

[The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine](#) by [Hans Memling](#)
Original Lithographic Bookplate - Main Subject: Religion & Belief

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Medium
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About Hans Memling

Hans Memling was probably born around the year 1430. Memling probably served his apprenticeship at Mainz or Cologne, and later worked under Rogier van der Weyden. He did not come to Bruges until about 1467, and certainly not as a wounded fugitive from the field of Nancy. The story is fiction, as is also the report that he was sheltered and cured by the Hospitallers at Bruges, and, to show his gratitude, refused payment for a picture he had painted. Memling did indeed paint for the Hospitallers, but he painted not one but many pictures, and he did so in 1479 and 1480, being probably known to his patrons of St John by many masterpieces even before the battle of Nancy.

Memling is only connected with military operations in a mediate and distant sense. His name appears on a list of subscribers to the loan which was raised by Maximilian of Austria (Maximilian I), to crush hostilities against France in the year 1480. In 1477, when he is falsely said to have fallen, and when Charles the Bold was killed, he was under contract to furnish an altarpiece for the gild-chapel of the booksellers of Bruges; and this altarpiece, now reserved, under the name of the Seven Griefs of Mary, in the Gallery of Turin, is one of the fine creations of his riper age, and not inferior in any way to those of 1479 in the hospital of St John, which for their part are hardly less interesting as illustrative of the master's power than the Last Judgment in the cathedral of the Hanse city Gdansk, Poland. Critical opinion has been unanimous in assigning the altarpiece of Gdansk to Memling; and by this it affirms that Memling was a resident and a skilled artist at Bruges in 1473; for there is no doubt that the Last Judgment was painted and sold to a merchant at Bruges, who shipped it there on board of a vessel bound to the Mediterranean, which was captured by a Gdansk privateer in that very year. But, in order that Memling's repute should be so fair as to make his pictures purchasable, as this had been, by an agent of the Medici at Bruges, it is incumbent on us to acknowledge that he had furnished sufficient proofs before that time of the skill which excited the wonder of such highly cultivated patrons.

It is characteristic that the oldest allusions to pictures connected with Memling's name are those which point to relations with the Burgundian court. The inventories of Margaret of Austria, drawn up in 1524, allude to a triptych of the God of Pity by Roger van der Weyden, of which the wings containing angels were by Master Hans. But this entry is less important as affording testimony in favour of the preservation of Memling's work than as showing his connection with an older Flemish craftsman. For ages Roger van der Weyden was acknowledged as an artist of the school of Bruges, until records of undisputed authenticity demonstrated that he was bred at Tournai and settled at Brussels. Nothing seems more natural than the conjunction of his name with that of Memling as the author of an altarpiece, since, though Memling's youth remains obscure, it is clear from the style of his manhood that he was taught in the painting-room of Van der Weyden. Nor is it beyond the limits of probability that it was Van der Weyden who received commissions at a distance from Brussels, and first took his pupil to Bruges, where he afterwards dwelt. The clearest evidence of the connexion of the two masters is that afforded by pictures, particularly an altarpiece, which has alternately been assigned to each of them, and which may possibly be due to, their joint labours. In this altarpiece, which is a triptych ordered for a patron of the house of Sforza, we find the style of Van der Weyden in the central panel of the Crucifixion, and that of Memling in the episodes on the wings. Yet the whole piece was assigned to the former in the Zambeccari collection at Bologna, whilst it was attributed to the latter at the Middleton sale in London in 1872. At first, we may think, a closer resemblance might be traced between the two artists than that disclosed in later works of Memling, but the delicate organization of the younger painter, perhaps also a milder appreciation of the duties of a Christian artist, may have led Memling to realise a sweet and perfect ideal, without losing, on that account, the feeling of his master. He certainly exchanged the asceticism of Van der Weyden for a sentiment of less energetic concentration. He softened his teacher's asperities and bitter hardness of expression.

In the oldest form in which Memling's style is displayed, or rather in that example which represents the Baptist in the gallery of Munich, we are supposed to contemplate an effort of the year 1470. The finish of this piece is scarcely surpassed, though the subject is more important, by that of the Last Judgment Gdansk.

But the latter is more interesting than the former, because it tells how Memling, long after Roger's death and his own settlement at Bruges, preserved the traditions of sacred art which had been applied in the first part of the century by Rogier van der Weyden to the Last Judgment of Beaune. All that Memling did was to purge his master's manner of excessive stringency, and add to his other qualities a velvet softness of pigment, a delicate transparence of colours, and yielding grace of slender forms. That such a beautiful work as the Last Judgment of Gdansk should have been bought for the Italian market is not surprising when we recollect that picture-fanciers in that country were familiar with the beauties of Memling's compositions, as shown in the preference given to them by such purchasers as Cardinal Grimari and Cardinal Bembo at Venice, and the heads of the house of Medici at Florence.

But Memling's reputation was not confined to Italy or Flanders. The Madonna and Saints which passed out of the Duchatel collection into the gallery of the Louvre, the Virgin and Child painted for Sir John Donne and now at Chatsworth, and other noble specimens in English and Continental private houses, show that his work was as widely known and appreciated as it could be in the state of civilization of the 16th century.

It was perhaps not their sole attraction that they gave the most tender and delicate possible impersonations of the Mother of Christ that could suit the taste of that age in any European country. But the portraits of the donors, with which they were mostly combined, were more characteristic, and probably more remarkable as likenesses, than any that Memling's contemporaries could produce. Nor is it unreasonable to think that his success as a portrait painter, which is manifested in isolated busts as well as in altarpieces, was of a kind to react with effect on the Venetian school, which undoubtedly was affected by the partiality of Antonello da Messina for trans-Alpine types studied in Flanders in Memling's time. The portraits of Sir John Donne and his wife and children in the Chatsworth altarpiece are not less remarkable as models of drawing and finish than as refined presentations of persons of distinction; nor is any difference in this respect to be found in the splendid groups of father, mother, and children which fill the noble altarpiece of the Louvre. As single portraits, the busts of Burgomaster Moreel and his wife in the museum of Brussels, and their daughter the Sibyl Zambetha (according to the added description) in the hospital at Bruges, are the finest and most interesting of specimens. The Seven Grievs of Mary in the gallery of Turin, to which we may add the Seven Joys of Mary in the Pinakothek of Munich, are illustrations of the habit which clung to the art of Flanders of representing a cycle of subjects on the different planes of a single picture, where a wide expanse of ground is covered with incidents from the Passion in the form common to the action of sacred plays.

The masterpiece of Memling's later years, a shrine containing relics of St Ursula in the museum of the hospital of Bruges, is fairly supposed to have been ordered and finished in 1480. The delicacy of finish in its miniature figures, the variety of its landscapes and costume, the marvellous patience with which its details are given, are all matters of enjoyment to the spectator. There is later work of the master in the St Christopher and Saints of 1484 in the academy, or the Newenhoven Madonna in the hospital of Bruges, or a large Crucifixion, with scenes from the Passion, of 1491 from the cathedral (Dom) of Lübeck, now in Lübeck's St. Annen museum. But as we near the close of Memling's career we observe that his practice has become larger than he can compass alone; and, as usual in such cases, the labour of disciples is substituted for his own. The registers of the painters' corporation at Bruges give the names of two apprentices who served their time with Memling and paid dues on admission to the gild in 1480 and 1486. These subordinates remained obscure.

The trustees of his will appeared before the court of wards at Bruges on December 10, 1495, and we gather from records of that date and place that Memling left behind several children and a considerable property.

Original Lithographic Bookplate

Sorry. No information about this medium is available.

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