



PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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*Frick Collection is the Exclusive U.S. Venue of the
Most Comprehensive Exhibition of
Memling's Portraits*

A PRESENTATION UNLIKELY TO BE REPEATED

October 12 through December 31, 2005



Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero (Bernardo Bembo)*, c. 1473–74, oil on panel, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp

The Frick Collection is the only museum in North America to present this keenly anticipated touring exhibition of paintings by the important Netherlandish artist **Hans Memling** (c. 1435–1494). The presentation of *Memling's Portraits* in New York draws upon major international collections and provides the most comprehensive overview ever undertaken of the artist's successful career in portraiture, with a selection of twenty works by the master and his school, including portrait-wings from diptychs and triptychs along with autonomous panels of individual patrons. Nearly two-thirds of all of Memling's recorded portraits are featured in this exhibition, which is considered to be an unprecedented viewing opportunity and one unlikely to be repeated. Indeed, the

exhibition, which not only illuminates the career of a Renaissance master but also explores the function of portraiture in the Netherlands during the fifteenth century, has been a highlight of international museum calendars this year, having been met with critical acclaim at both of its European venues (spring at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, and this summer at the Groeningemuseum, Bruges). The touring exhibition was co-organized by those institutions and The Frick Collection. Its New York showing and final stop—running from October 12 through December 31, 2005—is coordinated by Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey. *Memling's Portraits* is accompanied by a full-color catalogue and a number of public lectures as well as a special lecture-concert program.



Hans Memling, *Portrait of an Elderly Couple (Woman)*, c. 1470–75, oil on panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Major funding for *Memling's Portraits* has been provided by The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation, with generous support from Melvin R. Seiden in honor of Joseph Koerner, Meg Koster, and Leo Anselm Koerner. Additional support has been provided by The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, The Council of The Frick Collection, the Consulate General of Belgium in New York, The Helen Clay Frick Foundation, and the Fellows of The Frick Collection. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.

This project is also supported, in part, by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.



Comments Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey, “There is something quite thrilling about being able to experience in two rooms many of the finest portraits from Memling’s career, some of which are crossing the Atlantic for the first time. Thanks to the contribution of an international group of Memling specialists, these works have been studied as carefully and as thoroughly as at any time in their history. The excitement now will be to see how the public responds to the experience of confronting these portraits, face to face: for just under three months, New York will be home to the fifteenth-century master from Bruges.”

TRUTHFULNESS, TECHNIQUE, AND INNOVATION

The panels in this exhibition were executed in Bruges over a period of some twenty-five years, between 1470 and the artist’s death in 1494. While issues of chronology, authorship, and the identification of sitters have long been debated by historians, the panels themselves never fail to impress—and sometimes amaze us—by their humanity, truthfulness, and peerless technique. Often placed before radiant, tranquil landscapes (Memling’s signal innovation to portraiture) the sitters appear close to the picture plane, frequently in seven-eighths as opposed to the more conventional three-quarters view, their hands (or hats) occasionally extending beyond the frame into the viewer’s own space. Measured and confident, Memling’s sitters display their prosperity and social position with dignity and grace; their apparel is elegant and costly (Bruges was a center of cloth-making), but their adornment is never ostentatious. As for expression, they are almost always found in serious reflection, yet are not without emotion.

SAINTLY SUBJECTS AS WELL AS BANKERS, MERCHANTS, AND DIPLOMATS

More or less similar in scale, format, and presentation (most of the featured panels are half-lengths with hands), Memling’s portraits fulfilled both secular and religious functions. In fifteenth-century Netherlandish art, portraiture had infiltrated devotional painting, as can be seen in his full-length standing Virgin, in which the anonymous donor kneels by his patron saint to receive the visit of the Mother and Child. Male donors often commissioned their likeness as part of a devotional ensemble. The panel, shown at the top of the following page, of the finely appareled young man in prayer, perhaps a merchant involved in the Spanish wool and textile



Hans Memling, *The Virgin and Child with St. Anthony Abbot and a Donor*, 1472, oil on panel, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

industry, might have formed the left wing of a triptych. In such a case, the central image of a Virgin and Child would have been flanked on the right by a portrait of the man's wife. Portraits might celebrate forthcoming nuptials, commemorate a longstanding union, or, as with a portrait of composer Gilles Joye, painted in 1472, have been created as an independent epitaph, to be placed near the sitter's tomb.



Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Young Man at Prayer*, c. 1485–94, oil on panel, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Among the many independent portraits that Memling painted, several dating from the 1470s seem to have been commissioned to commemorate a foreigner's sojourn in Bruges. Such half-lengths, with waterways and swans dotting the lush countryside in the background, were particularly popular with the Italian bankers and merchants who did business in this international trading city. Recently, the handsome aquiline features of the man holding a Roman coin have been identified as those of Bernardo Bembo, the humanist and patrician who, in 1473, resided as Venetian envoy at the Burgundian court of Charles the Bold (see first page). The palm tree in the background and the sprig of laurel visible to the left of the coin have been associated with Bembo's family emblem, and one wonders if the work might have been executed to commemorate his appointment as Venetian ambassador to Florence in 1475.



Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Young Man*, c. 1475–80, oil on panel, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection



Hans Memling, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1470–75, oil on panel, The Frick Collection

There are far fewer clues to the personalities of other unidentified sitters, although Italian origins also can be posited. *The Portrait of a Young Man* (above, right), for example, has a distinctive loggia motif—with the landscape viewed beyond marble columns—that is generally agreed to have inspired an artist in Verrocchio's workshop; furthermore, its composition as a whole seems to have provided an artist in Perugino's circle with the model for the painting by Perugino that is now in the Uffizi, suggesting that the portrait was in Florence by the late 1470s. Even the sitter in the Frick's *Portrait of a Man*, shown to the left, might be associated with the Italian community in Bruges: this painting had a north Italian provenance before it appeared on the Berlin art market in the early decades of the twentieth century.

LIFE AND CAREER OF MEMLING

Although his date of birth is not recorded, Jan van Mimnelinghe (Hans Memling) was born sometime between 1435 and 1440 in the German town of Seligenstadt, near Mainz. His early training was carried out probably in Cologne, where he would have been exposed to the international style of Stefan Lochner (c. 1400–1451). It is generally agreed that Memling, having arrived in the Low Countries in the late 1450s, spent a prolonged period in Brussels, in the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden (1399–1464), where he may have enjoyed journeyman status. There he completed his formation as a painter, thoroughly assimilating the artist's style, technique, and composition.

Following van der Weyden's death in June 1464, Memling made the move north to Bruges, a thriving commercial center that was also a hub of international banking. The city had attracted painters of the importance of Jan van Eyck (c. 1395–1441), who spent the last nine years of his life in Bruges, and Petrus Christus (c. 1410–1475 or 1476), who worked there for thirty years and was the leading artistic personality at the time of Memling's arrival. Memling was granted citizenship of the city in January 1465, and by the 1470s he was Bruges's preeminent painter.

Memling was primarily engaged as a painter of devotional works for a variety of local and foreign patrons. While he never enrolled as a member of Bruges's corporation of painters and was not employed by the Burgundian court, throughout his career he received prestigious commissions from religious institutions, trade guilds, foreign merchants and patrons, and Flemish patricians. By 1480 he had established enough wealth to be among the citizenry assessed for a loan to support the continuing war against France. Although the final decade of his career was marked by political turmoil, domestic disturbance, and economic instability, his practice still attracted important foreign commissions from as far afield as Lübeck Cathedral and the Benedictine abbey of Santa Maria la Real in Castille. With the disappearance of his Italian patrons and sitters, he relied more on prominent local patrician families. In the early 1480s, Willem Moreel, a burgomaster and banker, commissioned a devotional triptych and a large family altar from him, and in 1487 Maarten van Nieuwenhove—scion of a family of civic officeholders and a future councilor and burgomaster—was memorialized in a small portrait diptych, shown below, which is universally considered one of the masterpieces of Northern Renaissance art.



Hans Memling, *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove*, 1487, oil on panel, Musea Brugge, Hospitaalmuseum, OCMW Brugge

The twenty-three-year-old Maarten van Nieuwenhove commissioned this devotional diptych, in which he was portrayed in prayer before the Virgin Mary, to fulfill dynastic and representational functions as well. References to the sitter's identity abound: from the family coat of arms and motto in the stained-glass window at upper left, to the four medallions around the heraldic cipher. In the panel to the right, Maarten's patron saint, Saint Martin, appears on horseback in the stained-

glass window. His lips parted in prayer, van Nieuwenhove is shown kneeling against the parapet, which is covered with an Oriental carpet that extends across the foreground of both panels and on which the Virgin has placed the brocaded cushion as a seat for the naked Christ child. A tour de force of illusionism—note the convex mirror behind the Virgin's right shoulder—whose spatial complexities (and coherence) were meticulously determined, the *Diptych of Maarten van Nieuwenhove* communicates piety, luxury, and dynastic ambition in equal measure. It is poignant, then, that the following year, with Maximilian of Austria's defeat and detention in Bruges, Maarten's elder brother Jan, a burgomaster and member of the pro-Hapsburg city council, would be publicly tortured and executed by the insurrectionary municipal militia. As scholar Dirk de Vos has noted, “with the possible exception

of Fra Angelico in Medici Florence . . . no artist ever created an oeuvre with as little connection to the real world as Memling.”

Memling’s last years were difficult ones: his wife, Tanne (or Anna), died in 1487, leaving him with three young children for whom to care. In this same year the city suffered violent upheaval following the accession to the throne of Maximilian of Austria, and plague further devastated Bruges in 1492. With its trading privileges lost to Antwerp, the city swiftly declined as a center of commerce and banking, but Memling seems to have been active until the end; his enormous retable of nine panels for the monastery church of Najera was dispatched to Castille in 1492. The artist died on August 11, 1494, and was buried in the cemetery of the church of Saint Giles (fifty-three years earlier, van Eyck had been given the honor of burial within). Never forgetting his Rhenish origins, he endowed annual masses to be given in the Seligenstadt church for “Henn Mommelings . . .citizen of Bruges in Flanders.”

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color catalogue (191 pages) published by Ludion in English, French, Dutch, Spanish, and German editions. It features essays by Till-Holger Borchert, Chief Curator of the Groeningemuseum (also the catalogue’s editor); Lorne Campbell; Paula Nuttall; and Maryan W. Ainsworth, as well as detailed entries on all twenty-eight panels that were featured in the slightly variant versions of the traveling exhibition. It is available for \$40 in English and French softcover editions through the Museum Shop of the Frick, the institution’s Web site (www.frick.org), and by calling (212) 288-0700 (hardcover through Thames & Hudson).

FOUR FREE PUBLIC LECTURES (*SEATING FOR LECTURES IS LIMITED AND UNRESERVED*)

Date: Friday, October 14, 2005, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Till-Holger Borchert, Groeningemuseum, Bruges
Title: *Memling and the Art of Portraiture*

The chief curator of the Groeningemuseum will provide an overview of the career of Hans Memling, the subject of the Frick’s fall special exhibition, *Memling’s Portraits*. Borchert, who edited the accompanying catalogue and contributed an essay, will discuss patronage, the artist’s sitters, the function of portraiture, and the way in which Memling was influenced by earlier Netherlandish portraiture.

Date: Wednesday, October 26, 2005, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Barbara G. Lane, Queens College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
Title: *Memling’s Influence on Italian Portraiture from Leonardo to Raphael*

This lecture will highlight a number of portraits by Memling that were in Italy during the late quattrocento, tracing their influence on Italian portraiture from the 1470s to the first decade of the sixteenth century.

Date: Wednesday, November 16, 2005, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Maryan W. Ainsworth, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Title: *Face to Face with Memling’s Portraits*

Memling's Portraits offers an unparalleled opportunity to reconsider first-hand this aspect of the artist's oeuvre. This lecture will explore the working methods behind the extraordinary results that secured Memling's reputation as Bruges's most successful fifteenth-century portraitist.

Date: Wednesday, December 7, 2005, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Paula Nuttall, Victoria and Albert Museum
Title: *Memling's Italian Patrons*

Working in the cosmopolitan city of Bruges, Memling found a ready market for his art amongst the Italian mercantile community. This lecture will look at the varied commissions he produced for his Italian clients, including Tommaso Portinari, manager of the Medici Bank.

LECTURE–CONCERT PROGRAM

Date: Sunday, November 13, 2005, 4:15 p.m. talk; 5:00 p.m. concert
Speaker: Joelle Wallach
Artists: Newberry Consort

To coincide with the exhibition *Memling's Portraits*, this two-part program begins with a talk by composer Joelle Wallach, who discusses parallels between Franco-Flemish painters and composers of the fifteenth century. At 5:00 p.m., the Newberry Consort (vielles, lutes, harp, countertenor, and tenor) will perform Renaissance/Medieval vocal, instrumental, and dance music of the period of Hans Memling. The Newberry Consort is ensemble-in-residence at the Newberry Library and at the Northwestern University School of Music.

\$20. Tickets are available by telephone (212) 547-0709, online at www.frick.org, and by mail.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Website: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$15; senior citizens \$10; students \$5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing, or Geetha Natarajan, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

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