Van Eyck: An Optical Revolution

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This exhibition has been hyped for at least a decade. The apropos of the exhibition is that after eight years, the restauration of the *Ghent Altarpiece*, Jan and Hubert Van Eyck’s masterpiece, is finally completed. And this was to be celebrated with what was advertised as the largest Van Eyck exhibition ever.

The problem with advertising an exhibition this way is that those pieces that are absent become even more conspicuous. And there were a lot of these. First, in a somewhat unusual move, the interior panels of the actual altarpiece (including the central panel with the famous lamb) were not part of the exhibition. Only the external panels were. And there were other famous Van Eycks missing, including the ones one is most likely to know. The Madonna in the Church from Berlin and the Madonna and Child with Canon van der Paele from Brugge from were not there (according to the curators, they are too fragile to travel). Nor were the Arnolfinis from London and the Madonna of Chancellor Ronin from the Louvre (according to my unconfirmed sources, as a result of power play between the museums). That’s the five best known Van Eyck paintings missing.

Further, those who live in the vicinity of the city of Ghent, the actual square footage of Van Eycks on display in this very museum (the MSK) has actually went down with the opening of the exhibition. During the restauration project, which took place in this museum, the visitors could see the actual work on the panels being done in an enclosed space divided from the rest of the museum by a large windowpane. I happen to live in Ghent and I spent a lot of time looking at the restauration work of the (inside) panels that were not actually exhibited in the present exhibition. A month before the exhibition, I had more Van Eyck to look at that during the exhibition. In short, it is difficult to see what demographics of visitors would not have been disappointed by the range of exhibited artworks after the hype.

Don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of amazing paintings on display, most of them from the atelier of Van Eyck or by his followers. And as an exhibition of paintings from Van Eyck’s circle, this is an extremely impressive collection of works. But putting the emphasis on the genius of Van Eyck, without exhibiting the most important paintings by him, creates false expectations. Statistics shows that the most popular exhibitions are about one artist emphasizing the genius of this artist. There are lots of problems with this approach from a philosophical point of view, but the MSK’s Van Eyck, marketed itself as an exhibition of this kind, whereas, in fact, if we look at the paintings actually on display, it was a very well-chosen exhibition of paintings from Van Eyck’s time.

The guiding narrative of the exhibition was made so explicit it even made it into the title of the exhibition: optical revolution. Van Eyck’s paintings are radically different from paintings made at the same time both in Italy and in the low countries because of some kind of revolutionary new way of perception Van Eyck utilized or relied on. The term ‘realism’ is used early and often throughout the exhibition and the catalogue in a way that would have made Ernst Gombrich blush.

This angle is also behind many of the curatorial choices concerning the way the exhibition is organized. There are repeated attempts at a ‘compare and contrast’ style juxtaposition of two paintings, one by Van Eyck and one by an Italian painter of the same period. The first one is Van Eyck’s Antwerp Madonna at the fountain and Stefano di Giovanni’s Madonna. The second one is Van Eyck’s Annunciation from Washington and Domenico Veneziano’s small predella of the same theme from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. The point of both comparisons is just how much more realistic Van Eyck is than the Italians of the same time period.

There are a number of problems with this narrative. First, van Eyck’s realism is presented as an obvious sign of progress – again, it is difficult not to see echoes of Gombrich’s grand story of art history here.[[1]](#footnote-1) The take-home message of the comparisons between Van Eyck and the Italians is that they painted the very same scenes, but just look how much better Van Eyck was doing. This Hegelian way of thinking about the history of art as a project with a definite direction (less realistic 🡪 more realistic) has been long out of fashion in art history and aesthetics, but this exhibition has revived its wider appeal of this Euro-centric narrative. But the problem with this narrative is not just that it is a Hegelian story with a simple one-directionality or that it only works if we forget about pictures that were painted outside Europe (in fact, outside Italy and the Low Countries). The real problem is that it is just factually incorrect. Take the depiction of three-dimensional space in Van Eyck paintings. It is significantly less realistic than the depiction of three-dimensional space in the work of his Italian contemporaries, Domenico Veneziano very much included.

Second, by describing this change as an ‘optical revolution’, the exhibition seriously downplays the importance of the real and unquestionable material revolution that happened at that time in the Low Countries. The Domenico Veneziano and the Stefano di Giovanni paintings are tempera on wood. Van Eyck, in contrast, painted with oil paint. In fact, this Giorgio Vasari, in his *The Lives of the Artists* credits Van Eyck as the inventor of this technique. Vasari, by all evidence, was wrong, as oil paint was used a couple of decades before van Eyck, but he did modify this technique in a way (by adding a drying agent) that allowed oil paint to dry very quickly. In other words, there is a giant difference between Domenico Veneziano and the Stefano di Giovanni paintings on one hand and the Van Eycks on the other. Comparing them – their realism, their optical revolution or lack thereof – is like comparing apples and oranges. You simply can’t paint the kind of details Van Eyck is known for if you use tempera on wood. It doesn’t matter one little bit how your optics is and how revolutionary it is.

The third and most philosophical problem with the ‘optical revolution’ narrative concerns a recurring theme of the last one and a half centuries of thinking about art, the historicity of vision. According to an influential line of thought that started (at least in the modern era) with the German formalists, vision has its own history. People in Van Eyck’s time saw the world differently from people in the 18th century and both of these ways of seeing are different from the way we see the world now. Further, it is impossible to understand the visual art of a certain period and a certain place without understanding the way people at that time (and place) perceived. Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin were probably the most important early advocates of this view,[[2]](#footnote-2) which became quite mainstream in the first half of the 20th century, partly as a result of the influential Riegl-inspired exposition of the idea by Walter Benjamin.[[3]](#footnote-3) The general idea of the historicity of vision made it into analytic aesthetics at the end of the 20th century, mainly as a result of Arthur Danto’s mistrust of the concept (quickly echoed by many Danto-followers).[[4]](#footnote-4)

There are many versions of the historicity of vision claim.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some proponents (like Riegl or Benjamin) had a fairly radical version in mind, according to which people in different historical eras just had radically different perceptual experiences of everything, including, say, a tree or the Moon. Some others (like Wölfflin or Michael Baxandall) restricted the scope of the historicity of vision claim: people in different historical eras had different visual experiences when looking at pictures (because they had different ‘period eye’ or maybe different ways of attending to pictures).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Van Eyck exhibition is very vague about just what the optical revolution of Van Eyck’s is supposed to entail. Is it closer to Riegl’s and Benjamin’s sweeping claims about global changes in vision between historical eras or to Wölfflin’s and Baxandall’s claims about the ‘period eye’? Or something in between? Even more importantly, what is the relation between Van Eyck and this ‘optical revolution’? The emphasis on Van Eyck’s genius throughout the exhibition seems to suggest that it was Van Eyck who revolutionized vision. To relate this back to the historicity of vision claims, did Van Eyck suddenly saw everything (or paintings) differently from the way the previous generation did? Or did his audience saw everything (or paintings) differently from the way the previous generation did and Van Eyck was the first to cater for this new visual sensitivity? Did he make things visible in paintings that were not visible before?

The deeper point is that the emphasis on optical revolution is in tension with the overall cult of genius dripping from the entire exhibition. In the same text where Wölfflin outlined the main claim of the historicity of vision, he also advocated ‘art history without names’. And this is an understandable move: if we are interested in how perception (or the perception of pictures) changed from one historical era to the other, it is not clear why we should focus on one specific artist rather than image-makers in general. Benjamin, another famous advocate of the historicity of vision claim insisted that we can learn more about the art of a period by looking at minor artists from that period. This way of thinking about art is clearly very different from the narrative according to which we should focus on the genius of Jan Van Eyck, the founding father of Western painting.

More generally, aestheticians often contrast artist-centered and audience-centered approaches. The Van Eyck exhibition tried to do both at the same time. The emphasis on the optical revolution is clearly an audience-centered move and organizing everything around Van Eyck’s genius is clearly an artist-centered one. And these two approaches clash throughout the exhibition.

This is a review for a philosophy journal and, as a result, I focused on philosophical issues raised by the exhibition. Having said that, there are a lot of breathtaking paintings to be seen in this exhibition and it is obviously an exhibition worth seeing. Is it more worthy of your time or money than spending a couple of hours looking at early 15th century Flemish paintings in the Groeningemuseum in Brugge just half an hour away? I’m not sure.

1. Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art*. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1950/1972) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alois Riegl, *The Late Roman Art Industry*, (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore 1901/1985), Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, (New York, Dover Publications, 1915/1932 ). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Walter Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1936/1969) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See esp. Arthur Danto, “Seeing and showing”. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001): 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bence Nanay: The history of vision. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73 (2015): 259-271 and Bence Nanay: *Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Baxandall: *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)