a scholar on the institute's staff, spent an afternoon going through 50 or 60 boxes of pictures relating to the Ghent Altarpiece. The two women worked their way down to the last box. For a moment, Philip recalls, "I wasn't sure there was much point in going on. But I picked up the box and glanced through the pictures and then—there it was!" The photograph was of a picture, now in the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam, painted by Pierre François de Noter in 1829, when the Gothic revival was just beginning on the Continent. It showed the Vijd Chapel in St. Bavo's Cathedral as De Noter believed it had looked in the early sixteenth century. In the process of trying to visualize the chapel as it had looked then, De Noter had not added anything except for three figures dressed in period costume; he had merely omitted all the objects in the chapel that struck him as not being "Gothic." Thus,

he faithfully showed above the painted panels of the Ghent Altarpiece a large stone canopy—the sole portion of Hubert's sculptural framework to survive the onslaught of the iconoclasts and the subsequent ravages of time. As Philip later wrote: "The canopy ... is, apart from its restorations, virtually identical to the one I sketched in my reconstruction drawing long before I knew of the nineteenth-century picture. No wonder, then, that I am inclined to regard the De Noter painting as a document which proves the basic accuracy of my reconstruction."

One could call this finding serendipitous, but Philip was the only person in the world to whom it could have happened; she alone could grasp the significance of this fragment of a framework as she alone had believed it had existed.

Philip's solution to the mystery of the Ghent Altarpiece represents a rare triumph of the mind in which imagination, scholarship, and sheer good luck combined to recreate a masterpiece. It was a labor of love that spanned a full 20 years, culminating in a scholarly and yet exhilarating book, *The Ghent Altarpiece and the Art of Jan van*

Eyck, published by Princeton University Press, in 1972. (Panofsky, previously the most authoritative commentator on the art of Van Eyck, died in 1968; thus there is no way of knowing how he would have received a theory that differed from his own.) In a review that appeared in *The Art Bulletin*, Karl W. Birkmeyer, a professor of art history at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote that Philip's account of her search for evidence of the missing framework "reads like an extremely well-constructed mystery story." (He also praised the book as "a unique contribution not only to scholarship—that is taken for granted in the case of its author—but as a contribution to scholarly writing on scholarship.") In a similar vein, an anonymous reviewer writing in *Choice*, the American Library Association's review of scholarly books, called Philip's book "another exciting 'Whodunit' by art history's most gifted writer" of detective tales.

If the culprit in this case was time, Philip arrested it—and allowed art lovers of the twentieth century to enjoy and understand a masterpiece as the common folk of Ghent did the day it was consecrated in 1432. ●

Manaus

...where the blue Rio Negro
joins the brown Amazon
and the two rivers meet—but do not mix.
Incredible!

...but Brasil's Amazon region is full of incredible things.
Like the baroque opera house built by 19th century
rubber barons. Or the Tropical Hotel Manaus—
the largest resort hotel in South America.
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